

## Introduction

Creating sustainable school mental health systems is a cornerstone of school mental health initiatives. Movements led by local and state leaders across the country ensure coordinated and comprehensive school-based services thrive and meet the needs of school community members. This requires learning how to translate the creative, innovative, and solution-focused work of school-based services for mental health initiatives (e.g., Project AWARE, Safe and Supportive Schools) from the local to the state level. One way to do that? Policy.

Synthesizing highlights, themes, and wisdom shared from school-based policy peers across the country, this learning capture provides local and state school professionals a general introduction to leadership approaches that are essential to school-based mental health policy design (foundations), with excerpts from voices of experience nationwide.

## WHAT ARE THESE LEARNING CAPTURES?

In April 2021, NTTAC hosted state and local school systems leaders from across the country. These leaders shared their experiences about what issues are most urgent when it comes to school mental health; what policies have been the most helpful for leaders and those they serve; and what youth need most right now.<sup>1</sup>

Collaboration, mutuality, and peer support are cornerstone principles of trauma-informed approaches to systems change. As such, we gathered school leaders from across the country in a two-part discussion and dialogue (August 2021).

We offer this to local, state, and school-based leaders as guidance, connection, validation, and encouragement in creating policy definition and design that supports the health of children, youth, families, and educators. We offer insights and strategies for schools to identify and dismantle policies that harm members of the school community. Each discussion is captured in a document intended to accompany the recorded conversations. The four conversations (two panels each) have each been condensed and edited for clarity. This is Part 1 ([see Part 2 here](#)).

## WHAT IS SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH AND SCHOOL-BASED MENTAL HEALTH POLICY ALL ABOUT?

*In all four of the policy learning forums, we opened with six fundamental pillars to school-based mental health policy. These six pillars are offered to build a shared consensus about why school-based mental health policy matters; what it can mean and how we can understand it; and why it is connected to other movements and school leadership initiatives.*

- » **School-Based Policies are Health Policies:** If we frame school mental health policy as general health policy, we commit to recognizing that all school policy impacts the mental health of the school community, even when it is not explicitly related to mental health. When understood this way, special education accommodation policy is school mental health policy; employee bereavement policy is school mental health policy, testing standards policy is mental health policy. We're inviting each other to widen the definition of what policy can be used to achieve collective health, to rehumanize our bodies and spirits in school institutions, and forge systems from a holistic space.
- » **Policy Leadership is Leading Towards Anti-Racism:** Policies are not neutral. They are informed by our biases (implicit and explicit); the needs of those we prioritize (and historically prioritized or not); and are often written and implemented through lenses of privilege and power. School policy has historically reinforced systems and tools that reproduce inequity. Commitment to equity demands that school-based mental health policy leadership be fundamental to anti-racist efforts.
- » **Policies are Issues of Legacy and Sustainability:** This work happened before us and will continue to happen long after we're gone. Sustainability doesn't always mean positive impact; it can perpetuate harm as well as support positive impact. School-based mental health policy leadership acknowledges both realities and possibilities.
- » **Safety Is the Motor Engine:** Safety is the way a school or school system feels and helps establish trusting relationships between students and adults. We need to hold ourselves to our standards even when it's difficult. Safety is a school-based mental health policy's motor engine; without safety present when designing or implementing policy, the policy is not going to result in mental health equity.
- » **Make the Implicit Explicit:** Every word we put in our policy holds a message about our belief system. Policies hold a wealth of data to surface these internalized belief systems. By examining the policies in place in our school communities and systems, by explicitly defining the who, how, and why of a policy, we lead with more transparency and trustworthiness.
- » **School-Based Services are Organizational Self-Care:** School-based mental health policies are not just for students. They are for the adults, too. The staff, faculty, and workforce in a school community are central to school-based policy leadership; we can't create policies for our students without creating policies that ensure the wellbeing of our educators.

<sup>1</sup> Missed the introduction to school-based services policy session in April 2021? [Check out the materials here.](#)

This learning capture is composed of excerpts from the two panels' discussions that took place on August 24, 2021: "The What & Why: Foundations of School Based Policy."

