

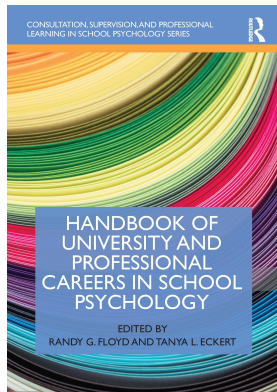
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## **Handbook of University and Professional Careers in School Psychology**

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### **Engaging in Political Leadership and Public Policy Advocacy**

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## 29 Engaging in Political Leadership and Public Policy Advocacy

*Tammy L. Hughes and Celeste M. Malone*

Advocacy is defined as the process of “informing and assisting decision-makers . . . who promote the interests of clients, health care systems, public and welfare issues, and professional psychology” (Lating, Barnett, & Horowitz, 2009, p. 106). In education, advocacy focuses on changing or influencing the professionals *and* systems that serve students (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). This includes local school personnel (e.g., teachers and administrators), institutions (e.g., school districts), decision influencers (e.g., school board members, the mayor’s office, police departments, and service providers) as well as other larger power brokers (e.g., congress, states, and the court system; think tanks and philanthropies; and sociopolitical movements; Scott, Lubienski, & Debray-Pelot, 2009).

School psychologists have viewed advocacy as a core function and expectation of their work for over 50 years (Skalski, 2012). Advocacy is embedded in the education and training of school psychologists and in their day-to-day professional practice (Jacobs, Decker, & Hartshorne, 2016). Formal recommendations for school psychologists to engage in advocacy are detailed in the Preamble of the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Ethical Principles of Psychologists (APA, 2017) and Code of Conduct and in the Introduction of the National Association of School Psychologists’ (NASP) Principles for Professional Ethics (NASP, 2010). In sum, these documents provide guidance to school psychologists in advocacy and the manner of prioritizing the needs of children. As such, school psychologists’ efforts may address any of the wide range of issues listed previously (i.e., pertaining to the individual student, the school building, or government or legislative priorities).

The most common example of school psychology advocacy is in communicating the needs of individual students to broader school personnel (e.g., ensuring that special education students’ academic and social learning needs are identified and that students are receiving individualized instruction in the least restrictive environment). Additionally, many school psychologists advocate to change school policies when their implementation results in uneven support for groups of children (e.g., disparities in discipline referral practices; Girvan, Gion, McIntosh, & Smolkowski, 2017) or when there is a need to expand assistance to children (e.g., addressing the safety concerns of LGBTQ+ students who report being bullied) and their families in the community (e.g., developing home-school partnerships to enhance family engagement with the school; Romano & Kachgal, 2004). School psychologists aiming to enhance the health and well-being of the broader population (e.g., students living below the poverty line or exposed to adverse childhood experiences) may use governmental, legislative, and political processes to advance the needs of children (Hage et al., 2007; Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000).

Advocacy may be conveyed through an individual school psychologist – such as providing legislative testimony about education practices (Hearing of House Committee on Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Education Reform, 2002) or recommendations to funders about educational priorities (Institute of Education Sciences & Department of

Education, 2019) – or may occur via professional learned societies. For example, APA and NASP recently partnered to highlight priorities in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA, 2015), and the Resolution on Gender and Sexual Orientation Diversity in Children and Adolescents in Schools (2015).

Given that the most important influences on educational practice and schooling over the past century have been court decisions and statutory laws passed by the federal government (e.g., *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, and the No Child Left Behind Act 2002), local advocacy that is well within the confines of these legislative priorities has the best probability of enactment (Worrell, Subotnik, & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2018). This is especially true when legislative requirements are followed by a source of funding or sanctions for a school that is non-compliant. Indeed, it is in this context—where school psychologists advocate for the needs of an individual student who falls within the protections of established federal mandates—that is a common and comfortable professional role for many school psychologists. When the need for advocacy falls outside of this well-worn path, however, school psychologists are less practiced and can be unclear on how to proceed.

