

## An Analysis of U.S. Student Drug and Alcohol Policies through the Lens of a Professional Ethic for School Leadership

Mark E. Stamm, *South Williamsport Area School District*  
William C. Frick, *University of Oklahoma*  
Hollie J. Mackey, *University of Oklahoma*

**Abstract** This study explored the moral complexity of student drug and alcohol policies that are often disciplinary, punitive, and exclusionary in nature. The Ethic of the Profession and its Model for Students' Best Interests (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Stefkovich, 2013), a professional ethical construct for educational leadership and for school workers writ large, was employed as a theoretical framework to evaluate a bounded case of seven school districts' pupil policies. This research utilized textual analysis of school policies from the school communities represented in the study, in addition to interview data employed in a larger systemic study from which this research is drawn. Findings contribute to a fuller understanding of the valuation process of local administrators when they are drafting policy in relation to an ethic of the profession. Practical implications include the impact of such school policies on the immediate and long-range needs of students deemed as at risk.

**Keywords** Pupil personnel policy; School exclusion; School governance; Ethics in education administration; Best interests of the student

**Mark E. Stamm** is Superintendent at South Williamsport Area School District. **William C. Frick** is Associate Professor at the University of Oklahoma. **Hollie J. Mackey** is Associate Professor at the University of Oklahoma (2015). An Analysis of U.S. Student Drug and Alcohol Policies through the Lens of a Professional Ethic for School Leadership. *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership* 11(1). URL: <http://journals.sfu.ca/ijepl/index.php/ijepl/article/view/631>

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Drug and alcohol abuse is a significant problem in the United States, and its effects in schools are no exception. How schools weigh their response to students involved with drugs and alcohol against the needs of society, the school, and the student is a decision with implications that reach beyond the immediate issue of possession. Student drug and alcohol policies are typically housed under the umbrella of “zero tolerance,” which includes school exclusion<sup>1</sup> as a common disciplinary technique. Zero-tolerance policies are intended to provide defined parameters that are applied equally to all students and that send the clear message that defined infractions are not permitted in schools under any circumstances (Casella, 2003; Martinez, 2009; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Stader, 2004). Commentators have characterized zero tolerance as one of the most simplistic and subsequently flawed approaches to school discipline (Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015), citing a lack of empirical evidence to support its effectiveness (Chen, 2008; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; McNeal & Dunbar, 2010; Englehart, 2014) in addition to a host of unintended outcomes of a discipline policy naively thought to be effective based on rational choice and deterrence (Kupchik, 2015; Kupchik & Catlaw, 2015; Way, 2011).

Nonetheless, school districts regularly employ exclusionary practices in response to drug and alcohol infractions, although in more recent years, the discourse of equity versus the discourse of safety has gained some momentum and, as a result, has increasingly problematized zero tolerance policy and practice for a range of school discipline issues (Kennedy-Lewis, 2014; Epstein, 2014). This is especially evident in the joint policy position of the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Office of Civil Rights in the Department of Education (ED), as expressed in the “Dear Colleague Letter” to publicly funded schools, which targeted disparate impact and restorative practices (US Department of Justice, 2014).

The purpose of this investigation is to focus on the rationale for disciplinary, punitive, and exclusionary student drug and alcohol policies by examining them through a specific ethical framework commonly utilized within educational administration. By applying an ethical framework designed for the profession of educational administration (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Stefkovich, 2013) to a constellation of pupil personnel policies situated at the local school district level, we propose that two goals can be accomplished: (1) the policies under consideration can serve as a test case for the utility and meaningfulness of an ostensibly agreed-upon ethic for the profession of school administration, and (2) pupil personnel policies of the kind analyzed within this study can be interrogated both by researchers and practitioners either for their right, true, good, and praiseworthy qualities, or otherwise.

## **Context of contemporary student drug and alcohol policies**

In 2004, a survey by the National Survey on Drug Use and Health reported that 10.6 percent of teenagers between the ages of 12 and 17 used illegal drugs in the past month, 21 percent in the past year, and 30 percent in their lifetime. Other national surveys indicate that 37 percent of eighth graders and 72 percent of twelfth graders tried alcohol, and 15 percent of eighth graders and 44 percent of twelfth graders drank during the past month. More disturbing, another report reveals that

nearly 20 percent of all youth aged 12 to 20 years report binge drinking (Centers for Disease Control, 2010).

Beginning in the 1980s with America's "War on Drugs," the nation's schools began to recognize their role in educating youth on the dangers of illegal substances and the abuse of alcohol. The Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (OSDFS), a subdivision within the United States Department of Education, was established in 2002 pursuant to the Drug Free Schools and Communities Act that pushed states, often by providing funding and resources, into adopting specific curricula that target illicit drug use among adolescents. For example, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (1999, 2009) regulations under Chapter 4, "Academic Standards and Assessment," mandate at each grade level (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school) that schools provide education to prevent the use and abuse of illegal substances, alcohol, and other harmful and toxic chemicals. This mandate is often fulfilled through school health curricula.

Schools address and extend beyond such curricular mandates by inviting local law enforcement agencies to participate with the school in educating youth about the dangers of drugs and alcohol. National non-government organizations with programs such as Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) and Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD), now known as Students Against Destructive Decisions, exist in slightly over 30 percent of schools nationwide (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001). These programs link the school to the community in an attempt to specifically prevent the possession, use, and abuse of illegal substances and alcohol while also deterring the destructive decisions of children and young adults. Schools, police, and parents attempt to form a united front by sending a clear and simple message to their children—that the collective finds it in the students' best interests to abstain from alcohol and drug use.

