

My Job Is Now Illegal”: School Climate and Senate File 496, Iowa’s “Don’t Say Gay” legislation

¹Kathryn Watson

Abstract

This instrumental case study contained interviews with 35 school board members and educators in the state of Iowa to gain an understanding of Senate File 496, Iowa’s “Don’t Say Gay” legislation influenced school climate. Martinsone et al.’s sustainable promoting of positive school climate guided interviews and data analysis. The key findings of the study were Senate File 496 weakened relationships, challenged school cultural congruity, and systematically reduced inclusion.

Keywords: *school climate, K-12 policy, education policy, don’t say gay policies, wellness*

¹Kathryn Watson, PhD, Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Psychological and Quantitative Foundations
University of Iowa
Email: kathryn-watson@uiowa.edu

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“My Job is Now Illegal”

A positive school climate, encompassing a school's values, culture, and systems, is positively correlated with student academic achievement, social-emotional health, and a reduction in behavior problems, bullying, harassment, aggression, and substance use (Charlton et al., 2021; Cohen & Freiberg, 2013; Flores & Shuls, 2024). An analysis of school shootings reveals that shooters often cite bullying as part of the cause for their actions (Cohen & Freiberg, 2013), reflecting the importance of a positive school climate. Thapa et al. (2013) note five domains of school climate: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, institutional environment, and school improvement processes. Moreover, a positive school climate assists in teacher retention (Flores & Shuls, 2024).

There has been a rise in legislation restricting instruction and inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals in K-12 schools (Whitten & Thomas, 2023; Goldberg, 2023; Kline et al., 2022). These types of legislation are often referred to as “no promo homo” or “Don’t Say Gay” legislation (Kline et al., 2022; Smart & Elasser, 2023). In Iowa, Senate File 496 is part of this trend, reflecting the state's conservative political climate and focus on parental rights, which have contributed to limiting discussions of LGBTQ+ topics in schools (O’Neal, 2023; Story Maps, 2023), Mirroring that of states like Florida, Texas, Pennsylvania, and Utah (A bill for an act relating to children and students [Senate File 496], 2023; Smart & Elasser, 2023). While there is a growing body of research examining these types of policies (Goldberg, 2023; Zhang, 2022; Wargo & Katz, 2024), there is a dearth of literature examining how such policies impact predominantly White, rural states. Additionally, Whitten & Thomas (2023) highlight that anti-queer policies often erase queer families from the educational narrative, make it harder for rural parents to support queer children, and push queer educators out of rural areas. This erasure and the lack of queer-affirming visibility, curricula, and resources in rural areas contribute to recruitment and retention challenges in education.

Furthermore, there remains a limited understanding of how these legislations influence school climates, which have a positive relationship with student and teacher health and student achievement. As Wargo & Katz (2024) note, educators’ sensemaking of LGBTQ+-inclusive policies can vary widely, with some educators aligning with inclusion efforts while others resist them due to personal or professional tensions. Additionally, ideology-based policies, such as those that restrict LGBTQ+ inclusion, present conflicts with evidence-based practices aimed at fostering positive school climates. This study aims to understand how educators and board of education members perceive Iowa’s “Don’t Say Gay” policies as influencing K-12 school climate. These policies reflect a broader trend of ideology-based policymaking that often conflicts with established evidence-based practices.

Literature Review

Positive school climates center on healthy, positive relationships that engage the entire school community (Cohen & Freiberg, 2013). The more positive the perception of school climate is, the more likely students will achieve academically and grow socially and civically (Thapa et al., 2013) and increase rates of educator retention (Martinsone t al., 2023). Moreover, schools with

higher reported perceptions of school climate report lower rates of bullying, harassment, disciplinary issues, and truancy, as well as lower rates of turnover for teachers. Schools that promote healthy, inclusive, relationship-oriented environments have higher rates of student and educator wellbeing and higher student achievement (Martinsone et al., 2023). Indeed, relationships, wellness, and equity play an important role in fostering a positive school climate.

Relationships

Safe and supportive schools that promote positive relationships are vital in supporting student education and development (Charlton et al., 2021). Positive relationships between teachers and students and educators and their peers help prevent educator turnover and increases student attendance (Bransfield et al., 2019). Relationship building can include social emotional learning, civil and service learning, and cultural sensitivity (Thapa et al., 2013). Moreover, trust between educators and students is essential for schools to promote healthy strong relationships between educators and students (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). Students who lack healthy relationships tend to feel less safe in schools and are more likely to experience violence, peer victimization, higher rates of disciplinary action and absenteeism, and reduced academic achievement (Thapa et al., 2013). Indeed, there is a correlation between the strength of relationships and student safety. Therefore, borrowing from Thappa et al. (2013), student safety is viewed as an aspect of student-school relationships in this study.

Classroom teachers and school counselors play an important role in fostering these relationships. Educators strongly believe in their role supporting students and their mental health (Watson, 2022; Watson, 2024). For LGBTQ+ students, school counselors or teachers are often the first adult they confide in, reflecting and requiring deep levels of trust (McClellan, 2024). Additionally, these relationships help create an environment that affirms cognitive perceptions and social interactions held by school personnel and students, further enhancing perceptions of school climate (Rudasill et al., 2018). However, in rural schools especially, over 300 across the US promote anti-queer policies (Whitten & Thomas, 2023), which continually silence and erase LGBTQ+ students. In doing so, these policies erode student-teacher relationships that are essential in helping mitigate suicidal ideation and helping identify and support students at risk, whom are more often LGBTQ+ students (Marraccini et al., 2022). This is especially true for LGBTQ+ students who are four times more likely to die by suicide than their cisgendered heterosexual peers (Madireddy & Madireddy, 2020).

