

**Restorative Justice in Coachella Valley Unified School District:
A Transformation in Education, School Discipline, and Equity Enhancement**

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between the strength of Restorative Justice (RJ) implementation and student outcomes in the Coachella Valley Unified School District (CVUSD), with comparative reference to Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD). We take existing literature a step further by hypothesizing that stronger RJ policies are associated not only with lower rates of suspensions but also with lower rates of chronic absenteeism, expulsions, and higher graduation rates. Using publicly available data from 2017 to 2024 and a final sample of 103 schools, we coded the strength of RJ policies based on a 3-point scale derived from district documents, Student Safety Plans, and program descriptions emphasizing conflict resolution, wellness, and equity. Results demonstrate suspension rates decrease with stronger RJ policies, highlighting that they can be a powerful tool for reducing racial disparities and enhancing student success.

Introduction

Effectively addressing challenging student behavior remains a persistent concern for K-12 educators. In recent years, educational leaders have increasingly recognized the limitations of zero-tolerance disciplinary policies, particularly given their disproportionate impact on students of color, students with disabilities, and students from low-income backgrounds. Data reveals that exclusionary practices such as suspensions and expulsions are associated with adverse academic, social, and long-term life outcomes, particularly for marginalized student groups. In response, restorative justice (RJ) practices have gained national and local recognition as a more equitable alternative to traditional school discipline. Restorative justice emphasizes accountability, relationship-building, and community engagement, shifting the focus from punishment to prevention and repair. Coachella Valley Unified School District (CVUSD),

located in a high-poverty, rural region of inland Southern California, offers a compelling case for examining RJ in practice. With approximately 98% of students identifying as Hispanic and nearly 1% as American Indian or Alaska Native (KidsData.org, 2024), CVUSD serves a demographically distinct population that has historically been underserved by traditional disciplinary systems. Over the past several years, the district has implemented restorative policies districtwide, often in collaboration with community-based partners such as Alianza Coachella Valley. This paper evaluates the degree and consistency of RJ implementation across all 22 K–12 schools in CVUSD from 2017 to 2024. Using a content analysis of School Accountability Report Cards (SARCs) and a three-point scoring rubric, we assess implementation across five key categories and compare trends in suspension, expulsion, and graduation rates. Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) serves as a comparison district due to its earlier adoption and long-term institutional support for RJ practices. Our central research question is: *To what degree do restorative justice policies promote student retention and graduation rates within CVUSD schools, as well as compared to LBUSD schools?*

Literature Review

While the beginnings of Restorative Justice (RJ) practices in schools can be traced back to the 1970s, the literature on RJ's success is still fairly new. Within our legal system, RJ practices are centered around facilitating an environment that is relationship-focused by dealing with violations of “legal and human rights” through collaborative programs (Fronius et al, 2019). This pushes past the traditional system aligned with sending offenders to prisons and looks toward other ways to deal with the root of the problem. These ideals have been used in school settings to assist students in understanding their actions and emotions without subjecting them to

exclusionary disciplinary actions, such as suspension and expulsion. Unlocking the intentions behind a student's action through non-punitive disciplinary approaches allows those who have harmed and were harmed to grow from the "student conflict resolution programs". Various programs such as Social and Emotional Learning and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports have continued to grow and expand across the country (Fronius et al, 2019). RJ practices and programs have served as a light for many students who might have felt forgotten or looked down upon, especially for Black and Hispanic/Latino students.

During the 1980s and 1990s, zero-tolerance policies were popular, which had disproportionate effects on Black and Hispanic/Latino students. With the increased likelihood of suspensions and expulsions, Black and Hispanic/Latino students began to further fall into the school-to-prison pipeline, leading to a life surrounded by the criminal justice system (Fronius et al, 2019). Students with disabilities were also heavily affected by zero-tolerance policies, as schools would not develop inclusionary strategies to work around their disabilities. The U.S. Government Accountability Office found that Black students accounted for 39 percent of school suspensions, while only representing 15.5 percent of all students in the nation. Similarly, students with disabilities account for 25.9 percent of suspensions while only accounting for 13.7 percent of all students (Government Accountability Office, 2018). RJ, when implemented effectively, has been shown to foster community, reduce suspensions, and promote a positive school climate (Ashley & Burke, 2009; Sandwick et al., 2019). However, implementation varies, and when schools rely solely on a single RJ coordinator rather than engaging all staff, inequities may persist or even be exacerbated (Lustick, 2021).

Due to implementation differences across schools, outcomes vary. Urban areas that have higher populations of Black and Hispanic/Latino students can still experience disproportionate

outcomes in suspensions and expulsions. Lustick (2021) focused on the impact RJ practices have in urban public schools and highlighted that poor implementation can lead to a system that further sustains racial inequalities. Schools hired staff to be restorative coordinators who were typically young, non-White members of the same community, instead of training all of the staff on how to implement RJ practices in their classrooms. This left the coordinators with the sole responsibility to create fundamental change that can not be done without schoolwide restructuring. When implemented to the best of the school's ability, a decrease in suspension, chronic absenteeism, and expulsion has been found. A report illustrated that Denver Public Schools saw a suspension drop rate for Black and Hispanic/Latino students, narrowing the discipline gaps between Black and White students as well as Hispanic/Latino and White students (González, 2015). Similarly, in Oakland, California, a reduction of 24 percent in chronic absenteeism throughout middle schools was seen compared to an increase of 62.3 percent in schools without RJ programs (Jain et al., 2014).

