

Using Restorative Justice as a Tool for Providing a Better Education + Future for Kahnawà:ke

When it comes to education in our community, the first thought for most people would not likely to be, “How does justice fit in?” But education is not just about reading and writing, it’s about getting our kids ready for the world.

If we look at the justice system, it’s always clogged up with cases, and most are about people not being able to solve their problems or disagreements, leading to conflict. The truth is, most files that go to court could be solved by people simply talking the matter out rationally. But if people don’t have the skills to talk matters out, the result is not likely to be positive. Getting back to the relationship between education and justice, they are more connected than it would seem at first. If we want our kids to learn skills to help them live good lives, which would include not ending up in court, maybe kids need to be learning a more about resolving conflict. We need to reconnect with each other as we once did within the clan system. If there was a conflict between a Bear and a Turtle, both clans would be responsible to resolve the issue and make peace. This was necessary for survival.

Many schools have started to make dealing with discipline a priority. After all, if teachers and staff are spending all their time dealing with discipline problems, where is the time for academics? Many schools are incorporating Restorative Practices into their curriculums, and some of the results are dramatic. The concept is to use group talks or conferencing to build empathy, accountability, and connectedness. It becomes part of the way people interact, and can change the culture of a school.

For example, since using in 2002 Restorative Practices in the curriculum, disciplinary referrals are down by approximately 50% at Springfield Township High School in Montgomery County Pennsylvania, and at Centennial Middle School in the Detroit area, the number of suspension days students had to serve dropped from 1800 in 2002, to approx 400 in 2008. Three years after implementing restorative practices in the curriculum in Newtown Middle School in Newtown, Pennsylvania, the detention rate dropped 82%, and the suspension rate was down 59%. These are real figures, and doing a simple internet search will yield many more similar figures about how restorative practices have positively impacted schools. Using restorative practices doesn’t necessarily get rid of all the problems in a school, there’s no magical solution for that. But it can result in finding more effective solutions for dealing with problem behavior. And if these solutions provide kids with better skills to deal with conflict, why are we not providing this in our schools?

Using group conferences to resolve issues is well and good, but how can that have an impact on a whole school? The stress of dealing with discipline can have a huge impact on both staff and administration, which in the end will affect the students. In class, teachers often ending up dealing with conflicts to the point that the classroom becomes disrupted, possibly even out of control. This takes the teacher away from doing their primary job, adds additional stress, and hinders them from doing their job well. In turn, the students suffer academically. Principals and vice-principals then have to deal with these “problem” students, taking them away from doing other work, and adding stress to them as well. Given all this, it’s safe to say that conflict, and how it is handled, can impact at all levels.

Getting back to the justice/education connection, we see the things happening in schools with our youth are later being reproduced in the community, and once these kids grow up it often means going to court. So if we're not teaching these types of skills to kids, how do we expect things to change? Obviously the responsibility lies with the parents first. But our kids spend so much time at school, why shouldn't this be a part of their lives there too?

Everyone has an opinion about what should, and shouldn't be done to make positive changes in our community, and everyone seems to agree that our children are the future. But if we are going to develop a long term vision for where we want our community to be, we have to take a good look at what values we're teaching our kids. None of us wants our kids to grow up lacking the ability to deal with a problem. Looking at our justice system currently, it seems that if we don't start making changes in what we are teaching to our kids soon, and take some real action, the problem is going to get worse before it gets any better.

For more information on Restorative Justice and Restorative practices, call the Court of Kahnawà:ke at 450-638-5647 to speak to Dale Dione-Dell, or Davis Montour.