Fostering Policies that Enhance Positive School Environment

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Abstract

Schools have a considerable influence on children's development, both through proximal factors such as teachers and curriculum, but also through indirect effects of school policies. While some policies and programs have the potential to increase stress and burden on students, educators, as well as the broader educational context, several programs have demonstrated a positive impact on the school environment. This article considers the role of educational policies, programs, and activities related to discipline and teacher behavior which together influence the school environment. Programs which set high expectations for student performance, healthy social-emotional learning, and positive behavior support are highlighted, due in part to rigorous research demonstrating both their broad reach and their impact on a range of learning and positive behavioral outcomes. Despite the potential significance of policies on the learning environment, there has been limited systematic research documenting the impact of policies on the school environment more broadly. This paper concludes by identifying some areas for future study and a greater need for implementation research.

Fostering Policies that Enhance Positive School Environment

Schools are an important context for child and youth development, as they have a considerable influence on several aspects of behavior, emotional well-being, as well as academic performance. Some of these effects are likely mediated by the creation of a positive school and classroom environments. While there has been considerable attention to programs and curricula which can be implemented to promote a positive school environment, there has been less consideration of the potential influence of policies on the school context. This paper considers the influence of several policies and related programs intended to impact school environments and conditions for learning. However, not all policies and programs have resulted in favorable outcomes for students and the staff who support them. As a result, it is important to consider both the successes as well as the challenges associated with these types of policies. In synthesizing this research, we identify certain features of effective policies, such as those which encourage the use of research-based programs, procedures, and activities related to discipline, structure, and teacher behavior, which together contribute to a positive school environment. Similarly, school-wide efforts to promote positive behavior, social-emotional learning, a favorable school climate, and high expectations for student performance have been linked with learning and positive behavioral outcomes, and thus should be central to future incentive focused policies. We conclude with some recommendations and areas for future research related to the impact of policies on the school environment.

Examples of Federal Policies Which Have Impacted the School Environment

There is a long history of research on educational policies, the vast majority of which has focused on academic standards, safety, and the provision of services for children with special needs. The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* is one federal policy dating back to

1965 which has had considerable influence on learning standards, student behavior, and the school environment. Specific elements of *ESEA*, such as *Title I*, have also helped allocate federal resources to schools with a high concentration of low income students, whereas *Title IX* has directed resources for gender equity. Similarly, the *Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA)*, originally enacted in the mid-1970s, had considerable reach in terms of services for children with disabilities. The more recent reauthorization of IDEA has allowed for up to 15% of funds to be used to *prevent* behavior, social-emotional, and educational problems. While these policies advocated for rights and opportunities for students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, they also led to significant increases in the focus on standardized testing and documentation of processes, particularly since the 2001 reauthorization of *ESEA* under the name *No Child Left Behind*. There is no denying the significant impact of high stakes standardized testing on student and teacher accountability; many practitioners and researchers posit that these dramatic shifts in focus toward testing have negatively impacted the school environment, and may have produced iatrogenic impacts on student engagement and quality instruction.

Growing concern about school safety and student discipline problems have also ushered in a host of policies related to student behavior. Many of these policies and programs had a strong focus on punishing low performing schools rather than incentivizing efforts to promote safety. For example, the school shootings occurring in the late 1990s, most notably those at Columbine High School, but including other incidents before, led to an upswing in the use of Zero Tolerance polices and other similar policies focused on youth violence and school safety. Similarly, elements of *ESEA* (i.e., *No Child Left Behind*) charged states with designating schools as “Persistently Dangerous”; this often resulted in families being provided an opportunity to

select another school and the closure of schools which were unable to return to a more successful learning environment (see Jones et al., 2009). A related line of legislation has been enacted regarding school turnaround, which aims to improve the school environment through extensive overhaul of the school's leadership, staff, and organizational structure, which are often accompanied by changes in the curriculum and discipline practices. Although largely unmeasured, these and numerous other federal policies have likely had a significant impact on the school environment. Yet, relatively few of these efforts have been rigorously evaluated in relation to their impact on the school environment, despite their large scale and far reach. In fact, is quite possible that some of these efforts have actually resulted in unfavorable outcomes for students and the school environment.

Less than optimal impacts of school policies: A focus on zero tolerance. As noted above, the wave of school shootings in the 1990s led federal and state legislatures to draw upon a set of policies regarding school violence, often referred to collectively as "zero tolerance". The concept of zero tolerance was developed as a program for drug enforcement used to empound seagoing vessels carry contraband drugs in 1986 (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). The term was adopted in schools beginning in 1990s as a policy (really viewed more as a "philosophy") requiring school administrators and officials to apply and enforce specific and predetermined punishments or consequences irrespective of circumstances. These consequences were often inflexible, severe, and punitive in nature, intended to be applied monolithically without consideration of the severity of the behavior, the context in which it occurred, or other mitigating factors. Zero tolerance was designed mostly to deter negative social behaviors. Refined in the juvenile justice system, these policies outlined circumstances in which certain behavioral infractions resulted in automatic school suspensions. Such offenses often included weapons carrying, fighting, and

bullying; in some instances, ‘three strikes’ types of zero tolerance policies are in place, whereby repeat offenses automatically translate into suspensions or expulsions.