Evidence from Sandwick et al. (2019) underscores the importance of embedding restorative justice (RJ) as a schoolwide ethos rather than treating it as a standalone disciplinary tool. Their case study of five NYC schools found that when RJ was implemented holistically with a focus on community-building, shared power, and student leadership, it led to sustained reductions in suspensions and improvements in school climate. Central to this success were deliberate efforts such as professional development for staff, stakeholder buy-in, and elevating student voices. However, when RJ was inconsistently implemented or lacked systemic support, its ability to challenge entrenched inequities was significantly diminished.

Building on this, Kim et al. (2024) highlight how the success of RJ is often undermined by insufficient capacity, lack of clarity around RJ's intent, and minimal staff investment. In their

mixed-methods study of 28 diverse charter schools, RJ reduced suspension rates in only three of the five jurisdictions studied and significantly narrowed racial discipline gaps in just two. They caution that top-down mandates, “train-and-hope” strategies, and under-resourced rollouts are often misaligned with RJ’s relational and community-driven principles. However, schools that embraced RJ as an integrated, schoolwide framework bolstered by leadership support, ongoing training, and family engagement were more likely to experience positive outcomes. These findings are echoed by Jain et al. (2014), who documented a 24% decrease in chronic absenteeism in Oakland middle schools with robust RJ implementation.

Quantitative findings from Anyon et al. (2016) further demonstrate the potential of well-executed RJ practices. In their analysis of over 9,000 students in Denver Public Schools, students who participated in restorative interventions were significantly less likely to receive office discipline referrals or suspensions in the following semester. Importantly, the data also showed that marginalized students, such as Black, Latino, and Native American youth, boys, and students in special education, were just as likely, if not more so, to engage in restorative interventions. Yet, like Kim et al., Anyon et al. found that racial disparities in suspension outcomes persisted, underscoring the need for more equity-centered implementation strategies that address the root causes of systemic bias.

Comparative research from the *Education Research Alliance for New Orleans* contributes to this context by adding depth to the literature to further explore implementation fidelity and variation across diverse schools and districts. Their research design and methods provide valuable insights into conceptualizing a framework for evaluating RJ outcomes in diverse settings, further emphasizing the need for context-specific indicators such as graduation, suspension, and expulsion trends. These findings align with our scoring rubric and trends we

observed in the Coachella Valley and Long Beach districts. The study recommends that school districts incorporate qualitative data and stakeholder perspectives to supplement quantitative metrics and mixed-method approaches (Fong et al., 2020). Together, these sources establish a clear rationale for examining RJ implementation within CVUSD and comparing it to LBUSD. CVUSD's evolving RJ practices can be better understood when situated within the larger state policy landscape and the growing national evidence that suggests RJ's efficacy as an equity-centered intervention.

Not only do exclusionary disciplinary actions result in harming students' performance and overall well-being, but there are also economic impacts to address. Looking specifically at California, a one percent increase in suspension rates solely among 10th graders can cost around \$180 million over three years. \$2.7 billion is the projected lifetime economic loss due to dropouts from suspensions (Kreger et al, 2019). It is important to take into account the broad ramifications that disciplinary policies can have on not only a student but also a community. In California there has been a reduction in overall suspension rates by 42 percent (2011-2017) but racial disparities continue to exist with Black (9.8%), American Indian/Alaska Native (7.4%), and Latino (3.7%) among the highest suspension rates (Kreger et al, 2019). Kreger et al (2019) demonstrate that pilot programs are implemented to strategize the best ways to build community inclusion and resolve conflicts. By including parents in the process and integrating coaching and assistance for staff, the narrative of RJ can be shifted to be seen as a helpful tool.

Restorative justice has gained momentum in California due to increasing state-level recognition and local support. The California Department of Education (2023) encourages RJ as a framework for addressing racial disparities and improving school climate, and many districts are integrating RJ into their Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs). In CVUSD, this

state encouragement is followed by tangible investment in RJ programs and committee-level oversight (CVUSD, 2024a). Empirical evaluations of RJ in K-12 settings provide robust evidence for its positive impact on school climate and student outcomes. According to the Learning Policy Institute (2019), schools that implemented RJ practices saw improved relationships between staff and students, reductions in suspension rates, and increases in student engagement. A follow-up Learning Policy Institute report from 2022 emphasized that RJ can only be successful when integrated into a whole-school approach supported by leadership, staff training, and consistent evaluation.

Other studies offer important contextual findings that mirror the challenges faced by CVUSD and LBUSD. Keane (2021) highlighted the implementation barriers of RJ in Southern California school districts, noting that a lack of staff buy-in, training, and sustained funding are frequent concerns. Her study reinforces the importance of community engagement and district-level policy alignment, which are two features that are present in CVUSD's collaboration with Alianza and its Culture & Climate Committee. Alianza has been instrumental and positions itself as a key player in fostering inclusive community engagement by uniting residents, nonprofits, and government agencies to work together to address systemic inequities in education, environment, and civic participation. Their initiatives, such as the Youth Organizing Council (YO-C), encourage and empower local youth to become active leaders to advocate for restorative justice practices in their schools. Additionally, Alianza's efforts have led to significant policy changes, including securing funding for restorative justice in the 2024-25 CVUSD Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), demonstrating their pivotal role in shaping equitable educational policies in the region (Alianza Coachella Valley, 2023; Alianza Coachella Valley, 2024).

