Lansing School District Restorative Justice Program

Final Report

2005-2006

The Ingham Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ) Alliance has worked for nearly five years to integrate Restorative Justice (RJ) practices into the schools and juvenile justice systems of the area. In January 2005, with funding and support from the Ingham County Youth Violence Prevention Coalition (now called the Continuum of Care for Youth), they started a pilot RJ program based in Lansing's Pattengill Middle School. This program also received support from the Lansing School District and the City of Lansing. The Dispute Resolution Center of Central Michigan (DRC) served as fiduciary and provided staff and technical support.

The Pattengill pilot program introduced Restorative Justice as an effective discipline alternative for secondary schools. This program targets youth who misbehave in school, by engaging them in a process which:

- imposes accountability on and empowers the offender to correct the harm caused by his/her behavior;
- addresses the misbehavior and its root conflict by engaging all affected parties; and,
- teaches and engages youths (and sometimes their families) in peaceful conflict resolution practices.

Beginning January 2005 and continuing throughout the 2005-06 school year, the DRC has operated its pilot Restorative Justice Center in Pattengill Middle School and provided RJ services to other Lansing students through the Office of Student Services. Its success has led the DRC and Lansing School District (LSD) to garner CAUW funding to expand the program to two other middle schools, one K-8 school and one high school for the coming 2006-2007 academic year.

The LSD program's many successes include:

- Resolved 157 conflicts through RJ interventions;
- Engaged 292 students in RJ interventions;
- Served many of those students multiple times for a total of 423 incidents of participation;
- Involved 133 parents in helping their children peacefully resolve conflict;
- Saved students 1,327 days they would have been suspended from school and on the streets;
- Supported a 15.2 percent drop in incidents of suspension at Pattengill from the 2004-05 school year, while every other Lansing middle school experienced an increase in suspension days, ranging from 8 to 40 percent;

- Averted two expulsions;
- Inspired two criminal assault charges to be dropped after student offenders participated in RJ interventions; and,
- Empowered students with new skills—nearly 90 percent of students surveyed reported they learned new skills in their RJ experiences, and 86 percent of students surveyed reported using those skills to peacefully resolve or avert conflicts they encountered after their RJ interventions.

Given that Pattengill is an inner city middle school, with 78 percent of its students qualifying for free or reduced breakfast and lunch, these numbers mean more than just simple data. Many of these students' lives swirl with drama, violence and dysfunction every moment they spend outside school. And of course it doesn't stop there – it spills into the school. While the DRC did not collect criminal data on these students or their families, we know that many of the students who attended more than two RJ interventions had been involved with the criminal justice system either as a victim, offender or child of an offender.

Pattengill's Interim Principal, Donna Pohl, explains, "This [RJ] expands students' options by engaging them in and modeling a peaceful method for resolving conflict—something they may never have experienced before. In most cases students who engage in RJ succeed in resolving their immediate conflict, and some apply principles they've learned to resolve their subsequent conflicts as well. This cuts down on suspension days and leads to the safe, respectful environment sought by Pattengill and the Lansing School Board."

Lansing School District Office of Student Services Director, James Davis, concurs. "This program helps us to address one of our main Board goals of improving student behavior and increasing parental involvement. This endeavor allows us to create a positive process which fosters accountability and healing, by taking into account the needs of all those in the schools and community that have been affected [by student misbehavior]"

Other educators offered similar comments. After engaging with her eighth grade Social Studies class in a restorative circle, a Pattengill teacher wrote, "[RJ is] very helpful as a tool to let all students begin to think about ways to lessen the negative actions they think are 'no big deal'." And choir teacher, Mimi Burpee, wrote about her sixth grade class after an RJ intervention about bullying: "Thank you so much. I could see their interest and confidence growing each day."

The bottom line, however, must be measured by its effect on the students who engage in RJ. All but one of the RJ interventions tracked concluded with a conflict resolution agreement signed by all the parties. When asked in long-term surveys whether they had honored their part of the agreement, 93 percent agreed they had. This indicates an extraordinarily high success rate in resolving immediate conflicts. But the benefit didn't stop there.

As noted above, the DRC conducted long-term surveys one month or more after the RJ interventions. Of the 423 incidents of student participation, students completed 263 surveys designed to measure RJ's effectiveness in resolving conflict and developing participants' competency. (Surveys were not completed by non-Pattengill students or students whose RJ intervention took place less than a month before the end of the school year. Participating parents and school personnel were not surveyed.) The majority of these surveys were administered by volunteers to ensure that students didn't feel obligated to sugar-coat their answers out of 'loyalty' to RJ Center staff.

In these long-term surveys, 89.7 percent of respondents said they learned new skills in their RJ intervention and 86 percent said they had used those skills to resolve or avert subsequent conflicts. This is also supported anecdotally by the number of students who participated in RJ more than one time. Of the 292 students who used RJ to successfully resolve conflict, 76 participated in multiple sessions, often at their own request. One student, who is emotionally impaired for anger issues, referred herself eight times after her first intervention. The average number of interventions per student over the year, however, was 1.43.

While numbers tell a great deal, participants' comments offer a different insight into the benefit of this process. One eighth grade girl whose home life is fraught with uncertainty wrote that her RJ experience taught her, "I don't have to like someone, but I have to respect them." She continues, "I really like this program, and hope you can have it in other schools to help kids."

A young male wrote "The experience here helped me stop making mean comments to other people. I'm doing good with my grades and my behavior is good."

Yet another view from a 12 year old female student: "It worked even though it was really hard talking about it."

"Something like this should be in every school," concludes a 15 year old student. Based on the results and comments listed above and the many stories untold here, the DRCCM agrees. We are delighted to present this report on the RJ pilot program. And we eagerly anticipate greater success as this RJ program expands.