Wellness

The wellness of educators and students, or factors that influence the health and happiness of school individuals, is directly related to school climate (Brasfield et al., 2019; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Skaalvik & Skaalvik 2017). Schools that can protect and promote educator wellness experience better climates and report lower rates of educator turnover, higher self-efficacy and job satisfaction, and educators are more likely to implement interventions with fidelity (Charlton et al., 2021). Schools with less positive climates are more likely to have educators who report high levels of stress, which is a precursor for burnout and attrition, which is attributed to reduced climate and lower student achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). The rates of

burn out in education result in nearly half of all educators departing from the field within the first five years (Bransfield et al., 2019). The three factors influencing teacher stress, a key part of educator wellness, are legislation, vocational influences, and personal characteristics (Brasfield et al., 2019). Grayson and Alvarez (2008) note that teacher burn out negatively influences school climate as well as student test scores in schools. Historically, rates of burn out and attrition have been highest in subject areas with more oversight and testing such as science and math (Brasfield et al., 2019). They are also linked with schools that report higher rates of discipline issues, more time pressure, low student motivation, and value dissonance (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). However, there is an inverse relationship between school climate and teacher burnout, which is mediated by teacher satisfaction levels and emotional exhaustion (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Schools that encourage positive work environments help increase positive relationships in schools for teachers and students, which mitigates burn out, feeds back into promoting a positive school climate (Bransfield et al., 2019).

School Cultural Congruity

School cultural congruity refers to the alignment between a school's culture and the cultural backgrounds of the students and families it serves (Weber et al., 2021). Traditionally, this concept is used to examine the socioeconomic and racial/ethnic composition of a school and its surrounding community. However, given that Iowa remains one of the most predominantly White states in the nation (85%) (United States Census Bureau, 2021) and Senate File 496 focuses specifically on LGBTQ+ identities, this paper will examine school cultural congruity in terms of how well schools align with the needs and identities of LGBTQ+ students and families. This is particularly challenging in rural areas, where anti-queer policies like Senate File 496 contribute to the erasure of queer identities and make it harder for rural parents to support their queer children (Whitten & Thomas, 2023; O'Neal, 2023). This focus is important as LGBTQ+ students are among the most likely to report feeling unsafe in school (Kline et al., 2022) and face disproportionately high rates of mental health challenges, school dropout, substance use, and social isolation (Madireddy & Madireddy, 2020). This perspective aligns with Martinsone et al. (2023), who emphasize the need for schools to foster parental engagement and assess how well they address the diverse needs of their communities. However, many schools already have systems in place that allow parents to opt their child out of content that conflicts with their values, providing alternative assignments of appropriate academic level (Rhen, 2023).

Inclusion

Inclusion plays a key role in fostering positive school climates. Schools that work to facilitate inclusive policies produce better outcomes for all students (Cooper & Casey, 2023). School policies that promote inclusion reduce feelings of ostracism in students and bullying, while promoting cultural competence (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). This includes policies and practices that are inclusive toward LGBTQ+ students and educators. They are also 120% more likely to experience youth homelessness than their peers (Ormiston, 2022). Goldberg & Abreu (2023) highlight the compounding implications of bias legislation on already marginalized groups causing further mental health issues and stress. Schools that can acknowledge the racial/ethnic, religious, sexual orientation, and gender identities enhance student sense of

belonging and empowerment foster higher rates of safety (Henderson, 2022; Madireddy & Madireddy, 2020). Schools that offer safe/brave spaces for LGBTQ+ students and provide anti-bias curriculum often report more positive school climates across students and educators regardless of background (Pearson & Gill, 2023) and Dover (2009) notes most parents are in favor of such curriculum. Indeed, inclusive schools that teach equity report higher levels of safety and acceptance, and lower levels of victimization and a more positive school climate (Boske, 2022; Madireddy & Madireddy, 2020).

What is more, the U.S. Department of Education encourages schools to permit nicknames (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020), yet there lacks clear guidance across education policy regarding these issues. For example, there are many states that are requiring LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum, such as California, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey, and Virginia (Boske, 2022; Wargo & Katz, 2024). Nevertheless, there are some states actively working to restrict equity work through limiting discussion around race/racism and LGBTQ+ laws (Henderson, 2022; Tran et al., 2023; Waagmeester, 2023). In 2023, Iowa passed legislation limiting inclusive instruction in schools.

Senate File 496

The Iowa legislature codified Senate File 496 in May 2023. This legislation required all books depicting or describing sexual activity from schools be banned, requires parent permission for any mental health screeners and for students to use a nickname, and prevents any discussion around gender identity or sexual orientation in schools before 7th grade (Senate File 495, 2023). Educators found to be violating this legislation are at risk of losing their job and/or their license (Senate File 496, 2023). This legislation is considered Iowa's "Don't Say Gay" law mirroring states such as Florida and Texas (Smart & Elasser, 2023). The book ban led to the removal of nearly 500 titles across state public schools (Becker, 2023). Proponents of the legislation, such as Mom's for Liberty, state the legislation protects parental rights and prevents students from woke indoctrination and grooming of students to become LGBTQ+ in schools (Nguyen, 2023). Opponents of the legislation argue Senate File 496 violates the First and Fourteenth Amendments and marginalizes LGBTQ+ students (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023).

