



Restorative Justice Practices in Allegheny County Schools *An Allegheny County Education Research Brief*

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Introduction: Restorative Justice in Schools

In Allegheny County, schools are working to create safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environments, but disparities in discipline continue to affect students' opportunities and experiences. Black students, particularly Black girls, remain disproportionately impacted by exclusionary practices and school-based arrests, with Pittsburgh Public Schools arresting students at eight times the rate of Philadelphia Public Schools despite similar state laws¹. Research and evidence show that well-implemented restorative practices can address these challenges by repairing harm, tackling root causes of behavior, fostering accountability, and strengthening community. In some Allegheny County districts, efforts are already underway to introduce restorative models, launch programs in schools, and evaluate early implementation and outcomes. The next step is to expand these practices with fidelity, adequate resources, and strong support systems so that all students can develop the relational skills, empathy, and sense of community that contribute to positive school climates. Building on early successes with sustained investment, leadership, and data-driven evaluation will ensure restorative initiatives are effective, equitable, and capable of supporting long-term improvements in student outcomes.

This brief examines the development and implementation of restorative practices in Allegheny County schools and provides a snapshot of the current school discipline landscape. It draws on local literature, regional news coverage, and school district resources to understand how policies and practices are communicated and applied. Rather than offering an exhaustive review, the brief highlights key insights from local efforts and situates them within the broader national conversation on school climate, equity, and restorative approaches. It focuses on early successes in reducing exclusionary discipline, explores how practices vary across districts, and identifies evidence-based strategies that support safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments. The brief concludes with actionable recommendations grounded in both research and practice, designed to guide school and district leaders, educators, and community partners in strengthening implementation, building accountability, and advancing equity in school discipline countywide.

Defining Restorative

Restorative justice (RJ) based programs and practices in education grew out of restorative justice models originally developed in the criminal justice system, which sought alternatives to punitive approaches by emphasizing accountability, repair of harm, and reintegration into the community.



In educational settings, the terms *restorative justice* and *restorative practices* are frequently used interchangeably, though restorative justice typically refers to formal, structured responses to harm, while restorative practices include both proactive strategies to build community and reactive strategies to repair harm.² In schools, restorative approaches prioritize repairing harm, addressing the root causes of behavior, and fostering accountability and belonging. Unlike traditional exclusionary discipline practices such as suspensions or expulsions, restorative approaches emphasize inclusion, dialogue, and relationship-building.

Rooted in Indigenous and community-based justice traditions, restorative justice programs began gaining traction in U.S. public schools in the mid-1990s, influenced in part by early pilots in countries such as Australia.³ By the early 2000s, initiatives such as Judge Teske’s school-justice partnership in Clayton County, Georgia, and restorative justice programs in the Oakland Unified School District demonstrated promising outcomes, including reductions in suspensions, court referrals, and racial disparities in school discipline.⁴ Throughout the 2010s, restorative justice gained broader acceptance in large urban districts such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. In Chicago Public Schools, for example, district-wide restorative justice implementation was linked to significantly fewer suspensions and in-school arrests.⁵ By 2020, more than 20 states and Washington, D.C., had integrated restorative justice into educational policy through legislation or formal guidance.⁶

Key Definitions

Restorative justice in schools is a relational and non-punitive approach to discipline that focuses on repairing harm, addressing the needs of all affected parties, and rebuilding relationships within the school community, rather than relying on exclusionary practices like suspension or expulsion.⁷

Restorative practices in schools are strategies that focus on preventing and resolving conflict, repairing harm caused by misbehavior, and strengthening relationships within the school community instead of removing students from the learning environment.⁸

Punitive justice in schools refers to disciplinary approaches that rely on exclusionary measures, such as suspension or expulsion, to address student misbehavior. These strategies focus on deterring misconduct by removing students from the learning environment rather than repairing harm or restoring relationships.⁹

Despite growing evidence and policy adoption, implementation across the U.S. remains uneven. Some districts, including several in Connecticut, have expanded restorative practices, particularly in elementary schools, where improvements in behavior and reductions in school-based arrests have been observed.¹⁰ Others, such as Gwinnett County in Georgia and Clark County in Nevada, have scaled back programs in response to political pressure and concerns about school safety.¹¹ The long-term sustainability of restorative justice depends on strong implementation, leadership commitment, and ongoing evaluation to ensure fidelity and equity in practice.