These findings emphasize the importance of systemic and well-resourced RJ implementation. Tracking outcomes beyond suspension and expulsion, such as school climate, relationship quality, and student voice, is essential. Schools must invest in professional development, data tracking, and inclusive leadership to ensure that RJ transforms school culture rather than becoming a performative tool. “Restore, Repair, and Rebuild,” a guiding motto in many districts, including CVUSD and LBUSD, encapsulates RJ’s promise when embedded with fidelity and equity at its core. Our research builds on this growing literature by focusing on Southern California school districts that have yet to be extensively studied. We aim to contribute to the understanding of how RJ practices can foster inclusive, accountable, and empowering learning environments, especially for students historically marginalized by school discipline systems.

Hypotheses

Restorative Justice has gained momentum as a holistic alternative to exclusionary and disciplinary practices in schools. Rather than relying on punitive responses such as suspensions or expulsions, RJ emphasizes relationship-building, accountability, and repairing harm through dialogue and community engagement. The literature suggests that when implemented as a schoolwide practice—supported through staff training, student voice, and stakeholder collaboration—RJ can produce a range of positive student outcomes, including reductions in absenteeism and disciplinary actions, as well as improvements in academic engagement and graduation rates (Anyon et al., 2016; Sandwick et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2014; González, 2015). Implementation quality varies widely, but schools that treat RJ not merely as an intervention but as a cultural framework are more likely to see substantive improvements. The following hypotheses are grounded in the expectation that stronger implementation of RJ (hereafter

referred to as RJ strength)—measured through depth of program integration, regular use, and community support—will correlate with better school-level outcomes.

Hypothesis 1: All else equal, an increase in RJ strength is associated with a decrease in chronic absenteeism rates.

RJ's emphasis on community building and student engagement is expected to foster a greater sense of belonging and accountability among students. As students feel more connected to their school environment, they may be more likely to attend regularly. Jain et al. (2014) provide empirical evidence that schools with strong RJ practices experienced significant reductions in chronic absenteeism. Furthermore, Sandwick et al. (2019) argue that RJ creates relational trust between students and staff, which is critical in motivating consistent attendance, especially among students previously disengaged from school.

Hypothesis 2: All else equal, an increase in RJ strength is associated with a decrease in suspension rates.

A central purpose of RJ is to reduce reliance on exclusionary disciplinary practices like suspension by promoting accountability and dialogue. Strong RJ programs enable schools to address behavioral issues through restorative circles, mediations, and community-based responses, which are more inclusive and less disruptive to student learning. Anyon et al. (2016) found that participation in restorative interventions significantly lowered the odds of receiving future suspensions, even among students from groups that are typically overrepresented in discipline statistics. The mechanisms of RJ, such as reflection, harm repair, and reintegration, are designed specifically to replace suspension as a default response to conflict.

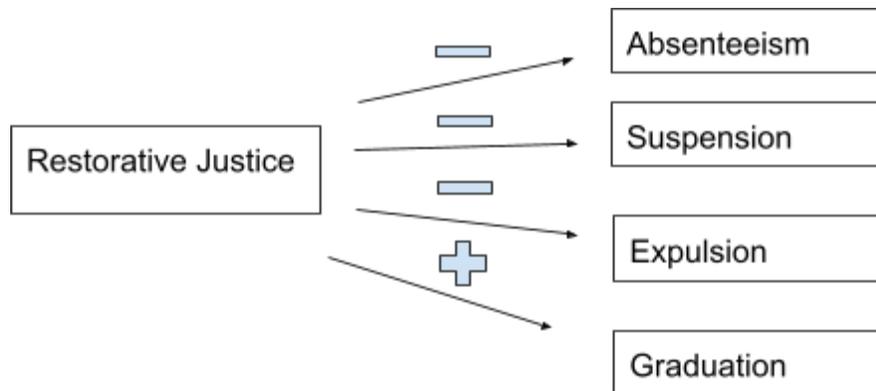
Hypothesis 3: All else equal, an increase in RJ strength is associated with a decrease in expulsion rates.

Expulsions, like suspensions, are exclusionary and often used in response to severe behavioral infractions. However, robust RJ programs provide structured, yet supportive, frameworks for addressing even serious incidents without permanently removing students from the educational environment. When RJ is treated as a comprehensive response for not only minor misbehavior but for major disciplinary cases as well, schools are more likely to use restorative conferences and harm agreements instead of expulsion. Kim et al. (2024) cautioned that without full integration, RJ may not displace punitive responses, but when implemented comprehensively, it has the potential to reduce high-stakes exclusions such as expulsion.

Hypothesis 4: All else equal, an increase in RJ strength is associated with an increase in graduation rates.

Graduation is a long-term outcome influenced by multiple factors, including school climate, student-teacher relationships, discipline history, and attendance, which are targeted by RJ practices. As RJ reduces suspensions and absenteeism and improves student engagement, it supports the academic persistence needed for graduation. Fronius et al. (2019) and González (2015) suggest that RJ can contribute to a more supportive and inclusive educational climate, especially for students historically marginalized by punitive systems. By shifting the school culture toward one that values inclusivity and student voice, RJ may indirectly increase the likelihood that students remain in school and graduate.

These hypotheses reflect the theoretical expectation that RJ, when implemented with fidelity and institutional support, can transform the school climate and reduce systemic barriers to student success. Each outcome—absenteeism, suspension, expulsion, and graduation—is both a target of RJ and an indicator of school health, making them appropriate metrics for evaluating the strength and impact of restorative justice practices.



Data

To test our hypotheses, we used publicly available data from the years 2017 to 2024, covering a total of 103 schools; student-level data could not be provided due to confidentiality reasons. We focused on those years because 2017 was the first year of restorative practices implemented in CVUSD. Our sources ranged from data provided by CVUSD and LBUSD as well as data provided by the California Department of Education (CDE). School Academic Report Cards (SARC) provided necessary information on the dependent variables—chronic absenteeism, suspension, expulsion, and graduation rates. Some data was not available for these variables, so we used the Education Data Partnership (Ed-Data) provided by CDE to fill those gaps.

