

Applying Restorative Practices to Minneapolis Public Schools Students Recommended for Possible Expulsion

A Pilot Program Evaluation of the Family and Youth Restorative Conference Program

Executive Summary - February 2014



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
Driven to DiscoverSM

School of Nursing
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Overview

Starting in 2008, Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) has offered restorative justice services for students recommended for expulsion, in partnership with the Legal Rights Center of Minneapolis, a community nonprofit. In 2010, the University of Minnesota joined this partnership as an external evaluator, undertaking a multi-year evaluation aimed at assessing program effectiveness.

A full technical report, published in December, 2013 and available at www.legalrightscenter.org, summarizes the pilot evaluation of the Family and Youth Restorative Conference Program (RCP), implemented by Legal Rights Center staff in conjunction with MPS staff.

The RCP utilizes family group conferencing as a restorative intervention strategy. This approach is grounded in a youth development framework. School administrators have the opportunity to provide additional resources as part of the disciplinary intervention, while acknowledging the reality that some behavioral incidents require students to be temporarily removed from and/or required to transfer schools.

Evaluation Design

The evaluation design of the RCP specified collection of pre- and post-conference surveys of students and one participating parent/guardian and school record data, including attendance, suspensions, and indicators of academic achievement, during the year prior, year of the disciplinary intervention, and year after.

Surveys assessed student outcomes related to program satisfaction, awareness of community supports, positive communication with family members, increased levels of problem solving and connection to school, and reduced levels of problem behavior at school. Parent/guardian surveys rated satisfaction with the program, awareness of community and school supports, and communication with their child.

To test for significant changes between responses at the pre-conference and post-conference surveys, paired t-tests were conducted using the SPSS

statistical software package. Changes in school records at the three time points were assessed using repeated measures analysis of variance.

Results reported here are from survey data collected between March 2010 and August 2012, and school records data from four school years (2009-10 to 2012-13). School records data were collected for all 90 students for whom parents consented to participation in the evaluation. A total of 83 students and 90 parents/guardians completed pre-conference surveys during this time period and, of those, 59 students and 73 family members completed a post-conference survey (approximately 6 weeks later), yielding follow-up rates of 71% and 81%, respectively.

Student Characteristics

Demographic data for the evaluation reflect the challenges of disproportionate minority representation in school discipline systems. A third of all students who make up the student body of

Student Characteristics

Race

55% African Americans
15% Multicultural
12% American Indian
10% Latino
7% White

Gender

63% Males
37% Females

Incidents Leading to Referral

Middle School:

55% Assault
27% Weapons
18% Other*

High School:

41% Assault
30% Weapons
29% Other*

*Other: drugs, theft, etc.

Socioeconomic Status

90% Eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch
92% Family Income Below 200% of Federal Poverty Level

Exposure to Violence

78% Have seen someone get beat up, stabbed, or shot with a gun

MPS in 2012 were African American, compared to over half of students who participated in this evaluation. With regard to socioeconomic status, 90% of participating students were eligible for free or reduced lunch compared to about two-thirds of all MPS students in 2012-13.

- **Involvement in serious behavioral incidents decreases** for students actively attending MPS schools **the year after RCP participation**, as measured by number of suspensions and days suspended

Findings

Highlights of survey data results:

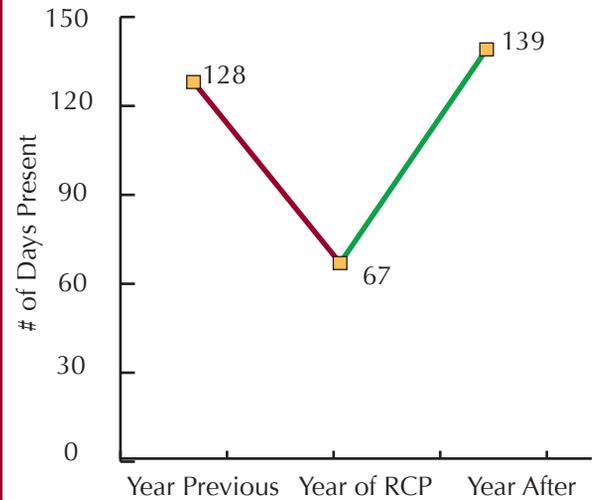
- **Very high levels of program satisfaction** were reported by both students and parents/guardians
- Students reported **positive, significant increases in their ability to make good choices** about how to act, even when they are upset (from pre- to post-conference)
- Compared to pre-conference, students were more likely to agree that **students know someone they could ask for help at school** post-conference
- **Students reported significantly less fighting and skipping school** on the post-conference survey
- **Positive increases in family communication** were reported both by students and their family members on the post-conference survey
- **Parents/guardians reported significantly higher levels of connection to their child's school** on the post conference survey, in addition to **greater awareness of community resources to help them support their child** to do better at school

With regard to analysis of school records, over half of students who participated in the RCP were not actively attending MPS schools during the school year after their participation; this is likely indicative of mobile population students and their families, among other factors.