Despite the wide-spread use of these policies, there was growing concern among researchers and some practitioners that these approaches may do more harm than good. One of the most comprehensive reviews of zero tolerance and other similar school safety policies was conducted by the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008). This report examined the question of whether zero tolerance policies made schools safer for students, more able to handle school discipline effectively by reducing fights or difficult behaviors, or had differential impact on students with disabilities or students of color. The report further concluded that zero tolerance attempted to create schools that were safe for students and promotes positive learning experiences.

However, the evidence showed that such policies, as implemented, largely failed to reach their stated goal and that there needed to be a change either in how zero tolerance practices were applied or through the creation of new, alternative policies. At the policy level the report made seven recommendations. 1) zero tolerance removals should be only for the most severe disruptive behaviors, 2) one-size-fits-all strategies should be modified to be more graduated and related to the seriousness of the negative behavior, 3) school police or security officers should have training in adolescent development, 4) legislative initiatives should require an array of disciplinary alternatives before suspension, including prevention efforts, 5) an increase in teacher training in culturally sensitive pedagogy and classroom management, 6) additional teacher training regarding sensitivity to issues of race, and finally 7) more training should be undertaken related to harassment and sexual harassment for teachers and school personnel.

Although the APA report, and several other similar reviews of the policy (e.g., Boccanfuso & Kuhfeld, 2011) helped initiate a shift in public perception regarding the effectiveness and appropriateness of zero tolerance policies, many of these policies remain in place today. It was only recently that the U.S. Department of Education publically came out against zero tolerance policies. However, many schools and school systems fall back on such approaches following high profile events, such as those involving bullying, serious acts of school violence, or teacher assault, likely due in part to the public's perception that alternatives to suspension or expulsion are not 'tough enough' to crack the issue of school violence. Nevertheless, prevention researchers, educators, and practitioners have sought to promote a set of alternatives to zero tolerance, which are more preventive, proactive, and less punitive. Many of these approaches aim to improve the school environment through research-based programs and practices intending to reward positive student and staff behaviors and teach social-emotional skills. Below we consider these approaches, beginning with a focus on school climate, given its central role in these policy and programmatic efforts.

Role of School Climate

School climate is defined as the "norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe" (National School Climate Council, 2007, p.4). It is a product of the interpersonal relationships between students, families, teachers, support staff, and administrators. Positive school climate is fostered through a shared vision of respect and engagement across the educational system. Emphasis is also placed on the collective sense of safety and care for the school's physical environment. The U.S. Department of education recently outlined a model of school climate includes three inter-related domains or features of *student engagement* (e.g., relationships, respect for diversity, and school participation), *safety*

(e.g., social-emotional safety, physical safety, substance use), and the *school environment* (e.g., physical environment, academic environment, wellness, and disciplinary environment); this model has subsequently been empirically validated and linked with a range of behavioral and academic outcomes for students (Bradshaw et al., 2014).

As a result of the growing body of research documenting the positive attributes and correlates of school climate, it has become an important target for school reform efforts and programs aimed at improving behavioral, academic, and mental health outcomes for students (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). In fact, there are efforts at both state and national levels which are aimed at making school climate and children's social-emotional wellbeing indicators that should be monitored and reported to the public, much like *ESEA* now requires the tracking of academic and disciplinary outcomes at a student as well as school level. Such a broadening of the focus on student and school outcomes to include these other indicators of the school environment and student 'non-cognitive' outcomes would significantly increase the use of school-based programming to improve the school environment.

Frameworks for Improving School Climate

Following and in some cases concurrent to these recommendations, development and implementation of a number of policies have been undertaken to improve school climate through use of programs and practices. One such large-scale effort supported by the U.S. Department of Education focuses on a multi-tiered framework called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS; Sugai & Horner, 2006). PBIS is a three-tiered prevention strategy that focuses on the prevention of student behavior problems and promotes a positive, collaborative school environment. Consistent with the public health model, PBIS is a multi-tiered system of support which layers on universal supports to benefit students school-wide, selective interventions

targeted at students with emerging behavioral, academic, and social-emotional concerns, and indicated support services for students with more intense needs.