Restorative Justice in Allegheny County

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, some districts in Allegheny County made significant strides in advancing restorative justice in public education. A strong example is Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) who in 2015 launched the Pursuing Equitable Restorative Communities (PERC) initiative,

backed by a \$3 million federal grant. This districtwide program emphasized relationship-building, student voice, and alternatives to exclusionary discipline. According to a RAND Corporation evaluation, PERC schools experienced lower suspension rates, improved school climate, and decreased racial disparities in discipline, especially in elementary settings.¹²

Local advocacy has played an important role in advancing efforts to address inequities in school discipline. Organizations such as the Black Girls Equity Alliance (BGEA) have helped document and elevate disparities affecting Black girls in Allegheny County schools and the juvenile justice system.¹³ Earlier analyses found that Black girls were referred to the juvenile justice system at disproportionately high rates compared to their peers.¹⁴ More recent data from BGEA's 10-year progress report indicate that, although disparities persist, the overall level of disparity in school discipline and referrals involving Black girls has declined compared to 2016, suggesting measurable progress over the past decade.¹⁵ At the same time, exclusionary discipline practices such as suspensions, citations, and referrals for minor, nonviolent infractions continue to disproportionately affect students of color and students with disabilities, particularly Black girls.¹⁶ These trends highlight both the persistence of inequities and the potential for positive change when targeted advocacy and policy attention are sustained.

Despite these signs of progress, policy implementation across the region remains uneven. Districts vary widely in how discipline reforms and restorative approaches are applied, and many efforts lack consistent oversight, dedicated funding, and accountability structures to support long-term implementation.¹⁷ Research also shows that school discipline policies continue to be applied in ways that disproportionately affect Black girls, emphasizing the need for policies to be consistently monitored and aligned with equitable practices.¹⁸ Frequent leadership turnover and reliance on short-term funding have further limited the expansion of restorative initiatives beyond pilot programs, leaving many promising models externally driven or underdeveloped and reducing districts' capacity to sustain and scale effective approaches over time.

Building Momentum in Allegheny County

Successes with Restorative Justice in Education

Innovative equity-driven initiatives aimed at transforming school climate and reducing reliance on punitive discipline are becoming increasingly visible in Allegheny County, though adoption remains limited to a subset of districts. Of the 43 public school districts in the county, nine explicitly reference restorative practices or restorative justice in their publicly available school discipline policies or handbooks, including Baldwin-Whitehall, Pittsburgh, South Fayette Township, Steel Valley, Sto-Rox, Upper St. Clair, West Allegheny, and West Mifflin Area school districts. In these districts, restorative approaches take many forms, including structured interventions, reentry meetings, community-building circles, and student leadership initiatives, collectively reflecting a commitment to relationship-centered strategies that address root causes of behavior and promote accountability without exclusion.

Several of these efforts have also received attention in regional reporting, demonstrating that restorative justice practices are gaining broader recognition beyond the research community. For example, Steel Valley's use of a Restorative Tardy Room and structured reentry process after suspensions was highlighted for prioritizing student support over punishment,¹⁹ while Sto-Rox School District's partnership with the University of Pittsburgh's Just Discipline Project has been recognized for reducing suspensions and strengthening school relationships.²⁰ These examples

illustrate early momentum and growing interest in fostering more inclusive and supportive school environments, while also highlighting the need for broader adoption and sustained investment. Community organizations and local initiatives have further raised awareness of inequities in school discipline, helping to build the case for expanding restorative practices and providing supports necessary for their effective implementation.

Research for Action (RFA) examined key initiatives and organizations working to improve discipline practices across Allegheny County, highlighting concrete strategies that districts and community partners are using to reduce reliance on punitive approaches and promote equity. These examples offer a window into how targeted, evidence-informed interventions can transform school climate, address systemic disparities, and provide replicable models for other districts seeking more just and supportive environments. They demonstrate that meaningful change is possible when schools, community organizations, and policymakers align around clear, data-driven strategies.

- **The Just Discipline Project in Allegheny County**
The Just Discipline Project, housed at the University of Pittsburgh’s Center on Race and Social Problems, has for the last decade partnered with schools to build relational school climates through restorative practices. While they have a range of partnership approaches, their best practice model places trained coordinators in schools to reduce teachers’ fatigue from new initiatives and to directly lead the implementation strategies that reduce suspensions, improve student-teacher relationships, and address racial disparities in student outcomes.
- **Black Girls Equity Alliance (BGEA)**
Led by Gwen’s Girls, the Black Girls Equity Alliance is a collective of youth-serving organizations focused on addressing systemic inequities affecting Black girls in Allegheny County. Through working groups in education, juvenile justice, child welfare, and health, BGEA develops data-informed strategies and policy recommendations to promote equitable outcomes.
- **American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania (ACLU-PA)**
ACLU-PA’s Student & Youth Rights program works to create public school environments in Pennsylvania where students are treated fairly, their constitutional rights are protected, and they experience fewer instances of unnecessary interactions with police and removals from school instruction. The organization advocates for policy reforms at the state and district levels (including in Allegheny County) and produces a variety of resources such as reports, factsheets, and guidance for school district-level decision-makers.