### **Wicked Problems**

Although the school psychologists' ethical codes describe an affirmative responsibility to engage in advocacy, what makes professional action a challenge is when this action becomes overly complex, given the needs of the population or when there are numerous competing requests from a variety of stakeholders; these are called wicked problems. Wicked problems are socially complex—where there is a number and diversity of stake holders whose influence can undermine progress if their priorities are not considered (Conklin, 2001). For example, it is well-documented that there are large populations of students in need of early intervention, mental health intervention, trauma informed instruction, discipline reforms, or otherwise have a need that is not traditionally covered by special education (e.g., parent divorce, teen pregnancy, drug use, and grief) whose needs often remain unaddressed (Kataoka, Zhang, & Wells, 2002; Merikangas et al., 2010). This is likely because (a) there is no legal mandate requiring that these needs are addressed and (b) there is no simple approach that leads a clean mutually satisfactory solution. Solutions to wicked problems stall when one aspect of the problem is targeted for intervention (e.g., reactively providing support to address an immediate challenge), but this intervention fails to address the whole of the problem (e.g., preventing the flow of new cases). Consider the following examples. Children exposed to abuse and neglect can benefit from trauma informed early intervention to address social-emotional and academic functioning (e.g., school success; Dorado et al., 2016), but they also remain vulnerable for substance use across the lifespan (Anda et al., 2006; Dube et al., 2003; Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2010) and poor health outcomes (Rosenberg, 2011). Considered another way, early intervention in substance use programs may prevent later cases (Botvin et al., 1995; Mitchell et al., 2012) and may be rejected by school systems because it may not fall squarely within educational goals (Curtis, McLellan, & Gabellini, 2014). That is, even when there may be a shared overarching goal (e.g., providing quality education to all students), how to define and accomplish that goal may diverge significantly across stakeholders. Taken altogether, the identification of shared goals, the ability to negotiate and address a wide variety of priorities, and the striving to find common agreement, even when there will be less than complete success, are important steps to developing an effective approach to comprehensive school psychology advocacy (Oyen, Eklund, & von der Embse, 2019).

*Theoretical, Evidence-Based, and Personal Considerations*

**Advocacy Competency Model**

Although school psychology does not have a specific advocacy model, the advocacy competencies (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Toporek & Daniels, 2018) endorsed by the American Counseling Association (ACA) are useful to guiding school psychologists' advocacy work. These competencies address advocacy at three levels: client/student, school/community, and public arena (see Figure 29.1). Within each level, the competencies are further distinguished by the level of client involvement (i.e., advocacy in collaboration with the client versus advocacy on behalf of the client). The intersection of the levels of advocacy intervention with the levels of client involvement leads to six domains. The client/student level consists of the (1) empowerment domain and (2) client advocacy domain, the school/community level consists of the (3) community collaboration domain and (4) systems advocacy domain, and the public arena level consists of the (5) collective action domain, and (6) social/political advocacy domain.

This conceptualization of advocacy highlights the multiple roles that school psychologists can take to support students and their families and schools. Additionally, this model provides multiple opportunities for school psychologists to work within their spheres of influence to enact change. With regard to specific actions, school psychologists advocating on the client/student level provide individual interventions to students to help develop their advocacy skills (consistent with the empowerment domain) and advocate for specific student needs and resources (consistent with the client advocacy domain). At the school/community level, school psychologists work individually or collaboratively with others to facilitate systems-level change despite institutional barriers. This may include conducting family training workshops to build awareness of advocacy issues (consistent with the community collaboration domain) and advocating for improved policies and systems-level procedures (consistent with the systems advocacy domain). At the public arena level, school psychologists inform the general public about issues of access and inequity. This may be done through volunteering with national and state school

