

Oregon school pushes 'restorative justice,' not punishment

By Teresa Thomas
Mail Tribune

MEDFORD (AP) — Phoenix High School junior Timothy Dunlop has authority issues, is a self-described "rebel" and has been on probation for unlawful possession of marijuana.

So when he wadded up a piece of paper in class one day and threw it at his teacher, he knew the drill.

His teacher would write a referral. A student manager would talk to him. He'd be forced to apologize and, maybe, he'd have to write an essay.

But not anymore.

Last year, Phoenix High School, in partnership with Resolve (formerly Mediation Works), began implementing schoolwide "restorative justice" practices.

"Basically, we're slowing down the school's response," said Principal Jani Hale. "We're giving both sides a chance to be heard ... and giving students the opportunity to see how their actions impact others and take responsibility for that."

In the past, a teacher might write a referral out of anger or frustration and give it to the student manager to decide the consequences. And, hopefully, that student would return to class a changed person, Hale said.

"But we want to stop sending kids that old-school message, 'Just wait till your

daddy gets home,'" Hale said. "In other words, 'I'm not going to deal with this.'"

In Dunlop's case, he was not let off the hook for his actions.

But instead of giving an insincere apology to his teacher or being placed on in-school suspension, he was handed a responsibility reflection form and had to answer questions about what happened in class, how he was feeling emotionally and physically, who was affected by his actions and how he was going to make it right.

Dunlop, 16, talked to his teacher before class, and she explained that she felt threatened by his actions, especially because he was so much bigger than she was.

"I felt really bad," Dunlop said. "I had no idea that's how it would be interpreted. It's crazy how a situation can have so many different views."

As a result of their interaction, Dunlop said he isn't angry nor does he hold a grudge against his teacher.

"And now she doesn't see me as her worst student," he added.

Last year, Phoenix High School — located a few miles south of Medford — had 18 percent fewer in-school suspensions than in 2013-14. There also was a drop in the number of incidents involving drugs, bullying, weapons, gang behavior and acts of insubordination.

"In some cases, in-school suspension becomes kind of a refuge for students and a place where they are connecting with other students who are exhibiting bad behavior," Hale said.

Restorative practices are built on prevention, intervention and restoration and emphasize healing and repair over punishment, inclusion over exclusion, and accountability, said Raphaëlle Kunkel, Resolve's director of education and training.

Resolve has been employing these principles in the community and in the juvenile justice system for the past 20 years, and last year, received a one-time grant for \$60,000 from the Youth Development Council to launch the pilot program in Phoenix High School.

The agency trained staff and administrators and provided a restorative practices specialist who is available 15 hours a week to support staff and to respond to student behavioral issues.

This year, Rogue River Junior/Senior High and Roosevelt and John Muir elementary schools began incorporating restorative practices into their disciplinary policies.

Positive relationships in the school, Kunkel said, are the key to having a thriving community and positive school culture and climate.

"From there, when harm has happened and rules have

been broken, we look at what relationships were damaged or harmed and hold the person that caused the harm accountable for repairing the relationship," Kunkel said.

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— Principal Jani Hale

The last piece of restorative justice is reintegrating students who have been suspended or expelled in such a way that they know they are supported by the school, Kunkel explained.

At Phoenix, classes hold "circle check-ins." During this time, students are asked questions about bullying or their dreams for the future, and everyone gets a chance to respond.

"When you know someone more personally and hear, 'I'm having a really hard day today,' students tend to

be more compassionate and understanding," Kunkel said.

And when there is an incident, students fill out responsibility reflection forms and meet with either the student or staff member they harmed, as well as an administrator and, if possible, a parent.

"I had a student who got up and walked out of class, so I had his mother come in with the young man and the person who wrote the referral," Hale said. "The teacher came in and shared how it made her feel disrespected, and the student responded and explained that he was struggling from a breakup with his girlfriend. In the end, there was an understanding that came from the episode, and the teacher's and student's relationship was restored."

Under the old policy, Dunlop said, after he was punished he would go to class in a bad mood and feeling that he didn't want to listen to anything he or she had to say. He started skipping class, he said, because "what's the point of coming to school if I'm not going to listen to them?"

"When you actually talk to the person that you did harm to, you regret it, and when you regret it, you don't want to do it again," Dunlop said.

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