At the time of writing, two court cases were in process against Senate File 496. One lawsuit brought about by Penguin Random House, a prominent publishing house in the United States, along with educators and authors argue the legislation violates the First Amendment due to the book ban and the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment because the books removed focused predominantly on LGBTQ+ texts (Becker, 2023; Connor, 2023; Nguyen, 2023; Smart & Elasser, 2023). The second case *Iowa Safe Schools v Reynolds* (2024) consists of group of Iowa students who challenged Senate File 496's ban on discussion of gender identity and sexual orientation as a violation of the First Amendment and the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment (Becker, 2023). In December 2023 a federal judge placed a temporary injunction on Senate File 496 citing the ban of gender identity and sexual orientation was overbroad and unable to be applied correctly, and the legislation needed to be further analyzed to see if it held

against the Constitution (Connor, 2023). The state of Iowa responded by appealing the injunction in January 2024.

Schools across the state have been influenced in different ways by Senate File 496 which must be considered as Graza and Molinari (2020) note that changes in school climate as a result of policy influences aspects of safety, relationships, academic support and institutional environment. Indeed, Lenz et al (2021) found changes in school climate influence all stakeholders including teachers, parents, board members, and school leaders. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the way Senate File 496 influenced educators' and school board members' perceptions of school climate in a predominantly rural midwestern state.

Research Question

1. How do educators and school board members perceive Senate File 496 influenced school climate in Iowa?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that guided this inquiry was Martinsone et al.'s (2023) sustainable promoting of positive school climate (SPPSC). School climate consists of school culture and values and often are influenced by physical and emotional safety, interpersonal relationships, and perceptions of learning environments. The core of SPPSC contends that school climate directly relates to student and staff wellness and outcomes. Thus, the conceptual framework provides considerations to promote a sustainable positive school climate through a holistic approach and incorporates psychology and educational tactics (Martinsone et al., 2023). This approach includes the valuing of relationships, fostering school cultural congruity, and promoting equity and inclusion at the universal school level. Student-teacher, student-peer, and educator-educator relationships are all foundational in fostering school climate. At the district level, board members play a role in how they interpret and direct schools to implement policy and the way the ground community feedback, while educators are more responsible for the day-to-day implementation of the districts culture and policy. For students, healthy relationships are directly linked to increased engagement and more positive mental health outcomes. For staff, positive relationships help foster a collaborative workplace and reduce turnover (Martinsone et al., 2023). School cultural congruity refers to the level of which the school meets the diverse needs and values of the families it serves. This includes fostering parent involvement, while ensuring this involvement does not hinder the school's mission. Additionally, equity and inclusion efforts are also linked to a more positive school climate and stronger relationships in schools.

Some programs Martinsone et al. (2023) suggest to promote positive school climate include multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), positive behavioral intervention support (PBIS), and social emotional learning (SEL). All three can be implemented universally, or on a classroom-by-classroom level. Sustainable promoting of positive school climate holds that for efforts to be sustainable they must take a whole-school approach where the staff is ready to engage, continuous support and training is offered to teachers, and administrators foster this environment with fidelity. Moreover, it is important to note teacher-wellbeing plays a key role in ensuring the

roll out of these programs toward students is vital, thus schools have a duty to support educator wellbeing. Sustainability also requires explicit commitment, involvement of implementers, integration of the intervention into school life, compatibility of intervention with school needs, sticking to long-term implementation plan, providing opportunities to reflect on implementation, and collecting information on effectiveness (Martinsone et al., 20223). Finally, SPPSC asserts the importance of policymakers prioritizing fostering supportive and inclusive schools to promote student connection, mental health, and achievement (Grazia & Molinari, 2020). The author selected SPPSC to guide this study as school climate directly relates to educator and student wellbeing and participants discussed the ways Senate File 496 influenced their wellbeing and school climate.

Methods

Research Design

For this study, the researcher employed an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) to examine ways educators and board members in Iowa felt Senate File 496 reflected the state of education in Iowa. Instrumental case studies are useful in highlighting nuances within a broader context that may seem unnoteworthy to outsiders. In this case, an instrumental case study provides a unique structure to explore the state of public education in a predominantly rural midwestern state.

Participants

This study included 35 school board members and educators from across the state of Iowa. The researcher contacted educators using publicly available e-mail addresses across 129 districts at random across the state. Willing participants responded to the email and received an informed exemption sheet that provided protocols for participation. Participants received \$15 e-gift cards for their time. Overall, participants in the study hold diverse roles in their school and reflect a wide range (1-33 years) in education and represent rural, town, suburban, and urban districts across the state. The researcher used the National Center for Education Statistics (2024) to classify each school setting. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect anonymity and those holding multiple roles in their schools are reported here in accordance with the role they spend the most time at to help protect anonymity.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Table

Pseudonym	Role	School Setting	Years in Ed	Pseudonym	Role	School Setting	Years in Ed
Alexis	Elementary SPED*	City	15	Kersten	High School Associate Principal	City	12
Amelia	7-12 SPED	Rural	5	Kim	High School English	Rural	28