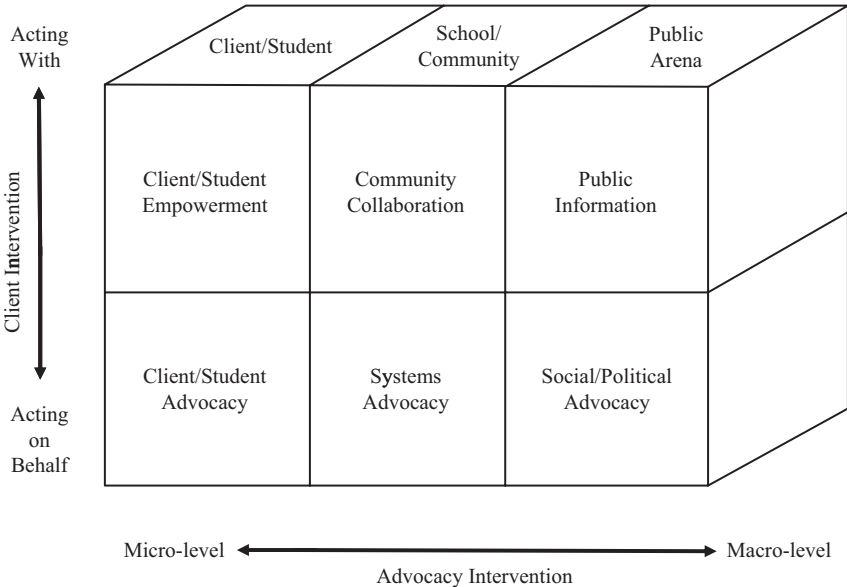


Figure 29.1 Adapted advocacy competencies (Ratts et al., 2007; Toporek & Daniels, 2018) for school psychologists.

psychology and education professional associations (consistent with the collective action domain) and by supporting laws and policies that protect and empower youth (consistent with the social/political advocacy domain).

### Barriers to Engaging in Advocacy

Despite the importance and relevance of advocacy to school psychology practice, school psychologists may not readily engage in advocacy activities. Heinowitz and colleagues (2012) explored barriers to psychologists' participation in advocacy efforts and found three primary reasons: disinterest (i.e., lack of interest in advocacy or a belief there is no need for advocacy), uncertainty (i.e., lack of advocacy knowledge and skills), and unawareness (i.e., lack of awareness of public policy issues). These barriers also varied based on the amount of advocacy experience psychologists have. For novice psychology advocates, lack of awareness of public policy issues is the most significant barrier (Heinowitz et al., 2012). These individuals may have general awareness of the role of psychologists as advocates but not know where or how to direct their efforts. More experienced advocates identified lack of knowledge as a barrier to advocacy but also noted that negative past experiences in advocacy (Heinowitz et al., 2012) as well as resistance to change, institutional barriers, and limited resources as significant barriers (Rogers, Marraccini, Lubiner, Dupont-Frechette, & O'Bryon, 2019).

Results from the Heinowitz and colleagues (2012) study are consistent with findings from a similar study conducted by Fenning et al. (2015) that examined school psychologists primarily employed as university faculty. In this study, participants' disinterest in advocacy was a result of not making a difference (described as institutional barriers [43%], limited resources [43%], and limited time [33%]) as well as previous experiences of a poor response (described as resistance to change [48%] and conflicting agendas [19%]) to their efforts. Feelings of uncertainty have also been described in other studies in terms of intrapersonal struggles (23.8%; Fenning et al., 2015), depleted emotional and physical reserves (9.5%; Rogers et al., 2019), and a perceived personal cost to advocacy engagement (Chang, Hays, & Milliken, 2009). Unawareness and a lack of knowledge were noted by almost half of the Fenning et al. (2015) participants. This is concerning because Gronholt (2009) showed that a professionals' level of awareness was critical to understanding the types of participation required for advocacy-related activities.

In addition to the aforementioned barriers, school psychologists may be less likely to engage in advocacy if they believe there are personal or professional risks to doing so (Shriberg et al., 2011). Bernak and Chung (2008) conceptualized the personal risks to advocacy as "Nice Counselor Syndrome" (NCS). Those with NCS strive to promote harmony and avoid interpersonal conflict (i.e., they are nice), are aware of public policy and social justice issues, but choose not to engage in advocacy work because they value being seen as a nice, team player and do not want to risk changing others' perceptions of them by engaging in actions that would disrupt the status quo (Bernak & Young, 2008). They may be concerned that their colleagues may avoid them and that this shift in their personal relationships at work may translate to being ostracized professionally. Additionally, given that most school psychologists are employed in public school districts (Walcott & Hyson, 2018), it is reasonable for school psychologists to be concerned about the potential repercussions of doing advocacy work and being seen as "political" while also being a government employee (Jacobs et al., 2016).

