



An Analysis of Statewide Anti-bullying Laws Employing the Iowa Safe Schools Law as a Case Study

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Abstract

School bullying is a pervasive social problem that has been linked to severe mental health consequences for students. Though 50 states have adopted anti-bullying policies, research into the effectiveness of these policies has suggested that many such policies are not effective in reducing rates of bullying in schools. This paper aims to identify strategies for policy makers and social workers to reduce bullying in schools. This paper focuses on the Iowa Safe Schools Law as a case study for better understanding the strengths and limitations of statewide anti-bullying laws. Consistent with general evaluations of statewide anti-bullying laws, comparisons of rates of bullying before and after the passage of the Iowa Safe Schools Law reveal no reductions in rates of bullying. Through an examination of the extant academic and popular literature, this analysis identifies several critiques of the policy, namely that such policies infringe upon freedom of expression and that such policies focus on individual behavior modification rather than on changing underlying social norms that contribute to hostile environments. This paper presents several recommendations for advancing the prevention of bullying. Future research should identify underlying factors that render these policies ineffective and common factors of policies that have been found to be more effective. Bullying prevention policies should include funding allocated to these efforts and components that have been empirically linked to reductions in bullying. Social workers hold a key role in advocating for funding for this policy and offering institutional and individual-level interventions to reduce bullying.

Keywords Bullying prevention · Statewide anti-bullying laws · Policy analysis · Education policy

Bullying is a profound social problem that a robust body of literature has linked to severe mental and behavioral health consequences, including depression and suicidality (Brunstein Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007; Espelage & Holt, 2013). Though there is no universally agreed upon definition of bullying, there is some consensus that bullying is a repetitive aggressive behavior that occurs in the context of an imbalance of power, resulting in a dynamic where it is difficult for victims of bullying to defend themselves (Smith, 2016). Several key individual and institutional-level risk factors have been identified. Unsupportive and hostile school climates, including schools that have permissive norms around bullying, have been linked to higher levels of bullying (Acosta et al., 2019; Smith, 2016). Youth who hold stigmatized statuses or deviate from the norms of

their peers, including having a physical or mental disability or mental illness, such as depression, experiencing obesity, or belonging to an ethnic or linguistic minority group the LGBTQ community, are at greater risk for experiencing bullying in schools (Graham, 2016; Smith, 2016). Youth who generally exhibit aggressive behaviors, low impulse control, and low empathy and who experience aggression in their homes are more likely to perpetrate bullying (Farrington & Baldry, 2010; Smith, 2016).

Many studies have documented the pervasiveness of bullying in schools. A national, general survey of students found that, overall, nearly 50% of students in grades 4–12 reported having experienced bullying and 71% reported having witnessed bullying (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). Youth with marginalized identities, particularly lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth experience particularly high rates of bullying. According to the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network's (GLSEN, 2013) report on school climates: 74% of LGBTQ students experienced harassment at school in the

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past year, 55% felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and 30% skipped a day of school in the past month because of feeling unsafe.

Statewide anti-bullying laws are a common response to the problem of bullying. As of 2017, all 50 states have adopted anti-bullying laws for their schools (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). The first statewide anti-bullying legislation was passed by the state of Georgia in 2009 in response to the Columbine shooting (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Between 1999 and 2010, state legislatures enacted more than 120 bills targeted toward preventing and responding to bullying (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Over the last decade, stories of youth taking their lives after experiencing horrific bullying in schools has captured widespread media attention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Though anti-bullying initiatives have been passed under a range of rationale (including improving academic performance of marginalized youth; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005) and reducing rates of depression among students (Klomek et al., 2011), suicidality has become a dominant social ill that anti-bullying policies have set out to rectify (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). A string of bullying-related suicides of LGBTQ individuals in 2010 renewed the focus on the relationship between bullying and suicide and the commitment to addressing this issue; that year, 21 additional laws passed in states across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

There is tremendous variation in these statewide laws and how they conceptualize and address bullying. Some policies require education programs for faculty and students, whereby others merely require the existence of a reporting mechanism for bullying (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Some policies enumerate protected classes of individuals, while others do not. Definitions of bullying vary widely across policies. One of the most critical distinctions is that of the 46 states that had anti-bullying laws in 2011, 36 states had laws that include cyberbullying as a form of bullying to be addressed by school policies, whereas the remaining 10 states did not have such a component (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). These policies also vary in terms of how they propose bullying be addressed; some policies encourage or require the provision of mental health services for victims and perpetrators of bullying, whereas others do not (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). For detailed information about each state's anti-bullying policy, please visit: <https://www.stopbullying.gov/resources/laws>; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019).

