

Importance of Student Social Behavior in the Mission Statements, Personnel Preparation Standards, and Innovation Efforts of State Departments of Education

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We examined the extent to which state departments of education are including (a) goals for student social behavior in their mission statements; (b) criteria for individual student, classroom, and schoolwide behavior support in certification standards for general education teachers, special education teachers, and principals; and (c) state initiatives focused on improving student social behavior. Web-based information from state departments of education from all 50 states and from the District of Columbia were reviewed in the fall of 2004. Results indicated that only 16 states (31%) include a focus on student social behavior in their mission statements. Individual student behavior support practices were identified in the curriculum for general educators in 30 (59%) states and for special educators in 39 (76%) states. Classroom behavior support practices were required for general education teachers in 39 (76%) states and for special educators in 40 (78%) states. Schoolwide behavior support practices were most likely to be required for principal certification, and they were formally identified in 20 (39%) of the states surveyed. Character education was the most common state initiative cited for improving social behavior in schools.

A central assumption of any state department of education (DOE) is that recommendations, guidelines, regulations, laws, and initiatives developed by the state will influence the educational practices available in schools. The mechanisms by which this influence occurs may vary (Thompson & Thurlow, 2001). Stipulating that funding is contingent on monitored compliance with educational practices (e.g., the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 1997; the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEIA], 2004), or making educator licensing contingent on teaching competencies are two common strategies. Increases over the past 20 years in access to special education and in the use of formal assessments for students referred for special education are examples of federal and state policy changes that have affected practice (Thurlow, Lazarus, Thompson, & Morse, 2005; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2000). Initiatives and recommendations with less clearly defined contingencies have a history of less substantive (or durable) impact (Carnine, 1997; Latham, 1988). As the nation continues the ongoing debate about how to educate children, it is appropriate both to monitor patterns of educational policy across states and to better understand how these policies may affect day-to-day educational practices.

Currently, one area where the role of policy may warrant monitoring relates to the relevance, importance, and standards for student social behavior. Establishing a social climate of safety, respect, and responsibility is viewed increasingly as a foundation for achieving the academic gains that are the primary focus of our schools (Colvin, Kame'enui, & Sugai, 1993; Gottfredson, Gottfredson, & Hybl, 1993; Nelson, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2002; Netzel & Eber, 2003). Problem behaviors such as disruption, defiance, aggression, bullying, and property destruction impede the delivery of instruction and the acquisition of core academic content (Walker et al., 1996). Simply put, schools that are effective academic environments typically are also places where (a) students have clear behavioral expectations, (b) appropriate behavior is overtly acknowledged, (c) a continuum of consequences for inappropriate behavior exists, (d) children with more intense behavior support needs get early and appropriate levels of support, and (e) data are collected and used to guide implementation of behavior supports (Colvin & Sugai, 1988; Lewis & Sugai, 1999).

States support federal policy and encourage educational innovation in a number of ways. Primary among these are (a) state department of education mission statements that de-

fine clear goals and outcomes, (b) personnel preparation programs that require mastery of core competencies, and (c) initiatives that facilitate dissemination of evidence-based innovations. The present study examined the extent to which encouragement in recent federal legislation to enhance behavior support in schools is reflected in (a) the mission statements that state departments of education have formulated, (b) state certification programs for teachers and administrators, and (c) states' special initiatives used to enhance current educational practices.

Mission statements organize top educational priorities, guide change, and attract and maintain support for that change (Moldenhauer-Salazar, 2000). Once the top priorities are made clear, these priorities drive state policy regarding school-based practice, organizing activities under a general, valued outcome.

Successful personnel preparation standards reflect the valued outcomes and priorities formulated in the mission statement. If a state values a specific educator competence, it may include requirements regarding that competence in its teacher/administrator certifications, ensuring common experiences that give educators active knowledge of the actions, routines, and procedures that are expected of them to work toward the priority (Grisham-Brown, Collins, & Baird, 2000; Snell, Martin, & Orelove, 1997).

State education initiatives are a strategy by which state departments of education infuse the tools and knowledge needed for implementation of educational innovations. Changing common educational practice to match federal policies is a complex process that demands an active focus for an extended time period (Thurlow et al., 2005). Behavior support is one area in which federal and state systems change efforts are focused. Both the 1997 and 2004 amendments to IDEA require development and delivery of positive behavior support services (Drasgow & Yell, 2002; Wilcox, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 1999–2000). For schools to adopt new and more effective practices, it is reasonable for states to invest in local innovation efforts that allow adaptation to local contexts, deliver support for changeover efforts, and provide efficient access to the new material and approaches needed to improve student outcomes (Freeman et al., 2005; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Louis & Miles, 1990).

