I used to be really loud because I was talking over the kids in my classroom. I would yell and be sarcastic. The students’ response was, ‘You’re gonna yell at me? We yell all the time at my house.’ In my classroom now, because of restorative practices, we’re all quieter than we used to be and listening is deeper. And classes are more relaxing and less tiring than they used to be for me. —Erin Dunlevy, Spanish and drama teacher, High School for Arts, Imagination and Inquiry, New York City

Teachers in 22 schools across the US are having experiences like Erin Dunlevy’s, due to the IIRP’s two-year Whole-School Change Program. An explicit road map for training entire school staffs, the program also includes built-in systems for monitoring, measuring and sustaining implementation. The complete program is spelled out in the Restorative Practices Whole-School Implementation Overview, at: www.iirp.org/pdf/SSS_Implementation_Overview.pdf.

“We have been working on training in restorative practices for public education for many years,” said IIRP director of continuing education John Bailie. “The most current evolution is not just about teaching the skills of restorative practices but effecting lasting, sustainable organizational change. Schools are large, complex organizations that aren’t easy to change.”

Bailie said the IIRP has figured out a way to teach restorative practices — how to consistently build community, relationships and social bonds — to almost anybody. “The idea that really separates us from other programs is that this is something that can be understood and used by everyone from five-year-olds to 95-year-olds. It’s not just another new thing for experts in charge of large systems.” That’s why the Whole-School Change Program trains everyone in the school community in restorative practices.

At City Springs Elementary/Middle School, in Baltimore, Maryland (a part of the Baltimore Curriculum Project), 99 percent of students are from families with incomes below the poverty line. City Springs started implementing restorative practices in 2007 but began the Whole-School Change Program in September 2010.

Principal Rhonda Richetta said that her entire school staff had been trained in restorative practices, including cafeteria workers and office staff. “Just the fact of being included made them feel a part of things. They really got something out of it. We had an issue last year with the cafeteria manager. Her service with the kids needed to improve. Parents were complaining. Her whole attitude has changed.”

Kosciusko Middle School, in Hamtramck, Michigan, is in the process of implementing the Whole-School Change Program, one of seven schools doing so in this independent municipality within the city of Detroit. Hamtramck has a highly diverse population that includes African-American, Arab, Bengali and Bosnian residents, as well as those whose families have lived there for generations. Nuo Ivesay, principal, said that Kosciusko’s whole staff had been trained, including lunchroom workers and custodians. “Before, they felt: Nobody pays attention to us. Now they feel part of the school community and that somebody cares. Now we feel like we’re all in this together. It’s making a difference everywhere.”

The Whole-School Change Program goes further to avoid the possible pitfalls of top-down-initiated schemes. Said Bailie, “All school staff members have some responsibility to craft and implement the program, teaching and developing their restorative practices skills for themselves and their colleagues in teams, supporting and spurring each other along.” This change process mirrors the restorative philosophy: that people respond best when those in authority do things with them, not to or for them. “By giving everyone a voice and a role in the change process, you give them a reason to buy in,” said Bailie, adding, “You can’t coerce people to grow, learn and change.”

Said City Springs’s Richetta, “It’s not me or the IIRP trainers doing most of the
work. It’s the teachers working together, deciding: This is what we need to be proficient. I’m sitting back and they’re taking it over. They really took ownership.”

Warren Preparatory Academy (Warren Prep), a K–5 public school in Brooklyn, New York (where 40 percent of students live in housing shelters and 20 percent are in foster care), began implementing restorative practices in September 2010. “The most important thing about the Whole-School Change program is that each and every person in the school has bought in,” said Warren Prep principal Sadie Silver. “It’s not the principal. Teachers and other staff are taking charge. It’s being implemented by them. They all think about: ‘What are you doing for the whole school?’ It’s a beautiful thing.”

