Restorative Justice in D.C. Schools:
Impact of SchoolTalk's RestorativeDC from Pre-Pandemic Through Recovery

Since 2015, SchoolTalk's RestorativeDC initiative has introduced and supported restorative practices in schools in Washington, D.C. Working in partnership with public and public charter schools and community organizations in the District, RestorativeDC has helped bring restorative practices to 86 schools, fostering a positive and more inclusive school climate, while mitigating educational inequities and promoting school safety. Funded by the District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, RestorativeDC provides school leadership and staff with intensive technical assistance, coaching, workshops, and communities of practice.

When the pandemic hit in 2020, RestorativeDC, like its school partners, was forced to adjust its professional learning offerings and help educators build connections in a virtual

environment. This paper describes RestorativeDC's work in public and public charter schools in the District, key lessons learned during the pandemic, and why it is important to continue to support the integration of restorative justice practices going forward as students, schools, and families re-engage and rebuild school communities now that in-person schooling has returned.

Restorative Justice in Schools

Traditionally, school systems in the U.S. have employed school discipline policies that rely on suspensions and expulsions as a way of responding to student misbehavior. Over the last two decades, there has been a growing recognition that these **punitive approaches harm students** by excluding them from the learning environment and are not effective for deterring future issues. Additionally, through school discipline systems, students are often referred to law enforcement which contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline.[1]

There are significant equity concerns as well. Research has found that across the nation Black students and students with disabilities experience significantly higher rates of out-of-school suspensions than their peers.[2][3] In Washington, D.C., Black students are 11.7 times more likely than their white peers to be suspended.[4] In addition, D.C. students living with a disability represent one-third of all students receiving out-of-school suspensions.[5]

In recent years, public and public charter schools in the District, like many other communities around the country, have begun to address these inequities by adopting and implementing restorative justice policies and practices. Restorative justice is an effective approach to promoting school safety and stability, while also supporting the behavioral needs of students, and enabling positive culture shifts within schools. While restorative justice can be implemented in response to disciplinary issues, implementing a **whole school approach** to restorative justice can also serve as a proactive tool for building positive relationships and creating equitable and inclusive school environments.
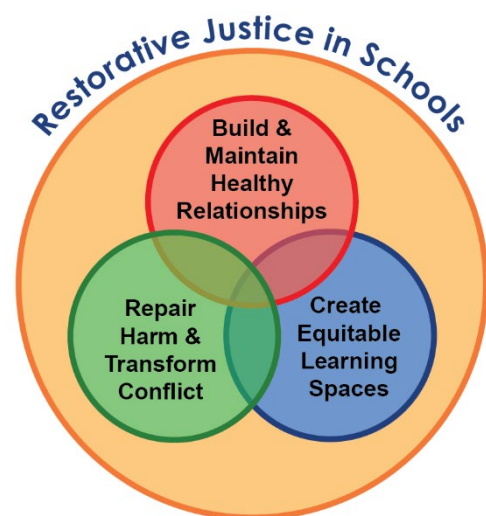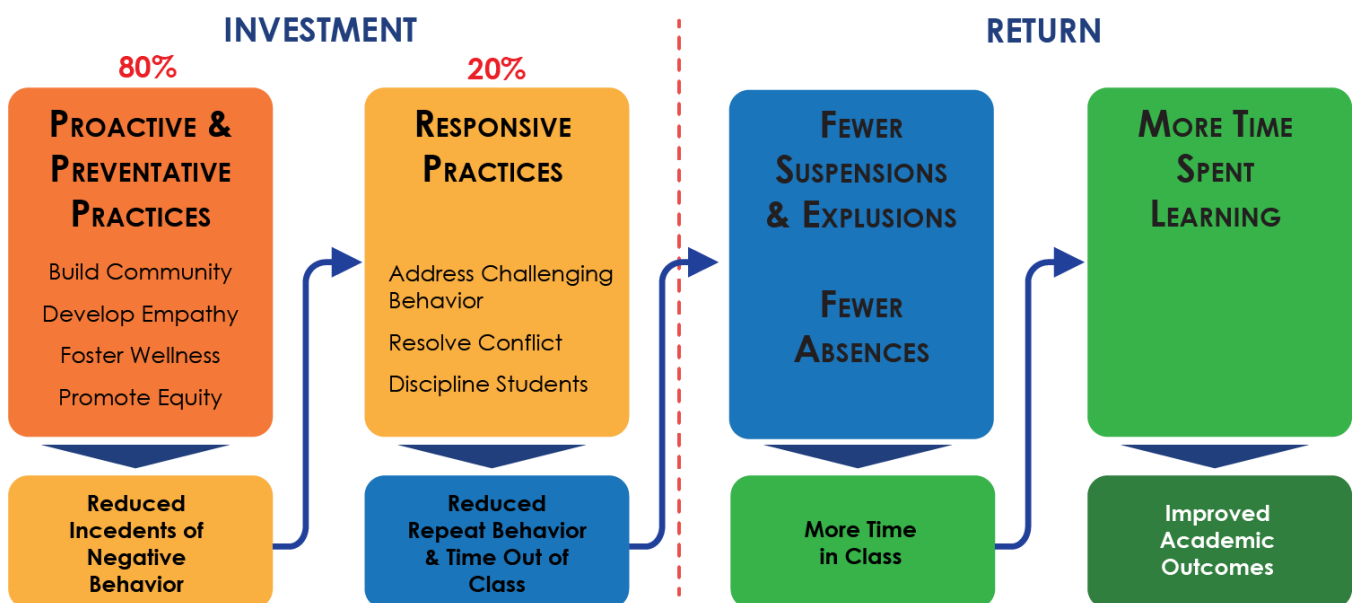
What is Restorative Justice?