An analysis of more than 40 statewide anti-bullying laws found minimal impact of these laws (Kueny & Zirkel, 2012). This study found that most laws, failed to address cultural factors within the school and provide accountability for

enforcing anti-bullying laws. The authors argued that these two missing components led to the inefficacy of these laws.

There are no federal laws that explicitly prohibit school bullying or cyber-bullying (McCallion & Feder, 2013). In some cases, bullying may be prohibited by certain federal civil rights laws. For instance, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability; Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex (McCallion & Feder, 2013). Despite federal efforts to raise awareness of these policies, many educators and school administrators are unfamiliar with these laws and how they apply to school bullying (McCallion & Feder, 2013).

Despite considerable efforts to reduce school bullying, school bullying remains a pervasive problem in schools across the country, disproportionately affecting members of marginalized communities. The mental health consequences of bullying are severe and include depression and suicide (Brunstein Klomek et al., 2007; Espelage & Holt, 2013). This study employs the Iowa Safe Schools Law as a case study, drawing upon empirical evaluation studies to establish effectiveness of the law for the general population of students and LGBTQ students in Iowa, and incorporating critiques of this law and similar policies to identify implications for policy and social work practice across the social ecology (Berry, 1995). It is the hope of the author that such implications can inform bullying prevention efforts in the state of Iowa, and though not explicitly generalizable, perhaps hold relevance for reducing bullying and its consequences in states, particularly under-researched rural states, that hold similar policies.

Methods

Case Study: Iowa Safe Schools Law

This paper will focus on the "Iowa Safe Schools Law," a portion of *Iowa Code 280: Uniform School Requirements* focused on addressing bullying in schools. This policy was selected because despite considerable variation in policies across states, this policy is fairly representative of many policies nationally with its focus on requiring schools to have a policy prohibiting bullying that details procedures for reporting and investigating instances of bullying (Iowa Code 280.28, 2019). This policy is also particularly desirable for exploration because it was implemented in a rural state, a crucial gap when a considerable portion of education research focuses on urban environments (Nielsen, Haun, Kärtner, & Legare, 2017).

The case study method was selected because it provides the opportunity to draw from multiple sources of information, including peer-reviewed policy evaluations, briefings from non-profit organizations, government documents, and popular media coverage to provide a more in-depth analysis of the Iowa Safe Schools Law (Neale & Thapa, 2006). This study followed the case study guidelines proposed by Neale & Thapa (2006), including the identification of relevant stakeholders and data collection processes, drawing from academic search engines (e.g., Google Scholar and ERIC), non-profit organization websites (e.g., Iowa Safe Schools and Iowa Pride Network), government sources (e.g., United States Department of Education, United States Department of Health and Human Services, Iowa Civil Rights Commission, and Iowa Legal Code), and local newspapers (e.g., The Des Moines Register and The Courier). Google was also employed to identify any additional sources that may not have appeared from these more targeted searches; several evaluations of similar policies in other states were conducted to determine if the identified content for the state of Iowa mirrored that of other states (e.g., Sautter Errichetti, 2014). The initial review of these documents was conducted by the author of this study in May 2009, which facilitated the identification of sources, particularly from local media and the now-defunct Iowa Pride Network, an organization which advocated for the policy, that are presently less readily available. To capture policy updates and more recent information, the search was replicated by the author in February 2020. This study was exempt from human subjects review because all analyses were conducted using publicly available documents (e.g., peer-reviewed program evaluations and government reports).