Anastasia	High School English	Rural	30	Lacie	BOE**	Town	2
Ari	High School English	Rural	4	Lexi	High School English	Town	22
Ava	Middle School Social Studies	Suburb	12	Maud	Middle School Counselor	Town	17
Avery	Middle School English	Suburb	10	Meryl	High School SPED	City	17
Bailey	Elementary Counselor	Rural	8	Penny	High School SPED	Town	22
Bri	Elementary SED	Town	6	Rebecca	High School English	Rural	8
Brain	High School Science	Town	7	Rob	BOE	City	24
Christina	Middle School Reading	Rural	23	Sam	High School Librarian	Rural	31
Cindy	High School*** Librarian	Suburb	13	Sarah	Middle School English		
Claire	BOE	Rural	1	Skylar	High School Librarian	Suburb	13
Danielle	High School English	Rural	30	Stacy	Middle School Librarian	Suburb	25
Elly	High School English	Town	18	Talia	High School SPED	Rural	27
Erica	Elementary Counselor	Rural	1	Taylor	BOE	City	16
Greg	Middle School Principal	Rural	33	Tim	Superintendent	Town	20
Haley	High School English	Rural	3	Trent	Principal	Rural	1
Jeff	Elementary Teacher	Rural	19				

Note. *SPED denotes Special Education. **BOE- Board of Education, ***Librarians are known as Teacher Librarians across the state as they are also responsible for content and skill instruction for the entire school population.

Data Collection

After obtaining institutional review board permission, the researcher recruited educators and board members from the state. Then, after acquiring consent, the researcher and the participant

engaged in a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to probe for additional clarification to better understand participant perspectives and experiences (Patton et al., 2015). The interview protocol included eight questions ranging from the participant's familiarity with Senate File 496, ways the legislation influenced their practices, and thoughts on the legislation. Interviews took place on zoom and averaged 45 minutes in length. The researcher then saved the zoom-generated transcripts under participant pseudonyms on her encrypted drive to help protect participant privacy and confidentiality. Upon the saving of transcripts, the researcher deleted original audio files and identifiable transcripts. No question directly asked about participant perceptions of school climate; however, this was a clear theme during interviews and data analysis.

Positionality

Researchers have a duty to disclose their positionalities to aid readers in interpreting potential factors and perspectives that can influence a researcher in data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher in this study is a cisgendered woman social science scholar trained in educational leadership and policy with a background in social studies secondary education. She holds a constructivist epistemology and believes in public education's power to address equity gaps while enhancing the overall well-being of all. While she has taught in many states and resided in Iowa at the time of writing, she has not spent time as a K-12 teacher in Iowa, thus her observations stem from an outsider's perspective.

Data Analysis

For this study, the researcher utilized Stake's (1995) four step data analysis to examine ways educators and school board members in Iowa felt Senate File 496 influenced school climate. The researcher conducted the analysis through Martinsone et al.'s (2023) conceptual framework of SPPSC. Stake's (1995) data analysis includes (1) direct interpretations, (2) categorical aggregations, (3) pattern recognition, and (4) naturalistic generalizations. During the first step the researcher generates codes reflecting participant words. During categorical aggregation, the researcher transposes these codes into prefatory themes. For example for the first theme, codes included "can't talk to students," "no check-ins", and "can't know my kids." For the second theme codes included "policies around parent participation," "community reviews v educational best-practices," "different parental values," and "challenge educator autonomy." The third theme consisted of codes such as "silencing of identity," "reduce equity in public schools," and "detriment of students." During the third step, these themes are cultivated into more precise themes before the researcher clarifies the themes to broadly represent the data during naturalistic generalizations.

Trustworthiness

Researchers must strive to ensure trustworthiness by engaging in credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher ensured credibility through cross-case examination to discover patterns across participants. Then, the researcher engaged transferability by providing thick, rich descriptions in participant voice. Dependability was ensured as the researcher engaged in reflexivity and bracketing throughout the research

process. Additionally, the researcher allowed for confirmability by validating themes during all stages of data analysis and through member checking to ensure the text reflected participant words and perspectives.

Limitations

As with all research, this study has limitations that must be addressed to assist with the interpretation of the findings. First, not all participants were able or willing to engage in member checking. Second, many potential participants privately emailed the researcher on their personal email stating an interest in participation, but an overarching fear of losing their job if they participated, therefore, there is a chance and subset of perspectives is not represented in the study. Also, the researcher at times avoided direct participant quotes to ensure the general meaning held, while removing identifying information to protect participant anonymity. Moreover, this study offers board of education perspectives but they do not make up a large portion of the sample. Additionally, a majority of participants represent the secondary perspective. While there is less on the primary perspectives, participants shared they felt this was because puberty often happens during student secondary years. Finally, the researcher has never taught in the Iowa K-12 school system.

Findings

This instrumental case-study examined the way 35 educators and school board members across the state of Iowa perceive Senate File 496 influenced school climate using Martinsone et al.'s (2023) SPPSC. The key findings to emerge from the analysis were participants felt Senate File 496 weakened relationships in schools, challenged school cultural congruity, and systematically reduced inclusion.

Weakened Relationships

The first theme was Senate File 496 weakened relationships in schools. Relationships are a key part of fostering school climate (Martinsone et al., 2023). Participants noted weakened relationships between educators and students as well as educators and the broader school community. The educators in the study spoke of an abrupt change in ways they were allowed to communicate with students. As Haley, a high school English teacher, noted;

All of a sudden, we're not supposed to like, talk about mental health, like it's like a bad word. You can't like, ask kids how they're doing and it's so important. I do a bell ringer with my kids every day, and sometimes it's just like, 'How are you feeling today' and stuff like that. And I had like after I did it, I didn't even think about it the first time I did. I was like, Am I going to get like, fired? Am I going to be in trouble, like all these things.