Restorative justice is a philosophy and set of supporting practices that center a community around equitable and inclusive relationships of trust, understanding, and collaboration. It has its roots in indigenous approaches to living in relationship with others, including traditions of storytelling in circle and reintegration of those who have harmed others within the community. These practices are trauma-informed and provide ample opportunities for social-emotional learning for students, school staff, and families. Restorative practices seek to address the root causes of student behavior issues and give students and staff the tools and strategies they need to repair and improve relationships and communication, thus providing the foundation for learning to occur for all students.[6]

Core to the restorative justice framework is the belief that by taking a proactive approach, schools can help teachers and staff to recognize student trauma, create spaces for students and staff to express themselves emotionally, and establish policies and processes that empower teachers to use restorative responses that promote trust, compassion, inclusivity, accountability, safety, equity, collaboration, and growth.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE KEEPS KIDS LEARNING

INVESTMENT

RETURN

80%

PROACTIVE & PREVENTATIVE PRACTICES

Build Community
Develop Empathy
Foster Wellness
Promote Equity

Reduced Incidents of Negative Behavior

20%

RESPONSIVE PRACTICES

Address Challenging Behavior
Resolve Conflict
Discipline Students

Reduced Repeat Behavior & Time Out of Class

FEWER SUSPENSIONS & EXPLUSIONS

FEWER ABSENCES

More Time in Class

MORE TIME SPENT LEARNING

Improved Academic Outcomes

Specific practices include active listening, safe spaces, peer mediation, restorative communication, and restorative circles. In restorative justice, the two main types of circle practices are proactive circles and responsive circles. **Responsive circles** are typically used after an incident or harm has occurred, with the intention of healing harms, correcting wrongs, and bringing everyone back into the school community. In contrast, practitioners use **proactive circles** to create positive school culture and climate and prevent minor or serious incidents. Schools that employ these techniques can create a sense of community ownership where youth and adults work together to resolve issues and build relationships.[7]

When embedded in schools, restorative justice practices can help foster a more productive, safer learning environment where students feel they have a voice and a means of participation. As such, restorative justice programs have been gaining in popularity in the U.S. over the last two decades as an alternative to exclusionary discipline policies.