Though this case study primarily focuses on bullying among the general student population of the state of Iowa, some additional attention is given to the effects of this policy on LGBTQ youth. The reasons for the additional focus on LGBTQ youth are threefold: (1) LGBTQ youth are disproportionately impacted by bullying and its consequences, and thus the effectiveness of this policy for this population is particularly crucial and may not be the same as for the general population (GLSEN, 2011); (2) Though LGBTQ youth are not the only marginalized population disproportionately impacted by bullying, more robust data exists for rates of bullying among LGBTQ youth in Iowa in the time frame preceding and following the passage of the Iowa Safe Schools Law than for other marginalized groups (GLSEN, 2011); (3) LGBTQ organizations in Iowa have been particularly active in the passage and implementation of this law, and thus explicitly including the effects of this law for LGBTQ youth may make this analysis particularly useful for existing advocacy efforts (GLBT Youth in Iowa Schools Taskforce, 2007).

Results

This paper will begin by describing the policy. This paper will then discuss the empirical evidence supporting effectiveness of this policy in reducing bullying and discuss common critiques of the policy. This paper will conclude by providing policy recommendations informed by the described evaluation and critiques.

Policy Overview

The “Iowa Safe Schools Law” was passed in 2007 to address the issue of bullying in public and private schools across the state. The policy defines bullying and harassment as:

Any electronic, written, verbal, or physical act or conduct toward a student which is based on any actual or perceived trait or characteristic of the student and which creates an objectively hostile school environment that meets one or more of the following conditions:

1. Places the student in reasonable fear of harm to the student’s person or property.
2. Has a substantially detrimental effect on the student’s physical or mental health.
3. Has the effect of substantially interfering with a student’s academic performance.
4. Has the effect of substantially interfering with the student’s ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or privileges provided by a school (Iowa Code 280.28, 2019).

This policy focuses on bullying as it relates to particular identity categories. The policy defines “trait or characteristic of the student” as including but not limited to “age, color, creed, national origin, race, religion, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical attributes, physical or mental ability or disability, ancestry, political party preference, political belief, socioeconomic status, or familial status” (Iowa Code 280.28, 2019). The policy includes bullying that occurs both on school grounds and through electronic communication (cyberbullying).

Though the policy features several recommendations, the only mandate of the policy is that by September 1, 2007, all accredited schools in the state of Iowa needed to have a policy that:

1. Declares bullying to be against school and state law
2. Defines bullying and harassment in the terms described above

3. Enumerates identity categories that are explicitly protected from bullying
4. Describes general consequences for bullying
5. Includes a procedure for victims of bullying to report their experience and a plan for publicizing this procedure
6. Describes the process of investigation the school will employ in response to reports of bullying (Iowa Code 280.28, 2019)

All schools were required to be certified as compliant with this law by September 1, 2007 or they would lose accreditation with the state (Iowa Civil Rights Commission, 2007). Though not required, the law encourages additional interventions, such as anti-bullying and anti-harassment trainings for faculty and staff that help them to develop the necessary skills to respond to incidents of bullying (Iowa Code 280.28, 2019).

Policy Evaluation

The primary outcome examined through this policy evaluation is rates of bullying before and after the passage of the Iowa Safe Schools Law. Available secondary outcomes, including rates of teacher intervention, levels of formal reporting of bullying following the passage of the law, and barriers to implementation of the law, are also discussed. The outcomes data provides the most direct measurement of the effectiveness of the law, but the secondary outcomes provide valuable information about potential opportunities for targeted corrective intervention detailed further in the discussion section.

A study examining trends in relational (e.g., social exclusion), verbal (e.g., name-calling), physical (e.g., hit, kicked, or shoved), and cyber (e.g., threatening emails or text messages) bullying in Iowa before (2005) and after (2010) the passage of the 2007 Iowa Safe Schools Law employing a survey of students in 6th, 8th, and 11th grades ($n=253,000$) generally found significant increases across these types of bullying: relational ($OR=1.08$; 95% CI 1.05, 1.11), verbal ($OR=1.10$; 95% CI 1.06, 1.13), physical ($OR=1.03$; 95% CI 0.98, 1.08), and cyber ($OR=1.47$; 95% CI 1.38, 1.57) bullying (Ramirez, Ten Eyck, Peek-Asa, Onwuachi-Willig, & Cavanaugh, 2016). These increases in bullying may have been due to the policy raising awareness of bullying and priming students to report bullying at higher levels than they would have previously (Ramirez et al., 2016). This study also found that although teacher intervention reduced odds of bullying by nearly 50%, the odds of teacher intervention decreased by 11% ($OR=0.89$; 95% CI 0.88, 0.90) from the pre-law to post-law periods.