Taken altogether, these studies show that some school psychologists are disinterested, uncertain about what to do, and unaware of the scope of the advocacy needs. Some do not view their own professional identity situated in a broader context that is in need of advocacy efforts (Benjamin & Crouse, 2002), and some are concerned about their dual role serving as a child advocate as well as a school employee (Jacobs et al., 2016). Although advocacy is considered important, it is among the least highly rated activities (Fenning et al., 2015). Given these

challenges, it is important to clarify that psychologists can take public stances on issues of public concern provided that their assertions are based on their professional knowledge and experiences, are supported by psychological research, and are consistent with their ethical standards (Nadal, 2017; Oyen, Eklund, & von der Embse, 2019).

### *Recommendations*

Engaging in advocacy requires school psychologists to be knowledgeable of the public policy issues relevant to education and school psychology practice and to possess advocacy skills (Heinowitz et al., 2012). Although school psychologists can acquire knowledge and skills through the process of engaging in advocacy activities (Rogers et al., 2019), formal training increases the likelihood that psychologists will pursue advocacy and the amount of time they dedicate to these activities (Lyons et al., 2015). Thus, any efforts to increase school psychologists' participation in advocacy must focus on capacity building by both incorporating advocacy training in graduate education programs and providing ample opportunities for advocacy-professional development throughout school psychologists' careers (Heinowitz et al., 2012; Nadal, 2017).

### **Role of Graduate Education Programs**

When asked about the experiences that led them to advocacy, only 20% of experienced school psychology advocates cited academic experiences (Rogers et al., 2019). This is disappointing but unsurprising, given that professional advocacy is not typically addressed in graduate training (Nadal, 2017) even though the NASP *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services* (NASP Practice Model; 2010) has multiple references to the role of school psychologists as advocates. Graduate programs have an important role in socializing graduate students to the profession by teaching them the norms, values, skills, attitudes, and knowledge associated with being a school psychologist (Gardner, 2010). Incorporating advocacy training into graduate education will increase the likelihood that graduate students will internalize the role of "advocate" into their professional identity as they become school psychologists.

NASP-approved graduate programs are required to demonstrate that their graduates have knowledge and skills in the domains of practice identified in the NASP Practice Model (2010). Several of these domains, such as Data-Based Decision Making and Accountability, Consultation and Collaboration, School-Wide Practices to Promote Learning, and Research and Program Evaluation include skills that are directly transferable to advocacy work. When teaching school psychology courses, faculty are encouraged to be explicit and intentional in describing how school psychology practice competencies can be used for professional advocacy.

Given the importance of out-of-class learning experiences in expanding graduate students' understanding of professional expectations (Liddell, Wilson, Pasquesi, Hirschy, & Boyle, 2014), graduate students also need supervised opportunities to use these skills within an advocacy context to increase their self-efficacy and confidence in engaging in professional advocacy. School psychology training programs should consider expanding practicum outside of traditional settings. Having practica in educational, legal, and public policy institutions would help graduate students develop a better understanding of the systems in which educational inequities and other issues occur and teach them how to navigate within these systems (Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, & Bryant, 2007). Additionally, graduate programs can partner with campus advocacy and outreach groups to provide graduate students with additional opportunities to become involved (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005).

## Role of Professional Associations

Adding advocacy training to graduate education programs will help to bring new advocates into the field; however, those already in practice need opportunities to learn about professional advocacy. Consistently, experienced school psychology advocates noted that their professional experiences, particularly professional association involvement, were critical to getting them involved in advocacy (Rogers et al., 2019). Given the role that professional associations have in advocating for policies that protect the profession and highlight the contributions of the profession to the public (Jimerson, 2014), they have a vested interest in insuring that their members are well-versed in advocacy and public policy issues and developed many resources to build knowledge and expertise in this area.

**Advocacy resources.** To help build member awareness of the issues that impact education and psychology and their familiarity with the advocacy process, NASP and APA publish several advocacy tools and other materials that can be adapted for use at the state or local level. These include the *NASP Advocacy Toolkit* the *APA Community Advocacy: A Psychologist Toolkit*.

