The Implementation of Suspension and Expulsion Programs in Two Ontario School Boards

by

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ABSTRACT

In 2008, the Ontario Ministry of Education made it mandatory that school boards in the province institute programs to serve suspended and expelled youth. These programs have now been in place for five years. Limited information has been collected as to how effective they are in addressing the needs of these students and little is known about the factors that have had an effect on the implementation of these policies. This study provides a description of the programs and focuses on the factors that have impacted policy implementation in this area.

Research has shown that several factors impact policy implementation in general. Among the main influential factors are the impact of policy actors, the conditions that exist, supports that are available and the level and type of central control that is in place. Through one-on-one interviews involving thirteen school and board personnel in two Ontario school boards, this research explored how these four factors had an impact on the policy implementation process as it relates to the suspension and expulsion programs.

The study participants believed that the relationships within and between these four factors and the creativity and flexibility this allowed were important in their ability to implement the new policies. Collaborative relationships between school board personnel and their community partners were highlighted in both participating boards as encouraging policy implementation. Strong relationships between staff, the students, and their families were important in finding program solutions for the particular conditions that existed, especially in
the rural board that participated in the study. The importance of strong relationships between board personnel and community partners was also stressed, especially in the board that had a combined urban and rural make-up. Two-way communication between board and Ministry personnel allowed for the provision of appropriate supports in order to keep the programs viable. I conclude that when it comes to implementing new policies, central control from the Ministry should demonstrate an understanding of the distinct situations that exist in each board, the importance of key relationships, and the need for flexibility in allowing for creative responses to the needs that exist.
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CHAPTER ONE – RESPONDING TO ONTARIO SCHOOL DISCIPLINE ISSUES

BACKGROUND

“The best Teacher, like the best Parent, will seldom resort to the Rod; but there are occasions when it cannot be wisely avoided.” Egerton Ryerson, superintendent of schools, Canada West, 1864 (Axelrod, 2010, p. 262).

“The Ministry of Education is committed to ensuring that all students who are expelled have the opportunity to continue their education…..With respect to programs for expelled students, research has demonstrated that positive outcomes for students are related to specific program elements that are tailored to meet the needs of each student.” (Ontario Ministry of Education Policy/Program Memorandum No. 142, 2012).

As long as there have been schools, there have been students who have gotten into trouble in schools by engaging in behaviours that are not suitable in a classroom setting. While some of the minor acts of insubordination have been easily handled by the classroom teacher, behaviours of an extreme and repetitive nature have required responses in the form of policy change on the part of the school, board and Ministry leaders.

In 2007, the Ministry of Education amended the Education Act to address the needs of students who had been suspended or expelled from Ontario schools. According to Policy/Program Memorandum 141, school boards would be required, effective February 1, 2008, “to offer at least one board program for suspended students” (Ontario Ministry of Education, PPM 141, 2007, p. 1) who had been suspended for longer than five days. Simultaneously, Policy/Program Memorandum 142 required school boards, by the same date, to “provide at least one program for students who have been expelled from all schools of the board” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, PPM 142, p. 2). Minor changes to terminology were made in the revised versions of the Policy/Program Memorandums circulated in 2012 but, otherwise, the directives to Ontario’s school boards remained the same. Prior to February 2008 in the Ontario education system, no program was required for students who were removed from the school
setting, at the board level. What did school boards do in response to the policy change? What existed before 2008? What would the new programs look like and how would this be determined? Ultimately, what factors would most influence the implementation of the new policies about programs for suspended and expelled youth?

The path to present day school discipline has had many significant junctures in Ontario since the time of Egerton Ryerson, the superintendent of schools quoted at the beginning of this thesis. From Confederation to the middle of the twentieth century, the policies that dealt with the most disruptive youth in schools remained relatively unchanged, with corporal punishment and suspension taken for granted as the solutions to extreme cases of school misbehaviour. From the Second World War up to the last few years of the century, concerns about human rights and mental health were influential in shaping changes in discipline policy, especially as they pertained to the most serious offenders. Then, as Ontario approached the year 2000, the Harris Conservatives introduced a zero tolerance approach to misbehaviour in response to a new politics of punishment.

Early in the new millennium, still searching for the appropriate balance between punishment and care, discipline policy underwent a series of significant changes as the provincial Liberals took power. While policy was uniform at the provincial level in this regard, differences in interpretation and implementation of policy meant that a diverse range of practices existed at the local level. Still, over the course of one hundred years, the education system moved from a philosophy that supported the use of corporal punishment to address extreme cases of misbehaviour to one in which rehabilitation and attention to special needs was encouraged. During this time, many and varied factors influenced the formation and implementation of policy related to addressing extreme inappropriate behaviour of youth in the Ontario school system.

**RESEARCH QUESTION**

The current programs for suspended and expelled students will be the focus for this thesis. The research question that will be addressed is “What impact do policy actors, local conditions, support and central control have on the implementation of Safe Schools’ policies related to suspension and expulsion programs in Ontario?” Implementation can be defined as the “process by which we actually carry out policy” (Redlinger & Shanahan, 1986, p. 76). It “consists of the adaptation of an innovative idea to its institutional setting” (Berman, 1981). In this instance, the innovative idea pertains to the use of programs that consist of academic and
non-academic components to support the continued development of students whose behaviour requires consideration of suspension or expulsion as possible consequences.

**RATIONALE FOR STUDY**

The term ‘discipline’ has its roots in ancient French and Latin terminology. The French word ‘descepline’ has varied meanings including “discipline; physical punishment; teaching; suffering; martyrdom” while the Latin “disciplina” refers to “instruction given, teaching, learning, knowledge” (dictionary.reference.com). In my view, school discipline should be more closely aligned to the Latin root linked to learning than to the French root, although that has not always been the case.

This research will examine the implementation of the policy directives that relate to the programs that currently exist for suspended and expelled students, how they came about, and how they are implemented in two school districts. The predecessor to these programs was the Strict Discipline Program which was first introduced in 2001, as a result of an invitation from the Ministry of Education in November 2000. The invitation called for “proposals from potential providers across the province for the design and delivery of one or more strict discipline school projects” (Roher & Weir, 2004, p. 51) for those students who had been expelled. Seven projects were awarded across the province by the Ministry in June 2001 and the resulting seven programs represented the extent of the province’s initial foray into directing that services be provided for suspended and expelled youth. As the majority of the pilot programs that were awarded were located in the “Golden Horseshoe” region near the west end of Lake Ontario, it was decided that the opportunity for programs would be extended to other parts of the province. As a result, a total of fifteen programs, the original seven demonstration programs and eight more extended programs, were recognized by the Ministry of Education as Strict Discipline Programs (A. Tikaram, personal communication, December 4, 2013).

The Strict Discipline Program was created in response to feedback from Ontarians on Safe Schools’ policies which indicated a desire for school boards to provide continuous learning for expelled students. Students who were removed from the school environment were “at risk of losing an important connection to the school community” (Ontario Ministry of Education, Safe Schools Policy and Practice: An Agenda for Action, 2006, p. 14). Instead of being cut adrift, it was felt that these students should be provided with resources that “might include access to
learning and treatment programs, behavioural management, individual counseling” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 14). The hope, then, was that a program providing these resources would allow students to continue to progress in their studies and in their growth and, thus, to continue to learn. As a result, the programs were set up in fifteen regions of the province and each program could potentially draw students from all boards within the region. According to Policy/Program Memorandum 130, all boards were required to have arrangements made to support students who were fully expelled. Arrangements meant that a program could exist within the board itself or could be arranged with a nearby provider that had been awarded a Strict Discipline Program (Ontario Ministry of Education, Policy/Program Memorandum 130, 2007). The regional programs remained in place until 2008, when the Ministry directives required that programs be set up in each of the school boards in the province.

As with the Strict Discipline Program that preceded them, the goal of the board suspension and expulsion programs was to ensure that students’ needs were supported while the violations of Safe Schools’ policy that they had committed were addressed. Implementation of the policies about suspension and expulsion focuses on the provision of support that involves an academic and non-academic component. The academic component of the program is intended to ensure that the suspended student is able to continue to receive an education. The non-academic component is intended to assist the student by addressing the causes of the behaviour that have led to the suspension or expulsion.

The Ministry recognized that students might require a variety of supports, depending on the nature of the activity that had led to the sanction. Boards were directed to “make appropriate support available and/or facilitate a student’s referral to community-based service providers and/or provide support through other methods, such as remote access to resources” (Ontario Ministry of Education, Policy/Program Memorandum No. 142, 2012, p. 5). One exception existed in the program for students who had been suspended for six to ten days. In this instance, boards were not required to provide non-academic support, but they were encouraged to “consider what types of support, if any, the student may require during the suspension and upon his or her return to school” (Ontario Ministry of Education, Policy/Program Memorandum No. 141, 2012, pp. 3 &4).

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Given the short period of time during which the current programs for suspended and
expelled youth have been in place in Ontario, very little information has been collected about how these programs are operated, reviewed and updated. In 2011 and 2012, Ministry of Education representatives met and engaged in teleconferences with board representatives who were responsible for overseeing the programs for suspended and expelled youth, as part of their Safe Schools’ portfolio. Information about the programs that were offered in each of the boards was shared, as was data on program effectiveness, such as recidivism or rates of reoffending. A clearer indication of best practices and areas of concern began to develop. The varied approaches that have been taken, based on individual board interpretations of the legislation, became apparent. It was felt that, with this and other available information, the best direction for next steps would become clear. I hope that the information contained in this paper will be of value in determining how selected factors impact policies connected to the work that is done with suspended and expelled youth in Ontario school boards.

This study has personal and professional significance for me, as well. During my years in education, I have had the opportunity to be involved in policy implementation in many roles and in diverse ways. As a teacher in the classroom, in the labs, in the resource room, and in the gymnasium, I had myriad opportunities to implement education policies on the front lines of the schools. As a department head, I was required to direct and work with my department members and administration at putting policy into practice, bridging the gap between the leaders and the school staff. During the same period, I was involved in curriculum writing, which allowed me to translate policy into tangible materials and practices with which the students could work.

Moving into administration, my role in implementing policy broadened. I now had a hand in determining how policy would be implemented across an entire school and I worked in collaboration with my colleagues at other schools to set protocols for policy implementation across the school board. In the role of system principal responsible for the Safe Schools’ portfolio, it was my job to assist school administrators with policy implementation while also interacting with my counterparts in other boards and bringing feedback to members of the senior administration and to Ministry of Education representatives. During this time, I worked with vice principals within my school board to write local Safe Schools’ policy based on the Policy/Program Memoranda sent out by the Ministry of Education, as well.

At the time of this writing, I am serving in a consultant’s role, assisting superintendents, principals and their Safe Schools’ teams with the implementation of Safe Schools’ policy across the province. The work that I am completing in this thesis provides me with insight into many
of the factors that impact Safe Schools’ policy implementation. It allows me to study, in depth, the history behind existing policies, the societal changes that have influenced policy, and the other factors that have had an impact on implementation. This knowledge serves not only to inform my work as a researcher, but also to inform my practice in the field. Hopefully, in turn, I will be able to support policy implementation practices of my colleagues across the province.
CHAPTER TWO – THE EVOLUTION OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

OVERVIEW

The focus of this literature review will be the evolution of practices and policies related to school discipline for the most disruptive students in Ontario schools. The development process will be traced from Confederation up until the present day. In addition to describing the actions that were taken to deal with misbehaviour in each period, an explanation of the prevailing thought and societal influences on practices will be briefly outlined to provide the reader with context.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

School Discipline in Canada from Confederation to World War II

Prior to Confederation, in Upper Canada or Canada West, when schooling opportunities for the youth of the working class were being considered, the discussion focused on student discipline to be used in response to the most extreme student misbehaviour. Corporal punishment, the use of physical force in response to significant forms of inappropriate behaviour, was the ultimate method of discipline that schools employed at that time. This type of disciplinary intervention would be a contentious topic for more than a century in Canadian schools.

While educators were discouraged from using physical force in punishing their charges, situations regularly arose in which corporal punishment was deemed necessary and supported by the school superintendents. As Canada West evolved into the province of Ontario as part of the new nation of Canada, discipline policy also evolved. Excessive violence in the disciplining of a student was not condoned, but the use of a ‘reasonable level’ of physical force for the purposes of school discipline was seen as a right possessed by the teachers of the period. This vague rule of thumb would stay in place in Ontario schools until the 1970’s (Curtis, 1998).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, compulsory schooling was becoming more of the rule than the exception for youth in most parts of the Western world. In Ontario, after 1919, school attendance was mandatory for children between ages 8 and 16 years (Gidney, 1999, p. 13). While there were exemptions through the early part of the century, children of all cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic levels were required to share equally in an educational
opportunity (Rothstein, 1984). Increased numbers of children and adolescents attending school meant that there would be an increase in the likelihood of misbehaviour in school. Teachers and administrators needed to decide how to address this concern, since the school doors could not be closed to any student entitled to an education.

The standards expected in Victorian society at that time were used to set the guidelines for behaviour and for the consequences to be meted out to address misbehaviour. The basis for the guidelines could be found, in part, in the idea of ‘original sin’, which is defined as “in Christian doctrine, the condition or state of sin into which each human being is born” (Encyclopaedia Brittanica, 2012). Parents condoned the use of physical force in order to keep their children from becoming separated from God. In addition, at the time, children were seen as possessions of their fathers (Gagne, 1982) and in school, church and politics, physical force was seen as a way to keep order among youth (Axelrod, 2010; Wilson, 1982). As a result, corporal punishment through the use of the strap continued to be quite prevalent, in both the home and the school, for a wide range of behaviour infractions. It was seen by many to be an effective solution to student misbehaviour.

The term *in loco parentis* began to gain acceptance in legal and educational circles of the era. This term gave the teachers the rights and duties of parents as they carried out their roles in education and discipline, since the teachers served as the adult replacement supervising children during school hours (Parker-Jenkins, 1999; Wilson, 1982). For more than a century, the amount of leeway that this designation provided would be interpreted in many and varied ways. As Rothstein suggests, “there was a great deal of similarity between the norms of high schools and other agencies of confinement and coercion in the society” (1984, p. 120). Practices in schools often mimicked those of the industrial world, striving for efficiency and cooperation, often at the expense of individuality. Schools also continued to look to religious institutions, as well as the military and the state schools of Europe for examples of how best to control the increasingly diverse population of young people in their care (Rothstein, 1984). Disciplinary measures were used on students who did not conform to the expectations that were in place for the masses.

The methods used to deal with misbehaviour in schools were varied and often drastic in the early part of the twentieth century. According to the experts of the day, the need for punishment in every classroom at some point was inevitable. They also felt that punishment, which “must be looked upon as part of instruction” was only effective when “its certainty is guaranteed in advance, when it causes real pain and regret, and when it is fully understood”
(Sears, 1918, p. 85). The Ontario Teacher’s Manual of 1915, though, included a reminder to administrators not to use corporal punishment in anger. Further, if this type of punishment had to be used too frequently, it was a sign of weak management of the school (Cochrane, 1981).

Many parents who sent their children away to school gladly passed on the responsibility of academic and behavioural training to the teachers (Parker-Jenkins, 1999). Adults who had experienced the harsh discipline of the time, often supported it when asked for their opinions on the matter, after the fact. Ryerson’s words about use of the rod, that “there are occasions when it cannot be wisely avoided” (Axelrod, 2010, p. 262), set the tone for most of the twentieth century, in terms of school discipline. The province oversaw school discipline and left it up to the school boards as to how they would carry out the implementation of discipline policies (Axelrod, 2010). At this point, there was no provincially mandated method of dealing with extreme cases of misbehaviour.

**Post-World War II to the End of the Century**

A significant portion of the population had been opposed to corporal punishment even before the human rights movement at the end of the Second World War. Another approach, known as the mental hygiene movement, had arisen after the First World War, thirty years earlier. The link between child behaviour and mental health was made apparent to teachers and parents, foreshadowing the focus that would be placed on mental health in the new millennium. “Fear, anxiety, insufficient rest, improper food, and emotional insecurity all could lead young people to engage in anti-social activities” (Axelrod, 2010, p. 270 – 271). Advocates for the mental hygiene approach pursued this line of thinking further, with respect to education, in the 1940’s and 1950’s. The involvement of psychologists and guidance counselors was recommended on the one hand in contrast to corporal punishment which continued to exist on the other hand.

During this same time period, Ontario was beginning to more closely resemble a typical “modern urban industrial society” (Gidney, 1999, p. 9). The major cities in the province were small by today’s standards, though, and one quarter of the province’s population still lived in rural areas. Students were mandated to attend school from the age of 8 years. Many within the cities started earlier than this but, in the country, students were often older when entering classes for the first time. As well, young people could be granted an Exemption Certificate to allow them to leave school at the age of 14 years if they were needed to help around the home.
or the farm. In 1948, 54% of Ontario students dropped out of school at the age of 16 years and, among adolescents aged between 15 and 19 years, less than 40% stayed in school (Gidney, 1999, p. 13). By 1960, this figure would rise to 63% (Gidney, 1999, p. 27), but a significant portion of the adolescent population still opted out of school when it did not fit their needs or abilities or when they chose not to conform to school rules and expectations. As a result, voluntary exclusion from school often eliminated the need to have consequences in place to address misbehaviour, at least among the older adolescents. Those young people who did not fit or did not choose to comply with a school’s behavioural or academic expectations often simply walked away from the education experience.

Ronald E. Jones was an educator in the Toronto Board of Education whose career began in the 1940’s and extended into the 1970’s when he became director within the board. It was during his time in this leadership role that corporal punishment was discontinued as a disciplinary practice in the TBE. He admits that corporal punishment was, during his career, the main method of discipline, effective in controlling behaviour and accepted by the key stakeholder groups in education. Educators who refused to use it were seen as weak disciplinarians. Many students defended the use of the strap, as well (Axelrod, 2010).

While there were still a large number of blue collar jobs available for young people in the 1950’s, there was a noticeable increase in the number of white collar jobs. As a result, some students began to extend their involvement in school at this time, in order to qualify for what they saw to be more prestigious careers, causing student participation rates among older teens to slowly increase. In addition, the number of students involved in Special Education, while not a major focus early in the 1950’s, doubled by the end of the decade reflecting a more diverse set of needs among the student population. This was accompanied by an increased focus on health services over the same time period in school (Gidney, 1999, p. 29), setting up supports beyond the provision of academic assistance for learners.

In 1959, the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child reminded all those involved with schooling that the best interests of the child must be considered first and foremost in all education decisions (Roher and Weir, 2004). A movement away from punitive and painful consequences for misbehaviour was becoming apparent in the approach that behavioural experts were recommending. Militant stands taken by young people in the 1960’s added to the momentum of the human rights movement. In Canada, this time period brought reform measures for the education system. Concerns arose over the seemingly uniform and inflexible nature of
school learning, which seemed to be at odds with democracy. “Bitterness and disillusionment with all constituted authority and traditional wisdom prevailed in Western Culture” (Petrone, 2007, p. 115). Baby boomers lobbied for changes in education at this time (Axelrod, 2010).

Most parents could now afford to keep their children in school longer. They wanted their sons and daughters to have better opportunities than they had previously and further growth in white collar employment provided an added incentive for continued involvement in school. The main goal of the Robarts Plan, which was introduced in 1962, was to ensure that more young people in Ontario stayed in school to gain the benefits of an education (Tountas, 2011).

Sociologist John Porter drew attention to inequities in status and power among the various cultures represented in Canada’s “The Vertical Mosaic” (Porter, 1965) at the time. In his work he stated, “it is likely that the historical pattern of class and ethnicity will be perpetuated as long as ethnic differentiation is so highly valued” (Porter, 1965, p. 558). Forty years later, feedback on the Safe Schools policies of the day would suggest that inequities existed in the meting out of suspensions and expulsions to a diverse school population in Ontario. At that time, the Human Rights Commission would go so far as to direct that data should be kept as to the racial background of students who were suspended or expelled (Ontario Ministry of Education, Safer Schools, Safer Communities, 2005).

The findings in the Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario of 1968 provided an indication as to changing philosophy of school discipline and punishment in the latter part of the twentieth century in the province. The authors of the report, in Recommendation 29, gave the direction to “Abolish corporal punishment and other degrading forms of punishment as a means of discipline in the schools, in favour of a climate of warmth, co-operation and responsibility” (Axelrod, 2010, p. 262). They felt that “discomforts in the form of deprivation or punishment do not make a positive contribution toward learning” (Hall & Dennis, 1968, pp. 22-23). Neither should students be turned away from schools without being provided with other ways in which to learn, as this would be “contradictory to the purpose of education” (Hall & Dennis, 1968, p. 37). Some of the ‘tools’ that had previously been used to deal with misbehaving students were now being taken away. A need for alternative ways of addressing student misbehaviour was becoming more apparent.

The report went on to state that rewards for good behaviour were far more effective than punishment for poor behaviour but, ultimately, intrinsic reward was the best way for students to
learn how to conduct themselves appropriately. The writers of the report encouraged the involvement of students in the decision-making process (Gidney, 1999), saying “children can and should learn to make their own decisions and to take responsibility for their actions in an atmosphere that is positive and encouraging” (Hall & Dennis, 1968, p. 38). Still, resistors to this notion insisted that there needed to be realistic alternatives to corporal punishment, in which educators would have to gain experience, if order was to be maintained in the absence of the strap (Axelrod, 2010).

The mid-1970’s saw a decrease in the protests that had been associated with the previous decade. Schools were faced with a different type of unrest, however, as behaviour challenges became more prevalent. “From the late 1970’s onwards, ‘the dropout problem’ had been of growing concern to politicians and policy-makers alike” (Gidney, 1999, p. 206). Educators were cautioned to be careful in their use of suspensions as a sanction for discipline issues, since keeping students out of school deprived them of learning opportunities. School support units were suggested as a way to address the needs of students who found themselves at odds with school rules and school authorities (Docking, 1980).

In 1980, corporal punishment could still be found in some Ontario schools. It had only been banned in the Toronto District School Board less than a decade before. No Ontario Ministry policy against it existed. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982 stated, though, that “Everyone has the right not to be subjected to any cruel and unusual treatment or punishment” (Bickenbach, 1998, p. 285). The Charter opened up the possibility of closer scrutiny of children’s rights as they existed in the Canadian school system (Parker-Jenkins, 1999). There continued to be a noticeable drop in the use of physical force and punishment as the rights of children gained in importance (Gagne, 1982). By 2001, record numbers of people had turned to the courts over human rights issues, largely as a result of the Charter (Roher and Weir, 2004).

In 1982, the Ministry of Education introduced a revised version of Policy/Program Memorandum 8 regarding Special Education. In the memorandum, an increased focus was placed on students with identified special needs. It required boards to ensure that suitable programs and services were available for all exceptional students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1982). Twenty-five years later, the percentage of expelled or suspended students with a special education designation would become an area of concern for the Ministry, boards, and parents. As a result, the term ‘mitigating factors’ would become increasingly
important in determining the appropriateness of these types of sanctions for students with identified special needs.

A study carried out in Ontario in 1988 indicated that an increasing number of students were dropping out of Ontario high schools. It was felt that schools were best suited for a particular type of student and those that did not fit the mold often ended up leaving school altogether. Behaviour expectations in the typical school setting were strict, especially for the learners who did not fit well into the academic stream. The rate of suspensions was strongly linked to the rate of student dropouts (Lawton, Leithwood et al, 1988).

“During the 1980’s and early 1990’s there was a steady increase, year by year, in the volume of reports about schoolyard bullying, racial and sexual harassment, and student assaults on peers and teachers on and off school premises” (Gidney, 1999, p. 180). While this could be traced, in part, to an increase in the diligence with which such behaviours were reported, it was obvious that the behaviours themselves had become more common in the school system (Gidney, 1999). In 1992, violence in schools was viewed as a very serious social concern by 36% of teens (Bibby, 2001, p. 181) As the education system moved towards the new millennium, policies were revised and new policies were created to address these problems.

In the late 1980’s, the North York Board of Education, for one, began searching for options to allow a constructive approach to long-term suspensions for violent students. In the early 1990’s, the board set up an Alternative to Suspension Program which was used to serve the educational, social and emotional needs of violent and potentially violent students. Educators in the program worked with health care and other community agencies to support these students in their academic and behavioural development (Cooper, 1998). This type of program foreshadowed the Strict Discipline and Intervention Programs that would become prevalent in the new millennium.

The emphasis on a safe learning environment for all, which had been a cause for concern in recent decades, was outlined in the Royal Commission on Learning Report of 1993. Under the title of Purposes of Education, it stated that education “must be pursued with a safe, supportive environment for students which values and supports diversity of race, culture, class, gender, and physical or intellectual ability” (Begin, 1994, p. 75). Diversity, which is highlighted in the report’s purposes, became a key issue of concern when examining the fairness of Safe Schools’ policy of the time. While, in previous generations, less emphasis was placed on this as a school issue, as the century drew to a close there was a greater clamour for equity (Gidney,
Student Discipline in Ontario in the New Millennium

Expulsion was another disciplinary consequence that underwent change at the end of the twentieth century. From Confederation to 2000, students could be expelled for what was termed ‘refractory’ conduct, but again the term was not clearly defined. In August 2000, the courts finally looked closely at what constituted refractory behaviour. Shortly thereafter, a prescriptive list of behaviours for which a student could be expelled was introduced into school policy in Ontario (Roher and Weir, 2004).

The rate of violent crime committed by Canadian youth continued to increase as the country entered the twenty-first century. The overall rate of violent crimes by young people had “risen by 7% over the past decade” (Roher and Weir, 2004, p. 5). In 2001, of the 37,682 charges against young people in Canada, “10,782 involved violent crimes ranging from homicide to common assault” (Roher and Weir, 2004, p. 6). The incidence of weapon use and hate or bias-motivated crimes was also on the rise. A large percentage of Canadian teens – 65 percent of females and 40 percent of males surveyed - saw violence in schools as an important issue at this time (Bibby, 2001, p. 81). The Federation of Canadian Municipalities, wishing to gain input from a broader stakeholder group on Safe Schools’ issues, recommended an approach to youth crime that would involve community and youth in the process of finding solutions. It was determined that parents were to be held responsible to work with the schools to address discipline issues (Roher and Weir, 2004).

The first decade of the new millennium would prove to be a time of rapid change in the area of school discipline, due to the prevailing social climate and to political change in the province. Policies related to Safe Schools’ issues were introduced, reviewed, revised and reintroduced in their new form at a steady pace in a span of just over ten years. In1999, the Progressive Conservative Party had taken a tough stand on school discipline, introducing a zero tolerance policy for inappropriate behaviour in schools. In April 2000, the Code of Conduct for Ontario schools was introduced followed by the Safe Schools Act one month later. This Act, a part of the Education Act known as Bill 81, came into effect as law in September 2001 (Bhattacharjee, 2003).

The Safe Schools Act differentiated between student behaviour that would result in mandatory suspension and those for which consequences would be left to the discretion of the
school principal. Cases in which police involvement was required were also clearly outlined in the legislation. Decisions on expulsion were to be made by the school boards, on the recommendation of the principal, and could be limited or full in nature. The latter would require that the offending student attend a strict discipline program at a regional location in order to qualify for possible re-entry to the regular school system (Veryard, 2010).

Suspensions were mandatory for students who committed any of the following infractions:

1. Uttering a threat to inflict serious bodily harm on another person.
2. Possessing alcohol or illegal drugs.
3. Being under the influence of alcohol.
4. Swearing at a teacher or another person in a position of authority.
5. Committing an act of vandalism causing extensive damage to school property or property located on the premises of the pupil’s school.
6. Engaging in another activity that, under a policy of the board, is one for which suspension is mandatory. (Roher & Weir, 2004, p. 28)

Expulsions were deemed mandatory in any Ontario school in the case of the following infractions:

1. Possessing a weapon, including possessing a firearm.
2. Using a weapon to cause or to threaten bodily harm to another person.
3. Committing physical assault on another person that causes bodily harm requiring treatment by a medical practitioner.
4. Committing sexual assault.
5. Trafficking in weapons or illegal drugs.
6. Committing robbery.
7. Giving alcohol to a minor.
8. Engaging in another activity that, under a policy of the board, is one for which expulsion is mandatory. (Roher and Weir, 2004, p. 41)

According to the Safe Schools Act, school administrators were to consider three mitigating factors when determining if a suspension or expulsion should be mandatory or not. The first two mitigating factors involved the consideration of whether the pupil had the ability to control the behaviour and understand the consequences of the behaviour. The third mitigating
factor involved the determination of whether or not the student’s continued presence in the school created an unacceptable risk to safety for others (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005).

Feedback on the Safe Schools Act came from many stakeholder groups following its implementation. Ken Bhattacharjee, a Human Rights Consultant, provided input in the form of a report to the Human Rights Commission in 2003. This report was cited by the Ontario Human Rights Commission in a submission to the Toronto District School Board in 2004 (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2004). Among the recommendations in the report, those who were consulted suggested that there needed to be a “better balance between punishment, on the one hand, and conflict resolution, peer mediation, prevention, human rights protection and equity, on the other hand” (2003, p. ix).

At this same time, concern arose over the number of students who were leaving school before graduating. In 2001, 18.4% of Canadians between the ages of 20 and 24 were found to have left high school without earning a degree, certificate or diploma. Although Ontario had the lowest drop-out rate of all provinces and territories at 15.9%, this was still a cause for concern. The Ministry of Education began investigating risk and protection factors associated with early school leaving (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell & Rummens, 2005). By 2003, the problem was even more noticeable, with nearly a third of students not completing high school in Ontario. Research suggested that leaving school early would result in an income loss of more than $100,000 over a lifetime, an increased pressure on the social assistance system, increased likelihood of incarceration and a decrease in quality of life for school drop-outs (Ontario Ministry of Education, Student Success/Learning to 18, 2006).

In response to the prevailing data, the newly-elected Liberal government under Premier Dalton McGuinty implemented their Learning to 18 Student Success policy, with a target of having 85% of youth successfully completing their high school studies (Ontario Ministry of Education, Student Success/Learning to 18, 2006). Now, choosing to drop out of school if one could not conform to the expectations was not an option.

In preparation for a planned review of the Safe Schools Act in 2005, a Safe Schools Action Team was put into place in 2004 in Ontario. The team sought input from students, parents, educators, community members and school administrators across Ontario through a series of consultations. The government concluded that the Act was not being consistently applied across the province. “Some school boards in Ontario reported a suspension rate of 0.5% in 2003-2004, while other boards reported suspension rates above 36%. There was less variation
in expulsion rates. Some school boards reported no expulsions, while others reported expulsion rates of 2.3%” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 13). At the same time, they felt that very little room was left for administrators to exercise good judgment in making decisions regarding consequences for inappropriate behaviours. It also appeared that certain groups were more likely to be sanctioned through suspensions and expulsions than were other groups of students. “The Ontario Human Rights Commission lodged a complaint alleging that the application of the ‘Safe Schools’ sections of the *Education Act* and related discipline policies are having a disproportionate impact on racial minority and disabled students. The Commission has also called on the Ministry of Education to collect race-based statistics” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 13). Finally, it was felt that the Act focused too much on discipline and not enough on creating a proactive environment (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). Clearly, there were several aspects of the existing policy that were creating concern.

Prevention and early intervention, rather than punishment, were emphasized in the report that came out of the work of the Safe Schools Action Team. Progressive discipline was suggested as a way to utilize a sequence of increasingly severe responses to behavioural issues prior to suspension. Progressive discipline measures could include meetings with students and their parents, withdrawal of privileges, withdrawal from class, detention, restitution for damages, peer mediation, restorative practices, school transfer and consultation with board supports or outside agencies (Bill 212 Teacher Full Presentation, 2008). Partnerships with parents and other support groups were recommended, as was training to allow school administrators to be more sensitive to the diverse needs of the students in their care.

The Strict Discipline Program, which had initially been created as a pilot project to address the needs of suspended and expelled students, was reviewed as well. It was felt that the feedback from Ontarians indicated a desire for programs to provide continuous learning for suspended and expelled students. According to those polled, students who were removed from the school environment were “at risk of losing an important connection to the school community” (Ontario Ministry of Education, Safe Schools Policy and Practice, 2006, p. 14). Instead of being cut adrift, it was felt that these students should be provided with resources that “might include access to learning and treatment programs, behavioural management, individual counseling” (Ontario Ministry of Education, Safe Schools Policy and Practice, 2006, p. 14).

The recommendations that came from the Action Team’s report formed the foundation of Bill 212, the next stage in the evolution of Safe Schools’ policy which came into effect in
February 2008. With Bill 212, principals could use some discretion in deciding whether or not to impose a suspension as a result of inappropriate actions by a student. It was now only required that the principal ‘consider’ a suspension as a consequence for a student’s actions. Bullying was added as a behaviour for which a suspension would be considered. The principal was also required to consider an increased number of factors before making a final decision (Veryard, 2010). Added to the previous list of factors were 1) the pupil’s history, 2) any evidence of progressive discipline being used, 3) any harassment that might have led to the student action, 4) the impact of a suspension or expulsion on the student’s education, 5) the age of the pupil, and 6) any Individual Education Plan that might have an impact (Roher, 2007).

In a supplementary report in December 2008, the Safe Schools Action Team took a closer look at specific issues of concern related to gender-based and sexuality related infractions. The report was based on feedback from the usual stakeholder groups, but it also drew on the input of “representatives of a wide range of community groups: police, Public Health personnel, Aboriginal groups, diverse cultural groups, special needs advocacy groups, crisis centres, sexual assault centres” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, Shaping a Culture of Respect in Our Schools, p. 5).

Bill 157, a revision of Bill 212, came into effect in February 2010. According to Bill 157, all staff members who work within the schools would be required to report to school administration about any inappropriate behaviour and comments of which they had become aware. Those employees who worked directly with students would, in addition, be required to respond by addressing the person or people who had carried out the observed behaviour. After investigating the reported incident, the administrator would be required to provide a written response outlining the action taken by the office (Ontario Ministry of Education, Keeping Our Kids Safe at School – Reporting and Responding to Incidents, 2009).

Since the most recent changes to Safe Schools’ legislation in February 2010, the school boards have focused on the implementation of related plans. As part of Policy/Program Memorandum 145, all schools were required to carry out climate surveys that were administered by their boards, share the results with their safe schools teams and address issues that arose in their school improvement plans (Ontario Ministry of Education, Policy/Program Memorandum 145, 2009). These surveys and events within school communities across the province have helped to underline the strengths and needs of Safe Schools’ policies at the local and provincial levels. Much of the focus has turned to addressing the needs of the most at-risk students as bully
prevention and mental health practices are reviewed and modified.

The Caring and Safe Schools document, which was introduced early in 2011, helped to outline practices that could be used to address the behaviours of students identified with special needs. The accompanying tag line “essential for some, good for all”, suggests that the practices outlined in the document may be helpful beyond their use in dealing with identified students and that they could be used to address the needs of students across the entire school population. If adopted for all students, the Caring and Safe Schools practices could help to ensure that more students remain in their regular school environment, having their inappropriate behaviour addressed there, rather than being sent to off-site locations as a consequence for their infractions.

THEORIES ON DEVIANT BEHAVIOUR

Prevention and early intervention in dealing with inappropriate behaviour in a proactive manner is preferable to imposing sanctions as a reaction once the behaviour is exhibited. These approaches could be more effective if policymakers and implementers of policy had a better understanding of the reasons for deviant behaviour.

Many and varied theories have been put forward to explain why some people engage in what society would term deviant behaviour while others do not. While not all of the theories are meant to provide an explanation as to why some adolescents display inappropriate behaviours in a school setting, it is reasonable to assume that the theories would apply within the school as well as in the greater community in which adolescents find themselves. Knowing what leads to deviant behaviour may assist schools in addressing and ultimately changing the actions of adolescents engaged in deviance.

Radical criminologists blame the oppression and alienation that they feel accompanies capitalism for the deviant behaviour that presents itself in society. Control theorists, however, insist that restraints are essential if society is to operate properly and that the absence of these restraints is what leads to inappropriate behaviour. Functionalists suggest that deviance actually helps to hold society together as a type of counterbalance to normal behaviour. Certainly in school, as in society as a whole, it appears that the problem of deviance does not have one cause and therefore cannot be addressed with one simple solution (Downes & Rock, 1988).

