What's the Goal Here? Educator's Perspectives of Iowa's Senate File 496 on School Mental Health Systems

Kathryn Watson
University of Iowa

Iowa's Senate File 496 requires parent permission to formally survey students about their mental health, bans the discussion of gender identity and sexual orientation in schools before 7th grade, mandates schools obtain parental permission to use a nick name, and bans any books that depict or describe sex acts in schools. This exploratory case study explores educators' (n = 20) perceptions of Senate File 496's influence on school-based mental health systems and the ways participants perceived the legislation influenced student mental health. Key findings reveal that Senate File 496 was dismantling school-based mental health systems in schools, there was a rise of vigilantism in education, and participants perceived the legislation caused irrevocable student harm.

What's the Goal Here? Educator's Perspectives of Iowa's Senate File 496 on School Mental Health Systems

Abstract

Iowa's Senate File 496 requires parent permission to formally survey students about their mental health, bans the discussion of gender identity and sexual orientation in schools before 7th grade, mandates schools obtain parental permission to use a nick name, and bans any books that depict or describe sex acts in schools. This exploratory case study explores educators' (n = 20) perceptions of Senate File 496's influence on school-based mental health systems and the ways participants perceived the legislation influenced student mental health. Key findings reveal that Senate File 496 was dismantling school-based mental health systems in schools, there was a rise of vigilantism in education, and participants perceived the legislation caused irrevocable student harm.

Keywords: Senate File 496, school-based mental health, education policy, mental health promotion in schools

What's the Goal Here? Educator's Perspectives of Iowa's Senate File 496 on School Mental Health Systems

Mental health issues in K-12 students have been increasing over the past decade and were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2020; Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2020; Wright et al., 2023). Best practices in policy recommendations emphasize the critical need for increased access to mental health support within schools, including early detection and prevention initiatives (Wright et al., 2023). School-based mental health systems are multifaceted. They can include leveraging universal screeners that help identify students with internalizing symptoms such as depression or anxiety (Ormiston & Renshaw, 2023), or social emotional learning (SEL) and other programs that promote executive functioning and interpersonal skills (Kishimoto et al., 2023). Additionally, these efforts can be supported by school personnel who make up student mental health support team such as counselors (Christian & Brown, 2018) and teachers (Deaton, 2022). These professionals support students at different levels across a multi-tiered system of support in school-based mental health systems (MTSS; Russo et al., 2015). To support these efforts, there has been a rise in training to ensure educators can identify, support, and refer students showing signs of mental

health issues to school-based mental health professionals. For example, in Iowa, the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health, funded by a state grant, provides this type of training to educators through their BEST+Well curriculum (Scanlan Center for School Mental Health, 2024).

In Iowa, nearly 10% of students experience major depressive episodes and half of those students do not receive treatment (Hopeful Futures Campaign, 2024). Moreover, 20% of Iowa high school students reported considering suicide in 2017 (Nelson, 2020). Since the pandemic, rates of anxiety, depression, trauma, loneliness, and suicidality have increased across the state (National Alliance on Mental Health, 2024). Between 2015 and 2022 Iowa went from being the fourth highest ranked state for addressing student mental health to the 31st state and the rate of depression in students has nearly doubled (Hopeful Futures Campaigns 2024). The passing of Senate File 4796 in May 2023 directly challenges established practices for supporting student mental health.

Senate File 496

Amidst the growing concern around student mental health issues, the state of Iowa passed Senate File 496 which mandated all schools receive parent permission before surveying for student mental health, bans discussion of gender identity and sexual orientation before 7th grade, requires schools to receive parent permission to use student nick names, and bans any books that depict or describe sexual activity in public schools in Iowa (An Act Relating to Children and Students [SF 496], 2023). The root of the law is to silence LGBTQ+ discussion/instruction in school, yet it has broad implications that influence school-based mental health systems. The law comes at a time where the state also shared it would no longer be participating in the Youth Risk

Behavior Survey (YRBS) survey and would instead be relying on data from Iowa Youth Survey (IYS; Iowa Health and Human Services, 2023). However, students are unable to take the IYS unless a parent has seen the survey in advance and provided permission to take the survey (Waagmeester, 2023). The rationale for the pivot away from YRBS to IYS and the banning of mental health screeners without parent permission is to prevent students from identifying as LGBTQ+, and in doing so prevent any data from being collected about youth LGBTQ+ behavioral risks and mental health issues across the state (Discher, 2023). Educators who do not comply with the legislation risk losing their job and/or education license (Hernandez & Akin, 2023). Punishments for not complying were intended to begin January of 2024 (SF, 496). This legislation reflects a shift to more conservative legislation in Iowa (Smith, 2023).

Proponents of Senate File 496, such as the non-profit political organization Moms for Liberty, say this legislation helps increase parental control and increases the transparency of what is going on in schools (Waagmeester, 2023). This sentiment is shared by Iowan Governor Kim Reynolds, who states the legislation helps ensure student safety and prevents Iowa's children from woke indoctrination (Nguyen, 2023). Critics of the legislation claim the legislation unjustly targets LGBTQ+ students in efforts to silence them and argue the legislation is another "No Promo Homo" or "Don't Say Gay" legislation mirroring states like Alabama and Florida (Tran et al., 2023). Moreover, researchers and agencies like the CDC worry that this further reduces knowledge regarding understudied and marginalized students by limiting access to data about LGBTQ+ health in schools (Discher, 2023; Waagmeester, 2023) and challenge evidence based systems such as MTSS and universal screeners to support student mental health in aims of promoting an ideology (More et al., 2015; Russo et al., 2015)

At the time of writing, there were two court cases pending challenging Senate File 496. One case, brought about by the American Civil Liberties Union is challenging Senate File 496 on the grounds that it seeks to silence LGBTQ+ students and erase recognition of these people in schools as a violation of the First Amendment and a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment (Searles & Beck, 2023). Meanwhile, Penguin Random House, a publication company, four authors, and classroom educators filed a lawsuit arguing Senate File 496 violates the First and 14th amendments in response to the book ban (Nguyen, 2023). In December 2023 an Iowa federal judge placed an injunction on the banning of discussion around gender identity and the book ban aspects of Senate File 496 stating the legislation was so overbroad that recognizing if anyone is male or female would violate the law (Connor, 2023). Subsequently, in January 2024, the state of Iowa filed to appeal the injunction (Higgins, 2024 January), though this was overruled by the appeals court in August 2024 (Higgins, 2024 August)**.**

These types of ideology-based policies place schools in unwinnable situations as the laws addressing what is and is not permitted in schools change rapidly, while holding high accountability for educators. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of literature examining these types of situations. Therefore, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining the intersection of ideology-based practices, such as Senate File 496, with evidence-based school systems, highlighting the urgent need for research that explores how such policies impact school-based mental health systems and implications for students.

Literature Review

Schools are regarded as the ideal place for students to receive mental health interventions and support as most students spend a significant amount of time in schools and schools house

different professionals such as teachers, counselors, psychologists, nurses, and social workers who compose a student's mental health support team (Ormiston et al., 2021; Russo 2015). These individuals complement and compose aspects of school climate that also influence students' mental health. In fact, school wide systems that promote inclusive, anti-bullying, and positive climates report lower rates of mental health issues amongst students and higher academic achievement (Kishimoto & Ding, 2023). Inversely, schools that report higher levels of violence and behavior issues typically do not promote inclusive climates and report decreased enrollment and lower math and English scores (Beland & Kim, 2016). These initiatives are federally supported by Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) and the American Rescue Plan (2020) in efforts to develop robust school-based mental health systems for students.

School-Based Mental Health Systems

Schools provide different mental health support to students such as universal screening, school wide or class-based social emotional learning, and individual and group counseling (Christian and Brown, 2018). Often, these practices are integrated into a MTSS (Russo et al., 2015). At tier one, universal screeners, which screen students for internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and positive behavior intervention systems (PBIS) and SEL are effective prevention and support for student mental health needs. Tier two of MTSS systems focus on the needs of about 20% of students who may struggle with certain emotional/behavioral/academic needs that are addressed through short term counseling, group counseling, or additional support to mitigate challenges (Romer et al., 2017). Finally, about 5% of students are considered tier three, and are referred to targeted interventions which may include one-on-one counseling and other long-term support for student needs (Nese et al., 2021). Often, mental health screeners and/or teacher

referrals are used to identify students in need of tier two and tier three support. While Senate File 496 addresses screeners used at tier one, it is unclear to what extent the legislation has influenced MTSS.