Beyond educative and social supports of various kinds, schools impose consequences on students for possessing, using, and abusing illegal substances and alcohol. Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) found that 98 percent of schools they surveyed had written policies regarding drug use. While these policies often include a counseling component, they are often couched in zero tolerance guidelines; that is, they require mandatory exclusion from school. Schools recognize the need to help students with a possible addiction or with risks leading to addiction, but they also see a need to punish the student and send a message to others that possession, use, and abusive behavior will not be tolerated. Consistent with the nation's posture toward drugs, schools have often taken a punitive approach toward students who violate school drug and alcohol policies.

To better understand the use of such policies, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 1997) surveyed 1,415 public school principals. The NCES discovered that 27 percent of the principals reported taking action against students under their drug and alcohol policy. Of these, half were excluded from school for more than five days, and an additional 30 percent were expelled. Some principals report that drug and alcohol related incidents are rare compared to other rule infractions that occur on a routine basis (Imich, 1994). Yet other research, conducted on a regional basis, indicates that up to 15 percent of all school exclusion is primarily related to illegal substances (see Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004).

The purported rarity of disciplinary incidents as reported by principals stands in curious contrast in comparison to the level of adolescent use of drugs and alcohol cited previously. And although few students are actually disciplined under drug and alcohol policies, the literature indicates that involvement in delinquent behavior,<sup>2</sup> which may include alcohol and drug possession, use, and/or abuse, compounds the effect of school exclusion (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989).

This study focuses on the rationale for student drug and alcohol policies that are disciplinary, punitive, and exclusionary. Given the prevalence of student drug and alcohol policies and the potential negative impacts of school exclusion on students for possession, use, and/or abuse of drugs and/or alcohol, there is little research into the design, purpose, and effect of student drug and alcohol policies and those who create them. Additionally, school discipline data are notoriously challenging to analyze due to the many factors that contribute to school discipline in general. Among these, Osher, Bear, Sprague, and Doyle (2010) include the developmental needs of students; teacher, student, and school culture; students' socioeconomic status; school and classroom composition and structure; pedagogical demands; students' and teachers' role expectations and capacity to meet the institutionally established expectations for their roles; and school climate as factors contributing to school discipline data. Administrators have little control over most of these, yet face the challenge of making discipline decisions on a daily basis for infractions influenced by these myriad factors. As cited in the NCES report (1997), supposedly few students are disciplined under drug and alcohol policies relative to other rule infractions, but the compounding effect of school exclusion (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006) warrants a greater understanding of the rationale behind the design and enforcement of such policies. Specifically, this compounding effect occurs when a student is excluded from school and is unable to benefit from school support, such as counselors, positive adult interaction, and time spent accountably within the school day. In short, the consequences of the policies designed to prevent the student's involvement with drugs and/or alcohol could, in effect, facilitate greater at-risk behavior.

A number of scholars have found that the unintended consequences of applying zero tolerance outweigh the rationale for these policies (Chen, 2008; Civil Rights Project, 2000; Verdugo, 2002). Unintended consequences include the overuse of suspension as a teaching tool and the misuse of the policies by administrators (Martinez, 2009). Zero tolerance policies often give administrators the ability to use discretion and modify suspensions; however, many disregard this option (Osher, et. al., 2010). Another unintended consequence stems from the disproportionate representation of racially or ethnically diverse students and those with special needs (Civil Rights Project, 2000). Exclusion from school is also linked to higher drop-out rates, repeated suspensions, and poor academic achievement (Martinez, 2009).

What is the rationale behind student drug and alcohol policies that are disciplinary, punitive, and exclusionary? Are students' best interests being served by such policies, or are these policies formulated, adopted, given regulatory power, mandated or incentivized, and implemented for other purposes and aims? School leaders in

both their fiduciary and official capacities as administrators are implicated in such questions; and these therefore are the very questions that give rise to this study.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) and Stefkovich (2013) argue that school administrators require an entirely new ethical paradigm to guide their decision-making process in such situations. They advocate the use of the professional injunction—that is, responding to each student’s individual needs in order to promote their success. A careful examination of how drug and alcohol policies might or might not serve the best interests of the student was sought by examining a related group of existing school district policies.

## Related literature

Out-of-school suspension is the most widely used form of punishment for students in the United States (Raffaele-Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). Out-of-school suspension is typically defined as the exclusion of a student from the school building and from campus and school related activities for a period not exceeding 10 consecutive days. In a survey of a large Midwestern school district, Skiba, Peterson, and Williams (1997) found that 33 percent of disciplinary referrals resulted in school exclusion. A middle school student, the study concluded, had a one in four chance of being excluded from school between fifth and eighth grade. Approximately one percent of these exclusions were for drugs and alcohol. At the high school level, students experience, on average, five days of exclusion each year (Raffaele-Mendez et al., 2002). In both middle and high school, the exclusion removes the child from school support, increases the likelihood of further disciplinary problems, contributes to an achievement gap, and ushers withdrawal from school prior to graduation (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010).

