

A photograph of a smiling female teacher with dark hair, wearing a blue t-shirt, standing in a classroom with her arms crossed. In the background, several young students are seated at desks, some looking towards the camera. The classroom has a blue wall and various educational posters.

CREATING CULTURAL CHANGE IN EDUCATION: IMPLEMENTATION SCIENCE AND HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY

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KEITH HICKMAN, M.S.

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Keith Hickman, M.S.
Executive Director of Collective Impact
IIRP Graduate School



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ABSTRACT

Restorative practices has received national recognition for its positive impact on school climate and culture when addressing student and staff conflict. Research has led to questions about producing consistent results and the sustainability of restorative programs. Using a decade of experience implementing restorative practices into K-12 through the Whole-School Change Program of the IIRP Graduate School, the author will argue that two additional resources should be used to improve results: implementation science to ensure that the program is enacted with fidelity, and a human capital framework to maximize resources and provide sustainability. He will show how their use will result in co-created strategic plans, additional identified resources, data monitoring, and evaluation. He suggests that implementation science and human capital theory can help transform the experience of introducing a new program from something that is reactive to proactive. Instead of situations where front line staff, teachers, and counselors bear the direct burden for the effort and are expected to deliver results with few resources and limited support, they will be engaged as collaborators from the preparation phase and supported as partners throughout the process. The results for students could be transformative rather than transactional, offering them opportunities for meaningful engagement and belonging within a school system.



BACKGROUND

This paper is the result of what I've learned working at the International Institute for Restorative Practices Graduate School to implement restorative practices in schools and districts across the United States, including partnering with research investigators at Johns Hopkins University and the RAND Corporation respectively to assess the effectiveness of restorative practices in improving school culture. The formal studies were completed over 6 years and covered eight states, 16 districts, and 42 schools.

In 2014, the IIRP partnered with the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University, to conduct a three-year randomized field trial evaluation of the IIRP's SaferSanerSchools/ Whole-School Change Program in 15 urban schools across the country (JHU, 2018). In my role as Director of Continuing Education, I was tasked with coordinating program implementation in Boston, Baton Rouge, Brooklyn, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, San Antonio, and Washington, DC. I walked away with a much clearer view of the complexities and challenges of implementing restorative practices at the school district level. Evaluation showed that restorative practices could improve relationships between students and staff, but that strategically managing implementation of the program was a key to success and the range of success to help support fidelity of implementation. This trial also revealed the need to better understand the long-term social and academic impact of students to determine if the positive changes we were working for would last.

In 2014–2016, the IIRP received a randomized trial study grant from the National Institutes of Health to partner with RAND Corp, to measure the effectiveness of restorative practices on student behaviors across 14 Maine schools in

multiple districts (Acosta et al., 2016). Again, I was tasked to coordinate implementation of our SaferSanerSchools program. This study showed that restorative practices promoted positive behaviors and reduced bullying and other negative outcomes in the school environment by strengthening relationships among leaders, staff, and students (Acosta et al., 2019). Based on the conclusion drawn from the randomized control trial results, a thorough analysis of a more consistent whole-school implementation of restorative practices, inputs to outputs to outcomes, was needed. Further, the study revealed the necessity of understanding the complexities of adolescent behavior. Acosta points out the need for multiple intervention approaches within the complex school ecological system (e.g., the social conditions in the school environment and student behaviors). This study made it clear to me that the social conditions in a school environment had to be recognized and accommodated to support whole-school change.

In 2015, IIRP partnered with RAND Corp for its second randomized control trial (RCT) study under a grant from the Department of Justice with Pittsburgh Public Schools. This was the largest RCT study on restorative practices in the U.S. These 22 school-based studies measured numerous data points including school climate and disproportionate suspensions (Augustine et al., 2018). The research findings have been cited in journals and articles including the National Education Policy (NEP) brief written by Dr. Anne Gregory and Dr. Katherine Evans (2020).¹ This study provided me an opportunity to strategically guide the implementation of restorative practices across the entire school ecosystem, in partnership with school district leaders in other cities such as Louisville, KY, and Allentown, PA. For example, a key recommendation from the report was

1. Other articles supporting this research include Acosta et al. (2019). Evaluation of a whole-school change intervention: Findings from a two-year cluster-randomized trial of the restorative practices intervention, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 48(5), 876–890.

to provide coaching, which was offered to principals and their restorative leadership teams on a monthly basis. This allowed for more input in decisions to support learning, a less punitive approach to student discipline, and day-to-day practices in each building. Yet the results of the RAND RCT study indicated that the IIRP strategies for building capacity to implement restorative practices were successful. Teachers reported that restorative practices improved the school climate for students and that the suspension and disparity rates were reduced in treatment schools that were selected to implement restorative practices in the study. Of the eight recommendations in the report, one stood out the most to me — *Ensure that district leaders can manage this program* (Augustine et al., 2018). For example, the report showed that 61% viewed time as the greater barrier to implementation. This falls under the purview of the school district administration where pre-planning conversations with school administrators and their staff would

