

# Bennington Banner

## **Discipline in schools: Increasingly, restorative justice takes the place of detention**



**Seniors LaShea Stewart and Makaela Cummings talk to Dean of Students David Beriau on a recent morning at Mount Anthony Union High School.**

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## **HOW RESTORATIVE JUSTICE WORKS**

Restorative justice is a system of criminal justice that focuses rehabilitating offenders through reconciliation with those harmed by the offender's actions or behavior.

Schools that follow a restorative justice model focus less on punishment like suspension and expulsion and instead seek to repair harm caused by a student's actions. The goal of restorative justice is to negotiate for a resolution that satisfies both the offender and the victim of the offender's harmful actions or behavior.

School administrators are increasingly realizing that a child's delinquent behavior can be linked to a wide array of problems such as stress at home, mental illness, and disability. Across the board, administrators note that modern students are arriving at school with much more trauma than before.

The model allows administrators to address behavior on a student-by-student basis and focus more on consequences that allow the child to address their behavior, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach of giving a student detention or suspension.

**By Christie Wisniewski , Bennington Banner**

BENNINGTON — David Beriau has worked at Mount Anthony Union High School for 40 years, serving as dean of students for the past 20. Over the past few decades of being involved with schools, he has noticed some significant changes in the behaviors of children and teenagers and the methods used to discipline them.

When he started working at MAUHS in the late 1970s, he frequently heard people refer to it as "the Wild West," with large fights that administrators didn't dare try to break up.

"There were some physical altercations," Beriau said. "Fights, people acting out of anger a lot."

These actions were usually punished with a "straightforward suspension," he said. But that has changed.

"Over time, that's gotten less and less frequent," he said. "Today, we do more in terms of [the Center for Restorative Justice], we do more with counseling. We work with the local law enforcement to give kids an idea of what would happen if they did this later in life."

Thankfully, though, the amount of physical altercations has diminished significantly. Also mostly gone with the times is alcohol problems among students, and then cigarettes and chewing tobacco.

So, what are the main reasons students get into trouble nowadays?

"It's changed a lot," Beriau said.

For one, vaping has replaced smoking and chewing tobacco. These devices, which can look incredibly similar to a USB stick or a pen, allow the user to discreetly puff vaporized liquid concentrates that can be flavored like candy and often contain nicotine or THC, the main active ingredient in cannabis.

At first, it was fairly easy for students to sneak the devices past teachers. But now, administrators are becoming much more savvy to it, and kids take note, Beriau said.

If a student is caught using a vape pen at MAUHS, the device is confiscated and the student is issued a \$25 civil fine. Not only is it illegal for students to use these devices while under age 18 (or 21 for marijuana), schools have strict policies against smoking or drugs on the property.

Across the board, educational settings from preschool to high school are shifting student discipline methods to a restorative justice model rather than focusing on out-of-school punishments like expulsion and suspension. Restorative justice focuses more on repairing harm caused by disruptive actions, and thanks to MAUHS' in-house justice system, the high school rarely needs to involve law enforcement.

Additionally, administrators are noticing that students are arriving in school with much more childhood trauma than ever before, and this plays a large part in students' disruptive behavior.

Of course, there will most likely never be a time when school teachers and administrators won't have to discipline students. But, with new information and research, the disciplinary process can be more effective and constructive by tailoring it to the student as an individual versus taking a one-punishment-fits-all approach.

### **A shift in discipline**

One positive part to schools opting to use more of a restorative justice model is that administrators are beginning to realize delinquent behavior is often a symptom of something underlying — like stress at home stemming from tumultuous parental relationships or poverty.

"That's really what we want to get to," Beriau said. "What's really causing these behaviors?"

An important way of investigating these behaviors is by school administrators staying connected with parents to understand what's going on in a student's life outside of school. This way, school staff members may be able to better understand why a student is acting a certain way. Additionally, teachers and administrators can learn the best practices to prevent or shift a student's behaviors so that everyone can have a better classroom experience.

"I think parenting today is extremely difficult and we need to work together," Beriau said. "We don't want the kids to feel there is a difference between home and schools with how behaviors are viewed."

One behavior Beriau has noticed becoming much more common for today's students is their tendency to become frustrated with a difficult class and want to quit, he said.