An oft-cited reason for school disciplinary exclusion is administrators’ need to maintain a positive school environment free from excessive distraction so as to support instruction for all students. The typical argument made for suspension is that a student is disruptive of instruction and detracts from other students’ learning and collective needs. In other words, “it is the net effect that matters” (Epstein, 2014). Of course, this argument is based on a discourse of safety rather than equity. Public schools are for everyone, but especially for the weakest and most vulnerable of society. A discourse of safety asserts and elevates the needs of the group over the needs of the individuals and overlaps with a neoliberal de-emphasis on social responsibility in favor of individual responsibility. Conversely, equity robustly considers the role of social forces in creating uneven opportunity and sees a child’s non-compliance with a school’s pupil personnel policy as an indication of an issue much larger than the child herself. Rather than focusing on individual “failings,” the most important school response is to focus on the development of the whole child (Scherer, 2009), rather than solely on academic achievement in preparation for the labor force. Kennedy-Lewis (2014) argues that when students are noncompliant or choose to do wrong, (1) there is an underlying problem that needs investigation, (2) there is a possible misunderstanding or mismatch in expectations for behavior, (3) schools have a responsibility to educate fully, (4) consequences should be logical and restora-

tive, (5) compliant students should be taught to empathize with, support, and learn by thinking critically with students who struggle behaviorally, (6) schools should give ongoing support for all students to develop their full potential, and (7) schools should operate on student-centered, proactive, reflective approaches rather than group-centered, reactive, biased approaches. As Englehart (2014) indicates, because of the “be-all and end-all of disciplinary decisions, administrators can abdicate themselves of responsibility for the exclusion of students, which neither makes the school safer nor is in the *best interest of the student involved*” (p. 680, italics added).

School drug and alcohol policies outline such consequences as exclusion, expulsion, and criminal prosecution for possession, use, and/or distribution on campus. Although existing literature condemns exclusionary practices (Imich, 1994; Maag, 2001; Morrison & Skiba, 2001), schools choose this route more than any other form of discipline (Raffaele-Mendez et al., 2002; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). Although in-school suspension is an alternative that is used in schools to avoid removing students from school supports, the practice was not articulated as a disciplinary school-response option in the drug and alcohol policies reviewed in this study.

School district policies must address several audiences. Primary stakeholders include the individual student, the student body as a whole, the administration, and the community. Epp and Epp (2001), in reviewing Canadian school discipline policies and alternative programs, concluded that the concept of exclusion is contradictory per se. They argue that the justification for exclusion is to force a student to behave and thereby remain in the school. However, evidence from Christle, Nelson, and Jolivette (2004), Imich (1994), Skiba, Peterson, and Williams (1997), and Kupchik and Catlaw (2015) suggests that exclusion is, in itself, driving students farther from the supports of the school, thus eroding their stake in the institution and broader society. These findings appear to directly challenge whether administrators, in following school and district policies, are responding to students’ needs.

For those students who are disciplined at home when excluded and who see the school as essential to their future, exclusion can be effective (Morrison & Skiba, 2001). However, the Civil Rights Project (2000) concluded that not only does removing the student sever their connection with the supports provided by the school environment, it also hinders the ability of essential personnel to reach the student. These findings indicate that school exclusion as a disciplinary technique for rule infractions, in general, and for the possession, distribution, use, and/or abuse of illegal substances and alcohol specifically, may not be in the immediate best interests of the individual student.

Dupper (1994) and Knoff (2000) argue that alternatives to exclusion have yet to be adopted because of a reluctance to include other stakeholders in school discipline processes. For example, in a survey of school social workers, Dupper (1994) discovered that in those schools with social workers on site, just over one third reported that they were included in the discipline process of the school regarding exclusion. Knoff (2000) also argues that school psychologists are not fully utilized in the creation of alternatives to school exclusion. Dupper and Knoff’s observations are important considering the frequency of exclusions and who is affected—3.1 million students in 1998 according to the Civil Rights Project (2000), with middle school-aged students typically excluded at the highest rates.

Delinquency risk is an additional complicated matter related to exclusionary discipline policy responses toward students involved with illegal substances and alcohol. Delinquency is a problematic issue involving communities, families, schools, and the courts. The problem, like drug and alcohol use and/or abuse, is not new. For instance, the North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2003) found that, of adjudicated youth in that state, 78 percent were between 13 and 15 years old. Of those, 58 percent had serious disciplinary problems in school and slightly over one in every three had a history of substance abuse.

The central issue is not whether students will be delinquent, but how schools will respond as an agency that influences and shapes adolescent behavior. The Civil Rights Project (2000), along with McFadden and Marsh (1992), contends that exclusion does not reduce disciplinary problems but rather enables students to engage in increased delinquent behavior (Committee on School Health, 2000). In addition, the students most likely to be excluded from school for disciplinary reasons are without parental supervision.

The more obstacles placed in front of a child, the less likely they are to see options. Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to already suffer from a lack of emphasis on education and not see the value in school (Rothstein, 2004). As these students begin to struggle academically, they are more likely to break school rules and challenge authority (Costenbader & Markson, 1998). Given that exclusion is the primary means of school discipline (Morrison & Skiba, 2001), these students will eventually find themselves on the outside of the school community and removed from school supports (Epp & Epp, 2001; Walker, 1998a, 1998b). Lacking parental supervision during the day and already demonstrating a willingness to break rules, they are at risk of delinquency (Committee on School Health, 2000).

A student's involvement with illegal substances and alcohol, and a school's response to that involvement, can alienate students from school. Students may no longer see value in the school or in an education, in which case they fail to learn the lesson the school might be attempting to teach (Glasser, 1985). A process may be set in motion that reinforces a school's policy-driven disciplinary action: because the excluded student no longer causes disruption to the classroom or the administration, stakeholders inside the school community may conclude that exclusion is effective at addressing rule infractions. Unfortunately, this type of effectiveness may be at the expense of the immediate and long term best interests of the disciplined student. The aforementioned studies argue that schools need to recognize the path that many students at risk find themselves on and how exclusion impacts their future.