Through PBIS, school staff work together to create a school-wide program that clearly articulates positive behavioral expectations, recognizes when students meet those expectations, and encourages data-based decision-making by staff and administrators. Recent randomized controlled trials of PBIS at the elementary and high school levels have shown that schools implementing PBIS experience significant decreases in discipline problems (e.g., suspensions, office discipline referrals), enhanced school climate, reduced need for counseling and special education services, and improved academic outcomes (Bradshaw, 2013; Bradshaw et al., 2014; Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Horner et al., 2009). Related processes, such as Response to intervention (RTI) employed tiered approach to identifying students in need of academic, behavioral, and special education supports, and has been adopted by many states as an alternative to traditional discrepancy based approaches for special education referrals (Hawken, Vincent, & Schumann, 2008).

Another three-tiered evidence-based program designed to reduce and prevent bullying and improve school climate is the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP; Olweus et al., 2007). The program is implemented across all school contexts and includes school-wide components, classroom activities (e.g., class rules against bullying, class meetings), targeted interventions for individuals identified as bullies or victims, as well as activities aimed at increasing community involvement by parents, mental health workers, and others. Previous studies of the Olweus program have demonstrated significant reductions in students' reports of bullying and general antisocial behaviors (e.g., fighting, vandalism, theft, and truancy), as well as improvements in schools' social climate (Olweus, 2005).

Social and emotional learning (SEL; CASEL, 2013) is another a framework for choosing programs aimed at developing social and emotional competencies in children based on the understanding that learning is maximized in the context of supportive relationships and engaging educational settings. SEL programs are implemented school-wide (i.e., preschool through high school) and can improve the sense of the school as a caring, supportive environment. For instance, the Caring School Community program and the Responsive Classroom are both SEL programs that have been shown to improve student and staff perceptions of the school climate and increase positive behavior and academic performance (CASEL, 2013). Many of these practices can be integrated to create a more coherent continuum of support services for students; in fact, integrating such efforts may result in less burden on school staff and increased fidelity and sustainability of these programs and practices (Bradshaw, Bottiani, Osher, & Sugai, 2014).

Role of Policies in Promoting a Favorable School Climate

A program or intervention, however, is not a policy. Given the favorable research on the school climate promoting programs and practices highlighted above, there has been increased interest in mandated implementation of these efforts by state legislatures. For example given recent attention to the significant impact of bullying on mental health and the school environment, all but one state in the U.S. have passed legislation related to bullying, which is separate from the existing harassment and discrimination policies (for a review see Cornell & Limber, 2015). The majority of these policies focus on defining bullying, outlining processes for documenting reports of bullying by staff or students, and training in bullying prevention approaches. While few of these bullying policies have been rigorously evaluated, in terms of implementation much less outcomes, it is clear that the considerable attention to this issue from a

policy perspective has raised visibility of this ubiquitous concern for youth, educators, and families.

Other legislative efforts to improve school climate have focused on mandated implementation of threat assessment, such as the Commonwealth of Virginia which requires all school divisions to adopt a process and provide training to staff in assessing and documenting possible threats made by students (Cornell et al., 2015). Other states, such as Maryland, have mandated implementation of approaches such as PBIS for schools with high rates of truancy and/or suspension (Bradshaw et al., 2013). While it is promising to see policy efforts attend to issues of school safety and the school environment through the mandated implementation of research-based approaches, there is very limited research documenting the fidelity or impact of such approaches when mandated as compared to voluntary implementation. Additional research is needed that focused on this increasing trend toward mandated programming aimed at improving the school environment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite a paucity of rigorous outcome-based evaluation of educational policies, there is little denying the impact of these and several other policies on the school environment, as well as student and staff behavior. Given the largely unfavorable findings regarding punitive approaches to discipline, such as zero tolerance, there has been a shift toward the use of programs and creation of policies which aim to improve outcomes for students through the creation of a more positive school environment. In fact, there is considerable interest in strategies and methods for assessment of school climate and a growing number of programs which have demonstrated positive effects on school climate. However, additional work is needed in several areas both to promote the use of effective programs, much of which hinges on providing adequate

implementation support and leveraging dissemination networks. There are ways in which policies can help advance such dissemination efforts, such as the adage “what gets assessed gets attention”. While the trend toward policies mandating the implementation of prevention programming is one approach for increasing dissemination of promising school climate promoting efforts, there is a need for more research to determine the impacts of this approach. Evaluating the effectiveness of policies is contingent upon good implementation research. There is continuing need for understanding how to effectively implement programs or policies that have been proven by evidence-based methodologies to work. It is quite likely that incentivize-based approaches for increasing dissemination of empirically validated programs and practices to improve school climate and prosocial behavior may serve as an effective method for state and federal policymakers. Regardless of the approach, it is quite clear that in order to foster policies that enhance positive school environment, additional training and professional development for administrators and educators will be central to that success and policies should only be undertaken with some monitoring of their outcome.

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