Purpose of the State Survey

The present study sought to document the extent to which existing state policies encourage evidence-based behavior support practices in schools. The three specific research questions were as follows:

1. Do state mission statements include student social behavior as one of their identified educational outcomes?
2. Do state personnel preparation standards for (a) general education teachers, (b) special education teachers, and (c) principals require mastery of (1) schoolwide behavior support practices, (2) classroom behavior support practices, and (3) individual student behavior support practices?
3. Are states investing in statewide initiatives that will assist teachers to improve students' social behaviors?

Method

Participants

The DOEs for each state in the United States and the District of Columbia ($N = 51$) were included in the analysis. Responding to recommendations from state directors of special education, data were gathered directly from state Web sites. Information of varying specificity and breadth was successfully gathered from all 50 states and DC.

Measurement

The study was organized around a survey of published literature provided electronically by the U.S. Department of Education for each of the 51 states and territories in the country. The ASSEMBLI (Annual State Survey of Educational Missions for Behavior Support in Licensing and Initiatives) survey was used as a data-collection instrument (see Note). The survey has three major headings focused on (a) mission statements, (b) certification requirements, and (c) statewide initiatives. The major heading of "certification" contains three subheadings: (1) regular education teacher, (2) special education teacher, and (3) administrator. Subordinate to each of these subheadings are the individual, classroom, and schoolwide categories of behavior support.

Procedure

The ASSEMBLI survey was conducted by the first author between June 1, 2004, and October 31, 2004. Due to the large amount of information available on Web sites, once the appropriate Web pages were found, the keywords *positive*, *management*, *climate*, *social*, and *behavior* were used to locate evidence of emphasis on behavior support. To ensure that no information was missed, the first author sent e-mails to the Webmaster of each Web site, as well as to the appropriate staff member from the DOE, to request further guidance in finding the desired information.

State policy guidelines located on the Web were screened for (a) mission statements, (b) certification require-

ments, and (c) statewide initiatives. The search terms used to find the certification-specific Web pages were *certification, standards, regulations, requirements, credentials, and licensure*. To find Web pages related to initiatives, we used the search terms *initiatives, curriculum, partnerships, state improvement grants, funding, proposals, and grants*. (Please note that “state” here includes Washington, DC.)

Mission statement was used as an umbrella term for any DOE statement with the heading “mission statement, vision statement, or goal statement.” Mission statements were defined as including student social behavior as a core element if they included any reference to student behavior, character education, or citizenship.

Certification program curricula and requirements were examined for elementary (K–6) principals, elementary general education teachers, and elementary special education teachers. A program was scored as including information about *schoolwide* behavior support if the curriculum or requirements included any reference to whole-school behavior support or schoolwide discipline. A program was scored as including information about *classroom* behavior support if the curriculum or requirements included reference to classroom behavior management or classroom management practices. A program was scored as including information about *individual* student behavior support if the curriculum or requirements listed information about behavior support planning, individualized behavior support, functional behavioral assessment, or individual interventions.

State initiatives in the form of special education grants, state improvement grants, professional development plans, and statewide curricula also were examined. A state was scored as including an initiative focused on behavior support for students if the Web site listed any initiative addressing positive behavior support, character education, classroom management, or other professional development or support systems for student social behavior.

Interobserver Agreement

A second investigator examined the hard copy of results from each of the state Web searches and independently scored (a) each mission statement as including or not including social behavior of students as a priority and (b) each personnel preparation curriculum as including or not including (1) schoolwide behavior support, (2) classroom behavior support, and/or (3) individual student behavior support.

The scores from the second investigator were compared with those of the first author. An agreement was defined as both investigators scoring the state exactly the same. The interobserver agreement was calculated by dividing the number of agreements by 51 and multiplying by 100%. Interobserver agreement on mission statements was 100%. Interobserver agreement on the content of personnel preparation programs was 97%.

Results

Mission Statement

The question “Do state mission statements include student social behavior as one of their identified educational outcomes?” was addressed by examining the mission statements of 50 states and the District of Columbia. A mission, vision, or goal statement was found for each of the 51 DOEs. Of the 51 mission statements, 16 contained language regarding student social behavior. Many of the mission statements focused solely on academic goals. The Arizona DOE, for example, sums up its only statewide priority succinctly, “To ensure academic excellence for all students.” The West Virginia DOE, on the other hand, includes social behavior in its vision for students; one of the three main goals is that “all students and school personnel shall develop and promote responsibility, citizenship, strong character and healthful living.” The most common mode of talking about student behavior implicitly was as “citizenship”—in terms of students growing up to be good citizens of the state and the world, as exemplified by the mission statement of the Hawaii DOE: “All public school students [are] to acquire the knowledge, skills, respect for learning and attributes necessary for life-long learning and productive and responsible citizenship.”