A substantial argument can be made against school exclusion, especially for students demonstrating behaviors placing them at further risk of deviant behavior (such as possession, distribution, use, and/or abuse of drugs and/or alcohol). However, the majority of drug and alcohol policies seem to favor exclusion as a primary disciplinary response, as opposed to in-school suspension or other forms of progressive disciplinary responses, including restorative justice approaches. This apparent disparity between the research informing expert opinion and the school governance informing administrative practice led us to question how student drug and alcohol policies and those who oversee and implement them rationalized those policies and their outcomes.

## Theoretical framework

There are several distinct theoretical perspectives for ethical and moral leadership within educational administration. The prominent ethical themes, standpoints, or “paradigms” consist of justice (Rawls, 1993; Strike, Haller & Soltis, 1998), care (Beck, 1994; Noddings, 1988), critique (Apple, 1982; Foster, 1986; Giroux, 1992), community (Dewey, 1909/1975; Furman, 2004), virtue (Begley, 2005; Starratt, 2004), and profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Stefkovich 2013). These moral perspectives, typically articulated as theories of duty, guidance for individual ethical decision-making, expressions of relational morality, or guidance for establishing moral school environments, provide a backdrop for understanding an ethic for the profession.

A systematic professional ethic for the field of educational administration, or what has been referred to in literature and practice within educational leadership as the “Ethic of the Profession,” is clearly expressed in the work of Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), Stefkovich and O’Brien (2004), and Stefkovich (2013). This perspective argues for an ethical construct or system that considers the moral aspects unique to the profession of education and educational leadership in particular (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). The ethic of the profession considers the ethical frameworks of justice, care, and critique not as totally distinct, incommensurable moral reasonings, but as complementary—a “tapestry of ethical perspectives that encourages . . . rich human response to . . . many uncertain ethical situations” (Starratt, 1994, p. 57). The Ethic of the profession, although informed by other moral theory, is distinct unto itself as a framework to guide and inform educational leadership as a practical and moral activity.

The Ethic of the profession indicates that a disparity often exists between community standards, professional codes meant to inform decision-making and conduct, and the personal moral values of administrators that guide their judgment and behavior. An attempt to integrate professional and personal codes of ethics while attending to community standards can lead to moral dissonance, or a clashing of codes. In responding to this inevitable discord, the Ethic of the profession is grounded in a reasoned consideration of that educational shibboleth, “the best interests of the [student]” (Walker, 1998a, 1998b). The student’s best interests are the focal point of the ethic of the profession. A model for determining the best interests of the student consists of a robust focus on the essential nature of a child’s individual rights within the schooling process; the duty of responsibility to others for a common interest—both in terms of the school worker’s responsibility, but the child’s as well; and respect as mutual acknowledgement of the other as having worth, value, and dignity unto themselves (Stefkovich & O’Brien, 2004; Stefkovich, 2013).

The ethic of the profession, and more precisely the “best interests of the student” model (Stefkovich & O’Brien, 2004; Stefkovich, 2013), emphasizes the student’s well-being as a fundamental value. This orientation is reflected in professional association codes, various ethical perspectives, the standards of the profession set forth by the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (1996, 2008), and the empirical and jurisprudential research of Walker (1998b). For instance, the first injunction within the American Association of School Administrators (2007) *Code of Ethics* reads as follows: “To these ends, the educational leader subscribes to the following statements of standards. The educational leader: 1. Makes the education and well-being of students the fundamental value of all decision making.”



The aforementioned sources support a reasoned consideration of the best interests of the student as the “backbone,” or moral imperative, of the profession—with this basic principle driving the profession and serving as an ethical ideal at the heart of a professional paradigm for educational leaders (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). The expression is therefore theorized to be much more than simple shop talk or a “party line;” rather, properly conceived, it can serve as a moral imperative for the profession. The ethical model described here moves the work of school administration beyond well-meaning jargon into an ever clearer moral reality by proposing a three-tiered standard of student rights, responsibility, and respect, built on the foundation of an ethic of professional practice.

Professionalism, as defined by Walker (1998a), is an ethic that places the needs of the student above teacher, administration, or the organization itself. What those needs are is largely determined by the specific contexts of time and place. The complexity of determining those needs is the inherent difficulty faced by school leadership. Walker (1998b) contends that the complexity of the concept of *best interests of the child* is best illustrated by focusing on the *interests* surrounding the student. According to Walker, interests include: (a) individual (i.e., uniquely personal), (b) public (i.e., civil/state), and (c) social (i.e., communal care, respect and responsibility) (1998b). This complexity is the foundation upon which the ethical standard of *best interests of the student* is constructed; not as a home for administrators to find refuge in, but as a beacon to guide their actions amid competing value-informed interests.

## Methods

A cross sector of seven regional student drug and alcohol policies was analyzed to uncover policy verbiage and structure indicative of the values and beliefs of the school districts from which they were retrieved (Edwards & Nicoll, 2001). This analytical framework focuses on print language as purposeful, tactical, and reflective of power struggles within the organization and its environment.

### **Acquired policies**

The drug and alcohol policies from seven local education agencies (LEAs) within a specific geo-spatial region, comprised within and serviced by single Intermediate Unit,<sup>3</sup> were selected for comparison (see Appendix). The group selection was based on geographic connectedness and administrative collaboration between the respective LEAs. Each LEA was a member of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA), which provides policy services to Pennsylvania school districts. The impact of the PSBA on public school policy in Pennsylvania creates, in many instances, general uniformity between school districts across the state. The PSBA, as part of its service to school districts, provides a comprehensive policy service with uniform nomenclature, legal research, and appropriate citations. As such, most Pennsylvania school districts have policies with similar content and pagination, making comparisons across districts more coherent. Although the seven districts represented in this study, and their associated policies, are not meant to represent drug and alcohol policies from across the state, the influence of a state-level organization on these local policies is apparent.