These efforts and their early successes, described in more detail below, can inform future and ongoing efforts toward just and supportive school environments.

The Just Discipline Project in Allegheny County: Investing in Staff and Building Capacity

A compelling example of progress in reducing exclusionary discipline in Allegheny County is the Just Discipline Project, developed at the University of Pittsburgh. Using restorative practices to improve school climate and address racial disparities, the project has delivered measurable results. In Woodland Hills Intermediate, where the program was first implemented, suspensions fell by 22 percent, office referrals dropped by 30 percent, and academic performance in math, science, and reading improved within just two years.²¹ Over the past decade, schools participating in the program have continued to make positive, sustained progress, with emerging clinical trial

evidence supporting these effects. These findings show that prioritizing relational and restorative approaches can produce tangible, lasting benefits for student behavior, equity, and learning.

A key piece of the model is the use of half- to full-time Restorative Practice Coordinators placed directly in schools. These staff work with teachers and students daily, helping to lead restorative circles, manage conflict, and support students dealing with trauma. Research from the program has shown that when schools invest in such capacity, and make space for these types of relational strategies, students and teachers alike experience stronger community and more consistent support.²² The project also emphasizes meaningful stakeholder engagement as a core part of implementation. Administrators, teachers, and families have been involved from the beginning, which has helped with both buy-in and long-term success²³

Gwen's Girls and the Black Girls Equity Alliance: Cross-Collaboration Approach

Gwen's Girls launched the Black Girls Equity Alliance (BGEA) following its first annual Equity Summit as a community-driven effort to address structural inequities affecting Black girls in Allegheny County. The alliance brings together youth, families, educators, and community organizations through four action teams focused on education, juvenile justice, child welfare, and health.²⁴ Through equity summits, community convenings, and youth-centered discussions, BGEA creates opportunities for Black girls and their families to share their experiences with school discipline and other systems.²⁵ These insights help inform collaborative research, advocacy, and policy recommendations aimed at advancing more equitable outcomes.

BGEA's 2020 report highlighted progress in the Woodland Hills School District, where police involvement declined over two years through partnerships with the Allegheny County Juvenile Court, local law enforcement, the Just Discipline Project, and the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Urban Education. Shawn Thomas, a Restorative Practices Coordinator in the Woodland Hills School District, attributes these changes in part to the trust built with students and families. As he explained, "trust and open communication help us understand where students are coming from and meet their needs before things escalate."²⁶ These relationship-centered practices help schools respond to student needs earlier and reduce reliance on punitive responses, strengthening both safety and student support.

BGEA has continued to call for broader adoption of restorative practices and a shift away from exclusionary discipline. Their reports emphasize that punitive approaches harm school climate overall and disproportionately impact Black students, particularly in districts like Pittsburgh Public Schools, where the arrest rate is eight times higher than Philadelphia's despite identical state laws.²⁷ Regional partners, including the FISA Foundation and The Heinz Endowments, have echoed BGEA's recommendations to scale equity-centered practices in the schools where they're needed most.²⁸ Through sustained research, advocacy, and coalition-building, Gwen's Girls and BGEA continue to elevate models that work and push systems toward more just and supportive environments for Black girls.

ACLU of Pennsylvania: Data-Driven Insights for Restorative Justice Reform

The ACLU of Pennsylvania has influenced school discipline reform in Allegheny County through research, public education, and policy advocacy focused on transparency and accountability. Its 2015 report *Beyond Zero Tolerance* critiques exclusionary discipline policies and promotes the use of restorative practices, positive behavioral supports, and social-emotional learning. As the report explains, "Adoption of these approaches has led to reduction in the use of exclusionary discipline, a reduction in the amount of instructional time lost to discipline, and increased student

engagement.”²⁹ At the same time, the report cautions that discipline reform must go beyond simply lowering suspension rates. It notes that “some districts have reduced suspensions only to see more students get arrested for the same violations.”³⁰ This finding highlights the risk that punitive responses can shift to other systems when schools reduce suspensions without implementing restorative supports or other interventions that address the underlying causes of behavior. By documenting these patterns and sharing the findings publicly, ACLU’s analysis informs policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders. The ACLU’s analysis underscores that effective discipline reform requires both reducing exclusionary practices and strengthening restorative and supportive alternatives

