REACH ACADEMY

David Washburn, *Voice of OC*
March 2018

The California Endowment

About This Series

In 2016, The California Endowment commissioned a series of case studies, highlighting experiences of six Southern California communities as they work to support youth in achieving their dreams. They are doing this by improving school climate for all students as well as advocating for limited contact between youth and the criminal justice system. Applying a restorative justice approach, they seek to change punitive disciplinary policies and practices that can have negative effects for youth in favor of policies and practices that promote accountability for and healing of harms.

These stories of change demonstrate how parents, students, educators, and community leaders are working together to facilitate a new vision of justice. They also exemplify how focusing on equity in the education and juvenile justice systems can lead to better outcomes for youth.

The six communities profiled in this series are Boyle Heights, City Heights, Eastern Coachella Valley, Long Beach, Santa Ana, and South Los Angeles. And, while each of these places are distinct from one another, what they share is a commitment to action and a passion for health justice. Each is part of Building Healthy Communities (BHC), a ten-year place-based initiative that supports community-led efforts to improve health equity through organized action, changing narratives about who belongs, and policy and systems change.

Acknowledgments

The Endowment asked David Washburn of Voice of OC, a veteran journalist and writer, to interview leaders and chronicle their progress. Interviews were conducted over a one-year period beginning July 2016. We thank him for his diligent efforts to tell these stories of change.

Most of all, we thank the many people who shared their experiences and perspectives which contributed powerful stories of progress to this series. We are honored to work alongside you in this effort that promotes healthy communities for children, youth and their families.

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Introduction

The Circle That Saved Vladimir

Vladimir Herrera wonders whether he'd be alive today if not for the circle that morning in his first-period class at Santa Ana's Valley High School.

It was the spring of 2015 and he'd been back at school for a couple months after spending time in a shelter for youth who were considered suicide risks. While in the shelter he'd finally mustered up the courage to come out as transgender.

He'd arrived back at school with his hair cut short, and wearing both masculine clothes and a binder to flatten his chest. It was a liberation like none he'd ever felt before.

But the reception from some of his classmates, especially among those in his immediate peer group, was hostile. "People started giving me weird looks and making rude comments and I felt like everything was starting all over again," he said.

The "everything" was bullying during the previous fall that caused him to spiral into a depression so acute that he'd begun cutting his wrists. A teacher noticed Vladimir's wounds one afternoon and he was taken from the school grounds to a hospital, and then ultimately to the shelter.

As his despair was deepening, Vladimir was told about The Center OC, an LGBT organization in Santa Ana. "I went there and told them my story, and they suggested I do a healing circle at my school."

The healing circle, a cornerstone of the restorative practices framework, included about 30 of Vladimir's first-period classmates. The subject was bullying.

Vladimir Herrera, a transgender student, expresses his admiration for his new school.

Photography: Julie Leopo

> **When I saw them with tears in their eyes as I told my story, that's when everything changed.**
>
> – **Vladimir Herrera**

The facilitator, a representative from The Center OC, asked for a show of hands from people who'd experienced bullying at school. Several hands went up, and, one by one, students shared their stories. By design, Vladimir was the last to speak.

With shaking hands and a halting voice, he told the story of the intense homophobia he experienced during his childhood in his native Guatemala. He talked about being shunned by his classmates and their parents, and the abuse he suffered at the hands of a particularly cruel teacher.

"In front of the class she would put me on the spot and say 'this kid is dumb,'" Vladimir remembers. "And when the other kids bullied me and I would go to her for help, she would accuse me of lying. And she'd tell the other kids to hit me when I messed up in school."

After years of similar treatment in a variety of schools, his mother finally sent him to live with his father in Santa Ana. He enrolled at Valley High at the age of 15. And though the bullying was not nearly as bad as in Guatemala, it was nonetheless real.

As Vladimir finished his story, several of his classmates in the circle with him were openly crying.

"When I saw them with tears in their eyes as I told my story, that's when everything changed," he said. "I was treated with respect and I made more friends. People apologized to me for the things they had said."