The seven school districts are part of the same intermediate unit. The intermediate unit hosts monthly meetings with district superintendents to facilitate dialogue on issues of educational and regional significance. District principals also hold similar monthly meetings hosted by a different district each month on a topic of common concern. These meetings facilitate ongoing communication between school districts. Both geographic features and professional networks have established a historical connection through the regional municipalities and school districts.

Although school district policy is part of the public record, each school district's name has been changed to a letter from A to H. In addition to the seven school districts and their related policies, the PSBA model policy was included in the content narrative analysis with the understanding that its context-generic quality and broad use as initial policy guidance for districts could be helpful in comparing and contrasting textual variance among the seven policies in the study.

### ***Policy analysis procedures and organization of the study***

This analysis was intended to focus on subtle differences in language that enabled a closer inspection and understanding of internal conflicts or organizational perspectives as represented both within and between the seven policies and their respective districts. Narrative content analysis was used to examine each policy (Edwards & Nicoll, 2001). The analysis framework utilized within this study consisted of 1) whole text organization (WTO); 2) clause combination (CC); 3) grammatical and semantic features (S/WC) (e.g., transitivity, action, voice, mood, modality); and 4) words (W) (e.g., vocabulary, collocations, use of metaphors, etc.). Each policy was viewed through these analytical categories in order to extrapolate structural or semantic differences that indicated values articulated through written policy.

In a study whose goals are to closely examine the normative investments of student drug and alcohol policies, narrative content analysis is a relevant method for extracting textual meaning. Narrative content analysis systematically examines how different text discourses appear, and how policy implementers use them to make sense of and potentially carry out certain “philosophical beliefs about the nature of students or the purpose of schools ... used to establish and maintain particular educational practices and outcomes” (Kennedy-Lewis, 2014, p. 167). Taking the “argumentative turn” in policy analysis, this study examines the linguistic expression that underwrites and stabilizes assumptions for policies “in the face of an issue’s uncertainty, complexity or polarization” (Roe, 1994, p. 3; van Eeten, 2007).

## **Results and discussion of policy comparison**

Following the Edwards and Nicoll (2001) policy study elements, WTO, CC, and S/WC were considered and analyzed for each of the seven district policies and for the PSBA model, in order to determine the comparative extent to each of the written documents reflected organizational values and goals.

### ***Whole text organization***

Whole text organization is defined as the major categories and sub-categories of a document. The influence of the PSBA on local school district policy was apparent,

especially on the smaller school districts in the sample. Among four of the seven school districts, the whole text organization for the policy under consideration was virtually identical. The PSBA model policy included a) Purpose, b) Definition, c) Authority, d) Delegation of Authority, and e) Guidelines, with sub-categories Steroids and Reasonable Suspicion/Testing. District F and the two largest districts in the group, G and H, had different whole text organization.

The group of district policies yielded both similarities and differences. The bounding of the group was validated by the matching matrices in two districts and by information such as monthly inter-district administrative meetings along with frequent sharing of policies by district administrators, as indicated in an interview with one district administrator. The differences in the policies provided indicators of how separate school communities might conceptualize the best interests of the student.

The policies for districts G and H were similar. Collaboration at some level between the two districts was apparent. Each district had a comprehensive matrix that governed administrative action in drug/alcohol related incidents. The matrices were identical for districts G and H, a correspondence that was not evident in the policies of other school districts in this study. In addition, districts G and H included categories not contained in the PSBA model policy. These identical matrices support the above observation that professional networking occurred among districts.

An earlier version of district F's policy was, like the other six districts in this study, similar in its organization of the whole text relative to the PSBA model. However, the policy as revised in February of 2006 contained three additional "nested" policies. Drug and alcohol policies were assigned the nomenclature #227 according to the PSBA schema. District F was the only district in the study to have the following sub-policies: #227 Within School Parameters, #227.1 Outside School Parameters, #227.2 Incentive,<sup>4</sup> and #227.3 Anabolic Steroids. The other school district policies in this study included a section on Anabolic Steroids, and most included clauses for inside and outside school parameters, as will be discussed later, but only District F set these considerations aside as separate policies within its #227 Drug and Alcohol Policy.

This isolated indicator illuminated the policy's unique quality in comparison to other policies in the sample. District F, or the district's governing bodies and community, appeared to place considerable importance on clearly defined rules and consequences that were supposedly vigorously applied. At first blush, the modus operandi of this district appeared to be policy-driven organizational goal attainment at the expense of members and their needs. Therefore, based only on policy analysis, district F appeared to operate from an adult-centered perspective rather than a child or student-centered perspective (Smith, 1998; Stefkovich, 2013; Walker, 1998a, 1998b).

The differences can be interpreted two ways. One is to interpret them as the result of linear thinking and clear organization on the part of a school board, superintendent, or building leadership team focused on promulgating a large and expansive policy. The other interpretation follows Bolman and Deal (2008) by suggesting that such highly structured policies are indicative of organizations that adhere to a bureaucratic structural functionalism that values goal completion above the needs of constituents and employees. There may be, however, a utilitarian purpose: the greater

good for the greater number (Mills, 1951)—that is, ensuring the safety and security of hundreds of adolescents in a confined space.