Screeners

Universal screeners are extremely helpful in identifying students that experience mental illness and increase the likelihood of early intervention and prevention as a majority of mental illness is not treated for at least eight years after the initial onset (Moore et al., 2015). Universal screeners typically screen for symptoms of psychological distress and student overall well-being and SEL strengths (Burns & Rapee, 2022). Additionally, universal screeners are also useful tools that prioritize prevention efforts and encourage collaboration amongst educators and are six times more likely to ensure a student receives support (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023). Moreover, universal screeners help to reduce stigma around mental health issues and can identify symptoms that parents and teachers may have missed (Burns & Rapee, 2022). In addition, these screeners can be used to measure student conscientiousness, self-control, grit, and growth mindset, which are associated with higher attendance, better behavior, and higher test scores (West et al., 2016). Common screeners include the Social, Academic, Emotional Behavior Risk Screeners (SABERS) (Ormiston & Renshaw, 2023) and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Youth in Mind, 2024).

Typically, parents provide passive consent during registration for students to take mental health screeners and surveys (United States Department of Education, 2020). Historically, Iowa has implemented the YRBS which is conducted by the Center for Disease Control and is a key source of data around health outcomes for K-12 students and is used to inform policy, funding,

program strategies, surveillance, and research efforts (Iowa Health and Human Services, 2023). Additionally, the state of Iowa has the Iowa Youth Survey (IYS), which mirrors YRBS but does not ask students about their gender identity and sexual orientation, and lacks many questions around mental health (Discher, 2023). This is essential to note as YRBS data reflects that 74% of LGBTQ+ Iowa high school students feel sad or hopeless and 25% of LGBTQ+ students in Iowa attempt suicide compared to 31%, and 7% of straight cisgendered peers respectfully (Discher, 2023). Thus, amidst a mental health crisis, Senate File 496 removes a tier one ability to identify students in need.

Teachers

Senate File 496 has also influenced teachers' ability to support student mental health. Teachers are on the front line of providing early intervention services, such as SEL, and interpersonal skills and executive functioning development (Deaton et al., 2022; Nygaard, 2022). They are a natural extension of a student's support team as they see students daily and are in unique positions to reduce psychological distress and improve academic performance through the implementation of SEL (Deaton et al., 2022). In addition, teachers are responsible for administering 40% of universal interventions per tier one of MTSS (Deaton et al., 2022; Ohrt, 2021). Furthermore, teachers can employ trauma informed practices and implement classroom management that uniquely addresses students' needs (Resa, 2017) as they value and desire to support student mental health and student achievement (Watson, 2022). These efforts can be employed through differentiated lessons, varying tasks, group assignments, outcome measures, resources that accommodate student needs, (Resa, 2017), student check-ins, and other classroom management efforts (Watson, 2022). However, as a result of Senate File 496, teachers cannot

provide lessons around gender identity and sexual orientation or administer screeners that help in identifying students at risk, moreover, they are no longer able to guarantee student safety if/when a student discloses their pronouns or gender identity to them (Senate File 496, 2023).

Counselors

While teachers' abilities have been reduced by Senate File 496, it is unclear to what extent counselors have been influenced. School counselors are key school-based mental health personnel. Often, they are licensed mental health clinicians who also provide assistance with scheduling, life readiness guidance, and short-term mental health interventions (Bastian et al., 2019). Typically, students who require long term counseling are referred to community services, though sometimes these can be provided in school settings (Christian & Brown, 2018). The American Counseling Association (2020) calls for a student to counselor ratio of 250:1; however, in Iowa the ratio of students to school counselors is 391:1 (Hopeful Future Campaign, 2022). This drastic shortage leads to counselors often feeling overburdened and unable to meet the expansive demands of their time, thus not all students are able to receive the support they need (Whinnery, 2019). What is more, recent legislation in Iowa has potential impacts on existing school-based mental health systems across the state. Both counselors and teachers act as mandated reports (Health and Human Services, 2024). However, as a result of Senate File 496, counselors are required to inform parents of student gender identity, placing an ethical strain on the counselor-student relationship and reducing the likelihood a student will confide in them. Senate File 496's banning of formal mental health screeners without parent permission directly challenges school-based mental health systems and adds additional layers of accountability for teachers while further reducing teacher agency.

Policy Reduction of Teacher Agency

Scholarship documents how other legislative reforms that draw on political divides and provide unclear interpretations can lead to teacher burnout, weakened teacher-student relationships, and reduced autonomy in the classroom, and bars teachers from making student-centered decisions (Buchanan, 2015). For example, the rise of accountability policies in the last two decades. The United States adheres to a market model of education (Parcerisa et al., 2022; Wong, 2006) where teachers' worth is measured by their output' student test scores. This model coupled with increased standardization and high-stakes testing has shifted the art of teaching dramatically since 1990 and provided extensive oversight and accountability on teachers (Buchanan, 2015). These types of legislation significantly reduce teacher agency, which Vialli and Buese (2007) note causes teacher interpersonal and student relationships to deteriorate, diminishes their pedagogical quality, and reduces their professional sense of wellbeing. This continual removal of teacher control over their labor is called deskilling (Wong, 2006) and reflects the reality of high-stakes environment with high work demands and low trust in teachers. Senate File 496 adds another layer of deskilling, by removing educator ability to support student mental health issues, navigate questions and discussions of gender identity and sexual orientation, and their ability to respect student names (SF 496, 2023). Indeed, this legislation reflects bureaucratic oversight school processes and climate and revokes the decision making and autonomy from schools and teachers (Wong, 2006).

The implementation of this legislation is situated within a broader landscape of states implementing ideology-based, not evidence-based policies in K-12 schools. The ideology-based policies in schools include anti-critical race (CRT Forward, 2024), anti-diversity, equity, and

inclusion (DEI) (Alfonseca, 2024), Supreme Court removal of race-conscious admissions for higher education (Thomason & Brown, 2023) and anti-LGBTQ+ (Movement Advancement Project, 2024). At the time of writing there were 28 states with anti-critical race legislation (CRT Forward, 2024), 10 states with active anti-DEI laws and 15 with anti-DEI laws introduced in the legislature (Alfonseca, 2024). There were also 15 states with anti-LGBTQ curricular laws (Movement Advancement Project, 2024). Aside from Senate File 496 in Iowa, the state government implemented anti-critical race theory and anti-DEI policies in House File 802 (Richardson, 2021). The state also removed teacher training on equity (Belsha, 2011).

Senate File 496 mirrors Florida's 'don't say gay' legislation (Kline et al., 2022). States with similar religion-based policies include Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, Indiana, and Ohio. In Florida, Goldberg and Abreu (2023) discovered an increase in hostility toward LGBTQ+ students and staff and noted a high rate of concern and stress from LGBTQ+ parents Kline et al. (2022) noted increased rates of self-harm, depression, suicide, and worsened mental health for students in states that adopted ideology-based marginalizing practices. These types of legislation are also linked to increased violence and rates of hate crimes for LGBTQ+ students and they limit the school's ability to support students (Kline et al., 2022). In a study by Goldberg (2023), 20% fewer students reported coming out since the 'don't say gay' law was passed and 16% of parents of LGBTQ+ students had already moved out of the state. Additionally, Langrock et al. (2023) spoke of the rising rates of book bans across the nation as a means to mobilize parts of the voting block by disproportionally banning texts written by or featuring a person of color or LGBTQ+ person. Educators across studies examining anti-LGBTQ+ and book bans speak of diminished school climate, concern over student wellbeing, school violence and bullying, and teacher autonomy (Goldberg, 2023, Goldberg & Abreu, 2023; Kline et al., 2022; Langrock et al.,

2023; Zhang, 2022). These types of legislation coupled with rising rates of accountability in K-12 education dramatically reduce educator's autonomy over their practice (Metha, 2013). This accountability was a reaction to the decreased competitiveness of K-12 students on an international scale, and efforts to leverage political agendas (Cibulka, 1999). Collectively, these have crippled teacher agency of their practice and can be tied to teachers departing from the profession (Biesta et al., 2015). Universities, federal governing bodies, and agencies such as the American Psychological Association have condemned these types of legislation and urge people to speak up and vote responsible leaders into office (Kline et al., 2022).