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Emile Durkheim introduced the concept of the ‘conscience collective’ which he felt helped to guide appropriate behaviour in society. Anything
that did not fall in line with the behaviour and values of the majority in society was deemed deviant (Beamish, 2009), according to this definition. This black and white view of society, if taken literally, would mean that anything out of the norm was, by definition, deviant and, by extension, not to be tolerated. While this provided a starting point for theories regarding deviance, it did not go far enough to address the issue of deviant behaviour that could be disruptive to society. Several alternative theories were developed and refined in the half century to follow.

Building on Durkheim’s idea in the middle of the twentieth century, Robert Merton proposed Strain Theory. While Merton agreed that accepted social norms existed, he felt that some members of society either chose not to adhere to these goals, did not follow the typical pathways to achieve the goals or both. While some agreed with the goals and chose to conform, others did not agree but went along in order to succeed, in what Merton termed a ritual response. Others who rejected the goals chose to withdraw from mainstream society while still others sought to replace existing goals sometimes through extreme measures such as terrorist acts (Beamish, 2009).

In many instances, Merton concluded, individuals did not have the means by which to achieve the goals in typical, socially accepted fashion, even if they accepted the goals. If, for example, a person’s goal was to live in a nice house, but he could not afford this, he might resort to robbery in order to attain the money needed. In these instances, the inequities that existed for some members of society appeared to be the culprit responsible for deviance. A Marxist viewpoint would suggest that this demonstrated that deviant behaviour was a direct result of the flawed capitalist system. While this would explain the criminal acts carried out by some members of the lower class, the theory failed to provide an adequate explanation as to why those people who had achieved satisfactory socioeconomic status would sometimes engage in deviant behaviour as well (Beamish, 2009; Downes & Rock, 1998). These individuals had the financial and other means to attain their goals and, yet, some still chose to take part in deviant behaviour.

Albert Cohen felt that more attention needed to be paid to the choice of goals that seemed popular with the youth who were involved in deviant behaviour. “Children from lower class families would experience the structural strains Merton described but it was the subcultures with which they identified that would ultimately determine the path they would follow” (Beamish, 2009, p. 137). Cohen felt that students from the lower class had little chance of academic
success, since the school system was geared to the needs of the middle classes and designed to weed out those who did not meet the standards set in education. The dominant culture in North America during this period was white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant. The members of this culture were seen to be part of the “ascetic, achievement-orientated, highly competitive, middle-class” (Downes & Rock, 1988, p. 138). Since teens from the lower classes could not reach goals set by their middle class counterparts, Cohen maintained that they became frustrated and strove instead to aim for anything that opposed the middle class approach (Hoffman, 2011). This, then, would result in an ‘anti-establishment’ mindset that could lead to actions that were not aligned with ‘normal’ behaviour. Again, while this theory might provide an explanation as to why young people from the lower class would engage in deviant behaviour, it did not provide an adequate explanation as to why middle class youth take part in similar, socially unacceptable behaviours.

Deterrence Theory, which gained prominence during the Cold War, suggested that a rational person makes decisions about actions based on a calculation of the risk of punishment versus the chance of reward. If the chance of a positive outcome outweighed the likelihood of a penalty or punishment, the person was more likely to engage in the activity regardless of whether the action was ‘right’ or not (Hoffman, 2011). While this philosophy seems to have been central to the Zero Tolerance approach put forth by the Ontario Conservatives at the beginning of the millennium, it assumes rational decision-making precedes deviant behaviour. It would appear, however, that other factors are more powerful predictors of delinquency. Many delinquent adolescents act impulsively, without considering consequences (Hoffman, 2011). If this is the case for students involved in inappropriate behaviours in school, the likelihood is that severe punishment will have little or no impact as a deterrent in many instances.

Anthony Giddens, a British sociologist, maintained that “formal rules will only succeed in changing behaviour in a meaningful way if they can also alter the social circumstances that give rise to the informal rules that structure human action” (Beamish, 2009, p. 143). Without this, the actions were likely, in Giddens’ opinion, to be simply hidden from public view rather than changed. If policies did not take into account diverse needs and capabilities, it was likely that they would fail. If, as part of the implementation process, supports were not put into place with the outcome of ‘levelling the playing field’ on which the youth were ‘competing’, any policy would amount to a token gesture aimed at creating change that could not be sustained. Individuals would simply hide the inappropriate behaviour because they did not feel that they could give it up.
Arthur Stinchcombe, in a later analysis of the link between school achievement and delinquency, would debate the connection suggested by Cohen. He amended the Strain Formula, however, to suggest that those most pressured to do well in school would be the most rebellious. In his view, the middle class would be under the greatest pressure to perform and, therefore, would be the most likely to rebel (Tanner, 2010). While providing a possible explanation of middle class involvement in deviant behaviour at school, Stinchcombe's proposal failed to suggest a reason for deviant behaviour among the lower class.

Sykes and Matza (Downes & Rock, 1988) described what they termed Techniques of Neutralization to demonstrate how young people who engaged in socially unacceptable behaviour would explain their actions. According to their findings, youth engaged in deviant behaviour would be able to rationalize their conduct by indicating, for example, that the victim deserved the fate that came as a result of deviant actions (Downes & Rock, 1988). Matza went further to suggest that many of these youth, while not fully developed emotionally, found themselves in an environment without adequate control, which contributed to their deviant behaviour (Hoffman, 2011). While some of these young people were not ready to make informed decisions without adult guidance, many were being asked to do just that, due to the absence of parents or positive role models in their lives. Peer group, appearance to others and surroundings in which young people found themselves took on greater importance, according to these theories. If the circles in which they travelled consisted of youth engaged in deviant behaviour, they were more likely to develop a similar lifestyle.

Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (Beamish, 2009) took the works of Merton and Cohen and began to focus on the specific deviant subcultures of youth gangs. From their work, it became clear that the deviant subcultures were not easily defined nor their actions easily explained (Beamish, 2009). Many who did not come from the dominant culture also did not possess the same resources, thus leading again to the experience of an uneven playing field. While Cloward and Ohlin maintained that success was best achieved through education, they realized that this path, for many, was blocked (Hoffman, 2011). If status could not be gained through socially acceptable means, in some instances it would be sought in other ways. The alternative was to be seen as a failure and to do without. If the youth could not be famous for socially acceptable accomplishments, many decided they would be infamous for deviant behaviour. If a youth could not be an honour student, captain of the school team, student council president or star of the play, he might be able to achieve attention by reaching a prominent
position within a well-known gang.

Robert Burgess and Ronald L. Akers (Hoffman, 2011) put forward a differential association-reinforcement theory in an attempt to explain deviant behaviour. They felt that an increase in deviant behaviour and a decrease in conformity were likely if an individual associated with or was exposed to people who engaged in and were rewarded through crime. The association could even be a symbolic one, through media or other role models (Hoffman, 2011). Youth who lived in a high crime neighbourhood, then, would be more likely to be exposed to and, therefore, engage in criminal behaviour, according to this theory. If this were true, the cycle of crime would continue.

In the 1970’s and 1980’s, Travis Hirschi (Hoffman, 2011) proposed his Social Bonding Theory. As the name suggests, Hirschi felt that conformity was dependent on a person’s connection to society. The connection might be to any combination of people, activities or beliefs. If a youth had connections with positive role models, was committed to a cause or activity, and stayed involved in a positive manner in society, he or she would be more likely to conform to societal expectations. Conversely, Hirschi felt that low self-control or lack of inhibition was connected with a lack of bonds to the greater community (Hoffman, 2011).

Robert Agnew, in the early 1990’s, revisited a theory that had been previously put forward. Through his General Strain Theory (Hoffman, 2011), Agnew suggested that deviance resulted from a combination of factors. He suggested that the blockage of positively valued goals such as the attainment of good grades, the presence of negative stimuli such as abusive parents or critical teachers, or the loss of positively valued stimuli such as a long-time girlfriend, could increase the chance of deviant behaviour. The possibility of deviant behaviour could be further increased depending on the duration, frequency, and recency of the strain. A larger number of strains at one time would also increase the possibility of deviant behaviour. The emphasis of this theory was on the pressure to meet culturally induced goals, but it does not emphasize the importance of socialization in the process (Hoffman, 2011).

The names Labelling Theory and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy Theory suggest the direction that these two theories of deviance take. In the case of the former, based on the action of a youth, an authority figure such as a teacher deems the behaviour or person as deviant. If this label sticks, it serves to define the individual and leads to problems for him or her, since others in authority come to see the individual as deviant as well. To take this a step further, in Self-Fulfilling Prophecy, the teacher or person in authority makes predictions about the future
behaviour of a youth based on past deviant actions. The youth develops a change in self-concept as a result and, subsequently, a change in behaviour that falls in line with the attitude and behaviour of the person in authority. In the school setting the person in authority, usually the teacher, contributes to the further deviance of the individual based on this theory (Hargreaves et al, 1975). Since inappropriate behaviour precedes the label or the beginning of the self-fulfilling prophecy, though, it is difficult to determine which comes first – the label and expectation or the tendency towards deviant behaviour (Hoffman, 2011).

Julian Tanner puts forward the idea that industrialization is to blame for the deviant behaviour that we see among youth. While not proposing a formal theory, he suggests that the lifestyle of youth today provides “opportunity and motivation for deviant behaviour: more time for recreational activities, more time for experimenting with illicit adult pleasures of sex and drugs, and more frustrations caused by the constraints of high school” (Tanner, 2010, p. 40). Again, this is only a partial explanation. All adolescents have experienced the changes that industrialization has brought and, yet, not all youth engage in deviant behaviour. It is possible that this is a contributing factor, but it is not the only factor responsible for deviance.

Each of the theories put forward has its strengths and weaknesses. No one theory seems to adequately address all the factors involved in understanding deviant behaviour in adolescents. In some instances, combinations of theories have been used to provide an explanation. End-to-end integrated theory combines strain, social bonding and social learning theories while social development theory combines social bonding and social learning (Hoffman, 2011) in an attempt to pinpoint the reasons for deviant behaviour. Ultimately, each case must be looked at on an individual basis, using existing theories as a guideline, in order to address deviant behaviour with which we are faced in the school system.

Some common threads appear to run through the majority of theories that have been proposed over the past century. In most instances, a combination of thwarted goals and an environment that is not conducive to the modelling of socially acceptable behaviours seems to have some influence on the likelihood of deviant actions being carried out by youth. Whether the thwarted goals are a result of socio-economic limitations or impossible expectations that are placed on youth, deviant actions seem to be a highly possible outcome. If deviance is the ‘norm’ surrounding youth, they seem more likely to gravitate towards similar actions. With more leisure time available in modern society, the tendency to engage more frequently in one’s typical behaviour increases, whether that be socially acceptable or unacceptable action. Mental health
issues must also be considered, as they appear to be contributing factors in some of the deviant acts that are carried out by youth. Educators have an opportunity to influence behaviour since it is human nature to anticipate that previous behaviour will repeat itself, thus reinforcing the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy and Labelling Theories. Recent findings suggest that the majority of those students who are suspended or expelled are males from lower socio-economic levels who have certain exceptionalities, especially those related to behaviour.

In an editorial following a shooting incident in Toronto, Professor James Sheptycki of York University cautioned that “quantitative criminology tells us nothing about what is going on inside the heads of a couple of man-boys who decide to engage in gunplay at a summer barbecue” (Ottawa Citizen, July 18, 2012). The same could be said about the dangers of trying to find one all-encompassing theory to explain this or other types of deviant behaviour. One needs to look at the individual stories and address the underlying causes.

**WHY THIS? WHY NOW?**

Discipline practices in school settings have undergone a number of changes over the past century in Ontario. From the time of Confederation until early in the twentieth century, a philosophy akin to that of Durkheim’s ‘conscience collective’ could be seen to determine the direction that school discipline would take. If you did not fit the norm, you did not fit school. If you did not fit school, you were punished or encouraged to leave school. Corporal punishment was used to literally ‘beat the devil’ out of offending students in a society that was guided by strict religious principles and industrialization’s philosophy of mass production rather than individual need. School discipline practices were comparable to that which one might find in prisons. While the mental hygiene movement of the early 1900’s hinted at the need to support rather than punish, it was not widely adopted in the school system of the time. School discipline was left to school administrators and teachers and tended to be punitive rather than supportive.

As World War II loomed on the horizon, professionals beyond the school walls began to look more closely at the reasons for student misbehaviour. As has been shown, Strain Theory suggested that societal factors were influencing, sometimes in an adverse way, the behaviour of adolescents. Psychologists and social workers began to play a more prominent role researching the needs of youth, looking at these factors that impacted behaviour. In the 1960’s, the unique needs of students with different backgrounds were being considered. The influence of specific groups studied in Subculture Theory, along with identified special needs, learning styles and the
increased cultural diversity of the student population warranted consideration by education and support staff. The voices of advocates for youth began to be heard as Special Education and Human Rights became topics that gained awareness among the Baby Boomers who were seeking reform. Positive discipline and reward systems were promoted through Ministry directives and people began turning their attention to the challenges of serving an increasingly diverse population. Sociologists continued to draw attention to the importance of surroundings and preconceived notions held by authority figures in the development of youth. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms came into being in Canada towards the end of the century and, in a few short years, would have a significant impact on school discipline.

At the beginning of the new millennium, due in large part to the influence of the media and an increase in violent crime among the nation’s youth, school discipline policy directed a return to practices of strict discipline, zero tolerance and prescriptive responses to student misbehaviour. While it was not quite a return to the days of corporal punishment, the movement towards increased support for youth engaged in deviant behaviour was temporarily sidetracked.

By 2004, school discipline practices in Ontario seemed to be back on a path that emphasized support over punishment. Ontario Human Rights concerns focused on the use of strict disciplinary measures in schools. Students, parents, educators and community members became increasingly involved in the development of policy in the areas of school discipline and safety. Before the end of the decade, the community groups involved in setting policy in this area would be increased dramatically to reflect the diversity of the province’s population and the increased needs of its student population. Input from these groups provided the foundation for the policy changes that would result in progressive discipline policies and programs for suspended and expelled youth. On paper at least, Ontario school boards had moved from punishment to support in the approach that was used to address student misbehaviour.

The Ontario education system has had more than a century of practice at addressing the needs of students who do not conform to the behavioural expectations deemed appropriate for a school setting. Many changes have occurred in the approaches used over that time period and some methods used in the past have been revisited as the search for the ideal response to discipline issues continues. From a punitive stance prior to World War II, Ontario moved to the development of a policy more concerned with human rights and rehabilitation. With the election of a Conservative government as the province entered the twenty-first century, there was a return to ‘zero tolerance’ policies. This situation was reversed shortly thereafter, however, with
the election of a Liberal government. From that point to the present, there has been an increase in the attention and resources dedicated to providing programs for youth who are disruptive in the school system in the province. Certainly, thinking and actions in this area have evolved and continue to evolve as practices are reviewed, revised, and implemented again in a changed form.
CHAPTER THREE – SAFE SCHOOLS’ POLICY TO SAFE SCHOOLS’ PRACTICE – THE IMPLEMENTATION PATH

POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

To gain an understanding of the implementation of policies related to programs for suspended and expelled youth, one must understand how policies come to be introduced. Thomas suggests that there are four phases to policy formulation at any level: appraisal, dialogue, formulation, and consolidation. During the appraisal phase, data are gathered and examined. As part of the dialogue phase, policymakers speak to key stakeholders involved in the specific policy issue to get their input. Once the information is gathered through the first two phases, the formulation or drafting of the proposal takes place. Finally, during consolidation, feedback on the draft proposal is gathered, considered and used to make any necessary revisions to the policy before it reaches its final form (Howlett, Ramesh & Perl, 2009). A similar process can take place during policy implementation. Policy emerges at the Ministry level in one form, but it can look quite different at the local board and school level. It can also look different in different boards. To understand why, one must look at factors that influence local implementation.

The direction of this thesis paper and the factors that influence implementation are captured in a quote by Honig in her book New Directions in Education Policy Implementation (2006). In introducing the implementation process, she states:

Implementability and success are the product of interactions between policies, people, and places – the demands specific policies place on implementers; the participants in implementation and their starting beliefs, knowledge and other orientations toward policy demands; and the places or contexts that help shape what people can and will do. Implementation research should aim to reveal the policies, people, and places that shape how implementation unfolds and provide robust, grounded explanations for how interactions among them help to explain implementation outcomes. The essential implementation question then becomes not simply “what’s implementable and works,” but what is implementable and works for whom, where, when, and why? (p. 2)

The focus on policies, people and places suggested by Honig caused me to reflect on my own experiences with policy implementation. Whether on the front lines of implementation as a teacher or as an administrator receiving policy directives and overseeing implementation in
my school or department, I recognized that certain factors had repeatedly had significant impact on the translation of policy into practice. I considered the people, whether they were teachers, support workers, administrators, parents, members of different community agencies or government representatives. Through their actions or their attitudes, it was apparent that they shaped policy implementation. Next, I thought about the places or situations into which the policies were being introduced. Existing practices, characteristics of the location, the amount of change that a new policy required, societal influence, and the media were all conditions, or contexts as Honig would say, that had exerted some influence on the manner in which new policies were brought into play in my experiences. Moving beyond the short list suggested by Honig, I realized that a new policy required the investment of supports such as time, resources, training, information and incentives if it was to succeed. Finally, implementation required that there be a clearly communicated vision from the leaders, along with a monitoring process to determine how the implementation was going. Building on Honig’s model, I looked for terms to define the four factor categories that I had observed. Using references from the literature, I grouped those factors that involved people as policy actors. I called the characteristics related to places conditions. The supports that were invested in the process were called, simply, supports. Finally, the process of oversight of the implementation by a governing body was called central control.

The next step that I carried out in the process was to review the literature to see what factors researchers had listed as having an impact on policy implementation. While different terms were used on occasion and some researchers cited additional factors beyond those which I had selected, people, conditions, government and supports were at the core of the majority of the research work that I reviewed on policy implementation. People at the local level were seen by many to be key to the process (Barrett, 2004; Cohen et al, 2007; Elmore, 1980; Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Loeb & McEwan, 2006; McLaughlin, 2010; Mitnick & Backoff, 1984; Spillane, Reiser & Gomez, 2010; Walsh & Anthony, 2007). Some researchers added references to people at the government or central control level (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Fullan, 2007; Honig, 2006; Howlett, 2005; Howlett, Ramesh & Perl, 2009; Levin & Fullan, 2009; Pal, 2010; Smylie & Evans, 2006; Stein, 1984) The situation into which the new policy was being implemented was seen to have an impact (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Hall & Hord, 2001; Hayes, 2001; Hess, 2008; Ingram & Mann, 1980; Levin, 2010; Poocharoen, 2013;
Support in the form of resources and information was also deemed to be key (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Bickmore, 2011; Datnow, 2006; Fowler, 2013; Fullan, 2009; Hall & Hord, 2001; Howlett, 2011; Levin, 2010; Loeb & McEwen, 2006; Pal, 2010). Finally, several researchers pointed to the impact of government or central control on the implementation of policy (Berman, 1978; Cohen et al, 2007; Datnow, 2006; Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Malen, 2006; Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002; Wu et al, 2010). People at the local and government level, places that take into account the local conditions and supports that link the two are all influential factors in policy implementation, based on the attention that they receive within the literature. Other factors have been cited but, upon review, most still appear to stem back to the four outlined. For example, if one looks at Fullan’s list of interactive factors, the list includes need, clarity, complexity, and quality or practicality in addition to direct references to specific policy actors and government and external agencies (Fullan, 2009). Each of the factors that Fullan lists as characteristics of change can be seen as connected to the policy actor category. In fact, other researchers have referred to these aspects under the heading of policy actors’ knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes (Spillane et al), their values (Pal, 2010), their capacity to manage change (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990), and certainty as to the proper interpretation of the policy (Bickmore, 2011). As such, I felt that it was reasonable for the purposes of this thesis, to use the broad terms to encompass the other possible factors. I do not claim that the four factors constitute an exhaustive list of all factors that can potentially impact policy implementation. Based on the research, however, I do feel that policy actors, conditions, support and central control are four key factors in implementation and I hoped to use this study to determine how these selected factors impacted the implementation process in two selected boards. The paragraphs that follow provide more specific detail as to how, in the view of researchers, these factors have been shown to impact the implementation process.

Implementation of an education policy will be impacted by the people who are connected with education in some way. In this study, these people are called policy actors. These actors can be “at school, district, state, and federal levels” as well as “across institutions that matter for student learning, such as families, neighbourhood services organizations, and youth agencies” (Honig, 2006, p. 11). In my own work with policy implementation, depending on the nature of
the policy, these actors might include a board’s director, members of the board of trustees, superintendents, principals, parents, staff members in schools, community members, members of agencies and students. The capacity of these individuals to manage the changes required by the policy along with, in some instances, their political acumen, will influence the process of policy implementation (Fuhrman and Elmore, 1990). As well, their knowledge and preferences in areas related to the policy will have some impact on how the policy is brought into play at the board and school level (Loeb and McEwan, 2006). Conflict over goals or the way to accomplish goals can negatively impact implementation (Ingram & Mann, 1980), just as uncertainty as to how policy should be interpreted can lead to an inability to effectively implement policy (Bickmore, 2011).

Multi-level engagement, involving actors at the school, board and Ministry level will help to increase the chance of success of large scale change (Levin & Fullan, 2009). The interaction between various stakeholders will also influence implementation (Honig, 2006) as agreement on goals, effectiveness of communication, trust between participants and support for the initiative will all determine, to some degree, what the policy ends up looking like at the local level (Smylie & Evans, 2006). Loose connection between participants, on the other hand, may have a detrimental effect on implementation (Ingram & Mann, 1980).

Levin suggests that important decisions about policy are often made quickly, without a great deal of input. He also emphasizes the importance of the media in the process, since the media puts ideas in the mind of the public. Members of the public are influenced by the media. The public, in turn, influences the decisions that are made as part of the policymaking (Levin, 2001) and policy implementation process. This point hints at the blurred line that exists between the actors and their surroundings, as they relate to policy.

A recent example of this involved the Safe Schools’ policy in Ontario and revolved around the issue of bullying. In a very short period of time, due in large part to high profile bullying events highlighted in the media, public interest resulted in not one but two ‘Bullying’ bills being created for consideration. Bickmore suggests that the influence of media extends beyond the issue of bullying. She feels that there has been an increase in “widespread fear and concern about youth violence” (2011, p. 649) rather than an actual increase in youth violence. She contends that this response “is fueled by sensationalized reporting of violent incidents in mass media” (Bickmore, 2011, p. 649).

Combined with the people or policy actors, the situations into which a policy is being
introduced must also be considered. “Local factors and characteristics unique to specific implementation contexts have a strong and direct effect on outcomes” (Ingram & Mann, 1980). These characteristics can be referred to as conditions and they represent a second factor that can impact policy implementation. Unique conditions exist in each board and these conditions engage in a ‘push-pull’ with any policy that is introduced. As a teacher, department head and administrator responsible for writing, explaining, revising and implementing policy, I experienced the impact that conditions had on how policy moved from theory to practice.

Attitudes of the people involved, societal norms, and media focus all had the potential to exert influence. Policy ends up having an effect on practice within the board, but the existing practices within the board have an effect, in turn, on the form the policy takes as it is translated and merged into practice.

Past practice certainly has an effect, especially if this practice differs greatly from that which is required by the new policy (Hall & Hord, 2001). Prior conditions that existed within the board will factor into the implementation of policy (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990). These prior conditions might include the physical layout of the board, data that is available to the policy actors and, in the case of Safe Schools’ policy, the history of discipline practices that have existed within the board. The cultural and socio-economic diversity of the group being served (Spillane, 1996) is another existing condition that might push back and help shape the form that policy will take in a given board.

In addressing the impact of research on policymaking, Hess indicates that how “various constituencies motivate, interpret, and employ research may have an enormous impact on how research matters” for local policy implementation (Hess, 2008, p. 240). He warns that information coming from so many directions during the information technology age requires “someone to distill, explain, promote, and convey research to public officials if it is to be understood or influential” (Hess, 2008, p. 246). While difficult to achieve, the mobilization of research to support effective educational practices is important. As Levin suggests “reliable research must surely be one of the main routes to reduce variation while improving outcomes” (Levin, 2010, p. 305). He adds, however, that “there are many areas of education in which practices known to have good results are still not widely used whereas ineffective practices remain in use despite the general availability of contrary knowledge” (Levin, 2010, p. 305).

Again, crossover exists between conditions and the backing for an initiative that is evident. Some of the backing or support, as it is referred to in this thesis, might be seen to be
connected with the attitudes of policy actors or the local context. Whether or not overlap with other factors exists, the success of implementation is largely determined by the amount and type of support that accompanies the direction for implementation. In my experience, time to properly carry out implementation was one of the most important supports that could be provided in order to ensure effective implementation. I also found that support could take the form of appropriate resources, training, and even the provision of baseline and background data as a starting point for change.

Support for a new policy that is being introduced, in the form of funding and professional development, will certainly influence policy implementation at the board level (Datnow, 2006; Loeb & McEwen, 2006). Michael Fullan refers to this type of support as investment. “Any new system improvement requires investment. It will need funding, reallocation of resources, and the time and expertise of those involved” (Fullan, 2009, p. 280). If the policy is a major departure from most recent practice and funding is not provided for resources and training, implementation of policy will likely look much different from policy for which support is provided, as boards may tend to remain faithful to the status quo in their actions. Multi-pronged approaches, involving professional development and supported over time, (Bickmore, 2011) are essential if the implementation of policy is to be successfully put into practice, regardless of outcomes.

Of course, the education sector is accountable to the public. Policy implementation requires a vision and direction that are clearly communicated if it is to be effective. Oversight by the Ministry of Education and the trustees and senior administration must be considered. At the board level, the Safe Schools’ portfolio is often left as the responsibility of a superintendent or a system principal who serves as the policy actor directly overseeing the suspension and expulsion programs. As a result, central control in this thesis focuses on the involvement of the Ministry of Education in the implementation of Safe Schools’ policy.

The impact of the central governing body, the provincial government in the case of Safe Schools’ policy, cannot be overlooked as a primary factor in policy implementation. The branch of the Ministry responsible for Safe Schools has central control or oversight regarding the implementation of Safe Schools’ policy. If the government is unable to ensure compliance with new policies due to a loosely coupled structure (Berman, 1978; Datnow, 2006) or the high cost of meting out sanctions, it is likely that compromise with existing practices at the board level is the best that can be achieved (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990). If a major lack of alignment exists between government and local practice initially, implementation will again be impacted, since
the practice put in place by the board will not be what the Ministry has envisioned and will likely need to be revamped. Oversimplification as to what needs to be done, underestimation of the difficulties that could be encountered and avoidance of evidence of conflict (Malen, 2006) can all negatively impact policy implementation.

Using the information gained through personal experience and reinforced by findings of the literature review, it becomes clearly evident that there are several factors that have influenced the policy related to Ontario’s suspension and expulsion programs. The main influential factors will form the conceptual framework for this study. These factors, as summarized above, are the impact of policy actors, the local conditions that exist where the policy is being implemented, the support that is in place for implementation, and the level and type of central control that is connected with the implementation process. Each of these factors as they pertain to the implementation of policy related to the suspension and expulsion programs will be studied more closely in the pages that follow.

BACKGROUND TO SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION PROGRAM POLICY

As indicated in the first chapter of this study, a Strict Discipline Program was developed at the beginning of the millennium by the Ministry of Education in the province of Ontario. This program was the predecessor of the suspension and expulsion programs that are the main focus of this study. The Strict Discipline Program was created in response to feedback from Ontarians on Safe Schools’ policies which indicated a desire for school boards to provide continuous learning for suspended and expelled students. Students who were suspended or expelled and subsequently removed from the school environment were “at risk of losing an important connection to the school community” (Ontario Ministry of Education, Safe Schools Policy and Practice: An Agenda for Action, 2006, p. 14). The foundation for this approach can be found in the Hall & Dennis Report of 1968, in which the statement is made that students must “take responsibility for their actions in an atmosphere that is positive and encouraging” (Hall & Dennis, 1968, p. 38). It was also central to the recommendations made by a Human Rights Consultant in 2003, who suggested that there must be a balance between punishment and support (Bhattacharjee, 2003) in addressing deviant behaviour.

The recommendation was made that suspended and expelled students should be provided with resources that “might include access to learning and treatment programs, behavioural management, individual counseling” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 14).
While the Strict Discipline Programs were set up to serve regions rather than specific school boards, the philosophy behind them and, by extension, the basic objective of the program was the same as it would be for the suspension and expulsion programs that would evolve from them. The main objective of the current programs is to ensure that students are provided with an opportunity to stay connected with the school community and to access supports that would assist them in addressing the issues that have led to their suspension or expulsion. The ultimate aim of these programs, in the view of Ontarians who responded to the Safe Schools Action Team in 2006, should be to “re-integrate suspended and expelled students into the school community in a positive manner” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 14). As such in the planning stages, based on feedback from teachers, parents, students, support staff, school administrators and members of the broader community, it was envisioned that success should be measured by the ability of the programs to carry out these functions. The programs should allow students to continue their studies with support being provided for their academic and non-academic needs, while ideally working towards ultimately returning to a regular school environment to continue their studies.

The policies regarding the suspension and expulsion programs that were introduced in August 2007 were to be put into place by February 2008. These policies were quite prescriptive, outlining specifically the programs that boards were required to put into place for long-term suspensions and expulsions, replacing the Strict Discipline Programs that had come before them. A long-term suspension was defined as “a suspension of more than five school days” (Ontario Ministry of Education, Policy/Program Memorandum No. 141, 2012, pg. 1) and could be extended up to twenty school days. If an expulsion was being considered for a student, the student would first be suspended pending expulsion while an investigation was carried out.

Boards were provided with the template for a Student Action Plan document, which would set the direction for the implementation of the policy at the board level. The Student Action Plan was designed to allow the objectives for the student in the program to be outlined. Academic and non-academic goals were to be set for the duration of the student’s involvement in the program. The former were to be set in conjunction with teachers, teaching assistants and administrators at the home school and worked on by the teachers and teaching assistants at the program. The latter goals were to be set with the same staff members from the home school, along with the guidance counsellors and support staff. Decisions would be made at the board level as to the people and process that would be involved in implementing the non-academic
portion of the program. Success of the suspended or expelled students would be measured by their achievement, in the view of program staff, of the academic and non-academic goals that were set in the Student Action Plan at the outset of involvement in the programs. In developing board policies for the suspension and expulsion programs, a consultation process was to take place. For both types of programs, in 2007, it was recommended that “boards should consult with parents, principals, teachers, students, school councils, their Parent Involvement Committee, their Special Education Advisory Committee, community partners, social services agencies, members of Aboriginal communities (e.g. Elders) and those groups that are not traditionally consulted” (Ontario Ministry of Education, PPM 142, 2007, p. 3). In the 2012 revised version of the policy, the Ministry added “other school staff” and mental health personnel to the list of groups that should be involved in the consultation (Ontario Ministry of Education, PPM 142, 2012, p. 3).

As part of the policy, the Ministry also required that boards monitor and review the programs that were established. The performance indicators that would be used to monitor, review and evaluate the programs were to be “developed in consultation with their school community, including principals, teachers, students, parents, school councils, their Special Education Advisory, and their Parent Involvement Committees, as well as service providers in the community” (Ontario Ministry of Education, PPM 142, 2007, p. 8). The 2012 version of the document directed that “other school staff” and mental health personnel should be included in this process, as well.

The specific approach for programs for suspended and expelled students varies somewhat in boards across the province. In extreme cases for these students, options for an educational experience in the Ontario system have not changed much since measures were put in place following the recommendations of the Safe Schools Action Team Report in 2006. In these instances, students could be excluded from the program environment if it is felt that they might interfere with the program operation for staff or other students. In most instances, however, students who are removed from their school setting in response to serious rule infractions, find themselves with an opportunity to complete educational requirements with other students who have violated school rules while receiving some form of support for their non-academic needs.

As part of the implementation process, schoolwork is usually carried out at a location away from their home schools in order to help ensure the safety of students within the traditional school setting and to allow a focus on the needs of the suspended and expelled youth. Support is
supposed to be provided by a teaching team and a clinical team tasked with working specifically with this unique population. These students are receiving an educational opportunity, which was deemed to be an important point in the move from school exclusion to the development of suspension and expulsion programs. They are also receiving support for their non-academic needs, which are connected to the deviant behavior that led to suspension or expulsion. As the literature review about deviance suggests, there are a number of root causes for the behaviours that have led to extreme discipline sanctions and these must be addressed in order to properly support the students. The non-academic supports must be used to attend to issues ranging from inaccessibility of goals to environmental influences and mental health concerns.

**IMPACT OF POLICY ACTORS**

The impact of policy actors is the main factor influencing the implementation of any policy. Policy actors include the individuals and groups who are directly linked to carrying out implementation of policy. The actors also include stakeholder groups that have a say in how policy is implemented. In the case of Safe Schools’ policies, the former could include the director of education for a board, the board of trustees, program and school administrators and board staff. The latter could include members of the community at large, parents, students, and the media.

The impact of the various actors will depend, in turn, on factors that influence them. Their experiences related to education in general and to the suspension and expulsion programs specifically would be major influences. School leaders, for example, have cited their own experiences as well as those of their colleagues as influencing their attitudes and beliefs more than research and professional development (Levin, 2010) in several areas, including those related to Safe Schools’ policies. Knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and the current situation all have an impact on implementation (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Policy actors who feel that it is important to provide support for suspended and expelled youth, for example, will have a keen interest in ensuring that related policies are implemented appropriately and they will work hard to ensure that this happens.

Intermediary and hybrid organizations that bridge the gap between education and the greater community, along with non-system actors, can shape policy and push for a particular focus, thus influencing implementation (McLaughlin, 2010). Intermediary organizations, as the name suggests, serve as a connection between schools and community agencies, while hybrid
organizations work to level the playing field for students who come to education from a position of disadvantage. Advocacy organizations, looking out for the interests of special needs or urban youth would be examples of non-system actors. All can play a part in determining how a policy is rolled out at the local level.

Certainly, cognition is vital (Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2010) for policy actors. If policy directives are clearly laid out and if the actors who are responsible for implementation develop a thorough understanding of what is to be put in place as a result, chances of compliant implementation are increased. If the new policy is similar to the policy it is replacing, this may not be as much of an issue, provided that those involved in implementation actually carry out the subtle changes. If, however, it is not aligned, cognition plays an increasingly important role. Without cognition, efforts to adopt the policy at the board level will not be sufficient to allow a successful change to practice (Hall & Hord, 2001).

LOCAL CONDITIONS

Local conditions within a board will have a direct impact on the implementation of policy. The geography of the board will play a key role in the process since a board covering a large geographical area will have to approach implementation in a different way from a board that is relatively small in size. The size of the schools involved, along with the student population profile, will have an effect on implementation as well. Of course, the actors at the local level take into consideration and respond to local conditions through their actions and their impact on policy implementation has been summarized earlier.

Collected data must be considered as implementation gets underway, too, since it provides a baseline from which to progress. Baseline data would include suspension and expulsion statistics from past years, along with other behavioural data that is collected by the schools. Information about students with identified special needs would be helpful, as it has been an issue that has been highlighted in recent years when the percentage of suspended and expelled students with identified needs has been looked at. Given the focus on equity as it relates to Safe Schools’ issues, it would be of value to know information about the cultural backgrounds of the students who have been suspended. Information on socio-economic status and literacy would also be helpful.
SUPPORT FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Regardless of the roles played by the actors in a board and the pre-existing conditions that are in place there, policy implementation is affected by the level of resources available. Support, in the form of funding, resources connected to the initiative, and professional development or in-service training provides the tools required for implementation (Datnow, 2006). Time, personnel, space, and equipment are all required in order to effectively carry out the implementation process (Fowler, 2013).

