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The Cost of Restorative Justice in New York City Schools

Issue Brief

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Introduction

New York City's public school system has changed how it addresses student misconduct over the last decade. Once reliant on traditional disciplinary measures such as suspensions, removals, and written referrals, the NYC system instead adopted restorative justice (RJ) as its preferred response to conflict and disruption.[1] Promoted as a progressive alternative to reduce racial disparities in discipline and foster healing for students, administrators quickly embedded RJ into district policy, budgets, and staff training mandates. Starting in 2015, policy changes made suspensions so challenging to implement that exclusionary discipline was removed as an option.[2]

NYC's implementation of RJ has failed to achieve its promises. The changes undermined teacher authority and weakened classroom order rather than improving school climate and advancing equity. They diverted resources away from necessary supports, despite the tens of millions in spending on ideologically driven programs, with little evidence of success.[3] In examining the city's policy design, financial decisions, and classroom-level consequences, this issue brief reveals how RJ reforms have produced widespread dysfunction. It also outlines a path forward based on structure, evidence, and accountability.

New York's discipline model didn't stay local. Districts nationwide modeled their discipline reforms after NYC's approach, often without clear training, enforcement, or evaluation plans. The same patterns followed in many schools: disrupted classrooms, unclear expectations, and teachers lacking the fundamental tools to respond. An April 2025 Trump administration executive order directed the rollback of equity-driven discipline guidance and called for a return to behavior-based policies, reinforcing what NYC's experience has already made clear at the national level.[4]

What Is Restorative Justice?

First, let us consider where RJ comes from and how its proponents say the approach is supposed to look. Restorative justice is an approach to dealing with conflict and harm. It is intended to bring together wrongdoers and the people affected by a wrong, through reconciliation, constructive responses (it isn't always clear what those are), and communication. This approach should lead to resolutions that include reductions in harm and conflict.

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education set the stage for RJ in the classroom by publishing a report on alternative school discipline approaches and encouraging schools to improve their school climate by reducing the use of exclusionary discipline (school disciplinary action that removes students from their usual setting or classroom).[5] Although the guidelines never directly referred to RJ, they promoted many of the same ideas, such as prioritizing relationships over punishment and keeping students in class.

RJ was first used in the juvenile justice system, where it offered an alternative to incarceration.[6] These programs emphasized accountability by bringing together the juveniles who caused harm and those affected, in order to talk through what happened and how to repair the damage. Schools later began using similar methods to address student behavior that disrupted the learning environment. As schools came under growing pressure to cut down on suspensions and confront racial disparities in discipline, administrators and educators turned to RJ to keep students in class without ignoring serious misconduct.[7] The approach emphasized conversation, giving students a chance to reflect on the harm caused and to take responsibility for making things right. For example, if a student were to harm another peer physically, schools would arrange a meeting with both students and a teacher, during which they would discuss the harm inflicted and agree on measures to restore the relationship. In these cases, the structured conversation became the consequence.

Some restorative practices found in schools include:

- Holding restorative conversations after classroom disruptions, using guided questions (e.g., What happened? Who was affected?)
- Facilitating community-building circles to build empathy and resolve conflict
- Starting the day with morning meetings to assess students' emotional readiness
- Using "I" statements to express the emotional impact of behavior
- Asking curiosity-based questions to explore the root of student behavior[8]

Advocates of RJ practices in schools argue that they promote accountability, perspective-taking, and conflict-resolution skills by encouraging students to reflect on how their actions affect others, accept responsibility, and take steps to repair relationships. Many also see it as a way of reducing racial disparities in discipline by shifting away from exclusionary punishment.[9] However, these practices entirely replaced behavior-based consequences. Although RJ was well-intentioned, many teachers and administrators have raised questions about its impact. In practice, educators have struggled to maintain classroom control and consistently hold students accountable for their actions.[10]

Procedural and Policy Failures

The shift to RJ in NYC did not begin with student needs but with top-down policy constraints that removed essential tools from school leaders. Under former mayor Michael Bloomberg (2002–13), the city's school discipline system emphasized structure, clear expectations, and adult authority.[11] While suspensions were permitted, the system focused on setting clear behavioral expectations and backing up school leaders when those expectations were broken.[12] Principals had the authority to respond to severe disruptions. The goal was not zero tolerance but a system of accountability that supported safe learning environments, particularly in high-needs schools. It was a working system of accountability, and it was especially important in schools where consistent adult authority made the difference between order and chaos.[13] What followed under former mayor Bill de Blasio (2014–21) was not a shift from punishment to compassion but the dismantling of the systems that had maintained basic classroom stability.

