

An Educator's Primer on the School Policy Process



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Overview

Evidence shows that promoting a safe and supportive school environment can help children and adolescents feel more connected at school, and that youth who feel more connected are less likely to experience poor mental health, sexual health risks, substance use, and violence.¹ Critical components of the school environment are state, local, and school policies that have the potential to affect students' social, emotional, and physical health and whether they feel connected to their school. Not all school professionals have the resources or training on what policy is, how policies are developed, or how the policy design and implementation process works. School policy is a complex process with multiple stakeholders. This guide seeks to demystify the school policy process for educators and other supporters of students and schools.

About This Guide

An Educator's Primer on the School Policy Process is ChangeLab Solutions' resource for those who want to learn at a high level about the intricacies of the school policy process. Policies play a significant role in shaping the school environment and students' educational and health outcomes.^{2,3} This resource explores the following core questions:

- What is policy generally? What is school policy? How are school policies shaped by the different levels of government and school authority?
- What are the five steps of the policy process? What is the importance of engaging key partners and centering equity throughout the policy process?
- What additional resources can provide more information about the policy process?



Definitions

The following terms and concepts are used throughout this guide. These definitions are presented to clarify the meanings of these words in order to make understanding the content in this guide easier.

Law versus Policy: A policy is a law, regulation, procedure, administrative action, incentive, or voluntary practice of governments and other institutions.⁴ A law is the codification and institutionalization of a policy, typically written by a legislative body such as Congress.⁵ Note that all laws are policies, but not all policies are laws.

Equality versus Equity: Equality is achieved when the same, one-size-fits-all solution is applied to everyone regardless of need. Equity places a focus on giving each person what they need to thrive and acknowledges that not everyone starts off at the same place. What one person or population needs might be different from what another needs. When decision makers fail to develop policies with equity in mind, the potential for efforts, even well-intentioned ones, may reinforce or even widen inequities.⁶

Health Equity: This is a state in which everyone has the opportunity to attain their full health potential and no one is disadvantaged in achieving this potential because of social position or any other socially defined circumstance.⁷

Community: This is a group of people who are located in a particular geographic area. Alternatively, it is a group of people who share a common identity or characteristic but may not be located in a single geographic area.⁸

Inclusion: This is the act of creating an environment in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued.⁹ Inclusion also encompasses authentically bringing traditionally excluded individuals or groups into processes, activities, and decision making in an equitable manner.¹⁰

School Environment: This is a complex, dynamic system comprising a school's facilities, classroom practices, school-based health supports, and disciplinary policies and practices.¹¹

Safe and Supportive Environment (SSE): A safe and supportive school environment is one that is successful at connecting students to a network of caring peers and adults, including teachers, parents, and other primary caregivers.¹² Students who experience safe and supportive school environments are less likely to engage in risky sexual, violent, or substance use behaviors.¹³

What Is Policy?

When people hear the word *policy*, they often think of an ordinance made by a city council or a law made by a state legislature. However, policies encompass much more than that, and legislatures aren't the only entities that create them. Both public and private organizations, including schools, make policies.¹⁴ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) define *policy* as "a law, regulation, procedure, administrative action, incentive, or voluntary practice of governments and other institutions."¹⁵ In schools, policies serve as a foundation for school district practices and procedures.¹⁶ They provide guidance, direction, information, and support for everyone in the school system.¹⁷ Policies also reassure families, students, and school staff that protective measures for health and safety are in place.¹⁸ But to understand policies, it's important to review the levels of government and school authority. The next section elucidates both topics in the context of school policies.