In the case of Safe Schools’ policy implementation related to suspensions and expulsions, training for key board personnel on how to effectively set up and implement the new programs would be essential. Those individuals or groups responsible for assisting the students with their academic and non-academic goals in the programs would need support in determining how these objectives would be achieved. To begin with, they would need to receive in-service training, based on evidence-based research and prior experience, to know how to provide this support. This would require time for the training and funding to support the training. Principals and vice principals would need to become familiar with the process that would be used to access the programs when students were suspended or expelled. Again, time and money would need to be provided in order to make this training possible.

Time and funding would be required to allow monitoring of the programs to take place. The collection of data about the reasons for suspension and the recidivism levels as mentioned under local conditions, for example, would provide important information about the direction that supports should take and the effectiveness of the supports in allowing students to be successfully reintegrated in a regular school setting. Funding would be necessary to pay for the establishment and continued use of a location in which the program would be housed as well as to pay for the staff to support the students on site. Funding would also be required to pay for any additional resources that would be needed in order to support the students in the program.

Funding support for human and material resources could be provided by the local school board or community agencies who agreed to participate in a partnership with the board in the implementation of the program. This type of support could also come from the provincial government through the Ministry of Education as part of this body’s role of central control, which was the fourth factor cited as having an impact on policy implementation.
CENTRAL CONTROL

Central control over and a commitment to the implementation process are the final key factors that will impact the level of success that is experienced as the move for change occurs. The level of oversight that exists directly impacts implementation since the policy authorities need to be able to monitor the process of implementation and tailor support and direction accordingly. If policy is to be adopted and implemented as envisioned by those responsible for central control, policymakers must convince those who are implementing policy to think differently and change practice in order to be successful (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). They must be wary of the possibility of unwanted adaptations or modifications being made at the local level, as local districts have been known to readily accept funds for policy implementation while not carrying out the implementation as desired (Berman, 1978). Of course, adaptation can also be positive, especially if a policy involves change in new, unexplored territory. Monitoring and feedback will provide an opportunity to reveal possible positive adaptations as well as those that could prove to be negative.

A feedback loop needs to be in place to allow the central governing body to gain an accurate picture of how the implementation process is progressing. If the vision that exists at the Ministry level is not aligned with the vision at the local level, implementation will be impacted to an even greater degree if the Ministry decides to exert greater central control or to invest in greater support. This has been demonstrated in instances where boards have not been capable of reconciling their budgets. Rather than allow them to continue to work with funds in a fashion that is misaligned with the government vision, central control has been drastically changed as the government has stepped in to directly oversee the budget process at the board level. Ministry representatives have warned board teams in the past that not enough is being done to ensure the provision of non-academic support for suspended and expelled students. While, to date, the Ministry has not stepped in to take over this process, it is not inconceivable that they would do so if the problem was not rectified.

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND CHANGE

The term implementation indicates that something new is being introduced to an existing situation and a change is occurring in current practice. As a result, one must consider theories of change when the impact of the factors involved in policy implementation are being
Hall and Hord emphasize that their “research and that of others documents that most changes in education take three to five years to be implemented at a high level” (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 5) and that for each new unit, such as a school, board or province, “the process will take three to five years” (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 5). They further emphasize that change in practice will not be successful until the actors involved change.

These researchers discuss the fact that changes come in different sizes from cruise control, which does not differ significantly from the existing situation, to reconstitution, which involves a wholesale restructuring. The size of the change will definitely have an impact on implementation (Hall & Hord, 2001). In other words, if the new or revised policy represents a major departure from previous practice, there is an increased likelihood that successful implementation will be much more difficult.

In the case of boards that were directly involved in the creation of Strict Discipline Programs early in the millennium, change to the board suspension and expulsion programs would not have been a major departure from existing practice and, thus, should have been easier to implement smoothly. For boards that had not had a Strict Discipline Program in place, however, the requirement for suspension and expulsion programs to be put in place would have been a major departure in practice and, thus, potentially more difficult to implement successfully.

According to the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) of Change research, six functions are critical to effective implementation of any change. All can be connected to the factors impacting implementation under the category of central control. Shared vision, resource provision, professional learning, monitoring of progress, ongoing assistance and the creation of a context that supports change are all key to successful change (Hall & Hord, 2001).

The developers of the CBAM model emphasize the importance of aspects of the other factors as well. In describing “Stages of Concern” as part of the model, they discuss the importance of the attitudes of the policy actors towards the change that is being put into place (Anderson, 2010). The “Levels of Use” aspect of the model focuses on the behaviour changes of the actors involved in implementation as they move through the stages of incorporating the new practices (Anderson, 2010).

While the originators of the CBAM model describe the process in terms of a linear progression, other researchers have suggested that this is an oversimplification of the overall process. Instead, the suggestion is made that feedback loops in the stages lead to an ebb and
flow in the process. Change is impacted by policy actors, conditions, and events at different phases (Anderson, 2010). Fullan suggested that characteristics of the change itself, along with local characteristics and external factors such as government involvement will impact change (Fullan, 2001). The actions and reactions that occur lead to a constantly evolving change process. In a later work, Fullan emphasized the importance of direction and sector engagement with vision, resources, flexibility and partnership with the field for effective ongoing system change (Fullan, 2009). Again, one can see in the rethinking of the change model the impact of the four factors on implementation.

Andy Hargreaves feels that the education change process has evolved through three phases as he advocates for the “Fourth Way of Change”. In his opinion, the first phase involved freedom and flexibility to implement change as desired. While the degree of leeway was often appreciated by front line workers, the results of the implementation were not always in line with the initial vision. As the pendulum swung the other way in the second phase, standardization and market competition significantly limited the liberties that could be taken, but resulted in an approach of fear and force that could not be sustained. In the third phase, policy implementers looked to innovation and creativity for a solution. The path ultimately led to Hargreaves’ proposed Fourth Way with its five pillars. In the pillars of vision, public engagement, the need for investment, corporate partnership, and students as partners, one can again see the parallels with the four influential factors involved in policy implementation that have been cited in this thesis paper (Hargreaves, 2009).

**SUMMARY**

In my view four factors – policy actors, conditions, support and central control – all exert some form of impact on policy implementation as change takes place, according to the information gained through the literature review. If a visual of the conceptual framework were to be created, it might show these four factors surrounding implementation with arrows moving from each of the factors to the implementation process. This suggests that each of the four factors has an impact on implementation. One might assume that, as part of a feedback loop, outcomes of implementation would, in turn, have an impact on the four factors, but the main impact would extend from the four factors to the centre. The proposed conceptual framework is indicated as Figure 1.
In this study, the impact of these key factors on the implementation of Safe Schools’ policy related to programs for suspended and expelled youth will be considered. Participants in the study were asked to comment on the degree and type of impact these factors have had in their experience with policy implementation. The similarities and differences in the responses that are provided by the different boards, along with the similarities and differences in the responses that are provided by different people within the boards will be highlighted through this study.

The success of the programs, according to the aims that were articulated when the policies were first established, would be determined by their ability to allow students the opportunity to meet their academic and non-academic needs during the time that they are connected with one of the programs. The roles that the four factors related to policy implementation play in achieving or detracting from this success, then, would provide a measure of their impact.
CHAPTER FOUR – SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION PROGRAM POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN TWO ONTARIO BOARDS

OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY AND RATIONALE

This study is qualitative in nature based on accounts provided by participants in individual interviews. This type of study was selected in order to gain a deeper understanding (Creswell, 2008) and a more concrete image (Flick et al, 2000), from the participants’ perspectives (Slavin, 1992), of the impact of each of the outlined factors, and other possible influences, on the implementation process than might be gained through a quantitative measure of change in suspension, expulsion, and recidivism. While a quantitative study might provide some insight into the success of the programs in reducing suspensions, expulsions and repeat offenses, it would not demonstrate whether the programs in place are staying true to the original objective of providing an opportunity for students to continue their academic study while being provided with the non-academic supports deemed necessary. It would also not provide a true indication of the factors that impacted the implementation process. It is only through thorough discussions that it is possible to see clearly whether the requirements of the program were considered in the consultation and early implementation phases from the point of view of specific board personnel and to determine key factors that impacted implementation. It is not possible, of course, to determine how accurate these accounts are. As well, the study does not take into consideration the student or parent point of view on implementation.

Since the programs were introduced in 2008, limited information has been gathered about them. It was hoped that this type of study would allow a closer look at the intricate process involved in policy implementation and provide an opportunity to study this complex issue from a wide range of perspectives (Davies, 2007; Slavin, 1992). As a principal with responsibility for the suspension and expulsion programs in one Ontario board, I was very familiar with the process that had been followed for policy implementation there.

As indicated earlier, I had been involved in consultations with local policy actors including superintendents, school principals, vice principals, and board support staff. I had also been engaged in discussions with my counterparts in other boards across the province. The purpose of these contacts was to add to my personal knowledge about and experience with the factors that impacted Safe Schools’ policy implementation.
Based on my interactions with educators who served in a similar capacity in other boards of the province, I was aware that many similarities and differences existed in the implementation of the policies across Ontario. I was also aware, from my research and discussions with various stakeholders, that the programs and the implementation process that had been followed could be viewed from a number of different perspectives, depending on the role played by the particular stakeholder. For this reason, the potential participants in the study were carefully selected.

A strategic sample of two districts was chosen to allow exploration of the thesis question. By purposive sampling, I selected participants whose experiences were relevant to the research question (Schwandt, 2001; Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001). Study participants were selected based on my prior knowledge of the board personnel who were involved in the development and implementation of policies related to the suspension and expulsion programs. This prior knowledge came from discussions that had taken place with Ministry and local school board personnel. Initial discussions took place as part of the annual regional meetings held by the Ministry with Safe Schools’ representatives from each of the boards in my immediate area. Further information was gleaned through information shared during the teleconferences which involved similar representation from boards across the province. Locally, among others, I consulted with a director and retired deputy director, a superintendent who had responsibility for the Safe Schools’ portfolio, and a retired principal who had supervised the first Strict Discipline Program in the area. Based on this accumulated information about practices throughout Ontario, along with information gained through my research of the Safe Schools’ literature, I selected interview participants who would have had the most direct knowledge of the implementation process as it related to the suspension and expulsion programs.

Initially, the selected participants included only board personnel who were on the front lines in the process of implementing policies related to the suspension and expulsion programs from 2008 to 2013. While senior administration provided information on the policies themselves to program staff, by their own admission superintendents, trustees and directors did not take on the direct responsibility for implementation. Ultimately, it was decided that trustees and members of the senior administration should be included in the interviews, though, in order to hear directly from them as to their level of involvement in implementation and to get their thoughts on the process.
The participants in this study were interviewed one-on-one, allowing them to provide individual answers to questions about discipline policies used to address the programming details for the most disruptive youth in schools. While there is no formula for choosing participants to interview (Thomas, 2006), the participants for this study were carefully selected. The selected participants can be considered key informants, “knowledgeable insiders” who “assist the field worker in gaining and maintaining access, developing an insider’s understanding” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 127). They were selected because of their involvement (Wagner et al, 2010) in Safe Schools’ policy implementation and their firsthand knowledge of what is going on in the community (University of Illinois, 2014; University of California Los Angeles, 2012; New York State, 2014). The selection of multiple informants was carried out in order to get in depth answers (University of California Los Angeles, 2012; New York State, 2014), to increase the validity of the study (Wagner et al, 2010), and to draw attention to any possible discrepancy between informant reports (Kumar et al, 1993; New York State, 2014) while also looking for similarities in responses.

As key informant diversity is important (University of California Los Angeles, 2012) the selected informants were chosen from a variety of leadership positions within their respective boards. This helps to avoid individual bias or the chance that any single informant might restrict responses to those it is felt that the interviewer is looking for (University of Illinois, 2014; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Since the participants are identified in the research, it is possible that their responses to interview questions might be affected by the lack of confidentiality available to them (Tolich, 2004). The likelihood of this is minimized, however, by the fact that the roles of the key informants in the education system requires them to view implementation with a critical eye in order to assess areas of relative strength and need.

Key informant interviews have numerous advantages. They are inexpensive (New York State, 2014) and relatively simple to conduct (New York State, 2014; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Often, they will provide the interviewer with direct answers to research questions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013) and valuable quotes in language that is easy to understand (New York State, 2014). Also, the flexibility of this approach allows for the use of probing questions as an extension of the original questions set out in the interview plan (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; New York State, 2014). The leeway allowed in open-ended questions can lead to the acquisition of richer, deeper information than that which might come from a rigid set of questions with no follow-up probes. Interviews have credibility among qualitative researchers (Savin-Baden &
The disadvantages of interviews are that “they can be time consuming and resource intensive” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The value of the information obtained depends, to a great extent, on the ability of the interviewer to ask the right questions in the right way and the willingness of the informant to be honest in answering (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Wiersma, 2000). As well, a single interview provides only one perspective on a subject (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013) and the interviewee may not feel right about revealing certain information (Wiersma, 2000). One must also be careful, when interviewing, to keep procedures consistent across interviews. Inconsistencies in approach, length of interview, or location could have a detrimental effect on the interview (Wiersma, 2000). All of these aspects were considered when the interviews were conducted and appropriate precautions were taken to minimize the impact of these potential disadvantages.

By collecting and analyzing the feedback of the study participants, it was hoped that similarities and differences between boards would emerge in the findings and would help to direct further research. The analysis process would involve the identification of segments of thought that followed similar threads or had common themes (Creswell, 2008; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013) that could be found in the text of the interviews of a number of the study participants. For example, questions about the conditions that impact policy implementation might elicit responses pinpointing a local condition that was highlighted by a number of study participants. Regardless of the specific impact that the selected condition was thought to have by the various participants, it could be considered to constitute a theme if it appeared in a significant number of the interview texts. As another example, the differing role of the Safe Schools Lead in the two selected boards became evident only through probing questions that moved beyond the basic understanding of the titles of the key policy actors in each situation to determine how they specifically impacted the implementation process through their actions. This difference constituted a theme or thread that was followed through the remainder of the interviews and during the analysis of the data.

Educational change has been described as being composed of three overlapping sub-processes. These sub-processes are mobilization, implementation and institutionalization. During mobilization, the system which is to undergo change prepares for a change in state through a process that involves four main steps – policy image development, planning, internal support generation and external support generation (Berman, 1981). Since
mobilization is ongoing and therefore often overlaps with implementation, it was important to include the comments that were made about this part of the process in order to ensure all aspects of the change process during implementation were taken into consideration.

In most instances, the participants involved in mobilization and implementation of the suspension and expulsion program policies from the outset were board personnel. While individuals from the extended school community and the broader community, such as parents, board support staff and support agency representatives, were involved in later stages, my research did not show that these groups had been involved from the beginning of the process. As such, it would not be possible for them to completely describe the evolution of the process or the practices that had been in place beforehand. As a result, beyond administrators and trustees, these groups were not included in the study sample. One exception involved the interview conducted with a student support counselor in the larger urban board. Given the board’s division of responsibilities related to Safe Schools, a limited number of administrators were directly involved with the suspension and expulsion programs. The counselor was selected as a board representative who would have some insight into the implementation process, since he had been involved with the program since its beginning.

As outlined in the conceptual framework, determining the impact of key factors involved in policy implementation required that the most influential factors be determined, articulated and investigated further. Policy actors, pre-existing conditions, supports and central controls by the Ministry of Education were seen to be factors that had significant influence on policy implementation, based on my literature review. The interview questions extended from these four areas and led to the formulation of a description of each of these factors and a determination of the impact of each factor in the two boards involved in the study.

Wherever possible, the interviews took place in person. When this was not possible, the interviews were carried out by telephone. The latter approach was used in instances where distance and scheduling issues made it difficult to arrange a face-to-face meeting. While meeting in person for the interview was preferable, this was weighed against the possibility that the inconvenience of the situation could cause a potential interview candidate to withdraw from the process. This would, of course, limit the data that would be available for the study.

THE TWO SELECTED BOARDS – SAMPLE AND SAMPLING

Two school boards were chosen on the basis of public domain data on the Ontario
Ministry of Education website. The website provides information on the percentage of students in each board who have been suspended or expelled from their schools in the period from 2005 to 2010. An attempt was made to engage two boards that had demonstrated a marked difference in the percentage of students who had been suspended or expelled during that time period in order to obtain a maximum variation sample (Wiersma, 2000). This would help to satisfy the requirement of providing multiple, varied perspectives to more accurately reflect the broader situation in the province (Creswell, 2008; Palys, 2014). I decided on two boards, which will be referred to as Rural Catholic and Composite Public in this study, since they met the criteria of demonstrating a significant difference in these selected areas. Neither of the two boards had been involved in the pilot project for Strict Discipline Programs earlier in the decade, either as a demonstration program or as an extended program. The differences, in terms of suspension and expulsion data, are outlined in the table below.

**Table 1 – Suspension and Expulsion Data for Composite Public and Rural Catholic**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Composite Public</th>
<th>Rural Catholic</th>
<th>Province</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>% Students Suspended</strong></td>
<td>7.53 – 7.94 (7th)</td>
<td>1.89 – 3.94 (58th)</td>
<td>4.18-7.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>% Students Expelled</strong></td>
<td>0.07 – 0.23 (3rd)</td>
<td>0 – 0.2</td>
<td>0.03-0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. of HS</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Population</strong></td>
<td>22,272</td>
<td>4,736</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I was interested in whether differences exist in attitudes and responses towards student discipline issues and how any differences might be connected to variations in the policy implementation process, given that boards could choose to direct support to proactive prevention practices prior to suspension, in addition to focusing attention on intervention following a Safe Schools’ incident. The question existed as to whether a difference might also exist in the factors that impacted the implementation of policy related to the suspension and expulsion programs in the two boards.

Composite Public Board had suspension rates that ranged from 7.53% to 7.94% between September 2002 and June 2010, with the highest rate occurring in 2009-2010, the year after implementation of the suspension program became mandatory across the province and the seventh highest rate of suspensions out of the seventy-two boards in the province that year. This board’s expulsion rates ranged from 0.07% to 0.23% during the same period, with a rate of 0.12% being recorded in the second year of implementation of the expulsion program. In the
final year in which data was collected for the study, the board ranked third in terms of their rate of expulsions. Rural Catholic Board had suspension rates ranging from 1.89% to 3.94% between 2002 and 2010, with their final year result placing them fifty-eighth overall in terms of the number of suspensions. While the suspension rate had dropped consistently from 2006 to its lowest in 2009, it jumped again to 3.25% in 2009-2010, the second year in which the suspension program was to be in place. Rural Catholic had no expulsions for any year except one, when the expulsion rate was 0.02%. By comparison, provincial averages for suspension ranged from 4.18% to 7.28% between 2002 and 2010 frame, while expulsions ranged from 0.03% to 0.09% (Ontario Ministry of Education, Suspension/Expulsion Rates, 2011).

Suspension and expulsion rates were calculated by determining the number of students who were suspended or expelled in a school year as a percentage of the total student population within a school board. If a student was suspended or expelled more than once in a school year, the student was still counted only once in the percentage calculation. This method of calculation helped to ensure that a board’s numbers, in terms of students who were suspended or expelled, were not skewed by repeated reports of the same student or students being suspended or expelled multiple times during a single school year. The statistics on suspension and expulsion totals were gathered by the Ministry through the reports that school boards were required to complete and submit regarding each suspension and expulsion.

In both boards that participated in this study, as well as in all other boards in the province, programs were to be made available to students who were suspended for more than five days and for students who were expelled. These programs were required to have an academic component that allowed students to complete their coursework according to goals that were set at the outset of the program. In addition, non-academic goals were set up to address the Safe Schools’ issues that had resulted in student suspension or expulsion. Members of the support staff were to be involved in assisting students in achieving the non-academic goals that were set up.

Participants in the survey included board personnel from the two selected school boards in the province. The focus was on input from the secondary level since the incidence of suspensions and expulsions is greater at the secondary level and since the programs themselves are accessed more frequently by secondary school principals. An attempt was made to select principals who have been in the role for at least five years in order to provide information about the program since its early stages. To gain a picture of the evolution and development of board
policy over time, the sample included representatives who are currently working in each of these areas as well as, where possible, representatives who worked in each of these areas within the past ten years.

Interviews were requested with key members of board teams connected with the Safe Schools’ portfolio. For each board, requests were sent to six potential participants. The potential interview candidates included the director, a trustee, the superintendent for Safe Schools, Safe Schools principal or coordinator, and two secondary school administrators. The core sample selected for the interviews was chosen in order to have a representation of board personnel with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. It was hoped that this sample would provide responses that would allow a “proper account of situational context” (Davies, 2007, p. 148) from the perspective of senior administrators, program coordinators and front line personnel, each with different levels of knowledge and experience with regards to the suspension and expulsion programs.

In Rural Catholic, all members who were invited agreed to participate in the interview. The director had been with the board for thirteen years, seven as a superintendent and five as director. The trustee has held this post for twenty-nine years. The superintendent for Safe Schools had been with the board for twenty-three years, with the last five as superintendent. The Safe Schools coordinator had started her role only a few months before and, in order to get some historical context, her retired predecessor was also interviewed. The retired coordinator had been with the board for thirteen years, with her last five having been in the role of coordinator for Safe Schools. Two former secondary school vice-principals, currently in elementary principal roles, participated as well. One had been with the board for twenty-one years, completing five years as a high school vice principal before becoming principal at the elementary level, a post which she had held for the past three years. The other elementary principal had been with the board for thirteen years and had been in administration for five of those years. Both elementary principals, then, had been involved in the implementation process from the program’s inception, first as vice principals and then as principals. The principal for one high school was interviewed, but he had been principal at both of the board high schools in the past six years. He had a total of twelve years with the board.

In Composite Public, only five people were interviewed, as the director declined to participate and deferred to her assistant who was the principal responsible for overseeing the Safe Schools’ portfolio. The assistant had held the position of Safe Schools principal for
the past three years and had a total of seventeen years of experience with the board. The manner in which the board was structured meant that no senior administrator had direct responsibility for the Safe Schools’ portfolio and so, no superintendent was included in the interview process. Two secondary principals, a trustee and a student support counsellor with the suspension and expulsion programs were interviewed. The trustee had been in this position for the last thirteen years. The student support counsellor had been with the board for the past fifteen years and had spent the last six years working directly with the suspension and expulsion programs. One of the secondary school principals was selected from a city school. She had worked with the board for the past twenty years and had spent just over five years as a secondary school principal. The other principal was selected from a smaller town on the outskirts of the board. She had been with the board for twenty-two years and had been in the role of secondary principal for the last six years.

In total, thirteen people were interviewed with eleven being interviewed in person and two completing a telephone interview. The numbers were consistent with those often found in purposive samples which are typically small (Wiersma, 2000) and specifically in key informant interviews which do not adhere to the “notion truth resides in large numbers” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 250). Eight of the study participants came from Rural Catholic and five participated from Composite Public. The first set of interviews was held in April 2013. Further interviews were held when participants were available throughout the month of May and the last interviews were held at the end of June. Each interview took approximately forty-five minutes to conduct.

Before contact could be made with any of the potential participants in the study, permission to carry out the study was sought from the University of Toronto. The Ethics Review Protocol Form for Supervised and Sponsored Researchers was completed and submitted. Once permission for the study was granted at the university, board and school levels, the study was carried out.

**INSTRUMENTS**

The data for this thesis are derived from one-on-one semi-structured interviews that were audio-taped. A detailed summary of the transcript was created based on the information gleaned from the tape recordings. Most of the interviews were carried out face-to-face but, when time and distance did not permit this, on two occasions the interviews were carried out by telephone. The purpose of each of the interviews that was conducted was to determine how specific factors
had impacted the implementation of the policy mandating the formation of programs to support suspended and expelled youth.

The factors explored have been outlined in the conceptual framework. They include impact of policy actors on implementation, local conditions, support, and central control. Each of these factors contains related subthemes that formed the basis for the questions used in the interviews. The theme approach provided an open-ended discussion that allowed the respondents to provide their own feedback rather than choosing from a predetermined list of choices in their responses. Initial questions allowed the researcher to establish background information about the interview participant. Once background information about current roles within the board and time in the positions was established, the interview moved to the questions that had been sent out in advance to potential participants. As outlined in the conceptual framework, the questions focused on the four factors that were thought to have a significant impact on the implementation process as it related to suspension and expulsion programs – policy actors, conditions, support and central control. Interview participants also had the opportunity to comment on aspects of the four factors not covered in the questions. The questions were as follows:

- How long have you worked with the board?
- How long have you been in your current position?
- What experience have you had in other boards or education related positions?
- Have you had a chance to review and sign two copies of the letter?

Policy Actors

1. What people or groups provided input on the implementation of policies related to the suspension and expulsion programs in your board?
2. What people or groups who should have been included were omitted from the process? Is there a plan to include them in subsequent stages of the process? If so, please describe.

Local Conditions

3. Describe your board and the secondary schools within your board – size of board, number of high schools, size of the schools, profile of the student population.
4. Describe any unique features of your board related to the suspension and expulsion programs.
5. Describe the general makeup and needs of the students involved with the suspension and expulsion program in your board.
6. How are the needs of all members of this student population taken into consideration in the implementation of policies for suspension and expulsion programs?
7. In your opinion, what improvements could be made in considering the needs of your student population in implementation of this policy?
Support

8. What information was provided or gathered to inform the process of policy implementation?

9. What information that should have been gathered or provided was not included? Is there a plan to include this information? If so, please describe.

10. What supports are provided for the programs and by who are they provided?

11. What additional supports are needed? Is there a plan to add these or other supports?

Central Control

12. Were the policies about suspension and expulsion programs clearly communicated by the Ministry to the individual boards?

13. In what other ways is commitment to these policies demonstrated by the Ministry?

14. How is the implementation of policy related to the suspension and expulsion programs monitored by the Ministry?

Other

15. Do you have anything else to add?

The questions about policy actors focused on the participants’ understanding as to who was involved, at the local level, in implementing Safe Schools’ policy. Respondents were asked to indicate which individuals and groups, to the best of their knowledge, were involved in putting the suspension and expulsion programs into place in their board. They were also invited to suggest groups or individuals that could have been asked for input. These would be individuals or groups who could have contributed their knowledge, expertise, or skill set to the process of moving from planning or the mobilization phase through to change in practice or implementation with the introduction of these programs. Since planning, review, implementation and institutionalization are part of an ongoing process in educational change (Berman, 1981), this information would help to describe, in the views of the participants, which policy actors could have had an impact on some or all of these stages. The participants were asked whether they knew of any plan to include those initially omitted in any subsequent consultations.

Each of the interview participants was asked to describe the conditions that existed within their board which might have an impact on the policy implementation process. Conditions might include the geography of the board, along with the community, school and student profiles. The answers to questions that focused on a description of the board and the unique features of the suspension and expulsion programs (numbers 3 and 4) provided information about each of the board’s programs. They also allowed participants to expand on their description of facts such as
the history of practices in the area, along with the beliefs that were held, especially in areas related to student discipline. Questions were asked about the typical profile of a student involved in the suspension and expulsion program. Participants were also invited to comment on the nature of the program itself, including any features that were felt to be unique to the local board practices in dealing with suspended and expelled youth.

A number of the questions that were posed related to supports for the implementation process. Typically, supports involved funding or expertise needed to assist with professional development for staff who would be involved in policy implementation. This factor, however, also included research opportunities and community involvement connected with the programs in place.

Finally, the last set of questions had to do with central control of the implementation process from the Ministry of Education. As indicated in the preparation phase, trustees and directors usually take a step back and let superintendents and principals work directly with Ministry representatives through regional meetings. Participants were asked to give their opinion on the communication process between Ministry representatives and board personnel. They were asked to comment on the ways in which the Ministry demonstrated commitment to the initiatives. To conclude the interview, participants were asked to explain how the process was monitored and then they were given the opportunity to add any final comments.

The format of open-ended questions allowed opportunities for general concepts to emerge in the responses rather than having the direction of the interview limited by the answers given to closed-ended questions. Probes were used on occasion in an attempt to gain richer, deeper, more elaborate answers and to encourage interview participants to reflect carefully on their responses to the questions that were asked (University of California Los Angeles, 2012). The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed the interviewer to pursue a thread of questions further if a response opened up a different area relevant to the study. The interviewer attempted to avoid leading questions but sometimes repeated a point in order to get clarification. Common themes and trends became evident in the responses that were given to the open-ended questions that were used in the interviews. When this occurred, probing questions were used to pull at the threads of thought that had been uncovered.

Use of the open-ended questions with follow-up probes proved to be quite valuable as it led me to uncover themes that had not been immediately apparent. The best example of this was evident in the responses to the questions about the unique features of the suspension and
expulsion programs. A broad range of responses pointed to factors that had led to the identified uniqueness and the responses were arrived at without the informants being led to a specific conclusion by the interviewer, as would have been the risk involved in using more convergent questioning techniques. The responses provided evidence of similarities in thought, as well as discrepancies, for example, in the views regarding the effectiveness of the different types of programs that were offered. Further description of themes and trends that were uncovered can be found in the findings section of the thesis.

One-to-one interviews have the advantage of providing the participants with the opportunity to describe their personal experiences. It is possible that the interviewee may be intimidated by the process or by the interviewer which would, again, change the information that is received (Creswell, 2008). The interviews were set up in such a way as to make the interviewee as comfortable as possible, usually taking place in a quiet, private area in his or her place of work. I was familiar with the Safe Schools coordinators for Rural Catholic, both current and retired, and the Safe Schools principal for Composite Public, as we had all been part of the regional team that met on an annual basis to discuss Safe Schools’ issues. As a result, they would have viewed me as a colleague who was carrying out research related to my field of work. I had not previously met the other participants in the interview process. As such, they would have seen me as a graduate student rather than as a colleague, although I had provided them with a basic outline as to my background as an educator and principal.

As data collection through interviewing of the informants got underway, the reviewing of transcripts began. A qualitative content analysis approach was used as I was engaged in “reading and re-reading transcripts looking for similarities and differences” (Kawulich, 2004). Initially, I read the data several times over in iterative fashion (Creswell, 2008; Grbich, 2013; Saldana, 2008), working between collection and analysis as I conducted the various interviews and studied the transcripts along the way. Through this procedure, I was attempting to get a general sense of the responses and the perspectives held by the key informants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

Early reviews were used to identify manifest or obvious, surface content and distinct differences in themes (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Later reviews, after all interviews were completed, allowed the uncovering of latent content and underlying meanings that might not have been evident initially (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009) when only a few interviews had been conducted. For example, the term “diverse” was used to describe the populations in both boards,
which would seem to suggest a similarity. In digging deeper, however, it became apparent that the type of diversity that was being referred to was very different in different contexts.

Key points found in responses to the interview questions and probes were highlighted (Grbich, 2013), noted in the transcript margin (Creswell, 2008; Saldana, 2008) and summarized on index cards (Bogdan & Bilken, 1982) through coding which was used to condense the data (Saldana, 2008). The coding was intended as a transition between collection of the data and a more detailed analysis (Saldana, 2008). Code labels were assigned using lean coding (Creswell, 2008) in which only a few codes were assigned throughout the transcript, to keep the amount of material to be analyzed manageable. For example, when questioned about the policy actors involved in policy implementation, some of the informants described the different individuals involved in the creation of local policy, while others spoke of the actors who were involved in the later stages of hands-on implementation. Initially, the different individuals and groups of actors and their involvements in the process were coded together. When these code words were listed and then grouped, this allowed me to eliminate those code words that were redundant (Creswell, 2008) and limit the overall number of codes. Then, as the analysis process proceeded, I was able to determine and explain the important distinction between the actors who were initially consulted and those who were involved in the active implementation process.

Next, the codes were reduced to themes (Creswell, 2008; Grbich, 2013), which included both major themes and subthemes (Creswell, 2008). For the purposes of this thesis, a theme can be defined as “an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection” (Saldana, 2008, p. 13). These themes were often indicated by key words (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). They highlighted similarities found in several informants’ responses, stand-alone components found in only some transcript segments and contrary evidence which went against the general findings in the theme (Creswell, 2008). The frequency with which the various themes appeared in the transcripts provided a measure of their importance when analysis was undertaken (Kawulich, 2004).

Similarities in the information provided through the themes were highlighted. In some instances, I adopted the narrative form of the informants (Kawulich, 2004), using their quotes to better illustrate what they were trying to say. As well, distinct differences in what analysis of the themes revealed was highlighted in the discussion of findings, as was ‘outlier’ information (Gladwell, 2008; Kawulich, 2004), which was unique to one board or one set of comments. Drawing on Merriam’s work, I used visual models in my notes to show the network of
connections between ideas (Suter, 2012), along with “thick description” to better describe the “rich detail of context of the study” (Suter, 2012, p. 364). The similarities, differences and unique aspects, the images of which informants provided through their responses, were a major focus of the discussion carried out in the final pages of the thesis.

An example from the study of a theme that was explored can be found in the responses to questions about unique features of their programs. In this situation informants from both boards described the manner in which the needs of the students in the program were addressed. Both the similarities and differences in the approaches formed key components of the themes that became apparent in the analysis of the information provided by the key informants. In Chapter Five of this thesis, the themes and subthemes are evident in the way the discussion of their impact is set out in the format of the text. In Chapter Six, the significance of the similarities and differences are explored in greater depth.

PROCEDURES

Once the ethics committee provided the green light and the thesis advisory committee input had been received, board approval was sought from the school boards that were invited to participate in the study and the research was conducted according to the procedures that are set out in the participating boards. Once approval was received at all levels, contact was made with the board and school administrators involved in the interview through a formal invitation. In the letter, a request was made for the individual’s participation in the interview process. The letter outlined the purpose of the study, the proposed involvement of the participant, and assurances as to the practices of confidentiality and anonymity that would be followed (Creswell, 2008). The letter, in the form of the Informed Consent Letter, is included in Appendix 2. A date, time, and location for the interview was arranged. Any concerns expressed by the parties involved were addressed at that time.

The questions that were used in the interview fell into four categories, based on the conceptual framework that emerged from the literature review. The categories coincided with the four factors that have been found, in past studies, to impact significantly on policy implementation – policy actors, conditions, support, and central control. Participants in the interview had the opportunity to add any additional information that they did not feel was previously covered at the end of the interview.

At the outset of the interview, introductions were made. The purpose of the study was explained, as was the importance of the participant’s involvement. The nature of the questions
and the response process was reviewed and the use of the audio-taping machine was explained. The participant was given an indication as to the anticipated length of the interview, which was projected to be around sixty minutes. The interviewee was asked if he or she had any questions at that time. At the conclusion of the interview, the interviewee was thanked for participation and arrangements were made for follow-up.

Each interview was taped and notes were transcribed based on the taped discussion. The transcribed notes were read and re-read in order to highlight concepts and determine common themes and ideas that came forward, as mentioned previously. The final draft of themes formed the basis of the information that was brought forward to address the research question. Follow-up included sharing the final transcript copies with the interviewees at the conclusion of the study to allow each person to review and, if necessary, edit the summary.

**ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The ethics process outlined and required by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education was followed in the completion of this study, beginning with the completion of the Ethics Review Protocol Submission Form. The ethics process required by the participating boards was also followed before any contact was made with the potential participants in the study. It was anticipated that the boards would require an abstract and detailed literature review for the study, along with a description of the research design, the instruments, the analyses that were to be performed and a copy of all materials to be used in the study. These were provided upon request.

An informed consent form was included for signature with the cover letter that was sent out to participants. A sample Informed Consent Letter has been included in Appendix 2. If requested, a copy of the study proposal was also sent. The study would in no way interfere with the rights of the participants and they were at no risk through their participation.

Potential participants in the study were contacted through their gatekeepers – senior administration at the board level – to determine their interest in participating in the study. In all instances, permission was obtained in order for the interviews to take place. Participants were made aware that participation in the study was completely voluntary and that they could decline to answer specific questions in the study if they so desired. They were also made aware that they could withdraw entirely from the study at any time.