The first major shift in NYC's approach to discipline wasn't restorative—it was bureaucratic. In 2015, the NYC Department of Education required principals to obtain central-office approval before suspending students in grades K–2.[14] By 2016, the de Blasio administration had effectively eliminated suspensions for these students, making restorative practices the preferred or only acceptable response, in many cases.[15] What began as an alternative became a mandate, forcing administrators to abandon exclusionary options regardless of school context. These policies tied the hands of school leaders and sent a clear message that exclusionary discipline was no longer acceptable.[16] The changes were not limited to elementary schools.

In 2017–18, pilot RJ programs were introduced in high schools with historically high suspension rates. In 2018, NYC DOE released the *Restorative Practices Whole-School Implementation Guide*,[17] designed to help schools adopt RJ through a step-by-step framework. However, the framework lacked the core infrastructure that schools needed to succeed. There were no teacher training standards, no systems for student and teacher accountability, and no alternative supports for high-needs students. Schools were left to interpret and implement RJ independently, and implementation looked different across the city.[18]

In June 2019, the de Blasio administration formally expanded citywide RJ and social-emotional learning (SEL) initiatives, but the expansion occurred without the infrastructure to support it.[19] At the same time, the Discipline Code was changed to limit suspension lengths, even for serious or repeated offenses. These so-called equity reforms weakened school leaders' ability to handle students who were continually disruptive, making it challenging to address persistent behavioral problems effectively. In 2022, the New York City Bar Association's Education and Law Committee supported the Judith Kaye Solutions Not Suspensions Act. This proposed state law aimed to embed RJ principles into statewide discipline policy.[20] The bill ultimately was not passed into law. However, as of the most recent school year, NYC continues to rely on the same restorative framework introduced under de Blasio, without addressing its foundational flaws. A randomized controlled trial by the Center for Justice Innovation (previously called the Center for Court Innovation)[21] found that implementation varied widely from school to school, training was inconsistent, and outcomes were difficult to measure.[22] Too many schools lacked the support they needed to make RJ initiatives effective and the program was rolled out without the correct training or consistent support, leaving schools alone. As a result, RJ ended up being more about appearances and posturing than concretely helping students who needed it most.

Financial Failures

Beyond the merits of the policy, it is important to look at NYC's investment in RJ—how money was spent and what schools received in return. Exact cumulative figures are difficult to verify because of spending embedded within broader SEL and equity budgets, but the city appeared to allocate an estimated $97 million to RJ initiatives during 2015–24.[23]

Even with millions allocated, schools reported inconsistent access to resources and support. According to the 2022 randomized controlled trial by the Center for Justice Innovation, teachers lacked the time, training, or administrative backing to apply restorative practices with fidelity within classrooms.[24] RJ implementation varied widely from school to school and within schools. Some campuses received coaching and staffing, while others had minimal guidance. Consistent delivery models did not match financial inputs, and the RJ programs were layered on top of overwhelmed support systems.

The investment in RJ was not always a supplement to children's education. In many schools, particularly those serving high-needs populations, funding RJ initiatives displaced existing supports. Schools already struggling with disruptive behavior adopted a broad ideological framework with limited resources and few trained personnel. The opportunity costs were significant because resources spent on RJ could have instead funded evidence-based behavioral supports to maintain safe and focused classrooms.