## The What & Why: Foundations of School-Based Policy

**Define** (How do we talk about policy across roles and responsibilities?)

**Design** (How might we design policies that are student, family, and educator centered?)

**Dismantle** (How might we interrupt or modify historically injurious and trauma-inducing policy?)

In Part 1 (the What & the Why: Foundations), we explored three areas of school-based policy leadership:

- 1. Define:** We used the rich experiences of local education agencies and district, county, and state levels of leadership to define the needs that policies are intended to address.
- 2. Design:** We provided a space for leaders to share the celebrations and challenges of designing policies with students, families, and educators.
- 3. Dismantle:** We explored a key and often under-discussed element of school-based policy leadership by examining what policies are in place currently that may be out of date, harmful, or not aligned with the school community's values.

### ***Recording Links for Both Sessions on August 24, 2021***

- [Part 1 - Round A: School-Based Services Policy Learning Forum: The What & Why: Foundations](#)
- [Part 1 - Round B: School-Based Services Policy Learning Forum: The What & Why: Foundations](#)

As you explore the "What & Why: Foundations of School Based Policy" below, please note:

- To view the full recording and transcript, please navigate to the event page.
- This conversation capture was edited for clarity.
- All of the ideas, beliefs, and opinions expressed by panelists and moderators are theirs alone and do not represent official policy or policy positions of NTTAC or any state, local, or federal entity.

# The What & Why: Foundations of School Based Policy

## Excerpts from the School Based Services and Support Policy Forum<sup>2</sup>

### I. Definitions (How do we talk about policy across roles and responsibilities?)

A key leadership responsibility and challenge for school-based leaders is to create shared language across roles and responsibilities so that as a multi-dimensional team, diverse members can access each other's perspectives and knowledge base and work together towards shared outcomes. Any policy work begins first with getting clear and granular about language choices, definitions, and approaches.

Here, leaders share their ideas about what policy is and can be, what policy is to school leaders, what word choices accelerate or break momentum, and more.



**When we say the word “policy,” what language should we be using in different settings to organize diverse roles (e.g., school counselors, school psychologists, educators, family members, students) to coalesce around the same outcome?**

“ We often think about policy as value statements: Who gets what, when, and how, and why?

**School mental health policy can refer to norms, rules, institutions; personal policies (e.g., one’s classroom policies) all the way up to federal and international policies.**

Think about it in terms of your own role and sphere of influence: Do what you can, start where you’re at. Think about the interconnectedness and interdependence of policy.

- Amber Reid

.....

“ In the education system, policy is what empowers everything else that happens. You can tell the level of commitment and involvement based on the appetite to create good, sound policy. Why? Leaders move on, policy stays. Policy is a critical mechanism: it must be well-written, thoughtful, collaborative, involve stakeholders in the community, and be student- supportive.

- Maribeth Barney

.....

“ From a school board perspective, policies are who we’re choosing to be. We’re governed by them but there are also ways to work around them. And there will always be some unintended impact based on the way it’s implemented.

When you don’t use your voice, you’re giving up your power. People in positions of power (formal/informal) are people too, and there are opportunities to make those connections:

**In the end, policies are about people.**

- Rachele Espiritu



**How do we talk about school mental health policy across different roles? How do we make it feel real and get people on board to do the work?**

“ Policy sets up the systems to make the programs, practices, and procedures sustainable. By not linking excellent work to one specific champion, policy is a way to sustain, innovate, and grow those efforts.

- Laura Ficarra

“ Policy is about rules, but the rules aren’t equal for everyone. It’s easy for folks to say, “I want to help people directly, but I don’t want to deal with politics.” **If you’re helping a student, then you have to work within systems that have policies.**

Sometimes policies fit well and sometimes they don’t. Bring together the masterminds and thought partners to help think about how things could be improved for all people involved.

Transparency is essential to good policy design work.

- Monica Nepomuceno

.....

“ For schools, our policies are based on the laws that come down from our legislatures. The Tennessee School Board Association writes policies for the district, and then the district is responsible for procedures and protocols.

And there can be lots of change from the bottom-up in Tennessee: students, communities, advisory councils, parents; these bodies are important and can make change.

- Kim Guinn

“ My role is more as [policy] facilitator than designer. And part of that is making sure that I’ve brought all voices to the table.