**Advocacy training opportunities.** To be effective advocates, particularly in the social/political advocacy domain, school psychologists should know the process through which policies are developed on a local, state, and national level. Both NASP and APA provide trainings to enhance psychologists' awareness of public policy issues relevant to education and professional practice and develop their advocacy knowledge and skills. Both organizations have several advocacy-related sessions at their annual conventions. Additionally, the NASP Public Policy Institute and the APA Practice Leadership Conference are structured to provide attendees with an in-depth overview of a selected advocacy topic from national leaders and training in legislative, grassroots, and professional advocacy. Participants engage in large and small group sessions for discussion, reflection, and networking, and participate in interactive activities designed to strengthen their communication, relationship building, organizational, and strategic analysis skills (Maton, 2017; Rogers et al., 2019). Both conferences end with a visit to Capitol Hill during which state delegations visit their congressional representatives to request their support in advancing legislation relevant to the conference theme. State associations often conduct similar events in their state capitals, as well as engage in other advocacy-related activities such as letter-writing campaigns, town halls, and other grassroots advocacy efforts.

**Volunteer opportunities.** As discussed in Chapter 31 (Grapin, Malone, & Stoner, this volume), professional associations heavily rely on volunteers to conduct the work of the association. Those interested in becoming more involved in professional advocacy are encouraged to join the advocacy or legislative committees of their state association. Involvement at the state level builds a pipeline of potential leaders for NASP's and APA's advocacy committees. For example, the NASP Government and Professional Relations (GPR) Committee serves as NASP's public policy arm. The GPR Committee provides (a) assistance to states on advocacy and public policy related activities and professional development to educate school psychologists about key policy and advocacy initiatives, (b) helps to plan the NASP Public Policy Institute, and (c) develops advocacy resources for NASP members. Similarly, the APA Advocacy Coordinating Committee evaluates and prioritizes APA's advocacy goals with respect to impact on the discipline of psychology and individuals whom psychologists serve.

**Policy fellowships.** Doctoral-level school psychologists who have previous advocacy experience but would like more intensive training should consider applying for a policy fellowship through APA. APA sponsors these fellowships in conjunction with the American Academy for the Advancement of Science (<https://www.aaas.org/programs/science-technology-policy-fellowships>). Responsibilities of the fellowship may include drafting legislation, conducting oversight work, assisting with congressional hearings and events, and preparing policy briefs and speeches. APA's Jacquelin Goldman Congressional Fellowship (<https://www.apa.org/>

about/awards/goldman-fellow) is co-sponsored by the American Psychological Foundation and is specifically for psychologists who have experience directly working with children. APA also sponsors an Executive Branch Science Fellowship (<https://www.apa.org/about/awards/science-fellowship>) which the fellow spends 1 year working as a special assistance in an executive branch science mission agency. The specific placement is determined based on the fellow's expertise and interests, but placement opportunities include the Department of Education, the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the Department of Justice. Some activities of this fellowship include soliciting research applications and running peer review panels, staffing intergovernmental scientific task forces and committees, producing scientific media materials, and working on agency budgets and programming.

### Summary

Schools play various roles in the community. Driving the educational success for all children is primary and can be the first place school psychologists can find their opportunity to advocate for children. However, meeting this minimum does not match well the needs of the communities you will serve. It is well documented that schools are the primary service provider of children's mental health services (Barrett, Eber, & Weist, 2013) yet most do not receive the services they need (Kataoka, Zhang, & Wells, 2002; Merikangas et al., 2010). Perhaps most concerning is that some children receive services in their districts whereas other children do not (SAM-HSA, 2017). Indeed, there are many missed opportunities. As such, finding the underserved and marginalized groups where we can lend our expertise, voice, and frankly our social status is imperative for the next generation of children.

