



Navigating Get-Tough and Support-Oriented Philosophies for Improving School Safety: Insights from School Administrators and School Safety Staff

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Abstract

Schools in the United States are increasingly faced with the challenge of navigating two seemingly contradictory approaches to school safety. On the one hand, they attempt to make schools safer by employing get-tough, punishment-oriented policies. On the other hand, schools promote support-oriented policies that seek to address the root causes of students' behavioral issues. Despite considerable advances in research on school safety, little is known about how schools balance the implementation of these two approaches. To address this research gap, we present findings from interviews with school principals, assistant principals, discipline coordinators, police, and district leaders to illustrate how schools navigate the implementation of these competing school safety philosophies. Implications for theory, research, and policy are discussed.

Keywords School safety · Get-tough · Support-oriented · Police · Zero tolerance

Introduction

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, schools increasingly adopted get-tough approaches to improve school safety (Hirschfield, 2008; Hirschfield & Celinska, 2011; Skiba & Knesting, 2001). These efforts, prompted in part by fears of rising youth violence and school shootings, aimed to deter violence and incapacitate violent youth. However, there has been a growing belief among scholars that get-tough efforts may not be as effective, or alone are not as effective, as a more diverse set of strategies (Gardella, 2015; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). For example, scholars and policymakers have

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recognized that supportive approaches, either on their own or alongside get-tough efforts, may also improve school safety (Duncan, 2014; Eden, 2017; Gottfredson, 2017; Stern, 2016a, b; Villalobos & Bohannon, 2017; Watanabe, 2013).

Using both approaches can be a challenge for schools. Get-tough approaches promote punishment for misbehavior, while support-oriented approaches promote rehabilitative interventions. How, then, do schools pursue school safety strategies that can, on the face of it, appear to contradict one another while still providing a safe school environment that promotes learning and other prosocial outcomes? Despite substantial progress in research on school safety strategies, little research exists about how schools navigate the side-by-side implementation of these two philosophies (Gottfredson, 2017; Hirschfield, 2018). To this end, insights drawn from ground-level staff—including school administrators, school police, and other school safety staff—can be especially informative given the role these individuals play in implementing punishment and intervention policies on a day-to-day basis (Villalobos & Bohannon, 2017; Ward & Kupchik, 2009).

Against this backdrop, the goal of this paper is to shed light on how schools navigate and balance seemingly contradictory philosophies or approaches—get-tough, control-oriented approaches, on the one hand, and rehabilitative, support-oriented approaches, on the other hand—to improving school safety. It draws on findings from a process evaluation of a federally-funded school safety intervention. This process evaluation includes interviews with individuals who have first-hand experience with the side-by-side implementation of these two approaches. Specifically, this study examines the following questions: (1) How do schools navigate pursuing two seemingly contradictory approaches toward achieving school safety? (2) How, if at all, does pursuing both approaches help or hinder efforts to promote school safety? (3) What barriers do schools face as they seek to navigate, or balance, efforts to simultaneously pursue get-tough approaches and support-oriented approaches? (4) What can schools do to adopt or implement both approaches in ways that best improve safety? In what follows, we first situate the relevance of this study by describing current debates about school safety in prior research. We also discuss broader shifts in how schools approach safety concerns. Next, we present the study's findings and then discuss its implications for theory, research, and policy.

Background

Get-Tough Approaches to School Safety

Get-tough approaches in school settings are characterized by an intolerance of misbehavior and disruption (Hirschfield, 2008; Kupchik, 2010; Skiba & Losen, 2016). When misbehavior or disruptions occur, this philosophy promotes exclusionary punishment. The rise of the get-tough era in school intervention and sanctioning approaches occurred when fear of juvenile violence was widespread. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, juvenile crime rates increased across the United States (Furdella & Puzanchera, 2015; Skiba, 2013; Snyder, 2012). By the mid-1990s, however, the rates of juvenile crime and violence began to decline (Sickmund & Puzanchera, 2014). Those declines, though, did not alter how schools responded to student misbehavior. Fear of juvenile crime

continued to escalate (Cornell, 2017; Snyder, 2012). As a result, schools continued to rely on get-tough punishments (Kupchik, 2010; Skiba & Losen, 2016).

Among the most prominent get-tough approaches are zero-tolerance policies. These policies mandate exclusionary punishments for serious in-school misbehavior and, under the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, are tied to the receipt of federal funding (Skiba, 2013). They are intended to reduce violence and incapacitate dangerous youth (Hirschfield, 2008; Hirschfield & Celinska, 2011). Schools that use these policies are required to administer predetermined consequences, regardless of any mitigating circumstances (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). These policies originally targeted on-campus weapons possession, but they have since expanded to create consequences for more minor misbehavior such as drug and alcohol possession, smoking, truancy and attendance issues, failing to complete homework, disobedience and disruption, dress code violations, and disrespectful attitudes (Kang-Brown, Trone, Fratello, & Daftary-Kapur, 2013; Skiba & Knesting, 2001; Skiba & Rausch, 2013).

Other get-tough approaches endorsed by school administrators include detentions, suspensions, expulsions, arrests, and referrals to the juvenile justice system (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009; Hirschfield, 2018; Skiba & Losen, 2016). There have been calls for the use of security measures, such as metal detectors and drug-detecting dogs, as well as arming civilian security volunteers and school administrators. Not least, get-tough approaches to school safety have led to an increased presence of police officers on school campuses (Hirschfield, 2018; Hirschfield & Celinska, 2011; Mallett, 2016).