- Amber Reid

“ The go-to reaction is to think about policy from the top-down and use it as reasons why we CAN’T do xyz.

**And:** there is a lot of policy within our control: classroom teachers, schools (e.g., what we choose to police in our students’ behaviors).

How can we create cultures that prioritize anti-racism **and** cultures of care? How are we grading students **and** including students and families in the conversation? How do we do the “both, and”?

- Gregory Peters



## **When is school-based policy about behavior and control versus focusing on the need?**

“ Need-based policies happen with the right networks and support; it can be easy to do when there’s shared vision and shared language.

- Kendall Fujioka

“ In one school with whom I worked, we had a no hoodie policy. Well, one student needed his hoodie as a deep safety mechanism; the hoodie allowed the person to focus and feel safe. Next to that student sat someone whose brother had been killed by gang violence; the hoodie was deeply activating.

**No policy will ever be universal because our needs are not universal. There is not a right or a wrong, except when there isn’t a conversation.**

- Leora Wolf-Prusan



## How do we get everyone on the same page? What does it take to coordinate multiple systems? How do we humanize policies?

*“ How do we design policy that can be flexible and hit the most important pieces while allowing for contextualization at the local level? There are different levels of stewardship. It’s challenging to craft policy to serve such a diverse spread of communities.*

*You have to ask people, then you have to listen. Policy is a process.*

**- Amber Reid**



*“ It’s all about the mindset. At the end of the day, these are kids.*

*Lots of kids are focused on surviving versus school. When we’re dealing with mental health, we’re dealing with the whole child. Navigate these services as if these were your children (empathy!) rather than present bodies in your classrooms.*

**- Tamika Gregory**



*“ There’s a difference between being trauma-sensitive and having policies and practices be trauma-informed. How we think about trauma is broader than ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences). It has a lot to do with risk and protective factors.*

*Policies at both macro and micro levels have to be reflective of the voices of the people we’re impacting. Are we including some and excluding others? There’s a difference: people being empowered versus coming into the knowledge that they’ve always been empowered.*

**- Laura Ficarra**



*“ We forget the underlying questions: Am I safe? (brain stem) Am I loved? (limbic system). In our policy and practice, there is too much focus on the prefrontal cortex. It is critical to educate teachers on these systems by helping them change their approach to brain-based learning.*

**- Pamala Trivedi**

## II. Design (How might we design student, family, and educator centered policy?)

*All school-based policies should be trauma-informed, not only in the outcome and impact of the policy, but the way the policy came about: the process. When policies are designed with the community members they will impact, it is more effective for that policy’s long-term sustainability.*

*Co-designing is not easy. It requires “power with” partnerships. This is not simple or easy, and often surfaces complex issues of power holding and sharing that are important for leaders to confront. For example, we in the industry might say “trauma-informed policy.” But we work with schools, families, and communities who might say “stop saying that. We are not traumatized.” Who do we listen to? Who gets the final call? Who are we talking about rather than talking with? Moreover, co-designing often looks like bringing in community members to inform the policy’s design, to center lived experience. How might leaders do this without tokenizing or manipulating lived experience? How might community members with lived experience (e.g., parents whose child died by suicide) be central to school-based policy design?*

*Here, leaders share their experiences with co-designing policy with students, families, and educators, including the challenges and celebrations. The theme of celebrations? Building and fostering trustworthy, multi-dimensional relationships that make the policies feel shared and from the community.*



## How might we co-design policy with students, families, and educators?

*“ To answer, “how do we design student family and educator centered policy?” we should also ask ourselves “who are we to be doing the designing, or should we be co-constructing?”*

**- Yesmina Luchsinger**

.....

*“ It’s about making connections and building rapport. For example, one of our challenges has been low parental support- this is an issue in education overall. You have to get out and make visits, make personal connections. Get out of your comfort zone. The communication link is huge.*

**- Tamika Gregory**

.....

*“ There is a crucial relationship between research, activism, hierarchy, and federal programming and legislation. If we don’t bridge that conversation, we will continue to design programs for children at risk, then expelling children from programs designed for them.*

*We’ve seen the back and forth between macro and micro play out in early childhood education. Amygdala activation proves and justifies early childhood programming. New programming reflected a response to brain development research. Maternal and Early Childhood Home Visiting was created by advocacy by scientists, researchers, and practitioners. Head Start is another example.*

**- Pamala Trivedi**

.....