What happened at Valley High School that day would have been almost unheard of a decade ago, and the healing circle that was such a benefit to Vladimir is a testament to how far the idea of implementing restorative practices and restorative justice into our education and juvenile justice systems has come.

Throughout Southern California, school districts are coming to terms with how decades of zero tolerance discipline policies have led to persistent inequities across racial and ethnic lines in school suspension and expulsion rates. And, at long last, they are taking serious steps to address bullying and improve school climate. Restorative practices have been a big part of the response.

Helping matters was the California Legislature's 2014 passage of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which gave school districts and the communities they serve more flexibility in deciding how state education money would be allocated in their schools.

SCHOOL CLIMATE is best described as the quality and character of school life. Today, educators strive for school climates that not only focus on academic and athletic achievement, but are also inclusive, culturally competent and free from bullying.

The formula allocates additional funds for high-needs students, including English learners, low-income children, and foster youth, with the districts required to spend this money in a targeted, equitable and transparent manner. Advocates argue that a significant portion of this funding should be directed to programs that emphasize restorative practices.

There has been a corresponding push to make restorative justice an alternative to the juvenile justice system in an effort to combat the "school-to-prison pipeline," a metaphor for the increase in contact youth have with the criminal justice system as a result of harsh discipline policies in schools.

School districts and juvenile justice systems in Northern California are much further along in implementing restorative justice policies and practices than their counterparts in the south. But over the past few years advocates and officials throughout Southern California have made significant progress.

Probation departments, district attorney offices and other juvenile justice institutions in Long Beach and San Diego have signed memorandums of understanding with advocacy groups to make restorative justice an option for diverting youth from the juvenile justice system. And school districts in those places, as well as in Los Angeles and Santa Ana, have made restorative practices central to their efforts to improve school climate.

The early results are promising. Recidivism rates among juvenile offenders diverted to restorative justice programs have been lower than those who receive traditional punishments.

Administrators and teachers in schools that have adopted restorative practices say they've been able to reduce suspensions and expulsions while at the same time creating a stronger sense of community and connectedness among students and teachers.

Consider the following:

- Recidivism among juveniles diverted to restorative justice in San Diego's City Heights neighborhood was just 12 percent, far lower than traditional recidivism rates, which range from 30 percent to as high as 80 percent among certain populations.

- School suspensions and expulsions at the Santa Ana Unified School District have dropped by 71 percent and 85 percent, respectively, since the 2011-12 school year.

- The suspension rate in the Los Angeles Unified School District dropped by 93 percent between the 2007-08 and 2015-16 school years; and the number of instructional days lost to suspension went from 74,765 to 6,574 during that time period.

Yet, while the successes are certainly real, both community advocates and proponents of restorative practices within educational and juvenile justice institutions have also reported their share of setbacks and challenges.

Entrenched views regarding crime and punishment in police and prosecutorial agencies have been hard to overcome, and advocates often find themselves in sharp disagreement with law enforcement regarding which crimes are appropriate for restorative justice.

Meanwhile, officials in many large school districts have been receptive to the idea of using restorative practices to improve school climate, but districts have yet to devote the kind of resources that such a system change requires.

The purpose of this case study is to provide a comprehensive report on restorative justice efforts underway in Boyle Heights, South Los Angeles, Long Beach, Santa Ana, City Heights, and the Coachella Valley supported through Building Healthy Communities. In each of the sites, systems people and advocates were interviewed, as well as individuals and families who've participated in restorative justice programs as offenders or persons harmed.

Also, whenever possible, the initial data from the programs was examined in an effort to get some sense of their efficacy.

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> **Since 2007, Los Angeles Unified School District's suspension rate dropped by 93%.**
>
> **Since 2011, Santa Ana Unified School District's suspension rate dropped by 71% and expulsion rate dropped by 85%.**

What Is Restorative Justice?

Ask five different people to define restorative justice, and you might get five different answers. So before going further, it's important to provide a brief history of the restorative justice movement and provide a framework for the restorative practices being used in the places we are studying.

Although the restorative justice movement began in the U.S. in the 1970s, its origins can be traced far back into human history to the traditions of indigenous peoples the world over. It can be broadly defined as community-based justice that addresses wrongdoing by expanding the circle of stakeholders beyond just the government and the offender.

