

Los Angeles school suspensions drop as students talk out their problems

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In this photo taken Dec. 15, 2014, high school students attend a circle session at restorative justice class at the Augustus F. Hawkins High School in Los Angeles. At Los Angeles Unified School District, the suspension rate has dropped from 8 percent in 2008 to 1.5 percent last school year. Photo: AP/Damian Dovarganes

LOS ANGELES — Two times in the last three years, Marcquees Banks has been taken out of class for getting into fights. He was even sent to another school.

The third time he got into a scuffle, something different happened: A counselor at Augustus Hawkins High School in South Los Angeles pulled Banks and the other teen aside and told them they needed to talk.

With the teens seated face to face, Joseph Luciani asked them to explain why they had fought and how they felt.

Restorative Justice Policy

The school's new approach to discipline, which is known as restorative justice, is catching on in other school districts as well. It focuses less on suspensions, and more on students working out their differences with counselors.

"I realized we had a lot of similarities," said Banks, 17, talking of the student he had been fighting with. Banks said his father is involved in a gang and his mother is jobless.

At Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation's second largest, the shift has been major. During the 2006-2007 school year, students were scolded with 74,765 days of suspension; last year, they received 8,351, an 89-percent decrease.

The decline comes as many schools around the country are moving toward discipline measures that support students, and rolling back tough policies put in place after the deadly Columbine High School shootings in Colorado. That incident in 1999 prompted many U.S. schools to adopt zero tolerance policies that emphasize harsh discipline for even minor misbehavior.

Talking Things Out

In a letter to school districts last year, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan urged administrators to move away from punishing students by removing them from class.

In Los Angeles, the school board has announced that by 2020 every school must use restorative justice to deal with disciplinary problems. Restorative justice was first used in criminal cases and is now being implemented in a number of large school districts.

The new approach cultivates communication between teachers and students, who gather in weekly circles to discuss concerns. One-on-one "harm circles" are formed between students, parents and counselors when conflicts arise.

Los Angeles, in particular, will be a case study showing just how well the approach works, and whether it can be broadly applied.

Will It Work?

One of the biggest debates concerning restorative justice is over how to measure success.

Looking at suspension rates is one way, said Howard Zehr, who has been studying restorative justice since the 1970s, but there are other, perhaps more important markers that are much harder to measure. They include things like how well children come to understand each other.

Skeptics fear that forcing schools to reduce suspensions will make teachers afraid to suspend anyone, no matter what they do.

"I worry about it going to the other extreme," said education expert Michael Petrilli. He said he fears "a situation in which there's very few or zero suspensions" and "schools become unruly places."

Training Teachers, Building Trust

Augustus Hawkins High School was opened in 2012, in a poor and rough neighborhood with a lot of gang activity.

Principal Claudia Rojas said she is determined to increase achievement levels at the school, which is in one of LA's poorest areas.

During her first year, Rojas and the school's two other principals issued a lot of suspensions — then, they began looking for alternatives.

The school hired Joseph Luciani, who has studied conflict and peace-building, to train teachers how to use restorative justice.

Teachers were instructed to first work on building trust by gathering students weekly and asking questions about their lives. Students talked about relatives that had been killed by gun violence or deported to another country.

Suspensions Drop

When a student acted out, teachers would try to handle the situation in class, and if that failed to work, they would then send the student to a counselor. If students still continued to cause trouble, they would be sent to the principals and, if truly necessary, suspended.

At the program Rojas runs, suspensions dropped 44 percent the next year.

Those numbers parallel declines seen in schools across the district. One school has had just one suspension since 2012, while another has had none since 2010.

However, some also wonder: If students are not being suspended, how are they being held accountable? Zehr said the accountability comes in students having to take responsibility for their actions and the people they harmed by speaking with them directly.

Support Network Needed

Some critics point out that while schools like Augustus Hawkins have a full-time restorative justice counselor, most do not.

"They feel they're just being told not to suspend or not expel," Alex Caputo-Pearl said, speaking of teachers in schools without counselors. She's president of United Teachers Los Angeles, a union group representing teachers. "There's not a support network around them to get help for students or get help for themselves."

Now a junior, Banks said he has begun thinking differently about his future. He said he always thought he would end up in jail, because that is what others seemed to expect of him.

Now, he wants to be a counselor.