

Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: An Updated Research Review

Fronius, T., Darling-Hammond, S., Persson, H., Guckenburg, S., Hurley, N., & Petrosino, A. (2019). Restorative Justice in US Schools: An Updated Research Review. *WestEd*.

What is the study about?

This is an update to a previous research review by scholars at WestEd (initially completed in early 2016) that reviews the literature on Restorative Justice (RJ) in American K-12 schools. The authors asked the following:

- What are the origins and theory underlying U.S. schools' interest in RJ?
- How does the literature describe RJ programs or approaches in U.S. schools?
- What issues have been identified as important to consider for implementing RJ in the schools?
- What does the empirical research say about the impact of RJ in the schools? (p.3)

What did they find?

RJ started first in pre-modern societies of the South Pacific & Americas; RJ is widely used in juvenile justice in the U.S., & has only recently come to U.S. schools; RJ is being used to address racial disparities in disciplinary practices; Only one study (Augustine et al., 2018) used an RCT design to test RJ impact, & found mixed results.

How is Restorative Justice (RJ) Defined?

- Emphasis on repairing harm done to others in schools vs. discipline assigning blame and punishment
- Focus on building relationships within the school via peace circles, & restorative conferences
- Increasingly a priority being placed on infusing “restorative practices” into all parts of the school
- Still...authors acknowledge that there is no one settled definition for RJ and write in their introduction:

We use the term “restorative justice” (“RJ”) broadly to capture what the literature describes using a variety of terms such as “restorative practices,” “restorative approaches,” and similar language. (p. 1)

Why is the Study Important?

“One trend in the available literature is that RJ qualitative reviews & descriptive reports are much more prevalent than RJ evaluation studies. (p. 21)”

The one rigorous RCT trial of RJ (Augustine et al., 2018) showed in the 22 RJ schools, RJ worked to decrease out-of-school suspensions for many groups, and helped schools to reduce discipline disparities by race. The 22 RJ schools also saw positive gains for PSAT scores, fewer kids going into alternative school referrals, and increased teacher ratings of key school climate indicators.

Other less rigorously designed studies also showed significant RJ impacts on decreasing behavior problems and reducing suspensions, though the evidence is still very preliminary on if RJ “works.”

What can School Social Workers Do?

Examine the 5 RJ Implementation Guides & Toolkits in this review (p. 15) and consider bringing them to school and district leadership

Collect data on RJ where you are: the evidence base for RJ programs are still in the “infancy stage” (p.21) and much more research is needed, particularly both rigorous research designs & school social work-led examples of “Practice-based Evidence.”

“Regardless of the RJ program type being focused on, these reports suggest that for the RJ program to be effective, it should be embedded within the school culture. (p. 22)” Creating buy-in among key school stakeholders seems to be crucial in implementing RJ effectively.