### **Clause combination**

**School exclusion.** Expanding the policy analysis to include clause combination and word usage assisted in understanding the tactical approach of the policy, as indicated by Edwards and Nicoll (2001). Specific aspects of the drug and alcohol policy—school exclusion, off campus incidents, and counseling—were of central concern. As such, four clauses were analyzed in each of the seven school district policies.

Of all seven districts, district F had the longest school exclusion requirement and was the only district within the bounded group with mandatory 10-day exclusion for a first offense. Other district policies mandated exclusions from three to five days, and district H practiced 10-day exclusion, but none codified a full suspension (i.e., 10-day exclusion) from school on the first offense. Such measures did not appear to recognize expert opinion driven by research on the potential negative effect of school exclusion in general (Skiba et al., 2002; Wu et al., 1982) and of exclusion for youth “at risk” specifically (Committee on School Health, 2000). Why the exclusion clause exists in five of the seven policies cannot be determined from this analysis, but one can conjecture that it is the impact of several forces such as school culture, community expectations, and a punitive societal model.

**Off-campus incidents.** For off-campus incidents, the district policies fell into several groups. Although district F was not alone in disciplining students for incidents that occurred outside school parameters, the districts differed on how they perceived their role in exerting authority outside the schoolhouse. The drug and alcohol policies at district F and district H were enforced if the student participated in an extracurricular or co-curricular activity and was involved in a drug or alcohol incident outside the school day. The U.S. Supreme Court, in two separate decisions, gave LEAs greater authority over students participating in extracurricular and co-curricular activities, citing arguments that these students volunteer to participate in such activities and thus tacitly agree to greater scrutiny by the district (*Vernonia School District v. Acton*, 1995; *Board of Education v. Earls*, 2002).

Both districts’ policies specifically mentioned events such as dances, musical performances, the prom, and commencement as events at which a student’s infractions could justify exclusion. However, district H’s policy (unlike that of district F), stated that “students must be found guilty before they can be disciplined at school for a drug/alcohol related incident that occurred outside the school” (District H SD Policy #.2.d., 2003). District F appeared to take a more assertive position and adhered to a lesser legal standard of “reasonable suspicion.” In other words, district F utilized the same standard of judgment as it did for on-campus, during-the-school-day incidents, where a simple preponderance of evidence is the operative requirement for pursuing disciplinary action.

The specification of the lesser standard of reasonable suspicion for incidents that occurred off school property was an indicator of the assertive approach of district F toward students involved with drugs or alcohol inside or outside the school facility. Although it cannot be inferred from this analysis whether this was a punitive measure

to control student behavior, it can be assumed that the district perceived its authority as reaching beyond the schoolhouse and considered this authority a necessity in order to act more quickly than the judicial process.

**Counseling.** The counseling requirement was the final area of clause analysis. The seven policies all contained counseling statements, but approached the subject with varying degrees of expectation for the school's involvement. All the policies mentioned counseling, but two of the policies mandated counseling and two of the policies required a drug and alcohol assessment. In one of those policies, counseling was not required. District F was different in that it mandated a referral to the school-based student assistance program and 12 hours of counseling. Like the PSBA model and the other policies, district F incorporated the school-based assistance program, but unlike other policies, it mandated a specific period of counseling (i.e., 12 hours) regardless of the circumstances or severity of the incident. The other policies deferred to the local drug and alcohol agencies for counseling requirements, using phrases such as completion of counseling as recommended by a specific agency.

The counseling clause in district F's drug and alcohol policy was significant. The policy appeared to defer to the student assistance program, but then stipulated its own counseling requirement of 12 hours for all students in violation of the policy. The policy stopped short of establishing standards for counseling, but it enabled the service to be provided by a wide range of professionals and programs. This appeared as a tactical clause designed to show nominal respect to the student assistance program while keeping the decision-making power in administrative ranks. Such lack of specificity may also indicate a lack of co-operation and perhaps even trust between private drug and alcohol agencies and the school administration. In addition, the 12 hours of counseling was consistent whether the incident was the first offense or the third offense for a particular student.

Only district A had a similar clause that mandated specific counseling requirements. However, district A required any student disciplined under the policy to complete an education and treatment program called STOP. STOP is managed by a local drug and alcohol agency that employs a scripted program of discussion topics for goal setting. The disciplined student must also participate in a school-based student intervention group. There is no specific time requirement for the student intervention group. District F policy contained no such stipulations beyond the 12-hour counseling requirement.

The policy element differences provide insights into the various districts represented in the study. District F's policy, although structurally similar to the others', had notable differences in student discipline and counseling requirements. Edwards and Nicoll (2001) argue that textual analysis reveals how a policy is reflective of the environment in which it emerged and continues to operate. None of the school districts' policies spoke to the complexity of determining the individual needs of each child in their particular uniqueness under varying circumstances, as in Walker's (1998b) conceptualization of the varied interests of the child. Individual or personal interests of students appeared to be secondary to adult interpreted, defined and driven public and social interests concerning children.

**Semantics and word choice**

The effect of the PSBA on school policy was apparent when comparing semantics and word choice. A tertiary review of the mood between indicative, subjunctive, and imperative verb tense in each policy found only minor differences. One exception was noted in the policy for district G. District G was the largest district with a student population twice that of any other school district in the bounded group. The racial makeup was also different in that 36 percent of its student population is non-white (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2011). The remaining districts in the study all had smaller and less racially diverse student populations. The policy for district G includes a lengthy section dedicated to providing a policy rationale based on national commentary and a local survey conducted in May 1996. None of the other policies in the sample contained such a narrative.

