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This faceoff keeps kids in school

By Tina Griego
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We're going to Abraham Lincoln High School this morning, to a cramped second-floor office in which four chairs are arranged facing one another.

Two seats are occupied by students, both girls. One is a sophomore. The other is a junior. The junior slumps in her chair. She studies her fingernails. The sophomore sits up straight, feet tapping the floor. She steals glances at the junior, who does not return them.

The rules have been explained. They are angry with each other, but they must speak and listen to each other with respect. They are here, in this room, because they chose to be here to answer three questions: What happened? Who was harmed? How do we repair the harm?

A couple weeks ago, I wrote about the recent report on racial disparity in public-school suspension of students. The data raised a lot of questions, among them: Why are we still using out-of-school suspensions so frequently? Suspension increases the chances a student will drop out. It removes from the classroom the kids who can least afford to miss instruction.

A reader who taught for 30 years replied: "The reason for suspensions is to drastically alter the atmosphere in the classrooms from which the distracting, disruptive students are removed so that others can learn. The focus is all wrong, on the 'poor, prospective dropouts.' Let them go — encourage them to leave as early as possible. They will eventually, after harming irreparably students who have a chance at school success."

Let's agree disruptive kids rob other students of their right to an education. But pushing students out of school is no solution. Groups such as Padres and Jovenes Unidos were making that case years ago, and the state and Denver Public Schools are moving away from a reliance on out-of-school suspensions, police tickets and expulsions, from the criminalization of adolescent behavior.

No one is saying misbehavior shouldn't have consequences.

"What we're saying is the discipline should meet the offense," Marco Nunez of Padres Unidos said.

Which brings us to Lincoln and the two students before Holly Gorman, a former probation officer turned DPS restorative-justice coordinator.

"All right, ladies," she says. "How did we get to this point?"

The sophomore launches into an animated description of how she confronted the junior in the hallway because the junior was talking to her best friend's boyfriend and she kissed him on the cheek.

Gorman turns to the junior. "What happened?"

"Like she said," the junior says, then looks at the sophomore. "I'm just going to tell you. I'm not gonna stop talking to him because you tell me to. That's up to him. If he doesn't want to talk to me, he'll tell me."

Lincoln joined the district's restorative-justice project three years ago. It's one of the tools in an ever-expanding discipline toolbox, and anyone who thinks it's an easy way out for students should sit in on a session. Descriptions of restorative justice typically emphasize accountability, empathy, community, the repairing and rebuilding of relationships.

I'd say it teaches students to act like grown-ups — or like grown-ups should. You have a problem? Calm down. Sit down with the person who has aggrieved you. Talk it out. Figure out a solution.

Last school year, the restorative-justice project at Lincoln served 238 students involved in 155 incidents. Seventy percent were girls. Most incidents involved "inter-personal conflict." Lots of girl drama in high school. Thirty-four of the cases were substitutes for out-of-school suspension, which, by the way, is still on the menu. Fights, weapons, drugs and gang activity typically draw out-of-school suspension or expulsion. School safety is paramount, as it should be.

Here's what's promising: Since the project began in December 2006, out-of-school suspensions at Lincoln have dropped by 22 percent; referrals to law enforcement are down 80 percent; tickets and arrests are down 83 percent, according to an independent analysis. This is about changing school culture, and restorative justice is one piece of that.

The students in Gorman's office talk for about 45 minutes, with Gorman gently guiding them to see the other's point of view. The junior says to the sophomore: "I didn't know you, and you came and talked in my face, and that kind of (ticked) me off, but I'm over it. I'm a respectful girl, and I have better things to do than fight with other girls."

The sophomore replies: "I shouldn't have gotten involved. I don't like drama, but when I get mad, I get mad. Now I know you're like me. You don't like drama either."

"This part is always voluntary," Gorman says, "but you've come to a solution in the business world, how do you seal the deal?"

"Shake hands," the junior says.

"I'm just putting it out there," Gorman says. "It's up to you."

The two sit, suddenly awkward. Then they stand and exchange a brief, but emphatic, handshake.

Tina Griego writes Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Reach her at 303-954-2699 or tgriego@denverpost.com.