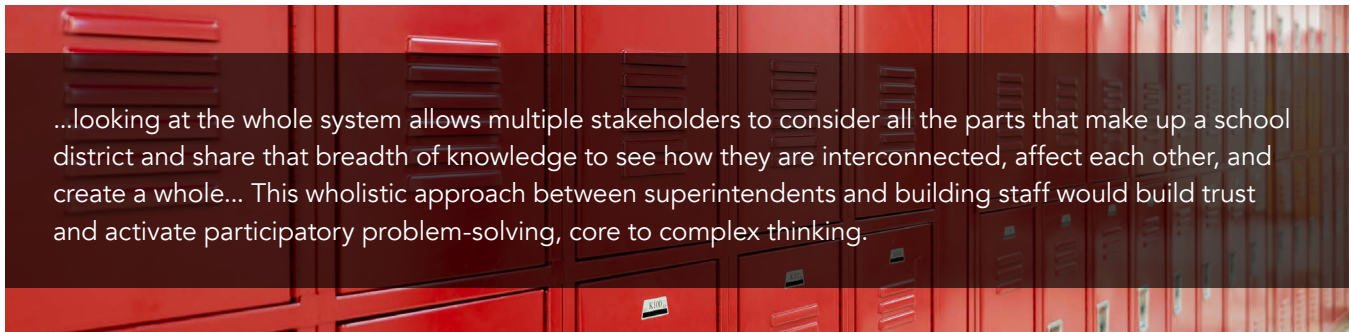
have been beneficial to identify time constraints. In addition, the other aspect of the results that I found compelling was that all the recommendations require additional resources beyond basic training. This means that additional staff time and stipends would be required to support professional development and coaching days. To do this, consideration must be given, and usually isn't, to relieving staff of some current duties to make room for this new work. Resources available to school district leaders also include their own interest and ability to transmit enthusiasm to their faculty, staff, and students, as well as the financial and staff resources needed to support them. It may seem like a statement of the obvious but working with different school districts can be like comparing apples and oranges — while the framework and practices are impactful, how each district achieves implementation is dependent upon their available resources, and this can vary greatly.

THE COMPLEX CHALLENGES SCHOOLS FACE

School administrators lead complex educational environments that have multiple challenges across many systems. Essentially, they are managing and resourcing microsystems within a more complex system, like fitting all the cogs and wheels together. The challenges range from federal policies to pedagogy, budget constraints to resource allocation, and personnel shortages to competing stakeholder interest. Each one of these issues can cause complications that threaten fidelity when implementing a new program. These challenges are often influenced by both internal and external system complexities e.g., healthcare, economics, and political/cultural domains, such as what schools experienced during the global pandemic. Any one

up a school district and share that breadth of knowledge to see how they are interconnected, affect each other, and create a whole. This would allow superintendents the opportunity to perform a full environmental scan across all schools with “radar vision,” thus creating the opportunity for better dialogue and diagnosis with school administrators. This holistic approach between superintendents, school administrators, and staff would build trust and activate participatory problem-solving, core to complex thinking.

During my school visits across the country, teachers often shared they were given new initiatives and programs to implement with limited resources and



or any combination of these can disrupt educational interventions including restorative practices. Mitel et al. stress the need to “better understand the attributes and relationships that may cause an intervention to succeed or fail” (2014, p. 371).

In many of my conversations with school administrators, the complex environment in which education operates is rarely discussed or considered with staff before undertaking a new program. This is unfortunate because it could provide the knowledge for shared understanding from purpose to process to planning. In other words, looking at the whole system allows multiple stakeholders to consider all the parts that make

then expected to make huge gains in areas that were causing public discord e.g., suspension rates, equity, test scores, and many other data points that are ailing school administrators. If time is made for systems thinking, which restorative practices can support in the readiness and preparation phase, this would increase the likelihood for school leaders to apply strategies in their buildings that are more transformative and less transactional, as a way to stabilize and sustain a positive school culture. For example, this would mean that school districts would invite suggestions and contributions from school administrators and their staff for budget plans. This inclusion of frontline staff sends the message that they are seen as valuable thought

partners, accountable to their students and their colleagues, and helps everyone to become results driven with a commitment to personal performance. It allows administrators and staff to jointly apply analytical thinking, not from a top-down-view, but under a unified framework that Mitel et al. describe in their research on K-12 as a complex system.

In addition to recognizing that education is part of a large and complex system, I also recommend two specific resources that I believe, based on my experience implementing restorative practices, can improve implementation success. First, using implementation science to introduce restorative

practices improves the relationships between leaders, staff, and students, which is crucial to the program's success and long-lasting school climate change. Second, human capital theory can broaden school district leaders' understanding of how to provide sufficient resources for strategic management of restorative practices consistently in school environments. I suggest that attention to these two resources can increase the success rate of the implementation of restorative practices, but more importantly, that improved school climates will ensure our children, the primary recipients of our education system, will have the best possible experience in K-12.



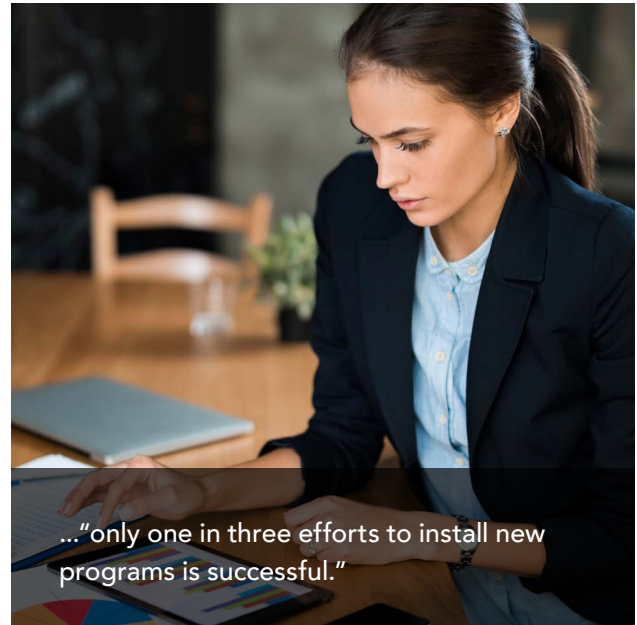
...improved school climates will ensure our children, the primary recipients of our education system, will have the best possible experience in K-12.