"Restorative justice is an approach to achieving justice that involves, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense or harm to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations in order to heal and put things as right as possible," writes Howard Zehr, the grandfather of the restorative justice movement.

Zehr, who is the son of a Mennonite preacher and in 1966 became the first white person to receive a bachelor's degree from Atlanta's historically black Morehouse College, pioneered restorative justice as we know it today in the late 1970s while running a half-way house in Elkhart, Indiana.

Zehr sees the movement as a response to the so-called punishment model that defines the Western approach to criminal justice. Western society, he writes, focuses on making sure those who have offended get what they deserve. Meanwhile, the restorative approach focuses on victim needs and offender responsibility for repairing harm. In his book, "The Little Book of Restorative Justice," Zehr further explains the differences by posing the primary questions that each system endeavors to answer.

The CRIMINAL JUSTICE model asks:	The RESTORATIVE JUSTICE model asks:
• What laws have been broken? • Who did it? • What do they deserve?	• Who has been harmed? • What are their needs? • Whose obligations are these?

The phrase "making things right" is probably the most succinct way to describe restorative justice model that Zehr developed. And in order for things to be made right, the person harmed needs to be made whole as best as can be, the wrongdoer needs to be held accountable in a manner he or she accepts, and the entire process needs buy-in from the community, which is to say that community members both accept restorative justice as a viable alternative to the punitive model and become active participants.

In addition to addressing the harm, the process also needs to address the underlying conditions that caused the harm to happen. This usually requires that the wrongdoer be seen as a victim as well. As Zehr notes, many of those who offend have been victimized or traumatized in significant ways. And when they commit crimes, offenders are often acting to undo an injustice that they feel has been done to them.

Zehr, however, is quick to point out that the perception of oneself as a victim does not absolve responsibility for offending behavior. But we can't expect the offending behavior to stop without addressing this sense of victimization. And the Western criminal justice model, which is focused on punishment, more often than not reinforces this sense of victimization.

Restorative justice seeks to break this cycle by staying focused on the restoration of those who've been harmed, those who've caused harm, and the well-being of the entire community.

How Restorative Justice Is Practiced

There are many ways to practice restorative justice, and some of its core elements can be found in criminal justice diversion programs as well as longstanding school discipline policies. But for the purpose of this case study, we will focus on the methods that are primarily being used in the juvenile justice and school systems we are examining.

Although they all have somewhat similar structures, the various models will differ in the number of people involved and how they are facilitated. As Zehr writes, in juvenile justice, the main models are "victim offender conferences" and "restorative community conferencing," which can also be called "family group conferencing." In the school setting, most restorative practices fall under the heading of "circle processes."

Victim Offender Conferences

This model primarily involves those directly harmed and those responsible for the harm. The two parties are worked with individually beforehand, then a meeting is arranged by one or more trained facilitators. Family members of either party may participate, but they are to be there mainly for support.

The outcome of a victim offender conference is usually a signed restitution agreement.

> **Circles are used to address bullying issues, mediate disputes among students, and to come up with ways to improve overall school climate.**

Community/Family Group Conferences

Community or family group conferences enlarge the circle of primary participants to include family members or others who are close to the parties involved. This model puts particular focus on helping those who have offended take responsibility and change their behavior. As such, the offending person's family—or others in the community who have influence over him or her—play a pivotal role.

Like with the victim offender conferences, a restitution agreement is usually the final result, but the process is often much more complicated due to the issues brought out by the family and community involvement.

Circle Processes

Circles are a core element of restorative practices and can be used in many settings. In the criminal justice milieu, sentencing circles are used to determine sentences or other forms of restitution. However, as Zehr writes, there are also healing circles, circles to deal with workplace conflicts, and circles designed as forms of community dialogue.

Restorative practices come in a variety of forms in school settings, including teen courts, peer mediation and one-on-one interventions. However, in most schools, circles have become the foundational practice. Circles are used to address bullying issues, mediate disputes among students, and to come up with ways to improve overall school climate.