Participants lamented the banning of mental health screeners as this was implemented across many districts as a check-in ban, which are key to relationship building (Martinsone et al., 2023). As Anastasia, a high school English teacher who could no longer check in with students or teach traditional texts such as *Anne Frank* bemoaned, "My work is now illegal." Meryl, a high school special education teacher expressed her concerns regarding students; "If we can't ask students if they're okay or not, that's not okay." As Stacy, a middle school librarian said, 'It's a slap in the face to us professionally.' Educators could not understand how this legislation was supposed to

promote positive school climates, and this messaging was compounded from vague legislation and leaders lacking clear guidelines.

However, for some educators, such as Alexis, an elementary special education teacher, their ability to support student social emotional learning was not restricted because she worked with students with individualized education plans. Alexis shared “my role really involves providing a lot of intensive social emotional support and providing that intervention, so the students are able to be successful with the academic portion of things.” She was deeply grateful that she had not been restricted in her practice because of the importance of social emotional learning on academic achievement and relationship building, a cornerstone of SPPSC (Martinsone et al., 2023). Meanwhile, Danielle, a high school English teacher shared her ability to get to know students and foster strong relationships was also limited. She disclosed; “I did send a survey out to the students to find out what snacks they like to eat. And then afterwards, I'm like, I don't think I can do that” because of the ban on screeners, reflecting another barrier to promoting SPPSC in schools as a result of Senate File 496. These experiences speak to extensive limitations in promoting school climate.

Many educators spoke to ways Senate File 496 targeted relationships specifically for LGBTQ+ students. Claire, a school board member, articulated concerns specifically for LGBTQ+ students when she reflected;

It [Senate File 496] exceeds what a public school district should be. It's so restrictive. It places teachers in very difficult situations. If a child is in a home situation that is not receptive to speaking about gender identity and if they are in a family that is not open about those issues open and that child has very little outside support, this is very a very bad situation. It removes that feeling that this is a safe place now.

Claire's observation acknowledges the importance of healthy relationships in schools for students to be themselves and the dangers of removing these relationships for students. Similarly, Taylor, a school board member, ran on a non-partisan platform to promote positive school climates and school safety. She recalled;

When people would ask about trans or queer kids and I would say, “you know what, my background is always going to come back to the mental health side of it.” I'm like, “my priority for those kids is they are safe.” And I would say that they are safe and are they getting the mental health they need, the mental health care they need because of the incidents of depression and anxiety and suicide in those kids.

Clearly the educators in this study note the importance of relationships and student safety in fostering positive school climates.

Moreover, the inability to check in with students limits the ability for students who need help to get the appropriate support as many teachers and the counselors in the study noted. Both Bailey and Maud, middle school counselors, spoke to challenges of speaking with students, as Bailey stated Senate File 496 “created sort of an ethical dilemma for counselors as prior to we only had to share if someone was a risk to themselves or others.” Erica, an elementary counselor extended the dangers of failing to support students in need by sharing, “Unfortunately, we just saw

[reference to Perry school shooting] a response to that [mental health] last week in Iowa when that is not addressed.” Erica’s point notes the importance of healthy relationships in schools and the ability for schools to follow up with students to ensure student safety to promote positive school climate (Martinsone et al., 2023).

At the same time, participants touched on ways Senate File 496 also degraded educator relationships with their local community as well. They spoke of receiving threats from people in their district. Elly, a high school English teacher noted that the legislation did not just influence students when she criticized; “It’s just frustrating because it feels like it’s not about protecting kids. It’s yet another way to, it feels like anyway, another way that the legislation is attacking teachers.” While this sentiment was palpable across participants, some strove to make sense of this. Jeff, an elementary teacher spoke to the strain of complying with Senate File 496 and the ways it limits relationship building saying; “I just am like, this is not worth it. It is not worth my license. You know, I just I, I feel like I have to work so hard at doing the right thing.” As Tim, a superintendent observed there is a general misunderstanding of schools when he shared;

I think the perception out there toward public education, public education specifically is my opinion. Okay, somebody would disagree with this, but it’s being put under attack that we’re not telling people that we’re trying to brainwash students and things like that.

Cindy, a high school librarian, spoke of the challenge between perceptions of schools and what schools actually do when she thought about the book ban. She noted;

They’ve [politicians] been trying to invalidate the credentials and the expertise of teachers across the country, not just in Iowa, but it’s easy for them to understand that, like we have these advanced degrees, but somehow in this case those don’t count.

Avery, a middle school English teacher noticed this as well and sarcastically offered;

Like these [check ins] are things that as teachers we have been trained to do and we know how to do and the state. If the state knows better than they’re welcome to sub for me any day Mrs. Reynolds [Iowa’s governor], you can even take my salary.