Prior to any public sharing of the research, the transcripts used in the analysis were shared with the participants to gain their consent and to address any concerns. The participants
were made aware that confidentiality would be maintained and their anonymity would be guaranteed, to the degree that this was possible, throughout the process. A numerical code was used in place of the participant’s name and the list of codes and names was saved in a file on a password protected computer and separate from the interview transcripts to ensure anonymity. Each participant will receive a copy of the final paper upon completion. The participants were made aware that the tapes from the interviews will be kept in a locked cabinet at the researcher’s residence for two years and then destroyed.
CHAPTER FIVE – SAFE SCHOOLS’ POLICY – THE STORIES OF A RURAL AND A COMPOSITE BOARD

INTRODUCTION

Composite Public Board and Rural Catholic Board are very similar in size, with each board covering an area almost 1.5 times the size of Prince Edward Island. At present, Composite Public has almost four times the number of students found in Rural Catholic. Composite Public has a total of 11 secondary schools, six of which are found within a city of approximately 120,000. Rural Catholic has two secondary schools, each found in one of the two larger towns within the board.

From 2008 until 2012, Composite Public Board’s success rate on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test for all students writing ranged from 79 to 83 percent. During that same period, between 78 and 86 percent of the Grade 10 students who were completing the test in the Rural Catholic Board were successful. In terms of success on the Grade 9 Mathematics EQAO Test, between 37 and 53 percent of the Applied Level students in the Composite Board were successful over the five year period, while between 72 and 85 percent of the Academic Level students experienced success. In Rural Catholic, the range for Applied Level students extended from 33 to 75 percent, while Academic Level students had a range extending from 60 to 82 percent (EQAO, 2013).

In order to get an idea of the profile of the populations from which the two school boards drew their students, data was taken from the Statistics Canada website. The information was based on the National Household Survey from 2011. Since it was impossible to access data that accurately reflected the entire board region in each instance, the largest community in each board was chosen and the data for the communities were examined.

In Composite Public, the only city within the board contained six of the board’s eleven secondary schools. As such, data about the city’s population provided the most accurate indication of the socio-economic and cultural profile of the student population within the board. The larger of the two towns in Rural Catholic was home to one of the two secondary schools in the board and, as a result, it was felt that Statistics Canada information about this town’s population would provide the most accurate indication of the student profile of the board. The information about the two selected boards is summarized in the table on the following page.
Table 2 – Sample Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Composite Public</th>
<th>Rural Catholic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible Minority</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Income</td>
<td>$41,056</td>
<td>$34,371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Education</td>
<td>14.75%</td>
<td>30.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Sec. Ed.</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Composite’s city, 13 percent of the population were defined as immigrants. The largest group of immigrants came from Europe, of which almost half hailed from the United Kingdom, followed by Portugal, Germany and the Netherlands. The second largest group of immigrants, half the number that were of European descent, came from Asia. Seven percent of the city’s population was comprised of visible minorities and approximately 5 percent more were of aboriginal descent. The unemployment rate at the time of the survey was 8.4 percent with an average income of just over $41000 annually. Forty-three percent of the population between the ages of 25 and 64 had post-secondary education. Almost 15 percent of the population had a high school diploma and 8.6 percent had no educational certificate (Statistics Canada, 2013).

In Rural’s largest town, 4.7 percent of the population was defined as immigrants with one third coming from the United Kingdom and one quarter coming from Asia. The visible minority comprised 2.6 percent of the population and almost 10 percent of the town’s numbers were of Aboriginal descent. The unemployment rate for the period of the survey was 7.3 percent and the average income was approximately $34400. Fifty-three percent of the town’s population between the ages of 25 and 64 had post-secondary education. Thirty percent had a high school diploma and 16 percent had no educational certificate (Statistics Canada, 2013).

As indicated in the methodology of this thesis paper, all transcripts were reviewed and text was analyzed for common themes and trends, as well as discrepancies. These themes and discrepancies were highlighted and explored further as the total picture provided by all key informants was revealed in the findings that follow.

Participants in the study were asked to describe the student profile within their respective
boards to provide some background about the board. Some of the key points that were highlighted by Rural Catholic representatives, in terms of the student profile within the board included:

- We have an aboriginal population, particularly at our larger high school. There’d be a fair gender representation, pretty equal. Poverty is definitely an issue, low socio-economic here … poorest community, poorest county in Ontario … twenty-five percent of our kids in poverty here (director)
- A poor county in Ontario … I guess it’s diverse (trustee)
- In terms of public testing like EQAO ….. we do fairly well ….. institutes like the Fraser Institute ….. would say that relative to how the schools should be performing, we tend to do a little better than the other, the socio-economic data would indicate (superintendent)
- It’s urban and rural as well. Some kids are coming from tiny schools into a much larger high school and then some kids who’ve been living in the city going to a larger school. It’s kind of a collision of cultures sometimes. (safe schools coordinator)
- I would say schools are rural. Some of them can be very isolated. We have high poverty and high unemployment in the area. Also we are a military community … with information that I garnered from the Tell Them From Me survey, that shone a spotlight on increased levels of anxiety, more so than kids who are from non-military families (retired safe schools coordinator)
- We have students who are coming from higher income families but a larger percentage would come from lower income families …. It’s an economically diverse population …… Fairly homogeneous (culturally). We do have an aboriginal population within the building but with the exception of that it’s fairly homogeneous (high school principal)
- Very homogeneous … we do have a significant First Nations population in some of our schools … economically challenged ….. a lot of split families … strong connection to the church … diverse needs ….. Distance is a big factor for a lot of our schools in getting access to services (elementary principal)
- Because we’re very rural I think we would have different scenarios or issues as opposed to an urban centre (elementary principal)

Poverty and unemployment were cited by more than half of the Rural Catholic participants as being conditions that were prevalent in the board. The Aboriginal population was mentioned by half of those interviewed as being a significant aspect of the student profile. Urban/rural diversity was a thread that ran throughout the comments. While one person commented that the student profile was culturally homogeneous, another commented on the occasional “collision of cultures” that could be found in the towns within the board. The statement appeared to refer to the differences in the student profile of youth who came from the town versus those who came from more rural locations into town to attend high school. Certainly, the rural, isolated experience and large distances that some had to travel to access services followed a similar vein. The statement made by the retired safe schools coordinator about anxiety among the children
from military families was a unique perspective not mentioned by others but worth consideration, given the responses coming from the School Climate Survey.

In describing the student population, all of the participants in the Composite board spoke of the diversity, emphasizing the different profiles that could be found in the rural locations compared to the city schools. Their specific comments included:

- Geographically quite diverse in the sense that we have one significant urban area as well as then a couple of other smaller big towns …. We’re geographically quite large, and so as a result we have a concentrated urban population but we also then have quite a range of rural schools in some of our more outlying areas … there certainly is a great deal of socio-economic diversity within each of our schools, but also then some of our communities would have significantly lower SES than some of our other school communities …. There’s a whole range of racial as well as religious diversity. I would also suggest there’s some language diversity that is in the mix too …. I think diversity would be primarily concentrated in the urban area in our larger centre (safe schools principal)
- Our school board is pretty varied. It’s a mixture of urban and rural areas. We’ve got a really diverse mixture of economic backgrounds, social backgrounds (trustee)
- It’s pretty unique and diverse … some students that we deal with who are definitely lower economical class, struggling in those areas but then we also have some who are driving big fancy cars that their parents have for them (student support counsellor)
- (Student profile) varies from school to school … kids that live in the town … a huge number of students from the farming community, too, that have to travel in on a bus over an hour to get to school …. There’s socio-economic diversity within that but there’s also some cultural diversity as well. It makes for a very rich community. (principal)
- It’s rural and it’s city, it’s a real mix of both ..... the profile of the student, it feels like a composite board. Like there are students with all needs. There are probably, or statistically, what I understand to be a higher percentage of students with special education needs (principal)

The diversity of students’ educational pathways was commented on by some of the participants in Composite Public. Declining enrolment and the impact of reduced numbers was also mentioned, as was the feeling that the board had a higher percentage of identified students than the provincial norm.

Responses to the interview questions given by participants from Rural Catholic Board and Composite Public Board provided a wealth of information about the implementation, as well as some information about the mobilization, of Ministry policies related to board suspension and expulsion programs. Some commonality could be found in many of the responses that came from within each of the two boards. Similarities were also apparent in some of the responses that were
provided by participants across the two boards. Many of the common points came to be used as themes that are discussed in the analysis of data which is carried out in the summary of findings in Chapter Six.

Many differences were also apparent in the responses that were provided by participants within and across the two boards. In some instances, differences found within boards could be attributed to the different perspective or focus of the person answering the questions. In other instances, differences were found to be due to the level of knowledge that the interviewee possessed about the topic of the question. Differences between the two boards in responses could be attributed to the difference in perspective or knowledge, as was sometimes true within boards. The differences could also, however, provide evidence of differences that actually existed in the implementation of policy that had taken place in the two boards. The significance of the latter is looked at more closely in the summary and conclusions of this thesis.

POLICY ACTORS

The views of policy actors about the clientele for their programs, in this case the understanding that board personnel had about the students with whom they worked, was a key factor in implementation. When the student profile of the students involved in the suspension and expulsion programs was described in the interviews, some definite patterns began to emerge. The profile of the ‘average’ program participant in Rural Catholic was quite consistent as reported by the interview participants.

- Boys. Kids that already have issues, they’ve got problems, they don’t have the supports at home already … this stuff’s been building over a number of years. Probably, if we trend it back we’d see some suspensions in elementary school (director)
- It’s mostly secondary, mostly male, from lower socio-economic areas (trustee)
- We’ll have 10 or 20 suspensions in a session with the trustees monthly and 18 are boys … it’s generally boys, related to substance abuse, sometimes selling drugs. Violent incidents, fighting over something …. I don’t have any hard data to back this up, but I would bet that the highest percentage of these are from a lower socio-economic background (superintendent)
- Most of the kids under suspension fall into two categories: one is drug-related and the other is school violence … I find that poverty plays a major role in a lot of our students and it’s the ripple effect … His mom might have some medical issues herself or dad is out of work, not a lot of connections for the student. They seem very disengaged at home as well as at school. So it’s kind of like the blind leading the blind. The parent needs a tremendous amount of assistance. Most of the suspensions in our board would be male. I want to say grade 10 and 11, males in grade 10 or 11 and it’s either violence or drugs.
(retired safe schools coordinator)

- We draw quite a bit of students from both populations (high and low SES) … more male … actually grade 10 seems to be a big year for us … definitely in the last two years there’s been more grade 9 and 10’s who have been receiving long terms suspensions versus 11’s and 12’s (high school principal)

- Addictions is a big factor … addictions and substance issues. And attendance is also an issue. And mental health is a variable that comes into play. So all these things compound. Higher number of males accessing although it’s my bias that I’m seeing that start to turn. I’m feeling we’re at a bit of a tipping point with our girls (elementary principal)

- A lot of males, certainly at the elementary. A lot of disenfranchised parents, too. Like there’s not a lot of home support ….. from my short experience at high school, I would say it tended to be male. I find that females tended to have a lot of peer issues that linger … the groups I dealt with, a lot of grade 9/10 (elementary principal)

In Composite Public, the similarities in responses from one interview participant to the next were not quite as obvious, but some common elements did appear in the descriptions that were provided by those interviewed.

- Some of those students are certainly our most at-risk students by a whole range of indicators, whether it’s in terms of their socio-economic status or whether it’s the different trauma or family issues that they may have had historically … anger management, their resiliency, are areas of concern. Conflict resolution, problem solving, as well, as I suppose, another factor involved with them, as I mentioned, was drug use as well ….. most of the students there are secondary …. Most of them are between grades 9 and 11 … more males that are in the program than females ….. they have a whole range of diversity of needs and a lot of that is based upon their own personal circumstances and background experiences …. Most of them are successful in an intensive, closely supervised, low student/teacher ratio kind of environment – most of the students have gotten into difficulties during unstructured time ….. more of the students are lower SES, absolutely but that’s ….. there are always exceptions (safe schools principal)

- Most of the kids that we see have got underlying mental health problems or they’ve gotten into drugs … sometimes even their socio-economic background … or they’ve had a terrible home setting … and they haven’t really had any stability. It’s kind of diverse that way. But I would say that most of the kids we see are mental health problems (trustee)

- No definitely not (any pattern). We definitely have some of the inner city ….. a lot of unemployment, but then we also get students who more or less live completely rural .. which is a struggle because some of these students don’t venture into cities or don’t want to leave their own area, so we will go out and meet with them somewhere near their home ….. I guess it’s diverse … Definitely the city students I would say are quite similar with some of the needs they need, but then when you get rural it can be completely different … definitely with more males … when a female comes there’s usually two or three females that are getting in trouble at the same time with the same situation. I would guess more grade 9 and 10. We do get some, obviously, the seniors, but a lot of them aren’t so serious (student support counsellor)
• I would say that every situation is different … you get students with significant mental health challenges, as well as diverse behavioural needs (principal)
• They tend to have a learning difficulty is what we’ve noticed … and often communication. I’ve found, that the males it would be substance concerns for students (principal)

In both boards, the participants overwhelmingly agreed that the students in the programs were, for the most part, male. Feelings were mixed as to the grades that were most likely to be involved in the programs, with different participants citing Grades 8, 9, 10, or 11 as being the key grades. All of the participants who provided an indication of grade involvement, however, felt that Grade 10 was one of the grades in which suspensions and expulsions were most prevalent. One principal, though, wondered “Are the older students better at ensuring that they’re not bringing things on campus, they’re a little more savvy, whereas the younger ones are just the ones we are catching?” In both boards, while female involvement in the program was relatively low, female suspensions tended to involve a group of students who had committed a Code of Conduct violation, usually connected to a relationship issue, together. One participant from Rural Catholic, however, felt that this situation was starting to change and she anticipated an increase in the number of female suspended students in future.

In Rural Catholic, the largest portion of participants in the interview felt that the students in the program had issues with substance abuse, either using themselves or engaging in trafficking, or both. One participant suggested that recidivism was highest in those who engaged in substance abuse related infractions. These perceptions regarding the significant impact of drugs among the suspended youth can be seen to have some connection to the program focus in the area of substance abuse counselling in the comments that interview participants make about supports that are being put into place for the programs.

Some of the interview participants felt that a significant number of students had engaged in violent actions. Poverty was also felt to play a major role in the lives of suspended students, but at least one person interviewed felt that poverty was not a good predictor, since students in the program came from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Mental health and family issues were also mentioned as contributing factors.

Mental health, anger management, conflict resolution and related issues were felt by the majority of the Composite Board group to be key aspects of the suspended and expelled students’ profiles. Drug issues were also seen to be significant by the majority. The learning environment needs and learning styles of the students were seen by some to be at odds with
practices in a traditional school environment. As can be seen from the comments, the Safe Schools principal suggested that the students in the program, as a general rule, learned best in a small, structured location with a low pupil to teacher ratio which made the program an ideal environment for the students to meet their academic goals. Traumatic experiences, family issues and socioeconomic status were cited by a small number as being part of the typical suspended or expelled student profile. These areas of concern would help to explain the emphasis that was placed on having effective support available for the non-academic component of the students’ program in one central location, where it could be easily accessed by all students participating there. Given the broad range of non-academic needs that was cited by interview participants – mental health, management of anger, substance abuse, and dealing with trauma – having all support agencies and personnel located on site with the program students certainly made sense.

**Policy Actors during Mobilization**

The impact of stakeholder consultations on policy actors was less important to the interview participants than their views of the student clientele. They were concerned about who was consulted, but the consultations did not seem to change their mind about implementation. Those interview participants who held positions in senior administration in Rural Catholic seemed to be more certain as to which stakeholders were involved in the policy mobilization process than their counterparts within the schools. As a result, the director, superintendent and trustee all provided a fairly detailed list of those who were involved in the consultations that took place.

- We didn’t used to do as wide consultations, but there’s been some pressure from the government even to do that, so certainly with the Safe Schools’ revisions there was a lot of consultation. Probably more than we’ve had with other policies (director)
- The Safe Schools Committee, and that committee includes staff, a union representative, a trustee representative, and I believe there’s two principals, a Spec. Ed. representative, and a superintendent and the chair of the PIC (Parent Involvement Committee) (trustee)
- We had one of our lawyers work on ensuring the policies matched the provincial requirements. We established a Safe and Caring Schools Committee and that committee included our union reps, secretaries and EA’s (representatives). We had a trustee rep. We had a Special Education rep. We had a vice principal secondary and a principal elementary. It seems to me we had a parent on the committee at the time as well …… there was a deadline to have the policy in place, so February 1st, ’08 we had draft policies ready to go, we did our consultation after, and then the final policies were approved probably in June of that year (superintendent)
The principals and coordinator in Rural Catholic indicated the people who they thought had participated in the mobilization process, but they were not as certain about the complete list as interviewees at the board were.

- The only people that dealt with that would have been the director and superintendent. Maybe they garnered some input from principals (retired safe schools coordinator)
- Superintendent, who’s also our lead safe schools person ….. spearheaded …. chaired the committee that got those in place … our safe schools coordinator at the time …. I believe she played a role ….. both principals played a role in the process and play an active role in working closely with the safe schools teacher (coordinator) ….. but as far as the implementation or how the board was going to implement this policy, there wasn’t a great role to be played at the time (high school principal)
- Our board seems to have a fairly close relationship with its lawyer ….. and I think when policies come down from the Ministry they collect them and look at them but then hand them over to (the lawyer) for interpretation …. (who) does a lot of our policy writing on his own. I think he gathers ideas from senior admin but in general he makes sure our policies meet the policies or the Ministry guidelines. I think there was some input from trustees, from the Parent Involvement Committee as well and perhaps from SEAC (Special Education Advisory Committee) too (elementary principal)
- The superintendent would have been … usually they choose some committees, principals to sit on …. I’m assuming that there was some principal input. And that then it was perhaps passed by trustees. Whether they had student input and things of that nature, I don’t know (elementary principal)

The Safe Schools principal for Composite Public described a similar process to that outlined by the Catholic board superintendent in which his predecessor coordinated “a number of consultation committees that included a broad range of stakeholders, both internal in terms of the board personnel, as well as external community-based program providers.” The internal team included school administrators, a trustee, and teacher representatives from the elementary and secondary panels. The external team involved representatives from several community-based programs that would be linked with the suspension and expulsion programs.

As with Rural Catholic, many of the Composite Board participants, outside of the Safe Schools principal, were not completely certain as to who was involved in providing input in the mobilization phase before the policy moved from theory to practice.

- We usually have a consultation panel made up of trustees, internal administration and that sort of thing, but also in regards to this we would have had other partnerships, agencies, Youth Diversion, that sort of thing (trustee)
- This is one I’m not positive of … I’m guessing it was people from the board and then others from Youth Diversion (student support counsellor)
- My recollection when it came in was that principals, elementary and secondary, as
well as superintendents here at the board and trustees, had input into the programming (principal)

- The Ministry certainly provides the PPM’s and then the board drafts policy. As vice principal I felt that I had input in seeing the policy ….. to me, if felt mostly that it was provided …. by the board from the Ministry ….. when board drafts policy, it would come from the Safe Schools principal (principal)

While not completely sure about the composition of the consultation teams, most of the interview participants were able to accurately identify a number of the people or groups who provided input. Participants varied in their knowledge of what the input might have been from each group. They also had different opinions as to the value of the input that was provided by various stakeholders. Many members of the Rural Catholic delegation mentioned the Safe Schools committee and specifically mentioned superintendent and trustee input. One indicated that the initial stage at the board level was dealt with primarily by the director and superintendent with, perhaps, some input by principals. Some knew of the involvement of the board lawyer in the preparations and thought that the Safe Schools coordinator, who is a teacher rather than a principal, had been involved. Some others also felt that school principals would have had input.

In Composite Board, most of the school principals and support staff felt that superintendents and school administrators, including the Safe Schools principal, had been involved, along with trustees. They also mentioned, by name, several of the community-based programs that they felt had provided input, including the police and various health care providers. One participant thought that a parent representative had been involved in the process. Another commented that, because of the many versions of Safe Schools’ policy that had been introduced, it was “hard to remember exactly who gave input on which part and when.”

Several of the interview participants from both boards had suggestions as to the individuals and groups who could provide valuable input into the implementation of policy. Perhaps not surprisingly, a large number of the potential policy actors that were suggested can be found on the lists of the groups suggested by the Ministry in Policy/Program Memorandums 141 and 142. Community partners and representatives from social service agencies were suggested for the consultation process and subsequent reviews in the original and updated forms of the policies, as were students and members of Aboriginal communities. Mental health workers were added to the list when the revised policy was circulated in 2012. Many of the additions suggested by interview participants connected directly to the needs outlined in the second section of the interview related to conditions.

In Rural Catholic the majority suggested, using a variety of examples, that the front line
groups that worked directly with students should have been included in the consultation process and subsequently in policy implementation.

Aboriginal representation was highlighted by Rural Catholic’s senior administration:

- We have an aboriginal trustee, so they would get a chance to see the policy …. It would be at the final stages, it wouldn’t be in the consultation process (director)
- Someone from First Nations probably could have been included (trustee)
- I jotted down here aboriginal representation (superintendent)

School administrators in Rural Catholic were also seen to be stakeholders that should have been involved in the process:

- Principals and vice principals of each of the schools …. very important to have …. principals at the table (retired safe schools coordinator)
- So I think because we’re on the ground it would be good to involve the principals (elementary principal)
- Certainly would have had a representation from our secondary and our elementary panel, because to me they experience different scenarios (elementary principal)

Students were considered by some in Rural Catholic to be important stakeholders who should have been consulted:

- A student rep. I’m not aware of any plan, now (to include them in subsequent stages) (trustee)
- Student trustees …. The students do have some voice in or some awareness of the fact that this is happening (safe schools coordinator)
- It might be good to have a student voice. Sometimes, though, I wonder the student voice, do we get the student voice of the, quote unquote, well behaved kids versus the actual group that we need to hear from that’s kind of more affected by safe schools? (elementary principal)

The other stakeholders suggested by Rural Catholic participants were various individuals and groups who had direct contact with the students:

- What about family and child services or (mental health), those kind of other ancillary groups? (director)
- Police services (superintendent)
- If we take a look at the make-up of students that are suspended or expelled, especially in the high schools, we need to have student services, and by that I mean guidance counsellors, special education people, any of the support workers that come into our schools (retired safe schools coordinator)
- School support counsellors or representation from that particular group … a nurse
for mental health ….. Parent input I think would be interesting, but again the tricky part would be which parents. (elementary principal)

In the Composite Board, front line workers of various types formed the largest group of representatives that were felt to be missing from the initial consultation. Included in the suggested additions were many representatives from groups in the community at large. While this had not been part of the original directive from the Ministry Safe Schools Action Team, it was a key change that was apparent in the second recommendation regarding consultation that took place prior to the 2008 revisions. The practice was also consistent with that followed in the review of other protocols connected to Safe Schools, such as the Local Board/Police Protocol and the Violence, Threat, Risk Assessment Protocol also referred to as VTRA.

- Different groups that I don’t think existed at that time or we didn’t have, you know, a high range of awareness of them…… a (military) base in the area, and so that group wasn’t included initially but that would be group that we would include now as part of the ongoing process. Our range of partners around aboriginal education have expanded dramatically in the last five or six years and so certainly there would be greater engagement with that community (safe schools principal)
- I don’t know if vice principals were included and I would say that that is an important group …. because it ends up they’re doing a lot of the paperwork ….. I don’t know about the representation from the rural communities at that point in time …. I don’t know (if there is a plan to include in subsequent stages). I think it’s almost in a constant review (with the safe schools principal) and he’s very open to ideas (principal)
- I wonder …. If there could be more consultation around expelled students who have so many barriers and have other agencies involved and their lives so complicated, what do we do for those students? (principal)

Most of the participants in the two boards did not know whether there was a plan to include other stakeholders in subsequent reviews but the comments of interest in some of the groups that had been missed suggested that they might consider this involvement in future.

When one considers the list of policy actors involved in policy mobilization in each of the boards and compares these lists to the list of consultation participants put forward by the Ministry, it is apparent that many of the suggested groups were not at the table when the policy plan was created at the board level. In fact, many of the groups that are suggested for future involvement in the process were suggested by the Ministry from the outset of program mobilization. Aboriginal representatives, suggested by senior administration and the trustee in Rural Catholic, would be one example of a group that had been suggested by the Ministry. Students, suggested by the Rural Catholic coordinator and principals, were also included in the initial directive. Mental health workers, raised by the Rural Catholic director, were added as
possible participants in the policy revision made in 2012.

In Composite Board, front line workers were cited as being absent from the initial consultations. While not mentioned specifically, this group could be equated with the community partners and social service agencies that were suggested by the Ministry in 2008 and the mental health representatives that were added to the list in the 2012 policy revision. As the Safe Schools principal suggests, some of the groups were being added as they became more significant in their impact on board functioning. For example, he describes in his comments the fact that involvement of Aboriginal partners has greatly expanded over the past five or six years.

While not having a direct impact on policy mobilization, then, the suggestions made by those interviewed as to who should have been included in the consultation process would seem to demonstrate the level of insight that interview participants had regarding the policies. As the situation currently stands, one can only speculate on the impact that the actors who were absent from the consultation table might have had on the process if they had been present at the table.

Policy Actors during Implementation

When policies regarding the suspension and expulsion programs moved from the planning stage into the implementation stage, there was a slight shift in the policy actors who were found to play a major role in the process. These actors were responsible for taking the policy, as written by the Ministry and interpreted at the Board level, and putting it into action within the board itself. These were the individuals who determined what the programs would look like at the local level, through their approaches to implementation.

In Rural Catholic, the interview participants were nearly unanimous in declaring the Safe Schools coordinator, a teacher with the responsibility for overseeing the suspension and expulsion programs, as the key actor responsible for implementation of these specific safe schools policies. According to the descriptions of the interview participants, the coordinator’s role involved overseeing policy implementation and also working directly with the students in the program and their family members. While the position seemed to change slightly with the appointment of a new person to the role in the past year, given the change in strengths and experience of the new person in the role, the direct connection with the student and family appeared to remain consistent.
- The safe schools coordinator really is the program, so you want to hire carefully …. Spec. Ed. background, she’s been a communication disorder facilitator, she recently was a student work study teacher, she spent a lot of time working with some of our more at-risk kids, so she has a real appreciation …. It’s not really a policy-focused role …. There isn’t one set linear way to go about dealing with (the suspended youth) (superintendent)
- Safe schools teacher (coordinator) who implements our long-term educational programs and plans for kids who are on long-term suspension (high school principal)
- Having a key person …. a safe schools coordinator contacting the families and regular classroom teachers to ensure that work is being provided, that they’re on track so that …. after the suspension that there’s a smooth transition (high school principal)
- We do have a safe schools coordinator ….. they put a tremendous number of miles on their vehicle having to address concerns at various schools (elementary principal)
- Safe schools coordinator … the position morphs along with the individual (who is appointed to the position) and the skill set that they come with. There’s no job description, I don’t think, written down anywhere; the role is going to morph …. because of the background of the person, but also because of the needs (elementary principal)
- Mainly the safe schools coordinator, and she of course liaises with teachers regularly and the administration staff and as well, of course, as external agencies and the parents (trustee)
- The safe schools coordinator will work with your teachers, with the alternate school teacher, to try to keep you connected with the school (superintendent)

The initial comment made by the Rural Catholic superintendent sums up the importance of the coordinator to the suspension program. As he suggests, the coordinator “is the program”. In hiring someone for the position, the board is looking for someone who is able to effectively work with at risk students, their families, teachers in the schools and at the Alternate program, and personnel who will be addressing students’ non-academic needs. The appropriate candidate, it would appear, must possess strong interpersonal skills in order to carry out the role as it is envisioned by those directing the board’s vision. Rural Catholic planners, using the flexibility that is provided in the Ministry’s memorandum regarding programming, have decided to make the coordinator position the cornerstone of their implementation process. As one elementary principal suggests, the flexibility extends to the role being able to “morph” with the needs of the students.

Participants in Rural Catholic listed other actors, including the superintendent, high school principals and a myriad of board personnel and supporters in the community as the other key contributors to the process of policy implementation. In most cases, the secondary actors who provided non-academic support did not work solely with the students in the program.
Instead, they were often connected with one of the two high schools in the board and, if students moved from a high school to the suspension program, the non-academic supporters spent a portion of their week working with the students at the program. The teacher at the Alternate program provided academic support for students who had been suspended as well as for those who had been directed to the alternate site for other reasons.

- Both (high school) principals …. play an active role (in implementation) (high school principal)
- Our superintendent …. who’s also our lead safe schools person …..spearheaded and implemented when the new PPM’s came out (high school principal);
- And so at both high schools we have an alternate site where we have a teacher staffed full-time … we often have them (the suspended students) at the alternate site. (high school principal)
- For every child you see with a long-term suspension, there’s hours and hours of work that’s been put into that from school personnel and with parents and with outside agencies (elementary principal)
- Addictions counsellor who comes to our building twice a week … he’ll be at the alternate school for an hour or two hours (if suspended students on his case load are there) (high school principal)
- We have quite a bit of services here at the school … two guidance counsellors, then we have two FCS (Family Child Services) workers that have their offices here in the (high school building … we have a relationship with …. mental health resources…. We have addiction treatment services …. We have a new relationship (with the children’s hospital); we have an addictions nurse who services kids with mental health needs (high school principal)
- Because we can’t do everything with the size of the board and the financial constraints and the geographical limitations, we really do partner with outside agencies (elementary principal)
- There are embedded workers from the …. local counselling agency … there are also Family and Child Services workers embedded in both of our high schools, so there is good conversation between services at the high school level …. In any long-term suspension, there’s many factors that come into play and many services that needed to meet their needs (elementary principal)
- When I first got here that addictions piece really seemed to be a big issue and a lot of the suspensions were coming because of the drug issue … at the time we didn’t have the ATS (addiction treatment services) counsellor on a permanent contract …. We’ve been able to advocate a lot by the data and by the suspension rates …. To increase that time from a half-day a week to two full days out of the week (in the high school). And he has a full …. unfortunately a full case load (high school principal)

The level of focus on the needs of suspended youth is a significant aspect of the comments made regarding the policy actors responsible for implementation of policy related to the non-academic needs in Rural Catholic. The needs are being met, according to the comments made about involvement of addiction counsellors, Family and Child Services workers and
mental health support. The focus of these actors, however, appears to be split between students in the program and students in the general population.

When asked about policy actors who should be included in the implementation process, the Rural Catholic participants suggested several key groups that had been initially omitted but who, in their estimation, could contribute significantly as the policy moved from theory to practice, from mobilization to implementation. As had been the case of the mobilization process, many of the groups put forward for consideration were the same as those suggested by the Ministry as being of value in monitoring, reviewing and evaluating the programs that were in place. The comments gleaned from the interviews provided some insight as to participants’ views on what could be lacking from the current mobilization and implementation practices. Since many of those responding were in a position to impact future revisions to practice, the comments made provided a hint of possible changes to implementation in future. Some brought up the importance of coordinating the involvement of the existing policy actors, so that their actions would be integrated.

- (Including the police) may be something to consider …. It’s not the policy so much as procedures that are focused on the policy …. What do you think about the policy? Does it capture everything we need to? (director)
- (In a high school) there’s a lot of professionals in the building, but I don’t think we meet enough to figure out the needs (retired safe schools coordinator)
- As the mental health issues ramp up, and I see violence, especially in our board, ramping up, very important to have the elementary principals ….. at that table (retired safe schools coordinator)
- I know I’ve advocated for meeting with principals to look at students on a case by case nature (retired safe schools coordinator)
- We look at maybe having a coordinator of services, you know, such as mental health, addiction, that sort of thing (trustee)

In outlining the key policy actors in the implementation stage in Composite Public, the interviewees felt that the key people involved in implementation were the service providers, both from the board and from the broader community. These individuals worked directly with the students where the suspension and expulsion programs were located and did not have the dual responsibility of working with both program and high school students, as did their Rural Catholic counterparts. It seemed that, while the Safe Schools principal played a key role in the program, his was more of an administrative position and, therefore, more closely aligned with policy mobilization, than his Rural Catholic counterpart. According to interview participants, however, the Safe Schools principal was accessible and open to suggestions made by program and school staff members. As such, he was involved in implementation as review and feedback were carried
out and revisions were made to the implementation process.

- (Student support counsellor) and then some of the YD (Youth Diversion) workers have been asked (student support counsellor)
- We have educational services personnel that are engaged with that (non-academic) …. usually they are the people who do network with the community services as well … we have what’s referred to as a student support counsellor that’s directly attached to the program. And that person, depending upon the needs of the particular young person, can certainly engage with a psychologist or with other educational services personnel who have expertise in a wide range of different areas, who will then provide the liaison with different community partners (safe school principal)
- We talk to the (sending) school, sometimes we can talk to the family doctors or … if they’re involved with CAS. So we’re trying to get to know them, where they’re coming from, what’s going on, if there’s any past trauma or if there’s stuff that’s never been dealt with or resolved. Because that’s usually the priority before the school piece (support)
- Did a good job in having some connections with some of the working agencies. We have a lot of connections in co-op, which I think is really big for kids to get that positive …. Pretty good connections within …. lots of different areas (student support worker)
- We did have a broad range of community-based program providers as well that were part of that discussion (safe school principal)
- We do have some flexibility around program provision in outlying areas through the use of an itinerant teacher (safe school principal)
- (The community partner) provide(s) two staff to the program that we have to liaise with them. That came directly out of the initial consultations … when we were developing the program; we also attach a teacher directly to it, and … we’ll provide some additional itinerant support either for geographic or for subject-based reasons; we do have internal supports through educational services, in terms of certainly some initial counselling and formation of the student action plan …. There’s liaising with other community-based partners, depending upon who’s already involved in the young person’s life, and then as well as additional partners that we would like to have engage with that young person (safe school principal)
- Law students actually do some pro bono work to help students fill out, for example, disability forms where they may need to access different services; we’re always looking for new partnerships and new service provision (safe school principal)
- At the Supervised Alternative Learning Program ….. there’s an EA to support them as well as a teacher (principal)
- We have pretty good relationships with some of the community partners and community people to connect the students with or try to get them support ….. Crown Attorney, Fire Department, Interval House (student support counsellor)
- My recollection when it came in was that principals, elementary and secondary, as well as superintendents here at the board and trustees, had input into the programming (principal)

The significance of one Composite Public participant’s comment about a “beautiful community of supports” in reference to the site of the program becomes apparent when the list of supports available is outlined by the interview participants above. Student support
counsellors, youth diversion workers, educational services personnel, cooperative education teachers, doctors, psychologists, university law students, and other community partners all come together to work with the students in the program. While the community partners would almost certainly have responsibilities beyond those carried out with the school board at the site, the fact that their involvement with students in the board would be limited to those in the program is worth noting. Coordination of partner involvement, which should reduce the possibilities of gaps and service overlap, has the potential to make the input of the various policy actors more effective than if the groups carried out their roles separately.

When asked to suggest other potential policy actors whose input would contribute significantly to the implementation process, the Safe Schools principal for Composite Public suggested that the students who had been involved in the programs should be consulted.

- The other information that we would like is more direct feedback from the students who are .... graduating from the program ..... completed the program, in terms of getting their feedback directly, but, failing that, also gathering some qualitative data from students as they’re leaving the program (safe schools principal)

The support counsellor felt that still more input from the community workers would be helpful in determining the process that should be followed during implementation. His rationale for this suggestion was that the individuals on the front lines would have a better understanding of the needs of this specific student population and the services that best matched those needs.

- Possibly some of the front line workers who are dealing with and just that could express some of the needs of some of these students and possible connection if some of these other people I guess who were implementing, knew of some of the connections or areas to turn to (student support counsellor)

The policy actors listed by interview participants in each of the two boards as having an impact on policy implementation were very similar, but the roles that they played in implementation were different. Most interviewees in Rural Catholic and Composite Public alike suggested that the key policy actors included board personnel such as teachers, educational teaching assistants, board psychologists, and student services staff members. They also included community-based workers connected with areas such as employment, mental health, addictions treatment and youth justice.

