

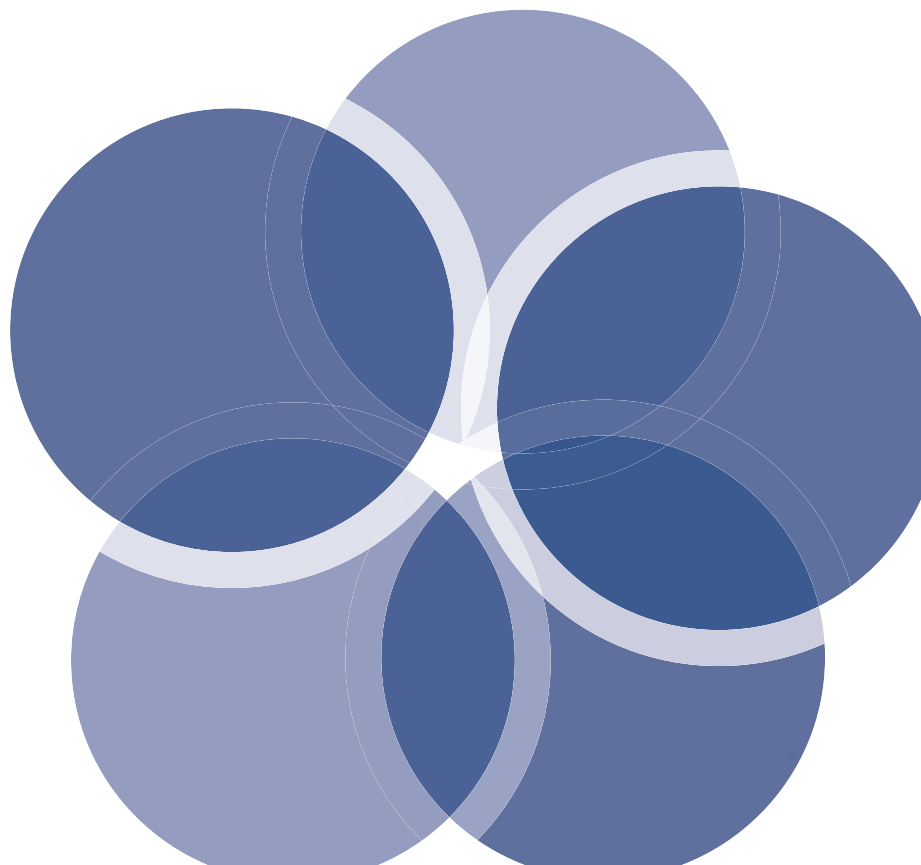
# Circle

# Forward

**BUILDING A RESTORATIVE  
SCHOOL COMMUNITY**

**Carolyn Boyes-Watson & Kay Pranis**

*Foreword by Nancy Riestenberg*



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## Foreword

# Safety and Pies



Early in my tenure at the Minnesota Department of Education, I had the opportunity to provide technical assistance to a principal—the principal of my son’s school.

A student, a 6th grader, had brought a handgun to school, waived it around on the playground, and then when the bell rang at the end of recess, he put it in his coat pocket and hung the coat up in his locker. Not only had this happened while my son was in the school, it had affected a friend’s family, because her son was on the playground, saw the gun, and, with a buddy, reported the incident to the principal.

The boy was arrested at school. Neither the principal, the social worker, the arresting officer, nor his mother could induce him to talk—to explain to everyone, who were all so scared, why he had the weapon in the first place, how he got it, or why he took it out on the playground.

The wheels of the systems turned; the boy was expelled, he was charged, and there was a court hearing that my friend and her son attended. She was so frustrated. In all these proceedings, the boy never said a thing.

In an attempt to help the principal and my friend, I contacted the restorative justice (RJ) specialist at county court services, but the boy’s case was not referred for a family group conference. I tried to see if Kay Pranis, who was working at the Minnesota Department of Corrections at the time, could help. We could not move the systems, but she did offer an explanation for the boy’s silence: “Children will speak,” she observed, “when they feel safe.” This boy obviously did not feel safe and thought that a handgun would offer safety. His sense of safety must have spiraled out of reach when he was caught. What happened to him that he had access to and took up a gun?

“Children will talk when they feel safe.” This is such a simple observation, but one that has profound implications for schools. Some students who don’t feel safe will end up in the office because they got into a fight. Some will elect to flee and start skipping classes or whole days. And some will just freeze. They are in the seat, but due to fear, no information goes to the pre-frontal cortex, and there is no “conscience thought” or learning.<sup>1</sup> Cultivating a sense of safety is important not only for an orderly school but for learning itself.