To gather data on our control variables (Percentage of students who are White, Black, Hispanic, Native American/Alaska American, and access to Free/Reduced lunches), we used a mix of Ed-Data and Data Quest from the CDE. For our race/ethnicity variables, we were able to

gather all of the information from Data Quest. The percentage of students accessing Free/Reduced lunches was available on Ed-Data. To code the strength of restorative justice policies, we scanned through different sources to get a better understanding of the policies and their implementation. For CVUSD and LBUSD, we looked through their Student Safety Plan (SSP) and district websites for further information about programs that align with RJ. Our initial sample was 105 schools—84 from LBUSD and 21 from CVUSD. A continuation school in CVUSD (La Familia High School) was omitted from our analysis due to its high percentages of absenteeism, suspension, and expulsion, leading to skewed results. An adult school in LBUSD was also omitted because it did not fit the criteria of our research, since we are focused on minors. This led our final sample to be 103 schools.

Methods

By cross-referencing the above sources, we were able to code the strength of RJ policies for each school within those districts on a scale of 1-3. One is weak, demonstrating that a school mentions no restorative practices/policies, and there is no evidence of implementation. Two is moderate and shows that a school mentions restorative practices/practices. This includes having limited evidence of implementation (i.e., 2 or fewer programs). Three shows strong evidence of implementation (i.e., 3 or more programs) and emphasizes restorative practices/policies. We focused on wording that would allude to looking at the source of an issue rather than punitive punishment. Keywords such as restore, rebuild, and reconnect are the most well-known terms for RJ policies.

CVUSD developed a transformational model aimed at improving student well-being (*Transformational model*). Programs and practices such as Wellness Centers, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum, and Calming Binders are designed to provide conflict resolution by

guiding students to emotionally self-regulate, which led to CVUSD scoring higher than LBUSD. The Wellness Centers provide a space for students to gain skills and attend workshops to improve their well-being and overall mental health. CVUSD introduced Calming Binders in 2023 into elementary classrooms, which builds upon the Wellness Centers and is designed to assist teachers with strategies for students to regain focus and “get back into an academic learning zone” (*Transformational model*). Similarly, the concept of Wellness Carts has been discussed, which would provide similar tools that the Wellness Centers and Calming Binders provide, but to all levels of schooling.

LBUSD also provides Wellness Centers, but only at the middle and high school level, while CVUSD designed it for all schools (*Wellness Centers*). LBUSD has also created a Multi-tiered System of Support, which is a collaborative approach to “personalizing instruction and intervention across academics and behavior for all students” (*Multi-tiered systems of support*). The essential components include screening, a multi-level prevention system, progress monitoring, and data-based decision-making. These components ensure the students receive an equitable educational experience, with the staff making informed decisions to best support them. Due to this being a subjective task, it was important for all members to agree on how each school was coded to have a better consensus on the strength of the RJ policies. LBUSD has also included a specific equity policy dedicated to establishing “a standard of humanity, compassion, sensitivity, and respect” (*LBUSD equity policy*). They state this is their foundation for all future endeavors around equity. Due to us only having access to publicly available data, there was little to no variation between schools within the same district, leading to most schools within their respective districts being coded the same. This is further acknowledged in the limitations section.

Chronic absenteeism, suspension, expulsion, graduation, access to Free/Reduced lunches, and ethnic/racial groups are continuous variables and coded as percentages. For our study, we used Free/Reduced lunches as a proxy for socioeconomic status (SES) since it allows us to understand the percentage of students in lower SES. For the rest of the paper, Free/Reduced Lunches will be labeled as SES. To see the impact of the RJ policies/practices, we ran an ordinary least squares regression for each school district and both districts combined. We coded the schools by district (0: LBUSD, 1: CVUSD) to run a regression for each district to demonstrate the impacts RJ policies/practices have on its schools while conducting a regression for the totality of our data allows us to see the overall RJ policies/practices can have on those school districts as a whole. We coded the schools by school level (1: Elementary school, 2: K-8 School, 3: Middle School, 4: High School, 5: K-12 School) to see differences between each age group for further analysis.

Results/Findings

Table 1 demonstrates RJ policies on chronic absenteeism rates in CVUSD, LBUSD, and both districts combined through an OLS regression model. Tables 2, 3, and 4 follow this model for each of our independent variables. Unfortunately for both districts, there is an increase in absenteeism rates associated with RJ. In CVUSD, the relationship between RJ and absenteeism is even more pronounced than in LBUSD, with a coefficient of 24.92 ($p < 0.001$). This indicates that RJ implementation is associated with an increase of nearly 25 percent in the absenteeism rate on average, suggesting that RJ may be less effective in this district. However, it is important to note that chronic absenteeism increased significantly post-COVID, potentially affecting the results. Interestingly, in CVUSD, the proportion of Hispanic students shows a negative association with absenteeism (Coef = -3.50, $p = 0.025$), meaning that higher Hispanic

representation is linked to lower absenteeism rates. The proportion of White students also shows a near-significant negative association (Coef = -3.79, p = 0.058), suggesting a potential relationship with reduced absenteeism.

