

# USING RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN SCHOOL

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## *Creating a caring community*

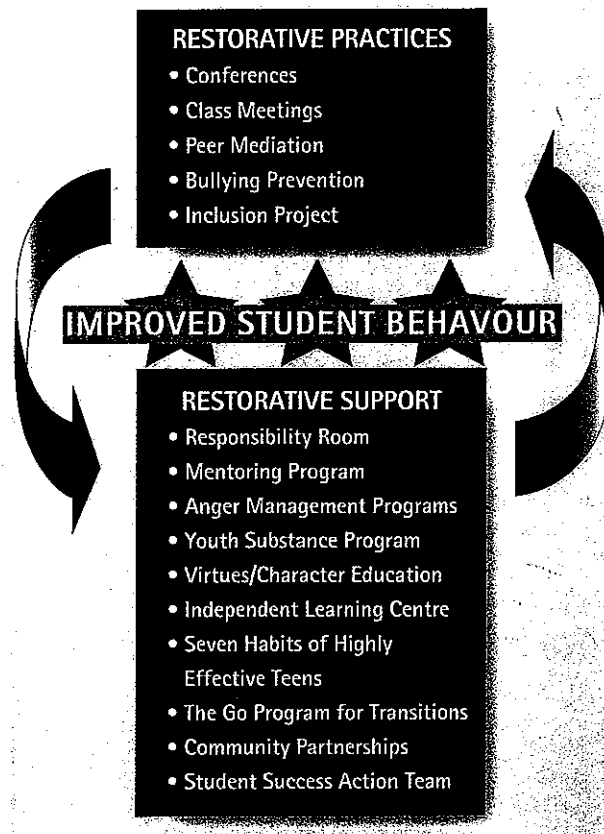
**L**incoln M. Alexander Secondary School and its feeder school, Morning Star Middle School, have experienced high short-term success in the reduction of suspensions through the implementation of a number of restorative practices. Lincoln and Morning Star are part of the Peel District School Board, and are communities characterized by low income. The restorative practices experience, resulting in more caring school communities, provides lessons to other schools and districts interested in reforming their approach to student discipline, while also supporting system outcomes aimed at improving student achievement and graduation rates.

Over the last four years, the administration and teaching staff at Lincoln and Morning Star have been striving to implement strategies that will assist students in reaching their potential both socially and academically. Through a series of proactive initiatives, consistent communication, dialogue, counseling and follow-through, these two schools have been able to significantly reduce suspension numbers. They have created a safer and more positive learning atmosphere that has increased student academic success.

### **Our Journey: Lincoln M. Alexander Secondary School and Morning Star Middle School**

By implementing a number of practices over the last four years, Lincoln and Morning Star have significantly improved student behaviour as indicated by a large reduction in suspension rates. For example at Lincoln, suspension rates have decreased from 569 in 2003-04 to 82 in 2006-07. At Morning Star, suspensions have dropped from 200 in 2002-03 to 30 in 2006-07. Figure 1 reveals a number of restorative practices and additional supports aimed at improving student behaviour that have been implemented at both schools in order to build positive relationships internally and within the community.

**FIGURE 1 Summary of Key Restorative Practices  
Lincoln M. Alexander Secondary School and  
Morning Star Middle School, 2003–2007**



The process includes formal and informal conferencing and mediation, which take place on a regular basis between students and teachers, and administrators and counselors. As school leaders, we recognize the need to put in place proactive measures that can help prevent problems from escalating.

An important part of the strategy is to ensure consistency within procedures and in the messages around character education. It is important that everyone is working together as a team and feels supported.

For example, Lincoln has a Peer Mediation program run through the guidance department. Students are trained in mediation and also act as tutors to support at-risk students. Morning Star's Peer Mediation program is based on students assisting other students to deal with conflict resolution and anger management. Students learn how to better handle difficult situations and how to assist their friends in similar situations.

Staff in both schools' Contact Rooms, including teaching assistants and special education teachers, offer support through conferencing, mediation and the use of reflective materials. Parents are often involved in these practices through phone contact or by direct participation. Class meetings occur on an informal basis and there is a focused effort to periodically

include conversations related to behaviour issues.

Individuals involved in the conferencing are the victim, the perpetrator, bystanders and parents. The conferencing process allows students to assume responsibility for their actions, and for victims to go through a healing process. Bullying Prevention initiatives include counseling, workshops involving victims and offenders and the use of reflective learning practices specific to the incident or infraction.

