

Information for participants attending a Restorative Conference at Wellington High School

What is a restorative conference?

A community conference is a meeting of the community of people affected by an incident of serious harm in the school or community setting. The conference provides a forum in which wrongdoers, those harmed and their respective supporters can seek ways to repair the damage caused by the incident or situation, and to minimise further harm.

A conference gives wrongdoers an opportunity to understand the impact of their behaviour on other people, themselves and the wider community in the school and beyond. It gives wrongdoers a chance to atone for their actions. A conference gives those harmed the opportunity to explain how they have been affected and to become involved in negotiating to repair the harm.

Who attends a restorative conference?

A conference usually involves the following people:

- The wrongdoer and their supporters
- Those harmed and their supporters
- The conference facilitator (an experienced and trained person)
- The school representative who investigated the incident
- Other school and/or community personnel if appropriate.

What happens during a restorative conference?

Participants listen to the stories of what happened so they have a clear understanding of the impact of the behaviour on everyone present. The damage may be physical or emotional. They then decide what needs to be done to repair the damage and minimise further harm. An agreement is reached which is recorded and signed by the key people present. These people are given a copy of the agreement. Follow-up occurs at the agreed time.

What are the outcomes of a conference?

The main outcome of a conference is the written agreement described above. The terms of the agreement may include anything from an apology and assurances that the behaviour will not occur again, to community service work around the school or elsewhere, repayment of money (if appropriate), repair of any physical damage to property, and undertakings by the student or family

to access appropriate support. The outcomes are limited only by the group's imagination and its ability to ensure compliance with the terms of the agreement. The process is designed to achieve maximum satisfaction for all those who participate.

How long does a restorative conference take?

This will depend on the circumstances and complexity of the situation and the number of people involved and willing to participate. The time taken to prepare for the conference is totally dependent on these factors, with the conference itself taking on average one and a half to two hours. Considering the time usually taken to deal with such incidents, this is a reasonable investment of time for the school or community.

What are the advantages of this approach?

Those harmed get the opportunity to have their say in a safe forum, both about how they were affected and what they want to see happen to repair the harm. Family and other supporters also get to talk about what has happened to them as a result of the incident, and they take part in deciding what needs to be done. The wrongdoer is confronted, often for the first time, with how their behaviour has affected others, including their own families. They take responsibility for their behaviours and are not allowed to walk away from the community of people they have hurt. Relationships are strengthened and extended, and they are given the opportunity to find a way to be accepted back into the community. Everyone at the conference learns from the experience and often there are dramatic behaviour changes.

Where this process is used to solve high level conflict or other relationship difficulties, bringing the community of people together in this way to problem-solve gives those involved insights which are often not possible with other approaches, and can also unite the community of people affected. Peace is a possibility.