

Combining *Restorative Practices* with *Diplomas Now*: Initial Results from a Randomized Control Trial Evaluating Impacts on Teacher's Practices, Students' Disciplinary Problems, Suspensions/Expulsions and Conflict in Big City Schools

Ashley Grant^{1,2}, Doug MacIver², Robert Balfanz², Vaughan Byrnes², Emily Clark², and Richard Lofton²

¹Presenting author

²Johns Hopkins University School of Education

Background/Context: Our nation’s largest cities have made considerable progress over the past decade in improving high school graduation rates has helped propel America’s graduation rate to an all-time high of 84% (DePaoli, Balfanz, Atwell & Bridgeland, 2018). However, despite this progress, the graduation rates for Black, Hispanic, and low income students still fall below 80 percent. Unfortunately, the most common response to these disciplinary problems --- zero tolerance/punitive/exclusionary disciplinary policies and practices combined with prison-like “maximum security” measures involving technological surveillance, security personnel, metal detectors, hall sweeps, and locker searches – has proven ineffectual and even counterproductive (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Devine 1996). The proliferation of zero tolerance disciplinary policies in high minority, high-poverty districts—combined with an increased police presence that has led to more arrests for school offenses which in the past would have been handled by school officials—has created a school-to-prison pipeline rather than a school-to-postsecondary-success pathway, and this bleak pipeline has disproportionately impacted African American and Latino students (Sullivan & Morgan, 2010; Texas Appleseed, 2007; Vanderhaar, Petrosko, & Munoz, 2015). Restorative Practices is one promising approach to in the place of exclusionary discipline policies, but little causal evidence exists yet to support this intervention.

Intervention/Program/Practice: This study tests the efficacy of combining *Restorative Practices* (RP, a positive youth development approach to improving the climate for learning; building close, respectful relationships; and holding wrongdoers accountable to their community while systematically reintegrating them) with *Diplomas Now* (DN, a reform model which strengthens learning environments, curriculum, instruction, and professional development and enhances student supports) (see Figure 1). This study focuses on the analysis of outcomes in 2016 after four or five years of Diplomas Now and two years of Restorative Practices. To help schools implement the Restorative Practices element, treatment schools were given the opportunity to receive a four-day-long professional development series from the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP), who also provided support to schools via: developing an implementation and sustainability plan, professional learning groups, and ongoing consulting visits.

Purpose/Objective/Research Question: Did the combined intervention enable schools to respond restoratively when someone misbehaves, actively involve students in restoring relationships, and significantly and substantially reduce the incidence and length of suspensions while simultaneously reducing the occurrence of behavior issues? We hypothesized that schools assigned to the combined intervention would exhibit more restorative practices, less disciplinary problems, and have fewer suspensions.

Setting and Population/Participants/Subjects: The sample consisted of 33 “low performing schools” (20 middle schools and 13 high schools) from 8 large districts. Table 1 provides further descriptive characteristics of the schools in the sample.

Research Design: This impact study is a school-level cluster randomized control trial (RCT). Schools were originally recruited in 2011 and 2012 to participate in the I3 validation study of the Diplomas Now model (a sample of 62 low-performing middle and high schools in 23 randomization blocks in 11 districts). In 2014, we recruited the 33 schools, representing 12 of the randomization blocks, to participate in a new follow-up study of the combined impact of DN and RP. The 17 treatment schools added implementation of RP during the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years to their ongoing implementation of DN and the 16 control schools continued implementing “business as usual” practices of their own choosing.