While there is limited literature examining the implications for 'don't say gay' laws in Florida (Goldberg, 2023; Goldberg & Abreu, 2023; Kline et al., 2022), there is a dearth of literature on the nuances of ideology-based legislation and its implications in K-12 schools and no known literature addressing banned mental health systems in schools. The broader implications of Senate File 496 extend beyond the immediate effects of student mental health to fundamentally alter dynamics of teacher agency in Iowa schools. By stripping educators of autonomy to address sensitive and crucial topics, the legislation mirrors effects in other states with ideology-based policies. Considering the novelty of the legislation, there is a lack of understanding of ways Senate File 496 has influenced school-based mental health systems, and how the legislation has influenced student mental health. Nevertheless, research shows such policies contribute to a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ students, increased mental health issues, and a decline in school safety and climate (Goldberg & Abreu, 2023; Kline et al., 2022). Amidst a mental health crisis and frequent school shootings, student mental health is foundational to student safety, wellness, academic achievement, interpersonal skills, and school climate (Cohen & Freiberg, 2013). The rates of school shootings in Iowa have increased in the

past decade (Des Moines Register, 2024). Given the unprecedented nature of Senate File 496, there is a critical gap in understanding how this legislation impacted school-based mental health systems, including teacher agency in Iowa. The current mental health crisis, coupled with increasing school violence, makes this research not only timely but essential. This study seeks to explore the multifaceted impact of Senate File 496 on school mental health practices, including educator agency within these systems in a predominantly rural, White Midwestern state, providing much-needed insight into the broader implications of ideology-driven policy on K-12 education.

Research Questions

1. How do educators perceive Senate File 496 influenced school-based mental health systems and practices?
2. How do educators in Iowa perceive Senate File 496 influenced student mental health?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used to ground this study is Cavoni et al.'s (2020) mental health promotion in schools (MHPS). This conceptual framework provides structure for successful school-based mental health systems and practices. Therefore, this conceptual framework provides a lens to examine ways educators perceive Senate File 496 influenced school-based mental health systems. Moreover, Cavoni et al. (2020) note the importance of mental health promotion in schools to help raise awareness and support for students, thus providing a framework and guidance to explore ways educators perceive Senate File 496 influenced student mental health. Mental health promotion in schools is compiled of three

domains; (1) promotion of SEL, (2) promotion of resilience, and (3) prevention of mental health issues, social emotional issues, and behavioral problems. Mental Health Promotion in Schools is grounded in evidence-based practices relating to ways to promote social-emotional health, which translates to interpersonal health and reduced bullying as well as promoting resilience to help students overcome adversity, and prevention methods to limit negative experiences in schools. The first domain argues for active social emotional learning in schools. Social emotional learning is widely accepted as an effective intervention for reducing internalizing and externalizing problems for students. It is also associated with enhanced self-esteem and connectedness to school, improved classroom behavior, academic motivation, and a reducing in bullying and aggression. Cavoni et al. (2020) also note schools are an ideal location for SEL as a majority of youth spend a significant time in schools.

The second domain of MHPS focuses on the need for resilience promotion. Resilience is a protective skill that supports positive mental health and can both mitigate and prevent different mental health problems. Indeed, higher rates of resilience are associated with lower rates of mental health issues. Thus, MHPS posits schools are ideal places to develop resiliency to improve stress management and coping skills, social emotional competence, and reduce anxiety, depression and risk-taking behaviors. Resiliency can be taught across classroom settings and integrated into school cultures and climates (Cavoni et al., 2020). The third domain of MHPS calls for active prevention in schools for behavioral, emotional, social, and mental health problems (Cavoni et al., 2020). These interventions can be targeted, or geared to specific students, or universal, meaning all students receive the intervention (Barnes, 2019). School-wide positive behavior interventions systems are common forms of universal interventions (Cook, 2015). These universal interventions also assist in reducing the stigmatization surrounding

student mental health issues. Meanwhile, counselors, psychologists, social workers, and other school professionals can offer group or individual counseling as targeted intervention.

Cavoni et al. (2020) suggest that through the active promotion of social emotional learning, resilience, and strategic prevention methods are effective means to address the growing number of student mental health issues in schools, while promoting an inclusive school climate. The framework borrows from evidence-based practices in supporting student mental health issues. Additionally, effective MHPS calls for strong cooperation between policy makers and schools to ensure the programs and interventions in schools are sustainable. The researcher selected this framework to guide the study as Iowa has seen a rise in student mental health needs and this is one of the few known frameworks for sensemaking and guidance around evaluating school-based mental health policies and practices.

Method

Research Design

This inquiry employs an exploratory case study as described by Priya (2020) and parallels an intrinsic case study as outlined by Stake (1995) to explore educator experiences and thoughts on Senate File 496 influence on school-based mental health systems and practices. Yet, due to the novelty of the legislation and injunction and appeal, many districts were in a holding pattern, therefore triangulating perspectives across multiple sources was inaccessible. Therefore, this study acts as an exploratory case study focused on exploring the phenomenon of Senate File 496 in schools (Priya, 2020). In this inquiry, the exploratory case study was employed to gain a more refined understanding of Senate File 496's influence on school-based mental health

practices and the ways educators in Iowa perceive the legislation influences students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Stake (1995) case studies are clearly bounded within a time and place more so than other forms of qualitative inquiry. In this study, the time bound is the 2023-2024 school year and the place is Iowa K-12 schools.

Participants

Twenty educators were recruited from districts across Iowa. These participants are a subset of 31 total interviews, however in the 11 interviews not included in this study, student mental health and school-based mental health systems were not addressed. These participants focused on the book ban or LGBTQ+ limitations of Senate File 496. In total, the researcher contacted 81 districts at random across the state of Iowa and recruited participants via email. Participants were incentivized with a $15 e-gift card. Participants in the study ranged from being in their first year in their educational role, to having been in education for over 33 years and reflect 19 districts across the state. The educational roles of participants range from English teacher, counselor, science teacher, superintendent, principal, assistant principal, special education teacher, social studies teacher, to teacher librarian. Participants represent city, suburban, town, and rural schools as listed by the National Center for Education Statistics. All participants in the study were assigned a pseudonym in efforts to protect their confidentiality. Moreover, at time educators held multiple roles or responsibilities. These additional roles are not reported in efforts to ensure confidentiality. Instead, the researcher reports the participants' principal role. Participant demographics are further outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Table

Pseudonym	Role	School Setting	Years in Ed	Pseudonym	Role	School Setting	Years in Ed
Alexis	Elementary SPED	City	15	Elly	High School English	Town	18
Anastasia	High School English	Rural	30	Erica	Elementary Counselor	Rural	1
Ari	High School English	Rural	4	Haley	High School English	Rural	3
Ava	Middle School Social Studies	Suburb	12	Jeff	Elementary Teacher	Rural	19
Avery	Middle School English	Suburb	10	Lexi	High School English	Town	
Bailey	Elementary Counselor	Rural	8	Maud	Middle School Counselor	Town	22
Bri	Elementary ESL	Town	6	Meryl	High School SPED	City	17
Brain	High School Science	Town	5	Rebecca	High School English	Rural	17
Cindy	High School Teacher Librarian	Suburb	13	Skylar	High School Teacher Librarian	Suburb	8
Danielle	High School English	Rural	30	Tim	Superintendent	Town	1

Data Collection

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, all participants received an

informed consent form and exempt status outlining the purpose of the study, survey and

interview procedures, and safeguards in place to protect privacy and confidentiality. To learn

about participant experiences, the researcher used semi-structured interviews with pre-developed

questions and allowed for additional questions to probe for clarification or meaning (Patton,

2015). The questions focused on participants' experience with Senate File 496, their thoughts on

the legislation, any training they received to ensure they were following the legislation, and ways

the legislation influenced their practice. The interviews averaged 45 minutes in length. Only de-

identified information was saved on the researcher's secured server. Sample questions for this study include;

1. Please describe your familiarity with File 496, the legislation that bans schools from formally surveying students about their mental health, bans discussion of gender identity and sexual orientation before 7th grade, and bans any books that depict or describe sexual activity from schools.
2. What are your thoughts on this legislation?
3. **How has this legislation influenced your practice?**

Positionality

Lincoln and Guba (1985) encourage researchers to disclose their positionality to help readers understand the unique perspectives a researcher brings to a study. The researcher on this study is a cisgendered woman trained in education policy who identifies strongly with constructivist epistemologies with a background in K-12 teaching. The researcher has not taught in Iowa; thus, she examines data from an outside perspective. Moreover, she has a history of advocating for student mental health in efforts to lessen mental health issues as a barrier to learning.