WHAT IS IMPLEMENTATION SCIENCE?

Restorative practices is often introduced into schools and school districts as a program to improve student behavior and reduce occurrences of suspensions and expulsions. But restorative practices is fundamentally about building community by strengthening relationships, and consequently it supports the broader goal of improving school climate and culture. School climate and culture includes safety, physical surroundings like facilities and resources, social inclusion regardless of physical and learning challenges, and connectedness and engagement among staff, students, and families. School climate is critically related to school success. For example, a positive school climate can improve attendance, achievement, and retention and even rates of graduation, according to research (Hughes & Pickeral, 2013). But even being such a compatible match to a school's larger goal of improving school climate cannot guarantee that restorative practices will be successfully implemented and sustained in every educational setting into which it is introduced.

According to Dr. Aaron Lyon et al., in education "only one in three efforts to install new programs is successful" (2018, 1). This means that less than half of programs are implemented as designed and sufficiently. Implementation science originated in the field of medicine to determine how identified best treatments and practices could be replicated consistently to maximize positive results. It offers a way to approach implementation that could produce a blueprint for implementing evidenced-based programs to maximize outcomes, using a sequence of steps that can help execute a program with fidelity.

Implementation science offers many benefits when applied in an educational setting to support the adoption of promising and evidenced-based practices. It can help identify a range of factors used to "bridge theory and effective practice," according to Dean Fixens with the National Implementation Research



Network of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (Moir, 2018, p.2). First, in using implementation science, we need to acknowledge the socioeconomic and cultural variables in the environment that might impede reaching successful outcomes, something that IIRP's previous research findings also pointed out. Second, implementation science stresses the importance of individual readiness for change, so that belief and buy-in can be accomplished and group dynamics can be successfully formed to influence the school ecosystem, from policy to performance. Restorative practices can support these efforts by offering processes to build relationships and community. Finally, program evaluation is needed. With an emphasis on feedback for continuous improvement, restorative practices is well suited to incorporate a range of informal and formal evaluative tools. The adoption of these steps into interventions and practices results in improved outcomes based, not on hope, but actions that are not confined to professional development training but include consulting, coaching, leadership training, and incentives within the educational system (Lyon et al., 2018).

Consider the importance of staff readiness, for example. Research and studies in the field of implementation science in education specifically indicate that “people need to be ready for change and that creating optimal conditions for an intervention is crucial to its maintenance” (Moir, 2018).² Consequently, school district leaders must recognize that change is difficult for staff and attention to readiness is about creating the optimal conditions to introduce a new program/intervention into the school system. If school leaders want to increase the probability of program success, then teachers must be given time and support to address knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, buy-in, and skills (**KABBS**). Specifically, they need to 1) become **knowledgeable** about the program at hand, 2) be able to freely express their **attitudes** and perspectives, 3) be given time to **believe** in what the program has to offer, 4) to build **buy-in**, and 5) allow for the development of **skills** over time.³

When leaders simply mandate the execution of programs and fail to build the social and intellectual capital needed to implement programs based on their design, then sustainability is unlikely. Implementation science must be applied throughout the design process of interventions if we want to see educational leaders implement restorative practices and “have a greater likelihood of success” (Lyon et al., 2018, p.1). For example, when I visited some school districts in the Johns Hopkins University research study, the principals had not even informed the staff that restorative practices were being implemented in their buildings. In fact, many of the staff had no knowledge about the program’s purpose and design.

Readiness became a longer process and building buy-in required shifting attitudes and pre-conceived beliefs about the perception that restorative practices was a soft attempt at student discipline. To change hearts and minds and get people to fully commit to implementation in a school building, let alone an

entire school system, requires creating the optimal conditions for readiness-to-responsibility. When I visited a school in Brooklyn, the principal was onboard with restorative practices; however, she wanted to completely leapfrog the readiness process and jump right to mandating restorative practices. This high control approach of a school-wide mandate sparked resistance and reticence among staff to buy into what she was asking of them. Most complied, yet they did not coopt the program into their pedagogy, a clear example of lack of fidelity to the implementation. This led to poorly run interventions that could appear successful, yet when evaluated, were ineffective and frustrating for staff and students, resulting in further distrust and a lack of progress.