The Whole-School Change Program involves 11 “essential elements,” including “affective statements,” “restorative questions,” “fair process,” “small impromptu conferences,” “proactive circles” and “responsive circles” and “restorative conferences” (see www.iirp.org/pdf/SSS_Implementation_Overview.pdf). Different elements are assigned to staff “expert teams” that develop and share knowledge and skills.

Many people are accustomed to thinking of restorative practices as a response to wrongdoing or conflict (such as formal restorative conferences). The Whole-School Change Program turns this notion on its head by starting with the most basic and informal restorative practices. Formal processes like conferences may have dramatic impact, the thinking goes, but informal practices have a more far-reaching effect because they are cumulative and become a part of everyday life.

The most informal restorative practice, “affective statements,” are defined as “personal expressions of feeling in response to specific positive or negative behaviors of others, and ‘I statements’ that humanize the person making them, immediately changing the dynamic between the people involved and making it possible to improve relationships in a school community” (Whole-School Implementation Overview, p. 6).

Richetta explained this essential element. “Traditionally, we would say: ‘Stop teasing K.’ Now, with affective statements, we say, ‘When you tease K, I feel uncomfortable,’ or ‘I feel frustrated’ or ‘I feel sad when you….’ Instead of ‘Sit down and shut up!’ we say, ‘I feel angry when you talk during my lesson.’”

City Springs restorative practices facilitator Brendan Lee added, “Affective statements motivate kids instead of coming down on them or belittling them. If you see a child who has his head down on his desk and is unmotivated to work who yesterday was working hard, instead of saying, ‘Pick your head up and work,’ you say, ‘It makes me upset to see you with your head down, because I know you can do it.’ It works out great.”

Lee grew up near City Springs and once struggled with many of the same issues as his students. “A lot of these kids come from broken homes,” he said, adding, “I’m someone they respect and can come to and ask for help. If they’re having a problem, they look to us for encouragement. They want to hear an affective statement.”

Added Warren Prep guidance counselor Rasheeda Brown, “If something disruptive happens in class, the teacher will say, ‘When you disrupt class, it hurts my feelings.’ It creates a better understanding. When we try to resolve a problem, we try to educate the children as to the impact they’ve had on others: ‘You’re affecting us, and we’d like you to change.’ And when kids see that we’re dealing with things in this calm way, they receive it well. They can tell that we care about them because we use caring words.”

“Affective statements are not meant to make them aware of the consequences of their actions,” said Warren Prep third-grade teacher Deborah Martinez. “If you tell a child, ‘You’re staying in for lunch today,’ they’re going to be resistant. But if you say, ‘You need to stay in for lunch today because I want to help you succeed in this class, they’re much more willing to be with you.’” Martinez said she sees children using affective statements with each other all the time. “Instead of lashing out or hitting, we hear them say, ‘You hurt my feelings.’ They didn’t have the words before.”

City Springs’ staff devised creative ways to focus on affective statements. Said Richetta, “The affective statements team put them in everybody’s mailbox, on posters around the building and all over the walls in the staff bathrooms. We have working team meetings, and teachers give examples of how they are using affective statements. They say, ‘I used an affective statement I saw on the bathroom wall and it worked really well!’”

Other essential elements, the various forms of circles, are fundamental to restorative practices because they provide structured opportunities for people to express themselves. In a circle, one person speaks at a time. This is sometimes reinforced with a “talking piece.” Only the person holding it is allowed to speak, until they pass it to the next person.

“Proactive circles” are used to build community in the classroom and can help shy, quiet or disengaged students blossom. You can’t hide in a circle.

At Upper Darby (Pennsylvania) High School, whose highly diverse population includes students from 70 countries, speaking 73 native languages, proactive circles have helped social studies teacher Alex DiBiasi engage students in his “low-level” ninth-grade class.

Before DiBiasi began using circles, he said, “Some kids spoke five or six times the entire semester. They were OK one-on-one, but not in front of other kids. I
realized that even if that was OK for me, it was not OK for them. They needed the sense of community and the connection to each other. Circles have been invaluable for that. Teachers who knew these kids before are astonished at how readily they’re answering questions in class and how involved they are in classroom discussion."