The process begins with one or two "circle keepers" who serve as facilitators and articulate the values of the circle, which include respect, integrity and speaking from the heart. The participants pass a "talking piece" around the circle to ensure that everyone gets a chance to speak without being interrupted.

The most effective circles have a wide range of participants, including those who've been harmed, those who have done harm and members of the community.

In the school setting, the circle process takes on two separate forms: "community building" circles and "harm/conflict" circles. The primary purpose of community building circles is to strengthen the bonds within groups in the school and help foster a healthier school climate.

These circles are often held in classrooms and facilitated by teachers. But schools have also had great success in using them to improve morale among teachers and administrators, create better connections within sports teams and other school groups, and better integrate parents into the school setting.

Harm/conflict circles, meanwhile, are increasingly being implemented in schools as an alternative to traditional discipline. Most often they are used in situations where a conflict has risen to a point where it must be handled outside the classroom. These circles are facilitated by either a restorative justice coordinator or an administrator with extensive training in the circle process.

Again, restorative justice is larger in scope than outlined here. But these basic practices make up the vast majority of what is happening in the areas examined for this study.

Photography: Julie Leopo

Circles are a core element of restorative practices and can be used in many settings.

Santa Ana

REACHing for More Restorative Outcomes

When students end up at REACH Academy, they've literally reached the end of the road in the Santa Ana Unified School District.

To get to there, you drive down Civic Center Drive until it dead ends at a large district-owned complex, which includes several large warehouses. The campus is on the right. It consists of ten portables squeezed into a small asphalt area surrounded by tall fences.

At first blush, it doesn't give off the vibe of an institution of learning. But the outward appearance belies a transformation that has taken place at REACH since the summer of 2015.

At that time, it was the district's "community day school," a catch-all name given to the schools in California districts where they send students who have been expelled from other schools. It was, in essence, a warehouse—just like the buildings on the other side of the fence.

Fights, some gang related, broke out routinely on the school grounds, and Santa Ana police were often dispatched to assist the school police officer stationed at the campus. The portable classrooms had bars on the windows and there was fence that separated two of the classrooms from the rest of campus.

> The school's discipline policy matched the toughness of its exterior— a zero-tolerance philosophy that led to a sky-high out-of-school suspension rate.

The school's discipline policy matched the toughness of its exterior. A zero-tolerance philosophy that led to a sky-high out-of-school suspension rate.

It turns out that a watershed moment for the school came when the state Legislature passed the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which gave school districts and the communities they served more flexibility in deciding how state education money would be allocated in their schools.

As part of the LCFF, districts and community members had to work together to come up with a Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), which laid out specific goals for students tailored toward priorities established by the community.

In Santa Ana, community members made it abundantly clear that the district's punitive discipline regime had to change. They cited statistics showing how a hugely disproportionate number of children from underserved communities were being suspended or expelled under vague pretenses like "willful defiance," and demanded that LCAP include a commitment to restorative practices.

The community day school stuck out as an institution where the approach to discipline was in particular need of reform. Therefore, in August of 2015, the district hired Trucker Clark to be the principal of the school and bring about the change.

Clark has spent the vast majority of his 25-year career working with students who've been kicked out of school, or, in education parlance, "alternative kids." He's worked with students in similar situations in other large California school districts and at a school in Idaho.

"Alternative kids are alternative kids, no matter where you go," Clark says. "They are the neediest kids, coming from the lowest socio-economic areas. But it's only been recently that we've focused on the traumas they are coming in with."

Principal Trucker Clark has instituted a number of reforms to make Reach Academy a restorative school.

Photography: Julie Leopo

One of the first things Clark decided was that his students needed a more welcoming environment. So he had the fence that split the campus torn down, he had the bars taken off the windows, and he and his staff gave the school an actual name and an eagle as its mascot.

"The school had become too punitive and negative," Clark said. "Our goal was to flip it to a positive and restorative culture while still dealing with the same population."

And beyond the cosmetic changes, Trucker and his staff—with the full support of the district—instituted true system change. They shut the school down for two weeks and trained every teacher and administrative staff member in restorative and trauma-informed practices.