Latest Research on Impact of Restorative Justice in Schools

A growing body of research indicates promising results of restorative justice approaches impacting school climate, student behavior, and relationships among students and with staff.[8]

Restorative Justice Improves
- School climate
- Student connectedness
- Family & community engagement
- Student achievement
- Student support from school staff

Restorative Justice Decreases
- Exulsionary discipline
- Harmful student behavior

WestEd conducted an extensive literature review focused on restorative justice approaches in U.S. primary and secondary schools. Most programs are still relatively new, and there are still a limited number of evaluations and other studies; however, there is some evidence that restorative justice has resulted in an improved school climate.[9] [10] [11] Other reports indicate that restorative justice has led to increased student connectedness, greater community and parent engagement, improved student achievement, and greater student supports from school staff.[12] [13] Finally, nearly all of the empirical studies included in the WestEd review reported a decrease in exclusionary discipline and harmful behavior after implementing restorative programming.[14]

How RestorativeDC Supports Restorative Justice Implementation

Since 2015, the District's Office of the State Superintendent of Education has provided funding to support the implementation of restorative justice and restorative practices in public and public charter schools. More recently, the District enacted the Student Fair Access to School Act of 2018. This law requires changes to student discipline policies over the course of three school years, with changes fully completed by SY 2021-22. The law limits the number of days of out-of-school suspension students can receive for a single disciplinary incident.

As a result of this financial support, SchoolTalk's RestorativeDC has been able to provide consultative, coaching, and training services to individuals and schools. These services respond to schools' unique contexts, priorities, and needs. These activities are simultaneously focused on building capacity of both individuals and at the school level, with the acknowledgement that both must happen for true change to occur.

Individual Capacity Building

These activities focus on shifting mindset, building skills and practices, and coaching on how to use these skills within specific school situations and settings through:

- **Professional development:** Training and workshops to introduce and explore key elements of restorative justice; and
- **Follow-up coaching:** Personalized sessions with a restorative justice expert who can support skill building and implementation.

Organizational & Schoolwide Change

Based on research and implementation science, we know that significant organization-level change requires attention to staffing, policies, and schoolwide practices that are aligned to restorative principles. RestorativeDC supports schools in this effort through:

- **Whole School Technical Assistance:** Intensive and collaborative technical support and coaching over three to five years for schools that want to make a long-term commitment to integrating restorative justice into their overall philosophy and school culture; and
- **Targeted Technical Assistance:** School-level customized support to address a specific critical need, identify the root causes of concern, and develop a tailored solution.

D.C. Schools Reached

Since 2015, RestorativeDC has worked with 86 public and public charter schools in the District. RestorativeDC worked with 42 of those schools in SY 2020-21 alone.
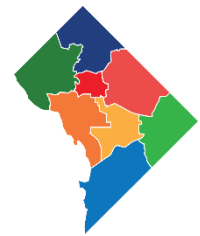
Schools Served through Whole School Approach (Since 2015)

Time Implementing	Schools (DCPS)	Schools (PCS)	Total
3+ years	9	2	11
2 years	3	6	9
1 year	1	3	4
Total	**13**	**11**	**24**

Schools Served through Targeted Technical Assistance (Since 2015)

Time Implementing	Schools (DCPS)	Schools (PCS)	Total
3+ years	1	2	3
2 years	12	17	29
1 year	22	24	48*
Total	**35**	**43**	**80***

This total includes two TA recipients that are not public or public charter schools in the District.

Note: Some schools received both targeted technical assistance and whole school support.

Impact of the Pandemic

When schools closed in March 2020, RestorativeDC found that not only did the delivery model need to change, but schools' needs also changed. Prior to the pandemic, RestorativeDC provided services almost entirely in person but were able to successfully adapt programming to an online delivery model almost immediately. RestorativeDC's shifted focus to help school staff maintain relationships and engage with students and families who were suddenly isolated and reliant on virtual technology. Since schools were no longer having to respond to behavior, particularly serious incidents, in the same way they did in person, they found that the biggest challenge became addressing the many barriers keeping students from participating in this new form of schooling. RestorativeDC's programming adapted to meet schools' needs as they evolved.

"The thing that I'm most grateful of in this year is how quickly RestorativeDC was able to pivot to what our exact needs were. To offer us some opportunities for our staff and for our students, things that we probably wouldn't have been able to do if we were in person, by understanding that the need was different." —Whole School Middle School Principal

"When students are in front of you, you have a really good sense of how they are, but behind a computer screen it's just a lot harder to know how they're feeling on a given day" —Whole School Elementary School Principal

Many school staff reported that they felt well-prepared to pivot when the pandemic hit because they had restorative justice teams and strategies already in place to identify and respond to the needs of student, staff, families, and school community, even as those needs changed.