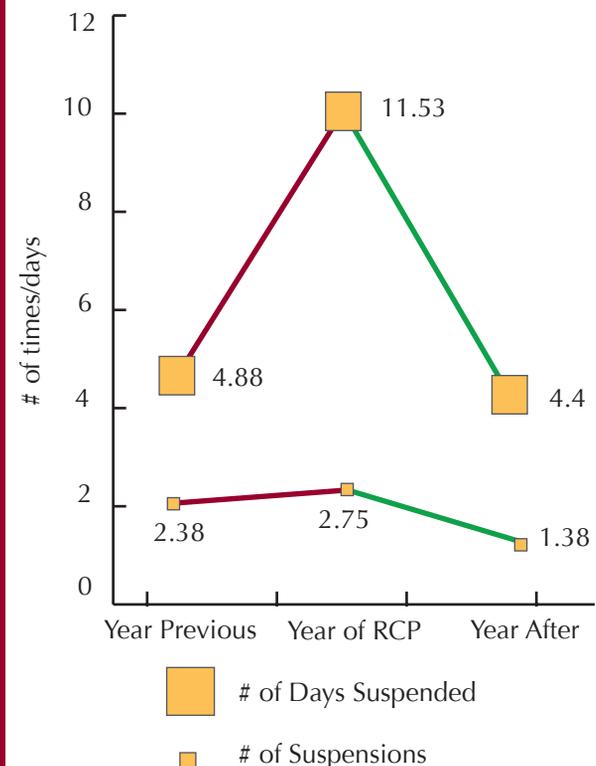
Highlights of school records data for students:

- **Attendance drops dramatically** during the year of the behavioral incident that led to a recommendation for expulsion and then **increases sharply up during the year after RCP participation** for students who were actively attending MPS schools

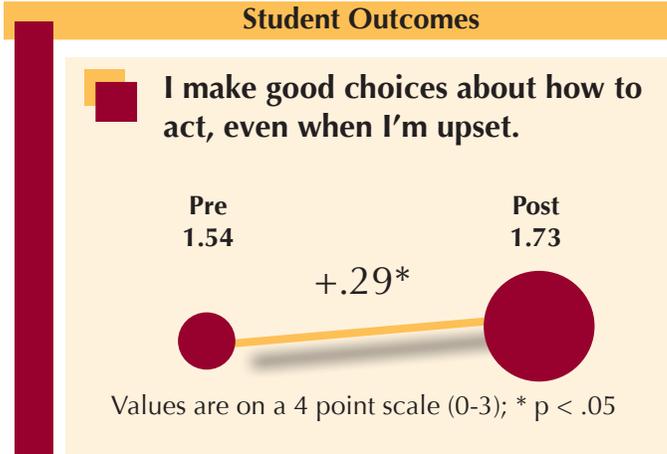
Average # of School Days Present (n=40)



Average Number of Suspensions and Days Suspended (n=40)



- The proportion of students who were tagged as **being on track to graduate increases the year after RCP participation**, as active MPS students earned credits and took proficiency tests



Discussion

Based on the results shared here and in the technical manual, participating in the RCP effectively increases parent engagement and student connections to school and appears to have a positive impact on student academic progress. These promising findings are likely due to a combination of high program satisfaction, leading to ongoing engagement with the restorative process, and effective program practices.

Participant satisfaction with a program is an indicator of how well that program supports the needs of students and families involved. It is clear from post-conference surveys that student and parent participation in the RCP was a positive experience.

MPS staff members also shared examples of experiences with families where mistrust and dissatisfaction with schools and the district had characterized interactions regarding student disciplinary incidents. This was not the case during the RCP process. Given that RCP is used as an adjunct support for disciplinary action that usually requires a temporary change of schools, the level of parent satisfaction appears to be a remarkable demonstration of the success a program may have in respectfully engaging parents as partners to resolve difficult behavioral challenges.

The evaluation also finds evidence of effective program practice. Results indicate that participation in the RCP increases student and parent connection to school and family communication and improves student self-report behavior while returning students to a path of academic progress, as indicated by better

attendance, fewer suspensions, continued credit accrual, slight increases in GPA, and increases in the number of students on track to graduate.

Strengths and Limitations

This evaluation benefits from certain strengths but also has limitations.

Strengths include:

- Multiple** sources of data
- A pre-post survey allowing examination of **within-student change**
- Assessment** of follow-up outcomes in students' school records **the year after** participation in the RCP
- Measurement not only of behavioral outcomes but also **positive youth development** factors such as connections to family, school, and community, which are a key focus of restorative measures programming
- High** survey response **rates**
- Triangulated evidence of **positive trends** from all sources of data increase confidence in the validity of the results

Limitations include:

- The lack of a comparison group in this one-group pre- and post-test study design
- The small number of students who have three years of MPS records ($n \sim 40$)

Conclusion

Taken together, the survey and school records data indicate that the Family and Youth Restorative Conference Program has a positive impact on at-risk students. The evaluation demonstrates evidence of positive changes in behavior, attitudes, and opinions for both students and family members who participate. Given that temporary exclusion from school and involuntary school transfers can be a precursor to disengagement from school, the RCP appears to interrupt downward trajectories and return students to a path of academic progress. Additional research is recommended to understand the impact of RCP as compared to more traditional disciplinary actions.