Kersten, a high school assistant principal also felt the strain Senate File 496 placed on schools when she said, “I mean, we already have a hard time with retaining teachers now and then you’re going to make it harder.” For many educators in the study, Senate File 496 was degrading their relationships in school and with the broader community to the extent that some were considering leaving the profession. As Brian, a high school science teacher shared;

The way that the state of Iowa is treating public schools, both politically, socially, economically, the rhetoric that the state of Iowa chooses to use around public schools, all of that is playing a role in my decision whether or not to stay

As Trent, a high school principal shared; ‘now we’re making things more challenging on those that have stuck with it or those that are getting into it, you know, jumping on a sinking ship.’ Considering SPPSC’s call for strong relationships as a foundation for positive school climates, Senate File 496 did not enhance relationships in K-12 schools (Martinsone et al., 2023).

Challenged School Cultural Congruity

The next theme was participants felt Senate File 496 challenged school cultural congruity, another key component to positive school climates in SPPSC (Martinsone et al., 2023). At a first

glance it may seem Senate File 496 promoted cultural congruity in schools by fostering parent involvement. For example, Lacie, a board of education member argued it was important for her district to consider the diverse viewpoints of those in the district when making and implementing policies. She shared, “our area is not considered a bubble, we actually have pretty equal representation.” In some districts, this manifested by the creation of community committees. Bri, an elementary special education teacher reported, “if a parent finds a book, they can bring that to the committee and it’ll be removed, or they’ll review it.” Similarly, Rob, a board of education member shared “we have always had policies around parents, and they can opt students out of objectional material.” For some participants, like Talia, a high school special education teacher, Senate File 496 promoted cultural congruity because it gave parents more access to power in schools. Talia felt parents, “have every right to know what’s going on with their child.” By requiring parent permission for screeners and nicknames, and controlling the narrative around LGBTQ+ identities, Talia and others like her felt this better protected students and allowed parents to have more influence in school, thus reflecting school cultural congruity (Martinsone et al., 2023). Also, Christina, a middle school reading teacher felt Senate File 496 increased parent participation in schools; “I think it is also intended to enhance the relationship that the parent has with the school instead of isolating the parents’ relationship with the school.” In this regard, Senate File 496 could work to promote school cultural congruity.

Nevertheless, other participants felt Senate File 496 directly limited school cultural congruity. Penny, a high school special education teacher shared *Persepolis*, a graphic novel depicting life during the Iranian Revolution was removed in her district. Penny wondered;

As for the parents, I thought it was a little overboard. Yeah, there are parts that are sexual and refer to sex, that kind of thing. But it’s a cartoon. It’s not that graphic. You know, one of the pictures that they took she’s listening in by the door and she’s hearing noises.

Penny and other participants worried about the loss of classics and cultural texts in response to concerns of a few parents. Lexi, a high school English teacher shared her district also had to remove *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, because there is a paragraph where he discovers masturbation. Lexi disclosed, “that results in a loss of important cultural texts.” As Bailey put it, “I feel that legislation did a knee jerk reaction to a couple of really radical parents.” Similarly, Ava, a middle school social studies teacher from a different district worried, “all it takes [to remove things] is one angry parent, that’s kind of the reality of education right now.” As Kersten was concerned, “small pockets of ideologies should not influence major education decisions.” By doing so, in accordance with SPPSC, school cultural congruity is diminished (Martinsone et al., 2023). Sarah, a middle school English teacher also noted how Senate File 496 restricted educator autonomy in protecting school cultural congruity when she disclosed;

My first thought, honestly, was kind of indignation like it makes me feel a little bit discredited and insulted as a professional because I feel like my ability to make good choices and instruction and materials is being taken away by people who aren’t necessarily trained in that area either.

Like other educators, Sarah spoke to ways Senate File 496 restricts diversity of teaching and instruction.

Considering the experience of these participants, Senate File 496 then fails to ensure cultural congruity in school by fostering civic participation and parent involvement in school, but instead limits cultural congruity by only addressing the concerns of louder parents (Martinsone et al., 2023). Indeed, not all parents support the legislation. Sam, a high school teacher librarian shared;

I think it's misleading to say that this is a parent's rights bill. I'm a parent. My two kids went K-12 in this school district where I teach, and these are not the things that I as a parent would advocate for my kid. That's not what I want for my kids.

Kim, a high school English teacher went further in addressing cultural congruity in schools equating the limitations of Senate File 496 to that of a control state when she expressed; "If your students are ignorant, we can have another generation of that. And so let's push for that lack of critical thinking, because then we can graduate another round of students that can't think for themselves." Kim went on to say she felt this reflected efforts of the Moms for Liberty and the right to limit the narrative of others in K-12 schools. Cindy and Anastasia also noted the degradation of cultural congruity as parents and community members no longer reach out to the school with concerns, but instead email legislators and carbon copy educators on the email. Thus, it seems that across districts and people's individual opinions there are conflicting perspectives on ways Senate File 496 influenced school cultural congruity.

Systematically Reduced Inclusion

Finally, participants spoke of systematic reduction of equity work in their schools as a result of Senate File 496. According to SPPSC, equity and inclusion efforts are essential for promoting positive school climates and sense of belonging for all students (Martinsone et al., 2023). One concern around inclusion manifested through student access to books. Rebecca, a high school English teacher worried;

By cutting that [books] off for students who don't have the ability to access books outside of their school library because they work or they take care of a younger sibling or their parents can't afford to buy them books or a combination of all of those things, what you're saying is this group of people doesn't deserve the tools to be successful, and there's no way to read. That's aside from intentionally trying even more so to decrease the equity in public education. And boy, it just makes me real, real mad. It just makes me angry.

Additionally, Greg, a middle school assistant principal expressed;

We're trying to create a student that is the best version of him or herself and has all the skills to be able to go out and do whatever it is they want to do it regardless of where they came from, where they live, money and all that.