One main difference was in the role played by the central Safe Schools lead in each of the two boards. The flexibility provided in policy allowed individual boards to decide how best
to utilize the personnel attached to the programs. The Safe Schools principal in Composite Public largely played an administrative role, overseeing the operation of the program while leaving the direct contact with students to the personnel working with the program from the board and the community at large. The Safe Schools coordinators in Rural Catholic, both current and retired, worked directly with students and their families, alongside of the academic and non-academic support staff. Interpersonal skills and experience in working directly with at risk students were key aspects that were looked for in this person’s resume prior to hiring. As the superintendent commented, the role was not seen as a linear one or one working directly with policy mobilization, but one that was more ‘hands-on’ in nature. While Composite Public interview participants spoke of the leadership and advisory relationship between the Safe Schools principal and school and board staff, Rural Catholic participants added to this the connections that their coordinator made through visits to the homes and families of the students linked to the programs. Even the difference in board position of the Safe Schools leads, with one being a principal and the other a teacher, suggests a different view in the two boards as to the role of this key person in the program implementation process and other aspects of Safe Schools’ policy.

In Composite Public, the role carried out by the coordinator in Rural Catholic seemed to be carried out largely by actors, both board and community, who were directly attached to the suspension and expulsion programs. The Safe Schools principal oversaw the process, but did not work to the same degree with the students and their families directly. He did, however, play a key role in ensuring that mobilization and implementation practices were regularly reviewed and, if necessary, changed. While the distinction was a subtle one, it was noticeable in the frequency with which it was cited by those who were interviewed.

Another distinction involved the degree to which policy actors in each of the two boards were involved solely with Safe Schools’ policy implementation as it pertained to suspended and expelled youth. The policy actors who provided non-academic support in Rural Catholic had the responsibility for providing this support in the high schools as well as in the suspension program, thus splitting their focus and diluting the amount of attention that they could specifically pay to the suspended youth. These same policy actors in the Composite Public Board, meanwhile, were able to focus entirely on the students at the off-site location in which the suspension program was housed and on any suspended or expelled students who did not come to the central location for the program. Community partners worked with the students at
the program along with board personnel and, in fact, the facility itself was provided by one of these community partners.

Thus, while the policy actors who impacted policy implementation were similar in each of the boards, the contributions that they made to the programs were quite different. The approach in Rural Catholic allowed personnel to provide supports to students prior to suspension, perhaps preventing the need to suspend by addressing the problematic behaviour in a proactive manner and thus reducing the number of suspensions in the board. While providing support in the regular school setting as well, Composite Public intensified support at the suspension and expulsion programs with the aim of addressing needs there and, hopefully, reducing recidivism rates once suspended and expelled students returned to regular schools. The board appears to have settled on this approach as the best way that they can meet the objective set out by the Safe Schools Action Team, which stated that “programs should aim to re-integrate suspended and expelled students into the school community in a positive manner” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 14).

LOCAL CONDITIONS

The second set of questions in the interview addressed the local conditions and dealt with issues related to unique practices and pre-existing conditions within a school board that might have an impact on implementation of policy. Local conditions could involve aspects such as the physical layout of the board, board practices that existed or prevailing attitudes regarding Safe Schools’ issues. As the responses to the questions were analyzed, connections between the different facets of this factor became evident. Many of the answers that were provided regarding conditions that existed within the boards could be seen to be interwoven with the unique features of the programs, since these features were likely put into place in response to a specific need.

In Composite Public Board, students who were suspended for more than five days or expelled from school had the opportunity to attend a suspension/expulsion program located in a school building within the main city of the board. At this location, students were able to work with a teacher on the academic component of their program, completing coursework and taking part in cooperative education experiences. At the same location, supports were available for the non-academic portion of their programming. This could take the form of assistance in addressing anger management, mental health, addiction or other needs and the supports were provided by agencies from the community at large as well as board staff. If students were unable or unwilling
to travel to the central site, attempts were made to provide support closer to their home location through itinerant staff.

In Rural Catholic Board, students who were suspended for longer than five days and not permitted to be in their home school had an opportunity to attend the alternate learning program in one of the two larger towns in the board. This program serves a wide range of students who are experiencing difficulties in a regular school setting. A teacher works with the students in order to help them meet their academic needs. Support staff and community workers who are connected with each of the two high schools in the board are able to include students at these programs in their case loads, but no support staff members are assigned exclusively to the Alternate programs to help students meet their non-academic needs. Suspended students who chose not to participate at the alternate site could complete their program from home. The Safe Schools coordinator would meet with them to provide the academic work. Where possible, support with the non-academic component of the program is provided through the support workers who work in the high school setting.

It would seem at first glance that Composite Public Board was better able to meet the objectives that are set out for these types of programs than Rural Catholic. Through the provision of academic and non-academic supports that are focused entirely on the needs of the students taking part in the program, it would seem that Composite Board has succeeded in providing more intensive assistance for students than their Catholic Board counterparts. The reality is more complicated than this, however. Keeping in mind that Rural Catholic has consistently had a lower percentage of suspensions and expulsions than both Composite and the provincial average, the reduction in personnel dedicated solely to suspended and expelled youth may be offset by the lower numbers of students that require support. If, in fact, Rural Catholic has used supports proactively prior to suspension as policy permits, it could be said that their effectiveness equals or exceeds that of the Composite Board.

A major focus of conditions in Rural Catholic centred on the geographic challenges posed in trying to offer programs in such a physically large board with a relatively small student population. Almost all of the participants commented on this facet in one way or another. The large size of the board combined with a relatively small student population meant that there were very few options to choose from in serving the needs of students who had been suspended from one of the board’s two high schools. Realistically, students could not travel on a daily basis from the outer edges of the board to a single program site to access supports.
- One of the unique features is just our sheer size (high school principal)
- Geography is a limitation. Numbers are a limitation, too… So I think we try to find alternative solutions but sometimes our decisions around suspensions are affected by what services we can access (elementary principal)
- When you only have two high schools and you have to expel a student from a school, it’s not very practical – the drive, the distance, the transportation piece (director)
- Our high schools are forty minutes apart, and then there’s the whole bussing, so that (transfer of a student to another school) is very difficult to do. (retired safe schools coordinator)
- Being a rural board … when a student is suspended …. is simply sitting at home. The vastness of driving a student …. Where do you place these students? (retired safe schools coordinator)
- A lot of people can’t drive (to town) if they don’t have a vehicle, or then there’s a wait list (for access to services) of six months (elementary principal)
- In small communities … we could say, well, send the student to a library. Well, there’s nothing like that ….. where do we put them? (retired safe schools coordinator)
- We only have two schools and they (student trustees) represent each of those schools. So we’ve got to be careful when information is being shared about the various things that are happening in the school community. Historically we gave a lot more information and it created too much conversation sometimes. Because people know individuals; it’s a small community. (director)

Creative responses were sought in order to address the issues of a large geographic region containing a small population. These responses included personal visits by the Safe Schools coordinator to the homes of suspended youth in order to provide learning opportunities in the absence of proximal program sites and access to resources. As one participant commented, it was “a matter of having a key person, like I say, a Safe Schools coordinator, contacting the families and regular classroom teachers to ensure that work is being provided, that they’re staying on track.” This approach, combined with access to the Alternate program sites, was the method used in Rural Catholic to implement the suspension program policy.

Other creative responses involved having students who were suspended placed in isolation within another board building, working with an assigned teacher to complete their programming, since keeping the students in a school setting of some sort was considered to be essential. Unfortunately, in some instances creativity was not sufficient and it was necessary for students to switch to another school board, since realistic options for service within Rural Catholic did not exist, if they were no longer permitted to attend their home Catholic school.

Anonymity of students involved in the program was also difficult to achieve given that the board had only two high schools and a relatively small number of suspended students, as can be seen in the comment made by the director. A level of anonymity, especially in terms of
information shared with student trustees, was achieved by changing the format by which the suspension data was shared.

The absence of expulsions in the board was seen by a few of the interview participants as unique to the Rural Catholic approach and, in one instance, was cited as a response by educators to the knowledge that easy access to programming for expelled students did not exist. Legislation regarding suspensions required only that administrators consider suspending in response to certain student behaviours (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005), while also looking at other progressive discipline options. Given the number of suspensions assigned and the observations made by study participants, it would appear that administrators in Rural Catholic often chose to use alternatives to suspension in addressing student behavior issues. This is consistent with views that were expressed prior to the creation of the suspension and expulsion programs, in which it was suggested that “judgment could be used more often to reduce the number of suspensions and expulsions” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 14), by relying more heavily on proactive progressive discipline measures. Certainly, the fact that only about six long-term suspensions were meted out in the course of a year helped to narrow the focus of resources in the program to a smaller group of students.

- We’ve looked at our data and we have a very small portion of students who end up (suspended) but I wonder if sometimes that’s a function of the services that we can access. For instance, I know it’s going to be difficult for me to access programming for a kid on a long-term suspension, so as a principal would you be more inclined to do a four-day suspension instead of a ten-day suspension even though a ten-day suspension might be what’s more warranted in terms of getting intervention and getting help for the child and the safe school piece. (elementary principal)
- It’s extremely rare where the board actually ends up issuing an expulsion (high school principal)
- (There have been no expulsions) which I’m kind of happy to say (trustee)
- Safe Schools teams worked out some other unique ways to deal with those kids that probably shouldn’t be in a regular school setting (director)
- Sometimes we get a request from a parent …. Maybe we can and maybe we can’t (fulfill the request) .. so it’s not as clean sometimes in terms of what you write down as a step-by-step process (superintendent)
- We’ve got another one from high school right now where again there’s a parent happens to be at home most of the time, it just works out that way, and the homework is going back and forth. That wouldn’t be the case all the time, so it’s almost a case-by-case basis … I guess because of our size and because we don’t have the location, we have to be able to meet it that way (safe schools coordinator)
- I would visit the student (at home) every two days, as much as I can (retired safe schools coordinator)
- I have placed some of our high school kids at elementary schools so that they are not
simply sitting at home alone, and I think that’s very, very important (retired safe schools coordinator)

- You’re going to try to deal with it in-house as best you can until more qualified people either become available or come for a monthly visit (elementary principal)
- The only thing we’ve done is kids would actually have to change school boards and go to the public board. And that has happened. Parents have moved students just because they thought their son or daughter needed a fresh start. (retired safe schools coordinator)

A variety of alternatives to placement in a formal program are mentioned in the comments above. Front and centre, of course, one finds the practice of limiting the use of suspension as a response to extreme behaviour concerns. In addition, as the key person responding to student and family needs, the coordinator regularly makes visits to suspended students’ homes, so that a program can be followed there. The retired coordinator repeatedly emphasized that this approach is not ideal, since the student is home alone and isolated from student contact and staff contact for most of the suspension period. High school students have been placed in elementary schools and, where no other options are available, they have transferred to the co-terminus board. Distance to a central site and the likelihood that students will not travel to a program in town appears to have influenced the decision to operate support in this fashion. Given the fact that the board contains only two small towns and a large amount of rural territory, a high percentage of the student population in the board would be faced with the prospect of having to travel a significant distance to attend a program in town. The situation would be different for boards like Composite, in which over half of the student population resided within the city in which the program was located. As the Safe Schools principal for Composite commented, there were only “rare circumstances where there might be a student in a very outlying area” who needed the support of the program, despite the board size.

In the Rural Catholic board, while a range of responses was given regarding the meeting of needs, one particular thread seemed to weave through the answers that were provided. The common aspect to most of the answers was that they were connected to the interpersonal skills and relationships developed by key members of the team of people who worked with the youth who were involved in the program. It appears that this was a pre-existing practice (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990) since, historically, board personnel had relied on these interpersonal connections as a key means of addressing student misbehaviour issues. This practice became a central piece that was sought in the hiring of the Safe Schools coordinator when the position came into being, as is evident in the comments made by senior administration in the board.

Many Rural Catholic participants spoke of the good connection that had been developed
between Safe Schools Program personnel and the teachers and parents of the youth in the program, along with the good connection with the youth themselves. Other respondents from Rural Catholic highlighted the ability on the part of school staff and board staff to deal with the issues in-house before moving to use of the program.

- We look at having a good knowledge of the at-risk students as well (trustee)
- The non-academic part of it is another situation … it’s almost a case by case basis (safe schools coordinator)
- We need to do a lot of work with that person that was, and I’ll use the term ‘victim’, or the person that was harmed ….. you’re not just dealing with the kids that have been suspended, you’re dealing with their friends (retired safe schools coordinator)
- (Addictions counselors) formed a trusting relationship (with the students) and so they’re able to battle with their addictions in a way that’s not going to allow them to think these guys are out to get me (high school principal).
- There’s been a good connection with our teachers as far as those kids who are long terms suspensions …..after the suspension that there’s a smooth integration (high school principal)
- There’s a culture of forgiveness, there is a culture of doing the best you can for your children. (elementary principal)

Relationships and connections were common terms that were used to describe the unique conditions that existed in the form of the Alternate programs that were in place in the Rural Catholic board and were used to house suspended youth, in addition to other students who were at risk of failure or dropping out. In Rural Catholic, half of the participants alluded to the programs put in place, once the board lawyer had reviewed the Ministry expectations for policy.

- We’re able to find an educational plan that allows us to provide them an educational path without necessarily having the student expelled. And so at both high schools we have an alternate site where we have a teacher staffed full-time … we often have them (the suspended students) at the alternate site. And so there’s a chance for them be in blended learning programs or direct instruction down there with their teacher (high school principal)
- (Alternate school program is) tailored very much to the students (high school principal)
- What we try to do is get agreement from the student, from the family … to pick up the rest of your timetable at one of our alternative schools …. If we can do something e-learning wise (superintendent)
- Alternate school … it’s an off-site classroom … it’s been a combination of things (superintendent)
- If they had a long-term suspension where they had to be off campus, then they’re at home … then our safe schools coordinator would facilitate a transfer; we have other students who are on in-school suspensions, let’s say, so they’d work in one of our resource centres (high school principal)
- It (low suspensions) shows you that schools are dealing proactively with those kids…
because it’s (alternate school) small they get to know the kids by name and it helps them a little bit (director)

- (If we had more schools) could certainly say … your new location is X (when suspended) but we can’t do that. So we’re using the alternate school location so that he can get the credits he needs to finish (safe schools coordinator)
- We do have alternate school options that are connected to both high schools and are sometimes used when you get into lengthy suspensions (elementary principal)
- As far as suspensions, we encourage our students to attend one of the alternate sites (trustee)

Positive relationships were seen as an important feature of the Rural Catholic program in aspects beyond the Alternate program, as well. As mentioned above, the coordinator made personal contact with the students who were suspended, both in the home and at the off-site location in the Alternate program. Suspensions were dealt with on a case-by-case basis with the approach being determined by the needs of the individual. At the same time as a connection was being made with the student in the home, a rapport was being developed with the parent. In addition, according to one participant, a good relationship was built between senior administration and teachers, thus helping with the support that could be arranged for students.

Despite the positive comments that were made about the Alternate program, one principal in Rural Catholic still felt improvements were needed in order to ensure that it more effectively served the needs of suspended youth. The superintendent who was interviewed also conceded that the Alternate program did not always provide the ideal solution to prevailing conditions in the board.

- Sometimes the credit success rates of the students when they’re at the alternate school or alternate sites does drop …. Is that model still working for a student …… Is there a different more creative model to provide services for those at-risk kids, in a healthier environment … could it be more of a hub, a drop-in centre? (high school principal)
- We’ve had about twenty students enrolled (in the alternate school) but …. There’d be just five or six students there at a time (typically) attendance (is an issue), reaching out trying to get them to come in (high school principal)
- We struggle with that (placement in alternate school) because there are situations that come up when we know the student is not ready but there isn’t a clean option or another space to send them …. There are only so many spots you can (send them) … so one remains at the school, the other is a combination of home study and checking in every so often at the alternate school, and the third is to report to the alternate school site (superintendent)
- The alternate programs that we do offer, how do we make them more viable? (high school principal)

The elementary principals and the retired coordinator felt that more attention needed to
be paid to prevention and support from parents.

- I have some parents that are very disenfranchised about support services that I’m recommending, either from past experience in their own lives or what have you … what can those other groups do to help me buy in? (elementary principal)
- I really think we need to address resources for the 6 to 8 cohort … the whole preventative piece is huge. I think we start to see the cracks show in a number of our students in grade 2, grade 3, and our services are top heavy and are piled at secondary … we’re kind of missing those foundation pieces (elementary principal)
- We are fighting for services (for grade 6 to 8 students) (elementary principal)

Many similar points would appear again when necessary supports were discussed, since the suggested improvements could not easily be put into place without assistance in the form of funding, research or training.

The majority of the Composite Board team commented on the importance of the individualized Student Action Plan in seeking to address the specific needs of each student. Although the plan is a required component of the suspension and expulsion program, the interview participants seemed to feel that their level of attention to the plan details was something that did not necessarily exist everywhere. Related to this, most of those interviewed in the board saw an importance in connecting with the experts. Those who knew the student formed one group of key people – parent, doctors and anyone who knew of the student’s past history. Those who know how to deal with the issues faced by the student, such as a wide range of community-based service providers, were the other key experts who could help to appropriately address the student’s needs. Two-way communication was cited by one respondent to this question, with emphasis being placed on the need for feedback to the sending school, to allow support upon the student’s return. Two of the participants mentioned flexibility in the approach as being important, shying away from a ‘cookie cutter’ response to all students in the program.

- We do have some flexibility around program provision in outlying areas through the use of an itinerant teacher … there’s a very open door as far as community-based providers having access to students (safe schools principal)
- It’s been very targeted to individual needs (trustee)
- Trying to differentiate the service provisions for those young people so that we are getting to the specific needs that they have, as opposed to just providing some general form of non-academic kind of program to try to meet some nebulous needs (safe schools principal)
- Every student has their own individualized plan through the student action plan … we’re trying to get to know them, where they’re coming from, what’s going on, if there’s any past trauma or if there’s stuff that’s never been dealt with or resolved … family
dynamics or home dynamics can really have an impact on how these students are doing or what happens to the students … so we are constantly trying to keep up (student support counsellor)

- I think they do a great job and I have truly had students in all realms of the spectrum there. Where it falls short, to be frank, is the fact that I can’t get my kids there from (the next town over) … so just the absolute logistics of getting the students there is a barrier (principal)
- There’s attention to the non-academic supports, so it isn’t just about the academic program …. advocates that work with them when they’re having discussions and meetings … on an individual basis … and then we have partnerships …. we have support through our policies in terms of staff that will draw up those student action plans. So there are people beyond us just as a school admin team who are connected to the program and connected to the board and also have knowledge of these community agencies and can talk to parents with specifics to be able to set those up (principal)

Just as they were seen as important in meeting the needs of students in the program, positive relationships were cited as important as participants in Composite Board described important aspects of their program, especially when discussing the ‘experts’ who would be working with the students in the programs. Board-Community relationships were viewed as a major contributing factor to the effectiveness of the work being done with suspended and expelled youth. These relationships included connections that existed with community-service providers working with suspended and expelled youth, connections through meetings and communication with families, and connections between the directorate, the Safe Schools principal and the broader community – both the educational and general population.

- We have pretty good relationships with some of the community partners … we do outreach … trying to get them involved in the community whether it be through sports, getting them jobs, getting them supports (student support counsellor)
- The partnership with Youth Diversion is probably fairly unique … they’re in the same building first off so they’re in a community use type building …. You also have a pool of people in the community that have training related to working with youth so it’s again one of those unofficial partnerships where we might actually feed each other in knowledge-based employees. We also have the threat assessment program in our board (principal)
- We have a community partner that provides the space for the program …. The entire program and its establishment is a partnership at its core (safe schools principal)
- (The program location) is run by the Boys and Girls Club …. There are a whole range of different programs that operate there … our program is also a partnership with our co-terminus board and so they have students (in the program) as well (safe schools principal)
- We have pretty good relationships with some of the community partners and community people to connect the students with or try to get them support …. Crown Attorney, Fire Department, Interval House (student support counsellor)
- (With the employment centres) there’s a week of I guess planning and working with them, and then these students go out and get to work in the field and get paid minimum
wage and work all summer, hopefully keep them out of trouble and get some income for them to try to get ahead (student support counsellor)

- We’ve tried to implement … getting some of the students into what we would consider apprenticeships …. For some of the students struggling academically in the school… I would say yes, with some of them (we have been successful) (support)

- They did a good job in having connections with some of the working agencies. We have a lot of connections with co-op, which I think is really big for kids to get that positive … for some of the males, that they can go out and do some work and I guess be removed from all the drama, get some positives, get some skills in life … I think it’s going in a good direction in that sense with the co-ops and the jobs for some of these students (student support counsellor)

- We did have a lot of community input around the different needs of the general population that might end up at risk and in a suspension and expulsion program (safe schools principal)

- Educational services personnel …. They are the people who do network with the community services as well (safe schools principal)

- The entire program and its establishment is a partnership at its core (safe schools principal)

- Different organizations have space under the same roof … you also have a pool of people in the community that have training related to working with youth and so it’s again one of those unofficial partnerships where we might actually feed each other in knowledge-based employees (principal)

- There’s attention to the non-academic supports so it isn’t just about the academic program … individual basis … discussions with parents about these are the … supports that are available in the community (principal)

- We’re fairly unique in that our suspension and expulsion program is not attached to an alternative education principal and school and program ….. so I guess maybe further understanding of that as we develop our alternative model, because we are in a rebuild of that right now, potentially (principal)

One can see from the comments by Composite Board personnel that, while relationships were an important aspect of the programs that had an impact on implementation, the focus of the relationships was slightly different from that found in Rural Catholic. While, like their Catholic counterparts, Composite Board participants commented on the good connections to students and families, most of their relationship comments dealt with the interactions among the various groups who were working with the students. The focus, then, was more on the internal dynamic within the board organization and the community partners with whom the board worked rather than the connection to the family and student. It is possible that, due to the relative size of the board, the latter type of connection would have been difficult to establish at the level found in Rural Catholic.

Certainly, judging from the comments made by the interview participants, the interaction between board personnel and community partners was a valuable one, even if more personal
connections with families was not possible. As participants suggest, the relationships shaped the program that the board settled on in response to the Ministry memorandum. The choice was made to put most of the focus on creating a central program with board personnel and community partners working together to meet the academic and non-academic needs of the student population. In the “rare” case of a student who required support but could not make it to the program in the city, arrangements would be made for the supports to be sent to the student.

In Composite Public a feature about the program that presented some problems was again connected with the need to effectively serve a population that was spread over a large geographic area. While not an issue to the same degree as it was in Rural Catholic, it was still viewed as a concern, especially by administrators who worked in the rural schools. Effective service meant not only having to deal with the distance issue through outreach, but also to deal with cultural diversity in supporting students in both urban and rural locations. Some of the participants’ comments provided specific examples of the unique features of the program that posed some potential difficulties:

- The geography of the board sometimes is a bit of a challenge and so there are some rare circumstances where there might be a student in a very outlying area that we do need to program for a little bit differently in the sense of providing a program for them through an itinerant teacher, as opposed to bringing that student into a more conventional centralized program that we have in our large urban areas (safe schools principal)
- We try and cater it to the different types of kids that we have and the types of backgrounds that they have … in a rural area I know that we have on occasion had an itinerant teacher go to the school (trustee)
- There are many cases where we have provided transportation …. Initially when the program started, there was a great deal of reluctance to put students onto existing transportation to move them to the program if they were from an outlying area, but I think in terms of equity of access we have tried to adjust that ….. except in those rare circumstances where there is a significant safety risk to other students, we do provide transportation of one sort or another, and so students will be brought into our central program (safe schools principal)
- We also get students who more or less live completely rural….. which is a struggle because some of these students don’t venture into cities or don’t want to leave their own area, so we will go out and meet them somewhere near their home, hopefully, and try to get them connected with whatever it is they may be (student support counsellor)
- Travel north two hours, where it’s completely rural, they don’t venture into the city. So you’ve got a wide variety of that sort of area where we will go and do outreach or itinerant work for the students who are … you know, who can’t make it into the program in the city (support)
- Where it falls short, to be frank, is that fact that I can’t get my kids there from (the next
town); sometimes I find our expelled students are put on full-day co-op and work on some independent learning courses on their own; had the teacher come up one day a week to meet with the student who was working on ILC and getting some co-op…. There was no way he was making it into the city, it wasn’t going to happen where he lived; it might be every two weeks they send me a report on attendance, behaviour, how they’re doing on their behaviour goals as well (principal)

- We do have some flexibility around program provisions in outlying areas through the use of an itinerant teacher (safe schools principal)
- The one thing I’ve noticed is if a student doesn’t partake in the expulsion program, it’s very hard to get them back (principal)

As is evident through participants’ comments, connections existed between some of the features of the programs in the boards and the ways in which the needs of students in the programs were being met. The features were put in place largely to meet the unique needs of the students who were participating in the programs and reflected the board’s use of the flexibility available in the policy memorandum to modify the program to accommodate local program profiles. The same could be said about connections between obstacles that were described as unique to the boards and the areas for improvement that were described by study participants.

In Composite Board, while the distance issue posed some difficulty, the concern surrounding this was not sufficient to influence the board to make wholesale changes to the manner in which it offered its suspension and expulsion programs. In all instances where distance was a factor, transportation was offered in order to get the student to the program site in the city. This solution worked in most cases, but on the rare occasions in which it was necessary to meet with a suspended or expelled student off-site, the decision was made to have a teacher in an itinerant role carry out the contact. The majority of the focus, then, could remain on offering an effective and complete program, complete with academic and non-academic supports at one central site.

Relationships formed an important aspect of local conditions that existed in both the Rural Catholic and Composite Public Boards. Like the impact of policy actors mentioned previously, however, the nature of the conditions within each board led to a difference in how the relationships played out in the two locations. In Composite Public board, much of the focus of relationships was on the connections that were made once a student was suspended or expelled and became formally involved in the board programs, since most of the students who were suspended or expelled were able to access the central programs. In Rural Catholic, however, a large part of the relationship emphasis was placed on connecting with the student before he or
she was placed in the Alternate program, given the fact that many couldn’t or wouldn’t agree to attend the program at the central location. As many of the interview participants from Rural Catholic suggested, creative practices have often been used to avoid sending students to one of the two board Alternate programs in which the suspension programs were housed.

The difference in beliefs regarding access to the program and access to support services may well be one of the key reasons for the difference in the relatively low number of suspensions that were meted out in Rural Catholic, along with the virtual non-existence of expulsions within the board. People who are in a position to assign a suspension or recommend an expulsion realize that it will be difficult for a student removed from the school setting to access much-needed supports. By their own admission, at times they looked for alternatives to the use of a long-term suspension as a response to a behaviour that would normally warrant such a consequence.

Although a student can get assistance in dealing with an issue while attending one of the two high schools in the Rural Catholic board, these services are only sporadically available to students at the Alternate program and they are almost impossible to arrange for a student who remains at home during a suspension or expulsion. Added to this, some of the interview participants indicated that the Alternate program was not always able to provide the most effective support for suspended youth and a large number of suspended students chose not to access the services at the Alternate program but, instead, stayed at home.

It would appear from the comments, then, that principals in Rural Catholic look long and hard for alternatives to suspension and expulsion and only go this route as a last resort, given the concerns about distance to the program and the effectiveness of the alternative program in serving students’ needs as potentially key obstacles. Although access to a suspension program would only be available to a student who was suspended for more than five days, participant comments from Rural Catholic seem to indicate that overall suspensions in the board were lower. Perhaps the attitude of minimizing the use of lengthy suspensions had extended to the view on all suspensions within the board, creating a “culture of forgiveness” as one participant had phrased it. The relationships with staff members and community support personnel at the school level, in that situation, becomes increasingly important in addressing the needs of students who might be headed towards suspension, before matters get to that point.

In Composite Public, it appears that the principals, including the Safe Schools principal, feel that students’ academic and non-academic goals can be most effectively met through
participation in the suspension and expulsion programs in most instances. Many of the comments that point out the positive aspects of the programs seem to suggest that this is the case. In cases where distance may prevent access, itinerant support and transportation are provided to help overcome obstacles. While the latter response is not ideal, it appears that it continues to be used by the rural schools in the board, which make up less than half of the total number of secondary schools in Composite Public. As a result, principals do not appear to be hesitant to suspend or expel students when they feel that this approach is necessary in Composite Public, since they view this approach as the best way to access support services for youth struggling with Safe Schools’ issues.

SUPPORT

The third factor to be reported on from the interview process involved supports or resources for the suspension and expulsion programs. In some instances, the answers that were provided in the previous section connected with the answers to the questions that were found in this part of the interview.

The vast majority of Rural Catholic participants emphasized that the most valuable information about the programs had come from discussions with other boards in the province. This information had been used on a trial and error basis and, if it proved to be a good fit for the local program, it was adopted into the local protocol replacing or augmenting the existing practices. To a slightly lesser extent, the Ministry of Education was seen as a main source of information to inform the process at the local level. The Safe Schools superintendent and coordinator were also seen as key sources of information to assist in policy implementation, the assumption being that they had received research-based in-service that would allow them to effectively lead the implementation process. The former coordinator in Rural Catholic indicated that, in fact, she had done some research in the use of restorative practices and bullying prevention and intervention techniques. Interestingly, board data was often seen as a form of support to be used, despite the fact that in the literature review, this type of information is viewed as a pre-existing condition. The responses in this regard may have been due to the way in which the interview question was worded. Whatever the reasons, climate survey and suspension data provided some direction on policy implementation as those involved in implementation used this information to determine strengths and weaknesses of existing programs.
• (The lawyer) always samples other boards to see that we’re in alignment (director)
• I was simply called to a meeting to say could you share with our principals that new
safe schools’ legislation … a brief PowerPoint presentation …. It was just fly by the
seat of your pants and this is what’s happening in other boards …. The words they told
me, ‘we’re not really sure what this role will entail’; (I did my own) research into
looking at the restorative stuff and the whole bullying thing (safe schools coordinator)
• We would have our own internal data … would have the board data and then he
(superintendent) would have Ministry data (high school principal)
• (The board) rolled out a number of policies to us (in fall meeting), so it is
communicated to us very well … we also have incredible access to our SO’s …. Also
directly to the lawyer (elementary principal)

The overwhelming view of Rural Catholic participants was that the necessary information
was available, but there was little time to analyze it in order to see how it could be used to impact
policy implementation. Similarly, information could be gained from community agencies, but
time had to be taken to bring these groups together. Various participants suggested that
background information on warning signs and contributing factors would be helpful in allowing
the creation of more proactive responses. It seems from the comments that teachers and school
staff, who were the staff members working with students in the schools on a daily basis, did not
have this information which might help them flag areas of concern or utilize appropriate
responses when faced with concerns. This type of information, provided by experts in behaviour
management, mental health, and addictions, would be of value in the regular school setting.
Finally, principals suggested that it was important to look at research on the effectiveness of off-
site programs to see if improvements could be made in these areas.

• We don’t have a Research Officer (director)
• There aren’t dedicated people who have necessarily a chunk of time to sit down and
go over… internal data (superintendent)
• We need to look at the communities that we serve, so we need to gather those people in
our communities and they may not be people in education …. there’s police
involvement, there’s some child and family services, there’s some mental health issues.
And it would be grand that there would be a centralized spot where all of these agencies
would come together and we would have a discussion…. Because to me that’s
community; we’re all working together because they’re all our kids …. The bottom line
is meeting the needs of those students … And having some classroom teachers and the
key people, the ones that work in the schools with the high risk, from Student Services,
Guidance, Special Education, whatever each school has. And now we have the mental
health workers in schools, which we could have one in each school. (retired safe schools
coordinator)
• Need to look closely at the success rate of our kids who leave main campus and go to
the alternate school…. They’re not as successful as opposed to the kids who are able to
reintegrate into the building (high school principal)

- Data (from the regional meetings) was helpful. It isn’t something that’s been presented to the principals at a principals’ meeting. I think looking at the suspension and expulsion data along with the policies might help us have consistency with regard to implementation. I think we need to have some discussion about some of the inequities and some hesitancies with regard to longer suspensions. (elementary principal)

Conditions that were cited in the previous section were apparent again when the supports that were in place were described. In Rural Catholic, some of the respondents discussed community service providers who contributed support, in one way or another, to the completion of the non-academic component of the Student Action Plan. The groups included those agencies that were connected with the local Violence, Threat, Risk Assessment protocol, child and family support services, local police, and probation services.

- We would work with our mental health partner, military family resource centre …..research that we’ve been exposed to through (Violence, Threat, Risk Assessment), that’s been helpful (retired safe schools coordinator)
- Probationary services plays a big role; relationship with the police has been excellent – they put on a little in-service for us ….. resource officer.. he comes in and speaks to our students and comes in and puts on different seminars (high school principal)
- They will pull in the (mental health) workers, the addictions counsellors, the family and child services people if that suits the needs of the student; we have three what are called attendance counsellors but they have a myriad of roles; we have a very strong partnership with the (mental health) centre, a very strong partnership with family and child services.
  You do what you have to do. (elementary principal)

Money from these and other community services, through grants, and from Ministry funds to support specific initiatives were also cited by the Rural Catholic participants as being essential to support implementation of the suspension program policy.

- Grants and we have some flexibility to use them effectively for a project (director)
- Grants for student needs, a few associated pockets of money, school climate funds, so odds and ends like that (superintendent)

The position of Safe Schools principal was seen as a key support for the programs in Rural Catholic and for Safe Schools in general within the board.

- Mainly the safe schools coordinator and she of course liaises with teachers regularly and the administration staff and as well of course as external agencies and parents (trustee)
- We have a safe schools coordinator; there’s a willingness, if you have a really hard to serve student, for the board to kick in some home instruction hours (elementary principal)
The safe schools coordinator is to be looking after what the school is or how it’s going to be off-site and whatever they’ve decided that the plan is for that particular child (elementary principal)

In looking at the support that was still needed, the majority of respondents in Rural Catholic focused on the need for funding to address mental health and, to a lesser extent, addiction issues that were significant conditions faced by policy actors who were implementing the suspension program.

It’s a money issue … hopefully that (funding) will help with getting a mental health lead … because there’s always a component of mental health and addiction usually with these pieces (director)

Mental health and addictions …. Money through the grant for mental health. Some of our data is telling us we have high levels of anxiety in our schools and in our high school population. Which leads to other things, right? Home issues, depression issues, all of that, so the more that you have inter-ministerial things working cohesively, I think the better you meet the needs of those kids. Instead of just dumping it all on the education sector (safe schools coordinator)

In looking at other additional supports that might be helpful, Rural Catholic respondents focused on the need for a ‘hub’ or ‘drop-in centre’ at which academic and non-academic supports could be housed. This sounded very much like the community of supports that Composite Public already had in place and suggested a slight shift in support of students from the existing Alternate program for students in future who were suspended in Rural Catholic. Rather than sharing the non-academic support with the two secondary schools, the ‘hub’ would have its own team of non-academic support staff. Coordination of services, which could likely be accomplished best if all were housed together, was also mentioned.

We’ve had a lot of discussion in the last year and a half about the non-academic support, the addiction support, the mental health support, some of those things we are struggling with …. Not even necessarily that there’s a lack of service, but it’s coordinating the service and having it in one spot (superintendent)

I come back to the coordination of services ….. we do have a plan ….we’d like to see a youth hub where we would have our alternate school providing the academic stuff; you would have addictions research maybe as a part-time office there; you might have family and child services; you might have a youth worker of some sort…… Mental health nurse. ......The military family resource centre (superintendent)

One of the things I know they talked about was kind of developing a hub …. ideally kids can come and you have professionals there that are fully engaged with these young people…… we need to bring in all of these supporting agencies… there’s not that sharing (of info) (retired safe schools coordinator)
• One of our families (of schools) which is geographically quite limited, we need to find a way to bring services to them. So whether it’s a matter of creating a hub.. you know, there just needs to be an easier access because it is a fairly needy population, certainly economically, and they are just so far from services (elementary principal)

• We look at maybe having a coordinator of services, such as mental health, addiction, that sort of thing (trustee)

• Avoid duplication but also to make sure the service is provided, that the left hand is watching the right hand (safe schools coordinator)

• I don’t know. I would have to know what we already have and is that working well together? Because we could have two or three different things and if they’re not really working together, adding four or five other things isn’t going to really, you know, kind of work (elementary principal)

The importance of developing students’ social skills was mentioned by the coordinator and the recommendation was made that the board strategic plan be adjusted to accommodate this.