Levels of Government and School Authority

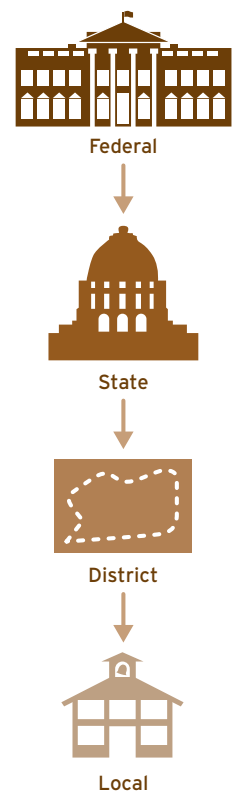
There are three levels of government: federal, state, and local. Government authority, including the power to create and enforce laws related to education, is divided among these three levels. School governance mirrors the overall U.S. governance structure.¹⁹ As such, schools are governed by an intricate design of federal, state, and local laws and policies.²⁰

Federal authority is granted by the U.S. Constitution. Some powers are expressly stated, or enumerated, by Article I, section 8 of the Constitution. These powers are unique to federal authority. Other powers are implied but necessary to carry out expressly stated powers.²¹ Additionally, some powers are concurrent, or shared, with the states.²² At the federal level:

- The U.S. Congress adopts federal legislation and budget appropriations affecting schools that are then generally implemented by the U.S. Department of Education.
- The U.S. Department of Education is currently authorized by Congress to disburse and monitor federal financial aid for education, collect nationwide data on schools to identify core issues in U.S. education, and promote equal access to education.²³

The U.S. Department of Education also plays a key role in education policy and guidance through programs and initiatives that measure student success. Several of its offices carry out these activities – for example:

- The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) administers the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), also known as "The Nation's Report Card." Through NAEP, the U.S. Department of Education collects information about student achievement across various subjects at state and local levels, as well as across student demographics.²⁴ Decision makers, researchers, and educators use this NAEP information to inform educational improvements across the nation.²⁵



- The department's Office of the Civil Rights also serves as the enforcement arm of federal laws that ensure equitable access to education, such as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (prohibiting racial discrimination); Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (prohibiting sex discrimination); and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (prohibiting disability discrimination and mandating certain accessibility requirements for people of different abilities).²⁶

State authority is granted by the U.S. Constitution through the Tenth Amendment, which grants states police power. In spite of its name, the police power extends beyond law enforcement. It encompasses the power of states – and, by delegation, local governments – to promote the public health, safety, and general well-being of the community. In fact, protecting the public's health is one of the core purposes of state and local government.²⁷ Similar to the federal level, state departments of education are usually responsible for:

- Funding statewide public education²⁸
- Providing licensing and chartering guidelines for private institutions
- Overseeing local school boards
- Setting state-level curricula and assessment standards
- Developing and communicating credential requirements for teachers and other school staff
- Overseeing education accommodations for people with disabilities and other in-need populations²⁹

For specific information on the school governance structure in your state, refer to your state's education agency on the U.S. Department of Education's list of state contacts.³⁰ For state-by-state comparisons on school governance, refer to the Education Commission of the States' 50-state comparison on K–12 governance.³¹

Local authority consists of delegated powers – those that are delegated to local governments by the state. At the local level, the powers delegated to schools vary across states. However, most states typically consist of school districts and individual schools:

- School districts are often their own special units of government, meaning that they are separate from city or county governments. School districts usually oversee public schools and have the power to set local school policies and budgets, the day-to-day operations of district schools, staff development and training, and specific curriculum as long as it falls within state guidelines.³²
- Individual schools are led by principals and school-specific leadership who can set policies, such as student discipline and personnel training, with potentially some input from teachers and staff within the school.³³ Whatever policies schools adopt, they must comply with school district, state, and federal requirements. As a result, some schools may have broader authority to enact certain policies than others.



TIP

State versus local control over school policy development may vary by jurisdiction. Remember to refer to your state's specific organizational structure or consult an attorney in your state.







TIP

To learn more about the precise governance structure in your district, visit your school district's website or contact your local school board.

How Do the Different Levels of Government and School Authority Affect School Policies?

The United States generally has a decentralized education system based on the U.S. Constitution, which reserves power over education to the states and local authorities, as well as to individual schools and higher education institutions.^{34,35} As a result, policies may be adopted at the federal, state, school district, or school level. The table shown here provides examples that highlight the distinction between school policies at different levels of authority.