Apart from the additional police officers on campuses, this use of get-tough approaches has required few school resources. The juvenile justice system's need for resources, however, has increased due to what has come to be referred to as the "pipelining" of youth from schools to the juvenile justice system. It is, for example, estimated that school referrals account for almost two-thirds of truancy cases overseen by the juvenile court (Hockenberry & Puzanchera, 2014).

Supporters of get-tough policies have argued that these policies can be part of the solution to creating a safer environment. Supporters suggest that get-tough efforts can increase students' perceptions of their likelihood of getting caught and punished for misbehavior, which can create a general deterrent effect (see, generally, Bishop & Feld, 2012; Gottfredson, 2017). School administrators support the use of on-campus officers for this same reason. Administrators believe that placing police officers on school campuses increases the overall safety of those schools (Brown, 2006; Chrusciel, Wolfe, Hanse, Rojek, & Kaminski, 2015; May, Fessel, & Means, 2004; Myrskog, 2013). Proponents of get-tough policies have also argued that the use of these practices removes problematic students from school campuses, thus creating a safer and more productive environment for the remaining staff and students (see, generally, Kupchik, 2010; Skiba & Rausch, 2013).

There are, though, several get-tough approaches that school staff do not support. In recent surveys, school administrators indicated that they did not favor practices such as arming school staff or using campus metal detectors (Chrusciel et al., 2015; Ewton, 2014). Such findings suggest that these types of get-tough approaches may not be viewed as appropriate or effective in keeping schools safe. They also suggest that administrators do not uniformly favor more punitive measures. Instead, their support may depend on factors such as the perceived effectiveness of a policy.

In a similar vein, research has identified several problems arising from get-tough policies. *First*, there has been a substantial increase in the use of school punishment. For example, suspension rates have increased more than 80% from 1974 to 2012 (Sykes, Piquero, Gioviano, & Pittman, 2015). *Second*, researchers have documented harmful effects associated with suspension, expulsion, and other get-tough policies, including decreased student engagement (Mowen & Manierre, 2015; Wun, 2016), lowered school-wide test scores (Gonzalez, 2015), increased school dropout rates (Fabelo et al., 2011; Nolan & Anyon, 2004), and a greater fear of victimization among students (Bachman, Gunter, & Bakken, 2011; Wilson, 2000). *Third*, researchers have noted racial disparities in the use of suspension and expulsion. Minority students, especially African American youth, are disproportionately likely to be punished under get-tough policies (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Civil Rights Project, 2000; Curran, 2016; Hoffman, 2014; Morris & Perry, 2016). *Finally*, schools, researchers, and policymakers have raised concerns about the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Duncan, 2014; Mallett, 2016; Nance, 2016; Wilson, 2014), which refers to the ways that school-administered punishments increase the likelihood that students will come into contact with the justice system. In fact, researchers have found that exclusionary school discipline is associated with an increased risk of arrest, even after controlling for youths’ actual delinquent behavior (Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014; Mowen & Brent, 2016).

Increased Emphasis on Support-Oriented Approaches to School Safety

These concerns have led to calls from researchers, policymakers, and school administrators to move away from get-tough policies and to incorporate more supportive policies into school safety efforts (Kupchik, Green, & Mowen, 2015; Weingarten, 2015). Support-oriented approaches are categorized by an overarching rehabilitative philosophy (Gottfredson, 2017; Thompson, 2011), and they include restorative justice interventions (Gonzalez, 2012; Gregory, Bell, & Pollock, 2014; International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2014), bullying prevention programs (Ferguson, San Miguel, Kilburn Jr, & Sanchez, 2007; U.S. Department of Justice, 2012), prosocial skills training (Grossman et al., 1997; Hammond, 1991), family-centered therapies (Connell & Dishion, 2008), cognitive-behavioral interventions (Barnes, Smith, & Miller, 2014), conflict resolution training (Bodine, Crawford, & Schrupf, 1996; Schrupf, Crawford, & Bodine, 1997), peer mediation efforts (Furlong, Morrison, Chung, Bates, & Morrison, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 1996), anger management and coping counseling (Lochman, 1992), youth courts programs (Cole & Vasquez-Heilig, 2011), and diversion efforts (Fader, Lockwood, Schall, & Stokes, 2015; Thompson, 2011).

A common element of many support-oriented interventions is a team of practitioners from multiple fields who work together to identify, on a case-by-case basis, the needs of troubled students (Teske, 2011; Thompson, 2011). Within schools, principals, assistant principals, deans over discipline, school police, school resource officers, counselors, and teachers may be involved in these efforts. Successful implementation of these interventions typically places additional work responsibilities on existing school staff or, in some cases, requires additional personnel. The implementation of the interventions also frequently requires collaboration among numerous stakeholders, such as

school administrators, law enforcement, juvenile courts, and community-based service providers (Payne & Welch, 2010; Wilson, 2000).

Despite these issues, there has been a widespread push for schools to use support-oriented approaches to address safety concerns, in part out of concerns about the “pipelining” of youth from schools to the juvenile justice system. For example, in 2010, the United States Department of Education awarded \$38.8 million in Safe and Supportive School grants (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), and the National Institute of Justice has awarded over \$240 million to schools under the Comprehensive School Safety Initiative since 2014 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). These initiatives in part support the implementation and evaluation of support-oriented approaches to school safety and, broadly, aim to develop knowledge about how to improve school safety in ways that do not contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. There also has been support for these approaches among school administrators. Research shows, for example, that school administrators support rehabilitative school safety approaches such as restorative justice programs (Gonzalez, 2012). Indeed, many school administrators and policymakers believe that support-oriented efforts can reduce recidivism, decrease delinquency on campus, improve students’ academic achievement, and improve overall school safety (Gardella, 2015; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012).

