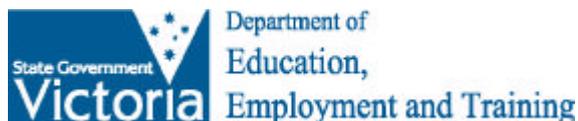


# COMMUNITY CONFERENCING IN VICTORIAN SCHOOLS: MAXIMISING PROTECTIVE FACTORS

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## Introduction

Under the *National School Drug Education Strategy*, Victoria received funding which has enabled the Department of Education & Training (DE&T), in collaboration with the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) to explore the effectiveness of *Community Conferencing/Restorative Practices* in schools across Victoria.

Community Conferencing is a restorative justice approach to the management of harmful behaviour. It offers a way to achieve positive outcomes for students, their parents and caregivers and the school community in the wake of the sort of serious incidents usually so challenging for our schools. This approach offers an opportunity for all parties to address unresolved feelings and questions about these incidents. It is also thought to be a useful approach to address the issue of retention of at risk students in our schools.

## History of Conferencing in Schools

Originally known as Family Group Conferencing, this approach was developed in New Zealand to divert juvenile offenders from courts and is used to complement the formal justice system at various stages after charges have been laid. Elements of this approach were first used in Australia in the early 1990's in New South Wales by police as an alternative to a caution or court appearance. South Australia included conferencing as an option for juvenile offending in its 1993 juvenile justice legislation.

Conferencing has moved from policing and juvenile justice into schools. The process was adapted and trialed in Queensland schools where it was used to deal with those incidents that were sufficiently serious for suspension or expulsion of students to be considered, and where achieving fair outcomes for all consistently presented a challenge.

Research findings from 119 Queensland schools have indicated;

- participants were highly satisfied with the process and its outcomes
- low rates of reoffending
- high compliance rate of agreements
- nearly all schools reported they had changed their thinking about managing behaviour from a punitive to a more restorative approach<sup>1</sup>

The majority of conferences were in response to assaults and serious victimisation, followed by property damage and theft. Incidents involving drugs were also addressed.

It is this approach which is being trialed in selected Victorian schools, renamed the *Restorative Practices in Schools Pilot Project*. Our intention in this pilot is to train teachers and regional staff, and monitor the application of this approach in response to a range of incidents including drug related matters. The ability to resolve incidents without suspension or expulsion is an important aspect of this project.

*“If the philosophy of restorative practices such as conferencing, were to underpin all our disciplinary dealings with young people in classrooms and playgrounds, our schools would go some way to building social capital and a sense of belonging in an emotionally healthy community.”<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Community Accountability Conferencing 1996 Dept Ed Queensland

<sup>2</sup> Thorsborne M 2000 Issue 1 School Principal.

## The Victorian Context

*The Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria* chaired by Peter Kirby found that the changes in the broader social context in relation to employment means that there is a need to address the issue of early school leaving. Central to the review has been the question of the capacity of schools to cater for the needs of young people in the post compulsory years. The Drug Policy Expert Committee in its report, *Drugs. Meeting the Challenge* clearly highlights the development of healthy and supportive school environments as a goal in the prevention framework recommended to the Victorian Government.<sup>3</sup> A strategy such as *Community Conferencing* offers one way of managing difficult behaviours whilst maintaining/promoting healthy school environments.

Recent research in the field of resilience has identified a number of protective factors that contribute to resilience (the ability to bounce back). Many Victorian schools have responded positively to this research and incorporated protective factors into their school programs. A report released in 2000 by the Centre for Adolescent Health, *Improving the Lives of Young Victorians* highlighted these protective factors that relate to school as:

- caring relationships – feeling connected to school, and close to the people there.
- high and positive expectations (emphasis on the learning process)
- youth participation and contribution – opportunities to participate and be responsible

Any programs that enhance connectedness with peers, family, school and community are seen as an accepted way of reducing high-risk behaviours or increasing protective factors.

*The Framework for Student Support Services* (1998) was also influenced by this research into resilience, along with the benefits of linking welfare to curriculum in the areas of resilience, coping skills, social skills, and mental health. This Framework represents both policy and implementation advice to schools in four levels of activity: primary prevention, early intervention, intervention and restoring wellbeing.