Level of Government	Policy
 Federal	The U.S. Department of Education develops regulations that prioritize funding allocations for schools with high concentrations of students from low-income families.
 State	A state department of education adopts a policy that requires all teachers to have a bachelor's degree to be certified to teach at public schools.
 District	A school board adopts a policy requiring all high schools within the district to provide students access to mental health services.
 School	A local middle school adopts a zero-tolerance policy against bullying and cyberbullying.

School policies across levels of authority may interact with each other. For example, consider sexual health and HIV prevention instruction in school environments:

1. A state may adopt a law requiring comprehensive sexual health and HIV prevention instruction in their schools but may leave it up to local school boards to determine when to introduce content and how to involve parents or guardians.
2. The school board for a local school district may then adopt policies that outline how it will implement state requirements across the school district, including:
 - a. How to develop the curriculum (e.g., whether to appoint a task force to review material to implement in the course curriculum)
 - b. Determining the learning objectives for the course
 - c. Determining what grade to begin introducing the curriculum material in students' coursework³⁶
3. The school may adopt a policy providing professional development opportunities to teachers assigned to teach HIV prevention instruction.

The reality is that not all policies across the various levels of government always work neatly together, and at times, overlapping requirements may lead to confusion. It is therefore important to understand how the levels of government, as well as the levels of school authority, may affect policy in any specific school setting.

What Steps Are Involved in the Policy Process?

This guide is intended to help readers navigate the policy process. Although the specific details of the policy process will likely look different depending on the type of policy (e.g., changes to curriculum requirements, school discipline policies, budget allocation for linking students to community resources) and the level in which the policy is being implemented (e.g., state, school district, school, or classroom), the policy process generally follows the steps depicted in the image shown here.

NOTE

This section contains a basic overview of the policy process. For a more detailed explanation of the policy process, refer to ChangeLab Solutions' [Pathways to Policy playbook](#) and CDC's [Policy Process](#).



As the circular diagram suggests, the policy process is iterative. “Centering equity” and “engaging key partners” are at the center of this process. These activities can be integrated across all parts of the policy process. We now offer a basic overview of the policy process, as well as guiding questions and actions to consider at each phase.



STEP 1: Problem Identification

Problem identification has two core actions:

- 1 Clearly identifying the root cause of a problem.
- 2 Developing a detailed problem statement that includes the problem's effect on a population's health

At this stage, decision makers often connect with key partners to reflect people's lived realities, identify the problem's root cause, as well as help frame the problem accurately. Decision makers finish this phase when they have a good sense of what the problem is, who is affected, how big the problem is, what contributes to the problem, and when and where the problem is most likely to occur.

School District Example: A high school health education teacher's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ+) students frequently ask her about safer-sex practices for same-sex and nonbinary couples. The teacher reaches out to the school health nurse about her observation, and the school nurse notes some students who visit have expressed interest in more resources on the topic. After some research, the health education teacher notices that safer-sex education for same-sex and nonbinary couples is not taught currently in the health education curriculum. The teacher confirms this during a meeting with the district curriculum director. The teacher asks other health education colleagues in the district if they notice this gap and they do. Together, they brainstorm how to address the gap and write a statement that articulates this issue. The teachers also consult with school district administrators with school policy experience, such as the local superintendent, for guidance in navigating through the stages of the school policy process.

State Example: Educators in a state, according to a recent survey, report feeling inadequately equipped to support students who identify as LGBTQ+. State legislators are interested in better equipping the educator workforce to foster safe and supportive school environments for their students. The legislators convene a committee to look into this issue. After gathering more information, the legislators identify a statewide need to develop an LGBTQ+ training curriculum on cultural competency for educators in the state. They write this finding in a statement to present to the other legislators at the next meeting.