Consider the following example. The school staff are aware that students with externalizing behaviors tend to receive in school and out of school suspensions. Many teachers are behind this approach which they regard as "holding kids accountable" for unwanted behavioral outbursts. As the school psychologist, you observe that a group of those suspended are also placed in special education. You might be inclined to discuss with school leadership the need to increase behavioral support, intervention integrity monitoring, manifestation determination and other protections for each child. This advocacy falls comfortably in your role (consistent with the client/student advocacy domain). However, it may occur to you that some of these students may not yet be identified but require special education services. A quick review of the literature shows that your school's approach, a traditional parent and teacher referral process, misses a third of children who require services when compared to those who would be identified with universal self-report screener procedures (Dowdy, Doane, Eklund, & Dever, 2013). As such, you consider moving your efforts to advocate for a school-wide initiative (consistent with the systems advocacy domain). At a meeting to discuss these issues with other psychologists in the district, you find out that use of school suspensions is gaining traction in most of the buildings. The increase follows an article in the local paper criticizing a building principal and assistant superintendent for failing to discipline a student after conflict with a teacher that involved the school resource officer and city police. The article accuses schools of failing to prepare student for responsibilities of real life. As you consider the need for mental health screening you realize that this move may have a political consequence that the school may reject, at least temporarily until the effects of the article settle down. Confirming your concerns, colleagues warn that this is "not the right time." Yet with preparation, considering the needs of multiple audiences (consistent with the public information domain) you can identify a path that moves from the micro-level to the macro-level and from advocacy-for to advocacy-with to accomplish your goal and those of the district.

Based on your training you are aware that the school needs to provide a safe environment for learning, address *all* children with behavioral concerns, *find* those with disabilities, and



engender confidence in the community. You also understand that the public wants assurances that educational institutions are accountable. You set about developing a plan to discuss with the administration which could result in a win-win for the district. That is, address your original observation about children in special education receiving suspensions, use the results to articulate its responsibilities to internal and external audiences, and address the negative press. The rationale is that by making school data public, explaining best practices and legal requirements, student, school and public goals can be accomplished.

To start, you first identify the codes in the student handbook that result in suspension. Next, analyze building and district wide data to determine who is receiving suspensions and to determine if those behaviors fall into categories that required action (e.g., concerning the safety of others) or if they fall into categories that do not pose a serious threat to the safety of others (e.g., willful defiance, insubordination, classroom disruption, among others). There is a national trend to decrease suspensions that result from low-level disciplinary issues (Steinberg & Johanna, 2017). Third, disaggregated data by age, grade, school, gender, disability, and minority status. Identify and consider other marginalized groups in the district’s catchment area. Gregory, Bell, and Pollock (2014) recommend considering teacher, offense location, and disciplinary action in order to target specific areas of need. With this information, schools can use a data-driven problem-solving process to improve their decision-making (McIntosh et al., 2018). This information, accompanying rationale and any reforms efforts can be shared with the public (consistent with the social advocacy and public information domains). Table 29.1 provides a summary of the advocacy model applied to the example case.

This example is meant to highlight where school psychologists are well equipped to address advocacy. We are trained to identify and respond to problems experienced by children and the systems that serve them. We access and rely on the scientific literature to inform our thinking and are prepared for courageous conversations and actions. The literature shows that school personnel discipline differently, despite working under common state or district policy environments (Payne & Welch, 2015). And, there is a need for school psychologists to neutralize the role that disability status plays in the decision-making (Hughes, Raines, & Malone, 2020). The example also shows that professional development around advocacy skills needs to be a priority for school psychologists as school responsibilities diversify and become more complex. Finally, it is important to note there is a clear need to develop the science behind advocacy. School psychology scholarly works should include efforts to measure the effects of advocacy processes, training for advocacy work and responses by the public. As a field situated in serving public health and dedicated to evidenced based practices, school psychology is well suited to contribute to effective advocacy decision-making in the future.

*Table 29.1* Advocacy Addressing School and Public Priorities

<i>Priority</i>	<i>Child/Student</i>	<i>School/Community</i>	<i>Public Arena</i>
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support child behavior development</li> <li>• Identify disabilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use fair discipline practices</li> <li>• Use screeners to inform multi-tiered systems of support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annually report disaggregated discipline referrals.</li> </ul>
Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assurance that their own child or neighbor would be supported through behavioral challenges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assurance that their own child or neighbor would be disciplined fairly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents, educators, advocates, and member of the media can insist that accurate data are collected and annually reported to the public.</li> </ul>

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