RestorativeDC training and professional development participants consistently reported that they were able to translate their in-person restorative practices to a virtual environment and many relied on RestorativeDC's tools and guidance to help their fellow teachers keep circles going and model of restorative mindset for others.

SY 2020-21 Evaluation: Participant Feedback & Impact

RestorativeDC conducted a series of evaluation activities during the 2020-21 school year to better understand how schools were using restorative practices—both prior to and during the pandemic—and the conditions required for successful restorative justice implementation. RestorativeDC collected data from post-professional development surveys and focus groups and interviews with students, principals, and staff working in public and public charter schools in the District. RestorativeDC collected data from schools partner schools and individual RestorativeDC training participants from across the District.[15]

Principal Interviews

The results show that **participants felt that restorative practices had positively impacted their school communities**, both before and during the pandemic. Of the 13 Whole School principals surveyed, **100%** agree that their work with **RestorativeDC has had a positive impact on their school**.

"In my 17 years in public education in D.C., the work with RestorativeDC has been the most impactful." —*Whole School High School Administrator*

"You could see a difference in our referrals and behavior. Teachers are more equipped with how to give nonverbal cues and use restorative language… We already know that suspension is not the answer, and now we are seeing our staff have more of a restorative mindset, thinking about how to keep students inside the school." —*Whole School PreK-8 Principal*

"Our school culture as a whole has thrived because of this work because it allows people to be vulnerable and collaborative about addressing things in our school and creates an environment to work together to achieve academic goals." —*Whole School High School Principal*

Principals indicated a variety of positive impacts of working with RestorativeDC, including a decrease in referrals and negative student behavior, teachers being more equipped to use restorative practices and engage students where they are, a more positive school culture and schoolwide restorative mindset, and fostering a collaborative environment focused on continuous improvement and achieving academic goals.

Training Participants

In SY 2020-21, SchoolTalk strengthened the capacity of **over 1,280 educators from 179 schools** with restorative justice training & coaching to prepare staff for the return to in-person learning. Participants reported that training on restorative practices was particularly helpful during a time of high stress and anxiety related to the pandemic. Based on exit surveys from RestorativeDC sessions:

- **Nearly every** participant said they would be **likely to recommend the training** to others, with **86%** reporting they would be **very likely**;
- **99%** of participants said they were **likely to implement the strategies** they learned, with **87%** reporting they were **very likely**;
- **Nearly every** participant found the training useful, with **91%** reporting they found it to be very useful; and
- **100% of principals** receiving whole school technical assistance reported that **RestorativeDC supports their needs**.

In 2021, RestorativeDC conducted a more in-depth follow-along survey of over 100 program participants, who were asked to reflect on the extent to which they were able to apply what they learned and how it impacted their work.

- **70%** indicated they were **able to apply what they learned to their work.**
- **89%** felt that training and related activities **impacted their mindset**;
- **91%** felt that training and activities **impacted their practice**; and
- **97%** felt that participating in RestorativeDC sessions had a **positive impact on their work**.

How D.C. Schools Use Restorative Practices

RestorativeDC's evaluation also examined how schools and staff were using restorative practices across multiple areas to impact change and build community. RestorativeDC conducted interviews with principals and school staff to learn more about skills and strategies

they were using to support restorative justice implementation in the seven key areas of RestorativeDC's Whole School model, outlined below.

Positive School Climate & Culture

Many principals reported using restorative practices to create a positive learning environment in their schools. This includes responding to student discipline and conflict issues as well as more proactive approaches designed to give students tools and strategies and safe spaces to engage productively with others.

"I have created a classroom culture where students know that it is okay to make mistakes and where students support each other. In my classroom, my students also hold each other responsible for their words and actions." —*Teacher*

Restorative Discipline, Policies & Practices

The evaluation identified examples of schools where leaders and staff actively examined and revised discipline policies, shifting away from punishment and towards a more supportive stance of helping students navigate challenging situations and avoid future misbehavior. In a virtual setting, some schools reported applying a restorative approach to truancy, seeking to understand the barriers keeping students from logging on and attending class.