• Kids need social skills, and some of that is sorely missing, that social and emotional literacy and development with young people …. I think community and culture and caring now needs… it should be the first pillar I think in every board’s strategic plan, rather than some of them listed as four. I think it means we have to get our hands dirty (retired safe schools coordinator)

While needs still existed in terms of supports for Rural Catholic, there were clearly a number of supports in place that impacted the implementation of program policy, according to the comments made by interview participants. As a baseline, board personnel possessed data on the student population and suspension details for the board and the province which served to show where they stood at present. They had the support of a wide range of partners who were able to use their skills and resources to serve the needs of students in the program and also to provide training and information for board staff. Funding through specialized grants gave them the ability to pay for many of these services and, thus, change the face of the program as well as the manner in which supports were provided at the school level. The knowledge that was gained from the partnerships allowed the board decision makers to begin looking at how additional funds could be used to further develop the program. Increased time and personnel to carry out further research on the data and on effective practices were discussed. The success experienced in working with the community partners had also led the board administration to consider establishing a ‘hub’ where all non-academic and academic supports could be provided.

In responding to the questions about supports, Composite Public participants cited four main areas from which information was gathered. As with their Catholic counterparts, they felt
that a great deal of the information came out from the Ministry. They also gleaned information from visits to other boards. Key information that they used to inform their process came from community service providers. The assumption was that each of the providers had carried out background research and that this led to evidence-based decisions that could be relied upon in board practices. Finally, the participants commented on the importance of the Safe Schools principal. As with Rural Catholic, local data on suspensions and expulsions was studied in the decision-making process. Again, in taking all of the information into account, a trial and error process was used, as the board tried recommended practices to see how they would fit locally.

- A lot of that was based on information that came out from the government around Bill 212 …. We did talk to a number of our community service providers and tried to look at the general profile of some of the students that were in greater difficulty (safe schools principal)
- I’m not sure if there was any individual research that we went by to make up our policy …. (trustees) sort of write up the policy but then the implementation is left more to staff (trustee)
- I was sent to (a large urban board) to meet with the person who oversaw their area up there (student support counsellor)
- I remember us sitting in a meeting and all this new was coming down with the expulsion and that we had to provide programming. And we just didn’t know what it was going to look like (principal)
- (The safe schools principal) has collected a lot of data for us and probably centrally as well ….. we know the types of suspensions … grade, pathway, special education, age, males, females; safe schools principal had gone to other boards and asked them questions and that’s informed and changed some of our policies; Partnerships …. provided us with research around when you’re setting up programs what types of students should be in those programs, which types of students should be together (principal)

The Composite Public board personnel felt that it would be helpful to glean more information from community service providers, especially in the area of mental health. Also emphasized was the need to get feedback from students involved in the program. Like their Catholic counterparts, the public board group made mention of the need to analyze the effectiveness of the Alternate programs, even though these programs were not directly connected to suspension and expulsion programs. The board is in the process of carrying out an analysis of existing Alternate programs to see what, if any, changes are needed.

- Networking and putting the pieces together and the puzzle together as far as different service providers; there’s a bit of a gap between 16 and 18 around mental health services for young people; I think the other area of information that we would like is
more direct feedback from the students who are …. Graduating from the program or leaving the program…. Getting some of their input directly…. Them being the ones who are at the receiving end of things, their voice would be very valuable (safe schools principal)

- We’ve got quite an amazing threat assessment protocol that we go through, so maybe if we could have had sort of some input from that (trustee)
- To be frank, I think the Ministry left us to our own devices… (need) more of a template from the Ministry and maybe a bit more money (principal)
- We never actually looked at it from the point of view of what are the needs of students – coordination in looking at the needs of those sort of 15 to under 21 youth who are not in regular day school (alternate, suspended and expelled)(principal)

In Composite Public, almost all of the participants referred to the supports available through community partnerships, in the form of space and staff, just as they had highlighted the partnerships in the description of unique conditions. As mentioned, one referred to the community-provided building in which the program and other services were housed as a “beautiful community of supports”. Added to these services were supports that were provided through the local post-secondary institutions, including free legal advice, cognitive behaviour therapy and social and emotional support in the form of university and college students who worked with the program students. “Pools of people in the community that have training related to working with youth …. They’ve provided us with research around when you’re setting up programs, what type of students should be in these programs.” Supports that were provided through the school board, including the Safe Schools principal, counseling and teachers for the program and outreach were also mentioned.

- Our program is somewhat unique in the sense that it’s not solely delivered by board personnel. We have a community partner that provides the space for the program and they also provide two staff to the program…. The entire program and its establishment is a partnership at its core…. We also attach a teacher directly to it and we’ll provide some additional itinerant support either for geographic or for subject-based reasons; we do have internal supports through educational services, in terms of certainly some initial counselling and formation of the student action plan … there’a liaising with other community based partners; (location) is actually run by the Boys and Girls Club (safe schools principal)
- We had the police involved, people from the hospital’s mental health department… and the university. I mean, we had everybody who could possibly come in touch with that person and that individual on the panel. I can remember thirty people at least sitting around the table. Our program I know is provided by a third party, Youth Diversion …. a behaviourist, a teacher, some kind of counsellors, probation people…..Also our education services, which would have all our counsellors involved, our behaviourists, psychologists, and all those involved. (trustee)
• We have lots of supports from (the college and university) – they come in and work with the students and just give them somebody else to talk to within the classroom; They may be coming in and doing their program on one of the students around some CBT (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy) stuff or working on whatever area, anxiety or whatever it may be the students need (student support counsellor)
• I love where the program is. It’s in this building, it’s a catchall building in downtown … it has drug counselling there, youth diversion is there, our transitions program is there (principal)
• Safe schools principal provides a lot of support in terms of consistency; we have a person that will help us do up a student action plan; support for addictions and mental health; diversion programs, anger management programs, if there’s a mental health need then we certainly have access to programs through the hospital as well. Parenting sometimes even as well (principal)

The majority of respondents in Composite Public felt that additional supports were still needed in the area of mental health. The need for additional staff was mentioned, as was the importance of having support in place for parents and members of the family of the at-risk youth. While participants were not sure whether there was a plan to add any of these supports, the trustee for the board commented that it had always been past practice to include supports as it became evident that they were needed.

• I think the mental health side of things is the one that I would identify as probably the area of greatest need and obviously over the last couple of years and moving into the future that’s going to be an area of focus. I think another additional need would be around transitions for some of these young people in the sense that, you know, they’re very successful in the program and we have had some students graduate from the program, but then in terms of something to allow them to be successful afterwards. We’re always looking for new partnerships and new service provisions, but I do worry about many of these young people after they’ve left the program. (safe schools principal)
• We’ve got an open door policy about that. As they’re needed they kind of get pulled in, supports and that sort of thing. So it’s been very flexible. And as we find that if there’s something that we’re lacking, we try to find that support for that child …... as we learn, we do (trustee)
• More consultation around expelled …….. That’s a refinement, I guess, of something that I feel is, you know, there and based on, I would say, knowledge and research of adolescent behaviour (principal)
• Mental health is such a major issue right now with some of these students. You know, it’s a huge struggle for some of these kids with, like, anxieties and some of the other things that are going on with some of them…..Additional supports I’d love to see more family, parenting stuff for some of the parents. And how to deal with some of their children. (student support counsellor)
• (Student success) has talked about potentially having a west option to some of the suspended kids, but that’s not in the offing for next year, I don’t think
I’ve talked about the occupational therapy dream. You know, the mental health piece is always a big one as well, the mental health of students.

In Composite Public, reflecting on improvements that were needed for the programs, the majority of the study participants commented on the need for more and larger sites in which to house the programs. It was felt that the one site, while effective, was not easily accessed by any students other than those in the eastern region of the board. Outreach services were provided for students who could not realistically make the trip to the program site, but these services were not seen to be as effective as a structured program setting. While support services were seen by most to be effective, occupational therapy and mental health were seen as two areas in which further advances would be welcomed. Even with the variety of services that were available, alignment of supports to avoid duplication and gaps was seen to be important.

- There’s always more work that could be done with different community organizations around making sure that we’re aligning our supports and trying not to duplicate services. And then just making sure that we’re aware of what those are … making sure that we’re aware of all the different community service providers (safe schools principal)
- More mental health supports probably …. Transporting our rural kids (trustee)
- Having multiple locations or extra locations (for the program) would be nice …. That should have been looked at (student support counsellor)
- We only have one room for the whole school board … we could use a different site, we could probably use a few sites but probably isn’t practical … it would be nice if we could separate them (the students) into different areas …. a couple of areas that we could go somewhere to talk with kids or have them calm down or cool down (student support counsellor)
- If we had all the money in the world, we’d just have a program in the west end, the east end, the north (principal)
- I’m a strong supporter of occupational therapy … you want to be able to, for secondary students, create independence and self-advocacy (principal)

Composite Board participants indicated that they felt the information provided by the Ministry was helpful, in terms of support for implementation, since it allowed them to set up a starting point for their program. This, combined with information gained through visits to other programs, some of which had been in place from the time Strict Discipline Programs were first established, meant that they had a good idea as to what their programs should look like. As with Rural Catholic, data that they had collected about their specific circumstances in comparison to other boards in the province allowed them to see the needs that would have to be addressed in the board. Almost all of the people interviewed in the board emphasized the support provided by the
community partners with whom they worked. It was obvious from the comments that the look of the programs would have been completely different without this essential piece.

While participants from the two boards cite similar supports that they see as important – funding for increased services, for example – it appears from the comments that the programs are at two different stages in the implementation process where supports are concerned. Composite Public participants seem to suggest that they are happy with the supports that are available through the site they use for their program. What most of them would like to see, however, would be the addition of more sites of the same type as the current one in the city’s downtown to allow them to support students in the same way over a broader physical area.

Rural Catholic participants were not as consistent in their support of the current Alternate program as an effective way to assist suspended students. In looking at possible supports, interview participants from the board suggested that funding and time were needed in order to allow them to more thoroughly examine their data and research effective solutions to support suspended youth. One interview participant directly indicated that the Alternate program was not an ideal solution while others suggested the need for a ‘hub’ which, when described by them, sounded very much like the program set up in Composite Public. Again, one is led to wonder whether there would be an increase in suspensions within Rural Catholic if the people making these decisions were confident that the supports offered in such a ‘hub’ were beneficial to the students who were housed there. Perhaps additional support for research would allow board personnel who were responsible for policy mobilization to investigate the most effective form a program could take to best support suspended and expelled youth.

According to feedback provided by the contingent from Rural Catholic, support available through various grants and Ministry funding allowed the board to create the program that was put into place in 2008. Given the decisions that were made as to what the program would look like, based on needs, decision makers put a great deal of focus on the Safe Schools coordinator position and worked a large part of the implementation plan around this central role. Direct and indirect support for the program was acquired from the many community partners who worked directly with the suspended students while also supporting board personnel through training. Collected data provided a baseline and suggested the direction the program focus should take, but the consensus was that more time and personnel working with the data would be helpful. It appeared, however, that enough information had been gained to lead the board team to consider the establishment of a ‘hub’ that would allow all partners to work together to
support students in a coordinated fashion in one location.

Composite Public participants saw the Safe Schools principal as a key support for the implementation of their program, but in a slightly different fashion from the support that was provided by the coordinator in Rural Catholic. The Safe Schools principal provided the data that informed the implementation process and everything proceeded from this point. Perhaps more than in Rural Catholic, the community partners were seen as an essential aspect of the support factor in Composite. Personnel, programming, and the program site were all provided by the community partners with whom the board liaised. The ‘hub’ that Rural Catholic was looking to establish was already running, quite successfully according to those interviewed, within the Composite Public Board. The main suggestion regarding additional support was to set up more sites on the same model across the board, which indicates the value board personnel placed on the arrangement.

Given the nature of the supports mentioned by interview participants, such as increase in services, a case could be made that this factor would be more accurately described as resources rather than supports. Clearly, those interviewed suggest that the biggest impact on implementation in terms of supports comes from the resources, both human and material, that are available to the program.

CENTRAL CONTROL

The final factor which was looked at in terms of its impact on policy implementation centred on Central Control of the process. In this category, participants in the interview were asked if the policies about suspension and expulsion programs had been clearly communicated by the Ministry to the individual boards. The almost unanimous response from both boards was that the information had been clearly communicated. The comment that was added, however, was that some barriers were encountered in translating from policy into action, especially as there seemed to be frequent changes to expectations, which made it hard for boards to keep up with the most current version of the policy.

Comments from Rural Catholic illustrate the clear communication of policy, but also suggest that more direction could have been provided to assist with implementation.

- Yes (the policies were communicated well), there’s no issue there (director)
- I felt they were….. very clearly communicated, but we’ve had several changes since ’08 and it’s sometimes very difficult to keep up with the rapidity of the …. You find you
just get one thing kind of settled and, you know, it’s changed (superintendent)

- From a teacher standpoint, when it first started unrolling, it was very, I think it was very clearly laid out what the expectations were. (safe schools coordinator)
- People were sent for training and then each school was to bring it back and each school board decided … at our board it was a leadership meeting where all our principals gathered; they’re pretty sterile presentations (retired safe schools coordinator)
- I remember going to a couple of in-services with the co-terminus board ….. which I found beneficial, from the ministry…. When our boards created our board policy to align with the new PPM’s, that communication piece was done really, really well. And we have a collaboration site that the leadership team can access that has a safe schools tab on that site (high school principal)
- I would think that they were communicated. There’s enough teleconferences and meetings ….. I think there’s an attempt at feedback, I think there’s an attempt at conversation, but ultimately there’s no more monies …. Maybe we really need to think outside the box and be creative about how we’re dealing with this (elementary principal)
- Oh, I’d like to think that they were certainly okay. They had the timeline to kind of put some things together and sort out policies to mesh and then they did distribute things down to us. We had a little in-service (elementary principal)

In Rural Catholic, most of the participants felt that the annual regional meetings of Safe Schools personnel and the related teleconferences demonstrated commitment by the Ministry to supporting policy implementation. At these meetings, Ministry personnel provided information about policy changes and feedback that had been received from across the province. In addition, they gave local participants the chance to provide their feedback and ask questions related to Safe Schools’ issues. Support through funding of Safe Schools’ positions and initiatives was also frequently cited. The commitment component was not without issues, however. Just as it was felt by some that communication involved more than simply explaining the policy, some respondents highlighted the importance of ensuring that commitment was not a ‘one shot deal’. Sustainability was seen as crucial to ongoing success.

- Meeting where annually they call boards together and they discuss rates of suspension and expulsion (superintendent)
- The annual review apparently of the suspension data and the in-service by the Equity and Inclusivity Branch as well (trustee)
- Teleconference. It’s a great opportunity to hear what other people are saying and doing but also then to put your own lens on it, too. (safe schools coordinator)
- Creating a safe schools position. So how do these programs become self-sustaining within and, you know, built for the needs of that community? (retired safe schools coordinator)
- We have regional safe schools meetings … sometimes there seems to be a bit of a dichotomy or different messaging from perhaps safe schools and definitely student success and perhaps the finance branch of the ministry (student off register, on
I think there’s a movement and there’s some funding attached to safe schools coordinator, attached to mental health workers. I don’t know if they really have a sense of what it’s like on the ground particularly in elementary schools. The funding is often in the form of another person, not in terms of capacity building among the staff that we already have here. It’s a bit short-sighted in some ways. Another individual, if you’re not changing your practice, isn’t really going to move mountains. It’s going to act as a bandaid or triage or something. There’s lots of money out there for PRO (Parents Reaching Out) grants but we’re not hitting, we’re not engaging these parents (elementary principal)

Part of the ministry funds I thought that that was one of the reasons why now our board has the mental health kind of nurse; several of our staff have been trained in VTRA (Violence, Threat, Risk Assessment) and I think that might have been coming through some ministry funds…. And training around restorative practices not just for principals but teachers and things, so I would say things that my safe schools coordinator was offering (elementary principal)

Rural Catholic participants, for the most part, indicated that clear communication from the Ministry at the outset of the endeavor provided a clear starting point as the suspension program was established. Networking and dialogue with counterparts from across Ontario allowed them to discuss best practices rather than reinventing the wheel by coming up with an existing program through trial and error. The comment from one respondent about the use of funding for one-time support provided a caution that this is only a “band-aid” solution. In order for gains to be sustained, as she suggests, support from the Ministry must be ongoing or the program must become self-sustaining. As participants in both boards have suggested, the latter solution may be realistic if the board is flexible and creative in the use of funds from overlapping areas such as Student Success.

Composite Board participants seemed to agree with their Rural Catholic counterparts that communication about the policies was clear. Again, however, one of the principals suggested that more assistance was needed in making the transition from the consultation process to implementation.

I remember there being some training that was actually for all administrators back in 2007-2008, where in many cases I think it was retired board personnel or principals that had gone to some training and they came out and they did kind of clearly articulate the changes. I think the components around a suspension and expulsion program were clearly communicated and were fairly straightforward in terms of the responsibility of the board to provide those services. (safe schools principal)

I think so, yes. We have got a fair bit of flexibility concerning the implementation and we do partner with our co-terminus board (trustee)

I would say yes. I got a big book that I had to read when I started … it had all the memorandums and everything … and what had to be done (student support counsellor)
• Well, I think policies were, I do. Because, I mean, I can read policy. That’s not the trouble. It was what do you (do to translate it) into action. That’s the part where I don’t think anybody could have anticipated different things that can happen (principal)

In the Composite Board, most of the participants felt that the connection that existed between many of the Ministry’s recent initiatives demonstrated commitment, in general, to Student Success. The initiatives that were cited included Learning to 18, Bill 13 Bullying Prevention and Intervention, support for mental health initiatives, Workplace Violence policy and the work that had been done in revising school incident forms. Coherence in pathway options was also cited. On the flip side, however, there was a feeling that insufficient funds had been provided to support these initiatives. One of the participants also suggested that an inconsistency existed as policy implementation was attempted, since the Ministry was simultaneously encouraging partnerships with third party service providers and tightening up the processes related to third party service provision.

• I think there has been quite a lot of coherence in terms of pathway options that are available to young people, as well as Learning to 18 meshes very well obviously with the provision of suspension and expulsion programs for young people. I think the commitment that has been made to increase the number of supports and services available for mental health and becoming a bit more creative around community service providers …. getting access into schools …..where it becomes a bit more challenging is when there appear to be contradictions within that structure … around third-party service provision (safe schools principal)
• No …. (the Ministry needs to) put their money where their mouth is (principal)
• It’s pretty clear that safe schools is a focus for the ministry. And they continue to, I guess, try to support by refining those policies. I feel that the Ontario government in general is looking at safety in the workplace…… and it would appear there’s some coordination, or it seems to work together (principal)

Like their Rural Catholic counterparts, Composite Public representatives saw the value of clear communication by the Ministry and the potential in utilizing funding coming from overlapping initiatives to support the suspension and expulsion programs. Observations were also made by Composite about the advantages that came from the flexibility that was allowed by the Ministry in policy implementation, allowing the board to use available funds and parallel programs to help determine the best implementation plan for these Safe Schools’ programs.

The final question in the interview asked how the implementation of policy was monitored by the Ministry. The responses from Rural Catholic and Composite Public to this question were very similar. In describing the monitoring of policy implementation by the
Ministry, participants in both boards spoke about the reports that are provided to the Ministry on suspensions, expulsions and incidents. These reports, however, dealt with outcomes rather than implementation.

Participants added other comments regarding the monitoring process. A representative from Rural Catholic felt that, like the boards themselves, the Ministry was overtaxed with no time to monitor the situation appropriately. Similarly, one representative from the Composite Public board felt that monitoring was not done frequently enough and, when meetings were being held, information was not circulated far enough in advance to allow board representatives to analyze information and prepare for discussion.

Participants in both boards spoke about the reports that are provided to the Ministry on suspensions, expulsions and incidents. They also talked about the dialogue that occurred at the regional Safe Schools’ meetings and the two-way communication of information that occurred there, which dealt to a greater degree with the way the policies were being implemented. A representative from the Rural Catholic board spoke about related information that was collected from the Ministry in other areas such as Student Success and Special Education and the connection between this and the Safe Schools’ data.

- We provide reports … periodically suspension and expulsion data; Our strategic plan highlights some of the initiatives so the ministry would see that (director)
- Next year they’re pulling the data from onSIS (data reporting system) ….. in the last year it’s been the stuff around equity and inclusion that they have really been providing support for and dollars and they’ve been checking to see if, you know, your policy is up on your website (superintendent)
- They seem to be monitoring more now the onSIS rates, reasons why (high school principal)
- We need to keep detailed records in our (reporting) system; data from the suspension and things that are monitored and are collected now and looked at …. There are suspension and expulsion kind of meetings … we have been sending either a superintendent or a superintendent and a representative …. to these discussion tables (elementary principal)

Composite Public participants provided some similar responses.

- There’s the package that they send us with regard to our own board statistics, disciplinary data, but also around uptake into the program and what the needs are of the young people (safe schools principal)
- Certainly through onSIS … and they’ll ask questions about how we are implementing policies or program or curriculum and what we think our needs are ….. there’s an expectation on the Ministry that we will have safe schools teams and that those teams will include community members, teachers, parents, students (principal)

Still, the monitoring process is not a perfect solution. As the Safe Schools principal for
Composite Public suggested, there are challenges surrounding the use of data provided. As he suggests, the issues arise “through whatever the reporting mechanisms are in terms of the input … how the data is taken from their end versus how the input of the data is put in at our end, I’m not sure that that’s entirely ironed out”. Another Composite Board representative added that there was “a general annual meeting to look at the data but it’s generally about the whole thing. So it’s not really monitored on a monthly basis or anything like that”. A Rural Catholic principal commented on the importance of collecting qualitative data saying,

I know there’s monitoring of numbers…. But that data, I’m curious of what story it’s telling. Because it’s really not telling how you’re implementing your policies; it’s just telling what the end result is. I think they’re gathering feedback, that’s why we were there, but where that goes or what’s done with that, I’m not sure. I think the stories are really important … the most powerful anecdotes and the most powerful examples don’t come from the numbers, they come from ….the story.

Central control at the Ministry level provides fairly broad latitude when it comes to the implementation of Safe Schools’ policy regarding board suspension and expulsion programs. As indicated in the literature review, the present policy allows boards to direct funding and support to preventative proactive measures rather than the reactive responses of suspension or expulsion, if they so choose.

When one considers the comments that were made by Rural Catholic participants throughout the interview process, it would appear that those within the board who are responsible for policy mobilization, and to some extent policy implementation, have chosen to work with the flexibility provided in interpreting the policy. Rather than suspend a student for an extended period of time and risk having this student remain at home without supports, school principals within the board have often chosen to seek other avenues that are supportive rather than punitive in nature. This has led to a decrease in the number of suspensions that have been meted out since 2002 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). By the admission of those involved in the mobilization process, however, more time and support is needed to investigate the effectiveness of their approach.

It appears that Composite Public board has also chosen to work with the flexibility provided in the policy directive. In their case, however, they have elected to devote a significant amount of their time, energy and expertise to providing supports to students once they are suspended or expelled. It is possible to assume from this response, that those members of the Composite Public Board responsible for making decisions around suspensions and expulsions
have decided that these students are being effectively served at the site where the suspension and expulsion programs are being housed.

As the Rural Catholic principal suggests through her comments above, perhaps the stories of students involved in suspensions, and expulsions, will help to determine which approach is most likely to lead to a reduction in suspensions and expulsions. This information, once obtained, might help to further impact the implementation of policies related to the suspension and expulsion programs in Ontario school boards. Quantitative data allows the Ministry and board personnel to determine whether suspensions and expulsions are increasing or decreasing. A link between this information and the effectiveness of the programs in assisting students could be made, if additional information was gathered. The ongoing dialogue that Ministry personnel conduct with program representatives in each board allows them to monitor whether or not the boards are compliant with expectations and it serves to also provide information on the needs of individual boards. It remains to be seen, however, whether one approach is more effective than another in addressing the needs of youth who are involved in Safe Schools’ issues. This could be the focus of another study.

CONCLUSION

With all the similarities and differences that became apparent through the interview process, the responses demonstrated that the implementation process clearly involved the four factors suggested at the outset as having significant impact on implementation of policy. Policy actors, local conditions, support and central control were factors of significant importance in influencing the implementation process as it related to the suspension and expulsion programs. When given the opportunity to add comments at the conclusion of the interviews, participants continued to come back to these four factors and the influence that they had on implementation. The factor entitled support was the only one that I would possibly reframe, having thought further about it and done the research. Given the nature of the comments that were made and the examples that were presented as supports by the interview participants, it is possible that this particular factor could be more accurately termed resources. Most of the discussion by participants in this category related to specific supports such as human and material resources that have had an impact on policy implementation.

In terms of the policy actors, participants in both boards listed similar groups of individuals who had impacted the implementation of policy. According to the comments,
however, these actors seemed to differ in the impact that they had on implementation. The Safe Schools coordinator in Rural Catholic served not only as the key organizer of the approach that was taken in programming for suspended youth, but also as the central person involved in connecting with the student, family and support services in the board and in the greater community. The coordinator often worked directly on providing the academic component of the program if the student was not attending one of the alternate programs in the board. The Safe Schools principal in Composite Public, meanwhile, oversaw the operation of the program and served as a resource for the individuals and groups who were working directly with the students and their families.

The other policy actors were also similar in title, background and services that they provided, when the two board lists were compared. The difference in their impact was related to the time and focus that they had on the students who were involved with the programs. In Rural Catholic, the non-academic supports were borrowed from the allotment that was provided to the board as a whole. In Composite Public, the non-academic supports were provided to suspended and expelled youth for the most part by workers who were located specifically at the site that housed the programs for these students.

Some local conditions, such as the large geographic region covered by each of the boards, were almost identical in each of the boards involved in the study. Again, though, differences existed when one looked closer at the seemingly common characteristics. In Rural Catholic, obstacles created by the large region were further compounded by the fact that a significant number of the students in the board lived in the outlying regions of the board. In Composite Board, while the physical size of the board was still a factor, the majority of the students lived in or near the major city found in the board. As a result, fewer students were impacted by being too far from the program site to access the services there on a daily basis. This difference appears to have had an influence in how the two boards approached their programs. Composite Public seems to have felt that they could successfully operate one central site for their program while Rural Catholic appears to have kept the alternate sites as an option while simultaneously focusing on supporting students prior to suspension and taking the services to the students rather than insisting that students come to the services.

Supports mentioned by both boards as having impact on implementation were similar, as well. Respondents in both boards spoke of the support gained from the Ministry of Education through presentations, shared data and training provided to Safe Schools’ leads and other key
personnel. As with the other two categories, though, there were some significant differences in certain areas that were highlighted. Rural Catholic participants focused on the important multi-faceted role played by the Safe Schools coordinator. While Composite Public respondents saw the value of the role played by the Safe Schools principal, they seemed to place more emphasis on the support provided by the community partners than their Catholic counterparts did.

In terms of central control, interviewees from both boards agreed that the information coming from the Ministry was clearly communicated and the majority from both boards seemed to see the value in the regional meetings and teleconferences in allowing the sharing of best practices and monitoring of the programs. Funding was acknowledged by both groups as critical and the sustainability of the programs was raised as a concern by participants from both boards if central support was not ongoing.
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Policy Actors

In 2005, the Safe Schools Action Team created by the Ministry of Education recognized the importance of consulting with a wide range of stakeholders or actors in deciding on how to implement programs for suspended and expelled youth. At the time, in a series of consultations, they asked for input from students, parents, educators, community members and school administrators from across the province (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). In 2008, when a follow-up report was carried out, the Ministry became even more specific as to who should be part of the team that was involved in the process of reviewing and advising on policies pertaining to suspensions and expulsions. As indicated earlier in this thesis, the recommendation was made that feedback be sought from “representatives of a wide range of community groups: police, Public Health personnel, Aboriginal groups, diverse cultural groups, special needs advocacy groups, crisis centres, sexual assault centres” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, Safe Schools Code of Conduct – Student Expulsions, p. 5).

The information gained through the interviews suggests that several of these groups were, in fact, involved in the consultation process at the board level in Rural Catholic and Composite Public, along with other groups that were not specifically named by the action team. Like the Ministry, local boards have been increasingly more specific as to the people who could be at the table to offer input and be involved in the discussions. Whether they were aware of the involvement of these stakeholders or not, many of the participants in the interviews felt that the selected groups, and others, should definitely be included in the consultation process. The actors who should, and in most cases did, have an impact on policy does not appear to be in dispute, then, among those who were interviewed

Key among those who were involved in the process of consultation at Rural Catholic and who had firsthand knowledge of the needs of the program were the Safe Schools Committee members for the board. This group included vice principal and principal representatives, a Special Education representative, school staff members and a parent representative, among others. The board lawyer, who possessed expertise in translating Ministry directives to local
policy, was also an important person involved in the mobilization of these policies. When the policy reached the implementation stage, interview participants were almost unanimous in declaring the Safe Schools coordinator as the main policy actor involved in the process. They also spoke of the importance of the continuing role played by principals and superintendents as the policy was moved to its next phase. Given the setup of the program in Rural Catholic, staff at the alternate site were seen as significant policy actors as implementation got underway, as were the community support agencies responsible for providing non-academic support.

In Composite Public, the local Safe Schools Committee members were seen as the main policy actors involved in the consultation process, as they had been in Rural Catholic. Principal and teacher representatives from the team were again highlighted, but an increased emphasis was placed on the value of the community service providers in this part of the process. When policy moved from mobilization to implementation, interview participants in Composite Public again focused on the importance of the educational services personnel and the representatives from the community in ensuring that the academic and non-academic components of the programs were attended to. Many of the agencies and groups named by Rural Catholic were included, such as addictions counsellors and psychologists. The list was expanded, however, to include groups such as the law students from the local university who assisted with program delivery.

There was some feeling expressed by participants in both boards that the circle of participants could be widened to include even more actors in policy deliberations and implementation. This is consistent with board practice in many areas, including board reviews of the Local Board/Police Protocol and the Violence, Threat, Risk Assessment Protocol. If the inclusion of more actors was to be of value, however, it would be important that the actors’ contribution be more than a tokenism or superficial compliance with Ministry directives. Interview participants in both boards spoke of the value of contributions made by board and community partners to the implementation process. By extension, one might assume that the knowledge and experience many of these people possessed would be of value in the planning stages as well.

Once feedback was received from the various stakeholder groups, the success of the next stage of the implementation process depended on the ability of several key players to manage the changes that were necessary (Fuhrman and Elmore, 1990) and on their ability to orchestrate policy implementation (Loeb and McEwan, 2006). Front line workers, in this case at the board
and school level, use their ‘coping mechanisms’ to make modifications so that implementation can work (Barrett, 2004; Cohen et al, 2007). Modifications could involve, as the student support counsellor suggested, changes to the way the non-academic needs of students were met. In Rural Catholic, the coordinator used coping mechanisms such as home visits when it was not feasible for students to travel to the central site. Similarly, itinerant teachers and the student support counsellor would, at times travel to the rural parts of Composite Public and Catholic Board students in the region would be served in Composite Public’s facilities.

In both Rural and Composite Board, interview participants for the most part responded positively to how the implementation process was handled by the players at the local level. This would suggest that they felt successful in carrying out their role in the process of implementing Safe Schools’ policy related to the suspension and expulsion programs to the best of their ability. The coordinator in Rural Catholic utilized her skills as a communication disorder facilitator and work study teacher to offer assistance to the students in need of academic help. Health personnel in both boards used their skills to support the needs of students with addictions and mental health issues. Partners and board staff in Composite Public helped to set up valuable work experience for program participants. Exceptions could be found regarding satisfaction with the delivery of program, however. In Rural Catholic, for example, concerns were expressed about the effectiveness of the Alternate programs in serving the needs of the suspended students and the lack of access to support services that was sometimes experienced there.

Another area of concern goes back to the lack of certainty that many of the interview participants in both boards had in naming the people or groups that had been involved in the implementation process. Interaction between stakeholders will have an impact on the success of policy implementation (Honig, 2006) and, therefore, clear communication between stakeholder groups is essential. This aspect becomes even more important if the stakeholder group enlarges. While not all of the participants in the interviews were involved in implementation in its initial stages, they all played an important role in some part of the implementation process. As a result, the question arises as to whether they should be kept abreast of the changes that are being made. Certainly, comments made by interview participants suggest that many of them feel that front line workers should be kept in the loop in order to contribute more effectively and provide their input on the implementation process.

Since this thesis paper was focused on the factors that had an impact on policy implementation, speculation about factor changes that might have had an impact if they had
been carried out moves beyond the realm of this study. Just as the Safe Schools Action Team in 2006 speculated as to whose input would be valuable in the consultation process, based on province-wide input, interview participants mused as to the individuals and groups who might have been able to provide important insights in advance of suspension and expulsion policy implementation based on their knowledge and experience. By providing feedback in this area, respondents were indirectly suggesting where they felt the impact of this factor was reduced because some major actors were missing from the mix. Just as their observations about the impact of involved policy actors influenced their feedback, their knowledge and experiences related to the needs of the students in the school system provided them with some insight as to the key personnel missing from the equation.

Is it important for all policy actors to know who is involved in the process? I would suggest that it is important. This knowledge may help with buy-in and is consistent with an open relationship and a transparent process. Some interview participants expressed frustration that, in their view, only a small circle of individuals was involved in the initial introduction of programs to the board and would most certainly have supported the involvement of a broader range of actors. Is it, though, too much information to be shared? If boards feel that it is important, they should consider ensuring that decisions and stages in the implementation process are communicated with a broader portion of the education population than has previously been carried out. This group should include teaching staff, since they are on the front lines in the work that is done with students before and after they are assigned to either the suspension or expulsion program. Again, many of the interview participants in both boards concurred on this view. The heavy emphasis placed on collaboration among policy actors by so many of the study participants makes this point clear.

Interview participants who ranged from counsellors and teachers to directors of education made excellent suggestions as to other groups who should be at the table. It is very likely that the implementation process could be further improved by including some of the actors who were suggested by interview participants. Vice principals and principals, for example, were suggested as important additions. While this is speculation on the part of the interview participants, it has some merit, given the role these individuals are required to play in their schools in the first stages of policy implementation for a suspended youth. As one interview participant suggested, these are the policy actors who are responsible for compiling documentation, including the Student Action Plan, which is such a crucial part of the implementation process in the
suspension and expulsion programs. Again, though, this comes with the potential obstacle that more stakeholders may slow down the process. Different groups, each with their own agenda, can have an impact on the effectiveness of policy implementation (Barrett, 2004; Fowler, 2013; Fuller, 2013; Hayes, 2001; Loeb & McEwan, 2006; McLaughlin, 2010; Poocharoen, 2013).

While input by front line workers can help to make policy implementation better suited to the students, there is a danger that the original intent of the policy will be lost (Poocharoen, 2013). A decision needs to be made as to whether the advantages of expanding the consultation group outweigh the disadvantages. It might be necessary to engage ‘policy brokers’ in the process to ensure that a reasonable compromise is achieved in the implementation process (Sabatier, 1986). Although not specifically recommending the inclusion of a policy broker role, more than half of the study participants mentioned the importance of coordinating services or bringing all of the key policy actors to the table for discussion. Certainly, then, they seem to be emphasizing the need for this type of cooperative, inclusive decision-making.

Some interview participants took the Ministry directions regarding stakeholder groups one crucial step further than was outlined in either 2005 or 2007. The point was made on several occasions that people connected with the suspension and expulsion programs often had very unique needs and looked at issues from a unique perspective. In addition to ensuring that several community-service providers were involved in the discussions, then, it was recommended that the input of the parents and students who were involved in the process be considered carefully. In the latter case, a value was certainly seen in involving student trustees, to get both the student and political voice. It was also seen as important, however, to include students who might be struggling in school or students who might have been involved in the suspension or expulsion programs, in order to get their perspectives. In the view of some researchers on education policy, “students are the key problem solvers” (Cohen et al, 2007). Similarly, while School Council representatives were asked for input, some study participants felt it was important to have the input of parents of youth who had experienced difficulties in school, especially in areas related to Safe Schools.