The schools have continued to build on character development through the readings and lessons in the Virtues Project (Lincoln), a school-wide program adapted from the U.S. aimed at positive character development among students, and The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens (Morning Star).

A staff Character Education Committee has also organized activities, assemblies and guest speakers linked to character development. By emphasizing the importance of one's character, both of these programs have taught our students important life strategies to help them become successful. Another key area of development has been to increase our communication within the schools and the multicultural community.

The Inclusion Project involves the development of reflective materials that are based on the top 10 reasons why students are suspended. These materials can be used as preventative measures by keeping students who are suspended connected to school and to assist students upon re-entry.

One of the goals of this project is to improve attendance and credit accumulation for at-risk students, those under suspension and repeat offenders. Staff and trained community volunteers designed these packages, based on an analysis of suspension data from the schools, thereby improving the relationships and involvement of the parents and the community.

No behavior strategy could be effective without the collaborative effort of the school, home and community. Community volunteers can be instrumental in sharing their insights and expertise by integrating their cultural and religious backgrounds into the mentoring of students. Individualized attention and an environment that allows students to think calmly and speak to a community volunteer, who may share the same cultural and religious background, may help students to open up, share and better communicate.

As part of the holistic approach to school improvement, supports at Lincoln and Morning Star include a supervised Responsibility/Accountability Room during lunch hours where students involved with minor incidents use reflective learning packages. Both schools have identified students who may be at risk of leaving school early, and have matched each student with a teacher volunteer to act as a mentor. Lincoln students with serious anger management issues are referred to one of two lunchtime gender-specific programs, facilitated by a clinical counselor from a community agency. The community organization runs a lunchtime program for disaffected teens called

ACYSAP (African-Canadian Youth Substance Abuse Program). Lincoln also has an independent learning centre called LEAP (Lincoln Educational Alternative Program) at a nearby church facility to support its at-risk student population.

Due to the fact that both schools are located in very transient communities, the guidance teams work with the administrators to develop a series of best practices that take place when a new student arrives. This acts as a proactive tactic to foster a positive school climate in welcoming new students and families. Students within each school are trained to become ambassadors and welcome new students.

Both schools' initiatives at improving student behaviour have paralleled focused efforts to improve literacy and numeracy. While Lincoln's numeracy initiatives have produced inconsistent results, the rates are gradually increasing. Results of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) for first-time eligible writers have increased from 39 per cent in February 2002 to 76 per cent in March 2006.

Indeed, Lincoln was recognized by the EQAO in 2004 as the school with the highest provincial improvement rate for first-time eligible writers. Morning Star's grade 6 EQAO results in reading/writing have increased from 51/46 per cent in 2002 to 58/58 per cent in 2006. Math grade 6 EQAO results have progressed from 46 per cent in 2003 to 66 per cent in 2006. Both schools have also been recognized by the district's validation teams, which identified successful strategies used to improve student achievement in literacy and numeracy.

### Creating Caring Communities:

#### School, district and system transformation

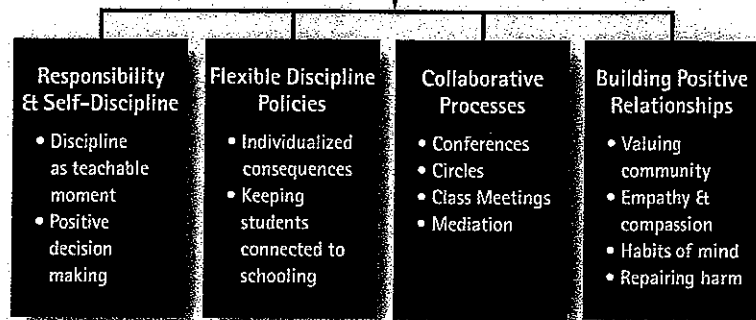
Building on the goals of creating caring communities, the ongoing planning of Lincoln and Morning Star aims to create a school climate that represents the pillars of restorative practices. Restorative practices rest on four foundations, as illustrated in Figure 2, and our own definition encompasses these pillars:

By using wrongdoing as a teachable moment, restorative practices teach responsibility and self-discipline. Through flexible discipline policies and collaborative processes that balance the needs of the offender, victim and community, restorative practices focus on building positive relationships within a school and its wider community.