Restorative Justice represents a philosophy and a process that acknowledges that when a person does harm, it affects the person(s) they hurt, the community and themselves. “*Restorative justice in the school setting views misconduct not as school rule breaking, but as a violation against people and relationships in the school and wider school community.*” (Thorsborne and Cameron 2000)

This restorative philosophy can be linked to the current DE&T policy, the *Framework for Student Support Services*.

- **Primary Prevention** – the development of social competencies in all children that empower them to sustain positive relationships and negotiate differences
- **Early Intervention** – the use of restorative language by the teacher in managing relationship issues and conflicts; the use of “mini-conferences” in the classroom and playground.
- **Intervention** – the use of community conferences for a range of incidents and including pathway planning and retention.
- **Restoring Wellbeing** – the consolidation of community through the enactment of agreements and the ongoing empowerment of members of the school community as a result of restorative processes.

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<sup>3</sup> Drugs: Meeting the Challenge 2000 p97

Schools can provide a strong foundation for student wellbeing and are so often considered to be logical places for early intervention programs. Morrison (2002) mentions “*schools may be the most appropriate institutions to focus on reducing antisocial and criminal behaviour patterns in children, while promoting health, resilience and social responsibility*”.

Restorative practices are consistent with current research and policy, through recognising the importance of the promotion of healthy relationships for the whole school community. It also acknowledges that the promotion of student wellbeing is strengthened through the integration of curriculum and welfare providing mechanisms for preventing and managing a range of incidents.

## **Project Establishment**

The *Restorative Practices in School Pilot Project* established trial sites across four regions, which involved a cohort of 53 participants from 23 schools: 14 secondary schools, 8 primary and one alternative school setting. A total of 16 support staff, Senior Program Officers and Student Welfare Support Staff from both Catholic and government sectors also participated in the training bringing the total cohort to 69. Schools were selected from four regional clusters, one in a regional centre, one rural, one metropolitan and one outer suburban.

A professional development strategy was developed and conducted across the four sites that involved two modes of training in Restorative Practices.

1. *Competency based Facilitator training* - Margaret Thorsborne Transformative Justice Australia (Queensland) conducted a 3-day training program.
2. *Research-based Professional Development* - *University of Melbourne* – a credentialed postgraduate training course titled “Managing Conflict in Educational Settings.” This involved participants attending 6 full days equivalent to 1 full semester, accessed as a ‘stand alone’ course or accredited as part of a Masters in Education. Conference facilitator training component of this course consisted of 2 days.

## **Preliminary Findings of the Evaluation**

Up to August 2002, data has been collected from 14 schools reporting on 15 community conferences and 23 other incidents involving restorative practices. While the sample is relatively small (and should be judged accordingly), some preliminary themes are evident.

1. High regard for training – both the teaching and content in the two different training modes
2. Involvement of school leadership – where there is principal class involvement in training, there appears to be more successful uptake of restorative practices across the whole school.
3. High levels of satisfaction with the process – participants have reported favourably about the process and outcomes.
4. High level of satisfaction by parents – parents are generally positive about their participation and outcomes.
5. High level of satisfaction with the outcomes – Facilitators report favourably on the benefits of restorative practice compared to other means available to them.
6. Confidence and experience of facilitators – Many facilitators have reported that they are more confident practising ‘mini conferences’ using restorative language and principles. They are less confident about running a formal community conference.

7. Collegiate and regional support – The emergence of an ongoing network of trained facilitators in each of the pilot clusters was seen as a highly positive development and an important forum for de-briefing.
8. Mandate for use of restorative justice – Restorative measures remain subordinate to more established (punitive) measures.
9. Time constraints – Formal conferences require a significant amount of time to organise, facilitate and monitor.
10. Student Involvement – Student awareness and understanding of restorative practices coupled with appropriate skill development may enhance outcomes. <sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

The data already gathered from this pilot indicates some real possibilities for the application of restorative justice practices in Victorian schools in contributing in a meaningful way to improved student wellbeing outcomes. These results have strong implications for the adoption of new approaches to the management of behaviour in schools, both at a system/policy level and the application of this policy in classrooms, corridors and playgrounds. It is to be hoped that a restorative approach may well mean that we will be better served by reframing behaviour management/discipline as relationship management.

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<sup>4</sup> Shaw G. & Wierenga A., (2002) Interim Evaluation of Restorative Practices Pilot Project

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