As noted above, LGBTQ students are particularly vulnerable to bullying. A review of survey data of this

subpopulation of students reveals similar findings to the evaluation of the general student body in Iowa. In 2007, prior to the implementation of the Iowa Safe Schools Law, 80% of LGBTQ youth in Iowa reported experiencing verbal harassment, and nearly 40% reported experiencing some form of physical assault targeted toward their sexual orientation (Iowa Pride Network, 2007). In 2011, after the implementation of the law, 80% of LGBTQ youth reported experiencing verbal harassment, and nearly 50% reported experiencing some form of physical assault targeted toward their sexual orientation (GLSEN, 2011).

A report from the Iowa Department of Education publicized by *The Courier* found that less than 2% of students had reported instances of bullying through the channels mandated by the Iowa Safe Schools Law (Wiser, 2011). The Iowa Department of Education Director at the time expressed concern about the level of reporting as these figures contrasted sharply with existing bullying data (Wiser, 2011). The author was unable to locate any more recent reports from the Iowa Department of Education documenting formal reporting rates.

Through a series of semi-structured interviews with school administrators in Iowa, Bruening, Orengo-Aguayo, Onwuachi-Willig, and Ramirez (2018) identified several barriers to implementing the Iowa Safe Schools Law, including limited funding and staff to support implementation and difficulties selecting prevention programs, applying the law's bullying definition during investigations, and understanding the school's jurisdiction for policy enforcement. The study also identified contextual barriers to implementation of the law such as media portrayals of bullying and parental attitudes (Bruening et al., 2018).

Policy Critiques

Comparisons of bullying rates in Iowa before and after the passage of the Iowa Safe Schools Law for both the general student population and LGBTQ students suggest that this law is not reducing the rates of bullying in schools. This section will discuss critiques of this policy, some of which may cast light on its limited effectiveness. Anti-bullying policies have come under scrutiny for a host of reasons. It is important to note that due to a paucity of resources about Iowa Safe Schools Law, many of the critiques discussed below were originally targeted toward other similar policies or anti-bullying policies generally. Given the diversity of these policies, this is a significant limitation of this section. In an effort to provide relevant critiques, this section will only focus on policies germane to Iowa's particular anti-bullying policy.

Critiques of anti-bullying policies have commonly fallen into one of two categories. The first category of critiques is comprised of arguments that assert that policies that forbid

bullying should not exist. These arguments generally claim that such policies restrict freedom or promote indoctrination, and contend that such policies force schools to overstep their appropriate role in young people's lives (Freedom Forum Institute, 2001). The second category of critiques is comprised of arguments that assert that these policies either do not go far enough or are misguided in their approach of focusing on sanctioning the bully. These arguments generally claim that anti-bullying policies are important but these policies should include alternative approaches to combating bullying, such as working to change school climates and norms through interventions like training staff and students about bullying (Freedom Forum Institute, 2001).