Certification

The ASSEMBLI focused on certification requirements for elementary-school general education and special education teachers, as well as elementary-school principals. The certification requirements or guidelines were further broken down into the three levels of behavior support needed in schools: individual, classroom, and schoolwide. We found that 96% of states require that teachers and principals in their elementary schools develop competencies to support student social behavior in some way, at the individual, classroom, or schoolwide level. Classroom behavior support is often labeled as *classroom management*—how the classroom is managed so that students may spend the maximum amount of time engaged in learning. A teacher’s classroom management style may affect student achievement as much as the student’s aptitude for learning (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997). Individual behavior support is intense function-based support to meet student-specific behavioral needs (Crone & Horner, 2003). Schoolwide behavior support refers to the school’s systems and practices to prevent and minimize the number of behavioral incidents (Lewis & Sugai, 1999).

We found behavior competency requirements for general educators in 42 states (82%), for special educators in 46 states (88%), and for elementary-school administrators in 26 states (51%). Many states required behavior support competencies in one area (i.e., classroom), but not another. General educator certification and licensure standards contained

TABLE 1. States Specifying Knowledge in Individual Student, Classroom, and Schoolwide Behavior Support as Certification Requirements for Elementary Administrators, Elementary General Education Teachers, and Elementary Special-Education Teachers

Elementary school position	Individual student	Classroom	Schoolwide
Administrators	9 (18%)	9 (18%)	20 (39%)
General education teachers	30 (59%)	39 (76%)	2 (4%)
Special education teachers	39 (76%)	40 (78%)	3 (6%)

statements about supporting individual student behaviors in 30 states, classroom behavior in 39 states, and schoolwide behavior in 2 states. Special educators had social behavior requirements at the individual level, classroom level, and schoolwide level in 39, 40, and 3 states, respectively. We also examined, when available, behavioral competency standards for elementary-school principals at the individual, classroom, and schoolwide level: 9, 9, and 20 states, respectively. Table 1 summarizes the frequency and percentage of states that had statements for each behavioral competency in each administrative category.

Extensive diversity exists in educator behavior support requirements. A classroom support standard that was found somewhat frequently was a requirement for “classroom management” coursework; 8 states required coursework in the area of classroom support. A clear and concise example of a classroom behavior support requirement comes from Colorado: “[The teacher should have] knowledge of classroom management [and] apply appropriate intervention strategies and practices to create a successful learning environment.” Colorado policy decision-makers demonstrate a concern for how classroom management knowledge might be applied in classrooms. Colorado’s requirement applied to both special and regular educators. Elementary-school principals in Colorado are expected to be “knowledgeable about the design of a positive learning environment focused on state achievement and characterized by appropriate and acceptable standards of student conduct and effective behavior management strategies.”

Student social competence may not be a top priority for some states at the present time, but most states consider knowledge of managing or supporting student behavior to be important for teachers. Classroom support received slightly more emphasis in state requirements than did individual behavior support: 40 states (78%) had regulations regarding classroom management for special educators and regular educators combined, compared to 35 states (69%) for individual behavior management. Courses in classroom management are the most straightforward way to ensure that teachers have the skills to direct and manage their students; 9 states (18%) specifically required behavior or classroom management coursework for their general education teachers, whereas 7 states (14%) required classroom management coursework for special education teachers. The most popular language regarding classroom

management requirements spoke of the *principles* and *theories* of classroom or behavior management.

Schoolwide behavior support received much less emphasis in general educator and special educator requirements (2 [4%] and 3 [6%] states, respectively); not surprisingly, principals were most likely to be expected to have the capacity to support schoolwide behavior much more often (20 states [39%]) than their teaching counterparts. Although principals are expected to support school personnel in their classroom instruction, their main responsibility is to ensure that the school, as a whole, has a positive climate and is running smoothly. Student behavior is an outcome of the climate and inappropriate student behavior can negatively affect day-to-day operations.

Compared to general educators, more states had behavior support requirements for special educators. Individual behavior management requirements, for example, were defined in 39 states (75%) for special educators, as compared to 30 states (59%) for general educators.

Initiatives

Are states investing in statewide initiatives that will assist teachers and administrators to improve students’ social behaviors? We found that 35 states (67%) listed some type of large-scale initiative focused on student behavior. Some states had more than one behavior support initiative, and in these cases, all initiatives were recorded. Table 2 contains the list of initiatives targeting behavior support that were found in more than one state.