"Sticking it out isn't as second nature as it once was," Beriau said. "If the immediate gratification isn't there, they tend to quit. I think what we need to do is partner with parents to teach kids to have more resilience and grit."

Beriau believes this reluctance to participate is a societal problem.

"This generation is dealing with some difficult things," he said. "They see strife within the country, politically and publicly. They don't see heroes to emulate because today if you're a public figure, everyone brings out the dirt on people."

"I think it's difficult being a teenager, it's difficult being a parent, it's difficult being an educator," he added. "So that's where we all have to work together."

If a parent wants to talk with an administrator about how to keep their child engaged in school, administrators are available, he said.

### **Shifting suspensions**

There are also many nuances to discipline. Some behavior may stem from childhood trauma, a one-time negative event at home, or even a disability. Therefore, schools are doing their best to handle disruptive behavior on a case-by-case basis.

Beriau recognizes the national movement to shy away from giving disorderly or delinquent students suspensions and detentions, but he believes suspension is still a useful practice in this particular region.

"I think in Bennington it [works] because we're the only game in town and kids like to come to school," he said. "Maybe not always for the right reasons; maybe sometimes for socialization but it's very rare that a kid says; 'Oh, I'm glad I got a vacation day' because their social life revolves around the school."

### **Early childhood suspension**

Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union Director of Early Childhood Education Kate Abbott, also the interim co-principal at Molly Stark Elementary School, is a staunch believer in finding alternative means of discipline to suspension for all levels of learning – which, she says, does more harm than good.

Preschools suspend students at a higher rate than high school, states Abbott in a recently published research paper.

"Not only does it correlate with higher risk of dropouts, it actually is counterintuitively reinforcing for children," she said.

Out-of-school punishments deny children the very environment they need to develop the positive social and behavioral skills they need to be safe. The longer children with unsafe behaviors go without intervention, it is more difficult to reverse those behaviors.

While Abbott typically disagrees with the practice of out-of-school suspension, she notes that in-school suspensions can be used when children need a break from a larger classroom setting until administrators can assist the child in developing a plan to address the behavior.

### **New generation, new practices**

In using the modern restorative justice model, MAUHS employs a Safety Management Team that collaborates frequently with counselors, administrators, and the Center for Restorative Justice.

Here, they talk with students about their entitlement to due process and explain to students the consequences they're facing and why.

"We want to make sure they know why they're in trouble," Beriau said. "We ask them why, and what were you thinking?"

The consequences are always fair, but may not always be the same, he said. A student who is upfront and honest about their actions may receive different consequences than a student who lies, he said.

"We reward people who are honest and contrite," he added. "We encourage that kind of behavior."

MAUHS' Safety Team is one of the state models for the program, Beriau said. While the school does not employ a school resource officer, retired state trooper and hostage negotiator Paul Barci acts as an unarmed security officer. He and students are on a first-name basis, and he is there to advise students with legal issues and also give discipline if a student rises to the level of disorderly conduct.

Retired police chief Vic Milani is the appointed safety coordinator for the entire district, which includes MAUHS. He is the person who will take a students out of class and mediate with them when there is a problem.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER THESE ADS

Teri Haskins is the longest-serving member of the team, working at MAUHS since the early 2000s. She essentially performs the same duties as Milani.

"Once [Milani or Haskins] bring the kid to me, they already have information of what's going on, and they can suggest the consequences," Beriau said.

New at MAUHS this year is Leslie Pinsonneault, who runs the in-school suspension room.

"She provides a firm-but-warm presence," Beriau said.

Her serious yet caring demeanor means that students often seek her out to talk to about their issues, sometimes even asking to go to the ISS room to "cool down" and chat with her, Beriau said.

One of the positive aspects of the safety team is that they are all on good terms with the students, and students are extremely open with them, even telling them about potential problems before they arise.

"It's not an us and them situation," Beriau said. "We have a climate where we hear about a lot of things before they happen."

MAUHS also offers school counselors and in-school clinicians who are trained as certified social workers. The role of these support staff members is to be available to listen to and help students who are dealing with childhood trauma or are going through a crisis.

Area schools might also partner with staff from outside clinical agencies and the Department of Children and Families to provide additional services and support to students and families.