*“ Young people are our greatest asset. They championed school safety legislation in Arizona. The legislation did not pass. But Arizona’s Superintendent of Public Education was able to take their draft policy and help DO many of the things they were asking for without the need for legislation. As state leaders, within our own sphere of influence, we can pick some of those things up and do it anyway.*

**- Yesmina Luchsinger**

.....

*“ So often we expect youth to “rubber stamp” the policies that “adults” put forward rather than engaging youth early in the formation of policies and advocacy priorities.*

**- Lisa Eisenberg**

.....

*“ You need to have champions- surround yourself with people who are impacted by the policy to hold yourself accountable. If you’re working on a suicide policy and you have a parent who has lost a child to suicide, that person is your champion.*

**- Kim Guinn**

.....

*“ It helps to connect the quantitative/data with the qualitative/stories: decision makers need both! And often one without the other won’t be convincing on its own. In the end, it’s really important to get the voices and respect culture and process.*

**- Amber Reid**

.....

*“ A main challenge is that adult policy focuses on behavior and student policy focuses on need. Are we policing the behavior or are we policing the need? (Yes, “policy” is closely related to “policing”).*

**- Leora Wolf-Prusan**

“ “Nos” can be revisited because information and research are always changing; that process of being told “no” [to policy needs] leads to building relationships and may have a better outcome than being told “yes” immediately.

- Monica Nepomuceno

### III. Dismantle (How might we interrupt or modify historically injurious and trauma inducing policy?)

When leaders step into roles that require or invite policy design, oftentimes they are stepping into already-existing policies that are antiquated, outdated, or simply not aligned to the current context and needs of the school community. This requires dismantling in-place policies.

As the panelists address in both conversations, relationships and trust are fundamental to policy design and subsequent implementation. Historical policies in place may be markers or makers of harm with school families and communities because of racism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, and other institutional and interpersonal expressions of dehumanization.

By engaging in the dismantling of existing, harmful policies, we can use a policy design process as an apology, or as a means for relational restoration. We can use the dismantling process as leaders to re-form the foundations of how we define school-based mental health services and practices. By striking down policies (e.g., corporal punishment) that are contemporary relics of historical harm, we can create new policies and practices that allow for repair and righting wrongs.

In this section, leaders share their policy review approaches; discuss which policies they would like to see interrupted or dismantled; explore the complications that arise in their leadership practices; and articulate their visions for new directions in school-based policy.



#### How do we modify or dismantle policies that are in place that are injurious, or not trauma-informed? How do we use policy review as an opportunity to amend or repair systemic harm?

“ Here is an example of deleting instead of creating: With COVID and the increase of anti-Asian hate attacks occurring across the nation, one thing that came up was the absence/ leaving out of AAPI in some of the recently developed school policies for Denver Public Schools. It was just another bias and example of systemic racism that had been happening in our system. {Some school leaders were} thinking about AAPI as “model minorities” and {saw them as} not needing the same kind of attention or supports those other students need. Students went to a school board meeting to testify and share what the impact was on them, what they would like to see, and made their asks clear. {The board} listened and rectified that and made a change to ensure that AAPI students and families aren’t left out of policy conversations in the future.

- Rachele Espiritu

“ We need to focus on the folks who are impacted by the policy and institutionalize family voice. For example, Head Start has a policy council that’s composed of parents. This is “baked into the model” and required by a federal program. Parents have to have a say on budgetary and programmatic decisions at the level of the grantee. Policy council gave voice to parents for whom English was not their first language.

- Pamala Trivedi

“ A while back, I was charged with monitoring attendance and checking with students about absences. We promoted [interventions such as] perfect attendance prizes, telling students to be present 100% of the time. I struggled with this policy. It took courage to point out that we [as staff] need sick days. Why do students not get sick days? How does [this policy] affect children with underlying or chronic conditions? How does that affect our overall health? We need to stop pushing students to be there 100% of the time.

Also, consider the new policies for [mental health days for students] that allow mental health to be an excuse for absence. I shouldn’t have to divulge why my student is absent. I shouldn’t have to give details, especially in a rural community.