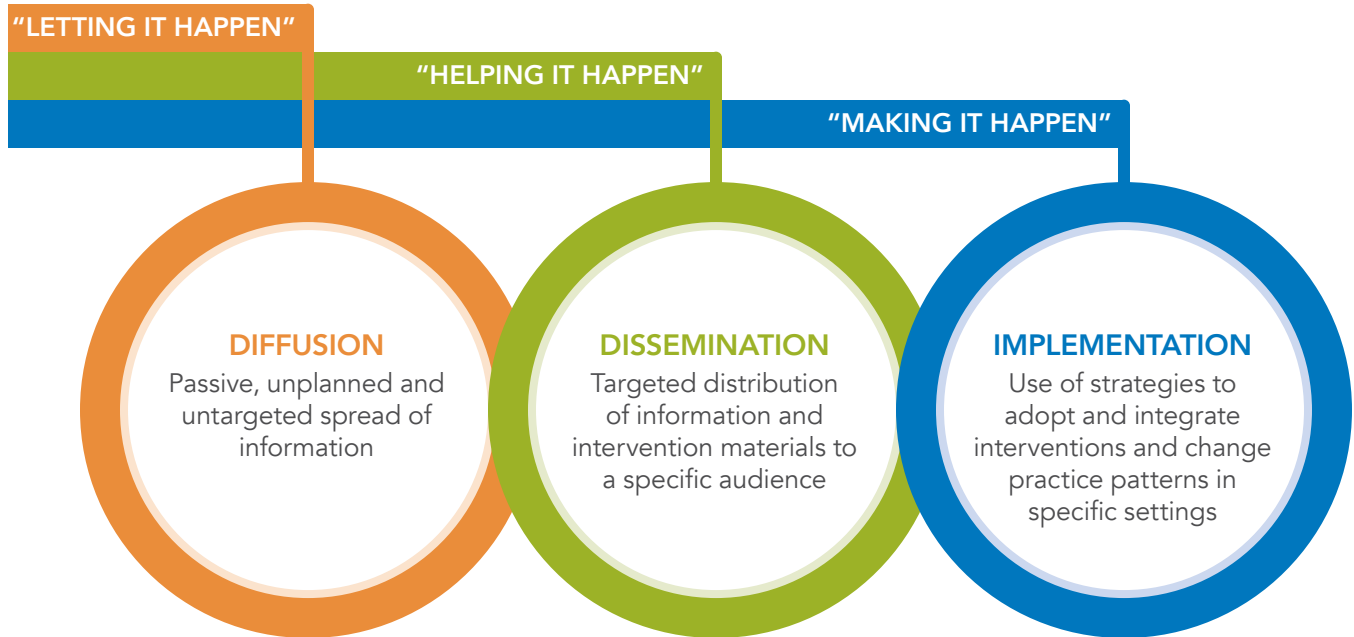
Implementation science provides a framework that anyone can use to identify the dynamic of their environment to implement an evidenced-based program; it will inform how the intervention/program should flow and be monitored and evaluated. In schools, inputs include staff selection and staffing models, pre-program readiness surveys and assessments, professional development training, coaching and consultations, staff perception and performance surveys, program monitoring through data collection, administrative support on policy and procedural changes, and system and policy alignment with national political and cultural shifts. When done effectively, implementation science could help identify and stave off challenges and threats such as time restrictions, staff commitment, staff qualifications, and misalignment between policy and practices, thereby increasing optimum implementation.

A high degree of support and commitment from executive administration is required to create readiness to optimize implementation fidelity of restorative practices. Which brings me to a point about trust in teachers, a key stakeholder group in restorative practices, with a professional identity that

2. There are many frameworks that apply implementation science across various disciplines including education, such as the ten steps and six sustainable factors by the Collaboration for Social and Emotional Learning.

3. KABBS (knowledge, attitudes, skills, beliefs) concept is part of the personal determinants of health (or proximal program objectives) included in Bartholomew Eldredge et al. (2016).

FIGURE 1: Definitions of Diffusion, Dissemination, and Implementation



Adapted from Greenhalgh T, Robert G, Macfarlane F, Bate P, Kyriakidou O. (2004). Diffusion of innovations in service organizations: systematic review and recommendations. Milbank Quarterly, 82(4):581-629.

is being challenged inside and outside of the public institution with more frequency and particularly since the start of the pandemic. There are many pressures in education that create internal tensions and mistrust on many levels. In my conversations and observations visiting schools around the country, it is in the classroom where we see delineating factors around pressure and trust (Dzur, 2018, p.47). The lack of trust between administrators and teachers will have an impact on what gets implemented in the classroom and to what degree. Essentially, trust impacts fidelity. It can mean the difference between letting things happen (passive and unplanned spread of information), helping things happen (targeted distribution of info), and making them happen (strategy adoption and integration) (See Figure 1) (Lyon et al., 2018).

We want teachers to intentionally incorporate the restorative practices continuum as designed into their lesson plans. Circle activities, for example, should be planned with clear objectives and executed like other subject matter plans that focus

on social and academic progress. Other continuum activities could include teaching and practicing check-ins, prompts to build community, class project planning, processing and reflection on course content, conflict resolution, and setting and managing classroom expectations. The investment of time by superintendents and principals to ready staff will build relationships, encourage trust between them, and help ensure fidelity to implementation of the program.