Despite differences in the policies as assessed through the other analysis perspectives, there did not appear to be any meaningful semantic differences in the sample group relative to the issues of school exclusion and counseling. The impact of the PSBA model in structure, semantics, and word choice was apparent in the uniformly neutral tone of the individual policies. Based upon document analysis and informant interviews, such commonalities in word choice were most likely the result of legal guidance through the PSBA than of informal administrative networks.

**Conclusion**

Policy analysis using word choice and organization is valuable in illuminating the politics of discourse in policy arenas and in exploring the relationship between policy texts and their historical, political, social, and cultural contexts (Taylor, 2004). On the surface, policy provides a framework allowing an organization to function. According to Osher and Quinn (2003), policies enable activities to occur, determine the distribution of scarce resources, and enable the transfer of authority. A more critical analysis of policy can illuminate the intricacies of distribution of power and political struggles within an organization. Dissecting the policy and comparing it to similar examples can also reveal organizational characteristics and the perspectives of people who create and enforce the policy. For our purposes, these same analyses yield insights into the ethical and moral implications of pupil personnel policy.

This study sought to illuminate the rationale for seven student drug and alcohol policies that were employed in a specific geospatial region and that were, to varying degrees, disciplinary, punitive, and exclusionary. The researchers considered whether the attitudes of social actors who craft such policies, and of the administrations who enforce them, are governed by an ethic (professional or otherwise) of acting morally and passionately on behalf of students, or whether their attitudes and corresponding actions toward a student in violation of the district drug and alcohol policy were guided by other, non-student-focused considerations, including responding to organizational rule procedures and goals.

Our purpose in this investigation was to uncover how school districts and their communities differ in the design and impact of student drug and alcohol policies and to what extent such policies, as written, are in concert with a professional ethical framework proposed by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) and Stefkovich (2013).

Returning to the initial goals of this research, we would like to draw conclusions about 1) the analysis of pupil personnel policies considered within this study as a test case for the utility and meaningfulness of an ostensibly agreed-upon ethic for the profession of school administration, and 2) the interrogation of pupil personnel policies of the kind analyzed within this study as right, true, good, and praiseworthy in regard to students and their various needs. Are students' needs being served by such policies and are these policies open to critique and revision based upon the theoretical analysis employed?

This study reveals the elaborate delineation of rules indicative of school district organizations that adhere to structural, policy-driven solutions where ultimately rule-following and codified administrative guidance is placed ahead of institutional goal attainment (Bolman & Deal, 2008) or the needs of specific organizational members, particularly students (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Goal displacement, or rule-following at the expense of the purposes for which the rules were written, is a regrettable phenomenon of organizational life. It is as if having a policy and regimentally following it, without variation or critical reflection, will solve organizational "problems" that happen to consist of, under these circumstances, the clientele schools are intended to serve. However, students are not the *problem*, they are the *reason* behind the moral imperative of the goal of an educated society. A clear illustration of the findings reported this research is cogently expressed by Willower and Licata (1997) in this insightful illustration:

An example ... would be when pupil control, which is a means to the end of learning, becomes an end in itself. ... [There is a] distinction between attempted, successful, and effective leadership acts. The first fails in the attempt to devise a structure to deal with a problem, the second successfully puts in place a structure for problem resolution, and the third puts such a structure in place and is effective, that is, it resolves the problem. (pp. 30–31)

Most organizations, especially those whose intended outcomes are, will exhibit a variety of successful, but not very effective, structures. We are all familiar with the committee that was praised for its efforts but did little to resolve the problem it was created to address. Successful but ineffective structures can sometimes contribute to the resolution of problems other than those that they were charged to solve, such as when a committee set up to deal with the problem of drug use in schools helps improve public relations while failing to influence drug use. Administrators need to be sensitive to subtle problems such as goal displacement and successful but ineffective structures if they are to move their organizations forward in substantive ways.

In the case of a professional ethic for educational administration, and essentially implicating those who are cultural workers at any and all institutional levels who are focused on developing and imparting tools to the next generation and beyond, this ethic has been viewed as a redundancy (Green, 1987). According to Green (1987) and others, professions are defined by the logic of their goals toward, and definitional relationships with, a larger public. By sheer virtue of a profession's internal character and structure, normative qualities emerge within it that either include

or exclude those from practice. In addition, the very meaning of the maxim, “the best interests of the student,” appears to be varied and indeterminate thanks to the multiplicity of circumstance and context.

With the above critique in mind, this research brings forward a paradox between equality and equity (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016) as they pertain to more fully conceptualizing what it means to *serve the best interests of the student*. The paradox of equal versus equitable treatment is not new (Aristotle, trans. 1989), and this research illustrates the complexity of ethical decision-making among competing constructs of school administrative morality and right conduct, especially as pertaining to the interpretation and execution of pupil personnel policy. Policy-driven equal treatment of students, for the sake of efficiency, expedience, consistency, or even public relations, can result in unfair treatment, because relevant characteristics and circumstances of students differ and require varying and unique responses. Equitable treatment means unequal treatment and response, whether supported by policy or not, precisely in order to be fair. Drug and alcohol school exclusion policies clearly do not meet an equitable standard of fairness and therefore do not effectively respond to the best interests of each individual student.