Youth Engagement

One of RestorativeDC's key focuses during the pandemic was raising the voices of D.C. students. In spring 2020, RestorativeDC launched the **Our City Our Voice** (OCOV) program, a citywide collaboration between SchoolTalk, Youth Justice, Inc., and E.L. Haynes Public Charter School. OCOV continued in SY 2020-21, adding new school partners: Alice Deal Middle School,

"Sometimes you think that you are the only one going through what you are feeling but in circles you hear that you aren't the only experiencing tough times." —*Secondary School Student*

Columbia Heights Education Campus, and Excel Academy Public Charter School. OCOV provides youth a platform for discussing their experiences with virtual learning, social distancing, and connecting with others. Students reported that the school and city groups gave them something to look forward to, helped them connect with other people, developed their presentation and public speaking skills and self-confidence, and provided a platform for talking about important topics such as current events and social justice.

Staff Engagement

Many schools reported using restorative practices to engage staff, build community, and navigate conflict amongst adults (or between adults and students). Using a restorative approach helped adults convene and connect effectively while also promoting staff wellness and improved staff interactions with and attitudes towards students.

Community Engagement

The pandemic gave families new access to classrooms via online learning and many teachers found themselves reflecting on and adapting the way they communicated with students and families in more supportive and positive ways. Schools reported taking a restorative approach to family engagement, going beyond responding to individual incidents with students and working to build a deeper level of connection.

> "It is our belief that our work with restorative justice is why we've been so successful in the virtual space… Families feel supported in the virtual space because of our restorative justice work." —*School Staff*

Assessment

The evaluation found that schools furthest along in implementing restorative practices were particularly thoughtful about what worked—and what did not—and continually sought to improve. They used data to make decisions and guide school priorities. This included using data to identify students most in need of support, when restorative practices are most appropriate, and how and when to apply

school resources. Capturing data during virtual learning was challenging, however, and schools continue to grapple with the best way to document implementation and its effects on school culture and climate.

Leadership

School leaders play an important role in implementing restorative justice. At schools successfully implementing restorative justice, RestorativeDC noted that principals set schoolwide expectations; modeled restorative practices for staff, parents, and students; established structures and policies to support effective implementation; and held staff accountable.

"The leadership team I work on, especially the principal, takes restorative justice very seriously, and very personally. He does everything he can to make those connections with parents and gives students an opportunity to make amends rather than just be the disciplinarian of previous generations." —*Technical TA School High School Dean of Students*

Keys to Success & Barriers to Implementation

Through evaluation activities this past year, RestorativeDC was able to identify factors that contribute to successful implementation of restorative practices and barriers to widespread school-level change.

Schools with the most success in implementing restorative practices:

- Embed restorative justice across school culture;
- Build buy-in by creating opportunities for staff to experience practices themselves;
- Invest adequate time in training and preparing staff; and
- Create safe spaces for building trust and addressing conflict.

Although schools are finding restorative justice to be incredibly beneficial to their school communities, the **most common barriers** to widespread implementation of schoolwide restorative practices can be grouped into three categories, detailed below.

- **Logistical and structural barriers**, such as the investment of time needed to implement restorative practices; the need for distributed responsibility for restorative justice among staff, not just a single person; and accountability and consistency.
- **Mindset and culture change**, particularly the need for buy-in across school staff and leadership, shifting from a punitive to a restorative framework, and identifying and addressing bias.
- **Impact of pandemic**, including establishing and maintaining connection and community and adapting proactive and responsive strategies for virtual learning and keeping students engaged.

Leadership

School leaders play a unique and critical role in the implementation of restorative practices. Successful restorative school leaders:

- Create and communicate a high-level vision and set expectations from the top;
- Ensure restorative practices are in place and staff are aware of them;
- Model and set tone with staff, parents, and students;
- Ensure ownership of restorative practices is not limited to one or two staff; and
- Know when and how to seek support.