Of the first category of critiques, perhaps the most common is that these policies infringe on students' right to freedom of speech (McCallion & Feder, 2013). One First Amendment rights organization wrote: "While few would criticize an attempt to encourage civility, some schools may have gone too far in adopting harassment policies that forbid uncivil remarks" (Freedom Forum Institute, 2001). This argument does have the support of legal precedent. In *Saxe v. State College Area School District*, the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals struck down a Pennsylvania school district's anti-bullying policy (Freedom Forum Institute, 2001) on the basis that this policy violated students' Constitutional rights "by prohibiting disparaging speech directed at a person's 'values'" (Freedom Forum Institute, 2001). The court claimed that this "policy strikes at the heart of moral and political discourse—the lifeblood of constitutional self-government (and democratic education) and the core concern of the First Amendment," (Freedom Forum Institute, 2001). The court advanced that this restriction of freedom of expression could not be justified under the substantial-disruption standard of *Tinker v. Des Moines Freedom Forum Institute*, 2001). In other words, since "disparaging of values" does not inherently result in a substantial disruption (which, according to the Supreme Court case of *Tinker v. Des Moines* is one criterion upon which a student's first amendment rights can be infringed upon), the policy violated the verdict of the court case and was deemed Unconstitutional. This critique is relevant to the Iowa Safe Schools Law as this policy protects students from bullying based on their "political belief" (Iowa Code 280.28, 2019). Political belief is very similar to values, and thus prohibiting bullying based on political belief could potentially be dismissed on a similar basis.

To exacerbate the concern of infringement of freedom of speech, of the states that have anti-bullying laws "none distinguishes between legitimate rights of free speech and bullying behavior" (Greene, 2006, p. 65). This lack of distinction makes enforcement of these policies difficult because those in charge of discipline are left to make the distinction between harassment and free expression. This can

have multiple implications. Firstly, cautious educators may dismiss harassment as freedom of speech in order to avoid lawsuits. Secondly, especially for students with morally controversial identities who are particularly vulnerable to harassment (such as LGBTQ students), educators may use the freedom of speech argument to justify failing to intervene.

Another common critique of anti-bullying laws is that they turn social problems into legal problems and fail to address them effectively. One approach to this argument is that the government simply cannot or should not attempt to bring about moral change. As one critic of anti-bullying policies wrote:

Aristotle, the most influential thinker in the history of the Western world, advocated for good government and for providing maximum rights to people. Yet even he knew, "The one thing that no state or government can do, no matter how good it is, is to make its citizens morally virtuous." But this is precisely what the anti-bully movement is trying to do - guarantee our children a life surrounded by morally virtuous people (Kalman, 2005).

This common criticism of anti-bullying policies states that these policies try to legislate morality, which many individuals believe cannot be done.

Though this critique has merits, it is not without flaws. On one hand, the Iowa Safe Schools Law does restrict behavior on what some might argue is a moral basis. On the other hand, one could argue that restricting a particular behavior is not equivalent to attempting to produce "morally virtuous people." Furthermore, the law states that "a safe and civil school environment is necessary for students to learn and achieve at high academic levels" and that restricting bullying is necessary for schools to perform their required function for all students (Iowa Code 280.28, 2019). By this argument, the anti-bullying law was enacted pragmatic, not moral, grounds.

Another criticism of anti-bullying policies is that they focus too narrowly on the behavior of the bully rather than intervening upon broader community norms. This criticism falls under the second category of critiques. Anti-bullying measures, such as the one implemented in Iowa, focus on reducing acts of verbal and physical harassment and assault. Few, if any, of the statewide policies "focus attention on the underlying norms that produce or facilitate the hostile environment in which such behaviors occur" (Greene, 2006, p. 66). No shortage of discriminatory norms exists in schools and some have been legally challenged. For example, at the federal level, in the 1980 Supreme Court Case *Fricke v. Lynch* the court ruled in favor of a Rhode Island gay high school senior who was denied admission to prom with his same-sex date (Szalacha, 2003). While this overt illustration of heterosexism was legally condemned, many norms remain

unchallenged. This is significant because, as demonstrated in a study of the long-term impact of anti-bullying policies, some interventions, particularly interventions initiated at the school (not the state) level, were effective in reducing direct bullying, but these interventions were not effective in reducing less overt bullying, such as peer ostracism, exclusionary tactics, and negative rumors (Greene, 2006). Many activists believe the purpose of anti-bullying policies is more than simply reducing rate of active bullying in schools. They contend that these policies are a critical piece in ensuring social inclusion for marginalized students (Iowa Pride Network, 2009). If the purpose of anti-bullying policies is more broadly defined as promoting social inclusion and acceptance, the current policies that are being employed are falling short.