In a later publication examining student arrests, the ACLU analyzed school-reported discipline data alongside court records and found that in Allegheny County student arrests and referrals to police occur more often than are documented by schools. The report also found that these practices fall disproportionately on Black students and students with disabilities.³¹ Based on these findings, the ACLU called for greater transparency and more accurate reporting of police involvement in schools, as well as policy reforms that limit law enforcement involvement in routine school discipline. The report also recommends protecting students with disabilities from inappropriate referrals to law enforcement and redirecting resources toward non-punitive approaches that address student behavior while keeping young people engaged in school.

Research and Evaluation Needs

As school systems in Allegheny County work to improve climate and reduce disparities in discipline, strong research and evaluation systems are critical to guide these efforts. While restorative approaches are increasingly recognized as effective, many districts and schools lack the data tools, evaluation frameworks, and measurement strategies needed to track implementation, assess outcomes, and sustain improvements over time. Without these systems, it is difficult to understand whether reforms are achieving their intended goals, identify areas for adjustment, or make evidence-based decisions about scaling practices. Changes in the political landscape and shifting policy priorities further strain district capacity, making systematic research and evaluation essential for ensuring that efforts to create safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environments remain consistent and impactful.

Locally, many restorative efforts remain limited in scale or duration and are not systematically evaluated. Districts may rely on external partners or temporary funding, making long-term planning difficult. In addition, discipline data is often inconsistently collected or not disaggregated by race, gender, or offense type, which restricts the ability to measure disparities or track change over time.³² This is a significant limitation, especially given continuing evidence that Black students, particularly Black girls, are disproportionately impacted by exclusionary practices.³³

Moreover, few districts use validated tools to measure relational climate, implementation fidelity, or the everyday experiences of students and staff. Reliance on suspension rates or behavioral referrals provides only a narrow view of school culture and often overlooks the relational work that underpins successful restorative models.³⁴

To support improvement and sustainability, several strategic research questions should guide future efforts. These include assessing the cost-effectiveness of full-time, embedded restorative practitioners, understanding how leadership transitions affect program continuity and outcomes, and identifying which supports are most effective for scaling practices across different school contexts. There is also a growing need for evaluation frameworks that can measure both outcomes

and processes, particularly those that reflect the lived experiences of students, educators, and families.³⁵

Additionally, efforts to maximize implementation benefits could examine the role of mindfulness in the effectiveness of RJ-focused programs in schools. Research suggests a mutually reinforcing relationship, as mindfulness practices such as breathing and grounding are commonly embedded in restorative circles to support emotional regulation and readiness for dialogue.³⁶ Restorative settings also create opportunities for collective mindfulness through reflection and active listening, contributing to learning-conducive environments.³⁷ Future research should assess whether intentional mindfulness integration strengthens implementation quality, relational outcomes, and student learning.

With stronger evaluation systems, aligned data collection, and sustained research partnerships, Allegheny County can continue strengthening its commitment to equitable, relationship-centered practices. A more robust evidence base will help inform decision-making, support effective scaling, and ensure that school climate and discipline reforms continue to advance positive outcomes for all students.

Conclusion

Although restorative practices and discipline reforms have expanded in recent years, the need for equitable, relationship-centered approaches remains urgent. Post-pandemic data indicate that while overall suspension rates declined in some districts, racial disparities in exclusionary discipline persist. Black students, and particularly Black girls, continue to experience disproportionately harsh disciplinary outcomes. National analyses show that Black girls receive suspensions and expulsions at rates several times higher than White girls, even when controlling for similar behaviors, indicating that disparities are driven largely by differential treatment within schools rather than differences between schools.³⁸ Student survey data from the 2023 national Youth Risk Behavior Survey similarly indicate disparities in students' experiences of school discipline, with Black students more likely than their peers to report being unfairly disciplined at school in the previous year.³⁹ Together, these findings show that despite some progress, racial disparities in discipline persist, and many restorative efforts remain limited, disconnected, or under-resourced, underscoring the need for systemic, sustained change.

Post-COVID, educators across the region have reported increased behavioral challenges among students. These concerns are often linked to trauma, stress, and unmet mental health needs, particularly in communities most affected by systemic inequities. Without adequate resources or support systems, schools may default to punitive responses such as suspensions and summary citations. This response raises serious concerns, as punitive discipline not only fails to address the root causes of behavior but can also intensify the negative effects of mental health crises. A comprehensive approach that integrates restorative practices with mental health support and trauma-informed care is essential for creating safe, inclusive school environments.