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed data through Stake's (1995) four step strategy for data analysis to examine educator experiences with Senate File 496 and the ways the legislation is influencing students and school-based mental health practices. Cavoni et al.'s (2020) MHPS guided the development of a coding protocol to make sense of educator experiences. During analysis, the researcher looked for indications of promoting SEL, promoting resilience, and efforts to prevent

mental health issues, social emotional issues, and behavior problems, or aspects of participant

experiences that directly challenged these efforts (Cavoni et al. 2020). The four-step deductive

analysis included direct interpretation, where codes are created to represent the participants'

words, and categorical aggregation, where preliminary themes are developed from the codes

(Stake, 1995). Codes attributed to the first theme were "red-tape around supporting students,"

"removal of screeners and check-ins," and "systems of support." Codes for the second theme

included "suicide prevention," "advocacy for students to reduce self-harm," and "student before

career" and were combined into the second theme. The third theme codes were "important for

students to have a trusted adult," "feeling alone increases mental health issues," and "immense

concern over student safety." Next, the researcher engaged in pattern recognition by refining

more precise codes. For the first theme this was "school systems of support." For the second

theme this was "prioritization of student health at core of educator being" and the third theme

was "inability to support students perceived to cause drastic harm." The final step, naturalistic

generalizations, was where the research further clarified themes to ensure the themes represent

the data and can be applied broadly. The coding breakdown is presented in Table 2 as suggested

by Miles et al. (2020).

Table 2

Coding Breakdown

	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3
Direct Interpretation	Unable to address student needs, banning of good teaching practices, Tier I and Tier II MTSS no go, no screeners	To do job correctly, it is no longer legal, illegal to help students, need to work outside law to support students,	Cannot listen to students, cannot support students, where will they turn, who can students trust, schools responsible for mental health, students falling

		suicide is real concern	through cracks, wider cracks, unable to help students, cannot do role
Categorical Aggregation	Red tape, no screeners, no check ins, no support, can't talk to them	Suicide prevention, advocacy for students to reduce self-harm, student before career, going to be fired?	Need trusted adults, , isolation increase mental health issues, not student centered, concern for student safety, where to turn
Pattern Recognition	Senate File 496 preventing Tier I and Tier II interventions for student mental health and all aspects of Cavoni et al. (2020) MHPS	Teachers conflicted with helping student or losing job, to help student must work around the law	Lack of MHPS (Cavoni et al. 2020) place student at risk, unable to provide necessary interventions for student mental health
Naturalistic generalizations	Dismantling School-Based Mental Health Systems	Rise of Vigilantism in Education	Irrevocable Student Harm

Trustworthiness

The research team ensured trustworthiness by engaging in credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure credibility, the researcher used cross-case examination to note how themes related across perspectives. Additionally, transferability was instilled by using thick, rich descriptions in participant voices. To address dependability, the researchers engaged in reflexivity and bracketing, and finally confirmability was ensured by validating themes along all stages of the data analysis process and by engaging in member checking (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Limitations

Needless to say, this study has limitations. First, due to the highly politicized nature of Senate File 496, some educators declined to participate but reached out to the researcher through

their personal email saying they feared participating could place their employment at risk. Similarly, the researcher omitted specific details from some participants by not using their quotes in the text as the information could threaten their confidentiality. Additionally, the researcher has not worked in the Iowa K-12 school system, thus while she holds an outsider perspective, she may lack a nuanced understanding of the K-12 system in the state.

Findings

After engaging in four rounds of data analysis to examine how Senate File 496 influenced school-based mental health practices and systems, and for ways educators perceive the legislation influences students, three themes emerged in the data and are presented below.

Dismantling of School-Based Mental Health Systems

The first theme from the data was that Senate File 496 reflects an intentional dismantling of school-based mental health systems. This dismantling can be seen at both the school level, and separately on the individual level for school counselors and teachers. Thus, there are sub themes to expand on each of these notions. Additionally, while districts held different interpretations of Senate File 496 and its ban on formally surveying students for mental health issues, all educators perceived the intent of the legislation to be an attack on supporting student mental health issues and student needs. As Tim shared, all of us have a goal of helping students to prepare for life after school" and the passing of Senate File 496 drastically limits educators' ability to do so.

School Level

Across many districts, the formal mental health screening ban without parent permission resulted in the removal of universal mental health screeners. There are a variety of different forms of screening that schools did, such as school climate surveys (Ari), SABERS (Alexis, Erica, and Kersten) and other mental health screeners (Bailey). As Kersten shared, her district's position was that "we just can't give the official screeners that we were doing." In these districts, as Meryl pointed out, obtaining active parent consent for screeners creates another burden on students, educators, and parents, especially since "kids' don't want to bring things home." Meryl shared that active permission dramatically reduced response rate. In many districts, this resulted in schools abandoning their screeners. Ari conveyed her school removed the school climate survey, which removed the opportunity to understand who the trusted adults were in the school:

> I thought [the mental health screener] was really great because like some of the questions on there were, do you have a trusted adult in the building? Who is that person? And students would write their trusted adults or adults. And like we as teachers would get those names so that we kind of knew. Not necessarily to like keep an eye out for them, but we knew that like, okay, they feel comfortable around us. And then also, just like the data of knowing how many of our students feel safe in the building

While some districts screened for an understanding of school climate, other districts used screeners like SABERS to check students for internalizing and externalizing mental health issues. Alexis shared her district removed mental health screeners because "because it would be considered assessing their mental health." However, she notes that her school also screens for reading and math ability, but those have remained in the school. Rebecca taught in a district that also removed mental health screeners. She divulged:

As a person who has seen the improvements in students' lives when they are able to get

mental health care and they are able to start those conversations with parents through the

school, not being able to screen without parent permission is wild. It's buck wild. I mean,

even using that information internally to help students with anxiety navigate the

challenges that come with being in school and having these expectations and growing and

changing and friend groups.

Additionally, Danielle warned, "why would we not want to give those to students?" These

sentiments reflect the understanding that mental health screeners are strong resources in active

prevention for student mental health issues (Cavoni et al., 2020).

However, not all districts removed universal screeners. Brian and Lexi both shared that

their district still conducts the school climate survey. Brian noted "we do at least one survey

every year and I think one of them we do twice a year. Just about the social and emotional

environment of the school." Lexi also shared that screening had not been an issue in her district,

"but my school district is very reactive, not proactive. So, until some parent freaks out and

causes a hullabaloo at a board meeting, it won't happen." The conflicting nature of districts'

interpretation of Senate File 496 speaks to the legislation's vagueness and reflects localized

interpretations of the legislation that, for some districts, resulted in the removal of best practices

to ensure student mental/emotional support. Thus, in some districts, Senate File 496 did not

influence the existing proactive support for student mental health, while in other districts, the

legislation dismantled existing systems of MHPS (Cavoni et al., 2020).

Individual Level

Teachers. Many participants in the study shared their districts interpretation of Senate File 496 has led to a dismantling of teachers' abilities to support student mental health. Bri highlighted the additional steps in supporting kids when she tried to help a student in need.

> I had reached out to the counselor and was like, 'Hey, I think there's some stuff going on here. I think she needs to talk to you'. She was like, 'okay, but I need parent permission first.' It's like, well, parents don't speak English, so let me help you communicate with them, because I am somewhat fluent in Spanish, and I'm used generally as a translator for our district.

Bri's experience reflects additional barriers in supporting students and the need for more resources to ensure non-English speaking parents have the appropriate consent forms.

Meanwhile, Anastasia shared that her district went so far as to encourage teachers not to get to know their students. She expressed "At the beginning of the year, it's pretty traditional, I would say, for teachers to get to know their students by asking them a list of questions on a survey, and we were told not to ask about preferred pronouns." Similarly, Jeff shared the legislation was preventing them from building relations with students. Jeff extrapolated:

> This year it's really hard to ask kids how they're feeling, because they've [the district leadership] generally understood it [Senate File 496] we can't ask them how they are doing. It [Senate File 496] is so vaguely written and yet encompassing kind of many things.

Avery noted that her district held a similar interpretation and put restrictions on checking in with students. Avey expanded on her thoughts of the vague legislation by saying;

It's super annoying because the way it's worded means that it is technically illegal for me to formally ask a kid I see crying, 'Oh my gosh, what's going on? Are you okay? Like, is it something at schools or something at home?' That's now illegal according to this law and that is a normal human empathy function that is very important in teaching because I teach middle schoolers and middle schoolers like to cry.

This relationship barrier made participants feel that they cannot support students and their mental health. Haley shared "All of the sudden, we're not supposed to like, talk about mental health, like its a bad word. You can't like ask kids how they're doing." Similarly, Cindy shared that even anonymous check-ins were no longer permitted in her district; "I was using a like a mood board with an anonymous kind of like Google form where they just kind of get a collective response from them and we aren't supposed to do those anymore." This reflects a significant barrier in successful implementation on MHPS through removal of SEL and active prevention efforts (Cavoni et al., 2019).