Another concern of focusing specifically on the behavior of the bully is that it fails to address the broader school environment. This failure to address the broader school environment takes several forms. Firstly, while many states, including Iowa, include the phrase “hostile environment” in their policies (Iowa Code 280.28, 2019), most statewide policies fail to identify proper protocols for addressing hostile environments (Greene, 2006). Iowa’s Safe Schools Law defines a “hostile school environment,” but it does not provide guidance in addressing the underlying cultural components that contribute to hostile environments. Failure to address a hostile environment results in problems that are similar to ignoring the norms of bullying; while it targets direct acts of bullying and harassment, it fails to prevent more subtle exclusionary tactics (Greene, 2006). Secondly, this policy encourages supplemental training and curriculum but does not actually allocate resources to improve the enforcement of these policies or support intervention from school employees or students or require such programming (Iowa Code 280.28, 2019; Sautter Errichetti, 2014). A final critique of statewide anti-bullying laws, which included Iowa’s law, is that there is no monitoring of school’s responses to incidents of bullying (Kueny & Zirkel, 2012). Though the law requires schools to have an anti-bullying policy and publicize it, the law does not monitor the implementation of these policies or provide support or enforcement of the actual enactment of these policies. Thus, though schools must have these policies, there is little assurance the policies become enacted (Iowa Code 280.28, 2019; Kueny & Zirkel, 2012).

Discussion

Implications

Policy Recommendations

The evaluation and critique of policies like the Iowa Safe School Law provide insights to policy recommendations. The minimal impact of existing statewide policies in reducing rates of bullying indicates that substantial work remains to be done to combat the social problem of bullying. A first step is to conduct further research about how to best address bullying. A starting point for this research is to determine if statewide anti-bullying laws are actually being implemented in schools. The lack of effectiveness of these policies has very different implications depending on whether or not these policies are being implemented. If these policies are being implemented, changes must be made to the policies themselves. If the policies are not being implemented, researchers should explore the barriers to implementation; policymakers should address these barriers, and researchers should assess the policies once they are in effect. The low rates of bullying as reported to school officials (Wiser, 2011) suggests that barriers may exist for students in filing formal reports. Potential sources of these barriers should be explored and solutions should be implemented and evaluated.

As one anti-bullying activist in Iowa claimed, “Without enforcement, the Safe Schools Law is as good as the dusty shelf it sits on” (GLBT Youth in Iowa Schools Taskforce, 2007). A lack of implementation of mandated and suggested program components is likely because there is no funding tied to this policy (Iowa Code 280.28, 2019) and no explicitly defined approach to enforcing the policy at the state level (GLBT Youth in Iowa Schools Taskforce, 2007). Thus enforcement of mandatory policy components and enactment of supplemental initiatives are to only occur “to the extent that funds are available for these purposes” (Iowa Code 280.28, 2019). At present, the Iowa Safe Schools Policy does not have a clear enforcement mechanism. Though schools are required to have an anti-bullying policy on their books and enforce it, there is no clear accountability structure. No one at the state level monitors reports of bullying and ensures that schools follow through on responding to these reports. The policy also does not specify the types of actions schools should take in response to allegations of bullying. Furthermore, the policy does not require schools to enact programs that increase the likelihood of effective responses to bullying, such as training for faculty and students focused on how to engage with victims and perpetrators of bullying.

These shortcomings in implementation and enforcement can be rectified by offering funding to implement the initiative and expanding the state's requirements of its schools. The state of Iowa should conduct random audits to ensure that schools' documented policies are being enforced and specify consequences for schools that are not enforcing the law. The state should also establish minimum consequences of bullying (including both mental health services and disciplinary actions). Enforcement can only be as effective as the efforts to enforce it, and thus the state should require that all faculty and staff receive proper training in how to enforce the policy and respond to bullying. In one study that examined the effectiveness of a bully prevention program, teachers attended training sessions and participated in a support team. The findings indicated the training improved teachers' knowledge of intervention strategies and increased their use of these intervention strategies (Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004). This finding suggests that policies that mandate teacher and faculty training increase enforcement of anti-bullying policies and are more likely to be effective than those that do not.