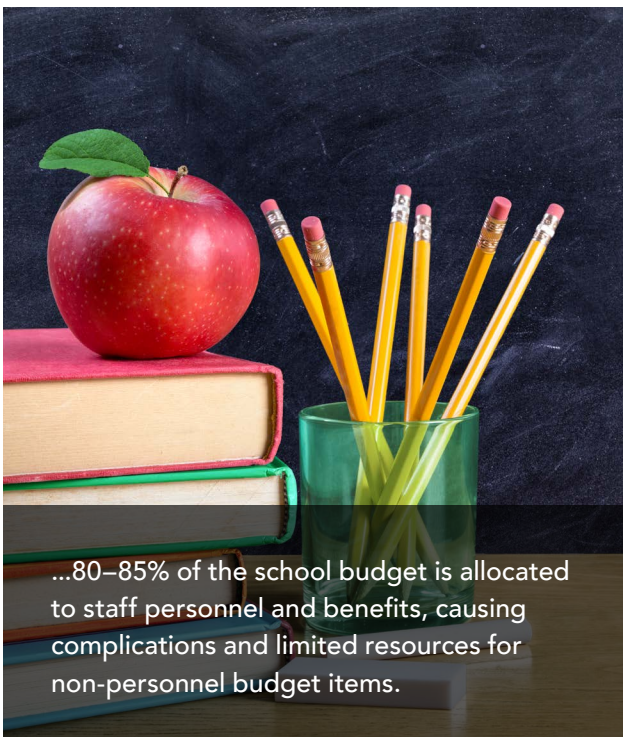
Implementation science can provide the framework to support superintendents, teachers and staff to provide a consistent flow of restorative practices throughout the schoolhouse. That framework requires a strategic plan with a focus on principal and teacher readiness. Before trying to arrive at a strategic plan however, I suggest time be devoted to create a human capital plan that can help to address some of the complexities of program implementation. A human capital plan can ensure that superintendents and principals approach program implementation with a shared vision and strategy.

HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY⁴

For any school-based initiative or program to make it into the classroom, it must be included prominently in the school budget; otherwise programs like restorative practices may become only diffuse and disseminated practices, missing the opportunity to support cultural change. According to the American Association of School Administrators, 80–85% of the school budget is allocated to staff personnel and benefits, causing complications and limited resources for non-personnel budget items. The primary goal for superintendents is to bridge the gap between the allocated resources in the budget and the district’s stated goals. Budgetary planning is further complicated by local, state, and federal funding streams with strict spending protocols and timelines. For example, Title 1 funding is used to

support academic achievement for all students by targeting schools that have 40% of their student body made up of low-income families. I’ve spoken with superintendents that shared the struggles of building their budgets to support restorative practices and other initiatives under a Title I scope. Other challenges include funding cycles where monies must be exhausted by the end of the school year to receive the following year’s allocation but can mean that engagement with a new program can be last minute or an add-on if money is available near the end of a school year, or that continuing implementation is in question if funding cannot be guaranteed in the following years. For example, towards the end of the school year, we often receive calls from school districts who have money left over in their budgets and are interested in restorative training and coaching. This makes for a rushed experience with little or no time for preparation before implementation.

One solution is to create a comprehensive human capital plan that provides the genesis for a collective budget planning process where programs and initiatives strategically imperative to the climate and culture of the school can be identified and itemized. Human capital planning can help draw a roadmap for building a highly effective and high performing school system and offer a coherent process for executing policies, programs, and practices under a shared vision between the superintendent and school staff. Human capital plans can vary among school districts to reflect their unique identities, issues, and goals. But their common elements across school districts include transparency in the strategic direction, shared responsibility of the plan, goals, and outcomes, implementation planning within the human capital plan, and communication



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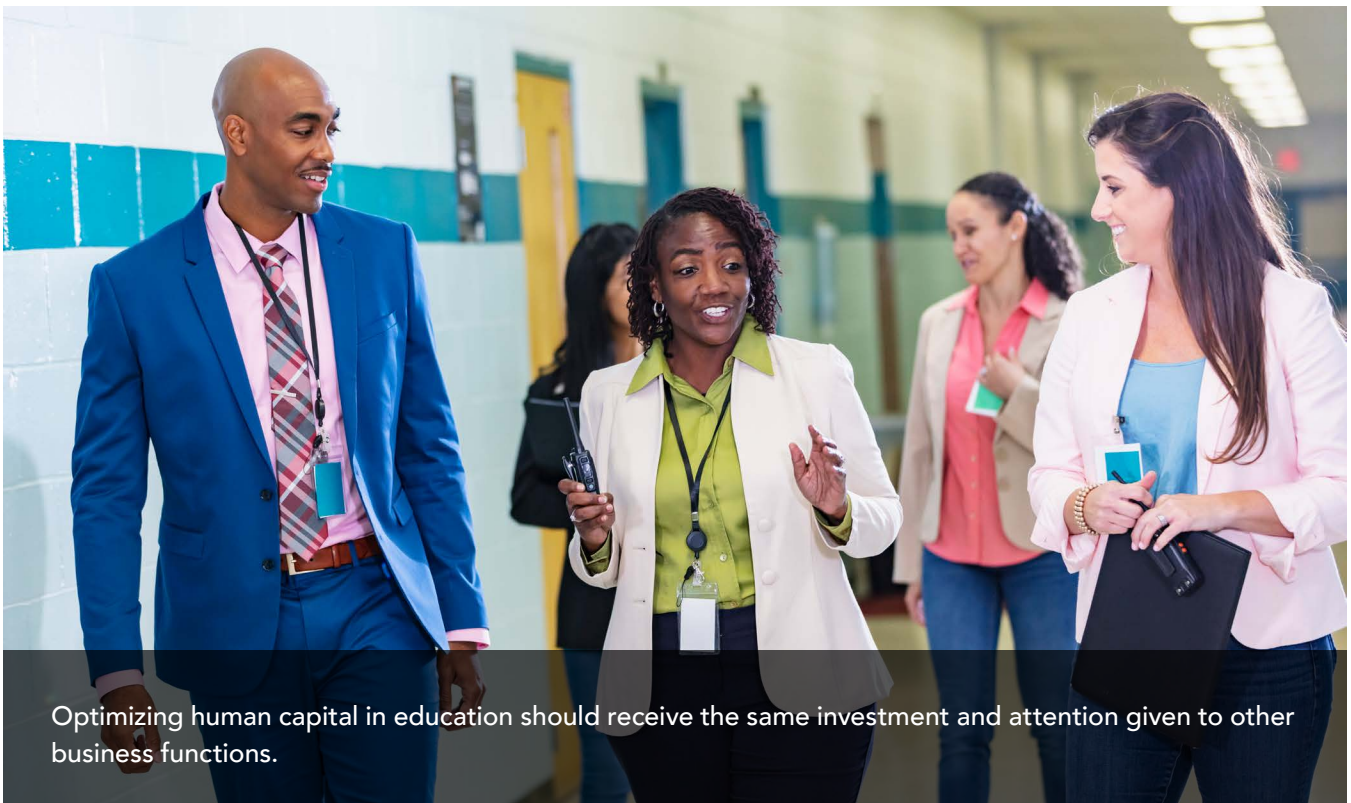
4. I wish to acknowledge the influence of Antonio Lopez who introduced me to this concept and who generously shared his time to discuss how it could support the implementation of restorative practices in school systems. My many conversations with him spurred my thinking about the importance of shifting from management by task to management by mission.