Table 1.
Results for OLS Regression Predicting Impact of RJ Policies on Absenteeism

Variable	Total			CVUSD			LBUSD		
	β	SE	Sig	β	SE	Sig	β	SE	Sig
Restorative Justice	13.395***	0.998	0.000	24.915***	1.465	0.000	14.066***	1.324	0.000
Free/ Reduced Lunch (SES)	-0.077	0.0465	0.095	-.0377	0.111	0.735	-.040	0.052	0.442
Hispanic	0.470***	0.124	0.000	-3.498**	1.540	0.025	.509***	0.129	0.000
White	0.257	0.153	0.094	-3.789	0.976	0.058	.213	0.157	0.178
Black	1.221***	0.170	0.000	-.184	3.172	0.954	.882	0.189	0.000
Asian	0.170	0.175	0.331	-2.446	3.930	0.535	.058	0.183	0.090
American Indian/ Alaska Native	0.459	1.543	0.766	-1.577	1.850	0.396	4.891	2.884	0.001

Note: (Total) N = 617; R2 = .422; Adjusted R2 = .415; F = 63.56, Prob > F = 0.0000.

(CVUSD) N = 119; R2 = .735; Adjusted R2 = .719; F = 44.15, Prob > F = 0.0000.

(LBUSD) N = 498; R2 = .400; Adjusted R2 = .391; F = 46.75, Prob > F = 0.0000.

*p < .10, two-tailed. **p < .05, two-tailed. ***p < .01, two-tailed.

Table 1 depicts that both districts show a positive association between RJ implementation and absenteeism; the increase is more substantial in CVUSD than in LBUSD. Moreover, the demographic differences between the districts highlight the importance of considering local contexts and student populations when evaluating the effectiveness of RJ policies. In LBUSD, higher proportions of Hispanic and Black students are associated with higher absenteeism, whereas in CVUSD, Hispanic student representation is linked to lower absenteeism. These

findings underscore that RJ practices should be carefully tailored to the unique needs and demographics of each district to ensure they achieve their intended outcomes.

On the other hand, suspension rates have decreased in Table 2. In CVUSD, the impact of RJ is greater than that of LBUSD. The RJ coefficient is -1.60 ($p = 0.014$), indicating that implementing RJ is associated with a decrease of 1.60 percent in the suspension rate on average. This significant reduction suggests that RJ practices may be particularly effective in CVUSD for curbing suspensions. In LBUSD, the results suggest that implementing RJ policies is associated with an average decrease of 0.92 percent in the suspension rate. This statistically significant reduction indicates that RJ practices might be effectively lowering suspension rates in LBUSD. However, the analysis also shows that higher proportions of Hispanic (Coef = 0.07, $p = 0.030$) and Black (Coef = 0.17, $p = 0.001$) students are associated with slightly higher suspension rates, highlighting demographic disparities in disciplinary outcomes. Notably, none of the other demographic variables—including socioeconomic status (SES), Hispanic, White, Black, Asian, and American Indian/Alaskan Native—were significant predictors of suspension rates in CVUSD ($p > 0.05$). This lack of demographic impact in CVUSD contrasts with the findings in LBUSD and suggests a more uniform reduction in suspensions across student groups.

Overall, RJ policies are associated with reduced suspension rates in both districts, with a more substantial reduction observed in CVUSD. The absence of significant demographic predictors in CVUSD may indicate a more equitable application of RJ policies, compared to LBUSD, where disparities by race and ethnicity are more evident. Despite these positive findings, it's important to note that the overall model performance is relatively poor in both cases. Especially when looking at the adjusted R^2 that demonstrates the CVUSD model only explains 3.6 percent of the variance, and for LBUSD, the model only explains 1.06 percent of the

variance in suspension rates. This suggests that there may be other, unmeasured factors influencing suspension rates, warranting further research to fully understand the dynamics at play.

Table 2.
Results for OLS Regression Predicting Impact of RJ Policies on Suspension

<i>Variable</i>	Total			CVUSD			LBUSD		
	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Restorative Justice	-0.934***	0.263	0.000	-1.599**	0.640	0.014	-0.920***	0.339	0.007
Free/Reduced Lunch (SES)	-0.002	0.012	0.849	-0.001	0.0480	0.977	-0.004	0.013	0.760
Hispanic	0.072**	0.031	0.024	0.146	0.675	0.829	0.070**	0.032	0.030
White	0.032	0.039	0.413	0.231	0.865	0.780	0.034	0.040	0.394
Black	0.154***	0.044	0.001	0.667	1.420	0.639	0.168***	0.048	0.001
Asian	-0.011**	0.045	0.807	-1.398	1.699	0.412	-0.005	0.046	0.902
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.827	0.298	0.038	0.884	0.791	0.266	0.444	0.737	0.547

Note: (Total) N = 720; R2 = .106; Adjusted R2 = .098; F = 12.17, Prob > F = 0.0000.

(CVUSD) N = 139; R2 = .085; Adjusted R2 = .036; F = 1.74, Prob > F = 0.1041.

(LBUSD) N = 581; R2 = .116; Adjusted R2 = .106; F = 10.84, Prob > F = 0.0000.

*p < .10, two-tailed. **p < .05, two-tailed. ***p < .01, two-tailed.

Table 3 presents the OLS regression results examining the relationship between restorative justice (RJ) implementation and expulsion rates across CVUSD, LBUSD, and the combined dataset. The analysis reveals mixed but promising findings regarding RJ's effectiveness in reducing disciplinary exclusions.

