With restorative practices, many schools have experienced a reduction in suspension rates as well as improvements in overall school climate. Restorative practices occur in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) classroom community building circles, teaching and curriculum circles, attendance circles, and circles to repair harm resulting from conflicted situations. In MPS, restorative justice practices are implemented in schools with three fundamental goals in mind:
Some schools use restorative practices as a philosophical approach to building relationships. Some schools build community by seeking strategies and approaches that increase the levels of trust that grow relationships fundamentally supportive of a pro-socially functioning sense of community in classrooms. Below, the trust model depicts the interplay between and amongst Community, Relationships, and Trust.


In the past few years, some MPS high schools chose to implement restorative practices in a rather unique manner, by instituting an academic course where students learn about restorative justice theory and then practically apply it with students facing school suspensions. Here is what one student peer advisor had to say about his experiences with the “repairing harm circle process” in his high school:

“How does it feel helping other people? It makes me feel good. I have so much pride now... like I’m the richest person because I have a bank full of pride. It helps me feel much better when I can help people. Restorative justice helped me realize that I’m helping people, and people are getting help, and that’s a good thing.”

Another student peer advisor talked about his personal struggles and how enrolling in the restorative justice academic course transformed him:

“I was on the verge of being a menace to society. Restorative justice helped a lot, because I was on the road to doing a lot of wrong, a lot. Honestly, I believe if it wasn’t for the class or if I wasn’t in the class thinking the way I thought, I probably wouldn’t even be here... really, because I probably would be out in the hallway skipping somewhere. If not skipping, I just wouldn’t even be in school or probably be in jail.”
From an historical perspective, during the 2007-2008 school year, MPS had a rate of suspensions far exceeding most school districts in the nation. For instance, during the 2007-2008 school year, 27.0% of MPS students were suspended on at least one occasion. That resulted in 87,051 suspensions and 148,737 school days missed due to suspensions in the 2007-08 school year alone (MPS Data Warehouse, 2008). Additionally, according to MPS Data Warehouse (2008) figures, on any given day in all K-12 MPS schools, 12% of students were absent from their classes (Pritchard, Johnson, Kruse, Cotton, & Doneis, 2008). A review of 2007-2008 as well as the prior three years, beginning with the 2004-2005 school year, reflects increases in suspensions, despite declines in enrollment in the MPS district.

Table: Four Year Trend of Suspensions within the Milwaukee Public School District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Years</th>
<th>All Students</th>
<th>Number of Students Suspended at Least Once</th>
<th>Percentage of Students Suspended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004-2005</td>
<td>98,549</td>
<td>21,607</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2006</td>
<td>97,144</td>
<td>22,398</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2007</td>
<td>97,042</td>
<td>24,148</td>
<td>24.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>94,347</td>
<td>25,474</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(MPS Data Warehouse, 2008)

These high rates of student suspensions for discipline caused the school district’s administrators to proactively seek solutions and alternatives to suspensions as a primary form of discipline for student misconduct. One such potential solution, restorative justice practices, gained favor with MPS. Prosecutors from the Milwaukee District Attorney’s office began working in tandem with efforts at the school district. As a result, restorative practices are rapidly growing within MPS.

How do repairing harm circles work? Peers help peers. Here is how one student peer advisor summed up her views on the efficacy of the circle process in her high school:

“Restorative justice just pretty much... it enlightens the person that we bring in our circle about what problem that they just committed or who they harmed. And, it just opens their eyes up to that and opens their eyes up to different ways of solving problems. I believe it’s a hundred percent better than a suspension.”

Students yearn for an environment of trust. One male high school student talked about the experience of feeling like the class developed a sense of family: “I basically feel like I can speak on anything in that class and trust that they are not going to go outside of that circle and tell anybody and everybody.” Restorative justice promotes a level of safety and personal security, best expressed by a student peer advisor from a different urban high school: “We
actually have these points of connections, and so we’re all kind of close friends right now. It’s like once everybody starts sharing things, that’s something deep from within them. You really can’t break that trust bond.”

Part of the reason why restorative practices have taken such strong roots in Milwaukee Public Schools is due to the fact that the philosophy expresses the values of peacemaking and respect for humanity:


Today, thousands of MPS principal leaders, assistant principals, teachers, staff, students, and parents have been trained by professionals from MPS in partnership with members of the Milwaukee District Attorney’s office. MPS school social workers and school psychologists participate in “Professional Learning Communities” to deepen their understanding of restorative justice practices with one another. These communities meet monthly to discuss and share resources to expand restorative practices throughout the school district. These professionals want to improve schools in order to produce students who will become leaders in restoratively transforming their communities.