strategies related to change in management and accountability.

A human capital plan is not a human resources plan. Human resources is focused on supporting and developing staff to perform their roles and responsibilities, while human capital identifies the skills and knowledge that staff already possess and looks for ways to incorporate them into the organization's work. Consider for example the difference between offering staff specialized training to improve their communication skills versus including staff in a brainstorming session to identify new ways to schedule parent-teacher meetings: the first is human resources; the second is human capital. In fact, this supports the IIRP's fundamental hypothesis of working *with* others. A basic tenant of the restorative practices' framework, the Social Discipline Window, offers a theory of how we tend to work with people in one of four ways: To, For, Not, With. The goal of the restorative practitioner is to work *with* others. By doing so, external stakeholders will be more cooperative and productive, and will

go beyond the bare requirements to begin to invest personally in the purpose of the program or initiative.

Positioning restorative practices within a human capital plan leverages the multitude of attributes that all staff bring to the table while also supporting the development and attainment of new skills and knowledge that benefit the school-based system. When superintendents invest in the future of people (their staff) with value, opportunities, and a purpose-driven performance (human capital) as much as the other business components, they increase the likelihood for staff cooperation, production, and positive affect; this is the root of the restorative practices' fundamental hypothesis — working "with" others. Optimizing human capital in education should receive the same investment and attention given to other business functions. Teachers must be seen as valuable human assets and not as cost and risk to the district. Critical to the successful implementation of a new program or initiative, human capital offers a way to shape policies, programs, and practices to achieve superintendents'



Optimizing human capital in education should receive the same investment and attention given to other business functions.

shared vision and strategic planning. The human capital plan is the district's way of committing to school-based programming and initiatives that are deemed important enough to be included in the school district budget.

I've been a part of many conversations with administrators of school districts that spent thousands of dollars implementing restorative practices using a human resource mindset e.g., time for professional development, stipends, etc. These are all good things. However, I've concluded based on observable and data-driven evidence that money or financial incentives do not alone ensure high-fidelity implementation and sustainable results. In fact, often I've seen the opposite where the school district is committed and shows early positive outcomes but fails to reach the evidence-based results for sustainable outcomes in restorative practices. I've also seen school districts restart restorative practices over multiple years because of staffing changes. Often this was because the approach was to train as many staff as possible (human resources) without a human capital plan. Such scenarios mean that the time to lay the restorative foundation to support working *with* others either doesn't happen or is shortchanged which in turn will affect the fidelity of the implementation. A human capital plan would have served as the strategic blueprint with clear goals for transforming school discipline policies that aligned to a restorative practices framework, for a whole school district and school approach. This would shift the mindset and readiness for better implementation, and effectively embed continuum of practices as part of the work climate and school pedagogy that creates new leaders among staff and students.

Therefore, a strategy that supports good implementation of any program initiative in schools consists of a purpose that is aligned to the overarching vision of the school district, strategies that close gaps in the systems at the school level, principals and department leaders that have the knowledge, attitudes, belief and skills to implement

restorative practices with fidelity, and a school district culture that holds itself accountable, first to the human capital needed to guide and sustain restorative practices in schools. This commitment should be present at every level including creating and changing policies, how teams are formed and function, and targeting and teaching specific competencies based on staff roles and responsibilities. This would be the best investment of capital and the greatest opportunity to serve all students under a shared vision, purpose, and importantly, strategy that is transparent and likely to be driven by school administrators and their teams (A. Lopez, personal communication, April 30, 2019).

In their brief in EdResearch for Recovery Project (2020), Honig and Rainey highly recommend that school districts move toward systems changes and away from standard operating procedures to address "the foundation first" and "pursue specific shifts that are especially likely to propel their systemic improvement efforts forward" (p. 2). This would increase the positive influence of growth and success for teachers and principals from the district office. This approach requires a fidelity check at district and schools, an audit of community and student needs and strengths, and data-driven planning and decision making. For principals, this would increase resources and support to effectively build school culture; for teachers, this would improve the quality of their pedagogy and offer learning opportunities (Honig & Rainey, 2020).