Counselor. The counselors in this study spoke to a dismantling of their role in school-based mental health systems to an extent that often created ethical dilemmas for supporting students. The counselors in the study felt that in order to correctly comply with their district's interpretation of Senate File 496, they had to compromise aspects of their professional role.

Erica first spoke to this sentiment when she shared:

It puts school counselors in a like an ethical dilemma because, you know, we talk to students about confidentiality and how, like, if you aren't hurting yourself, you're not hurting somebody else or somebody is hurting you, what's said in the room stays in the

room. And so now this legislation is like putting a stop to like our ethical oath and our

ethical guidelines that we follow as counselors. So, I think that kind of puts us between a

rock and a hard place, and it stops us from doing our jobs.

Bailey went on to share this was a concern for students questioning their identity, and best

practices are to work with the student "to feel self-confident, to advocate for themselves."

However, with the legislation mandating parents are made aware of nick names, Bailey said;

You don't get to work on that scale yet. It just takes away a lot of skill building that I was

doing before because now I have to enter with, well, you know. If you want to be a

different name, that's a different gender. I'm going to have to inform your parents before I

make the switch. And I've had at least three students this year pull back and say, Now,

fine, I'll just do what I need to do.

The concern over informing parents of student nick names was palpable amongst counselors as

part of counselor roles is to teach about identity development, including gender identity and

identity exploration. As Muad shared, this is part of the curriculum she taught as a counselor as

in sixth grade; "Puberty, it's happening. We need to be talking about the differences between

gender, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation because they're all different,

you know." Similarly, Bailey shared concern that removal of gender identity discussions puts

kids at risk as it "is kind of restricting that movement of being able to naturally develop oneself."

All counselors shared that having to out students to comply with Senate File 496 were, as Bailey

shared was unethical as it is outside the scope of what counselors are compelled to share

Because as a counselor, that's not one of the things that I would ethically have to release

because it doesn't cause danger to the student. Nobody's causing danger to them. ...but if

that makes that student feel more comfortable, more safe, more a part of something and respected, why would we not do that little piece without adding more stress? Additionally, Maud's shared that her lessons on gender identity were part of a larger anti-bias curriculum, which as a result of the legislation she had to remove and has since seen an increase in bullying towards students that she feels powerless to help. She worried;

> I would say it was really hard in the fall for me to swallow that pill. And what's really hard is for, like, my trans student right now in sixth grade who has experienced bullying. It's really awkward to how do you have prevention around that when you're like literally not allowed to talk about it in the classroom?

This curriculum was focused on reducing bias related bullying in schools. She went on to share the removal of this curriculum and inability to support students made her job "really hard."

Ultimately, the counselors in this study all desired to help students yet had to reform or restructure their practice. As Erica shared the legislation makes counselors "more cautious towards mental health." Bailey shared that while she can still work with kids, "it may take longer for me to get to a point with a student to get them to feel safe and secure" as a result of the additional restrictions put on counselors. Maud echoed these sentiments by sharing now there is "a lot of red tape around supporting students." These experiences reflect barriers to implementing SEL promotion and mental health prevention in schools (Cavoni et al., 2020)

Rise of Vigilantism in Education

The second theme that emerged during data analysis was that Senate File 496 created a culture of vigilantism of education in schools. This theme encompasses a rise in counselors,

administrators, and teachers seeking ways to work around Senate File 496 to provide students the

support they need, which may put them at risk of violating the policy and put their licensure on

the line. This theme reflects resilience in educators in line with MHPS (Cavoni et al., 2020).

While some districts, like Brian and Lexi said their district had no major changes, most of the

educators in the study identified an internal conflict between the desire to follow the law and

keep their job, and a desire to support students. First, participants noted that due to the legislation

their districts removed screeners, surveys, and simple student check-ins. Nevertheless, educators

strive to support students as they view it to be a fundamental part of their role, moreover, these

actions reflect educator efforts to keep alive social emotional learning and active prevention

methods in their schools as suggested by MHPS (Cavoni et al., 2019). Participants in the study

highlighted different workarounds, or little ways to show solidarity with students. In Kersten's

district, teacher check-ins were encouraged in place of formal screeners like SABER, reflecting

efforts to engage in active prevention in her school. Kersten disclosed:

> You just have to be careful in how you're asking them. But they do keep saying to us, if
>
> the teachers are asking it as part of their opening statement or lessons or, you know, rate
>
> yourself 1 to 10, how are you feeling today? And that is different than if we're putting out
>
> like that survey SABER's like social emotional surveys and then printing the results.

Another way educators attempt to work around the law to support student needs is by using

student's preferred name and pronouns without obtaining parent permission. As Skylar shared

"It's basic suicide prevention... I'm going to do whatever the student asks." Ava also noted,

"There are some people who are like, 'well, screw it, I'll call the kid whatever they want to be

called'." This sentiment was echoed by Avery who shared "I'm not going to do it. Period. I

haven't done it. I won't do it. Fire me or not, I don't care. It's not happening." These actions illustrate educators' efforts to actively prevent mental health issues in students by supporting students and their identity, though it violates Senate File 496 (Cavoni et al., 2020).

Similarly, Haley continued to conduct student check-ins, "I like still ask my students how they're doing mental health wise and things like that, regardless of the legislation." She went on to say that her school counselor appreciated her checking in with students because there was one counselor and hundreds of children. Nevertheless, Haley spoke of the internal conflict around supporting kids when she said, "Am I going to get like, fired? Am I going to be in trouble, like all these things?" Likewise, Avery shared though she is not supposed to, she still checks in with her students by, "talk[ing] to them and figure out what's going on. Is there something I can help you with? Is it something you need to talk to the counselor about? Is it something really major?" This rise in teachers finding work ways to work around their districts interpretation of the legislation to support students reflect educators' individual efforts to ensure social emotional learning and active prevention methods were being met in schools (Cavoni et al., 2020).

Irrevocable Student Harm

The third theme that emerged was educators' concern that the legislation resulted in irrevocable student harm. As some educators noted, their districts interpretation of Senate File 496 resulted challenges around suicide prevention and shared concerns the legislation would result in an increase of student suicide. Bailey noted the risks for suicide as well, especially for LGBTQ+ students when she shared "they don't have anywhere to go and they're not safe, that is not a great position for those students to be in. I mean, the statistics are clear about how heavy suicide and self-harm is." As Meryl noted, the removal of screeners makes it easier "for us not to notice them or for them to slip through the cracks." These sentiments were further echoed by

Rebecca; "when kids don't have representation and they don't have support and they don't have a way out, what they do instead is they kill themselves. And we know that we have data about it." The educators in the study voiced strong concerns about not being able to actively prevent and support student mental health challenges as suggested by MHPS (Cavoni et al., 2019).

Moreover, Lexi observed the broad role of schools, especially in rural communities, for providing support for students. She said:

> Well, and again, like we're rural districts, we feed kids two or three meals a day. Some kids shower here, some kids get their clothes here and their weekend meals here. Like, we're like I said before, we're more than just school.

She went on to reflect that Senate File 496 could limit access to support that the school provides her community. Elly also noted the importance of students having a place to express themselves; "kids need to have somewhere where they feel safe, where they feel like they can express themselves. And if they don't, that's when we start having major problems with, you know, depression." Additionally, Bailey noted that being unable to support student mental health or screen for mental health influences students' feeling of safety. Bailey stated:

> And so that impacts their mental health, their form of identity, and it's shown through years of data, that that's kind of what happens when you kind of suppress some of that group's development. And that's where I worry about then are overall safety in schools.

Erica shared Bailey's concern for student and school safety and extended this sentiment to address the link between mental health and school violence when she expressed, "And like, unfortunately, we just saw [reference to Perry school shooting]. We just saw like a response to

that last week in Iowa when that's not addressed." Rebecca frustratedly observed that the legislation reflected legislators "desire for students to die." Clearly these sentiments reflect failed systems of MHPS across all three domains (Cavoni et al., 2020).