- Monica Nepomuceno

*“ I just recently changed a policy that was from 1999. In order to understand what’s out there, I need to get my hands dirty. In order to change policy, I needed to find my champions. It’s about bottom-up leadership; taking policy amendments to my school board.*

- Kim Guinn



## **How might we avoid creating policies for schools that reinforce the status quo?**

*“ Oftentimes with competing priorities, there’s a tendency to listen to the voices that are the loudest. That has value and risk. Whose voices are you not hearing? (They’re harder to seek).*

*Utilize powerful data storytelling to get policy makers’ attention. Question data as well: Who created it? Was it done with an equity lens?*

- Rachele Espiritu

.....

*“ This question is rooted in a core belief that I have: policy and who gets to make policy is steeped in white supremacy.*

*We have to surface WHICH folks are benefitting from policy. We need to reset our mindset and flip the script on the power and the socio-politics of these relationships.*

- Gregory Peters

*“ Policy needs to be formed from the bottom up because it is the “bottom” is who is affected, especially long-term.*

- From chat: Danyelle Orr-McNeil

*“ In my state, corporal punishment laws are still on the books. Teachers can still paddle. Sometimes it takes someone being injured or dying to make change. Restorative justice starts with educating our folks to understand why “this” shouldn’t be.*

- Kim Guinn

.....

*“ Our children don’t go to school trying to get under our skin. When their basic needs aren’t met, their behaviors are a reaction. We’re criminalizing reactions (what happened right before the behavior?).*

- Gregory Peters

.....

*“ How can systems start to align? It’s one thing to talk about being trauma-informed; it’s another to still have corporal punishment on the books.*

*How are we doing this work (power with vs power over)? Where is the consent (things happening to rather than happening with community members)?*

- Leora Wolf-Prusan

.....

*“ We must start by stopping. We can’t create good policy until bad policy is amended or thrown out.*

**Policy is where the accountability starts.**

- Gregory Peters

## IV. What is one move that can help us drive our school-based policy leadership?

Leaders on both panels of *The What & the Why: Foundations* shared advice for colleagues in the school mental health policy work. The main theme? It comes down to self-reflection, self-awareness, relational organizing, and courage.

*“ Get to really love onions! Policy work is layered: Systems change, practices change, programs, monitoring, and evaluation change- these are layers. If something is worth doing, it’s worth sustaining. If you’re trying to sustain something, the policy is going to help you sustain it. Leverage resources, capacity, infrastructure: peel those onion layers!*

***Please don’t just do what’s easy. Do what’s needed.***

- Laura Ficarra

.....

*“ Spend the entire year figuring out “what is my sphere of influence?” It takes at least a year. If you want to make the change, you have to understand how the game is played. If you did nothing but spend your first-year learning who is the decision maker and the gatekeeper it will be time well spent (it’s almost never the person with the title).*

- Yesmina Luchsinger

.....

*“ Be humble. Put aside your preconceived notions about what is correct versus incorrect. Listen, but REALLY listen. Try to think about, ponder, and take on other perspectives, even if they’re not comfortable.*

- Amber Reid

.....

*“ If you want to advocate for removing harmful policies, you need to advocate for alternative restorative practices. Articulate the change in the statement: “take this away and replace it with THIS.”*

- Pamala Trivedi

.....

*“ Make connections. Think about starting small and making small changes to get bigger results. You won’t be able to change everything at once, but if you focus on kids’ needs, work in a team with collaborative efforts, you will reap benefits in the end. Consistency, communication, and small approaches are key for larger gains.*

- Tamika Gregory

.....

*“ Put your ego to the side, ruffle the feathers, stand your ground, put on your seatbelt. Once you know who the key players are and the dust has settled, things will go the way they’re supposed to for students. And a “no” isn’t always a downfall.*

- Monica Nepomuceno

.....

*“ Any policy that doesn’t consider the sameness of each of us as humans- humans of different sizes and different levels of development- is worthless.*

- Maribeth Barney

*“ It’s ok to be a rebel leader, and you will ruffle some feathers. “Mental health” is such an emotionally charged phrase. It’s ok to ruffle feathers, and it’s okay to say the word “suicide.” You may be unpopular but it’s what’s most effective and necessary.*

- Kendall Fujioka

## Closing

Ensuring that policies in our schools meet the needs of community members' mental health is complex, challenging, and requires tenacity and dedication. Throughout the conversations, we heard rich advice, reflection, and sharing from leaders across the country.