Transformation, stability, and sustainability start with high expectations and high support at the superintendency level with school principals, who can then confidently do the same with their building staff. The outcome is higher buy-in among all staff as leaders of the program or initiative within a culture of leadership. It is the collective purpose that reinforces why restorative practices are important and needed as a key human capital strategy that creates the systems that help the school district help principals help teachers help students thrive in a learning environment (Costello et al., 2022). Again, this points back to the reciprocity needed between

superintendents and school-based teams because anything short of applying restorative practices under a common framework of implementation science under a human capital plan will result in what Lyon refers to as diffusion, passive and unplanned strategy, and dissemination, targeted information, and interventions to a specific group of educators. This has been the approach for many K–12 schools that target only teachers or only administrators as the primary stakeholder group for restorative practices. Without including everyone in the building, practices and resources will be isolated only to some and we will not see a systematic effect. This is the antithesis of whole-school change that restorative practices seeks, which could result in the following:

- Unreliable data and inconsistent implementation in every classroom
- Confusion, disconnect, and competing interest among staff
- Unsustainable buy-in and lack of skills development among staff
- Unclear purpose, plan, and communication with stakeholder groups
- Little return on funds spent caused by limited investment
- Incongruency from purpose-to-strategy
- Lack of vertical and horizontal leadership accountability
- Students not reaping the full benefits of restorative practices (Lopez, 2019).

However, if we take the time to apply restorative practices under this common framework of complex thinking, implementation science and human capital theory, then we are likely to see:

- Schools as ecosystems that must be transformative and not transactional
- Resources are more adaptable to unforeseen crises when human capital planning is considered as part of initial preparation
- Frontline staff, and importantly, teachers treated as valuable thought partners with shared accountability with school and district administrators
- A strong and clear purpose-driven performance actualized because of a restorative practitioner leadership style
- Stability and sustainability of restorative practice because of the alignment between strategy, systems, leadership, and culture as an expectation and function of every school member

Furthermore, restorative practices implementation based on the research reports over the past five years shows compelling evidence supporting many schools taking a disseminated approach targeting interventions to a specific school audience (e.g., restorative coordinators, counselors, paraprofessionals) and not reaching a full adoption of strategies for changing practice patterns across the entire staff, especially teachers.

IMPLICATIONS

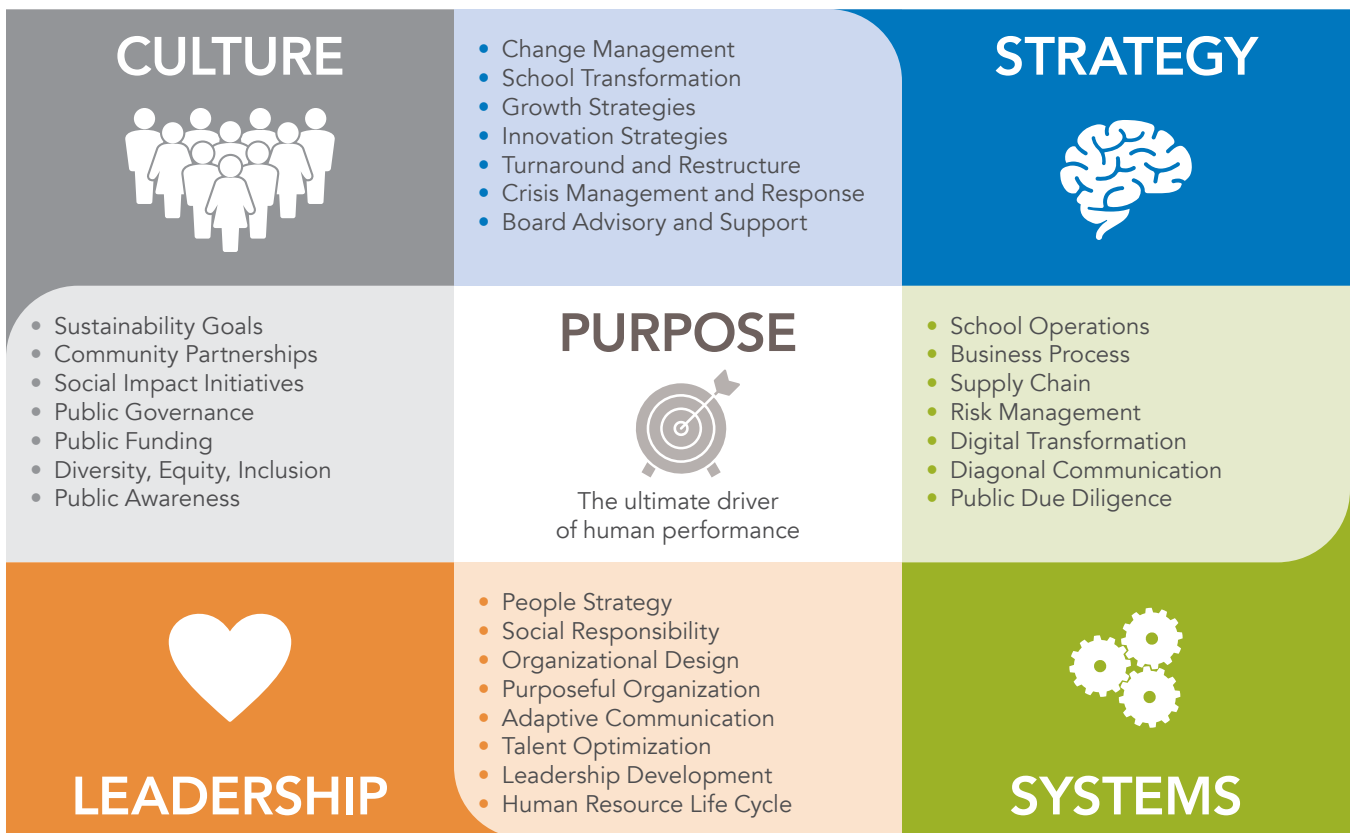
SHARED VISION & PURPOSE

Educational systems are complex and require shared understanding to address the problems and challenges that occur within them. Any new initiative such as restorative practices requires the establishment of a universal message of purpose and support from the school district to the classroom; it is an explicit communication that a shared understanding by stakeholder groups must be included in the design of the initiative. Community engagement and transparency creates

the bridge of support that the school district needs to drive transformative change for students inside and outside of the classroom.