Discussion

This intrinsic case study sought to examine (1) the ways Senate File 496 has influenced school-based mental health systems and (2) Iowan educators' perceptions of how the legislation has influenced student mental health through semi-structured interviews with 20 educators. The researcher found three themes in the data which were that Senate File 496 was dismantling school-based mental health systems, there was a rise of vigilantism in education, and the legislation is causing irrevocable student harm. These findings contribute an understanding of how restrictive policy influences school-based mental health systems in a predominantly rural midwestern state, as much of the literature, instead, focuses on evidence-based practices. Moreover, the findings add to a growing body of literature on increased accountability for educators and decreased autonomy (Buchanan, 2015; Parcerisa et al., 2022; Villa & Buese, 2007; Wong, 2006). However, not all educators cited significant changes in their systems. Some educators shared their district would only change its current practices if a parent complained, while others shared their district had a significantly less strict interpretation of the legislation.

Research Question 1

As posited by Cavoni et al. (2020), the MHPS framework requires active social emotional learning, resilience promotion, and active prevention efforts for behavioral, emotional, social, and mental health problems. The findings of this study help examine the ways Senate File

496 has influenced these practices in K-12 schools in Iowa. The first two themes, dismantling of school-based mental health systems, and a rise in the vigilantism of education provide insight into the ways Senate File 496 influenced school-based mental health systems. The second theme, a rise in vigilantism of education, addresses the ways teachers feel they must 'skirt' the law to support students needs, by doing so they act as vagilities, though their intentions are good. Across the findings a removal of evidence-based practices in favor of ideology-based practices threaten to endanger students. In this regard, Senate File 496 directly challenges MHPS systems by barring the foundational steps such as relationship building, and SEL and resilience promotion and active prevention of mental health issues (Cavoni et al., 2020). At the school-level, obtaining active consent on mental health surveys dramatically increased the demand on time and responsibility for educators, teachers, and parents and goes against best practices as outlined by the US Department of Education (2020) guidelines on student privacy, which suggest passive consent at student registration to be sufficient.

Instead, Senate File 496 places additional work and responsibility on schools while drastically hindering their professional autonomy. This provides additional support for Valli and Buese's (2007) argument that the increase accountability actively deskills teachers. While the aim of this principle is to empower parents, it fails to note that parents are already able to view any formal survey schools administer and just need to request to do so (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). However, this increased red tape and ambiguity of the legislation resulted in districts' erratic interpretation of the legislation unequally influencing systems across districts. By removing screeners, which are part of active prevention and inform social emotional learning as outlined in MHPS (Cavoni et al., 2020) and are considered best practices in school-based mental health systems (Burns & Rapee, 2022; Moore et al., 2015: Ormiston & Renshaw, 2023),

Senate File 496 has dramatically reduced the ability for at-risk students to be identified and receive the support, further damaging to schools, and placing students at risk (Resa, 2015). Moreover, this standardization of what districts and teachers can and cannot employ further limits educator ability to meet their student needs, further de-professionalizing the work of educators (Buchanan, 2015).

Teachers

At the same time, the teachers in this study noted Senate File 496 deconstructed their ability to support student mental health as well. This finding offers additional evidence to existing scholarship as to how accountability measures reshape teachers' professional identity and agency (Buchanan, 2015; Parcerisa et al., 2022; Valli & Buese, 2007; Wong, 2006). Existing scholarship has largely focused on teacher pedagogy; however, these findings demonstrate a reduction in teacher-student relationship autonomy, not simply instructional autonomy. For student mental health, these relationships are key to promoting SEL and resilience in students in accordance with MHPS (Cavoni et al., 2020). As one participant noted, the district went so far as to ban teachers from building relationships with and getting to know their students. In this regard, these districts interpretations of Senate File 496 directly prevent teachers from implementing evidence-based practices such as universal interventions and social emotional learning (Cavoni et al., 2020; Deaton, 2022; Ohrt, 2021) to instead implement ideology-based legislation. In doing so, participants in this study addressed removing different executive functioning and SEL lessons, which directly promote and protect mental health. Teachers' inability to teach these lessons that are paramount to healthy development and check-in/build relationships with students is highly concerning as positive relationships is the strongest indicator

of student success (Nygaard, 2022; Ormiston et al., 2021) and reflects failed MHPS at both SEL promotion and mental-emotional-behavioral prevention (Cavoni et al., 2020).

Counselors

Meanwhile, Senate File 496 dismantled counselors' roles in school-based mental health systems by implementing ideology-based practices at the expense of evidence-based practices. While scholarship noting increased accountability at the expense of professional autonomy for teacher is established (Buchanan, 2015; Parcerisa et al., 2022; Villa & Buese, 2007; Wong, 2006). these findings offer an example of legislation/policy restricting the professional work of counselors. To begin with, the counselors in the study all shared concerns that Senate File 496 created ethical dilemmas for them. These participants shared that because the law requires them to obtain parent permission to use nicknames, students who identify as trans or non-binary were much less likely to seek guidance as their confidentiality was no longer guaranteed. Counselors traditionally are only mandated to report self-harm or intent to harm others (Christian & Brown, 2018). This conundrum challenges all three components of successful MHPS as it reduces a counselor's ability to provide social emotional learning and guidance to students, work on resiliency for students in need, and take active preventative methods (Cavoni et al., 2020). The counselors also shared they have seen an increase in bullying, which is concerning when considering Kishimoto and Ding's (2023) finding that bullying victims experience higher levels of psychological disturbance and Cohen & Freiberg's (2013) assertion bullying is a factor in school shootings.

Rise of Vigilantism in Education

As educators witnessed the implementation of ideology-based Senate File 496, they found ways around the law or acted as vigilantes in attempts to support students through evidence-based practices. Indeed, Senate File 496's additional restrictions on teacher autonomy and harsh accountability forced teachers to either revise their professional practice to fit into the narrow scope of their role, or act outside the law like vigilantes to support student needs. This practice reflects teachers efforts to implement the third component of MHPS (Cavoni et al., 2022), however for many participants these efforts were not outlawed in their district, reflecting drastic deskilling and low trust of teachers (Wong, 2006). The author believes this to be the first study to date that notes this trend. Many educators believed Senate File 496 outlawed best practices in their profession and ethical dilemmas. Their desire to help students led them to find system work arounds to support students. In this regard, educators are acting as what Saucier & Webster (2010) call social vigilantism. Considering this, the educators in the study demonstrated effective MHPS by finding subliminal ways to teach social emotional learning, work on resilience with students, and take efforts to actively prevent mental health issues (Cavoni et al., 2020) and work on preserving aspects of their roles in implementing MTSS. Nevertheless, acting as vigilantes and employing educational subterfuge to support student mental health is not a sustainable system and compromises the security of educators and students alike.

Research Question 2

The findings of this study when viewed through MHPS (Cavoni et al., 2020) show educators hold concern that the ideology driving Senate File 496 is created irrevocable student harm. These findings are grounded in educator perception of student experiences amidst the erosion of school-based mental health systems. Educators provided evidence of every aspect of MHPS in schools being degraded, barred, or removed (Cavoni et al., 2020). They note that by

doing so, at-risk students are further jeopardized. These concerns were palpable in relation to concerns students at risk for self-harm and suicidal ideation would fall through the cracks and fail to receive the support they needed. This was especially true in districts that removed mental health screeners and student check ins, as these are often the most reliable tools for student identification (Ormiston et al., 2021) and foundational to MHPS component 3 for prevention (Cavoni et al., 2020). What is more, the educators in this study noted that between the removal of mental health surveys and the banning of gender identity before 7th grade, LGBTQ+ students, who are significantly more at risk for self-harm (Discher, 2023) and suicide will be significantly less likely to receive necessary aid and act as a barrier for evidence-based practices (Cavoni et al., 2020). Moreover, the considerable differences in district interpretations of Senate File 496 reflect varying levels of concerns for students as not all systems were dismantled in the same way, reflecting unclear goals from that state that inequitably harm students from areas with stricter views of the legislation or districts that were unable to afford expensive legal counsel.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of this study illuminate a significant threat to existing school-based mental health systems and MHPS. The failure of the state to clearly define and outline clear guidelines for policy implementation results in inequitable system restructuring across districts that results in some students failing to receive the support they need. Similarly, the broad interpretations have also placed inequitable restraints on educators in their efforts to implement best practices that leave educators to result balancing their desire to support students with their need for employment, further reducing educator agency and increasing state and parent oversight in schools. In doing so, Senate File 496 bars evidence-based practices in schools that promote and support student physical and mental health, personal safety, positive climates, and inclusive

spaces. It also represents ways ideology-based legislation and increased accountability erode teacher autonomy and well-being. Thus, this legislation reflects further restrictions on teachers with increased punitive measures for accountability and in this situation the oversight focused on ideology instead of curriculum. Additionally, the findings of this study speak to a critical need for policymakers to consider the intent of policy and the reality of its impact on schools and its influence on school systems and students. Limiting schools' ability to support student mental health amidst a mental health crisis sends direct messaging that the people suffering from mental health issues are not valued or supported.