STEP 2: Policy Analysis

Once a problem is identified, policy analysis may begin. This step entails identifying potential policy options that could address the problem identified in step 1 and then comparing those options to choose the most effective, efficient, and feasible one. Ultimately, the goal is for decision makers to land on one or a few potential policy options. In identifying possible policy options, they may consider the impact, cost of implementation, and feasibility of each option.

When assessing feasibility, decision makers often note any barriers that could prevent a policy option from being developed, enacted, implemented, or enforced. For example, in the school context, funding and preemption can be potential barriers to feasibility.³⁷

School District Example: Together, the high school health education teachers gather information on how schools in other districts address safer-sex education for same-sex couples. They take note of content that spans across curricula, is backed by scientific evidence, and is representative of various gender expressions, gender identities, and sexual orientations.

State Example: The legislators agree to continue looking into how to develop a sustainable training curriculum to support educators across the state. They gather information on how neighboring states implemented similar trainings, if any. They also look into how they implemented other statewide trainings for educators in the past, such as sexual harassment trainings and emergency response trainings. The legislators take note that in addition to the development of the training itself, it's crucial to consider which state agency should develop the training, how to keep track of who completes the training, how to determine how often the training needs to be completed, and other logistics related to a sustainable rollout of a new training series.

STEP 3: Strategy and Policy Development

After completing their policy analysis, decision makers will plan how to develop, draft, and prepare the policy option for enactment. They'll likely want to ensure it is actionable, that is, likely to work. Decision makers may find it helpful at this juncture to reach out to individuals who may be affected by the policy, community members and leaders, and people who understand how the policy option will be implemented or can identify any potential barriers to enactment. Decision makers will know this stage is complete when there is a clear strategy for policy enactment that identifies steps to enactment and addresses any potential barriers to enactment. In addition, they are ready to proceed to the next step when the policy option is drafted and clearly shows how it will work (including what additional information or resources may be needed for policy implementation).

School District Example: The high school health education teachers review their school district's guidance and policies on health education curricula. In their research, they use CDC's Health Education Curriculum Analysis Tool³⁸ to analyze their existing health education curriculum and identify areas for improvement. They then share their findings with the appropriate school and district administrators. Together, they identify a new evidence-based health education curriculum that meets the needs of the community and complies with district and state guidance and policy on health education.

State Example: The legislators in charge of developing the law to require LGBTQ+ cultural competency training for educators consider the factors named in step 2, such as which agency should develop the training, which agency should administer and oversee the training rollout, and so on. The legislators convene with their colleagues who worked on a similar initiative on mental health and wellness training for educators in the state. The legislators identify the state department of education as the appropriate agency to develop and oversee the training, based on factors such as prior experience rolling out similar trainings, funding, and human resources.



STEP 4: Implementation

This stage requires enactment: getting official permission (the “green light”) to implement a policy. As mentioned, policies can be enacted at multiple organizational levels, from school districts to federal agencies. In order to implement a policy at whatever level, it must be authorized. For example, implementing new physical activity guidelines for schools requires an official go-ahead, whether through a vote by the local school board or by passing a bill in the state legislature. Each school district may have a slightly different process.

After the policy is enacted, it can proceed to implementation. At this stage, the people implementing the policy will likely need to keep in mind the desired outcomes, identify resources that can help implement the policy (e.g., funding, staffing, infrastructure), and identify who is involved in implementation (including those who will be affected by the new policy). It is also important to consider who will monitor and enforce the policy and how to measure the policy’s efficacy.

School District Example: Once the new health education curriculum is identified, the high school teachers assist with piloting that curriculum and observe how students, teachers, parents, and other caregivers receive the curriculum. The teachers also take note of areas in which the curriculum can be improved further. As part of the process, the teachers engage decision makers, community members, parents and other caregivers, and students to collect feedback on growth areas for the curriculum.



State Example: Once the policy option is enacted, the state department of education can move on to developing the LGBTQ+ cultural competency training curriculum. The legislators assist the state department in development where needed and take note of areas in which the curriculum can continue to grow, as well as feedback from teachers who are retained to pilot the developing material. The state department of education also reaches out to LGBTQ+ organizations to ensure that the material being developed is accurate and appropriate for the intended audiences.