There are, however, several concerns about the use of these types of interventions. *First*, although they may be perceived positively by school administrators and policy makers because of their underlying rehabilitative philosophy, many of the policies and programs have not been empirically tested (Gottfredson, 2017; Hirschfield, 2018; Thompson, 2011). *Second*, there may be harmful effects associated with the use of these programs. One of the most well documented harms is net-widening: These practices may increase the number of youth who are closely supervised by schools and, potentially, the courts (Irby, 2014; Mears et al., 2016). *Third*, policies that promote support-oriented over get-tough approaches are not always well received by teachers and parents. Reliance on supportive approaches and reduced use of punitive responses has been perceived by some as a weak response to misbehavior and as contributing to *unsafe* school environments (Stern, 2016a).

Navigating Get-Tough and Support-Oriented Approaches to School Safety

Although many schools now use supportive responses to student misconduct and delinquency, they also invariably continue to rely on punitive responses (Duncan, 2014; Weingarten, 2015; Winter, 2016). Accordingly, researchers and policymakers have recommended that punitive discipline—such as suspensions and expulsions, referrals to the juvenile court, and arrests—be used only as a last resort and only if the student poses a serious threat to safety (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Duncan, 2014; Eden, 2017; Stern, 2016a, b; Villalobos & Bohannon, 2017; Watanabe, 2013).

The extant research on school safety strategies describes and examines the implementation and effectiveness of both punitive and supportive efforts for a range of youth outcomes. However, there has been little scholarly attention to how school staff simultaneously implement both approaches and what additional barriers may hinder efforts to balance the use of these two approaches. Many school districts and school administrators have struggled to find that balance (Gottfredson, 2017; Hirschfield,

2018; Winter, 2016), and this struggle creates situations that may impede efforts to promote school safety. Teachers, for example, may seek punitive or exclusionary responses to student misconduct but encounter resistance from school administrators who may endorse support-oriented interventions. Similarly, school administrators might seek to have a student arrested for on-campus delinquency, but the offense may be so minor that school police are reluctant to make an arrest.

One of the questions that arises when considering the contemporary educational landscape is how schools navigate the simultaneous use of both get-tough and support-oriented approaches to improving school safety. High schools, in particular, appear to face competing mandates: Continue to implement a plethora of get-tough policies while seeking to be, or at least appear to be, more embracing of support-oriented interventions that promote school safety. And they face these mandates while being required to prioritize positive educational outcomes for youth. What remains to be understood is how schools navigate this situation, how they view these approaches, the challenges they face in implementing two seemingly contradictory philosophies, and what schools can do to implement these approaches in a way that best promotes safety.

Data and Methods

The current study addresses these research gaps and, in so doing, seeks to contribute to scholarship on school safety and disciplinary practices. We respond in particular to calls from researchers to generate insights from ground-level views of how best to address school safety (Hirschfield, 2018; Villalobos & Bohannon, 2017; Ward & Kupchik, 2009) by examining how school staff navigate the implementation of diverse school safety approaches and policies.

This study takes advantage of a unique opportunity to leverage data from an ongoing federally-funded process evaluation of a delinquency prevention program implemented in four high schools in one of the nation's largest school districts. These schools have large student populations, are located in urban areas, and are categorized as Title I schools that serve a large number of low-income families and their children. They also have large minority populations, a history of high delinquency rates, and gang-related issues. Like many other schools across the nation, these schools face the difficult challenge of identifying ways to balance the use of two distinct approaches for improving school safety. This challenge is compounded for these schools by being located in a historically progressive school district within a politically conservative state. These schools, then, are ideal for examining how schools attempt to navigate calls to be both tough and supportive in creating safe schools.

For this study, researchers conducted several site visits to the school district during a three-year period. Over the course of the initial visits, researcher observations and discussions with school staff shed light on the issues schools face as they attempt to implement a diverse array of school safety policies. Additional site visits were conducted to focus specifically on this topic. These later visits consisted of face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 21 school safety staff members. Participants included individuals who helped to set, influence, and implement school discipline and safety policies. They consisted of principals, assistant principals, discipline coordinators, and school police officers. In addition, individuals leading district-level alternative education

efforts and the school district's police department, who help to guide the implementation of these policies, were also interviewed. The sample was racially diverse, including respondents who were black, white, and Hispanic, and was comprised of both males and females. There also were multiple individuals who had a longer tenure in schools and were able to provide insights into how school safety strategies have changed over time. (For example, some respondents had worked in schools for several decades.)

The use of semi-structured interview questions allowed researchers to explore the perspectives of on-the-ground staff without limiting or biasing their answers with predetermined response categories (Hirschfield, 2018; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006; Nolan, 2011). To enhance the likelihood that individuals would provide honest and open responses, concentrated efforts were made to maximize privacy and ensure confidentiality (Adams, 2010; Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014). All interviews were conducted with two or more researchers present, and researchers took hand-written notes.