Studies back this up. A randomized controlled trial found that restorative practices in NYC were unevenly implemented without consistent support and infrastructure, and teachers struggled with limited time, insufficient training, and inadequate administrative support.[25] Instead of focusing on results, the city focused on appearances. RJ became more about *signaling* change than about improving schools. With federal relief money running out, the city faces the consequences of spending tens of millions of dollars on programs that were not adequately evaluated or proven to work.[26]

Long-Term Consequences

Schools cannot run without structure, and one of the most apparent failures of NYC's restorative justice reforms has been the collapse of structure inside classrooms. Another RAND report, from 2023, found that nearly one in three teachers identified student behavior as one of their most frequent sources of job-related stress.[27] In NYC, educators report experiencing that stress firsthand through increased classroom disruptions and teachers unable to manage student conduct.[28] Union leaders and school administrators have voiced concern that teachers are left without viable tools to manage chronically disruptive students—especially in high-poverty schools, where structure is most critical.[29]

In practice, RJ often amounted to scripted conversations that did little to address repeated misbehavior. A study conducted in five Brooklyn high schools with elevated suspension rates found that, despite implementing restorative practices, there was no statistically significant difference in school climate, suspensions, or academic outcomes compared with schools that did not implement RJ.[30] This suggests that RJ may have failed to produce the intended improvements in student behavior and school safety without proper infrastructure and consistent application. Educators in these schools reported that the lack of meaningful consequences for repeated infractions left them unequipped to manage classroom disruptions effectively. The programs' outcomes indicate implementation

gaps and a failure to provide schools with tools for sustained behavioral change. These outcomes highlight a basic problem: schools were never given the necessary tools to make lasting changes in student behavior.[31]

Early last year, at Brooklyn's Origins High School, a Jewish teacher was subjected to Nazi salutes and threats. The school's response—parental calls and time spent in a "meditation room"—did not stop the harassment. The teacher filed a lawsuit, showing how RJ without consequences can leave staff vulnerable.[32] The breakdown was not due to a lack of compassion; it was a leadership failure shaped by policy decisions that took away effective disciplinary tools. When schools rely on restorative conversations in place of real interventions, students may come to expect that even serious misconduct will not lead to consequences. In the end, teachers are left with no clear path to protect themselves or restore order. The students whom RJ reforms were intended to support have often suffered the most under their implementation. In Title I schools with high concentrations of students from low-income families, where structure, predictability, and adult authority are essential, students face learning environments marked by disruption, disorganization, and a lack of meaningful consequences.[33] Instructional time is lost to peer conflict, recurring behavioral incidents, and constant redirection.[34] In practice, what was promoted as an equity initiative has created classrooms where chaos is tolerated in the name of compassion. Educators in these schools report that instructional time is increasingly fragmented. In some cases, the breakdown of order has contributed to staff turnover.[35] When teachers are not allowed to set clear expectations or enforce them, students lose the structure that they need to succeed.

Parental frustration with the city's RJ policies has grown more visible. In May 2025, parents at PS 8 on Staten Island protested after an eight-year-old allegedly stabbed a staff member with a pencil and threatened classmates. The school's response—a "meditation room" and phone calls—struck many families as inadequate. One parent put it plainly: "He has rights, and so does my child. If he's threatening my child, what am I supposed to do?" The incident reflects a broader concern: when schools avoid consequences in the name of compassion, safety, and accountability, they fall through the cracks.[36]

While NYC has continued doubling down on RJ, other large districts have reversed course. In places like Clark County, Nevada, and Gwinnett County, Georgia, rising school violence and teacher burnout have driven a return to more traditional disciplinary policies.[37] These shifts show a broader trend: even districts that once championed restorative practices recognize the limits of ideology without structure. Discipline-related burnout has also become a key driver of low teacher morale and turnover. National data from the EdWeek Research Center show that student behavioral challenges significantly contribute to teacher stress and decisions to leave the profession.[38] In NYC, where educators are often constrained by policy and discouraged from using traditional responses to misbehavior, these pressures are even more intense.