How Restorative Justice Can Help in Post-Pandemic Recovery

The return to school in 2021-22 has presented an opportunity to rebuild disrupted school communities. Schools and educators need to balance a variety of goals and objectives, including academic acceleration, social and emotional learning, integration of trauma-informed supports, reestablishment of school norms and routines, parent and family engagement, community building, and implementation of systems for monitoring student attendance, engagement, and discipline. As these activities do not happen overnight, **schools need ongoing support for this work to happen amidst the other significant health and safety requirements of returning to school**.

Using the lens of restorative justice, schools can work to address the root causes of student behavior, build and heal relationships, teach positive behaviors, and ensure students are learning. Restorative justice can serve as a coordinating framework for public and public charter schools in the District as they link important post-pandemic reintegration and recovery efforts and attend to specific issues, such as:

- **Reestablishing routines, rituals, and school structures to create a sense of belonging and trust.** Students missed more than a year of in-person instruction. Their families may have had personal losses and felt financial strain. The return to school feels so different for many students. An entire class graduated without a formal goodbye. Two new classes of students arrived, all of whom are new to their school buildings and unfamiliar with their schools' in-person routines and rituals. Also, students and teachers lack a sense of connectedness and community.

- **Assessing student and staff mental health needs, providing access to services with the help of community partners, and prioritizing compassion and empathy.** Prior to the pandemic, there was evidence of increasing rates of stress, anxiety, and trauma in young people,[16] which were exacerbated by remote schooling and economic and emotional hardships families faced.[17] While schools have reopened and are trying to return to "normal," it is important to acknowledge that students and staff are likely struggling with grief, uncertainty, and unresolved trauma.

- **Evaluating school safety policies and practices and developing a clear approach for deescalating conflicts.** There are troubling reports of increased violence in and around schools, indicating that students may be having difficulty readjusting to school.[18] The extended period of isolation and trauma has left students emotionally and psychologically scarred and unprepared for managing social situations with peers and adults. When done in a way that is inclusive of the entire school climate, schools can use restorative practices to address many factors that have led to higher levels of anxiety, stress, and depression during the pandemic.[19]

Call to Action: System-Level Support to Build Individual & School Capacity

Restorative practices have played a critical role in building positive school climates, responding to incidents and conflict, and supporting staff and students in public and public charter schools in the District. Continued investment is critical to building skills and mindsets at the individual level and in influencing school-level organizational change.

Successful implementation of restorative processes takes time, committed leadership, and an on-going allocation of staff and financial resources. Given the importance of the pandemic recovery, when restorative practices are needed more than ever, it will be important to support on-going investments in restorative justice training for teachers and staff in public and public charter schools in the District. This includes training for new staff as well as scaffolded learning opportunities for those with more experience and understanding.
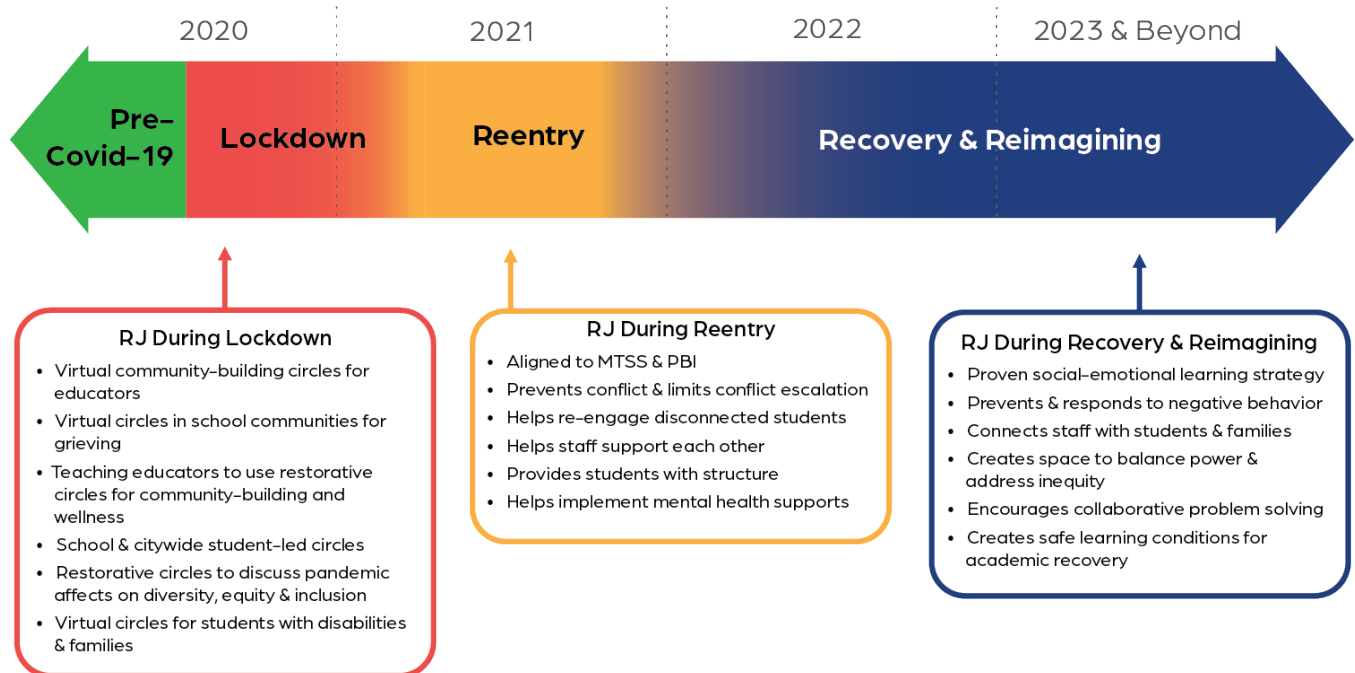
> **"Every school is going to need this!** I'm glad we are at the place we are, because you have to prepare for scholars who have been at home for a year and a half, scholars where their homes are NOT their safe place, how that trauma is going to come to school with them. Are we going to police them or are we going to have system in place to support them?" — *Whole School Elementary School Principal*