Qualitative researchers recommend reviewing and editing raw notes soon after an interview is conducted when the responses are still fresh in the researcher's memory (Adams, 2010; Patton, 2015). Accordingly, researchers typed and organized their notes in the days following the interviews. Multiple members of the research team reviewed these notes to verify their accuracy. Researchers then coded interview notes for themes across responses. In addition to themes that were anticipated to emerge, several unanticipated themes were identified through the analysis of the interview data. The identified themes were continually refined as new data were analyzed and coded (see, generally, Caudle, 2004). This coding was reviewed and agreed-upon by multiple members of the research team (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). The interview and coding processes were deemed complete once a point of data saturation was reached, or when no new information or themes emerged (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Results

Navigating Seemingly Contradictory Approaches to Achieving School Safety

We first asked respondents which approach to school safety *is* prioritized in their school. In addition, we asked them why they believed the school prioritized that approach. We then asked which approach they believed schools *should* prioritize.

Respondents emphasized that their schools use both punishment-oriented and support-oriented approaches. Many respondents believed that supportive approaches are prioritized in their schools, as evidenced by the availability and use of interventions like counseling, mediation, mentoring, and referrals to outside services. Punishment-oriented approaches are also used. However, they are viewed as more flexible than traditional zero-tolerance policies and are more likely to be used only after support-oriented approaches have been unsuccessful at improving student behavior. One respondent reported, “students get third, fourth, and even fifth chances before they receive punishments.” In many cases, punishment-oriented approaches were only used as a first response in instances of extreme misbehavior, such as a student bringing a weapon to campus. As another respondent stated, in these cases, “schools have to balance one student's needs with the needs of all students. If they are a danger to other students, then they still need to be removed.”

Respondents identified both “feel good” and pragmatic reasons that schools prioritize supportive philosophies. The “feel good reason” is that, as a respondent put it, “we don’t help [students] by kicking them out.” Schools want students to be successful, and they also do not want to contribute to the race- and class-based disenfranchisement that many students face. On a more pragmatic level, schools are judged on school-wide test scores and graduation rates. One principal said that “the goal is to get the student back to class as soon as possible” so that they can prepare for state tests and complete coursework for graduation. Another principal echoed this sentiment: “If they aren’t here, we can’t graduate them.”

Several respondents felt that support-oriented approaches are better than punishment because they address, in the words of the respondents, the “whole child,” the “root problems,” or the “holistic needs” of youth. For example, multiple assistant principals believed that they can help a student succeed if they find out *why* they are skipping class. Many respondents echoed sentiments that the misbehavior of students is rooted in other issues, including what is happening in the student’s home or family life. The troubled students—or the ‘frequent flyers’ that administrators deal with most often—may have greater emotional issues or trauma in their background than the average student. By learning about the student’s background, administrators believed that they can, as one put it, “figure out the why of the behavior” and work to address those causes rather than simply punishing the student for misbehaving. Respondents emphasized that a supportive approach allows the school to understand and address a student’s particular needs and keep them in school.

The individuals interviewed for the study reported that there are several reasons—including high suspension rates, racial disparities in suspension, and lowered academic achievement—that schools should, in their view, stop relying as heavily on punitive approaches. For example, one interviewee stated that excessive punishment can lead to “a school system that runs more like a prison system,” but when schools use supportive efforts “kids will not feel like the school is just out to get them.” Still, respondents felt that punishment-oriented approaches should never be completely abandoned. They indicated that consequences for bad behavior provide structure for youth, and, as one respondent stated, “some at-risk kids need more structure.” Indeed, respondents viewed the use of such behavioral consequences as a way to *support* students. One of the police officers stated that “without discipline, kids cannot learn.” Respondents reported that there is a smaller group of students for whom punishment is necessary, because, as one put it, “if you can’t get through to them, you have to come down with a hammer.”

These individuals also provided several examples of handling student misbehavior with a blend of both supportive and punitive efforts. For example, one assistant principal discussed a homeless student who had been displaying behavioral issues. This principal actively worked to help the student find a place to stay and provided her with money for groceries. However, the student still received school-based consequences for her problem behavior. In other examples, respondents reported referring students for an arrest but also providing a supportive character statement for the student in court. This blending of approaches is also illustrated by specific school practices and policies, such as a youth court operated by the school police, school police turning students over to the school principal instead of arresting them, and the use of graduated sanctions that respond first with support and then, if needed, with punishment.

Participants emphasized that the simultaneous use of both approaches is complementary, not contradictory. They said that these two approaches target separate goals: Support-oriented approaches help to promote student achievement, while punishment-oriented approaches help to promote student safety. Multiple principals noted that optimum student learning cannot occur without first addressing student safety. They therefore rely on both approaches to achieve these goals. Furthermore, they recognized that the punishment-oriented approaches of the past were too reactive in nature. They believed that incorporating support-oriented approaches allows them to be more proactive in identifying and preventing further threats to student safety.

Many respondents recommended continuing to prioritize supportive approaches and only using punishment when necessary. One district officer described this approach as “accountability with love.” In some cases staff members’ responses differed depending on their positions. For example, school administrators consistently favored a mixed approach. The school police, however, tended to have more polarized responses, with some individuals favoring either distinctly support-oriented approaches or distinctly punishment-oriented approaches. Nevertheless, school staff generally agreed that balancing the two approaches on a case-by-case basis has helped their schools to run more effectively than they did in the past.

How Simultaneously Pursuing Get-Tough and Support-Oriented Approaches May Facilitate or Impede School Safety

We asked participants to comment on how pursuing both approaches can help to keep schools safe. We then asked the counterpart—how pursuing both approaches can hinder school safety. Below, we describe the ways in which participants felt that the simultaneous use of both approaches can facilitate and hinder school safety.

How Pursuing both Approaches Can Facilitate School Safety

Respondents identified multiple ways pursuing both supportive and get-tough policies facilitates school safety. The most commonly identified ones included the ability to select from different approaches, to use individualized student plans, and to conserve of resources.