Table 3.
Results for OLS Regression Predicting Impact of RJ Policies on Expulsion

<i>Variable</i>	Total			CVUSD			LBUSD		
	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Restorative Justice	-0.006**	0.003	0.037	-0.005	0.009	0.573	-0.009**	0.003	0.012
Free/Reduced Lunch (SES)	0.000	0.000	0.463	0.000	0.000	0.249	0.000	0.000	0.850
Hispanic	0.000	0.000	0.160	0.009	0.010	0.366	0.000	0.000	0.108
White	0.000	0.000	0.283	0.003	0.013	0.817	0.000	0.000	0.193
Black	0.000	0.000	0.615	0.030	0.021	0.158	0.000	0.000	0.281
Asian	0.000	0.000	0.220	-0.001	0.025	0.963	0.000	0.000	0.130
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.003	0.004	0.478	0.015	0.012	0.217	-0.010	0.008	0.223

Note: (Total) N = 720; R2 = .019; Adjusted R2 = .010; F = 2.06, Prob > F = 0.0458.

(CVUSD) N = 139; R2 = .058; Adjusted R2 = .008; F = 1.17, Prob > F = 0.3264.

(LBUSD) N = 581; R2 = .023; Adjusted R2 = .023; F = 1.99, Prob > F = 0.0547.

*p < .10, two-tailed. **p < .05, two-tailed. ***p < .01, two-tailed.

For the total sample (N = 720), RJ implementation demonstrates a statistically significant association with reduced expulsion rates ($\beta = -0.006$, $p = 0.037$). However, this relationship varies considerably by district. LBUSD shows a stronger and more statistically significant reduction in expulsions ($\beta = -0.009$, $p = 0.012$), while CVUSD exhibits no significant relationship ($\beta = -0.005$, $p = 0.573$). This district-level variation suggests that implementation context, program maturity, or institutional factors may moderate RJ's effectiveness, especially with LBUSD's longer-standing program potentially demonstrating more consistent outcomes.

What's important to note here is that our demographic and socioeconomic control variables, such as free/reduced lunch eligibility and racial compositions (Hispanic, White, Black, Asian, and American Indian/Alaska Native populations), were not statistically significant predictors of expulsion rates in any model. This finding suggests that the observed RJ effects are not confounded by these traditional risk factors for school discipline disparities.

The weight of the model's explanatory power remains limited, with the R^2 values ranging from 0.019 (total sample) to 0.058 (CVUSD), which indicates that RJ implementation accounts for only a small portion of the variance in expulsion rates. While these findings provide evidence that restorative justice can contribute to reduced exclusionary discipline, particularly in well-established programs, they also highlight the need to examine additional school-level, policy, or other contextual factors that may influence disciplinary outcomes.

For Table 4, the total sample ($N = 122$) shows that RJ does not significantly affect graduation rates in either district, despite showing a positive trend. RJ implementation in CVUSD demonstrates a statistically non-significant association with increased graduation rates ($\beta = 2.521$, $p = 0.367$), while LBUSD also demonstrates a non-significant association ($\beta = 6.257$, $p = 1.43$). The difference in results between districts might be attributed to differences in RJ practices, sample size differences, demographic variability, or unobserved contextual factors.

CVUSD's graduation rates are negatively impacted by the presence of Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaskan Native students in LBUSD. In CVUSD, the impact of ethnicity on graduation rates is less clear, with some indications of negative associations for Hispanic and White students. In LBUSD, the presence of Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaskan Native students correlates with lower graduation rates. In CVUSD, the Hispanic and White

demographics show a marginally significant negative association with graduation rates. These differences suggest the need for demographic-informed decisions within both districts.

Table 4.
Results for OLS Regression Predicting Impact of RJ Policies on Graduation

Variable	Total			CVUSD			LBUSD		
	β	SE	Sig.	β	SE	Sig.	β	SE	Sig.
Restorative Justice	3.972	2.111	0.063	6.257	4.371	1.43	2.521	2.779	0.367
Free/Reduced Lunch (SES)	0.254	0.135	0.063	-0.164	0.425	-0.39	0.234	0.159	0.144
Hispanic	-0.884***	0.338	0.010	-9.529	5.212	-1.83	-1.183	0.369	0.002
White	-0.040	0.353	0.909	-12.548	6.555	-1.91	-0.205	0.381	0.592
Black	-1.173***	0.367	0.002	-7.847	8.335	-0.94	-1.169***	0.387	0.003
Asian	-0.293	0.516	0.572	5.732	11.230	0.51	-0.665	0.561	0.239
American Indian/Alaska Native	-4.645	3.937	0.241	-9.799	6.885	-1.42	-11.553**	5.593	0.042

Note: (Total) N = 122; R2 = .399; Adjusted R2 = .362; F = 10.85, Prob > F = 0.0000.

(CVUSD) N = 21; R2 = .335; Adjusted R2 = -.0232; F = 0.94, Prob > F = 0.5122.

(LBUSD) N = 101; R2 = .447; Adjusted R2 = .406; F = 10.78, Prob > F = 0.0000.

*p < .10, two-tailed. **p < .05, two-tailed. ***p < .01, two-tailed.

The weight of the model's explanatory power is moderate, with the R² values ranging from 0.4478 (LBUSD) to 0.3350 (CVUSD), which indicates that RJ implementation accounts for only a moderate portion of the variance in expulsion rates. The findings are suggestive that restorative justice can contribute to impact graduation rates but also highlight the need to examine additional factors that may influence graduation and retention outcomes.