In addition to professional development, schools need to ensure staff have time to practice restorative processes and work in collaboration. One-on-one coaching sessions and on-site technical assistance can be very effective in helping schools to personalize the work, build staff capacity, and address issues as they arise.

Continued dedicated resources towards widespread restorative practices in D.C. schools can have a tremendous impact on creating safe and supportive environments for school staff and students as they recover from the ongoing pandemic.

Restorative Justice: From Lockdown through Recovery

| 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 & Beyond |

Pre–Covid-19 | **Lockdown** | **Reentry** | **Recovery & Reimagining**

RJ During Lockdown
- Virtual community–building circles for educators
- Virtual circles in school communities for grieving
- Teaching educators to use restorative circles for community–building and wellness
- School & citywide student–led circles
- Restorative circles to discuss pandemic affects on diversity, equity & inclusion
- Virtual circles for students with disabilities & families

RJ During Reentry
- Aligned to MTSS & PBI
- Prevents conflict & limits conflict escalation
- Helps re-engage disconnected students
- Helps staff support each other
- Provides students with structure
- Helps implement mental health supports

RJ During Recovery & Reimagining
- Proven social–emotional learning strategy
- Prevents & responds to negative behavior
- Connects staff with students & families
- Creates space to balance power & address inequity
- Encourages collaborative problem solving
- Creates safe learning conditions for academic recovery

About SchoolTalk

SchoolTalk is a D.C.-based nonprofit that supports youth with disabilities and their peers to thrive in school and achieve fulfilling postsecondary outcomes by creating spaces that emphasize self-determination, community building, and inclusion. We focus on restorative justice and inclusive education—and where those two spheres intersect. Our programs are designed to improve postsecondary outcomes for youth through youth leadership and mentoring, building the skills of both students and education professionals, and engaging youth in workforce development activities. **www.SchoolTalkDC.org**

About RestorativeDC

SchoolTalk's RestorativeDC is a community-based initiative that provides technical assistance to support D.C. schools in the integration of restorative justice philosophy and practices into school communities. Our team has a deep knowledge base that spans multiple restorative justice models and practices, as well as complementary expertise in social work, drama therapy, non-violent communication, positive discipline, coaching, trauma-informed practices, special education, and more. RestorativeDC is supported by funding from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education. **www.RestorativeDC.org**

Endnotes

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