Across the country, many school districts scaled restorative policies with little attention to fidelity and measurable outcomes. These rollouts lacked clear metrics for success; as a result, districts did not assess whether restorative practices were improving student behavior or reducing suspension data by discouraging documentation. In many cases, declining discipline numbers reflected policy pressure, rather than improvements in school climate. To move forward, NYC must restore the structures that make learning possible by aligning discipline policies with clear expectations, real accountability, and the needs of students and teachers. The need for that shift has recently been reinforced by the federal government's April 2025 executive order directing a return to behavior-based discipline.[39]

New York City's discipline policies do not operate in a vacuum. Because its school district is the nation's largest, NYC's shift toward RJ was closely watched and, in many cases, directly emulated by other major urban systems. For example, Los Angeles, Baltimore, Chicago, and Oakland districts adopted similar RJ initiatives as part of broader efforts to reform school discipline in the

name of equity, mirroring many patterns seen in NYC.[40] Yet the results have followed a familiar pattern: inconsistent implementation, educator resistance, and a lack of measurable improvement in school climate or academic performance.[41] Well-meaning reforms have resulted in disciplinary confusion and frustrated teachers. These rollouts occurred with minimal outcome tracking and no rigorous evaluation of whether RJ was improving student behavior or simply masking it through reduced reporting.

RJ reforms may also contribute to NYC's chronic absenteeism crisis. Chronic absenteeism among all students rose from 26.5% in 2018–19 to 34.8% in 2022–23. A March 2025 Manhattan Institute report noted that absenteeism is most severe in the same high-poverty schools most affected by discipline reform.[42] In many of these schools, inconsistent expectations and weak consequences have created disorderly environments where students report feeling unsafe or unsupported. Rather than building community, restorative practices implemented without a clear structure may exacerbate the climate issues that they were meant to fix. For many students, chronic absenteeism reflects learned avoidance. When classrooms feel chaotic or unpredictable, students simply and regretfully opt out.

Not all RJ implementations have failed. Some NYC charter schools operate more autonomously than district schools, adopting restorative practices with more promising outcomes. According to national data, 72% of charter schools report using restorative approaches, 14 percentage points higher than district schools.[43] Unlike the NYC traditional public schools, which removed exclusionary discipline without replacing it with usable alternatives, charters tend to use RJ to supplement consequence-based behavioral models. This implementation gap highlights the central issue: RJ can support positive outcomes, but only when grounded in structure, consistency, and strong school leadership. Without those foundations, RJ does not work.

Recommendations

The general NYC mayoral race will take place this fall, shortly after the start of the new academic year. The next mayoral administration will inherit the consequences of nearly a decade of discipline reform that has failed to produce safe, orderly, and equitable learning environments. Rebuilding trust, structure, and academic focus will require more than policy; it will require decisive leadership. The following recommendations outline practical steps that the next mayoral administration should take to restore authority to school leaders, ensure fiscal accountability, and make classrooms safe and functional for every student.

Recommendation 1: Restore Administrative Authority

Principals cannot keep schools safe when they must fight through a great deal of bureaucratic red tape. The next mayor should end the policy that forces principals to obtain central office approval before suspending K–2 students, as this slows down necessary interventions and strips authority from the people closest to the problem. The city's Discipline Code must also be revised to clearly state that exclusionary consequences, such as suspensions, are legitimate and appropriate responses to serious or repeated misbehavior. Finally, educators must be shielded from top-down second-guessing by administrators far removed from classroom realities. Decision-making must return to the people closest to the problem: principals and teachers. These changes would send an immediate and unequivocal message: NYC stands with its educators in restoring order to its schools.

Recommendation 2: Redirect Funds Toward In-School Solutions

Although this recommendation is grounded in NYC's experience, the need for sustainable, in-school expertise applies far beyond it. Schools nationwide are grappling with the consequences of behavioral frameworks that lack clarity, support, or results. The city should prioritize building behavioral expertise within its school staff rather than expanding central office bureaucracy or investing in consulting contracts that lack a proven record of impact. Teachers and administrators need direct, evidence-based tools for managing behavior—tools rooted in clarity, structure, and consistency, not ideology. Professional development should emphasize foundational strategies. School leaders must be trained to recognize when students need more intensive support and to respond using interventions already accessible within the school system or supported by vetted, outcomes-driven partners. Most important, the city should shift away from abstract frameworks and therapeutic language and instead invest in practical training that helps teachers manage behavior, especially for students who regularly disrupt learning. What educators need most is not more theory, but strategies that they can use in real time to keep classrooms focused and safe.