The school has also taken advantage of a district partnership with Project Kinship, a Santa Ana-based organization that works with and advocates for formerly incarcerated adults, and youth who've had contact with the juvenile justice system.

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>
> — **Trucker Clark,** *Principal, REACH Academy*

Project Kinship is staffed by a multidisciplinary team that includes people from academia and social work, as well as those who themselves have overcome barriers created by their experiences in the criminal justice system. The organization has offices at REACH and, in addition to gang intervention work, staff members facilitate circles on an almost daily basis.

"Let's say there are two kids and one kid punches another kid. In the punitive system, the question asked is: 'what is wrong with you?'" Said Steven Kim, a co-founder of the organization. "Through our work, we ask the question: 'what has happened to you?' And by asking that question we force ourselves to look at the root causes of behavior."

The results have been quick and convincing. In the 2015-16 school year, suspensions at REACH were cut in half, as were overall campus incidents, Clark said. Attendance has also increased significantly and students are achieving higher test scores.

Other Efforts in Santa Ana Schools

While the turnaround at REACH might be the most visible example of Santa Ana Unified's efforts to reform its approach to discipline and improve school climate, it is hardly the only example. Perhaps more than any other school district in Southern California, Santa Ana Unified has embraced restorative practices and reaped the rewards.

Since getting serious about the issue in the 2013-14 school year, the district has gone from having a just a handful of schools actively working toward instituting restorative practices, to 17 schools, including just about every high school and intermediate school, with a restorative practices intervention specialist or a violence prevention specialist, said Sonia Llamas, the district's school climate coordinator.

> **What sets Santa Ana Unified apart is a genuine collaboration among schools and the advocate community, coupled with strong buy-in from district leaders.**

These and other efforts have led to an 81-percent drop in expulsions since the 2011-12 school year; and a 71-percent reduction in suspensions—going from 7,606 to 2,200, Llamas said.

What sets Santa Ana Unified apart is a genuine collaboration among schools and the advocate community, coupled with strong buy-in from district leaders.

"I think the board in general is very supportive of any interventions that support social and emotional well-being," Llamas said.

Among the leading advocates on the school board is Valerie Amezcua, who sees the issue through a different lens than most in her position because she works by day as a probation officer. As she tells it, she's been in the courtrooms, she's been in the homes and can talk the talk with both ardent community activists and hard-edged cops.

"You need an evangelist at the top and a mobilized community," Amezcua says. "[In Santa Ana] they see how involved the community has become and how vocal our students have become."

Advocates echo Amezcua and marvel at how well the community and district leaders have come together on this issue, especially in a place where there has historically been such a high level of distrust between residents and officialdom.

The seeds of this success were planted in 2013 by the Santa Ana Building Healthy Communities Restorative Justice in Schools Workgroup, which included representatives from Resilience OC (formally Santa Ana Boys and Men of Color), The LGBT Center of OC, Project Kinship, KidWorks, Orange County Congregation Community Organization, CLUE, and the Orange County Labor Federation.

Suspensions and Expulsions in Santa Ana Unified School District

DISCIPLINE	2011-12 SCHOOL YEAR	2015-16 SCHOOL YEAR	PERCENT DROP
SUSPENSIONS	7,606	2,200	-71%
EXPULSIONS	179	27	-85%

Led by youth leaders committed to implementing restorative practices, the workgroup educated and trained people in restorative practices, advocated for the creation of the district's School Climate Committee (comprised of parents, students, advocates and school district staff) and established the framework for key partnerships the district ultimately formed with Project Kinship and The LGBT Center OC.

"It was amazing to me the intersectionality of the work happening in the schools," said Sandra Ortega, an organizer for Clergy & Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE), which was also part of the restorative justice in education workgroup. "I think Santa Ana [Unified School District] is really ahead of the curve when it comes to shifting resources from suppression to prevention."

Ortega and others say they are especially impressed with how the advocacy efforts and partnership with the RJ in Schools Workgroup has manifested into the district moving to an intersectional approach to school climate which fully integrated and addressed LGBT concerns.

