

An alternative to using the blame approach to resolving conflict

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AMHERST - Students who respect each other and their teachers are less likely to exhibit bad behaviour in the classroom and the school, says the director of the International Institute for Restorative Practices Canada.

The institute's director, Bruce Schenk, was in Amherst earlier this week to speak to teachers and students at both Amherst Regional High School and E.B. Chandler Junior High while hosting a session for parents about another way to discipline children who may have stepped over the line.

"It's a way of thinking and being about how we can effectively live together in a community," said Schenk, who was brought to Amherst by Schools Plus. "When something goes wrong, instead of using a blame approach in which we look at who's to blame and what punishment or sanctions are needed, we look at what happened, who's affected and how can we make things right.

"The focus is on repairing harm when something goes wrong."

For many years, the school system and the family have used the most severe punishments for even the smallest of offences. Instead of using the opportunity to open up a dialog between the offender and the person he or she offended, authorities have removed the offender from the classroom or grounded the person within the household.

"The ultimate goal is repairing the harm and restoring that child back to the community that is the school," said Schenk, adding building relationships and fostering respect is paramount. "How we engage is very important. Do we use an adversarial approach which is the way we've been doing for years or do we use a restorative way of thinking."

While Schenk feels school suspensions or groundings may still be required in some circumstances, he feels the healing process would be better served by talking to the person at fault and encouraging him or her to get the other side.

"This doesn't do away with consequences. This whole process is not about being soft and easy, it's about being soft and fair," said Schenk. "We have expectations and rules in which we have to live as a society and a school."

By building relationships within the classroom and the school, students are more likely to excel academically. When there's connection, there are fewer incidents of bad behaviour.

"If the kids feel more connected to their school, studies have shown that not only is it safer but kids will also do better academically," he said, adding the philosophy builds on the notion that to be successful people have to have healthy, positive relationships. "School will be a community they want to be part of."

Also, instead of asking the why question, the discussion would be better served by asking a series of what questions as to what happened, what the person was thinking at the time, what has he or she thought of since and what needs to be done to make things right again.

Schenk said the restorative practices initiative is very similar to the restorative justice system already being used with young offenders in most Canadian provinces. Schenk said the Nova Scotia system is one of the best in the country at bringing offenders together with those they have harmed.

Schenk said the restorative practices philosophy has been used in Ontario for several years and around the world for many more years.

Jennifer Furlong of the Cumberland Community Alternatives Society is looking forward to working with the school system.

"We've been looking for ways over the last decade to work more closely with the school and bring our expertise on restorative practices into the school system," said Furlong.

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Bruce Schenk (front, right), the director of the International Institute of Restorative Practices spoke to teachers, students and parents of students at Amherst Regional High School and E.B. Chandler Junior High. He's shown talking to (seated, from left) E. Chandler principal Wendy Nordby, ARHS principal Frank Balcolm, (back, from left) Kim Wood of Schools Plus and Jennifer Furlong of the Cumberland Community Alternatives Society. Darrell Cole - Amherst Daily News