#### Why Restorative Practices: The Ontario context

Restorative practices, by focusing on improving student behaviour through relationship building, support the Ontario government's commitment to school safety, character development and, ultimately, student success. The recent report by the Safe Schools Action Team (2006) acknowledges school safety as being "a fundamental prerequisite for student success and academic achievement" (p. 4). The report calls on school boards to "implement a continuum of preventative strategies and

**FIGURE 2  
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OF RESTORATIVE  
PRACTICES**



empowerment programs" (p. 7) that focus on a number of items including "empathy, citizenship development, conflict resolution, restorative practice, bullying prevention, [and] peer mediation" (p. 7). Recent legislative amendments to the safe schools provisions of the *Education Act* reflect this emphasis on prevention and intervention.

Glaze, Zegarac and Giroux (2006) in *Finding Common Ground: Character development in Ontario schools, K-12*, emphasizes the connection between character education, "the creation of caring learning cultures," (p. 4) and academic achievement. In contributing to positive character development, restorative practices therefore support the two main outcomes of Ontario's education strategy: the commitment to improve elementary school literacy and numeracy outcomes and to increase high school graduation rates (Levin, Glaze & Fullan, 2007).

Restorative practices aim to reduce the need for suspensions and expulsions by focusing on helping students develop the skills needed for conflict resolution. Higher rates of suspensions and expulsions are associated with lower academic achievement and early school leaving (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Ferguson et al., 2005; Noguera, 2003). The Safe Schools Action Team (2006) recommended that boards "ensure that in-school disciplinary alternatives are created as steps in a progressive discipline framework where suspension may be necessary and expulsion should be used as a last resort after all other strategies have been attempted" (p. 9) and recommends the use of such supports as "restorative practice, healing circles" (p. 9) to support students. Restorative practices also target many school-related risk factors identified by Ferguson et al. (2005) in their report on early school leavers.

The literature on restorative practices and the progress made at Lincoln and Morning Star suggest a number of preliminary conclusions regarding school, district and system transformation.

## 1 Student Behaviour and Student Achievement: A reciprocal relationship

In order to meet system and district goals with regard to graduation rates and student achievement in literacy and numeracy, we must focus on strategies aimed at academic achievement and student behaviour. By improving relationships and reducing the need for suspensions and expulsions, restorative practices target those students who are most at risk of becoming disengaged and leaving school early.

Restorative practices, utilizing the community's support, represent a paradigm shift, a shift that takes us from focusing on consequences for infractions to building caring communities by renewing connections between students, teachers, parents and administrators.

## 2 Improvement is a Holistic Enterprise

At Lincoln and Morning Star, not only is there a focus on student achievement and behaviour, there are also efforts underway to improve capacity at all levels and to respond to the needs of a culturally diverse community with many social issues bred by poverty, transience and the needs of an immigrant population. A glance at the schools' calendars for the year reveals multi-faith celebrations around Eid, Ramadan, Holi, Black History Month, South Asian Month, culminating with a Multifest celebration complete with a pot-luck dinner for families in the community.

Both schools' ethic of social responsibility includes a breakfast program; clothing, food and toy drives; fundraising for global causes; environmental initiatives; welcoming workshops for new immigrant students; on-site access to settlement workers; and close connections with community agencies. At both schools, there has been a genuine moral commitment to improving not only education outcomes but also "life outcomes" for these students (Levin, 2004, *Students at risk: A review of research*. Paper prepared for The Learning Partnership).

### Community Building is a Continuous Process

Restorative practices are aimed at relationship and community building. Lincoln and Morning Star believe that the school must serve the community. In a multicultural setting, restorative practices can only work if staff understands the cultural backgrounds of their students. It is not a coincidence that in challenging communities like those of Lincoln and Morning Star restorative practices are at the centre of school improvement efforts.

## 4 Change is a Matter of Alignment Between Bottom Up and Top Down

Restorative practices not only represent a set of strategies but also a framework where system-wide efforts aimed at improving student behaviour, creating dispositions and critical thinking

skills are necessary for student success. We need to move beyond using restorative practices as another "behaviour management tool" (Blood, 2005, *The Australian context – Restorative practices as a platform for cultural change in schools*). Blood (2005) cautions, "if suspension rates are our only measure, we are likely to miss the opportunity for change at a deeper and more impacting level" (p. 10).

While the use of restorative practices at Lincoln and Morning Star have demonstrated excellent short-term results and have fueled the momentum for comprehensive school improvement, sustaining these efforts will require leadership and district and system support through resources for capacity building and policies that support the schools' work. Encouragingly, many districts are beginning to move in this directions and the work of Ontario's Safe Schools Action Team and Ontario's Character Development Initiative holds promise for future system level policy alignment.

The example of Lincoln M. Alexander Secondary School and Morning Star Middle School demonstrates that restorative practices support student success and the ongoing creation of a caring community.

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