Discussion

State Policies

Taken together, the results do not argue for a strong state policy commitment to behavior support in schools. Only 16 (31%) states included a formal commitment to providing children with the social skills needed to be effective members of society. Most states (76+%) expect both general and special education teachers to be skilled in classroom management, and special education teachers are slightly more likely than

TABLE 2. Number of States Implementing Statewide Initiatives That Support Student Behavior

Initiative	Number (%) of states implementing
Character education	13 (25)
School safety/violence prevention/anti-bullying	7 (14)
Positive behavior support (as part of state improvement grant or other initiative)	7 (14)
Professional development in the area of social/emotional/behavioral development	5 (10)
Community/School joint behavior support program	2 (4)

their general education peers to be expected to have skills in individual behavior support. A result that will be interesting to monitor over time is that teachers (both general and special education) are approximately half as likely as administrators to be required to have skills in schoolwide behavior support. It is tempting to speculate about the variables that affect these patterns and to ponder if changes in state mission, certification requirements, or investment in state initiatives will produce change in day-to-day practices in schools. The snapshot provided by the current analysis is consistent with a pattern in which federal mandates, funding, and regulations are most likely to influence state initiatives. There also is some evidence that if a state includes an educational goal in its mission, that goal will be reflected in initiatives and certification criteria. Any functional connection will require assessment of change in state mission statement content, certification requirements, and systems change initiatives over time.

It is likely that educational policies regarding behavior support will continue to evolve in response to emerging research and legislation (e.g., No Child Left Behind, NCLB, 2001; IDEIA, 2004). Both NCLB and IDEIA recognize a need for evidence-based practices that produce a school climate conducive to learning. If mission statements are a valid index, state policy does not currently reflect this commitment. IDEIA states that support activities should:

establish, expand, or increase the scope of behavioral supports and systemic interventions by providing for effective, research-based practices, including . . . training for administrators, teachers, related services personnel, behavioral specialists, and other school staff in positive behavioral interventions and supports, behavioral intervention planning, and classroom and student management techniques. (§ 665[b][1][B])

This section of IDEIA clarifies that states should make student social competence a priority in teacher training, licen-

sure regulations, and statewide programs that support teachers.

Systematic adoption of effective practices does not come easily (Cook, Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003). It seems that a general consensus regarding how to prepare and support educators for the task of improving student social behavior does not yet exist, as considerable variability was found across certification requirements for general educators, special educators, and principals. Now that the federal government has placed a greater emphasis on supporting student social competence, it is the responsibility of states to include student social behavior in their overall mission/goals. The small number (16) of mission statements that contained even minimal mention of social behavior demonstrates that the social behavior of children is not yet a top priority across the nation.

Educators and researchers continue to find that academic success is intrinsically linked to behavioral success (Colvin & Fernandez, 2000; Kern, Choutka, & Sokol, 2002; Witt, VanDerHeyden, & Gilbertson, 2004). When positive behavior supports are used throughout a school, the atmosphere of the school becomes less disruptive and more conducive to learning, thus allowing teachers to spend more time on teaching and less time reacting to problem behaviors (Beach Center, 2005). In addition, evidence now indicates that efforts to establish schoolwide discipline are associated with increases in student time in school (Scott & Barrett, 2004). The more minutes students spend academically engaged, the better their academic outcomes. Schoolwide positive behavior supports can foster engaged learning for students throughout a school (Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005; Nelson et al., 2002); therefore, including a goal regarding student social competence in a mission statement supports the goal of improved academic competence.

We hope to see an increasing number of states make supporting student social behavior one of their top educational priorities. Evidence of this priority will be found in mission statements similar to West Virginia's: "[The] West Virginia Board of Education assures that all students achieve at high levels of academic performance, allow for life-long learning, and develop positive social behaviors to improve the quality of their life." West Virginia's mission statement presents positive social behavior as one of its top three priorities, while keeping a focus on academic performance. Further evidence of states' priority to support student social behavior will be present in states that require principals and regular and special education teachers to be competent in the three areas of behavior support: individual student, classroom, and schoolwide. Finally, evidence that states have made student social behavior a priority will be seen in statewide initiatives that support teachers with ongoing technical assistance, resources (i.e., curriculum materials, release time for training), and data-based monitoring. A statewide declared goal that requires teachers' competency in behavior support and is continually emphasized through training and ongoing support will have a great chance of improving the social health of all students.

Limitations

This survey examined training for teachers and administrators who work with students from kindergarten through sixth grade. At this time, supporting student social behavior is more likely to be emphasized at the elementary-school level, but it is possible that states are also working toward systematically training secondary educators to improve students' behavior. A future survey should examine secondary teacher and secondary principal certification requirements.

Another limitation of this survey is the sole use of Web site information. Per a request from the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), the personnel that would generally be approached from each DOE were not contacted for responses or materials. It is possible that DOE Web sites do not reflect everything that states are doing in regard to social behavior. Many initiatives may not be posted on the Web. As states progress in their use of technology to communicate information to the public, more information will be available on the Web, thus giving a more complete context to our data.

The social behavior of children is an integral part of an effective education. Results from this survey suggest that some states are beginning to reflect policy that values student social behavior in their mission, personnel preparation, and state innovation initiatives. It will be important to follow these policy efforts as they grow over time and are linked to social and academic gains for children.

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NOTE

A copy of the data-collection instrument is available from the first author.

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