STEP 5: Evaluation

After a policy is adopted and implemented, it is important to collect data to see how well it is working and if it is achieving its intended goals. Evaluators will assess the data they collect to answer the following questions:

- Is the policy working as decision makers intended?
- Is the policy reaching the community members it was intended to serve?
- Is the policy being equitably implemented and enforced?

Policy evaluators can make this determination in several ways.³⁹ For example, they may want to examine whether the policy is enforced too strictly and creates a burden or harm that falls on certain members of the school community over others. It could monitor whether, for instance, a prohibitive policy leads to increased detentions or suspensions among students of a specific demographic. Or evaluators may examine whether the policy is not serving the community members it was intended to support. In this case, evaluators could also collect data to determine if a specific policy improves student health outcomes over time.

As part of this evaluation, evaluators may also:

- Engage the school community to assess the policy and collect the data necessary to answer the questions of what's working and what's not as it relates to the policy.
- Seek feedback from those implementing the policy to identify any additional tools that would assist them in making the policy more effective and implementation more equitable.
- Consider what is needed to make implementation and enforcement long term and sustainable.

School District Example: The high school health education teachers set up an evaluation committee to oversee the pilot of the new curriculum for the incoming school year. The committee keeps track of data points for implementation success with other colleagues. At the six-month mark of implementation, the committee's data show that the new course material is easy to incorporate into existing lesson plans according to fellow teachers. The data also show an increase in students visiting the school health office for resources on HIV/STD prevention, including LGBTQ students. A health education teacher shares student insights on Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) representation in the teaching material for the new curriculum. This insight will be used to update the teaching material for the following year.

State Example: After the policy option is enacted and implemented, the legislators, in partnership with the state department of education, set up a committee to oversee the rollout of the new training for the incoming cohort of new teachers. The committee keeps track of data points for implementation success. After receiving feedback, the committee continues to improve the training series over the next year before implementing it as required training for all teachers in the state.



TIP

To get a better idea of what policies look like in real time, there are policy trackers that compile and track school policy reform across districts and states – for example:

- ACLU Legislative Tracker on Legislative Reform in Schools that Affect LGBTQ+ Students: www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights?impact=school
- Education Commission of the States 2024 State Education Policy Watch List: www.ecs.org/state-education-policy-watch-list
- National Conference of State Legislatures | Education Legislation | Bill Tracking: www.ncsl.org/education/education-legislation-bill-tracking

Centering Equity and Engaging Key Partners

Policy can change physical environments, community norms, and the way organizations and systems operate.^{40,41} It has the potential to affect the decisions and behaviors of entire populations within and outside of schools.^{42,43} Although policy is just one tool used to improve health outcomes of schools, it often achieves significant results more efficiently than programs do by themselves.⁴⁴ In addition to navigating the stages of the policy process, it's also important to center equity throughout all stages. One way to do that is to know what drives inequity, why these drivers exist, and how our systems and society perpetuate inequity. There are five drivers of inequity:^{45,46,47}

- Structural racism and structural discrimination
- Income inequality and poverty
- Disparities in opportunity, such as fewer curriculum offerings and supports for students with learning disabilities
- Disparities in political power, such as lack of BIPOC representation on the school board
- Governance that limits meaningful participation

These drivers shape places, school environments, living conditions, and people's daily experiences. They lead to inequities and are directly related to historical and current imbalances in social, political, economic, and environmental resources.^{48,49} In the school context, these drivers play a significant role in health and educational outcomes of students.⁵⁰ Youth from socially disadvantaged populations are more likely to experience