While these ideology-based laws have been widely criticized and condemned by universities and accreditation bodies (Kline et al., 2022), educators are in a difficult situation. Educators can choose to follow best-practices and support students; however, this could result in them losing their job. Nevertheless, many districts had a hard time interpreting how to implement Senate File 496, suggesting it would be difficult for an educator to be dismissed for violating it. It would be best for educators to critically reflect on their district and their leadership to ensure they are following the law and ask for district clarity on why, in some cases, formal mental health screeners are so broadly applied to include student check-ins in hopes this follow up could help districts reevaluate their interpretation of the law. Meanwhile, educators can write to state officials asking for clarity and find other methods to engage in advocacy work while helping educate the public about these issues. Overall, Senate File 496 reflects the importance of voting in state and local elections. Considering a majority of people do not agree with the legislation, it will be up to voters to show up to the polls and elect leaders that create evidence-based policies that value student learning, growth, and humanity.

The National Education Association (2023) noted that violations of laws like Senate File 496 can lead to educators losing their job, however, federal civil rights laws state it is unconstitutional for districts to prohibit recognition in class of only LGBTQ+. Moreover, Title IX bars discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity in schools, however until these laws are brought through the court system, states will continue to try and pass them. Educators who believe their rights are violated should seek support from their local union and can file a complaint with Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights.

Future Research

Considering the novelty of Senate File 496, future research should consider longitudinal observation of ways the legislation influences student mental health. More work is needed to understand the way Senate File 496 has influenced educators. Additionally, more research is warranted to understand the climate of states that have passed laws in the name of parental rights that end up restricting student rights and access in schools to understand the factors influencing decisions that reflect the desires of few over the needs of many. Finally, there is a need for research to focus on effective means of dissemination to ensure policy makers, stakeholders, and ad administrators can make informed decisions to promote equitable education.

Conclusion

This intrinsic case study used 20 interviews from educators in Iowa to examine the ways Senate File 496 influenced school-based mental health systems and ways participants perceived the legislation influenced student mental health. The results of this inquiry revealed that the

participants perceived Senate File 496 dismantled existing school-based mental systems, resulted in a rise of vigilantism in education and caused irrevocable student harm. Participants in this study spoke of increased complications to successfully employ best-practices in their role resulting in a deep fear of losing their jobs. While the notion of protecting parental rights in schools is noble, the proponents of this mindset reflect a lack of understanding of existing parent rights. Nevertheless, this group holds enough power implement such legislation, however it remains essential for policy makers to consider the expansive risks to public health and possibility of further marginalizing at-risk students in K-12 schools, as this threatens students' First and 14th Amendment rights.

Funding Acknowledgement

References

A bill for an act related to children and students § Senate Fiel 496 (2023).

    https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ba=SF%20496&ga=90

Alfonseca, K. (2024). Map: The impact of anti-DEI legislation. *ABC News.*

    https://abcnews.go.com/US/map-impact-anti-dei-
    legislation/story?id=108795967#:~:text=At%20least%2010%20states%20have,%2C%20
    Texas%2C%20Utah%20and%20Wyoming.

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, (2020). AFSP applauds passage of K-12 suicide

    prevention and mental health legislation in NC. https://www.prnewswire.com/news-
    releases/afsp-applauds-passage-of-k-12-suicide-prevention-and-mental-
    health-legislation-in-nc-301073125.html

American Rescue Plan, 117th Congress § H. R. 1139, (2021).

Barnes, T. N, (2019, August). Changing the landscape of social emotional learning in urban

    schools: What are we currently focusing on and where do we go from here?. *The Urban*
    Review, 51, 599-637.

Bastian, K. C., Akos, P., Domina, T., & Griffard. M. (2019). Understanding the allocation of

    student support personnel in public schools. *AERA OPEN, 5*(4), 2-17.
    https://search.datacite.org/works/10.1177/2332858419890322

Beland, L-P. & Kim, D. (2016). The effect of high school shootings on schools and student

performance. *Educational Evaluation and Policy, 38*(1),

https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373715590683

Belsha, K. (2022). Iowa scrapped teacher training on equity. Students of color felt the sting of

that decision. *Chalkbeat.* https://www.chalkbeat.org/2022/3/11/22970779/iowa-critical-

race-theory-teacher-training-equity-diversity/

Biesta, G., Priestley, M., & Robinson, S. (2015). The role of beliefs in teacher agency. *Teachers*

and Teaching: Theory and Practice, 21(6), 624-640.

https://doi.org/10.1080/1354062.2015.10744325

Burns, J. R. & Rapee, R. M. (2022). Barriers to universal mental health screening in schools: The

perspective of school psychologists. *Journal of Applied School Psychology 38*(3), 223-

240. https://doi.org/10.1080/15377903.2021.1941470

Cavioni, V., Grazzani, I., & Ornaghi, V. (2020). Mental health promotion in schools: A

comprehensive theoretical framework. *International Journal of Emotional Education,*

12(1), 65-82.

Christian, D. D., & Brown, C. L. (2018, September) Recommendations for the role and

responsibilities of school-based mental health counselors. *Journal of School-Based*

Counseling Policy and Evaluation, 1(1), 25-39

https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jscpe/vol1/iss1/6/

Cibulka, J. G. (1999). Moving toward an accountable system of K-12 education: Alternative

approaches and challenges. In G. J. Cizek (Ed.), *Handbook of Educational POlicy.* (pp.

183-211). Academic Press. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-012174698-8/50035-7

Cohen, J. & Freiberg, J A. (2013). School climate and bullying prevention. *National School*

Climate Center. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED584442.pdf

Connor, T. (2023, December 30) Judge tears apart Iowa book ban, LGBTQ education law. *The*

Daily Beat. https://www.thedailybeast.com/judge-tears-apart-iowa-book-ban-lgbtq-

education-law

Cook, C. R., Frye, M., Slemrod, T., Lyon, A. R., Renshaw, T. L., & Zhang, Y. (2015). An

integrated approach to universal prevention: Independent and combined effects of PBIS

and SEL on youths' mental health. *School Psychology Quarterly, 30*(2), 166–183.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among*

five approaches (Fourth edition.). SAGE.

CRT Forward. (2024). Anio-CRT efforts. *University of California Los Angles.*

https://crtforward.law.ucla.edu/map/

Deaton, J. D., Ohrt, J. H., Linich, K., Wymer, B., Toomey, M., Lewis, O., Guest, J. D., &

Newton, T. (2022). Teacher's experiences with K-12 students' mental health. *Psychology*

in the Schools, 59, 932-949.

Des Moines Register. (2024). A history of Iowa school shootings.

   https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/crime-and-courts/2024/01/04/iowa-

   school-shootings-a-history/72105880007/

Discher, A. (2023). Iowa HHS abandons critical adolescent mental health data collection.

   Common Good Iowa. https://www.commongoodiowa.org/blog/2023/03/07/iowa-hhs-

   abandons-critical-adolescent-mental-health-data-collection

Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U. S. C. § 4108 (2015).

   https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/title-iv-part-a-statute#Sec%204108

Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, D. (2020). Mental health and the COVID-19 crisis: The hope and

   concerns for children as schools re-open. *Interchange, 52*(2), 1-16.

   https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-020-09413-1

Goldberg, A. E. (2023). Impact of HB 1557 (Florida's Don't Say Gay Bill) on LGBTQ+ parents

   in Florida. *University of California Las Angelas School of Law.*

Goldberg, A. E. & Abreu, R. (2023). LGBTQ parent concerns and parent-child communication

   about the Parental Rights in Education Bill ("Don't Say Gay) in Florida. *Family*

   Relations, 1-22. https://doi.org.10.1111/fare.12894

Goodman-Scott, E., Donohue, P., & Betters-Bubon, J. (2023). A phenomenological investigation

   of universal mental health screening: Making meaning for school counseling.