Though statewide anti-bullying policies have generally found to be ineffective, individual school-level policies are much more likely to be effective (Greene, 2006; Kueny & Zirkel, 2012). Anti-bullying researchers should employ strategies not unlike clinical researchers' common factors analyses to identify what shared aspects of schoolwide policies appear to be working most effectively (and least effectively; Wampold, 2015); if these aspects of schoolwide policies differ markedly from statewide policies, policymakers should modify statewide policies by removing ineffective components and adding effective ones.

Though anti-bullying initiatives have been supported for a range of reasons, mental health has come to be a particularly common justification for these policies. Though the Iowa Safe Schools Law was mostly passed under the justification of improving bullied students' ability to benefit from their education, the original law included "detrimental effects on students' ... mental health" as a primary rationale for the policy (Iowa Code 280.28, 2019). The link between bullying and depression is well established (Klomek et al. 2011), and the connection between bullying and suicide has been thoroughly publicized (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The Centers for Disease Control (2014) identified that both victims and perpetrators of bullying have higher rates of depression and suicidality than students not connected to bullying. Offering mental health services to both the victims and perpetrators has the potential to not only reduce the mental health consequences of being bullied (and hopefully reduce suicidality of victims of bullying) but also prevent bullying (by reducing the mental health challenges that likely lead to bullying).

Staunch proponents of anti-bullying measures, including the Iowa Pride Network, a now disbanded LGBTQ student organization in Iowa that lobbied intensively for the Iowa Safe Schools Law, argue that the function of these policies transcends simply reducing bullying, and that the actual function of these policies is to create social change in the direction of social acceptance and equality of academic and other wellness outcomes (Iowa Pride Network, 2009). If this is accepted as the rationale behind the Iowa Safe Schools Law, then there will need to be substantial alterations to the law. Primarily, the focus needs to shift away from punishing individuals who treat other students badly and toward cultivating a climate of acceptance (Greene, 2006). A curricular program is the most obvious way to promote tolerance in Iowa schools. Curricular programs to reduce bullying have been met with mixed reviews (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). However some effective practices for changing school climate and norms have emerged. The most effective curricular policies include active participation by students (such as role-playing) and occur at more than one grade level (annual academic trainings are much more effective than one-time trainings) (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). The study of active, multi-year programs found an improvement in school culture in terms of acceptance of previously excluded students (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). Therefore, incorporating an evidence-based curricular component into the statewide anti-bullying policy may be a vehicle to change ideas, norms, and environments, which can reduce both overt and covert harassment and social exclusion.

Funding anti-bullying policies may be an essential element to improving the implementation and effectiveness of these policies. Expanding mental health resources, increasing personnel at both the school and state levels to focus on implementation, and offering trainings for faculty and students all require financial resources. Thus if the state of Iowa is to be serious in combating bullying, it needs to invest in the implementation of these initiatives. One study found that anti-bullying initiatives that focus on reducing bullying without offering mental health services and training for staff and students may actually divert funds away from the schools' mental health services and training initiatives (Kueny & Zirkel, 2012). This is particularly problematic because training has been linked to stronger reductions in bullying than punitive policies (Greene, 2006).

This discussion of different approaches to combating bullying and the funding of these initiatives reinforces the arguments made above about the significance of expanding the body of literature about effective anti-bullying initiatives. Merely increasing funding is insufficient to address the issue of bullying; rather funding needs to be increased and then allocated to effective initiatives. Only through understanding the components that constitute effective

programs and directing funds to these programs, can schools reduce bullying.

It is perhaps an irony that the very court case that is most commonly used to refute anti-bullying laws on the grounds of freedom of speech (*Tinker v. Des Moines*), has its origins in Iowa (Freedom Forum Institute, 2001). The Constitutionality of anti-bullying laws is largely unsettled as decisions have emerged from the court system that have favored both sides of this argument (Szalacha, 2003). The most effective way for policies to confront this issue is to include a specific distinction separating harassment from free expression (Greene, 2006). Previous court decisions can be used as a guide for creating this distinction, but it is likely that a precise distinction will need to emerge from the courts themselves. By explicitly defining bullying in a way that complies with first amendment rights, the effectiveness of anti-bullying measures, such as the Iowa Safe Schools Law, will improve in two key ways. Firstly, the policies themselves are less likely to be ruled Unconstitutional and removed from law. Secondly, faculty and staff will likely feel greater freedom to enforce the policies without fear of prosecution for failing to uphold students' Constitutional rights.