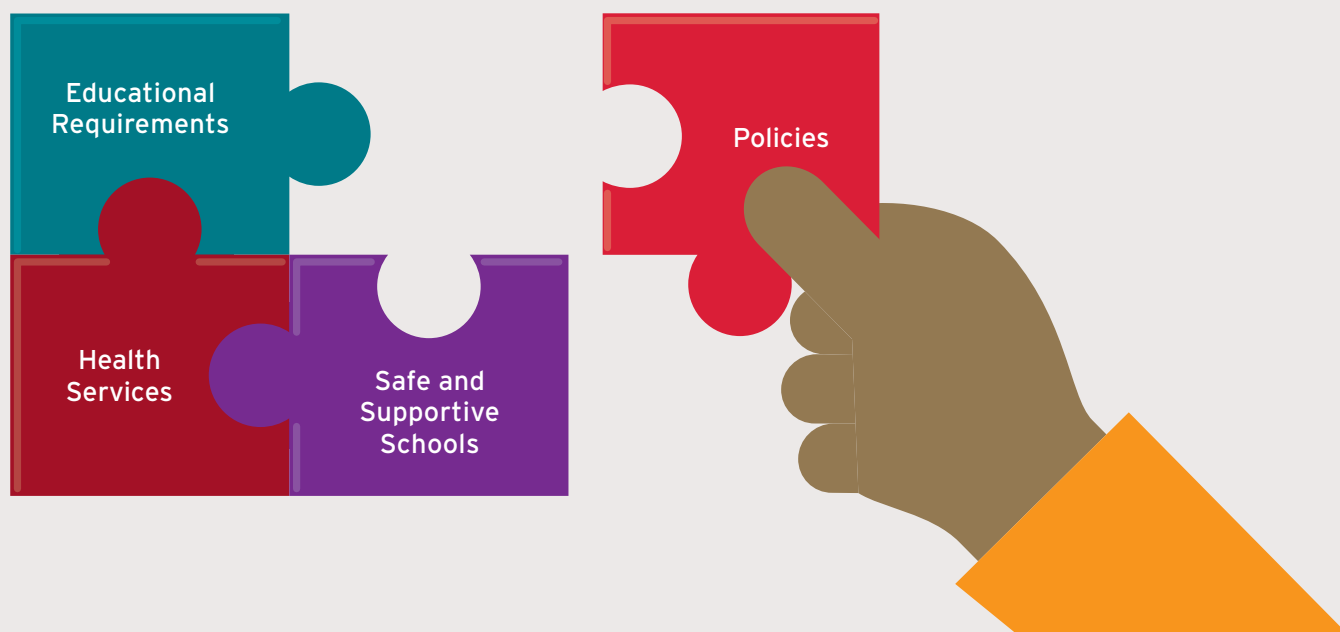
health disparities, defined by the CDC as “preventable differences in the burden of disease, injury, violence, or opportunities to achieve optimal health that are experienced by socially disadvantaged populations.”⁵¹ Some examples of health disparities include increased sexual risk behaviors, STD/STI/HIV diagnoses, teenage pregnancy, and substance abuse.^{52,53,54} These drivers also have an impact on educational opportunities and resources that bear on student educational outcomes, such as access to learning technology, qualified and skilled teachers, and tutoring.^{55,56}

The effects of inequity are not always apparent, and sometimes even a well-intentioned, nondiscriminatory policy can have a disparate impact, that is, an “adverse effect of a practice or policy that is neutral and nondiscriminatory in its intention but nonetheless disproportionately affects individuals belonging to a particular race or ethnicity.”⁵⁷ To avoid disparate impacts and to avoid perpetuating health and educational inequities, decision makers may reach out and engage the local community and key partners and gather data and information to identify and refine policy options.⁵⁸

REMEMBER: POLICIES ARE JUST ONE PART OF THE LARGER PUZZLE

The strongest policies are those that work in tandem with other policies, programs, and educational campaigns.