The goal of these discussions was not to create instructional check boxes of how to lead school-based policy, or what the foundations should be. Our intention was and is to raise the complexity of leading systems-centered, youth and family-focused, and equity-rooted school policy work. Our intention was to highlight the already-existing, rich wisdom in the field and to offer windows of peer connection and collegiality.

Transformation is not simple, nor does it happen alone. Together, learning with and from one another, we give each other courage, reflect on our own growth points, and transform ourselves so that we can transform our systems towards school-based service equity.

We hope you enjoy and learn from these conversations as we did.

Dr. Greg Peters offered this reflection to us during his panel:

*“What is it that gives you courage? How committed are you to transformation? This work will require transformation of policy and ourselves. Start with yourself and stay with yourself.”*

Your leadership is extraordinary. Thank you.

## Panelists for the Part I- What and the Why: Foundations

**Amber Reid**, MSW Education Program Professional for Climate, Data, & Equity Nevada Department of Education, Office for a Safe and Respectful Learning Environment

**Greg Peters, EdD**

Executive Director, San Francisco Coalition of Essential Schools (SF-CESS)

**Kendall Fujioka, MSW** Legal intern, U.S. DOE; former Program Director for School Climate Transformation Grant (SCTG) and Project Cal-Well, ABC Unified (California AWARE)

**Kim Guinn, RN, MS**

AWARE Director, former Anderson County Schools, current Cocke County Schools (Tennessee AWARE)

**Laura R. Ficarra, MS Special Education, PhD**

Project AWARE Co-Coordinator, New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH), Division of Integrated Community Services for Children & Families (New York AWARE)

**Maribeth Barney, MEd , CAS**

NYSED Supervisor of Education Programs, Student Support Services, NYS Education Department (New York AWARE)

**Monica Nepomuceno, MSW** Education Programs Consultant at California Department of Education, facilitator of the California Student Mental Health Policy Workgroup

**Pamala Trivedi, PhD, NCSP**

NTTAC Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Lead, Georgetown University, Mental Health Consultant for DC Charter Schools, MedStar Georgetown Center for Wellbeing in School Environments (WISE)

**Rachele Espiritu, PhD** Former school board member, Denver Public Schools (Colorado); Former Project AWARE Cultural Competence Coach for the Now is the Time TA Center

**Tamika Gregory**

Project AWARE Director/School Counselor at Conecuh County School District (Alabama AWARE)

**Yesmina Luchsinger, MS**

NTTAC School Based Services Lead at the Center for Applied Research Solutions (CARS), former Director of School Safety & Social Wellness at the Arizona Department of Education (Arizona AWARE)

Moderator: **Leora Wolf-Prusan, NTTAC**

## Resources for and from Session 1

**Websites:**

- [NTTAC Website](#)
- [Project AWARE](#)
- [Kentucky Student Voice Team](#)

**Articles:**

- [Arizona School Safety Task Force Releases Final Report and Model School Safety Plan](#)
- [Responding to Trauma through Policies that Create Supportive Learning Environments](#) (ChildTrends, 2019)
- [From Problems to Issues: Making Trauma-Informed Policy Change](#)

**Tip Sheets and Guides:**

- [Creating Trauma-Informed Policies: A Practice Guide for School & Mental Health Leadership](#)
- [Infographic: Trauma Informed Policies](#)
- [Mobilizing Action for Resilient Communities through Policy and Advocacy Toolkit](#)

**Research and Scholarly Articles:**

- Yatchmenoff, D. (2015). [Creating the Conditions for Change: Emerging Policies to Promote and Support Trauma-Informed Care \(Vol. 29, Trauma Informed Care\)](#), pp. 28-31, Issue brief). Focal Point: Youth, Young Adults, & Mental Health.
- [Trauma-Informed School](#)
- [Is in Pennsylvania: Aligning Expansion with High-Quality Implementation](#)

» [Continue reading the learning capture from Session 2 Implementation - The Who & The How](#)