Can Use Multiple Approaches Respondents indicated that having a multi-option approach can help improve the school safety by allowing staff to respond to youth misbehavior in a variety of ways. A consistent belief among respondents was that each student has different needs, and therefore a “one-size-fits-all” approach is less effective. For example, some students may need someone to listen to them and to provide them with structure and support. For these students, talking to administrators about their issues may be enough to reduce misbehavior. Some students may require more targeted supportive interventions. Other students, however, may not want to talk with or listen to administrators, and they may not react to supportive interventions. For these students, staff indicated that they may need to use a firmer, more punitive approach. Respondents believed that having the ability to select from supportive and punitive responses allows staff to address the issues of all students on a case-by-case basis.

Allows for Individualized Student Plans Respondents reported that safety improves when schools have the ability to create individualized plans for students who misbehave. This ability flows directly from having many different intervention options from which to choose. More relevant than the many options, however, was the ability to customize interventions to address each student's individual needs and to do so in a holistic way. For example, when responding to misbehavior, the student's academic standing, attendance, language barriers, cultural differences, home life, and behavioral issues should all be considered. Service plans that build on a diverse array of information help staff make the most appropriate decisions about how to address each student's misbehavior and, in so doing, protect the safety of the school.

Conserves Resources Respondents highlighted that having the option to respond with various approaches depending on the student's needs avoids wasting time and resources, which conserves resources for other efforts that can also improve school safety. For example, if a student has not benefitted from restorative justice programs and continues to misbehave, the respondents would not continue putting the student in such programs. Instead, staff could move on to other interventions or select a more punitive approach. By using the 'right' approach for specific students, schools can more efficiently administer supportive and punitive efforts in ways that better improve safety.

How Pursuing both Approaches Can Impede School Safety

In addition to factors that help improve school safety, respondents identified a number of ways that using both approaches may hinder school safety. Three, in particular, emerged.

Causes Confusion among Staff and Students When schools use both approaches, there may be inconsistency in how staff respond to misbehavior. Respondents felt that there was confusion among some staff members about when to use each approach. Indeed, there are not always formal guidelines to inform staff decision-making, which may lead to inconsistent responses.

Similarly, respondents indicated that using both approaches can create confusion for students. For example, students may not know what type of punishment or supportive services they will receive for any given misbehavior. Some respondents argued that when rules are applied inconsistently, there is no stable structure for students. The mixed messages may encourage rather than discourage misconduct, or it simply may fail to deter it. Either way, the outcome may be more student misbehavior and reduced school safety.

Leads to Perceptions of Unfairness Another hindrance is the lack of transparency in the punishment and support that students receive. When a student misbehaves, they might receive both a punitive and a supportive intervention. However, other students and staff do not always see both responses. Other students and staff may only see the supportive efforts that a student receives and are not always aware of the punishment that accompanied it. As a result, students and staff may view the administration as weak. Some respondents mentioned that this misperception can be especially problematic if a victim perceives that their perpetrator is "getting off easy." Similarly, if a student receives a punitive intervention but sees other students receiving supportive programs,

they may lose respect for administration and view them as unfair. This perception can lead to a loss of moral authority for the school and threaten the school safety. Some assistant principals reported that they have considered providing teachers with more information about the sanctions students receive in an attempt to reduce these misperceptions, but they typically do not do so because they do not want to negatively bias teachers' views of students or violate a student's privacy.

Students Push Boundaries Respondents emphasized that students will push boundaries and break rules if they believe that they will not be suspended or expelled for their misbehavior. One police officer, for example, believed that “suspensions send messages about what [behavior is] acceptable,” and that reducing the use of suspensions may also reduce the salience of these messages about behavioral boundaries. The on-campus presence of rehabilitative services may also signal to students that they will receive support before facing any exclusionary discipline. As a result, students might feel that they can get away with misbehaving numerous times before facing any “real punishment.” This perception can erode the deterrent effects of school rules and responses to misbehavior. It may instead contribute to students engaging in more misconduct, especially when they believe that exclusionary discipline is an unlikely consequence.

Barriers to Simultaneously Pursuing Get-Tough and Support-Oriented Approaches

To further understand the intricacies of navigating both approaches within schools, we asked respondents what factors they believe prevent schools from simultaneously pursuing get-tough and support-oriented philosophies. Several barriers were highlighted by respondents.

Lack of Resources The most common barrier mentioned by respondents is a lack of resources. One principal said that although their staff take the time to get to know their students, “knowing isn't enough. We also need resources to actually help those kids.” First, respondents indicated that there are not enough staff to supervise and assist students. Second, financial resources limit the kinds of services that staff can provide to students. For example, one staff member believed that high-risk students needed more group therapy sessions, but the school did not have the resources to provide these additional sessions. Third, respondents indicated that a lack of time is also a barrier for schools seeking to navigate both approaches. They reported that building relationships with students, which is a necessary component of any support-oriented programming, takes time, and many staff members simply are not able to allocate sufficient time to relationship-building. Fourth, respondents felt that students might be less inclined to improve their behavior when there are few incentives for doing so. Finally, a lack of outside support was highlighted as a barrier to improving school safety. Several principals indicated that having outside resources—such as organizations that provide food for students, trauma-based counseling services, and support for parents—to supplement school-based approaches helps to improve school safety; as one said, “some students' issues are bigger than what the counselors can handle, but it's all that is available to the students because they can't afford outside counseling.” Outside support for the schools could help schools more effectively address these more difficult

cases. Respondents argued that a lack of resources limits the ability of schools to implement supportive approaches, which then forces staff to prioritize punishment more than they otherwise might.