As noted earlier, most school-based approaches tend to be transactional fixes that result in repurposing of resources and decreases trust and buy-in among staff in schools (Honig & Rainey, 2020). The solution is rooted in an understanding of the decisions that inform strategies and systems that are measurable. Adapting a model from the business world (See Figure 2) helps to illustrate the many facets that need to be considered and coordinated so we can make change that is structurally transformative

FIGURE 2: Human Capital Ecosystem



Adapted with permission from A. Lopez, 2021.

and sustainable. This helps thread everything together from systems to leadership to culture. And school districts must move away from bringing in programs and new initiatives that fall flat because of the lack of high expectations (purpose) and high support (human/social capital) under the leadership of superintendents.

From the lens of the Social Discipline Window, when principals are provided a new program or initiative with little expectation and little to no support from their district offices, then staff will have challenges to reaching their maximum human performance or buy-in (**NOT Box**). This is a very high-risk quadrant because human transformation and program sustainability are less likely to occur. If the superintendent mandates or expects principals to implement a new program or initiative and provides little to no vision, purpose, and support, then staff may only do what they are told with no real purpose, commitment, or fidelity (**TO Box**). If the superintendent is supportive of the new program or initiative, however lacks a purpose and fails to set the expectation with principals, then there will be inconsistency in staff buy-in and implementation (**FOR Box**).



STRATEGY

An effective comprehensive approach starts with strategy at the superintendency level to create a change in thinking with principals and their building staffs across the entire district. To do this with fairness and efficiency, the current operations and culture of the district and their schools must be understood. Leaders need to create involvement, buy-in and support at every level. The goal is to ensure that everyone is on the same page and then create the strategies and a communication plan to get the key messages from top to bottom and across to community stakeholders including parents so that they can contribute as well. Being explicit in communicating the purpose and strategy of the new program invites contribution and collaboration.

This supports the IIRP's fundamental hypothesis of the social discipline window, working *with* others (Wachtel, 2016). Strategy defines purpose and practice in the stakeholder's role with students, which will be different for principals, teachers, counselors, support staff, and external partners.



SYSTEMS

Systems should be put in place to measure performance and reward and incentivize good practices, and they should be built on outcomes and performance indicators included in the program design for staff based on their roles. For example, the IIRP receives calls from school districts and schools whose only goal is to reduce suspensions, an outcome that can easily be accomplished by stopping suspensions all together. However, negative outcomes on school climate will still occur (e.g., increase in classroom-based conflict, more referrals to the office, the overreliance of security personnel). In this example, principals still need to address the behaviors; eliminating suspensions hasn't eliminated the problems. The assessment of gaps and changes needed will produce a strategic plan. This plan will help staff and students collectively make decisions about how (strategy) to change behaviors and outcomes (systems). These tactical choices with action steps support strategic decisions (big picture) that can be measured, discussed, and acknowledged as performance change indicators (A. Lopez, 2019).



LEADERSHIP

Unlike management, leadership is the efficient completion of tasks, while also elevating the people around leaders. In restorative practices, all stakeholder groups should encourage and foster leadership within their community. This promotes a structure of belonging that elevates human dignity

among every member in that community. Therefore, a sense of self and community is created and shared with the emerging school culture (Bailie, 2019). This type of leadership culture would be valuable to superintendents striving to shift from a reactive culture (letting things happen) to a proactive culture (making things happen with others). In addition, a culture of shared leadership results in long-term and better outcomes (Honig & Rainey, 2020).



CULTURE

Instead of micromanaging, when supervisors and administrators focus on the relational dynamics in their systems, culture is formed. Culture is built on the trust and bonds that have been created by school and district leaders that apply a restorative ethos in their leadership approach. It is people centered, shaped intentionally within and across a school system, with an embedded set of practices and competencies that are prescriptive and demonstrated through modeling and reflection. To achieve cultural transformation in a school district and across a school system requires a set of goals within the strategic plan that can be executed by all staff from top to bottom. Therefore, positive culture cannot be built without a healthy school climate, the right strategic plan, a pulse on the systems gaps, and effective school leaders with plenty of resources and support to implement restorative practices with fidelity (Honig & Rainey, 2020).

SUMMARY

School districts are complex and susceptible to social and cultural problems that are difficult to solve, and further complicated by the turmoil that can result from national and global crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Pourdehnad et al., 2020). The analysis and recommendations in this paper are offered to help K–12 district and school leaders understand what sustainable implementation of restorative practices requires and to suggest how to begin. Superintendents of school districts must

define a clear purpose for restorative practices as part of a systems change approach, under a strategic plan, with human capital resources that foster implementation fidelity across schools. The results would provide a more stable and sustainable district culture that benefits multiple stakeholders, including the most important group, students, in addition to a more promising return on the financial investment in the initiative itself.

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