The question of safety in schools is not just about preventing extreme forms of violence, fights, or bullying. It is also about shrinking the achievement gap, since the way a school disciplines the students will either help or hurt academic achievement. Russell Skiba and Jeffrey Sprague succinctly note, “*time spent* learning is the single *best predictor* of positive academic outcomes.”<sup>2</sup> Suspensions and expulsions are

time spent out of the classroom. As the research of Dr. Skiba and others has shown, using exclusionary practices to keep a well-mannered school has proven to be costly, harmful, and unfair; neither does it bring about the stated goal of safety or improved achievement for all students.<sup>3</sup>

In 2014, the U.S. Secretary of Education and the U.S. Attorney General highlighted the need for alternatives to exclusionary discipline as well as the importance of a positive school climate in a “Dear Colleague” letter to all superintendents of schools in the United States. In that letter, they cite the data that shows that students of color and students with disabilities are more likely to be suspended or expelled, and they state that this disproportionality may be a violation of civil rights laws. In the evidence-based recommendations for remediation, they list restorative justice practices.<sup>4</sup>

This is good news for those of us who have learned the principles and practices of restorative justice and adapted them to schools. We have seen the positive outcomes: reduced suspensions; reduced repeat suspensions; increased connection to school and learning; better relationships between parents and school administration and staff; and better relationships between children and their parents.<sup>5</sup> But we also know that implementing a philosophy involves more than teaching a set of practices. Implementing restorative practices calls for a paradigm shift—a change in the head and the heart.

In Kay and Carolyn’s excellent manual, *Circle Forward*, the authors make the case for cultivating not only safety but also a humane, compassionate school. Such a school recognizes the contributions of all members of the school—the students, of course, and the teachers, but also the entire staff, the parents, and the wider community. Through practicing the Circle process regularly, a school can create a climate of care and connection. These school-wide practices enhance the school’s capacities for problem solving and community building under almost any circumstance.

This book is comprehensive: just about every aspect of a school’s day could be done in Circle—or, more importantly, with the values and principles of the Circle process. Drawing upon restorative justice principles and the Indigenous wisdom of the Circle, the authors clearly articulate the philosophy and practices of a restorative school. They summarize theory and research in the beginning and expand upon it in the theoretical essay in Appendix 3. By providing Circle outline after Circle outline, they make using the process as clear and applicable to every aspect of school life as possible. There are outlines for Circles to build relationships and community and to teach social emotional skills; there are Circles for developing staff buy-in, cohesion, and self-care; and there are Circles that engage parents and community members. Of course, there are Circles to repair harm, even the harm of bullying. After reading the entire manual, one can grasp the interconnectedness of practices that help create a caring school climate: everyone and every aspect of school are part of the mix of a positive school climate.

Several excellent frameworks articulate school climate elements. I recently came across a particularly clear and succinct description: to build a positive community in a

school, all students (and I would say all adults, as well) need to feel a sense of *belonging* and *significance*. Graeme George, an Australian teacher and consultant, elaborates:

One of the key aims of any school is the building of a sense of community among its students, and between students and the adults in the school. For such cooperative relationships to best develop, according to Tyler and Blader (2000), individuals need to feel a high level of pride in membership of the group and a high level of respect within the group. ... [T]he descriptors for these key needs ... [are] *belonging* and *significance*. For students to feel part of the school community they must feel that they belong (i.e., they are interested in being part of the group) and that they are significant (i.e., they feel that others are interested in them being part of the group).<sup>6</sup>

How can all students in a school feel belonging and significance? That is the challenge of creating a safe, healthy school. The word ‘all’ has compelled me to pursue restorative practices and the Circle in particular. I was a “good kid” in school: I liked school, I felt I belonged there, and I was significant. As an extrovert, I raised my hand and was called on, and I felt that I was seen by teachers and peers alike. But many students were not seen. As a teacher, I remember having students whose voices I rarely, if ever, heard. I can’t say that I “saw” them in any honest way. They occupied seats to be checked only for attendance. I have heard students say, in effect, that it is so easy to disappear in a school.

To belong, one has to be seen. To be significant, one has to contribute. In its profound simplicity and deep complexity, the Circle process provides the means for everyone to belong and to be significant under any circumstance: as a student learning a world language; as a member of the classroom reviewing for a test; as a teacher, sharing his highs and lows; as a principal, sharing her favorite dessert; as a member of a team, learning winning and losing; as a kid who caused harm, helping to fix things; as a youth who has been hurt, helping others to fix things; or as a parent, working with the school to support the education of all children. The Circle, for a while, flattens the hierarchy between cliques and cliques, between adults and students, and between the book-learned educator and the experience-learned parent. Everyone has a place.

The Circle comes from an oral tradition. People have learned it as part of a larger culture. How do we teach and use this practice in settings outside of the cultures it is part of? How do we ensure that, in the context of the school, both the spirit of the Circle and the principles of restorative justice are implemented with fidelity? How does one maintain fidelity for a process that is so flexible? Conducting a Circle with fidelity is more than setting up chairs in a circle and asking a question.

The practice is taught mostly by doing: sitting around a fire, a dinner table, a lodge, or a set of chairs in a room. Over the last two decades, the Circle process has been taught through participation at workshops and three- and four-day trainings. Books

have been written on the theory, and more stories have been told to teach the spirit and the values of the process. Now with *Circle Forward*, the theory and the stories become the practice, the daily gathering, “arranging everyone in a circle of chairs with no other furniture.”