Table 5.
Summary of Hypotheses and Results

Hypothesis	Results
<i>Hypothesis 1:</i> All else equal, an increase in RJ strength is associated with a decrease in chronic absenteeism rates	Not Confirmed
<i>Hypothesis 2:</i> All else equal, an increase in RJ strength is associated with a decrease in suspension rates	Confirmed
<i>Hypothesis 3:</i> All else equal, an increase in RJ strength is associated with a decrease in expulsion rates	Not Confirmed
<i>Hypothesis 4:</i> All else equal, an increase in RJ strength is associated with an increase in graduation rates	Not Confirmed

The results from the OLS regression models offer valuable insights into the impact of restorative justice on retention and disciplinary outcomes, as well as how these effects may differ across demographic groups. However, only one of the hypotheses was supported: stronger implementation of restorative justice is significantly associated with lower suspension rates. This finding suggests that while restorative justice shows promise, especially in reducing suspensions, further research is needed to monitor its broader effects and to explore additional factors that may influence chronic absenteeism, expulsions, and other disciplinary outcomes.

Limitations

While our research presented informed recommendations based on its findings, limitations led to inconclusive results for some of our hypotheses. As stated previously, all of our data is public, which allowed for generalizability across the districts, but when specifically looking at the implementation of RJ programs and practices, it became apparent that our coding for RJ strength could have been more developed if we had further information given from each district. With specific dates and a timeline of implementation for each RJ program and practice, our coding for all of the schools would have more variation, which could have led to more

statistically significant results. While an association between stronger RJ practices and a decrease in suspensions was found, none of the other independent variables were statistically significant. Especially when looking at chronic absenteeism, which had surprising increases with increased strength in RJ. We believe there are effects of the COVID-19 pandemic that are not explained by our models. There was a sharp incline in chronic absenteeism starting in the 2020-2021 school year, suggesting COVID-19 could have an impact on those rates. The control variables that were used were sufficient for our research when using public data, but future research with student-level data, including household median income and parents' occupation, could be favorable for stronger results.

Future research should focus on a longitudinal study to understand the effects and the causal inference for how restorative justice practices influence chronic absenteeism, expulsion, suspension, and graduation rates. Including a qualitative component by interviewing students and faculty could also be beneficial to gather insight into the overall well-being of students, as well as how the faculty views the implementation of RJ practices and programs. These additional steps would ensure further development of RJ practices and programs not only within CVUSD but other school districts across the country.

Policy Recommendations

Based on these findings, it is clear that while restorative justice (RJ) programs are associated with a reduction in suspensions in both LBUSD and CVUSD, their relationship with higher absenteeism rates suggests that the impact of RJ may be more complex and nuanced than traditional metrics alone can capture. These contrasting outcomes highlight the importance of looking beyond just the data on absenteeism, suspension, graduation, and expulsion rates to fully understand how RJ practices are playing out in each district. Without additional information on

how RJ is perceived and experienced by students and staff, districts may be missing crucial insights into why these programs are successful in some areas but perhaps fall short in others.

To ensure the sustainability and equity impact of restorative justice (RJ) across Coachella Valley Unified School District (CVUSD), we recommend institutionalizing three district-level strategies. First, CVUSD should invest in consistent and culturally responsive RJ training for all school-based staff. Research shows that comprehensive professional development, when paired with administrative accountability, improves both the fidelity of RJ implementation and the overall school climate (González, 2015; WestEd, 2019). Administrators and associated staff (counselors, advisers, coordinators, etc.) play a significant role in setting a foundational path for RJ to become ingrained in school culture. Additionally, teachers are an incredibly important part of the process, as they interact with students most frequently. Fostering a culture of restorative practices takes time; teachers should adopt a tailored approach that feels natural to themselves and their classrooms. Embedding RJ goals into school site plans and administrator evaluations over the long term will help maintain alignment across district-level initiatives.

Second, the district should allocate Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) funding to hire and retain full-time RJ coordinators, preferably at every school site. They can provide ideas for implementation and give examples of how RJ practices can look in the classroom (e.g., role modeling) (Goodrich, 2021). RJ coordinators play a critical role in facilitating restorative circles, mentoring staff, and engaging with students. These coordinators can offer clarity on what restorative justice can look like, both long-term and short-term, within their specific school settings (Lustick et al., 2024). Additionally, they help build an understanding of the importance and use of RJ among those who are still skeptical or hesitant about changing their approach to discipline. Evidence suggests that the presence of dedicated

coordinators strengthens program consistency and significantly reduces the use of exclusionary discipline (Jain et al., 2014; WestEd, 2019).

Third, CVUSD should increase transparency and accountability by requiring all school sites to report RJ implementation progress in their annual School Accountability Report Cards (SARCs). This includes publishing implementation rubrics and outcomes alongside key metrics like chronic absenteeism, suspensions, expulsions, and graduation rates. Additionally, the district should formalize partnerships with community-based organizations such as Alianza Coachella Valley to ensure that RJ practices remain culturally relevant and grounded in the lived experiences of students and their families. These recommendations support RJ, not just as a discipline alternative, but as a long-term investment in school equity and climate reform.

Accordingly, it is strongly recommended that districts implementing RJ programs establish robust tracking mechanisms and conduct annual surveys that involve both staff and students. These surveys should be designed to capture not only quantitative data but also qualitative feedback on the ways RJ is shaping the school climate and relationships among students and educators. This kind of comprehensive feedback can shed light on whether RJ is fostering a sense of belonging, trust, and accountability, or if there are gaps in implementation that need to be addressed. By incorporating these additional perspectives, districts can ensure that RJ programs are not only reducing punitive discipline but also truly fostering environments that support student success and well-being in meaningful and lasting ways. Continuous monitoring and engagement with stakeholders can also help identify best practices and inform future adjustments to RJ initiatives, ensuring that these programs live up to their promise of building more inclusive and supportive school communities.