Lack of Student Motivation Another barrier is a lack of student motivation to improve their education, improve their behavior, and protect the school environment. Multiple principals and assistant principals stated that students need internal motivation to see the bigger picture and to understand the importance of their education so that they would adopt behaviors that do not threaten the safety of the school. When students lack this intrinsic motivation, they may be less likely to respond positively to supportive efforts, more likely to fear punitive efforts, and have less trust in school staff. The result, then, is a less safe school environment.

Mindset of Staff Several school police officers and principals indicated that staff are often too “black and white” in their thinking when responding to misbehavior. Staff who understand that there exists a “gray area” for addressing school safety concerns may more effectively navigate the use of both approaches. Respondents felt that training staff to have confidence in schools’ abilities to reform students who have engaged in misconduct, and to prevent misbehavior altogether, is important so that they buy-in to the principal’s vision.

Communication between Administration and Staff Members When staff members fail to collaborate and communicate about school safety issues, inconsistencies in how staff address student misbehavior may emerge. In addition, respondents highlighted that it may be helpful for administrators to better understand how to work with teachers to assist students. For example, it may be important for administrators to know what types of responses to misbehavior teachers expect. When misconduct occurs, knowing whether an apology would suffice or whether a teacher would want more punitive measures to be taken can help guide administrators in navigating the use of both rehabilitative and punitive approaches.

School District Mandates Respondents indicated that school district mandates can be adversely limiting. School staff want to meet district standards. However, sometimes achieving those standards—that they felt often included the use of tougher punishments—may reduce student participation in school activities and academic achievement. School staff indicated that although the district has disciplinary guidelines for them to follow, they sometimes make their own judgements about how to respond to an issue. For example, some of these respondents reported that school police who catch a student with small amounts of marijuana usually decide to turn the student over to school administrators, despite district policies for arresting students for drug possession. School staff also felt that they may push for and use more supportive interventions than the district would like them to apply.

These beliefs did not always align with how district leaders perceived school safety efforts. On the one hand, school district leaders felt that the district prioritized support-oriented programming, but that the schools were more resistant and prioritized punishment approaches. District leaders saw themselves as advocates for youth when the schools were too punitive. On the other hand, school staff often felt that district

mandates could be too punitive and “tie their hands,” so they would “sometimes teeter-totter that line” imposed by the mandates in order to be more supportive for the students. Although respondents from the schools and from the district disagreed about who had driven the shift toward more supportive efforts, they were in agreement that supportive efforts were now more common and that these efforts should be encouraged.

Recommendations for Simultaneously Pursuing Get-Tough and Support-Oriented Approaches to Effectively Improve School Safety

Respondents strongly recommended using both approaches—prioritizing support-oriented approaches while still using punishment-oriented approaches when necessary—as the best way to improve school safety. We asked about their suggestions for other schools that aim to implement both approaches in a similar manner. Respondents made several recommendations.

Implement Concrete Guidelines Although respondents embrace the overarching idea of balancing these approaches, they struggle with how to achieve this balance in practice and, consequently, call for concrete guidelines about how to respond to misconduct. One respondent argued that guidelines would help staff know how to balance the two approaches. The guidelines could be supported by trainings that would inform staff of the policies and provide opportunities to practice handling various scenarios. Furthermore, guidelines would provide students with a clearer understanding of the expectations and consequences for their behavior. One police officer noted that consistent administration of rules helps to provide stability and order, increasing the likelihood that students will follow the rules. At the same time, however, some staff expressed the need for individualized efforts. One police officer, for example, explained that “guidelines do not always work because there is no single solution that can always be followed. It needs to be a case-by-case thing.”

It may seem contradictory to want both an individualized approach and stricter guidelines for addressing misbehavior. One respondent suggested, however, that there was no contradiction and that schools could provide flexible guidelines with a range of responses to address common kinds of misbehavior. In short, they recommended a matrix of discipline options. The flexibility of these guidelines would allow for individualized responses to student misbehavior while also creating more consistency in responses to common types of disciplinary problems.

Establish Effective Leadership Respondents felt that an effective leader is one who believes in supporting students and who will be able to establish a school culture that supports this goal: One respondent noted that “the principal leads a lot of the decisions about how to handle students.” To set the tone for their schools, respondents stated that principals must communicate their vision clearly to staff, incorporate staff needs and feedback, and show staff that they are not ‘fazed’ by the inevitable behavioral, emotional, and academic issues that will arise with some students.

The most important leader was usually identified as the principal, but several principals noted that strong district leadership is also necessary to promote these goals. In addition, although respondents across all schools identified the importance of

leadership, respondents at one school in particular—a school that had recently experienced a transition in leadership—were especially likely to identify strong leadership as important for navigating these two philosophies effectively.¹ Respondents from this school provided examples of difficulties that could arise when implementing school safety approaches during transitional periods. For example, one respondent felt that “changes to the school culture need to be made gradually over time.” Respondents reported that when new principals make changes too quickly, the principal may experience push back or confusion from both staff and students. Some respondents believed that when cultural changes are made more slowly there is more likely to be leadership consistency, improvements in outcomes, and more support among staff.