Numerous studies show LGBT youth are bullied far more often than their straight peers, are more likely to be suspended or expelled, and are overrepresented in the school-to-prison pipeline. These realities make LGBT students great

Teacher counsels new transfer students on their academic performance during a healing circle.

candidates restorative practices, said Laura Kanter, who directs youth programs for The LGBT Center OC.

However, Kanter is also quick to mention that even now too few schools have climates that are welcoming to LGBT youth. And even those with the best intentions can fail to create an environment that allows a young person to comfortably come out.

"What I'm seeing is the nature of the practice itself requires us to be kind and caring," Kanter said. "But if there is not a visible LGBT presence, and the people facilitating are not culturally competent, RJ can be a really unsafe place for LGBT people."

Vladimir Herrera's case is a vivid example of what restorative practices can accomplish when they are done right. Tony Ortuno, who works with Kanter as a youth program coordinator, said the key was Valley High School's willingness to allow him and others from The Center OC to come in and facilitate the circles.

"It showed us that those circles work, and when things are implemented correctly it impacts not only an individual student, but can cause the climate of the entire classroom to shift," Ortuno said.

Yet despite the remarkable success with Vladimir, Ortuno and Kanter say they can't give the district an "A" for its restorative justice efforts. For one, they feel officials have been slow to implement the policies that have done so much to improve the climate at Valley High in other schools. And like advocates in other districts, they are frustrated with a lack of funding.

"As far as I'm aware there is not very much money going directly to this work," Ortuno said.

Ortuno is right that relative to the district's $600-million budget, relatively few dollars go directly to restorative justice. However, there is no denying that the district is making strides.

According to Llamas, the school climate director, nearly $900,000 is allotted annually from school site LCAP funds for restorative practice or violence prevention specialists. And $250,000 is allotted to restorative justice, which goes toward two full-time restorative practice community liaisons. Finally, the district just received a three-year $3.1 million grant that will pay for, among other things, five more community liaisons.

"Having restorative practices under my umbrella has ensured we build better system in place to build a better school climate and culture in our district," Llamas said.

Santa Ana Juvenile Justice: Frustrating Realities

While restorative practices are well on their way to being ingrained in Santa Ana schools, efforts to make them a part of Orange County's juvenile justice system are lagging significantly behind those in other Southern California jurisdictions.

This is certainly not due to a lack of desire on the part of advocates and even some in the law enforcement community. In fact, three agencies—the Santa Ana Police Department, and county's probation department and public defender—are prepared to sign a memorandum of understanding for referring juvenile cases to a restorative justice program.

But restorative justice is lacking one important public supporter—the district attorney's office. Without District Attorney Tony Rackauckas' blessing, a program will have trouble getting off the ground. And the DA has shown no interest, said Abraham Medina, executive director of Resilience OC.

"The OCDA is not accountable to anyone really," Medina said. "There is a lot of anger in the community and very little faith in the justice system in Orange County, and it's not just RJ."

Making matters worse has been a scandal involving the DA and Sheriff Department's use of jailhouse informants that has created a bunker mentality in the DA's office as it faces investigations from both the state and federal justice departments.

However, the current situation notwithstanding, this kind of system change has always been difficult in the deeply conservative county where law-and-order stances win votes. A recent analysis by Advancement Project in partnership with Resilience OC found that in the most recent fiscal year, the county spent $143 million on "suppression of youth" through the sheriff's and probation departments, while only $16 million was spent on "positive youth programming."

Yet, with all of this being said, there are restorative justice advocates within county law enforcement, most notably in the probation department and juvenile courts.

Maria Hernandez, the presiding judge of the juvenile court, is a proponent; as is Catherine Stiver, director the probation department's juvenile court services division.

> **" The OCDA is not accountable to anyone really. There is a lot of anger in the community and very little faith in the justice system in Orange County. "**
>
> – **Abraham Medina,** *Executive Director, Resilience OC*

"Restorative justice is something that can revolutionize the juvenile justice system," Stiver said. "The idea is to reduce recidivism. And we also look at it as enhancing the victim's role in the system."