The Role of Social Workers

Social work is a diverse field that offers many potential avenues across the social ecology to intervene upon bullying through the mechanisms detailed above (Berry, 1995; Segal, Gerdes, & Steiner, 2009). Social workers who serve as policy advocates can, for instance, advocate for funding to support the implementation of these policies and schoolwide programming. School social workers are perhaps the most obvious members of the profession to support anti-bullying initiatives. At the institutional level, school social workers can facilitate trainings for faculty, staff, and students about effective anti-bullying interventions and monitor the enforcement of these policies (Segal et al., 2009). As noted by Ramirez et al. (2016), facilitating intervention from teachers may be a particularly effective strategy for reducing bullying. Social workers can also facilitate trainings for school administrators, teachers, and other staff clarifying the meaning and mandates of national, state, and local policies that have implications for bullying. This may also be essential as a lack of clarity and understanding about these policies appears to be a significant barrier to implementation (Bruening et al., 2018). At the individual and group levels, school social workers can directly intervene when exposed to bullying, as well as employ clinical tools to address the mental health risk factors and consequences of experiencing bullying as either a perpetrator or victim (Segal et al., 2009).

Limitations

Though this study provides an in-depth examination of a common approach to reducing a profound social problem, bullying in schools, it is not without its limitations. Firstly, this study is limited by the shortcomings of its sources. For instance, the GLSEN reports for rates of anti-LGBTQ bullying in 2007 and 2011 relied on convenience samples of LGBTQ youth that may not generalize to the broader LGBTQ youth population of Iowa. The policy evaluation by Ramirez et al. (2016) was limited by a lack of control group. The increase in reported bullying documented by both of these studies may have been influenced by increased awareness of bullying due to the passage of the Iowa Safe Schools law rather than an increase in actual bullying behavior. This study is also limited by its design. Though this case study may reflect broader trends in statewide bullying laws beyond Iowa, generalizability was not a primary focus of this study and should not be assumed (Neale & Thapa, 2006). Though this review drew on many types of sources to create a robust picture from which to conceptualize the Iowa Safe Schools Law, a systematic review was not conducted as part of this study, and it is possible that important sources were not located (Neale & Thapa, 2006). Due to a shortage of resources about the Iowa Safe Schools Law, many of the critiques discussed were originally targeted toward other similar policies or anti-bullying policies, generally. Despite considerable effort to only focus on critiques that were specifically relevant to the Iowa law, given the diversity of these policies, it is possible that not all critiques were fully applicable to Iowa's law. Lastly, although LGBTQ youth represent a critical marginalized population severely impacted by bullying, they are not the only group of marginalized youth to disproportionately experience bullying and thus the findings about the effects of anti-bullying laws should not be generalized to other populations without further examination.

Conclusion

The Iowa Safe Schools Law serves as a compelling case study of statewide anti-bullying laws because this law is both similar to the laws in many other states, so analysis of it may, with further study, hold some generalizability, but also serves as a description of how statewide anti-bullying laws function in a rural state, a critical gap in the literature. Peer-reviewed policy evaluations, briefings from non-profit organizations, government documents, and popular media coverage provide rich sources of data through which to analyze this law. Though little empirical evidence exists for or against the exact initiatives proposed, particularly when they are mandated by the state, these initiatives are focused on

addressing issues of school climate and culture and more closely resemble empirically-supported initiatives than does the Iowa Safe Schools Law of 2007 (Greene, 2006). This law offers an opportunity to not only expand the arsenal of tools to fight bullying but also creates a chance to gather information about whether or not state-mandated policies focused on school climate have the power to produce a meaningful impact. Hopefully someday in the near future, guided by methodologically rigorous research, Iowa, and states all across the country, will be able to implement laws that effectively curb bullying while protecting students' freedoms, promoting mental health and learning for all.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author has no conflicts of interest.

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