Improve Staff Communication Respondents explained the necessity of having strong staff communication. School and district leaders need to communicate their philosophies and expectations with staff. Respondents recommended that teachers and other staff must also communicate with administrators, which may help to illuminate minor issues before they escalate. They mentioned that administrators need to communicate their expectations to school police about when they expect a student to be arrested and when they expect to handle misbehavior within the school. In addition, respondents emphasized that these staff need to work together to identify which students require more careful supervision. One principal noted that administrators must communicate with students so they know that the principal is there to support them. Several principals emphasized that different strategies—such as student assemblies and open-door policies—provide vehicles for conveying this message. The respondents emphasized that clear and consistent communication among administrators, staff, police, and even students creates greater understanding about the school’s vision and philosophy.

Tailor Approaches to the Needs of the School, Students, and Staff Respondents highlighted that schools have different needs, and administrators should look at metrics for student absenteeism and achievement to determine the school’s specific needs. They emphasized that the special conditions that low-income schools face need to be considered when balancing support- and punishment-oriented policies. The demographics and backgrounds of students also matter. Students in some schools may live in poverty, be exposed to more neighborhood gang conflicts, and have greater trauma in their past. Respondents felt that effective responses in these instances required individualization. They recommended that the staff member views be taken into consideration because these individuals have first-hand knowledge about the particular issues facing their students and the school. They also recommended that staff should be included when conducting needs assessments, trainings, and when developing strategies for improving school safety.

Have the "Right" Personnel in Place Respondents stated that it is necessary to have the "right" personnel to put these philosophies into action. One principal said, “The district thinks I try to solve everything just by adding more people, but it’s all about having the *right* people.” The “right people” include individuals who build relationships with

¹ The possibility of other school-based differences was examined; with the exception of the difference reported here, no consistent evidence of variations in results across schools emerged.

students, are comfortable with flexible decision-making, and share the administration's goals for the school. We describe each of these below.

Staff who build relationships with students: When staff members have positive relationships with students, there are multiple benefits, according to the respondents. Students who trust staff members may go to them with any concerns before problems escalate into major conflicts. Staff, in these instances, can be more proactive. When conflicts occur, staff who have relationships with students are better able to de-escalate tense situations. These same staff members frequently may have better knowledge of students' needs and can create individualized service plans for them. When students misbehave, the first step one principal takes is to identify the staff member who has the best relationship with that student and asks them to talk with the student. This approach improves the likelihood that the student will engage in a productive conversation with the staff member, cooperate with any supportive interventions, and understand that staff are looking out for their best interests even when they receive punishments. This more positive response from students can then decrease future misbehavior.

However, building these relationships takes time and effort, and not all staff are willing to make an effort. For those staff who wish to build such relationships, respondents recommended multiple strategies. For example, one staff member recognized that many students are interested in popular shoe trends. She therefore makes an effort to wear stylish shoes so she can use them as an icebreaker with students. In another example, one staff member spoke to a disruptive football player by explaining to him that the teacher was the "football coach of the classroom" who had to be respected in the same way football players respect their coach. In using the language and interests of students, staff may be better able to relate to students. Respondents also noted that hiring staff from the local community with backgrounds similar to the students can help students relate to staff.

Staff who have flexible decision-making: Although administrators must be as clear as possible about when to use each approach, respondents noted that there is need for flexibility on a case-by-case basis. In their view, judgment calls need to be made regarding when to use support-oriented approaches and when to use punishment-oriented approaches. Several school police officers pointed out that school staff, the police included, can be too inflexible and punitive in their approach to safety. Administrators therefore must seek staff who can understand the usefulness of relying on multiple approaches for intervening with students.

Staff who share the administration's goals: Similarly, it is important that staff also share the administration's goals for the school. One principal noted that staff can always be taught the strategies needed to achieve the school's goals, but if the staff do not believe in those goals then they are unlikely to be achieved. For many of these schools, an intentional effort to reduce suspensions and expulsions, a willingness to build relationships with students, and a shift towards more supportive options are goals that leaders encourage their staff to adopt. Respondents felt that administrators "must be willing to remove staff members who refuse to support students," are unable to build relationships with students, do not have a flexible mindset for decision-making, or do not share the administration's goals. Then, administrators must seek to hire people who actively support these sentiments.

Conclusion

Schools are dynamic social institutions wherein philosophies and responses to school safety are continuously negotiated. Even in school districts that have previously been heavily reliant on get-tough approaches—which characterizes the schools and school district in this study and many of their counterparts nationally (Gottfredson, 2017; Hirschfield, 2018)—progressive and support-oriented policies are now more commonly implemented. As they shift from primarily punitive approaches to more blended or even primarily supportive efforts, it is inevitable that there will be challenges that schools face as they attempt to navigate these two seemingly competing approaches. The challenge for schools, then, is to understand how to navigate these two approaches. However, there has been limited research that explores this process from the view of ground-level staff who play an important role in setting, influencing, and implementing school discipline and safety policies. The purpose of this study was therefore to investigate how school staff balance and navigate the side-by-side implementation of these differing philosophies for maintaining a safe learning environment for youth.

Four main findings emerged from this study. First, we found that the four schools in our study prioritize supportive approaches and only use punitive responses when necessary. Administrators appeared to have considerable discretion in which approach was more strongly emphasized, but mandates from the district and discretion exercised by teachers could modify how particular instances of misconduct get handled. Second, although relying on both approaches may help to keep schools safe (e.g., by allowing selection from multiple options, allowing for individualized plans, and conserving resources), this mixed approach could also hinder school safety. Use of the two approaches, for example, can create confusion among staff about which approach to use and when, can cause students to view the school administration as weak, and gives students room to push boundaries. Third, respondents identified several barriers to successful implementation of a balanced approach. These included a lack of resources, a lack of student motivation, and inflexible district mandates. These findings contribute to the literature on school safety strategies by illustrating the complexities associated with navigating get-tough and support-oriented policies. It is not enough to identify which practices are most effective at improving student outcomes and school safety. The barriers that staff face in implementing school safety programs bear directly on a program's effectiveness.