In March, the county's Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council, chaired by probation chief Steve Sentman, approved a proposal to use state grant funds for a restorative justice program, which is in the works.

Stiver did, however, make it a point to say that a long history of mistrust between the advocacy community and law enforcement in Orange County has not helped matters. And she said the advocates must accept part of the blame.

It is often the case, she said, that advocacy groups come off as blatantly anti-police and pro-offender.

> **If you have an approach that leans pro-offender you won't get system buy-in.**
>
> – **Catherine Stiver,** *Director, Juvenile Court Services Division, Orange County ProbationDepartment*

"When you pick a group to facilitate RJ, you can't pick a group that leans toward one side," Stiver said. "If you have an approach that leans pro offender you won't get system buy-in."

Police presence during passing period at Reach Academy Continuation School.

Going Forward/Lessons Learned

In many respects, the Santa Ana Unified School District should be held up as an example of the right way to implement restorative practices. The district has buy-in at the highest levels, successful efforts at individual school sites, and a generally good relationship with advocates.

That is not to say, however, that there isn't room for improvement. Like in so many other Southern California school districts, it is difficult to follow the money in Santa Ana Unified. The community does not have a clear picture of how district resources are being allocated to restorative practices. There have also been complaints about the district being slow to take practices that have been successful in certain schools and implement them in others.

While significant strides have been made in the schools, the state of affairs in Orange County's juvenile justice system is an entirely different matter. Efforts to institute a restorative justice pilot program in the county have stalled, largely due to refusals by the district attorney's office and sheriff's department to engage in the process.

> The LGBT Center OC's intervention on behalf of Vladimir Hererra at Valley High School shows the tremendous value of bringing people into the school setting who have specific cultural competencies that teachers and administrators might not have.

Yet despite the significant roadblocks, there are people within the system who are believers in restorative justice and working toward both establishing programs and securing funding by as early as this year. But even these efforts are imperiled by poor relations between advocates and systems people.

So while there are some green shoots, it is for the most part a barren landscape when it comes to restorative practices in the county's juvenile justice system. With that reality in mind, here are some lessons learned that could help cultivate a better environment:

- ## Build relationships within the system

    Orange County is in many ways an extremely difficult place to achieve the kind of change that restorative justice represents. It is a place where officials gain and hold office by pushing law-and-order solutions, being harsh on immigration and de-emphasizing social services. This has, over the years, put advocates continually at odds with law enforcement and some elected officials.

    It is understandable, given the history, that this would be the case. However, today there are people in prominent positions within the juvenile justice system who are strong advocates for restorative justice. And the only way reform has a chance in Orange County is if bridges can be built between these allies within the system and the community advocates that lead to a strong, honest and healthy dialogue.

- ## Strong partnerships pay off

    A key component of the success in Santa Ana schools has been the work of the Building Health Communities' Restorative Justice in Schools Workgroup, which included representatives from Resilience OC, LGBT Center OC, Project Kinship, Kidworks, CLUE, the Orange County Labor Federation, and Orange County Congregation Community Organization (OCCCO).

The groundwork laid by these organizations paved the way for the robust implementation of RJ in schools and the formal partnerships that Santa Ana Unified forged with Project Kinship and Center OC.

Without Project Kinship it is hard to see how the transformation at REACH Academy would have happened so quickly. And the LGBT Center OC's intervention on behalf of Vladimir Hererra at Valley High School shows the tremendous value of bringing people into the school setting who have specific cultural competencies that teachers and administrators might not have.

• Don't compromise on transparency

Given that the zero-tolerance policies implemented in recent decades have in many respects fallen out of favor, it is easy to find a high-ranking school official who will pay lip service to restorative practices. However, as advocates in San Diego have found, adequate funding usually doesn't follow the lip service. With LCAPs in place, there needs to be a push for clear reporting on how much money is being directed to restorative practices and where it is going.

• Be effectively persistent with big bureaucracies

While officialdom must be held accountable, it's also important to realize that implementing system change in large bureaucracies is extremely difficult and that very often each step forward on the path to reform might be followed by a step or more back. If advocates overreact to the backward steps, then they risk alienating those within the system who are on their side.