However, Greg noted that legislation like Senate File 496 makes it much more difficult to support students as they grow and try to understand themselves. Participants in the study felt Senate File 496 reduced access to support for students with mental health issues and LGBTQ+ students not only through the ban on discussion before 7th grade but by requiring permission to use nicknames for students. Participants noted that the legislation was so broad it was unclear if Alexander going by Alex needed parent permission, or if Alexander wanted to be called Alexis because they were gender non-conforming. Ari, a high school English teacher shared; "I think a lot of it targets LGBTQ folks. Especially like the nickname thing. Like really?" Many

participants in the study felt this was a poorly veiled attempt at outing LGBTQ+ students to their families. Cindy shared her district required everyone who had a nickname, regardless of gender expression to get parent permission to ensure that the law was applied equitably. While this effort shows a creative protection of equity in SPPSC (Martinsone et al., 2023), the intent of the legislation was not lost on students.

Indeed, many educators noted an attack on LGBTQ+ students. Amelia, a secondary special education teacher shared;

I do know of one or two individuals that identify in the LGBTQ community, and I know it's very hard for them. There's a lot of small-town views and anything that's a little different, it's not taken well. So, I do worry for those kids in here.

These sentiments were echoed by Maud who lamented; “If you're gay or trans in a rural Iowa school, it's really hard. I think you have to hide even more and you're not going to you're less likely to be accepted for who you are.” Maud expressed that in her role she is no longer able to support LGBTQ+ students in need because of Senate File 496 restrictions, reducing school climate according to SPPSC (Martinsone et al., 2023) when considering Maud’s sense of self-efficacy at school and by restricting equity for LGBTQ+ students in her school. Moreover, Skylar, a high school teacher librarian felt very strongly that Senate File 496 further marginalized LGBTQ+ students; “I think kids who are already marginalized am already at risk for terrible things.” Alexis shared “this is really to the detriment to students.” Kim also spoke to the determinants sharing that “this prevents diversity, which hurts us all.” Across participants in the study, educators felt Senate File 496 directly limited school equity for all students, therefore restricting positive school climates (Martinsone et al., 2023).

Discussion

Martinsone et al.’s (2023) conceptual framework of SPPSC guided this instrumental case study examining ways educators and school board members in Iowa perceived Senate File 496 influenced school climate. This is important as school climate plays a foundational role in student belonging, success, achievement, health, and safety (Charlton et al., 2021; Cohen & Freiberg, 2013; Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; DeAngelis & Lueken, 2019; Thapa et al., 2013). The findings of this study show that educators and board of education members felt Senate File 496 weakened relationships in schools, challenged school cultural congruity, and systematically reduced inclusion across Iowa. This is believed to be the first study examining the influence of “Don’t Say Gay” legislation on school climate and portray a bleak outlook on school climates across the state.

Considering the importance trust and openness for healthy relationships and student sense of belonging and academic success (Bransfield et al., 2019; Charlton et al., 2021; Cohen & Freiberg, 2013; Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; Thapa et al., 2013) it is unsurprising that educators and school board members in the study were concerned that Senate File 496 weakened relationships in schools. The participants in this study spoke of weakened educator-educator, educator-parent, and educator-student relationships, which when viewed through Martinsone et al.’s (2023) SPPSC reflect factors that challenge or reduce perceptions of positive school

climate. The participants referred to how in their district they were unable to build relationships with their students out of fear of losing their jobs, which added to participant stress. As documented in the literature, stress is a predecessor of educator burn out and departure from the field (Brasfield et al., 2019; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Yet, as Flores and Shuls (2024) note, improving school climate and providing classroom autonomy can help with teacher retention, efforts which Senate File 496 prevents. Moreover, the participants voiced the root of their concerns lied in student safety and academic achievement, echoing the importance of relationships on these factors as observed by Thapa et al. (2013) and Darling-Hammond & DePaoli (2020). Perhaps most worrisome was the underlying notion of danger for students, especially those identifying as LGBTQ+ as Senate File 496 restricted healthy and supportive outlets. These sentiments reflect the importance of school climate on student safety as discussed by Henderson (2022), Madireddy & Madireddy (2020), and Pearson & Gill (2023). It was clear many participants in the study felt increased levels of stress because of legislation requiring additional oversight (Brasfield et al., 2019), especially regarding English and library content. This negative stress and teacher wellness further hampers school climate (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Martinsone et al., 2023). Across participants, the reducing of relationships clearly damaged school climate.

School cultural congruity was also challenged by Senate File 496. As mentioned above, cultural congruity reflects the extent to which schools engage with and reflect the broader school community (Weber et al., 2021). Typically, this relates to race/ethnicity compositions of a community, however, considering the largely White population of Iowa (United States Census Bureau, 2021) and the nature of Senate File 496, which targets LGBTQ+ diversity, cultural congruity reflects the extent to which schools engage with and represent LGBTQ+ students and families. At first, when considering Senate File 496 is championed as a parental rights bill (Becker, 2023; Nguyen, 2023; Smart & Elasser, 2023) by providing parents the ability to hold schools accountable for their curriculum and teaching. However, this notion is vehemently misguided as cultural congruity cannot occur when one group of people is promoted or engaged in the schools at the expense of others. With Senate File 496, the views of the conservative right (Waagmeester, 2023; Zhang, 2022) were promoted in schools at the expense of LGBTQ+ students and any efforts for diversity and inclusion. This is especially important to consider as school districts already had systems in place for parents to opt children out of units (Rhen, 2023). Participants in the study spoke of the demoralizing consequences of removing books from schools, restricting curriculum, and silencing LGBTQ+ identities, all of which undoubtedly diminish school climate. In this regard, the findings of this study offer an example of what not to do when considering ways to promote cultural congruity in schools (Martinsone et al., 2023; Weber et al., 2021).