"We can fluidly find a place to catch a kid with a need that has to be met," Beriau said.

Schools like Molly Stark have begun using a nationally endorsed set of practices known as Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS). This system teaches students positive social and emotional skills and behaviors like academic subjects are taught. Abbott says generally, schools that use PBIS have experienced a reduction in out-of-school suspensions.

What are known as "trauma-informed" practices are also implemented at Molly Stark Elementary to better deal with the larger population of students that suffer from childhood trauma.

"If there is a child that has experienced trauma, the kid acts out in atypical ways," Abbott said.

These practices also prompt schools to gather information on what is happening in a child's life that may have prompted delinquent behavior.

Administrators will also encourage the student to restore relationships with whoever they have impacted by their behavior, be it their classmates or staff members.

"It's a research-based approach," Abbott said. "We do apology letters, think sheets. All levels of ability can be supportive to taking a restorative approach."

### **School resource officers**

In an age where schools are seeking heightened security, schools like MAUHS are increasingly employing part-time or full-time police officers to work on-site to help keep schools safe and to develop positive relationships with students.

Years ago, a School Resource Officer (SRO) program was started at Mount Anthony Union Middle School. It was initially grant funded, but now the school union reimburses the town of Bennington for the cost of the officer who works there four days a week.

In addition to Barci acting as security officer at MAUHS, an officer spends four hours a day at the Career Development Center. The hours can be extended depending on circumstances. An officer is also stationed at Bennington Elementary School several days a week, mostly to provide security and help students get used to interacting with law enforcement in a positive way.

For a variety of reasons, some students are afraid of police, so having the accessible security officer is a way to combat that fear.

Bennington Police Chief Paul Doucette commended MAUHS for its Safety Management Team and internal discipline policy, which typically deals with issues in-house and doesn't typically involve police.

"You put someone in the system, and now they're going through juvenile court, and that's not always a good thing," he said. "There's got to be other remedies. And the high school seems to have that down. When we go to the high school, we know it's serious."

However, there are some cases, like with disorderly conduct, where the local police department needs to be contacted, Beriau says.

"There are some kids who need the shock element," Beriau said.

Another helpful policy developed relatively recently is that if there is an aggressive behavior that begins in school and continues outside of it, administrators can handle it as a school offense.

### **Police in schools**

Over the past few years, a big change Doucette has noticed is that police are being called to schools much more often.

"I'm not convinced it's necessarily a bad thing, but it does take away resources [from the department]," he said.

"We've worked really hard in this community to help youth see law enforcement in a different light," Doucette said, adding that when police are frequently called to a school to address a low-level student problem, it can diminish that effort.

"Out of control" students used to be handled by a teacher, parent, or administrator, he said. Now, police receive fairly frequent calls to respond to these situations.

"It seems like there is a hands-off policy at the school where the first resort is to call the police," he said. "The last thing we want to do is go busting through the doors of the school, grab some 12-year-old kid and put them in restraints. That goes against what we believe in and what we're trying to do."

The chief believes schools need to ensure parents are held accountable for their child's actions.

"The first call when a child starts to become disruptive should not be to the BPD," he said. "It should be to the home. We have absolutely no way of knowing all the details about every student."

Of course, there are times when schools calling the police is absolutely necessary, like when a student is putting himself or others in danger.

"But we shouldn't be the front response to these calls because a student has backtalked a teacher or a student won't go to gym class," he said. "That has absolutely nothing to do with the police."

### **Police support of restorative justice**

The BPD "completely supports" restorative justice in local schools and colleges, Doucette said.

"Not everything needs to rise to involve law enforcement," Doucette said. "So we 100 percent support the restorative justice programs at these schools. This gives kids a chance to improve themselves within the school. If the behavior continues, then call the police."

Doucette stressed the point that the police are more than willing to assist any of the local schools at any time.

"If they call, we're definitely going to respond," he said.

But nevertheless, he believes more family involvement can go a long way in improving children's lives in school, and he encouraged a stronger partnership between schools and parents to help parents find the resources they need.

"Sometimes parents need a little guidance to help their children," he said. "That guidance should be coming from the school system, from CRJ, from guidance counselors. Parents need to use those resources to improve the lives of their children."