To move from promising models to sustained system-wide change requires building restorative capacity, fostering collaboration, and leveraging data to track progress and reduce disparities, as demonstrated by the Allegheny County organizations featured in this brief. The following policy and practice recommendations on pages 8-9 build on these lessons and are intended to guide schools, districts, and community partners in advancing more equitable and supportive school climates across Allegheny County.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

While budget limitations and competing priorities are real constraints for many districts, there are practical steps that can strengthen school climate and support restorative approaches, even with limited resources. The following recommendations are divided into those that can be implemented with minimal funding and those that may require deeper investment or external partnerships and collaboration. Together, they offer pathways for both sustaining early progress and scaling impact over time.

Low or No-Cost Actions

- **Strengthening Leadership Practices through Professional Culture Shifts:** District and school leaders can take an active role in addressing the root causes of student behavior, including trauma, stress, and dysregulation, by embedding supportive practices into existing leadership structures. This includes using restorative approaches and trauma-informed strategies in staff meetings, aligning school improvement plans with goals for safe and supportive climates, and fostering peer learning among principals to share effective strategies. When formal training is not feasible, leaders can build capacity by sharing best practices across schools and partnering with local experts or community organizations to provide guidance and support.
- **Promoting Transparency Using Existing Data:** Many schools already collect discipline data, but opportunities remain to incorporate measures of restorative practices and strengthen how data is used. Districts can begin by reviewing restorative and discipline patterns disaggregated by race, gender, and disability to better understand trends. Establishing regular opportunities to reflect on data with staff and community stakeholders, such as during professional development days or family engagement events, can foster greater accountability and shared understanding, even before formal reporting systems are in place.
- **Involving Students and Families in Shaping School Climate:** Building inclusive, responsive school environments does not always require new funding. Schools can elevate student voice through existing advisory councils, conduct listening sessions with families, and invite community partners to co-design or review discipline practices. These efforts strengthen trust and help ensure that climate initiatives reflect the lived experiences of those most affected.

Actions Requiring Additional Investment or Partnership

- **Funding and Embedding Restorative Justice Staff:** Where feasible, districts should consider funding full-time, school-based restorative justice practitioners who can lead implementation, coach staff, and respond to conflict throughout the school year. These roles have been shown to support stronger outcomes than training alone and contribute to sustained culture change. To support this work, district leaders can explore blended funding models or partnerships with philanthropy, higher education institutions, or community-based organizations. The Just Discipline project is an example of embedding RJ staff and is free resource based on capacity in Allegheny County.
- **Developing Shared Metrics and Data Systems:** Creating regional or districtwide tools to assess school climate, restorative fidelity, and stakeholder perceptions may require coordination and technical support. However, these systems are critical for evaluating impact and ensuring equity. Funding opportunities may be available through state

initiatives or foundations focused on education equity and youth mental health. Georgia’s Governor’s Office of Student Achievement’s K-12 Student Discipline Dashboard and Gwinnet County Public Schools’ Student Discipline Dashboard serve as state and district examples for assessing school climate across shared indicators.⁴⁰ The Institute of Education Sciences’ resource *School discipline data indicators: a guide for districts and schools* can support identification of metrics and approaches to utilizing key data.⁴¹

- **Scaling Promising Practices Through Multi-Year Planning:** Sustaining and expanding promising models requires intentional, long-term planning. Districts can benefit from identifying small-scale pilots that show success and building on them gradually. Multi-year implementation plans aligned with district priorities, and supported by cross-sector collaboration, can help bring successful approaches to scale while managing time and resource constraints.
- **Incorporate Restorative Justice in School Closure or Realignment Plans:** Districts facing school closures or realignment should prioritize incorporating restorative practices including designated staff and restorative justice training for teachers as part of their plans. As described in RFA’s PACER *Revisiting Research on School Closings*, studies have found tensions often arise between students and teachers from the closed and receiving schools, which can lead to an increase in student fights and cases of bullying.⁴² Districts can proactively prepare school staff to better support students during these changes with restorative practices.

We Want to Hear from You

This report highlights several restorative justice efforts in Allegheny County, but we know there is more happening across the region. If your school, district, or organization is implementing restorative practices that are not included here, we would love to learn from your work. Please share details using [this Google Form](#) so we can better understand and uplift local progress.

Endnotes

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