Existing literature extensively documents the positive implications of diversity and inclusion as well as anti-bias policies in schools on school climate (Boske, 2022; Cooper & Casey, 2023; Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2021; Henderson, 2022; Kline et al., 2022; Madireddy & Madireddy, 2020; Pearson & Gill, 2023). While there were some participants who acknowledged their district did little in addressing Senate File 496, the most of participants were deeply

concerned about Senate File 496's influence on school equity, especially efforts which relate to LGBTQ+ students. This is not surprising considering Kline et al.'s (2021) study examining the barriers to LGBTQ+ equity in Florida after Florida passed their own "Don't Say Gay" bill. As Goldberg (2023) noted 16% of LGBTQ+ parents were already moving out of Florida in response to the legislation to keep students safe and Goldberg & Abreu (2023) highlight the compounding factors of marginalizing legislation on already ostracized peoples. While parents have every right to move their families in response to restrictive legislations, this is still a detriment to the broader school community as students lose the ability to learn about diversity and practice anti-bias attitudes, which benefit all peoples in both safety, happiness, and academic achievement. Instead of teaching students how to manage diversity and adversity (Boske, 2022; Henderson, 2022), Senate File 496's empowerment of the far-right revokes student ability to develop independent critical thinking and development of civic minded action (Thapa et al., 2023). Thus, when considering Martinsone et al.'s (2023) SPPSC three key aspects of promoting a positive school climate; (1) relationships, (2) school cultural congruity, and (3) equity, the participants highlighted factors hindering these initiatives instead of efforts to promote a positive school climate in the face of Senate File 496.

Iowa's unique sociopolitical climate has significantly shaped the development and implementation of Senate File 496, contributing to the challenges in maintaining a positive school climate. As one of the most predominantly White and rural states in the nation, Iowa has historically maintained conservative cultural values, which have been reflected in its education policies. Senate File 496, often referred to as "Don't Say Gay" legislation, exemplifies this cultural conservatism by restricting discussions of LGBTQ+ content in K-12 schools (O'Neal, 2023). The law, which allows for penalties against school employees who fail to comply with its restrictions, has created an environment of fear and uncertainty among educators, particularly in rural areas where conservative views dominate local governance (Bleeding Heartland, 2023). These institutional changes have led to a clash between state-imposed regulations and community expectations, with local school board members navigating this complex terrain as they attempt to balance the law with their community's diverse needs (Story Maps, 2023). As a result, the enforcement of Senate File 496 has not only disrupted the relationships and inclusion within schools but also reflects the broader ideological divide within the state, affecting how educators perceive their ability to foster a safe and supportive environment for all students.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Senate File 496 holds implications for policymakers at state and district levels. At the state level, policymakers should find ways to mitigate the negative effects on school climate across the state to protect students' sense of belonging, wellness, safety and achievement. Additionally, through at the time of writing there was a federal injunction around the ban of books and discussion of gender identity and sexual orientation before 7th grade, many participants shared their district was acting as if the legislation was still in effect to prevent constant re-messaging in schools. Therefore, there is a need for policymakers to consider the diverse ways Senate File 496 was implemented across districts to consider creating clearer guidelines to allow for better uniformity

and equity across the state. At the district level, decision makers must cope with the vague nature of Senate File 496 to ensure they are complying.

In practice, Senate File 496 negatively influenced school climate resulting in a breakdown of relationships, school cultural congruity, and equity. Many participants spoke of their own desire to leave the field and/or shared friends of theirs were leaving education as a direct result of this legislation. Therefore, administrators should work to clarify any misinterpretations of Senate File 496 to placate the effects of Senate File 496 on school climate for both students and educators alike. Indeed many federal and state policies offer adaptability in incorporating a policy to the local context, they are not intended to actively marginalize subgroups of students (*Brown v Board of Education*, 1954). Moreover, there is a need to find ways to offer support for LGBTQ+ students and families as well to ensure their safety and feelings of belonging in schools.

Future Research

Future research should consider the ways “Don’t Say Gay” legislation influence educator retention across states. Additionally, the rise of parental rights bills suggest parents are largely unaware of the rights they already have in schools, thus research inquiring what parent perceptions of their rights in K-12 public schools is warranted. Moreover, while Goldberg (2023) offers an initial examination of implications of “Don’t Say Gay” legislation in Florida, comparative studies to understand the nuances in a predominantly rural state is warranted for LGBTQ+ youth and families, as well as the broader K-12 community.

Conclusion

Positive school climates help promote an environment that is safe and healthy for students to learn and grow. Part of this involves learning that there are people who differ and how to manage these differences. Legislation plays a direct role in influencing school climate. Senate File 496 reflects efforts to constrain school initiatives to do these things, while instead promoting a single ideology at the expense of all others. As participants in the study shared, this legislation negatively influenced their school climate and increased feelings of stress and burn out for teachers across the state as they worried about themselves, their practice, and their students.

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