Knowledge informs the implementation process (Loeb & McEwan, 2006) and students who are at-risk, along with their parents, would have the best knowledge of their situation. Recognition of the value of student and parent input is evident in comments made by the Composite Board Safe Schools principal about seeking input from students who have graduated from the program and in the comments of the Rural Catholic elementary principal who wanted to
ensure that the students and parents directly linked to the programs were asked for their input on the effectiveness of the programs. These educators realized the value of finding out, from those directly involved in the programs, what was working and what was standing in the way of effective implementation.

A crucial difference between the two participating boards existed with regards to the policy actors who had an impact on the implementation process. While the actors were almost identical in both boards, the role that some played was very different. The most obvious difference could be seen when the role of coordinator in Rural Catholic was compared with that of Safe Schools principal in Composite Public. The description of the responsibilities of Safe Schools principal in Composite made it clear that this position was an administrative one. The person in this role was responsible for the mobilization of the suspension and expulsion policies at the local level, bringing together individuals for consultation and setting the programs up from the outset. He coordinated the actions of the policy actors responsible for implementation but left most of the actual implementation to the ‘experts’ in the academic and non-academic areas.

In Rural Catholic, part of the mobilization process was carried out by the board lawyer who ensured that local policy was in line with Ministry intentions. The other aspects of policy mobilization were carried out by the superintendent, who organized consultations with the groups that were recommended to have input in the process. The coordinator’s role, as the title suggests, involved coordinating the efforts of the policy actors involved in implementation. She also, however, was the key person working with students to link them to the schools and to the Alternate program and the key contact with students and families if they did not attend the central Alternate site. As can be seen by the comments of the retired coordinator, at the time when the policies were introduced, she had almost no involvement in the initial mobilization, despite the belief of other educators to the contrary. To her knowledge, the director and superintendent were the only people at the board who dealt with the legislation when it first came out. When she was assigned her role, the coordinator was told that senior administration was not sure what the role would entail. They were basically only able to tell her a little bit about what was happening in other boards and she was to proceed from there, through a “make it up as you go along” approach. As a result, she ended up doing a great deal of research after the fact, to determine the direction she would take in the role. This beginning seemed to go a long way to setting the course for the role that the coordinator would play, since the position has continued
along a similar path in Rural Catholic since this point and the coordinator position is considered by senior administration to be “the program”.

The staff members who worked to support suspended and expelled students in meeting their academic and non-academic goals also differed in how they carried out their roles. In Composite Public, the teachers and support staff assigned to the program site worked exclusively with the students and fellow staff members there. In Rural Catholic, up to the time of the study interviews, the academic and non-academic needs of the students were met by community and board members who had the responsibility of simultaneously serving other parts of the board’s student population. The flexibility provided in the policy documents permitted each board to set up the non-academic component as the board team desired and the two boards involved in this study chose slightly different paths.

While theorists do not agree on the exact factors which are most likely to lead to deviant behaviour, they do agree that deviant behaviour is more likely to occur when certain key circumstances exist. The possible factors contributing to deviance include poverty, impulsivity and negative environmental influences such as poor role models with whom many of the youth come into contact. In addition, negative attitudes held by some of the individuals engaged in deviant behaviours could be very important in determining their actions. These negative attitudes could be directed toward authority figures or society in general. They could also involve a viewpoint held by some youth that if it was not possible to succeed in ways accepted in society, the next best approach was to succeed in rising up against the established order. No matter what might exert the most influence, it is obvious that the factors must be addressed if the resultant behaviour is to be dealt with effectively. With this in mind, the involvement of actors in the role of support during implementation is very important. The more involvement that they have with the students, the greater the likelihood that behaviour concerns can be constructively addressed. As a result, the manner in which this support is set up could be crucial to the success experienced in providing non-academic support. It could also determine how effectively the boards are meeting this aspect of their mandate with regards to the suspension and expulsion programs.

Another point that became clear through the interviews is that the past few years have been a time of rapid change in the area of Safe Schools’ policy and education in general, as one can see in the section of the literature review that deals with Safe Schools’ issues in Ontario in the new millennium. Since 2006, in response to the findings of the Safe Schools Action Team,
many new directives have come down to the boards from the provincial level. In addition to the requirement for boards to establish suspension and expulsion programs, boards were directed to put into place a prescriptive reporting process regarding Safe Schools’ violations as part of Bill 157. Extending from this, there was also a requirement to update Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plans and an expectation that progressive discipline practices in boards be reviewed and, where necessary, revised. As part of the emphasis on an inclusive model of support, boards were provided with in-service training on the Caring and Safe Schools document and the Whole School Approach to Caring, Safe, and Inclusive Schools. Dealing effectively with so many changes in a relatively short period of time could obviously pose a challenge for boards and make it difficult to focus on the implementation of a single set of policies, such as those involving the suspension and expulsion programs. As Hall and Hord have suggested, when a change takes place without sufficient time for it to fully take root, the likelihood is greater that the actions related to the change will exist only at the mechanical or superficial level. If another change follows in short order, the impact of the first change will be significantly lessened and may disappear completely (Hall & Hord, 2001). In this instance, subsequent Safe Schools’ policies took some of the attention away from policies related to suspension and expulsion programs while they were still in their infancy or mechanical stage.

Many key participants in the interview stated that new groups have gained greater prominence as partners in education, especially in working with at-risk youth, in the past five years. Keeping this in mind, it would be beneficial to carry out a regular review of the suspension and expulsion process to see if further changes are needed. This is especially important since most of the study participants admitted that the initial setup of the programs was done by trial and error with input limited to information gleaned from the Ministry and other boards within the province. The time is right for this type of review, since the change process takes three to five years (Hall and Hord, 2001) and the suspension and expulsion programs have now been in place, in their current form, for that period of time. This would suggest that the changes that were implemented in 2008 should now be fully in place and that they have moved beyond the mechanical stage of implementation (Hall and Hord, 2001) and they are ready for review and possible revision.
Conditions

Pre-existing conditions in a board have an impact on policy implementation (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990). During the period since Confederation, conditions that have influenced practices related to the disciplining of students in schools have changed with the times. As described in the literature review, extreme instances of misbehaviour in school were dealt with in the first half of the twentieth century through corporal punishment (Axelrod, 2010; Wilson, 1982). The impact of mental health on the behaviour of youth became increasingly apparent over the century (Axelrod, 2010) and this knowledge influenced policies related to discipline. The rights of the child became more important to decision-making around policies for students in the 1960’s and, with the introduction of The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982, led to the abolition of corporal punishment in response to student misbehaviour (Roher and Weir, 2004). In the years leading up to the new millennium, students with identified special needs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1982) and students who were either the perpetrators or the victims of violent acts were in the forefront of policy decisions aimed at making schools safer (Gidney, 1999; Roher and Weir, 2004). These conditions, as we have seen, led to some of the changes that would take place in Safe Schools’ policy in the new millennium. Subsequently, the conditions that came about from the first iterations of the Safe Schools Act would lead to the changes that resulted in the creation of the suspension and expulsion programs on which this study focuses.

Some pre-existing conditions that have impacted the two boards in the study, as well as other boards in the province, cannot be changed. Both boards from which interview participants were selected are spread over large geographic regions and this fact significantly impacted the implementation of policy related to suspension and expulsion programs. In the case of Rural Catholic, the majority of the student population was impacted by the board size, since only two high schools and two Alternate programs existed in the entire board and they were located in the board’s two largest towns. In Composite Board, meanwhile, over half of the board’s high schools were located within the board’s main city and, therefore, the city students at least had relatively easy access to the suspension and expulsion programs. Issues of board size and access to the services impacted a much smaller portion of the student population, as a result.

Each board used creative practices to help them to be successful in effectively implementing policies related to suspension and expulsion programs while being faced with the barriers created by the geography of their boards. In Rural Catholic, principals have worked
to support students in meeting their needs prior to being suspended and the Safe Schools coordinator has endeavoured to ensure that students are supported in the remote areas of the board as well as at the Alternate program. In Composite Public, transportation supports are provided to get students to the central program and itinerant staff members are used to support students who cannot travel to the city. As indicated in PPM 142, boards could “take into account local needs and circumstances” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012, pg. 3) including consideration of geographic size of the board in setting local policy and these two boards have done so.

In both boards, cultural and socio-economic diversity was felt to have had an impact on policy implementation (Spillane, 1996) regarding policies about the suspension and expulsion programs. While some studies have suggested that low socio-economic status has a significant influence on the likelihood that an individual will engage in deviant behaviour (Beamish, 2009; Merton; Hoffman, 2011), this finding was not unanimously supported by the interview participants. Instead, some were struck by the fact that many middle-class students were as likely as their poorer counterparts to engage in deviant behaviour as researchers have also found over time (Beamish, 2009; Downes & Rock, 1998). Perhaps this supports Tanner’s views that opportunity and motivation play more of a role than socio-economic status in influencing deviant behaviour. Whatever the reasons, the difference in backgrounds of urban and rural youth made it impossible to select a ‘typical’ teen, in terms of culture and socio-economic status, who represented the general student population in either board, if such a person exists.

The fact that both boards found that males, especially those in Grade 10, were most likely to be involved in the suspension and expulsion programs, is cause for further examination of conditions that could impact policy implementation. While this red flag is also connected with the research aspect of the support subtheme, it warrants further exploration. Perhaps work done in conjunction with Student Success and Student Services personnel could be used to work proactively with this subset of the student population before they find themselves in violation of Safe Schools’ policy and, thus, involved in the suspension or expulsion program. As well, interview responses suggest that there has been an increase in substance abuse related Safe Schools’ violations. Continued focus on how best to address this issue, which already appears to be well underway in both of the participating boards, would be recommended.

Interest in a ‘hub’ and comments about the need to review the effectiveness of the Alternate program suggest that the current practices used in Rural Catholic were not seen as
ideal by many of those who were interviewed and may have contributed to the practice of focusing attention on preventative measures before resorting to the use of suspension to deal with problematic student behaviour. Returning to the ideas put forward by theorists on deviant behaviour and the beliefs held by supporters of the mental hygiene movement, student behaviour could be significantly and negatively impacted by factors beyond academic performance. It is crucial that the non-academic supports that are in place be seen as effective in meeting the needs of the students who are engaged in the suspension and expulsion programs. If they are not effective, principals, parents and students may not seek to utilize the formal programs, except as a last resort.

Certainly, related to this last point, one prior condition in Rural Catholic that bears further mention is the practice of rarely using expulsion as a stage in the progressive discipline process. Perhaps this practice, combined with the relatively low rate of suspensions, has arisen in response, consciously or unconsciously, to the difficulties faced in accessing services for suspended and expelled youth in a physically large board. Perhaps it has taken place for other reasons. Whatever the basis for the practice, clearly it will impact policy implementation, as the decision makers within the board will look very carefully at alternatives before breaking with practice and deciding to expel a youth from the schools in the board.

In both boards, there was an obvious need to differentiate between the conditions that cannot be changed, such as the physical size of the boards, and the conditions that can and should be changed, such as the school level response to inappropriate behaviour. Both boards seem to have been successful in differentiating between these two types of conditions. They also have been able to successfully set up plans to address the barriers created by conditions that cannot be changed while changing other conditions to allow successful support of suspended and expelled youth, including providing transportation and itinerant support.

Key people in the implementation process seem to be aware of the supports that are needed to change conditions in order to positively impact their students. The next step would involve ensuring the supports are in place to allow these changes to take place. Certainly, it is essential to see what can be kept from existing practices rather than making wholesale changes, abandoning policies and practices that are working well, or ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater.’ A good example of this approach can be seen in Composite Public’s current review of their Alternate programs to see how they can be used to better benefit at risk students. Similarly, Rural Catholic seems to be at the stage of reviewing their existing Alternate program
to see how it might be improved. Incremental change, with attention to existing conditions, has a greater chance of being successful and is more likely to be accepted by a larger number of stakeholders (Hayes, 2001; Poocharoen, 2013). Fine tuning, to create a ‘hub’ as planned in Rural Catholic, then, may be the answer to this issue.

Support (Resources)

During the mobilization process, as plans were being developed as to how to best implement the policies, both boards sought and received input from other sources within the province. Ministry information was used to inform practice from the outset. In addition, the lawyer for Rural Catholic checked with other boards to ensure alignment of local board practice with approaches being used across the province. The Safe Schools coordinator was provided with direction as to those practices that were being used elsewhere and could be applicable at the local level. Board data was studied in order to determine which areas, such as most common reasons for suspension, were most important as focal points for policy implementation. As the process moved further along the track from mobilization to implementation, input was sought from people and resources as to how best to put theory into practice. Board personnel and community agencies were consulted for their input. The Safe Schools coordinator undertook research into practices such as restorative approaches in order to determine a concrete direction for the programs to take. Money earmarked for projects related to Student Success and Safe Schools initiatives was utilized to support the program through a planned approach.

In Composite Public, personnel involved in mobilization also utilized information that was provided by the Ministry and by other boards and programs in the province. The Safe Schools principal spoke of the importance of Bill 212 information from the Ministry in helping to establish a foundation for program plans. The student support counsellor added his input on the value of observing a program in another part of the province that had been in place since the time that pilot programs were first set up. As was the case in Rural Catholic, Composite Public participants emphasized the importance of data that was provided by the Safe Schools principal in informing and, thus, supporting the implementation process. The value of the community partnerships was highlighted, since these relationships not only led to an increase in the number of people working with the program and gave the board a place to house the program, but also provided access to the information and training that the personnel from various agencies brought to the process.
One practice that would probably help both participating boards with the process of implementation would be to research practices used successfully by boards with similar profiles. Both boards commented on the need for research, along with time and expertise to carry out this research. The director in Rural Catholic spoke of the need for a research officer and the superintendent of the board made a similar comment about not having the time to let people meet to examine internal data. The retired coordinator suggested that it would be helpful to have key actors meet to share their expertise and she added that she had been “flying by the seat” of her pants during initial implementation since she did not have this information. One principal within the board repeatedly spoke of the need to examine the effectiveness of the Alternate program and, if necessary, research alternatives to this approach.

Composite Board policy actors used information gained from their observation of a program in another part of the province to set up their own programs. Although the two boards were very different in profile, the information gained by the visit provided a good starting point. Subsequent research could take the form of consultation with key board personnel or the examination of relevant studies that have been carried out. The majority of participants in the interviews spoke of the influence of Ministry resources and information received from other boards on the implementation of policy as it related to suspension and expulsion programs. It must be kept in mind, however, that not all of the information gleaned from research done at the provincial level or from experiences in other parts of Ontario would apply to specific situations in Rural Catholic and Composite Public. This becomes obvious when one looks at the impact that varying conditions, such as the physical size of the board and distribution of the student population, have on policy implementation.

Many of the unique features cited by representatives in both boards were connected to the physical sizes of the boards and the differences between urban and rural needs. Research by one of the two participating boards of types of suspension and expulsion programs set up in a large urban board was, as mentioned earlier, a great start. Unfortunately, this research did not provide an understanding of the unique needs of a large board with a rural-urban mix. To find solutions for these issues, it would be best to seek out research and people who have dealt with similar situations. The former should not be omitted from the process since implementation is often impacted by discussion with colleagues rather than by evidence-based research (Levin, 2010). There is a danger that this closed loop approach could lead to the continuation of existing practices without consideration for recommendations that have come from more recent research
findings. There is a need to utilize research that shows good practices rather than continuing bad practices that sometimes continue to be used despite research findings (Levin, 2010). This is not to suggest that practices which have been adopted by the two participating boards are bad practices. It is meant only as a reminder to be aware of successful practices that are suggested through evidence-based research.

The manner in which the research is interpreted and used must also be considered. In the information age, there is a great deal of information available from a variety of sources and it needs to be sifted through to be of value to inform practice (Hess, 2008). This requires time and personnel, something that was pointed out by many of the interview participants. In addition, care must be taken to allow time for change due to policy implementation to take root. Without time and appropriate support, the new processes will not take hold (Hall & Hord, 2001), hence the comment by some interview participants that one Safe Schools’ policy was just in place when the next, different practice was on the horizon. Where possible, support should continue for links with existing policies so that practices might be built on rather than changed completely. At times, support for older but still effective policies is removed in favour of new ‘and improved’ policy. This can have the effect of leading policy implementers to be cynical in their views that they are implementing the ‘flavour of the month’ and that ‘this too shall pass’, thus increasing the possibility of policy failure (Cohen et al, 2007).

It is difficult to get buy-in from key people if the feeling exists that support will be pulled or the process will continue to change. It is typically easier to make minor changes to existing policies, as has been done with the most recent version of the suspension and expulsion policies, rather than making wholesale changes to the policies that are in place (Hall & Hord, 2001). If, however, larger changes are seen as essential, more resources in the form of funds, professional development and time must be provided in order to increase the likelihood that implementation will be successful (Cohen et al, 2007). For example, if all programs in the province were required to have a ‘hub’ approach to serving suspended and expelled youth, it would be most effective to provide supports in the form of time and professional development to allow board teams to determine how to set this up.

The profiles of the students involved in the suspension and expulsion programs also provide ideas as to possible directions that research could take as the boards continue the process of implementing Safe Schools’ policies. The majority of study participants indicated that students involved in the programs are most often male students in Grade 10 and many of those
who highlighted this fact expressed interest in why this was the case. Rather than waiting to deal with these students when they enter the program, research could be done on how best to recognize and assist students who are at-risk of suspension and expulsion before they become linked to the programs.

Attention should also be paid to the potential change to the profile, since at least one interview participant suggested that female students were beginning to exhibit deviant behaviour to a greater extent. Boards were encouraged to “draw upon evidence-informed practices that promote positive student behaviour” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 3). This approach seems to have been used with some success in addressing the substance abuse issues which appeared to be of specific concern in the suspension and expulsion data of the previous decade and could be applied where other patterns are seen. As well, school boards and community-service providers in the province are already working with assessment tools designed to identify students at risk and these could be used for the purpose of identifying potential candidates for the suspension and expulsion programs since the Ministry directives allow for the use of provincial funds to support students in proactive as well as reactive ways.

As would be expected, participants in both boards call for funding to assist with the planning and implementation of policies related to Safe Schools’ initiatives. The funds, if provided, would be used to purchase resources and provide in-service training for staff members who work with students who are presently involved in, or are potential candidates for, the suspension and expulsion programs. The need for this type of support is consistent with research findings (Datnow, 2006; Datnow, 2010; Loeb & McEwen, 2006). The provision of funding to allow key personnel the time to compile, study, and communicate information about suspension and expulsion data was cited as an essential support by many of the study participants. Research could be done to better determine the specific needs of the students involved in the programs, so that these needs could be better served. Support must be available over time, not just at the outset, in order to ensure success (Bickmore, 2011) which links to the comment made by one interview participant that capacity building should be the focus of support that was provided for the programs. Communication must involve members of both the internal board and external community teams in order to be effective, as both the Rural Catholic Safe Schools coordinator and the Composite Public Safe Schools principal have suggested. Again, this is consistent with research findings that understanding by all stakeholders is essential to effective implementation of policy (Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2010).
Central Control

The study participants were almost unanimous in their feeling that policies were adequately communicated by the Ministry. According to representatives from both boards, the expectations placed on the boards for policy implementation were quite clearly laid out in the Policy/Program Memorandums, written resources and presentations that were used to introduce the changes across the province. The teleconferences and regional meetings were cited as valuable communication mechanisms that permitted and encouraged the exchange of information, provision of feedback and sharing of best practices. Initial funding for the program, for the coordinator and Safe Schools principal role, and funds allotted for related initiatives provided a monetary starting point as boards put programs into place. Monitoring, at least of suspension and expulsion numbers, was seen as being carried out through the reports that were required to be submitted annually by school boards. Flexibility from the Ministry as to how the policies could be put in place was seen by some to be a positive which allowed boards to look at their individual strengths and needs as they approached implementation.

Issues did arise, however, with regards to how best to implement the policies. If Ministry control does not extend to this level, it is very likely that complete compliance with policy implementation will not take place as it has been envisioned (Berman, 1978; Datnow, 2006; Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990), despite everyone’s best intentions and best efforts. For example, does the level of non-academic support provided by staff “borrowed” from local high schools constitute compliance with Ministry direction? If not, the impact of these actors may not be what was sought when the policy was created. While flexibility in implementation is good when it is due to differences in boards, it can be detrimental if there is a complete lack of consistency in how policy is implemented across the province. Any sharing of best practices between the different boards’ programs, for example, will be of little value if there is no commonality between the programs.

A ‘cookie cutter’ approach to implementation must be avoided, however, if success is to be achieved (Malen, 2006). As can be seen, each board has unique features and unique approaches that have proven to be successful in dealing with the specific situations with which they are faced and the Ministry recognizes this. On the other hand, increased flexibility can lead to policy outcomes that were not originally intended (Cohen et al, 2007). A balance must be found between acknowledging the unique conditions and needs of each board, many of which
were outlined in the section above, while maintaining a common foundation of practices that are consistent with other boards in the province (Wu et al, 2010). Both boards involved in this study seem to be moving towards finding this balance.

Continued two-way communication about the implementation processes in each of the individual boards is essential. As one study participant has suggested, the stories are important to the process. This is true not only of the students’ stories about their unique situations but also of the stories and learning experiences of the individual boards. Qualitative research will allow a deeper understanding than quantitative study of the specific situations with which the board teams are dealing. This, in turn, will allow the Ministry and the individual boards to set up the appropriate plans to respond effectively to the needs that exist.

CONCLUSIONS

Two key terms came up time and again in the discussions that took place about the suspension and expulsion programs, in all four areas of focus – policy actors, conditions, support and central control. These two terms are relationships and flexibility. Participants in the study believe that relationships between the key stakeholders have a significant impact on policy implementation. As Fullan suggests, “it is the relationships that make the difference” (Fullan, 2001, p. 51) when change is needed. We see this in the comments that are made about the importance of interaction between the key policy actors. To begin with, caring and supportive relationships with students are key, (Portelli et al, 2007), as students need a bond with the wider community in order to thrive (Hoffman, 2011) and the interview participants demonstrate recognition of this fact when they comment on the importance of including student input in the process of implementation planning. As indicated earlier, the students providing the input should include those who have had experience with either the suspension or expulsion programs. Their insights into what they have found helpful about the programs and what they feel could be improved would serve as relevant input to those responsible for designing and updating the programs.

Equally vital are connections with the wider community (Portelli et al, 2007) as effective supports are being created. The expertise of policy actors from many community agencies, such as mental health centres, is necessary, especially in order to allow programs to meet the non-academic goals of the programs. As a supervisor of these programs, I have seen how important the involvement of these experts is and the input of the key informants confirmed that this is the case for the two boards involved in the study. Trust between participants in any venture of this
sort is also very important (Smylie & Evans, 2006) since they must work in collaboration to meet the complex and interconnected needs that were evident when informants described the profiles of the students involved in the program.

We see two general categories of relationships existing as part of the implementation process in the two boards that participated in the study, according to interview participants’ comments. The first type of relationship that is in evidence is the interpersonal relationship that exists among individuals within and between each group of policy actors. Various examples of this type of relationship exist, most importantly the relationship between program personnel and the students and families who are being served by the program. Some of the best examples of this type of relationship are evident in the comments that are made about the connections that existed between the Rural Catholic Safe Schools coordinator and the students working on the program requirements from home. Certainly, however, other examples existed in both boards.

The second type of relationship that appeared to be vital to program implementation in both boards could be referred to as an inter-organizational relationship. Both boards commented on the importance of this type of connection as key personnel planned, put into place and ran the programs that they decided upon to serve the youth in their charge. These relationships existed with Ministry personnel, counterparts in other boards and partners in the community. In the case of the latter relationship, while both boards cited it as an integral part of their operation, the connection in Composite appeared to have evolved to the point that it was seen as essential to have the partners operate under the same roof.

The stakeholders that form part of this vital connection include those that are already involved as well as those that have been recommended by study participants. Issues faced by students and educators are too vast to be adequately addressed by only one or two of the stakeholder groups in the community. The list of those who should be involved, according to the comments made by study participants, includes teachers, classroom support staff, community front line workers, students and parents and is almost identical to the list of those who have been found in the past to be necessary in supporting any at risk students (Veryard, 2003). Their involvement helps to ensure that teachers are not trying to deal with issues for which they are not trained (Fennimore, 1988). Proper division of duties also helps to ensure that teachers are freed up to carry out the duties in their areas of expertise – teaching and classroom management. They can continue to contribute to the safety of the school by engaging their students and by carrying
out their responding and reporting responsibilities according to Bill 157 so that students are able to get the help that they need, rather than carrying out the roles of psychologist and social worker, for which they are not trained.

Relationships with Ministry personnel are also seen as important since they represent a central collection site for information. It was obvious from comments made by interview participants that those on the front line of the implementation process rely heavily on the information and support that they gain from Ministry personnel responsible for the Safe Schools portfolio. Finally, further relationships are needed with those involved in research related to suspensions, expulsions and youth who are at risk. From the responses provided in the study, it does not seem that this area has been explored to its fullest extent, largely due to the fact that time and research expertise have not been available at the front lines. Judging by the comments, however, this is seen as a crucial piece of the puzzle since almost all study participants commented on the need to engage board and community support personnel in the planning and implementation stages.

Andy Hargreaves, in proposing a “Fourth Way of Change”, recognized the importance of both the interpersonal and inter-organizational relationships, although not calling them by these names. He saw the obstacles that were presented by both overly flexible and extremely rigid implementation practices that had been previously used. He emphasized, instead, an inclusive vision that involved public engagement and corporate and student partnerships (Hargreaves, 2009), all of which are consistent with the views presented by the key informants in this study.

As with the earlier comment about the importance of the contribution made by community members, the people external to the board who have knowledge of important research and effective practices that exist elsewhere have the potential to make contributions that will enhance programs. In my opinion, supported by comments made by key informants in this study, their input needs to be sought out and utilized. Each of the types of partnerships suggested by Hargreaves – student, parent, business, agency, and others – adds to the effective implementation of policy in ways that would not be possible if implementation was carried out solely by educators. Since non-academic goals make up a significant aspect of the action plan created for the students, it is imperative that the people assisting with the realization of these goals are qualified to provide the necessary support. Serving in the role of Safe Schools principal, it was apparent to me that this key role had to be carried out by the appropriate,
trained support staff to be effective, as the key informants have suggested.

If one looks at the evolution of discipline in schools to address the behaviours of the most hard to serve in the population, it is apparent that a great deal of change has occurred in the past 150 years. At the time of Confederation and well into the twentieth century, extreme student misbehaviour was dealt with through a punitive, one size fits all form of discipline.

Over time, voices of dissent were directed at the system and advocates appeared for those who did not fit the norm. Attention was drawn to the young people on the fringes of the education process who, in a metaphor put forward by Michael Apple, stood outside the market of education, able only to watch and wish that they could take part (Apple, 2007). Policymakers and educators became aware that it was important to understand the diversity and complexity of youth in order to keep them from becoming disengaged (Smyth, 2008). Participants in the mental hygiene movement, children’s rights advocates, vocal parents, and community support groups began to demand consideration for the unique needs of individual youth. Responses to student needs and to the misbehaviour of students became more diverse and were increasingly locally driven, rather than being determined by a central body according to a cookie cutter model. The African proverb, ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ started to be adopted by those in the education field. This approach, however, was not without its challenges. Many of these challenges have been experienced by those who participated in the study.

In some instances, relationships are hindered by the red tape that exists in any bureaucracy. As has been demonstrated through the study responses, many of the answers to questions faced by those involved in programming already exist. The organizers need to be able to access this information and they also need to be able to disclose key information about students already involved in the program. It is worthwhile to pursue these connections (Veryard, 2007). In some cases, policies may need to be revised in order to make the sharing of information possible. For example, as one study participant pointed out, PPM 128 (The Provincial Code of Conduct and School Board Code of Conduct) put limitations on the involvement of third party service providers, directing boards to build on existing partnerships and create new ones while, at the same time creating protocols for third party involvement and formalizing these relationships. I witnessed a similar experience when one local police force in the province attempted to gather information on the quality of service provided through the School Resource Officer program (practice of having police officers connected as a support for each of the schools in the board) only to be stymied by local board research protocols. While
limitations are necessary, it is important that the limitations do not also limit supports for students most in need of assistance. Processes that involve negotiation, the sharing of information, consensus building and willingness to listen to the ideas of others will have the greatest chance of success (Fuller, 2013). This is only possible if some of the barriers to this type of open discussion are removed.

A significant aspect of effective relationships involves two-way communication. Participants in both boards stressed the importance of making direct contact with students, parents and teachers. The positive relationships that exist between Safe Schools administrators and the people in the schools, the programs and the community were made possible because communication took place in both directions. This is consistent with research findings which stress the importance of building supportive and collaborative structures in schools (Portelli et al). All stakeholders gave and received information that helped to make the process more effective. Their level of awareness of the other actors involved was often important as well.

Where time permitted, climate surveys and other data were studied closely and used to inform practice. Similarly, the greatest gains were found at a macro level when open two-way communication existed between the Ministry representatives and personnel from each of the boards through the regional meetings and teleconferences, as indicated by those who participated or benefitted from the information in the two participating boards. These processes should be continued and built upon, including other Ministry departments as well. According to those interviewed, it is important for the Ministry to take the time to complete thorough, regular monitoring while ensuring that personnel within the boards have the time to adequately study data and discuss its significance among the key players. Monitoring and regular gathering of feedback are the only ways to determine what is needed at the board level, in order to ensure effective implementation (Fowler, 2004). I have observed the value of this in my own work, taking part in and observing the give and take of information at the regional Safe Schools meetings, in a practice that is vital if improvements to programs are to continue to be made.

Another key term that was emphasized repeatedly by key informants throughout the conversations was flexibility. As was evident in the two boards that were selected for the study, each board has distinct features. Rarely will one best practice be found that works in all cases (Wu et al, 2010). To this point, the Ministry has allowed considerable flexibility in how the policies related to suspensions and expulsions are put into place. At present, monitoring of the programs is limited to information gained by the Ministry through teleconferences and regional
meetings with Safe Schools’ leads. It is important for the evolution of the programs in Rural and Composite that the Ministry continue to leave flexibility in implementation guidelines while seeking better, more in-depth ways to monitor the programs. Some leads have expressed concern that the focus on Safe Schools is in danger of being “a mile wide and an inch deep”, cautioning that overseeing too many initiatives in a superficial way will result in only a vague awareness of what is truly taking place with regards to the initiative. This approach, if continued, leads to the possibility that programs will stray too far from the original vision, intentionally or unintentionally, making it impossible to bring them back on track.

The ‘backward mapping’ practice, first described by Elmore in the 1980’s (Barrett, 2004; Elmore, 1980; Dyer, 1999) would be effective as the front line workers decide collaboratively on what they wish to achieve and work backwards to determine what actions are needed to reach this end point. This is consistent with Barber’s paradigm which recommends devolving of responsibility to the front line (Barber, 2009). The Ministry and boards can learn a great deal from the creative ways that board personnel respond to challenges that they face in their unique situations. “Leaders should put aside any notions that they know best and listen carefully to what other stakeholders say” (Fowler, 2013, p. 259). The main purpose of the Ministry in the process of implementation would be to ensure that challenges were identified and addressed, supports provided in order to do this, and best practices shared in order to sustain effective practices across the province. Monitoring for the purpose of dictating a prescriptive approach to policy implementation would not be a key focus, as Ministry officials would rely on the expertise of the local or front line experts to ensure program effectiveness and instead concentrate their efforts on sharing findings with boards across the province.

Flexibility in programming allows the use of supports before students are sent to the program, as well. Rather than waiting until a student has committed an act that would result in suspension, support could be provided in the form of a social worker or psychologist to address this student’s needs while he or she is still in school. As was evident in the theories of deviance literature, there is often an underlying concern or inequity that has led to the deviant behaviour. If this can be addressed by support staff in the regular school setting, there might not be a need for attendance at a formal program to ‘rehabilitate’ the student. When the Strict Discipline Program was first put into place in 2001, it did not have a large number of expelled students to serve. As a result, the support services were briefly used to support students in need before they were expelled (Veryard, 2003). For example, a student who experienced substance abuse issues
but had not yet been expelled could be provided with supports from program staff without being fully integrated into an expulsion program. While this practice had to be discontinued when the programs began to fill up with expelled students, it is worth remembering that success was experienced with the proactive rather than reactive use of supports. Students who, if born a decade later, might have been candidates for the suspension program were provided with the assistance they needed before they had to be formally sanctioned. In some cases, the support was so effective that it was not necessary to suspend them down the road, thus resulting in the support over punishment emphasis that has been evident in the evolution of policy over time.

Ultimately, the purpose of this paper was to look at the implementation of policies related to suspension and expulsion programs in Ontario. While proactive responses may help to reduce the number of students who are suspended or expelled, a program is required when all other interventions fail. A diverse range of practices still exist in these programs, due to factors related to actors, conditions, support and central control, but innovative ideas and creative solutions have helped to steer approaches in the right direction. We see from the information collected that many similarities and some differences exist between the two boards participating in the study in the ways that they have addressed behaviours that could result in suspension or expulsion.

When it has become necessary to consider a long-term suspension, Rural Catholic Board has used a combination of responses. In some instances, students complete an in-school suspension in their home school. In other instances, they are transferred to a different board building to carry out their suspension or they work from home with the support of program staff. In some cases, they are referred to the one of the two Alternate programs in the board where they receive academic support from the teacher and support staff located there to work with all students in the program. Assistance with the non-academic component of the program, no matter where the student ends up being located, is provided by the appropriate support staff members from the board or community who specialize in providing assistance with a particular area of need, whether that is addictions, mental health, anger management or some other similar area. The people who work with the students in this capacity at the program also have responsibility for working with students in the regular school setting and must, therefore, divide their time accordingly.

Composite Public Board employs board staff and engages community agencies to carry out much the same role in meeting the needs of students in their suspension and expulsion programs. As with Rural Catholic, Composite has academic and non-academic support workers
who will, if necessary, travel to meet with students who cannot attend the program at its central site. At the central site, board staff and community agencies work directly and exclusively with students who are placed there. The actors are very similar to those involved in the process of implementation at Rural Catholic, but they work more exclusively with the students in the program.

While the Composite Public Board program could be described as a ‘hub’, Rural Catholic does not currently work with this type of arrangement. According to study participants, however, they are moving in that direction. One or more ‘hubs’ allowing “one stop shopping” for academic and non-academic supports from a wide range of stakeholders seems to best fit the bill for Composite Board and it appears that Rural Catholic policy actors are of the opinion that it might better serve their needs. While this type of program is already in place in Composite Board, many Rural Catholic representatives are so taken with the idea that the main recommendation seems to be to set up Alternate programs with the ‘hub’ format or to put the ‘hubs’ in place to work specifically with the suspended and expelled youth.

According to the points raised about the Alternate program in both boards, it seems that the jury is still out on the form that the academic program should take at the suspension and expulsion programs, with the benefits of various teaching styles being highlighted by different interview respondents. Some have spoken of the need to review Alternate program practices while others have emphasized the value of hands-on learning such as that found through cooperative education. Certainly, theorists studying deviant behaviour have stressed the importance of a level academic playing field to support youth development, if deviant behaviour is to be effectively addressed. Cohen (Downes & Rock, 1988), Cloward and Ohlin (Hoffman, 2011) have all found that deviance is more likely as a response if a student’s academic objectives are thwarted. Policy actors who are able to support diverse learning styles in the suspension and expulsion programs are of vital importance if progress is to be made. Stakeholders in both boards realize this and focus on this area is of the utmost importance in their program delivery. Different non-academic components have been suggested as well by the policy actors involved in the both the mobilization and implementation phases. Again, it appears from the responses that the suggestions are being taken into consideration, as the range of policy actors involved in this aspect of delivery continues to expand. The basic set-up of the ‘hub’ program, as a result, seems to be supported by those interviewed in both boards, which are at different stages in this aspect of the implementation process but headed in the same
While the differences in programming in the two boards are a result of the impact of a number of factors on the implementation process, there would appear to be one component at the heart of the issue that primarily accounts for the differences. This component could be considered a subgroup of the policy actors factor. The component is the student group involved in the suspension and expulsion programs. The implementation process is driven by the boards’ attempts to meet the needs of the students. If students are not able to have their needs met, both academic and non-academic needs, then it is necessary for changes to be made to the implementation process.