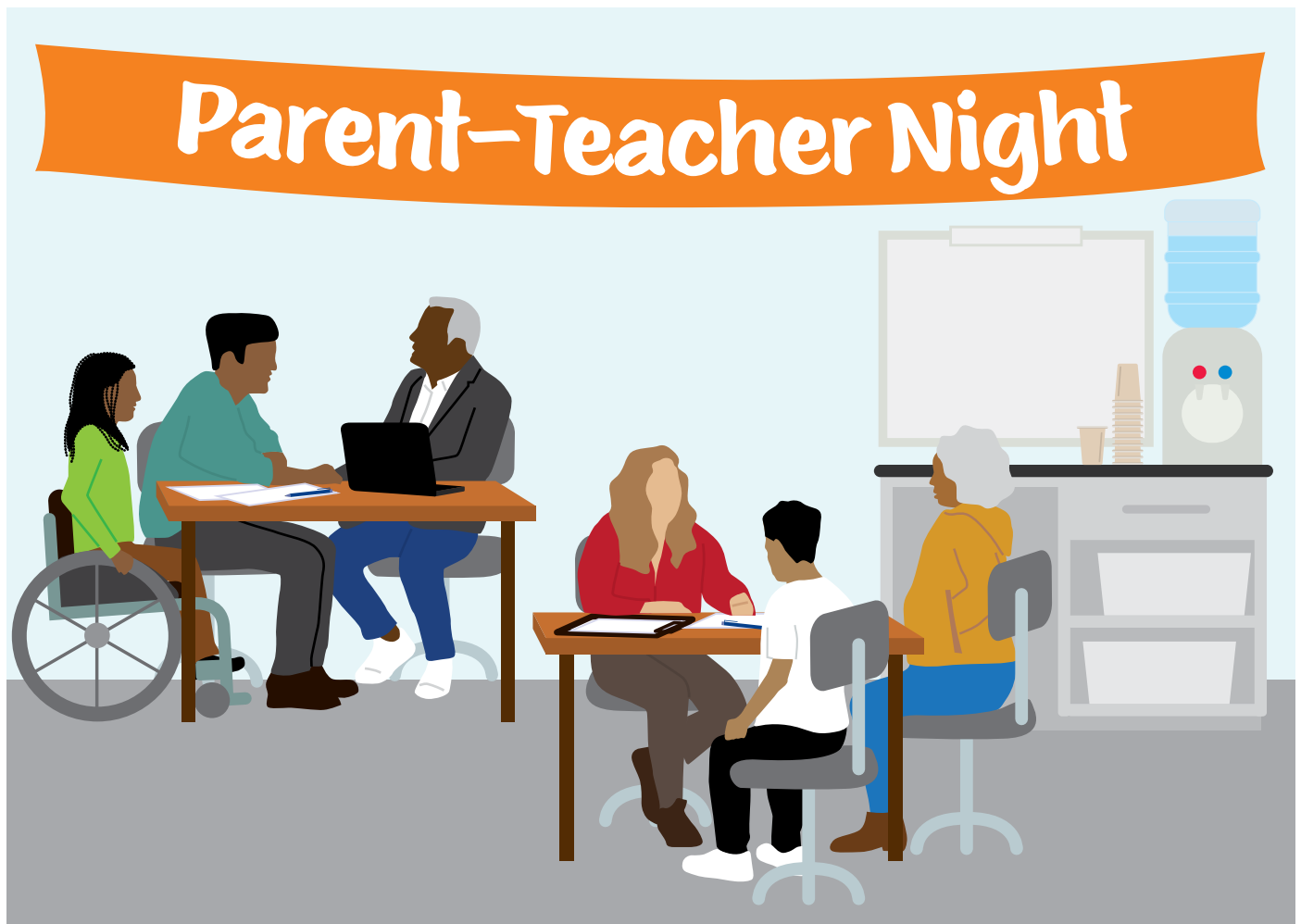
For example, consider how some school districts adopt policies to minimize the risk of HIV and STD/STI transmission in students. They might adopt a policy that requires schools within their district to teach students about the health risks associated with HIV and STD/STIs. These education requirements may have a strong impact when they are combined with policies that make condom and sexual health services widely available and policies that support safe and supportive environments within schools.⁵⁹