Data Collection and Analysis: 6 districts provided data (from 11 treatment and 12 control schools) on students' suspensions and attendance rates during the 2015-2016 school year. Students and teachers responded to a questionnaire in Spring 2016 which included: 17 items that asked students to report their teachers' use of some of these signature practices and their own level of involvement in these practices and 10 items asking students and teachers to report the severity of disciplinary problems at the school. Student survey data were collected in ten of the twelve blocks participating in the study, and teacher survey data were collected from seven of the twelve blocks. A two-level HLM analysis (adjusting for school clustering), incorporating block-level fixed effects, estimated the impact of treatment on the overall prevalence of: restorative practices in schools, discipline problems in schools, number of suspensions, and attendance rates. Additionally, a similar logistic regression model was used to estimate the impact of treatment on binary outcomes including suspensions of 3 or more days and attendance less than 90%.

Findings/Results: The treatment was effective in creating a positive contrast between the prevalence of restorative practices in treatment schools compared to control schools (ES = 0.17, $p < .01$, see Table 2). The weighted average treatment effect across all blocks indicated that the overall treatment effect in reducing the severity of disciplinary problems was small and nonsignificant (ES = - 0.07, $p > .50$, see Table 3). Students at treatment schools were 34% less likely to be suspended for 3 or more days of the school year ($p = .03$, see Table 4). Impacts on other suspension-related and attendance outcomes were all in the hypothesized direction but not statistically significant (see Tables 4 and 5).

Conclusions: The results demonstrate that it's possible to increase schools' use of restorative practices significantly -- by combining IIRP's *SaferSanerSchools Whole-School Change Program* (which includes a professional development series, implementation resources, and consulting visits) with the ongoing implementation and supports of the Diplomas Now model -- compared to the uptake of these practices in the control schools. However, the effect size of this treatment contrast -- under one-sixth of a standard deviation -- is small and reflects: a) the difficulty in winning over some of the schools that had been randomly assigned to implement the treatment to embrace the full-range of Restorative Practices and b) the fact that some of the control schools had above average use of these practices. This study provides some initial evidence for the promise of Restorative Practices but also provides questions for future effectiveness research into the potential variation in Restorative Practices implementation and impact.

References

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Figure 1. Logic Model for the Intervention (Embedding *Restorative Practices* within the *Diplomas Now* Model)

INPUTS	OUTCOMES (Those in bold are the study's focus)
<p>1. <i>Restorative Culture and Climate</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development and manuals on: basic restorative concepts and skills, using circles effectively, facilitating restorative conferences, & restorative family engagement • Ongoing consulting, coaching, and professional learning groups on restorative practices to refine skills and build sustainability and self-management • Use of Essential Elements of <i>Restorative Practices</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ School-wide use of affective statements, restorative questions, and small impromptu conferences ○ Broad-based use of proactive circles and responsive circles ○ Targeted-use of restorative conferences ○ School-wide use of fair process and reintegrative management of shame ○ A restorative staff community that models and consistently uses restorative practices with each other ○ A restorative approach to family and community involvement ○ Inappropriate behavior is not ignored but is addressed restoratively • Training of local school staff and partners to become licensed IIRP trainers 	<p><i>Primary Early Outcomes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 1. Increased use of Restorative Practices ➤ 2. Increased tiered supports for students who exhibit early warning indicators of dropout risk <p><i>Primary Intermediate Outcomes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 3. Reduction in the prevalence/severity of disciplinary problems in the school (bullying, fighting, out-of-control classrooms, verbal or physical abuse of teachers or staff, vandalism, weapons possession, use of drugs/alcohol, and gang involvement) ➤ 4. Reduction in the probability that students will be suspended for 3 days or more (and reductions in other suspension outcomes). ➤ 5. Higher student attendance rates and lower chronic absenteeism rates <p>Impacts on outcomes 4 and 5 above are expected to be higher for Black, Hispanic overage, and special education students (who suffer the most under zero-tolerance/punitive/exclusionary approaches)</p> <p><i>Primary Long-term Outcomes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 6. Improved student graduation rates ➤ 7. Increased teacher retention
<p>2. <i>Diplomas Now's Integrated Onsite Support for School Transformation</i> (e.g., on-site team from Talent Development Secondary, City Year, and Communities in Schools)</p>	
<p>3. <i>Diplomas Now's Tiered Student Supports and Interventions Guided by an Early Warning System (EWS)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tiered Intervention Model with EWS response meetings • Tier II Student Supports • Tier III Case-Managed Supports for highest needs students 	
<p>4. <i>Diplomas Now's Strong Curriculum and Instruction with Professional Development</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development, instructional coaching, & professional learning groups for math & English faculty • Curriculum for College Readiness 	
<p>5. <i>Diplomas Now's Strong Learning Environments</i> (e.g., teacher teams with common planning, SLCs, extended class periods)</p>	