Discussion

Implications for School Culture and Climate

The transition from punitive to restorative approaches in CVUSD aims to foster a more inclusive and supportive school culture. Restorative practices allow for strengthened student-teacher relationships and increased feelings of belonging. Additionally, RJ practices can promote a culture of accountability that encourages students to take responsibility for their actions rather than simply being punished. This commitment to addressing school climate is further institutionalized through the district's Culture & Climate Committee, an advisory board that facilitates stakeholder engagement and oversees climate-related efforts, including restorative justice (Coachella Valley Unified School District, 2024). The creation and existence of such a committee demonstrate CVUSD's district-level investment in sustaining inclusive practices and fostering continuous improvements.

In addition to CVUSD's Culture and Climate Committee, the district's Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) also reflects a commitment to restorative justice. The 2024-2025 LCAP outlines funding and goals to reduce suspensions and improve school climate through RJ training and student support services (Coachella Valley Unified School District, 2024). Including RJ in the LCAP signals that restorative practices are being institutionalized not only culturally, but also structurally and financially for the district. It's important to note that the LCAP includes data showing that RJ and trauma-informed response implemented in wellness centers and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) have contributed to measurable reductions in suspensions and chronic absenteeism. According to the 2024-2025 LCAP, between 2022-2023, CVUSD recognized a 3.5% decline in chronic absenteeism and a decrease in both the number of students suspended and total suspension days (Coachella Valley Unified School District, 2024).

These positive outcomes highlight how RJ is not only shaping school climate but also improving tangible metrics for student success indicators for the district.

Equity Considerations and Disparity Reduction

The findings underscore that restorative justice can play a crucial role in reducing racial and socioeconomic disparities. In CVUSD, marginalized students (e.g., Black, Latino/a, and students with disabilities) have shown greater improvements in retention and disciplinary outcomes when exposed to restorative practices. In restorative justice, equity does not always mean that students are treated equally, but rather that they are being treated equitably, and approaches are tailored to meet the needs of the students better. The equitable implementation of RJ practices is essential to ensure that all students benefit from the shift away from exclusionary discipline and to begin breaking down disparity barriers.

While equity and inclusion discussions around school discipline often emphasize race, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status (SES), food insecurity remains a commonly overlooked factor that may influence student behavior and academic engagement. Food insecurity may remain an invisible barrier because it is underreported, partially due to social stigma, embarrassment, or its natural role in school environments (Food Research & Action Center, 2022; California Food Policy Advocates, 2023). In a district like Coachella Valley Unified School District (CVUSD), where approximately 89% of its students qualify for free or reduced-priced meals, hunger is not an isolated experience, it is a systemic condition that shapes how students engage in the classroom (Coachella Valley Unified School District, 2024).

Research has linked food insecurity to increased behavioral disruptions, concentration difficulties, and emotional regulation challenges (Food Research & Action Center, 2022; Gundersen & Ziliak, 2015). These behavioral and cognitive effects of hunger are especially

pronounced among students living in poverty, where food insecurity is associated with higher rates of school disciplinary action, absenteeism, and challenges focusing in the classroom (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2015).

Restorative justice practices offer a trauma-informed lens for educators to approach these challenges more compassionately. The advantage of approaching these challenges with a unique perspective, with its restorative-focused lens from educators and community members, is being able to identify and interpret these challenges more holistically allows for more effective and impactful problem-solving. Additionally, instead of responding to hunger-driven behavior challenges with exclusion, restorative practices encourage educators to reveal root causes and respond faster to students with support, relationship-building, and community-based care. This highlights restorative justice not only functioning as a behavioral intervention but also as a vital tool to uplift mechanisms that support social equity (Food Research & Action Center, 2022; Gundersen & Ziliak, 2015).

Creating spaces that are aimed at addressing unmet needs, such as food, housing, and emotional support for students, further bolsters restorative justice's ability to move beyond discipline reform alternatives and accelerate toward a more holistic, community-based, shared value of restorative justice within a district. Furthermore, the ability to recognize food insecurity as part of the equity landscape strengthens the need for advocacy of expanding restorative justice efforts and implementation in high-poverty districts and reinforces integrated local community support that prioritizes overall student well-being and contributes to a positive school climate (California Food Policy Advocates, 2023; Food Research & Action Center, 2022).

The Role of Data in Informing Restorative Practices

Using data to drive continuous improvement has been a key factor in the success of RJ initiatives. The regular analysis of discipline, attendance, suspension, and graduation data helps schools identify gaps and adjust practices accordingly. While the hypotheses for absenteeism, expulsion, and graduation were not confirmed, this points to the need for improved tracking of restorative justice impacts beyond quantitative data. Overall, CVUSD's experience aligns with best practices outlined in recent reports on school climate data use, emphasizing the need for timely, disaggregated data and professional learning opportunities.

Conclusion

The shift toward restorative justice in the Coachella Valley Unified School District represents a promising response to longstanding challenges associated with exclusionary discipline practices. By prioritizing relationship-building, equity, and data-informed decision-making, CVUSD has taken significant steps to transform its school culture and improve outcomes for all students. Some challenges remain, particularly in tailoring practices to different developmental stages, ensuring consistent implementation, and measuring outcomes. Nonetheless, evidence suggests that restorative justice can reduce disciplinary and educational disparities in the form of suspension rates. improve.

These findings underscore the need for ongoing investment in professional development, infrastructure, and community partnerships to sustain and scale these positive changes. The restorative justice experience of CVUSD offers valuable lessons for educators and policymakers nationwide. By adopting a holistic, whole-child approach and leveraging data to drive continuous improvement, schools can create safer, more equitable learning environments that empower every student to succeed.

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