Fourth, respondents also identified several recommendations for effectively pursuing get-tough and support-oriented approaches simultaneously. They highlighted the importance of clarifying the school's overall philosophy and guidelines for promoting safety, of effective leadership at the school and district levels, and of having strong communication between school staff and administrators. They also stressed the importance of tailoring the school's approach to the needs of the school, staff, and students, and of having personnel on campus who can tailor and implement get-tough and supportive philosophies in an individualized and effective manner. These recommendations directly address the above-mentioned barriers to and limitations of a mixed approach, and they provide concrete ideas for districts and staff who wish to blend get-tough and support-oriented practices in their own schools.

Although staff did not perceive the two approaches to be inherently contradictory, some contradictions in the implementation of the approaches were observed. For example, staff recommended more specific guidelines about what approach to use with

specific incidents. However, if schools were to implement more structured guidelines, the end result might be less flexibility in the individualized services that staff could provide to students. This example highlights tensions that remain when schools try to balance discretion with structure, individualized approaches with a one-size-fits-all approach, and accountability with diversion.

These findings have theoretical implications for school safety research. Even though the theoretical traditions behind get-tough and support-oriented approaches appear to be incompatible, these approaches are routinely being blended in practice. Findings from this study show that supportive interventions are being used simultaneously with punitive approaches, despite the fact that the theories underlying these approaches rest on nearly opposing assumptions about the best ways to promote school safety. Future work should consider revising the theories on which these approaches rest, with a focus on how they interact and how the simultaneous use of these approaches could theoretically and empirically alter the effectiveness of school safety approaches.

In addition, theories of school policing typically view officers on campus as an inherently punitive practice (Hirschfield, 2008; Na & Gottfredson, 2013). However, this study indicates that police on school campuses are not simply there to provide punitive consequences for students, but can also promote supportive efforts (see also Kupchik, 2010; May, Barranco, & Stokes, 2018). Accordingly, having police on school campuses may constitute a signal that schools, rather than becoming more punitive, are collaborating with outside agencies to support students. Future research in this area should employ caution when using police presence as a proxy measure for school punitiveness since there is potential for school police to informally operate as counselors, coaches, and mentors, thus contributing to a supportive school culture and environment.

We turn next to several research implications of this study. First, the findings lend support to the view that ground-level staff play important roles in the implementation of school policies and interventions and that drawing on their insights can help to illuminate the factors that influence school safety. Second, the findings also lend warrant to the notion that the effectiveness of get-tough policies may be moderated by reliance on support-oriented approaches. A get-tough approach alone, for example, may be less effective than one that is complemented by supportive interventions. Research is needed that investigates this possibility. Third, research is needed on how best to guide school districts, schools, teachers, and school police officers in how to individualize interventions in ways that best achieve school safety and that do not compromise the overarching mission of schools—education. Fourth, because this study may be limited in its generalizability, future research should continue to examine how schools navigate get-tough and supportive policies. This study did not examine the broader prevalence of these approaches, nor did it provide a direct test of outcomes that may occur under blended approaches. As such, future research should address such limitations of this study, potentially using a quantitative approach. Fifth, some insights may arise from investigating parallel challenges in the juvenile justice system. The juvenile court was envisioned as a setting that would provide for the best interests of youth and do so through accountability, punishment, and rehabilitation (Bishop & Feld, 2012). It has had mixed success in doing so, but nonetheless it may offer approaches to navigating both get-tough and supportive approaches that can be transferred to school settings. Sixth, past research has demonstrated that support-oriented approaches can influence youth behavior (Gardella, 2015; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). In addition, although the

perception that exclusionary school discipline deters future misbehavior has not been substantiated in the literature (see generally Skiba & Rausch, 2013), it remains prevalent among school staff. Indeed, in this study, respondents perceived that punishment would have a deterrent effect and that using support-oriented approaches may erode this effect. However, these two largely separate lines of research—on the effects of support-oriented and punishment-oriented approaches—often ignore the potential for these approaches to either complement or undermine one another when used simultaneously. Whether a deterrent effect occurs in contexts that mix the two approaches has therefore been largely ignored. Future research should empirically test the effects of balanced approaches using supportive and punitive policies—in varying dosages—to see what measurable effect these policies may have on school misbehavior.

Finally, we turn to policy implications. This study did not assess the effectiveness of the approaches adopted by the different schools. Thus, no firm recommendations can be offered. However, the results of the study do suggest that appreciable gains in school safety likely require a careful calibration of get-tough and support-oriented approaches. They suggest, too, that any such gains likely require consistency in relying on these approaches while, at the same time, providing ground-level staff with the flexibility to craft individualized responses that consider the unique needs and context of particular students. There is, though, no “free lunch”—any efforts to allow for individualization of interventions will require resources.

In sum, schools prioritize safety and are always seeking ways to maintain and promote it on their campuses. This study suggests that schools are capable of using seemingly contradictory approaches—specifically, get-tough and support-oriented approaches—simultaneously to strive for a safer school environment. It appears that schools struggle with finding the perfect balance of these approaches, and that leadership, resources, and staffing all play roles in that struggle. Addressing the factors that impede the achievement of such a balance may help schools accomplish the simultaneous implementation of both approaches in a way that prioritizes the safety of their students and staff, while also improving the behavioral and educational outcomes of students.

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