The zero tolerance, exclusionary policies examined in this study serve as a test case for the utility of the ostensibly agreed-upon ethical framework (Frick, 2011) that guides this study. How can such a test case be useful for practitioners who are open to questioning their own decision-making? School leaders often look to the parameters of law and promulgated district policy in order to make final decisions when student discipline cases arise. Clearly, school districts are on firm legal ground with school exclusion policies (Fischer, Schimmel, & Stellman, 2007). But what is legal is not necessarily ethical. Punishing and excluding students and thereby exposing them to the compounding affects of school disconnectedness does not take into account individual students’ best interests. The students’ needs are not clearly met and their success (academic or otherwise) is not sufficiently promoted (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). School leaders and other school officials take on the responsibility of maintaining drug and alcohol free school environments. If zero tolerance policies worked as intended and ensured this type of learning environment for students, there would be no need for studies such as this one. Educational leaders would be wise to reconsider the unreflecting application of current drug and alcohol policies given the volume of literature indicating their detrimental effects on students and the lack of evidence supporting their effectiveness. These policies are only one tool educators have on hand to address the complex, and often challenging, school discipline issues they face daily. The test case of this policy analysis problematizes the taken-for-granted, naïve perspective that societal structures and properties are simply the way things are. Reasoning and acting ethically means navigating the paradoxes inherent in leading and managing within an institutional position, on the one hand, and being an activist against practices and procedures that do not support democratic processes, freedom, and social justice, on the other (Kozol, 2005).

The ethic of the profession calls for a discriminating leadership response to others, particularly children and youth, and this obliges administrators to engage in an elevated critical consciousness and reflective practice about our larger social world, its institu-



tions, and the dynamics of power and privilege. Most of the policies in this study are clearly replicative and conform to external policy guidance. While some policies appear to attend to individual student differences through required counseling services or by other means, the policies do not explicitly encourage thoughtful administrative discretion based on a professional ethic. Although this can jeopardize the best interests of the individual student, particularly in relation to policy structures that shape social reality, thoughtful administrators can re-envision student discipline policies. In this sense, the Ethic of the Profession and its Model for Students' Best Interests (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Stefkovich, 2013) has great utility in its formulation of professional moral authority for carrying out the fuller purposes of schooling.

One consistency among scholars and practitioners alike is their expressed need for innovative approaches to dealing with student behavior issues. There is a missing element in the basic premise of pupil control and safety: specifically, the needs of the offender are not valued or addressed (Mackey & Stefkovich, 2010). Until school policies and related practices reflect a commitment to serving the best interests of students, both as individuals *and* as a collective, and school leaders decrease their reliance on exclusion as a means of guiding student behavior, the unintended consequences of "one size fits all" policy strategies will continue unabated.

## Notes

1. School exclusion is defined as the removal of a student from school and school activities for at least one but not more than 10 school days. Exclusions greater than 10 consecutive school days constitute expulsion.
2. Patterson, DeBaryshe, and Ramsey (1989) describe the process of delinquent behavior as beginning with a lack of positive family interaction, leading to school failure and social rejection, then leading to membership in a deviant peer group.
3. The state of Pennsylvania is divided into 29 Intermediate Units. Each Intermediate Unit is a state educational entity that provides development and support services for local school districts in its region.
4. The incentive section of the policy provides an opportunity for students who voluntarily admit to a drug or alcohol problem to receive counseling under the policy without school exclusion. To take effect, the student must request to be placed under the incentive section prior to being in violation of the policy and it is available only once to each student.

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Stamm, Frick,  
& Mackey

*Ethics and Student  
Drug and Alcohol  
Policies*

**Appendix: Comparison of Student Drug and Alcohol Policies**

	Adopted	Revised	School Exclusion	Length of Exclusion	Assessment or Counseling Required	Off School Property	Days Removed from Activities
A	02/16 1981	08/15 2006	yes	5 First Offense - 10 Second Offense	STOP Program or similar program through West Branch Drug / Alcohol and attend school based student intervention group.	Applies only to students involved in extra/co curricular activities and/or students with parking privileges.	60 Days First Violation. 365 Days Second Violation. Permanent Third Violation
B	10/14 1985 PSBA Model	07/19 2004	no	Superintendent or designee will prepare rules for length of exclusion and/or expulsion	Board may require assessment and participation in prevention programs	Direct Nexus for students involved in extra/co curricular activities.	None specified
C	05/13 1987	08/18 2004	no	May be excluded from school	Counseling documentation may need to be provided.	No. Policy states that it applies only while under school jurisdiction.	None specified
D	10/10 2004	02/22 2005	no	None specified	Counseling documentation may need to be provided.	None specified	None specified
E	NA	07/18 2006	yes	5 Min. First Offense - 10 Min. Second Offense	Counseling required as recommended by a DA agency.	No. Policy states that it applies only while under school jurisdiction.	25 Days First Offense. 40 Days or balance of season second offense. Permanent Third Violation.
F	11/14 2083	08/07 2006	yes	10 Min. First Offense - 10 Min. Second Offense or Expulsion	12 hours of counseling meeting at least 1 time per week. Confirmation of counseling arrangements must be provided in 7 days to principal.	All students involved in extracurricular activities including athletics / dances / performances / commencement	4 Week Probation (practice only). 365 days for second offense. Permanent for Third Offense.
G	01/17 1995	07/11 1995	Yes	Not specified for First Offense - 10 and Expulsion Hearing before Board	Community referral for drug and alcohol assessment with 7 days. Refer to SAP team.	Yes for students involved in extra and co-curricular activities. Must be found guilty.	60 days from the day reported to school personnel First Offense. Permanent for subsequent offenses or 3 years.
H	11/21 1983	02/28 2002	Yes	Not specified for First Offense - 10 and Expulsion Hearing before Board	Community referral for drug and alcohol assessment with 7 days. Refer to SAP team.	Yes for students involved in extra and co-curricular activities. Must be found guilty.	60 days from the day reported to school personnel First Offense. Permanent for subsequent offenses or 3 years.