Table 1

Characteristic	Characteristics of Study Schools			Difference T-C	p-value
	All Schools N = 33	Treatment n = 17	Control n = 16		
Avg. Enrollment	1004	1016	938	+78	.739
Avg. % FRL	76.2	78.4	73.8	+4.6	.545
Avg. % Minority	96.3	97.2	95.4	+1.8	.375

Table 2
The Impact of Treatment on the Prevalence of Restorative Practices Within Each Block
and the Average Impact Across Blocks

Block	Impact of Treatment	Significance	Standard Error of Impact Estimate	Number of Schools w/Student Surveys
Western District (MS Block 5)	0.348	p < .01	0.073	2
Western District (HS Block 11)	0.262	p < .01	0.074	2
Southeastern District (MS Block 3)	0.244	p < .01	0.052	4
New England District (MS Block 7)	0.189	p < .05	0.079	2
Northeastern District (MS Block 12)	0.055	ns	0.042	7
Midwestern District (HS Block 20)	0.019	ns	0.100	2
Western District (HS Block 10)	-0.013	ns	0.069	2
Northeastern District (HS Block 8)	-0.037	ns	0.091	2
Northeastern District (MS Block 19)	-0.066	ns	0.073	2
Southcentral District (MS Block 16)	-0.086	ns	0.063	2
Weighted Avg. Across Blocks	0.096	p < .01	0.016	27

Table 3
The Impact of Treatment on the Student Reports of the Prevalence/Severity of Discipline Problems Within Each Block and the Weighted Average Impact Across Blocks

Block	Impact of Treatment	Significance	Standard Error of Impact Estimate	Number of Schools w/Student Surveys
Northeastern District (MS Block 19)	-0.423	p < .001	0.107	2
Western District (MS Block 5)	-0.343	p < .001	0.107	2
Western District (HS Block 10)	-0.319	p < .001	0.100	2
Southcentral District (MS Block 16)	-0.245	p < .001	0.093	2
Northeastern District (MS Block 12)	-0.092	ns	0.061	7
Northeastern District (HS Block 8)	-0.051	ns	0.132	2
Midwestern District (HS Block 20)	0.053	ns	0.148	2
New England District (MS Block 7)	0.092	ns	0.115	2
Western District (HS Block 11)	0.101	ns	0.108	2
Southeastern District (MS Block 3)	0.318	p < .001	0.076	4
Weighted Avg. Across Blocks	-0.061	p > .50	.0943	27

Table 4
The Impact of Treatment on Suspension-Related Outcomes

Outcome	Impact Estimate	P-Value	Effect Size
Suspended 3 or More Days ¹	0.66	.027*	Not applicable
Suspended 1 or More Times ¹	0.78	.121	Not applicable
# of Suspensions ²	-0.14	.170	.07
# of Days Suspended ²	-0.22	.343	.03

¹ Binary outcomes - estimates are reported in terms of odds-ratios.

² Continuous outcomes.

Table 5
The Impact of Treatment on Attendance-Related Outcomes

Outcome	Impact Estimate	P-Value	Effect Size
Attendance Rate ²	+1.61	.075	.09
Attendance <90% ¹	0.78	.091	Not applicable

¹ Binary outcome - estimates are reported in terms of odds-ratios.

² Continuous outcomes.