   Professional School Counseling, 27(1), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.117/2156759X221150008

Health and Human Services. (2024). Mandatory reporters. https://hhs.iowa.gov/report-abuse-

   fraud/mandatory-

reporters#:~:text=Mandatory%20reporters%20have%20a%20responsibility,abuse%20is%20no%20longer%20required

Higgins, C. (2024, January). Iowa appeals block on Senate File 496's book ban, gender and sexuality restrictions. *Des Moines Register*.

https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/education/2024/01/12/gov-kim-reynolds-appeals-judges-block-on-iowas-book-ban-law/72204242007/

Higgins, C. (2024, August). Iowa can now enforce book ban law after appeals court overturns injunction. *Des Moines Register.*

https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/education/2024/08/09/appeals-court-overturns-temporary-block-on-iowa-book-ban-law-senate-file-496/74737983007/

Hopeful Futures Campaign. (2022). America's school mental health report card. *Inseparable.*

https://hopefulfutures.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Final_Master_021522.pdf Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

Hopeful Futures Campaign. (2024). Iowa. https://hopefulfutures.us/action-iowa/

Kline, N. S., Griner, S. B., Neelamegam, M., Webb, N. J., Morales, J. J., & Rhodes, S. D. (2022). Responding to "Don't Say Gay" laws in the US: Research priorities and considerations for health equity. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy, 19*, 1397-1402. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-022-00773-0

Kishimoto, T., Ji, X., & Ding, X. (2023). The multivariate associations among bullying experiences, executive function, and psychological disturbance. *School Mental Health, 15,* 1158-1172. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-023-09612-y

Langrock, I., LaViolette, J., Goncalves, M. S. O. & Spoon, K. (2023). Book bans in political context: Evidence from U.S. public schools.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

Metha, J. (2013). When professions shape politics: The case of accountability in K-12 and higher education. *Educational Policy, 28*(6)

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaäna, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (Third edition.). SAGE.

Moore, S. A., Widales-Benitez, O., Carnazzo, K. W., Kim, E. K., Moffa, K., & Dowdy, E. (2015). Conducting universal complete mental health screening via student self-report. *California Association of School Psychologists, 19*, 253-267. https://doi.org/10.007/s40688-015-0062-x

Movement Advancement Project. (2024). Equality maps: LGBTQ curricular laws. https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/curricular_laws

National Alliance on Mental Health. (2024). Mental health in Iowa. https://www.nami.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/IowaStateFactSheet.pdf

National Education Association. (2023). What you need to know about Florida's "don't say gay" and "don't say they" laws, book bans, and other curricula restrictions. https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/30424-know-your-rights_web_v4.pdf

Nelson, S. (2020). Mental health in K-12 schools. *Scanlan Center.* https://education.uiowa.edu/news/2020/03/mental-health-k-12-schools

Nese, R. N. T., Kittleman, A., Strickland-Chohen, M. K., & McIntosh, K., (2021). Examining teaming and tier 2 and 3 practices within a PBIS framework. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions,* 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1177/10983007211051090

Nguyen, B. (2023, November). Iowa officials sued by Penguin Random House and John Green

over school book ban. *Forbes*.

https://www.forbes.com/sites/britneynguyen/2023/11/30/iowa-officials-sued-by-penguin-

random-house-and-john-green-over-school-book-ban/?sh=6c443f1f78df

Nygaard, M. A., Ormiston, H. E., Heck, O. C., Apgar, S., & Wood, M. (2022). Educator

perspectives on mental health supports at the primary level. *Early Childhood Education

Journal.* https://doi.org/10.10007/s10643-022-01346-x

Ohrt, J. H., Deaton, J. D., Linich, K., Guest, J. D., Wymer, B., & Sandonato, B. (2020). Teacher

training in K-12 student mental health: A systematic review. *Psychology in the Schools*.

https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22356

Ormiston, H. E. , Nygaard, M. A., Heck, O. C., Wood, M., Rodriguez, N., Maze, M., Asomani-

Adem, A. A., Ingmire, K., Burgess, B., & Shriberg, D., (2021). Educator perspectives on

mental health resources and practices in their school. *Psychology in the Schools, 58*(11),

2148-2174. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22582

Ormiston, H. E. & Renshaw, T. L. (2023). Student demographics as predictors of risk placement

via universal behavioral screening. *Student Mental Health, 15*, 1076-1089.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-023-096603-z

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*: *Integrating theory and

practice* (4th ed.). Sage.

Priya, A. (2020). Case study methodology of qualitative research: Key attributes and navigating

the conundrums in its application. Sociological Bulletin, 70(1), 94-110.

Https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022920970318

Resa, W. (2017). Quick guide for multi-tiered systems of supports: The classroom. *Board of*

Education.

https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1568836530/resanet/uqbhj3quz8ct9rmkfiw7/Classr

oomMTSSQuickGuide.pdf

Richardson, I. (2021). Iowa gov. Kim Reynolds signs law targeting critical race theory, saying

she's against 'discriminatory indoctrination.' *Des Moines Register.*

https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/politics/2021/06/08/governor-kim-

reynolds-signs-law-targeting-critical-race-theory-iowa-schools-diversity-

training/7489896002/

Russo, D. A., Stochl, J., Painter, M., Shelly, G. F., Jones, P. B., & Perez, J., (2015). Use of the

theory of planned behaviour to assess factors of influencing the identification of

students at clinical high-risk for psychosis in 16+ education. *BMC Health Services*

*Research, 15(*411), 1-11. 10.186/s12913-015-107-y

Scanlan Center for School Mental Health. (2024). Imagine Iowa: Building partners in school

mental health. https://scsmh.education.uiowa.edu/imagineiowa/.

Saucier, D. A. & Webster, R. J. (2010). Social vigilantism: Measuring individual differences in

belief superiority and resistance to persuasion. *Personality and Social Psychology*

Bulletin, 36(1), 19-32. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167209646170

Searles, D. & Beck, M. A. (2023). ACLU of Iowa files federal lawsuit saying SF 496 'seeks to silence LGBTQ+ students'. *We are Iowa.* https://www.weareiowa.com/article/news/local/local-politics/aclu-lambda-lawsuit-iowa-senate-file-496-book-ban-lgbtq-students-safe-schools/524-92d4a443-6387-4698-9f2b-f3293626fdcb

Smart, S. & Elassar, A. (2023, December 30). Iowa's LGBTQ+ book ban and 'do't say gay' law partially blocked by federal judge. *CNN Wire*. https://www.advocate.com/law/book-ban-iowa-curriculum-blocked#toggle-gdpr

Smith, M. (2023, December 29). Judge blocks Iowa's ban on school library books that depict sex acts. *The New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/29/us/iowa-book-ban-blocked.html

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.

Thomason, A. & Brown, S. (2023). U.S. Supreme Court strikes down race-conscious admissions nationwide. *The Cornicle of Higher education. https://www.chronicle.com/article/u-s-supreme-court-strikes-down-race-conscious-admissions-nationwide*

Tran, J. T., Loecher, N., Kosyluk, K. A., & Bauermeister, J. A. (2023). Anti-LGBTQ+ sex education laws: The effects on students and implications for schools and school practitioners. *Psychology in the Schools, 60*(12), 5062-5075. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.2013

United States Department of Education. (2020). Student Privacy. https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/sites/default/files/resource_document/file/SuperintendentsAnnualNoticeApril2020_0.pdf

Waagmeester, J. (2023). Parental permission, survey opt out will affect data on young Iowans, advocates say. *Iowa Capital Dispatch.*

https://iowacapitaldispatch.com/2023/06/02/parental-permission-survey-opt-out-will-affect-data-on-young-iowans-advocates-say/

Watson, K. J. (2022). Secondary teachers' self-efficacy in supporting student mental health. *The High School Journal, 106*(1), 55-75. https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2022.a906702

West, M. R., Kraft, M. A., Finn, A. S., Martin, R. E., Duckworth, A. L., Gabrieli, C. F. O., & Gabrieli, J. D. E. (2016). Promise and paradox: Measuring students' non-cognitive skills and the impact of schooling. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 38*(1), 148-170. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373715597298

Whinnery, E. (2019). Student mental health. *Education Commission of the States.* https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED599557.pdf

Wright, B., Celeste-Villalvir, A., Moorehead, D., Johnson, C., Mendoza, K. L., Bowers, M., & Zima, B. T. (2023). A community-partnered qualitative study on multiple stakeholders perspectives: The COVID-19 Pandemic's perceived impact on Black and Latinx youth mental health and community-driven school policy recommendations. *School Mental Health, 15,* 1145-1157. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-023-09611-z

Youth Mind. (2024). Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire. https://youthinmind.com/products-and-services/sdq/

Zhang, S. (2022). The impact of book bans on LGBTQ students. *Institute for Youth in Policy.* https://assets-global.website-

files.com/62c1a36aefce296b64cfe356/6497374f1c0669f49e9f9e94_Book%20Bans%20P

olicy%20Review%20-%20Sarah%20Zhang.pdf