

NC ACCESS BEST PRACTICES



Office of Charter Schools
NC ACCESS PROGRAM
NC Department of Public Instruction

School Culture

Social Emotional Learning

A Shift in Thinking

Implementation Description

Two Rivers Community School (TRCS) is a close-knit community of students, teachers, and families that values equity and a supportive school culture. To better align with their values, the school is transitioning from a traditional punitive disciplinary system into a Restorative Justice system. The school leadership believes a restorative justice approach will benefit their students and the community at large.

The school leadership decided to transition to a restorative justice disciplinary system, because studies have shown that Restorative Justice practices produce better outcomes than traditional criminal justice systems for both the victim and the perpetrator of the offense (Centre for Justice & Reconciliation, N.d.). Specifically in educational environments, Restorative Justice can play an important role in improving the overall school climate and preventing a “school to prison pipeline” (Fronius et al, 2019).

Utilizing NC ACCESS funding, Two Rivers contracted with Triad Restorative Justice (TRJ) to train staff members and provide support as they make this transition. The school director commented how helpful it was to work with an external organization, because they were able to provide a fresh perspective and had extensive knowledge beyond what school leadership would have been able to provide. Research has shown that outsourcing, specifically for small schools, can be very beneficial and cost-effective (Bretz, 2002).

In the initial phase of Triad Restorative Justice’s training program, the focus was building strong teacher leaders through positive staff relationships and quality professional development. The school director observed some staff members felt disconnected from the rest of the school,

August 3, 2021

About This School

Two Rivers Community School

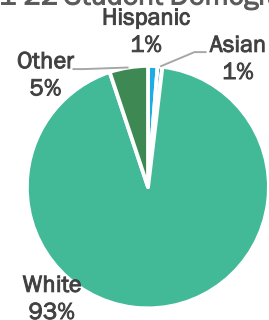
Two Rivers is a close-knit community of students, teachers, and families committed to learning in an environment that values the shared contributions of all. We recognize our responsibility to contribute positively to a larger purpose in our surrounding community and beyond. Two Rivers emphasizes an appreciation for the environment through environmental stewardship and enjoyment of the natural world and is based on an expeditionary learning model in which learning is integrated across multiple disciplines and includes field work and service. We value the role of expeditions in understanding the complexities of real-world success and are committed to providing a supportive learning environment to facilitate self-driven discipline in students.

Year School Opened: 2005-06

Grant Awarded: 2020-21

Initial Grade Levels Served: K-8

2021-22 Student Demographics



% ED Student Population: 47.1%

Urbanicity: Rural / Boone, NC

Persons in Poverty (Watauga County)⁶: 21.8%

particularly those teaching in modulars who were not in the main building for most of the school day. Based on the input from TFJ, the school director scheduled intentional relationship building time for her staff through their long-standing community partnership with the Buffalo Cove Outdoor Education Center. Teachers participated in team-oriented challenges and spent time connecting with one another. These efforts helped build closer relationships (Natalie Oransky, personal communication, June 14, 2021). Strong bonds between school leaders have been shown to provide a healthy model for students and create a positive learning environment (Hongboontri, 2014). When the strong connections were established, the staff was ready for the next phase, which included participating in eight training sessions with TRJ: four sessions on building restorative relationships with every student and four sessions on Reflective Circles for students who have experienced trauma. These sessions focused on understanding the research behind restorative justice and practical skills for implementing restorative justice practices in the school setting.

During the next phase of restorative justice implementation, the focus shifted to student involvement and feedback. About 8-10 students in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade participated in a focus group with TRJ trainers to share their experiences with how relationships and justice occur at Two Rivers. The participating students were chosen specifically based on their Educationally Disadvantaged (ED) status, because studies have shown that minority students as well as students living in poverty are more likely to experience punitive discipline in schools (Fronius et al, 2019). Studies have also shown that collecting input from students is a valuable part of the Restorative Justice process in schools, because it aids in staff members' understanding of the root cause of disciplinary struggles and causes students to feel valued by school leadership (Anderson, 2015). Additionally, the school created and distributed surveys to collect data from students, families, and staff members regarding their perspectives on current discipline practices at school. Two Rivers' leadership team will utilize the data from both the student focus group and the surveys to revise their existing discipline structure to be more supportive and equitable.

Results

TRJ's initial training sessions, in which Two Rivers participated this year, focused on a mindset change, with full implementation beginning in the 2021 school year. While teacher response has been positive thus far, the school anticipates quantitative effectiveness data will be available in 2022 after a full year of implementation.

Challenges

The School Director, Guidance Counselor, and Adventure Fitness teacher had originally planned to travel to Chicago for Restorative Justice training with an Expeditionary Learning affiliate, but were unable to attend because of COVID-19 safety guidelines. However, this obstacle led the school to partner with Triad Restorative Justice, which turned out to be an excellent option as it exposed the entire staff to expert training and incorporated student feedback.

Future Modifications

As a result of their training with Triad Restorative Justice, Two Rivers staff members are revising TRCS' discipline policies and their Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports program. The school will continue their partnership with TRJ and will receive additional professional development through large group sessions and individualized coaching as needed. Additionally, TRCS plans to build upon the progress of relationship building among the staff by appointing rotating teams of staff members to plan monthly activities, such as camping or volunteering at the Health and Hunger Coalition.

Critical Components

Getting Started

School leadership believes their partnership with Triad Restorative Justice was an essential component for making the change to restorative justice practices. The high-quality professional development provided common language and experiences for staff members to implement change successfully.

Ongoing Supports

Because an authoritative school environment has been the standard for so long, staff members may be resistant to change or may initially feel ill-equipped to implement Restorative Justice. TRCS' director recommends school administration, and any other support staff, should approach struggling staff members with the same compassionate, patient, relationship-focused approach that they are now seeking to apply to their students.

Equity Connections

Children living in poverty are more likely to regularly experience trauma and are most likely to benefit from Restorative Justice in the classroom (Swaringen, 2017). TRCS is pursuing a restoration-focused approach to discipline, which will especially benefit the 95.6% of their students who qualify as ED.

Research

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3. Centre for Justice & Reconciliation. (N.d.). "Lesson 6: Benefits of Restorative Justice". Prison Fellowship International. Accessed on June 15, 2021. Retrieved from <http://restorativejustice.org/restorative-justice/about-restorative-justice/tutorial-intro-to-restorative-justice/lesson-6-benefits-of-restorative-justice/#sthash.FGYhUAKb.dpbs>
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