The book spans the spectrum of Circle applications and offers several Circle outlines for each kind. Each section of the book has elements of great delight for me. In addition to using the Circle for social-emotional learning, community building, and teaching, I was delighted to see Circle outlines for staff development—developing staff connections. I was delighted to see Circles for parents and community, not just for Individual Education Program (IEP) planning meetings or to repair harm, but for parent-teacher conferences, school planning and improvement, and discussing the values of the family regarding education. I was delighted to read the outlines for student-led Circles. And I was delighted with the examples of the continuum of Circles for repairing harm.

Not every inappropriate behavior in a school rises to the level of “Go to the office!” I once helped to review grant applications for RJ programming in community organizations, correctional facilities, and schools. One reviewer exclaimed, “This school cannot be doing Circles to repair harm to fidelity. They claim they held 200 Circles last school year alone. They can’t have done pre-meetings for all of them!” I pointed out that this was an elementary school that used the Circle as a daily practice. They were counting all the Circles that were held to repair harm, and this included ten-minute Circles in which a student keeper passed the purple dinosaur to address taking turns on the swings. Not all Circles in a school are held for a fight.

*Circle Forward* provides an outline for short Circles, class-repair-of-harm Circles, Circles to address harm when no one is sure who caused the harm, Circles that require pre-meeting preparation, as well as Circles for including many people to provide support. Module 13 gives an excellent discussion of the preparation needed to use Circles to address bullying. Here, the Circle provides great promise, for bullying is a relationship problem, as Debra J. Pepler and Wendy Craig note, and a relationship problem requires relationship solutions.<sup>7</sup> As *Circle Forward* repeats throughout, we are beings who want to be in good relationship with each other.

We know that bullying happens often in the presence of others—whether in person or online. By carefully engaging the person who bullies, the person who was bullied, and the bystanders, we can effectively help people change behaviors—far more than a suspension, an agreement not to talk to each other, or a forced apology can. But preparation is key, from training the keeper to conduct a Circle to repair harm, to holding pre-meetings, to arranging Circles of support and, of course, to coming together in celebration Circles after the agreements have been met.

I was also delighted with the section about setting up ongoing Circles of support. Some students come to school with neural pathways for behaviors that are most useful for survival in a toxic-stress home or community, but these same survival behaviors

can be most disruptive in the classroom. In order to choose different behaviors, the student must first learn new ones. Learning anything new takes time. “How do I get to Carnegie Hall?” the young man asks. “Practice, my dear boy, practice!” is the reply. Some students need support from people who show explicitly that they care and who model caring support over a period of time. Building new neural pathways that are strong for new behaviors can take up to six months (for some of us, even longer).

All of this is wonderful, but the part that I am particularly glad for is the section of Circles for staff to explore implementing restorative measures. These three Circles provide that essential first step in implementing any whole-school process: buy-in. Restorative Practices, like Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports and Social and Emotional Learning, represent a paradigm shift for many people. The shift is away from shame, blame, and punishment and toward support and relationship. The idea is to “teach the behaviors we want to see”—to work with, not do to or for. How can we respect the whole child, instead of siloing academics away from the social, emotional, and physical needs of the students?

A paradigm shift requires movement within the head and the heart. Having the staff start with talking about who they are as people and what they value can help them build interest and excitement in making change. Using the Circle process for their own development, the adults can, perhaps, come to consensus about how to help the whole school move forward.

*Circle Forward* is like a good cookbook. It provides directions for the new baker and ideas and suggestions for the seasoned cook. Starting any new practice can be both frightening and exciting. People will more likely try something new if they feel safe. *Circle Forward* offers that sense of safety for the novice and the experienced Circle keeper. The appendices of openings and closings, of Circle questions, and of the theory that supports it all, combined with the Circle templates, make holding a Circle as easy as pie. There is a recipe, but keepers also apply their own care and intuition. Take a page, add people, and stir with a talking piece!

I am very grateful to Kay and Carolyn for their commitment to creating healthy communities for all young people, for their wisdom, and for their generosity. I cannot wait to share this wisdom with our schools—the teachers, administrators, students and their families, student support staff, educational assistants, volunteers, cooks, janitors, bus drivers, and school board members. This book is such a gift!

Nancy Riestenberg  
*School Climate Specialist, Minnesota Department of Education*  
Roseville, Minnesota, July 2014

## NOTES

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We also wish to acknowledge the ancient roots of Circles and the ancient practitioners of Circles. We are their descendants, working to bring our innate human capacities to bear on our complex modern world in a good way.

We humbly give thanks to all these and to those whose gifts to us are so much a part of who we are that we have not noticed them as separate from ourselves.

## Notes

The term “keeper” is used to refer to the Circle facilitator. Both terms—keeper and facilitator—are used in this guide.

We are following the convention used by many First Nations as well as other cultures of capitalizing a term that has special or sacred significance. Referring to the peacemaking process, the term “Circle” embodies many dimensions of meaning beyond the spatial or geometric, including sacred meanings, so we have chosen to capitalize it.