Conclusion

School environments have a significant impact on students' lives and long-term health outcomes, and all students deserve to attend schools where they can learn, grow, and thrive. Implementing health-promoting policies can improve students' experiences. Since their needs are vast and complex, it is important to learn about how school policies are developed and implemented.⁶⁰ By understanding the tools of policy, members of the school environment can be better equipped to address the levers that affect students' experiences and health outcomes.⁶¹

We also recommend watching our companion video "[How Do Schools Affect Adolescent Physical and Mental Health, and What Can Schools Do to Strengthen Students' Overall Health?](#)," which provides insights on the importance of school policies that foster student connectedness and safe, supportive school environments.



Additional Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Adolescent and School Health

- What Works In Schools
www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/whatworks/index.htm
- School Connectedness Helps Students Thrive
www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/school-connectedness.htm
- Inclusive Practices Help All Students Thrive
www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/safe-supportive-environments/LGBTQ-policies-practices.htm
- YRBSS Data Summary & Trends
www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/yrbs_data_summary_and_trends.htm

Policy Process Resources

TOOLKITS

- Long Beach Office of Equity, Equity Toolkit for City Leaders and Staff
www.longbeach.gov/globalassets/health/media-library/documents/healthy-living/office-of-equity/city-of-long-beach-office-of-equity-toolkit
- Government Alliance on Race and Equity, Racial Equity Toolkit
www.racialequityalliance.org/viewdocument/racial-equity-toolkit-an-opportuni-2
- Learning Policy Institute, Whole Child Policy Toolkit
www.wholechildpolicy.org
- White House Toolkit on Federal Resources to Support Community Schools
www.communityschools.org/resource/white-house-toolkit-federal-resources-to-support-community-schools

GUIDES

- The CDC Policy Process
www.cdc.gov/policy/polaris/policyprocess/index.html
- ChangeLab Solutions, Pathways to Policy Playbook
www.changelabsolutions.org/product/pathways-policy
- ChangeLab Solutions, What Is Policy?
www.changelabsolutions.org/product/what-policy
- ChangeLab Solutions, Overview of State Agency Rulemaking
www.changelabsolutions.org/product/know-rules
- ChangeLab Solutions, Equitable Enforcement to Achieve Health Equity
www.changelabsolutions.org/product/equitable-enforcement-achieve-health-equity
- National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, School Climate Improvement Action Guides
<https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/scirp/action-guides>
- U.S. Department of Education, Guiding Principles for Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive, and Fair School Climates
www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf

MODEL POLICIES

- California Department of Education, Model Local School Wellness Policy
www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/he/wellness
- Child Trends, State Policies that Support Healthy Schools
www.childtrends.org/publications/state-policies-that-support-healthy-schools

Understanding the School Environment

- Examining the Relationship between LGBTQ-Supportive School Health Policies and Practices and Psychosocial Health Outcomes of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Students
www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/lgbt.2021.0133
- Dosage in Implementation of an Effective School-Based Health Program Impacts Youth Health Risk Behaviors and Experiences
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35660127>
- Adolescent Connectedness and Adult Health Outcomes
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31235609>
- Local Education Agency Impact on School Environments to Reduce Health Risk Behaviors and Experiences among High School Students
www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1054139X21004006?dgcid=coauthor
- Creating Supportive Schools: 5 Promising Areas for Policy Change
www.changelabsolutions.org/blog/safe-supportive-schools
- Journal of Law, Medicine, & Ethics: Health Equity, School Discipline Reform, and Restorative Justice
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1073110519857316>
- American Consortium for Equity in Education, The Impact of Inequitable School Funding: Solutions for Struggling Schools without the Money to Fully Help Struggling Students
www.ace-ed.org/inequitable-school-funding

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- 5 Introduction to U.S. law and policy. Science Safety Security, Finding Balance Together. Updated February 15, 2018. phe.gov/s3/law/Pages/default.aspx#
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