"I have one student who struggles with marijuana use," DiBiasi continued. "He was always quiet in class. He fought with teachers. He didn’t want to work. When we first started with circles, he was uncommunicative and didn’t want to share at all. The first circle we had in class, I asked what everyone had done over the summer. I always say that students can ‘pass’ in a circle the first time around, but I always come back to anyone who passes. This student always passed the first time. But once he realized he had to share, he liked it! Last week we had a circle, and everyone was so eager to share they were talking over each other and had to be reminded that only one person talks at a time in the circle."

At the High School for Arts, Imagination and Inquiry (HSAII), in New York City, which began Whole-School Change implementation in September 2010, teacher Erin Dunlevy starts every class with a circle and uses circles for teaching course content. Said Dunlevy, "I think teaching in a circle addresses topics more comprehensively. Kids listen more when they’re involved, and the quiet kids speak more."

HSAII (like all the schools mentioned above) also employs "responsive circles," to respond to misbehavior or wrongdoing. Dunlevy told a story about a responsive circle: "I was having a bad day. A student was being very disruptive, and he wasn’t going to back down. I attacked him with sarcasm and embarrassed him. He got really angry and came at me physically. We went to the dean of students, who asked me: 'How many days' [meaning, 'How many days of suspension do you want to give him']? I knew I’d had a part in this; my sarcasm had set the boy off. I said to him: 'You can have three days of suspension or take part in a circle.' He chose the circle. Administrators, counselors, students and teachers attended. He told everyone where he was coming from. Everyone said how they had been affected by the incident. We both apologized. It ended in hugs. The student was never disruptive or missed my class again." Added Dunlevy, "I haven’t needed to have a responsive circle in my classroom since I started proactive circles."

Students at HSAII can call for a circle if they feel they need one. HSAII kids are now so accustomed to working things out that there has been only one fight this school year. Said Dunlevy, "After the fight, kids were upset. They, said, 'We got in a fight and we feel bad, can we have a circle?' And we did."

After Osama Bin Laden was killed, HSAII students called for a circle. Said Dunlevy, "They said, 'It seems weird that people are dancing in the streets because somebody murdered somebody.' So we had a circle with about 50 people. We looked at different approaches to how to respond to this event. The things these kids said, I haven’t heard in the media."

The enhanced engagement and communication provided by restorative practices seems to be having an impact on student behavior. Principal Sadie Silver of Warren Prep (K-5), in Brooklyn, New York, reported a decrease in students sent to the principal’s office from 100 a month to two or three a month since implementing the practices. Said Silver, "I can actually speak to you on the phone now! There aren’t kids with problems in and out of my office every minute."

Rhonda Richetta, principal of City Springs Elementary/Middle School in Baltimore, also reported a dramatic decrease in suspensions and office discipline referrals since implementing restorative practices. There were 86 suspensions in school year 2008-9 and 10 in 2009-2010 (the last data compiled as of this writing).

Both principals above also believe that restorative practices has improved students’ academic performance. Silver said that the number of students commended for academic achievement per month has increased from 50 to 200. Added Richetta, "When teachers are dealing with behavior problems all day, no one is able to learn. The Maryland state assessment scores have steadily increased in the last three years. We tripled the amount of students functioning at grade level, and we attribute that to the change in the culture. The reason for the change is restorative practices."

Ultimately, restorative practices and Whole-School Change benefits the entire school community — staff as much as students. Staff members say that restorative practices is improving staff-to-staff communication as much as staff-to-student interaction. Staff meetings are held in circles, and, as noted previously, the Whole-School Change implementation process is all about teamwork. As Warren Prep’s Deborah Martinez said, "With restorative practices, teachers have more communication and more patience with each other. They’re talking to each other more about work and depending on each other more. We can have tough conversations now. We can see what our colleagues need, and it’s much easier to give each other advice regarding teaching practices or how to handle or reach a particular child. Getting children where they need to be is much more a collective process now.”