With the rollback of federal support for equity-based discipline initiatives under a new administration, NYC should not use local dollars to sustain ineffective programs.[44] Continuing to fund unproven RJ initiatives after the shift in federal priorities would only increase the opportunity cost. Instead of preserving symbolic efforts, the next mayoral administration should reallocate resources toward in-school behavioral supports with demonstrated impact, such as well-trained staff, consistent routines, and leadership practices that reinforce teacher authority.

Recommendation 3: Link Restorative Justice Funding to Performance and Transparency

New York City's investment in restorative justice, totaling an estimated $97 million in the past decade, has advanced with little public oversight and no consistent measures of success. The city should subject all RJ initiatives to annual, independent audits to restore fiscal credibility and public trust. Continued funding should be contingent on measurable improvements in key indicators such as school safety, fewer repeated behavioral incidents, and more academic time spent on learning. In addition, contracts with RJ vendors and nonprofit partners should be publicly disclosed and evaluated for effectiveness. These reforms are not punitive but standard practice for any program receiving public funds. Symbolic programming that cannot demonstrate results should no longer be protected from scrutiny. Public dollars must be allocated based on performance, not intention.

Recommendation 4: Rebuild Safe, Structured Classrooms for Every Student

Discipline policies must protect instructional time and help teachers maintain classroom order because learning can't happen without order. When misbehavior is not addressed promptly, problems escalate and routines fall apart. Teachers need the support and training that gives them usable, behavior-based tools, not just abstract theories or therapeutic language. Every student has a right to learn, and learning can happen only when the class is orderly and safe. True equity means ensuring that all students have a safe, structured environment in which learning is not constantly disrupted and teachers can focus on being educators, not mediators for disruptive students. Schools need to return to clear expectations and consistent consequences to get there.

Recommendation 5: Restore Order Where It Matters Most

The breakdown of discipline in NYC schools has not affected all schools similarly. Title I schools, which serve the city's most vulnerable students, have been hit the hardest. These are the schools where consistent structure matters most and where the loss of adult authority has created the most significant challenges. High-disruption campuses should be prioritized for targeted intervention, which means hands-on staff training, consistent leadership coaching, and stronger oversight

from experienced administrators. These schools need immediate, structured support to reset expectations, restore order, and protect instructional time. Discipline reform must start where the consequences of failure have been most severe. This localized, behavior-based support approach echoes recent federal calls to return discipline decisions to the people closest to the classroom: principals and teachers.

Conclusion

New York City's experiment with RJ shows what happens when discipline policy is driven by narrative instead of evidence. Over time, NYC shifted from structure and accountability in how schools handle discipline. Instead of clear expectations and consistent consequences, many schools were left with vague ideas and little support. The result has not been better outcomes or more equity, but more disruption, frustration, and fewer tools for the people doing the work.

The April 2025 Executive Order on Education and School Discipline directs the U.S. attorney general and secretary of education to issue updated guidance rescinding equity-driven discipline mandates and restoring behavior-based policies.[45] While federal agencies develop that guidance, the next mayoral administration should act immediately by revising the NYC DOE Discipline Code to reinstate administrator discretion, clarify allowable responses to repeated and severe misbehavior, and ensure that training emphasizes consistent enforcement. The city should also pause new RJ contracts and conduct an internal audit of discipline outcomes to align with emerging federal standards.

Discipline is not a political experiment; it is a condition for learning. A meaningful reset must restore educators' authority, align discipline with accountability, and redirect funding to what works, not what performs. The next reform should begin not with ideals but with classrooms and the students who depend on their stability.

Endnotes

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