In some instances, the policy actors connected with policy implementation were changed in order to better meet student needs. Actors were added to the mobilization or implementation stages where their involvement was required to better serve the students. The Safe Schools coordinator in Rural Catholic took on a specific role to meet student needs while in Composite Public, actors such as law students were added to fill a niche that was evident in student needs there. If conditions, such as distance to a program, prevented students from accessing services, the conditions were addressed. Rural Catholic arranged to have services brought to the students and Composite Public, while also doing this, provided transportation to the central site for any students who might otherwise not attend. Since not all students would come to a central location in Rural Catholic, services were divided up in order to impact the broadest number of students there. On the other hand, since students were regularly attending the central site in Composite Public, the services were focused there, in order to better serve the needs of the students in the program. Each board took into consideration the unique needs of its students in determining how best to access central control. Each board utilized relationships and flexibility, albeit in different ways, in order to best meet the needs of the most important policy actor in the implementation of the policy – the student.

The question put forward at the beginning of this paper was “What impact do policy actors, local conditions, support and central control have on the implementation of Safe Schools Policy related to suspension and expulsion programs?”.

A wide range of policy actors have or could have impact on the implementation of these particular Safe Schools’ policies, with the list of actors varying from board to board depending on needs. The main decisions revolve around who should be involved and at what level of involvement, from those who are on the front line to those who are at the top of the chain of
stakeholders at the board and Ministry level.

Rural Catholic participants spoke of the key role that the coordinator played in the implementation process. As their program evolves, many in the board also spoke of the need to include a broader range of actors to support students in the non-academic realm and to focus on coordination of services. It was clear from the information communicated that, at present, principals often found it more effective to have actors within the regular school system work with students rather than move immediately to the suspension program. In Composite Public, interview participants again referred to the need to coordinate the involvement of the policy actors to improve service to the students. Those interviewed in Composite spoke of the important role played by the Safe Schools principal, but it was clear from their comments that this role differed from that of the Rural Catholic counterpart.

Pre-existing and present conditions within the board have an impact on the implementation process. Some conditions, such as the geography of the board, cannot be changed and must be considered in the implementation process if a policy is to have any success. Other conditions, while changeable, have been in place for an extended period of time. A decision must be made as to whether these conditions should be changed to assist with the implementation process. Generally speaking, the bigger the change that is required, the longer the change will take and tougher sustainability will be to achieve without the majority of the actors buying in and without the required support. In Rural Catholic, for example, a change from preventative measures and Alternate program support to an all-purpose ‘hub’ would be a major departure from current practice. If staff members in the schools, principals, senior administrators and trustees are not behind this change, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. At present, it represents one of the key differences between Composite Board, which has a type of ‘hub’ in place and Rural Catholic, where the decision makers are considering moving towards this model. Similarly, if funds to support the research and implementation of this change in practice are not available, it is unlikely that it will lead to the desired results over the long term. Based on reports provided by Composite Public informants and my own observations about the value of the contributions made by support staff, I feel that the ‘hub’ would be a change that would serve the Rural Catholic program well, if it was taken on with sufficient support in place.

The responses from the interview participants leave little doubt that support, or perhaps the provision of resources, is a key factor impacting the implementation of policy. Support can take the form of material resources, personnel, research and professional development and
almost always involves the provision of funds to support one or more of these components. Interview participants from both boards spoke of the benefits of having a location in which to house suspended and expelled youth, along with the appropriate support personnel to address student needs. Rural Catholic representatives indicated that provision of time, information and resources to allow a more detailed analysis of suspension and expulsion data would aid in their board’s ability to respond appropriately to Safe Schools’ issues. All of these components require internal and external support and are vital to program success.

While many of the suggestions put forward by the participants in the study had to do with resources connected with the non-academic goals set for students in the program, one must not forget the need to support academic progress. As research suggests, many at risk youth learn best in an options-loaded curriculum. Just as attention to diverse learning styles is important in the regular school program, it is equally important in the academic environment of the suspension and expulsion programs. Participants in the two boards involved in this study recognize this fact and, as a result, attention is being paid to the Alternate programs that currently are offered within the boards. Discussion is underway as to how information gained from looking at these programs can be used to enhance the learning environments of the suspension and expulsion programs. Support for this research would almost certainly benefit the programs, since the academic goals must be achieved for program students to be successful.

In order for the results achieved through the implementation process to be sustainable, time is one of the most important resources needed in the process. Time is required in order to determine the present situation, to find the most effective way to address the situation and to put into place the plan to address the situation. It is also required in order to review and revise practices on a regular basis and to seek and give feedback to others involved within or outside the board. Time, then, is needed at both the local and provincial level. As one interview participant suggested, it is also essential to have time to reflect on the information that is acquired. Without this, it is impossible to make informed, well thought out decisions and, in the words of one participant, local teams will still be “flying by the seat of their pants”.

Central control serves as a stabilizer in the implementation process, since it is key to have one body connecting all of the boards that are going through the implementation process. Acting in this role, representatives of the Ministry provided and received information regarding Safe Schools’ initiatives such as the suspension and expulsion programs. It was very apparent in the feedback that resulted from this study, though, that some control must be relinquished to the
local boards to allow them to address their diverse needs and utilize their varied strengths effectively. In the case of Rural Catholic, the Safe Schools’ representatives in the board were able to devote time, energy, and funds to support students at risk of suspension prior to sanctions being imposed, just as resources earmarked for the Strict Discipline Program a decade earlier had been used to support rather than sanction students. In Composite Public, funds were used for itinerant support to assist students who could not travel to the central program in the city.

Legislation related to the suspension and expulsion programs provides the opportunity for this local control. “Resources that are dedicated to programs for students on long-term suspension may also be used to benefit students who have not been suspended but who have shown behaviours that, if unchanged, could lead to suspension” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 2). The decision is left to the board personnel and their partners as to how to use the resources that are provided for these programs, as long as a priority is placed on programming for students who ultimately are suspended or expelled. It is vital that the Ministry continue in the role as the key connector of information, like the hub connecting all of the spokes of the wheel. The connection should be a loosely coupled one, however, consisting of monitoring to ensure that the overall direction of the policy is followed, providing support as needed, but also allowing the flexibility of delivery required by the needs and strengths that exist at the local level. Returning to Elmore’s model, the front line workers are in the best position to determine the needs of the students in the programs and how best to meet those needs. If students are able to receive the support needed to reach their academic and non-academic goals while working at a location away from a central site, this should be permitted. According to reports from key informants, this approach appears to be working for Composite Public, when needed. It is unclear if it works for Rural Catholic, based on feedback, although the interview responses seem to indicate that use of the Alternate Program to serve the needs of suspended and expelled youth is lacking. Communication among community agency actors, as suggested by the Safe Schools coordinator, would be helpful, as existing practices are reviewed and recommendations made.

In carefully examining the impact that the selected factors have on implementation, the focus comes back to relationships, communication and flexibility. Each of these components is a facet of the four factors that were listed at the outset. They are also the key components that exist between the factors. Factors having impact cannot be thought of in isolation since factors supporting implementation “form a system of variables that interact to determine success or failure” (Fullan, 2001, p. 71) over time. Repeatedly, throughout the interview process,
participants referred to the importance of coordination of services, the impact of local conditions such as distance, and the need for support for their initiatives. Relationships and communication are essential between the policy actors involved in implementation. Relationships and communication are also vital as connectors between the four factors. Conditions drive the actions carried out by the policy actors and must be considered in any action that is taken. Support limits or allows and informs the actions that are taken by the policy actors and aids in determining what can and should be done about conditions.

Central control can only be effective in the process if information is shared in two directions (Barber, 2009) and support is provided in direct response to needs determined by the policy actors, local conditions and the supports that are already in place. In Composite Public, informants indicate the process in the ‘hub’ is working, but they require support for additional ‘hubs’ to better serve students on the outskirts of the board’s boundaries. Rural Catholic has expressed a need to study data and bring partners together to determine the best course of action. While this information was shared in the interview process, it needs to be reported to the Ministry and decisions must be made at that level as to how to most effectively support the boards’ efforts.

In order to accurately describe the impact various factors have on each other, the degree of influence of the relationships that are formed and maintained during the implementation process must be considered. Policy actors influence implementation directly since they are the ones actually implementing policy. Without the people, no action of a positive, neutral or negative form would take place. As seen in the comments made by key informants, some policy actors have a more significant impact on implementation than others, certainly. The Safe Schools coordinator in Rural Catholic and the front line workers in Composite Public are just two examples of policy actors who have profound effects on how policy is implemented.

Conditions have an impact on how policy actors will respond to the direction to implement policy. The distance factor, for example, influenced student involvement in the program as well as the way in which support programs were set up. If programs are to be successful, it is important that the Ministry of Education consider conditions during the process of policy creation and also in terms of the support they provide. While a complete lack of support would almost certainly lead to implementation failure, policy actors determine how the supports that are available are being used. Creative responses by policy actors in both boards in the study demonstrated how great gains could be made with minimal support in adverse
conditions. Policy actors, one could extrapolate, could make greater progress with increased support in the form of relevant data and research, funding for resources and training, and more time to carry out the implementation process.

Flexibility is key to the process as well. There must be a “clear and firm direction” and “also a keen sense of partnership with the field, and flexibility according to local needs and variations” (Fullan, 2009, p. 280). Based on the feedback provided by key informants in both boards, the direction provided by the Ministry with regards to the suspension and expulsion programs was very clear and firm. Informants were almost unanimous in their expression of this view. Policy actors in Composite Public and Rural Catholic are aware of the need to support the achievement of academic and non-academic goals by the students in their care. The reports regarding partnerships and flexibility, while not stated by all informants, seem to indicate that these factors were present as well. Many of those interviewed spoke of the variety of ways in which they worked with partners to gain from their expertise to help the students.

For implementation to work, there must be give and take among the actors, including those in a position of central control. “Effective user implementation seems to be characterized by mutual adaptation at the user level and by the staff’s clarification of the innovation’s goals and required role behaviours” (Berman, 1981, p. 273). Mutual adaptation occurs when there is change to both the innovation and to those who are carrying out the innovation, in order to make the change work effectively. Goals are modified to suit needs and participants change in response to the new policy requirements (McLaughlin, 1998). “Negotiation, flexibility, and adjustment” (Datnow, 2006, p. 107) have led to successful implementation more frequently than top down technical-rational methods in which policymakers were not sensitive to the needs of the policy actors involved. Carried out correctly, mutual adaptation leads to changes in the behaviours and practices of policy actors consistent both with the intent of the policy and the local conditions (Anderson, 2010). The agendas of each stakeholder group cannot be completely met and groups may need to make some changes to their protocols in order to allow relationships to fit.

We see evidence of mutual adaptation in the development and evolution of policies connected with the suspension and expulsion programs. Policy/Program Memorandum 130, which pre-dated PPM 141 and 142, makes no mention of using resources to support students who have not yet been suspended, focusing instead solely on services for expelled students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). The policies that followed shortly after did provide this
increased flexibility, indicating some give and take between the parties. Similarly, the policy actors recommended to be involved in mobilization and implementation of subsequent versions of the suspension and expulsion program policies changed, expanding to include a broader range of stakeholders, as the policies ‘morphed’ to more accurately reflect the needs of the populations being served.

Varying conditions require flexibility in response since boards are not exact replicas of one another. What works in one area may not work in another and this must be anticipated. Flexibility must be allowed in support since boards with different actors and different conditions will require different supports to move forward. A board that is well along the path as they strive to put into place a whole school approach to Safe Schools’ policies, for example, may not need funds that are being provided for this purpose. They may wish, however, to use these same funds to create a second ‘hub’ in order to serve the outlying population requiring a suspension and expulsion program. This describes the situation in Composite Public. Rural Catholic, meanwhile, may wish to fund an initial ‘hub’ or even direct funds to research officers who would study the data to decide on greatest needs. The Ministry, in the role of central control, has indicated that boards have the flexibility to set up the programs as required and it appears that this approach has been beneficial to the boards as they carry out the implementation process.

At the outset, the conceptual framework indicated that four factors – policy actors, conditions, support and central control – all exerted some type of impact on policy implementation. If a visual were to be created, it might show these four factors surrounding implementation with arrows showing a uni-directional impact, moving from the factors to implementation. Based on the information gleaned through this study, it would be more accurate to have two-headed arrows joining the four factors to the centre with additional two-headed arrows extending between the four factors in a web. These arrows would demonstrate the importance of relationships and communication between as well as within each factor. The two-headed nature of the arrows emphasizes the ongoing feedback loop that occurs between and among the various factors. The different sizes of the arrows would be indicative of the varying degree of influence that the factors have on one another and on policy implementation.

For this study, it is evident that policy actors and conditions would have the greatest impact on implementation while support from central control would significantly impact policy actors’ actions in implementation. The nature of the students in the school system and the students in the suspension and expulsion programs sets the tone for implementation. The work
done with the students determines the success of the program. The key policy actors working with the students, their families and the school personnel – whether one is referring to the different Safe Schools leads or the front line workers – directly shape the way in which the policy is put into practice.

Rural Catholic puts a great deal of emphasis on one policy actor in the policy implementation process. This actor is the Safe Schools coordinator, who is described as “the program”. The role of this actor is very important and the two people who have held this position in recent years have obviously done a great job in carrying out their duties effectively, judging by the comments made by key informants. Given the emphasis on prevention and proactive response to behaviour issues encountered at schools in the board, the approach used by the coordinator is essential in determining program effectiveness. Since so much responsibility lies with one individual and the skills and knowledge that she possesses, however, the success of the program truly lives or dies with the performance of this particular policy actor. This approach, then, has the potential to fail if the coordinator is not up to the task.

Composite Public’s increased emphasis on a shared approach among partners with expertise in a wide range of vital areas of support, meanwhile, has numerous advantages. Using their model, it is not necessary for one person to have vast knowledge and expertise in all of the areas that must be involved in support for suspended and expelled youth. The evolution of policies related to serving these young people, as outlined in the earlier chapters of this thesis, points to a need for support over punishment. As the legislation points out, the ultimate goal is to support students to allow them to return to the regular school setting. If the proper support is not available, the program is not likely to operate at a maximum level of effectiveness, but these actors are trained specifically for the role they are playing and should be expected to provide the appropriate support, as a result. As well, the individuals who are experts in their given field are likely to bring with them the research and knowledge gained in their specific fields. This translates to the increase in resources, in the form of data and information, which was sought by the informants who were interviewed for this thesis.

Policy actors, in turn, are shaped by conditions. The conditions could take the form of past practice, such as a board’s history of intervention without expulsion or the impact that the geography of a region has on involvement in support programs, to name just two examples. The interaction within and among these factors is equally important, however, and would need to be
emphasized in any representation of the factors impacting implementation. While the two boards were at different stages, using slightly different approaches, they both were engaged in a process that involved a wide variety of actors working collaboratively under the local conditions to provide programs for suspended and expelled youth. The actions of the actors needed to be flexible, as well, since changes in actors, conditions, supports, and direction from central control would always be taking place.

While both boards faced geographical challenges in their attempts to provide effective programming, Composite Public seemed to have arrived at a solution that was more palatable for the majority of students requiring program supports. According to the information provided by the key informants, the majority of students who qualified for involvement in the suspension and expulsion programs were actively involved in them. Those who could not access the ‘hub’ directly were provided with itinerant services, which appeared to be meeting their needs. On the other hand, informants in Rural Catholic were quite consistent in their views that Alternate programs were not adequately meeting the needs of suspended and expelled youth and that, as a result, many of the students were opting to stay home for the duration of their sanction rather than travel to town to access services. For this reason, Rural Catholic leaders were actively working to set up a ‘hub’ approach, like that found in Composite. One can surmise from this that a model like that used in Composite was deemed the most successful approach to policy implementation in that it allowed effective provision of both the academic and non-academic supports that were required by the suspension and expulsion policies.

Other factors, beyond policy actors and conditions, would impact one another and implementation itself to lesser degrees as the process of implementation continued. Certainly, the connection between supports and actors needs to be noted. The importance of appropriate supports has been cited extensively in the literature review and the need for adequate resources was stated by all of the key informants in both boards. Time, for example, is a support that is sorely needed if implementation is to be successful. Time for study, review, discussion and carrying out of plans in an organized fashion will all lead to more effective implementation. This is especially true, as previously mentioned, if implementation requires a significant departure from existing practice.

While supports or resources formed an important part of the process, however, the level of importance was largely determined by the manner in which the key policy actors used the supports and the value of the supports actually provided to the implementation process.
Returning to the point made above, involvement of actors who have knowledge and expertise that is of value to implementation will have a significant impact on the quality of support that is available to the programs and, thus, will affect the level and quality of additional support that is required. If, for example, mental health workers are available to work directly with the youth in the programs, the need for additional support in this area is significantly lessened and the quality of the support that is provided exceeds that which could be provided by a teacher with basic training in the area of mental health. The use of a model which emphasizes the importance of inter-organizational relationships, such as the ones established in Composite Public, would obviously be preferred, then, over a model in which these supports are not available.

Some emphasis must also be placed on the links from actors and conditions to central control and, in turn, from central control to supports. Effective Ministry monitoring procedures that take into account feedback from policy actors and the unique conditions within each board would allow more effective response in terms of support for implementation. At present, much of the data that is collected by the Ministry focuses on the number of suspensions and expulsions along with the reasons that these sanctions were applied. Information on the programs that are offered to support suspended and expelled youth is not gathered on a consistent and detailed basis. This information, though, would assist Ministry officials as they seek to determine how best to support the implementation of these policies at the board level. Informants consistently commented on the value of information exchange at regional meetings which suggests that these and similar practices should be considered.

The flexibility that currently exists within the policy allows boards to make changes to suit their local situations without requiring constant revisions to policy in response to a constantly changing educational world. This flexibility should not be removed, as it is evident that it serves a purpose, based on feedback provided by informants interviewed, especially those in Rural Catholic. However, the existing flexibility must be combined with the type of monitoring suggested above, to ensure that the requirements of the programs are being properly implemented. This is not to suggest that either of the boards involved in this study were negligent in the implementation process. As informants have stated, however, the Ministry of Education does not have a monitoring mechanism that effectively determines compliance with program requirements at present. Monitoring is essential in order to have a level of central awareness that permits an effective balance of flexibility and control which ensures that the
policies are being implemented as required while taking into account unique local situations. Policy actors, conditions, support and central control, then, were found to significantly influence implementation of policy as it relates to suspension and expulsion programs in Ontario. Upon closer examination, it became apparent that policy actors and the local conditions were the most significant of these four factors. Equally important according to the findings, however, are the relationships, communication and flexibility within and among these factors, if implementation is to be completely successful.

If one looks at existing models for policy implementation, the input provided by study participants suggests adopting a model that draws on the ideas put forward by Richard Elmore regarding ‘backward mapping’ in 1980. Elmore suggests that policy implementation needs to start at the lowest level, that which involves the front line workers, and work back to the policy makers. He suggests that two questions need to be asked at each stage along the way. “What is the ability of this unit to affect the behaviour that is the target of the policy? And what resources does this unit require in order to have that effect?” (Elmore, 1980, p. 604).

Remarks made by study participants are consistent with Elmore’s findings. Those closest to the problem that has led to policy formation, whether that is the Safe Schools coordinator in Rural Catholic or the support service workers at the ‘hub’ in Composite Public, are in the best position to come up with a solution to the problem and they need to be provided with the flexibility to put the solution into place. ‘Delegated discretion’ gives the authority to develop solutions to those with expertise and proximity to the problem – the front line workers. These findings are consistent with those stated by Honig with regards to organizational learning. She states that “organizational learning occurs not within single organizations ….. but between organizations” (Honig, 2006). This approach, however, requires that those in power place a higher importance on discretion than on compliance, since the outcome will not always be identical to the initial intent of the policy (Elmore, 1980). Ministry and board leaders can assist with this by ensuring that support is available, in the form of funding and resources, to adequately equip the policy actors to collaboratively approach the implementation process in their unique circumstances (Cohen et al, 2007).

At the outset, the two boards involved in this study were selected because of the differences that existed in their suspension and expulsion rates. At first glance, it could be assumed that the board with the lower rates had found more effective ways to address issues of inappropriate behaviour, thus reducing recidivism or repeat offenses involving inappropriate
behaviour. While this could still be a factor, another key seems to be the generally held beliefs that exist in the two participating boards with regards to where and how support for students can be most effectively used.

In Rural Catholic, it seems, human resources or policy actors involved in implementation are divided in such a way as to provide support prior to as well as after students have been suspended. In Composite Public, while resources are provided to support students who remain in a regular school setting, a stand-alone group of implementation actors is devoted to working with students at the board’s program site. Returning to Elmore’s theory of backward mapping, it might be valuable to seek the input of the front line workers as to the impact that they feel they are having with the approach that is in place. Failing that, it would be necessary to monitor over a period of time the recidivism rates of suspensions, expulsions and even office referrals for behaviour issues in the regular school setting in order to connect implementation practices with the impact they are having.

As is the case with policy creation, a policy must go through several phases of preparation before it can be implemented. Data is gathered and studied in the appraisal phase, stakeholders provide input in the dialogue phase, a draft of the policy is created in the formulation stage and feedback about the draft is gathered and used in the consolidation phase (Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009). It would make sense to follow the same phases when a policy is reviewed after having been in place for three to five years, since this time frame should provide an accurate window on the impact the policy has had (Hall & Hord, 2001). Data regarding suspensions, expulsions and discipline measures used in the regular school setting could be analyzed to determine the best method of implementing the suspension and expulsion programs and the continued most effective use of the factors that have an impact on these programs.

**IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Prior to 2008, programs for suspended and expelled youth did not exist in all boards across the province. During this time, since their introduction, very little information has been collected about these programs, how they are operated, reviewed and updated. As has been demonstrated through this study, a number of the programs that were set up five years ago were created based on trial and error, without much evidence-based support. It is hoped that this study will serve as a starting point for research into how the programs could be improved, since it
looks closely at the factors that have impacted policy implementation. With the introduction of Learning to 18, school boards must have options for youth who are suspended or expelled. They cannot be kicked out of schools and studies have demonstrated the costs to society when young people drop out (Ontario Ministry of Education, Student Success/Learning to 18, 2006). The policies that have been created to support Student Success actually provide many supports that could be used to assist those students who might otherwise find themselves involved in the suspension or expulsion programs down the road if interventions are not carried out.

The results of the study suggest that the factors outlined in the conceptual framework do form the foundation of the policy implementation process and the information gained from the interviews provides significant detail as to what impact these factors have had on the process of implementation. The policy actors, their strengths, limitations, and interactions are the starting point. Without the stakeholders there can be no action taken. Similarly, the conditions that exist in a board will impact the implementation process – those that can be changed and those that cannot. Implementation will not be successful without appropriate supports, whether the supports take the form of funding, material resources, professional development or time. Finally, central control allows educational administrators across the province to learn from the experience and to adjust implementation practices accordingly.

The study pointed out the many strengths that exist with the policy implementation process. Many of the key stakeholders are already at the table and should continue to have input into the practices that are underway. Some of the partners have joined the discussions over the past five years and their input has been valuable. Suggestions were made as to additional actors who could be brought in to make valuable contributions to the discussions that are already underway. Again, this is consistent with the recommendation that came from policy directives issued in 2008 (Bill 212 Teacher Full Presentation, 2008).

Based on the findings of this study, I would make several recommendations to those responsible for implementation of this particular Safe Schools’ policy in the two participating boards. I would also have recommendations for the Ministry of Education as to how they could continue to effectively support policy implementation.

According to my findings, based on the information provided by key informants, the ‘hub’ program established in Composite Public Board effectively meets the requirements of policies designed to support the needs of suspended and expelled youth, provided that they are able to access the program. While itinerant teaching and community agency staff members can
provide support to students in more remote areas, the effectiveness of this approach does not seem to reach the level that key informants describe as existing at the ‘hub’. I feel that it would be beneficial for senior administration to look at ways to replicate their existing ‘hub’ at other locations within the board which would allow programs to be more accessible to all students in the board. At the same time, the local Safe Schools team could look to Rural Catholic Boards to determine whether more of their resources could be devoted to assisting students in a proactive manner within their school settings prior to the use of suspension or expulsion.

The findings from Rural Catholic indicate that key informants perceive the Safe Schools coordinator’s approach to building relationships with other policy actors to be a highlight of the board’s implementation of policy related to suspension and expulsion programs. I would recommend that this approach be maintained and even shared with other boards as a proactive best practice. I would also encourage the team at Rural Catholic to continue to pursue their planned changes to the programs that are in place to support suspended and expelled youth in a more formal way. While the ‘hub’ that is being considered is definitely an effective approach, the decision-makers at the board may wish to invest time and money available to support the programs in studying the available data in school climate surveys, community agency information and school discipline records to see if the ‘hub’ is the best option for their situation.

Finally, it is apparent from the key informant feedback that the flexibility of the policies, as they are currently written, provides boards with the opportunities to carry out implementation in ways that takes into consideration local strengths and needs, along with the conditions that have such a significant impact on the process. I would strongly recommend that the Ministry continue to provide this flexibility to the boards in combination with an ongoing effective monitoring process to ensure that they have an accurate, up-to-date indication of how implementation is proceeding. In addition, given the number of significant changes that have been made in Safe Schools’ policy in a very short time, it is important that boards be given the time and appropriate supports to effectively implement current policies before any further changes are made. The Ministry can continue to play an important role as liaison between board teams and the supports that they would benefit from, whether that be in the form of connection to best practices in other boards, community partners or evidence-based research relevant to the individual board situations.

The participating boards demonstrated that they have found creative, effective solutions to some of the obstacles that they have faced in policy implementation. They have come a long
way, but the makers and implementers of policy in both boards realize that there is still work to be done, as is evident in the comments made by the majority of key informants. The information they have provided for this study will, no doubt, be valuable to boards experiencing challenges similar to those that have been faced by Composite Public and Rural Catholic. As well, the sharing of information as to obstacles that still exist opens the door to input from other parts of the province. It also allows those who have control of the purse strings to find out more about where support is most needed and how this support can best be provided.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

In reflecting on the responses provided by participants, patterns in the data that were not initially noticed by the researcher became more apparent. If time permitted, a second round of interviews could have been carried out in order to probe further into these patterns. One example would be the limited discussion that took place around the needs of identified students. Beyond some superficial discussion about mental health issues, this aspect of policy implementation was not addressed in depth.

As with any qualitative study that is carried out with a small sample, the information gleaned from this study applies only to the two boards involved, according to the perceptions of those who agreed to take part in the interviews. Since one of the two selected boards did not have a culturally diverse population, for example, discussion regarding culture and its connection to the program was limited. It will be up to the decision-makers at the Ministry level, as well as the planners in the individual boards, to determine whether this information can be used to inform practice in other areas.

AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The information gained in this study suggests that policy actors, pre-existing conditions, support or resources, and central control are all factors that impact implementation of policy, as previous research has indicated. In this study, I have suggested that relationships within and between aspects of each factor along with flexibility in approach also significantly impact the implementation process. I feel that these last two factors are significant additions since they have the potential to drastically change the impact that the original four factors have on policy implementation. As I have pointed out, all factors are intertwined with each other in such a way
that change to one has a domino effect that impacts each of the others. As well, flexibility in how policies are implemented, by definition, will allow a broader range of possible results and thus impact the route or routes taken in implementation. Previous researchers have hinted at these factors to some degree and my research confirms the important part they play in policy implementation. With this information as a jumping off point, I feel it would be valuable to carry out further investigation as to the impact of these and any other, as yet, unidentified factors.

At present, most of the focus on suspension and expulsion programs deals with finding ways to deal effectively with students who find themselves enrolled in the programs. While this approach hopefully benefits these students, it is a reactive rather than a proactive response. The ultimate goal should be to make these programs unnecessary. This would require educators, community-service providers and researchers to determine the factors that lead young people to engage in behaviours that lead them in the direction of the suspension and expulsion programs. If these factors can be determined and addressed in the early stages of development, school boards may be able to reduce the need for the programs that are currently in place.

The fact that the behaviour that led to suspension did not occur in isolation is extremely important as one considers the best way in which to implement policy related to these types of programs. If screening, assessment, background information and early intervention can help to reduce the number of times that this type of program needs to be used, it would be well worth the effort.

Attention to supports in the transition years might be particularly helpful (Veryard, 2007). Studies have shown, for example, that an options-loaded curriculum will help to engage students (Cuppage, 2002; Day, 2002; Guerin & Denti, 1999; Leone & Drakeford, 1999; Marchesi, 1998; McGee, 2001; Raywid, 2001; Rutherford & Quinn, 1999) and, hopefully, keep them from moving in a less constructive direction. It is not necessary to create new policy to support this approach. The use of existing documents, such as the Ministry’s Caring and Safe Schools document, could be sufficient in many cases. In the document, a whole school approach to creating safe, caring and inclusive schools is suggested, along the lines of the culture described by study participants. Concrete examples of teaching strategies are provided with the goals of helping to increase student self-esteem and engagement, while also improving behaviour and school performance. The document emphasizes that educators must understand why inappropriate behaviour occurs in order to deal with it more effectively. It would be consistent with the Ministry directive to create a proactive environment rather than relying so heavily on
discipline (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005) to address student misbehaviour. It would also be a practice that is more consistent with the movement over time from a punitive to a more supportive response to Code of Conduct violations that was evident in the evolution of policy outlined in the literature review.

The supportive approach could serve to reduce the potentially negative impact of program involvement, as well. Exposure to deviance, together with the blocking of individual goals, has been shown to lead to the deviance (Hoffman, 2011) that these responses are meant to curtail. These aspects could also be true of bringing suspended students together into one location, so the programs should not be selected as an option for students without careful consideration. Research into proactive responses to inappropriate student behaviour at the school level, then, would be an excellent area for further research.
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## APPENDIX 1 – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Interview Focus</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Actors in Implementation Process</td>
<td>People/groups involved in process at the board level</td>
<td>- What people or groups provided input on the implementation of policies related to the suspension and expulsion programs in your board?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reasons for involvement of specific stakeholders</td>
<td>- What people or groups who should have been included were omitted from the process? Is there a plan to include them in subsequent stages of the process? If so, please describe.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Stakeholder involvement in monitoring and revision of policy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Groups or individuals who provided unsolicited input on the programs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Groups omitted from initial process</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Local Conditions in Board and Selected Schools</td>
<td>Description of Board</td>
<td>- Describe your board and the secondary schools within your board – size of board, number of high schools, size of the schools, profile of the student population.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collection of information to inform process – board and school levels</td>
<td>- Describe any unique features of your board related to the suspension and expulsion programs.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Additional information needed</td>
<td>- Describe the general makeup and needs of the student population involved with the suspension and expulsion program in your board.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- How are the needs of all members of this student population taken into consideration in the implementation of policy for suspension and expulsion programs?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- In your opinion, what improvements could be made in considering the needs of your student population in implementation of this policy?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Factors</td>
<td>Interview Focus</td>
<td>Interview Questions</td>
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</table>
| 3. Support for Implementation | - Impact of data on policy creation and implementation  
- Additional information needed  
- Ministry supports – existing and forthcoming  
- Board supports  
- Other supports provided  
- Additional supports needed | - What information was provided or gathered to inform the process of policy implementation?  
- What information that should have been gathered or provided was not included? Is there a plan to include this information? If so, please describe.  
- What supports are provided for the programs and by who are they provided?  
- What additional supports are needed? Is there a plan to add these or other supports? |
| 4. Central Control/Commitment to Implementation | - Ministry communication  
- Ministry support  
- Ministry monitoring of policy implementation | - Were the policies about suspension and expulsion programs clearly communicated by the Ministry to the individual boards?  
- In what other ways is commitment to these policies demonstrated by the Ministry?  
- How is the implementation of policy related to the suspension and expulsion programs monitored by the Ministry? |
Dear Sir or Madam,

I am writing to you at this time to ask you to participate in a study linked to Safe Schools’ Policy. The purpose of this study is to determine the factors that influence board personnel in the implementation of Safe Schools Policy related to programs for suspended and expelled youth in Ontario. The study is being carried out in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Educational Doctorate Program through OISE at the University of Toronto and is an OISE/UT study. It will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. Jane Gaskell, a professor at OISE/UT.

This study is being carried out at two selected Ontario school boards. Participants include individuals who are presently involved in Safe Schools’ policy implementation. From each board, I plan to interview the Director of Education, along with a trustee, the superintendent who has responsibility for the Safe Schools portfolio, the administrator or teacher who oversees the suspension and expulsion programs and two secondary school principals who are familiar with the program. The participating trustee and secondary school principals should have at least five years’ experience in the current role. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will be used to inform practice as it relates to programs for suspended and expelled youth in Ontario and at the national and international level. Participating in this study is also worthwhile professional development for the individual participants because it allows them time to reflect on their practice and views and allows them to talk about pedagogical issues.

Should you agree to participate, your participation would involve a one hour interview in which questions will be asked about discipline policies used to address the programming details for the most disruptive youth in schools. The interviews will take place individually, in a face-to-face format at your work location. To participate, you will need to consent to the interview being tape recorded and transcribed. Alternatively, if you do not wish to be tape recorded, I will take notes in place of the recording. During the interview you will be asked questions about the policies connected with the suspension and expulsion programs, based on your observations and experiences. As the interview progresses, I may ask questions for clarification or further detail, but the main part of the interview will be based on the standard questions that have been prepared in advance for the interview. A copy of these questions has been included with this letter.
The interview will be transcribed. You will be provided with an electronic copy of the transcript in order for you to add any further information or to clarify in order to prevent misinterpretation of your response.

The information obtained in the interview will be kept in strict confidence. Once tapes are transcribed, they will be erased. Only the researcher, the transcriber and the supervisor will have access to the raw data, surveys, audiotapes and transcripts.

All identifiable information outside of a secure server environment will be encrypted consistent with University of Toronto’s data security and encryption standards available at
http://www.research.utoronto.ca/ethics/pdf/human/nonspecific/datasecurity.pdf and
http://www.utoronto.ca/security/UTORprotect/encryption_guidelines.htm. Written copies of the data will be kept in a locked cabinet in my locked office. If the data is used for other reports, publications or public presentations, it will be kept confidential in these forms as well. In order to maintain confidentiality of each participant, each participant will be given a case number and all documents will be numbered. Should the participant name specific institutions or persons in the interview, these will be given a fictitious name in the final transcription of the data and not mentioned by name or title in the dissertation or in any publication. All raw data (i.e. transcripts, field notes) will be destroyed two years after the completion of the study.

You may at any time refuse to answer a question or withdraw from the interview process. You may request that any information be eliminated from the project. You will at no time be judged or evaluated and at no time will you be at risk of harm, nor have a value judgment placed on your responses. You are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it and may request a summary of the findings of the study. If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics, by email at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or by phone at 1-416-946-3273. You can have access to the final report, which will be located in the OISE/UT thesis collection and which can be accessed electronically in the University of Toronto Research Repository at http://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/9944.

A summary of the report will be sent to you, along with a copy of your transcript. If you wish to make any changes, please feel free to do so and return it to me within two weeks of the date on which you receive it. The information included in the study may be published or used in presentations. If this is the case, your identity and that of your school board will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Since there are a limited number of participants in this study from specific positions in the board, it will not be possible to ensure complete anonymity. If you as the participant are recognized, however, this would not result in any sanction against you since the information shared in the study would be that which is required of you in fulfillment of your professional role.

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign and return the attached form to my attention at 160 Tartan Drive, Nepean, Ontario, K2J 3X2 in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope. Thank you, once again, for considering my request to participate in this study. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.
Yours sincerely,

Joe Veryard                                      Dr. Jane Gaskell – Supervisor
OISE/University of Toronto                       OISE/UT
Telephone: 613-862-3659                          1-416-978-1172
Email: joe.veryard@ocsb.ca                       jgaskell@oise.utoronto.ca

By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study, you have received a copy of this letter, and you are fully aware of the conditions above. You are also consenting to being tape recorded during the interview and having your responses transcribed or, alternatively in place of tape recording, having your responses recorded in note form by the researcher.

Name____________________________________     School Board____________________________
Position____________________________________
Signature ________________________________     Date ________________________________

Please initial if you would like a summary of the findings of the study upon completion. It will be emailed to participants after completion of the study. __________