The Everyday Practice of Policy

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***Music Educators Journal, 107*(1), 49-54. https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432120941062**

Every day, music teachers interact with and act on policy. Sometimes these policies go unnoticed, while at other times, these policies challenge educators' practices and beliefs. For example, policies that often go unnoticed, such as a bell schedule, may be ingrained in the expectations of the organization of a school. In contrast, a policy developed about teacher evaluation may change several times from the beginning to the end of a teaching career. Because of this, music teachers need not only knowledge about current policies but the skills and dispositions to learn about, evaluate, act on, and respond to policy throughout their careers.

Music educators may wonder: How are certain policies are decided upon? Who created the policy and why? Education within public schools, and therefore music education, is highly regulated.[1] The individuals and groups creating policies that may impact teaching in the classroom come from both governmental and nongovernmental groups, reflecting the interests of "pupils, parents, school administrators, school board members, elected officials, publishers of textbooks and sheet music, and member of the professional performing arts and music product industries."[2] Particular stakeholder groups may be impacted by policies in an effort to encourage or discourage specific thoughts and/or behaviors.

Staying connected with policies can be part of the everyday work of the music educator. In this article we outline three main topics: (1) different types of policies and their associated consequences, or lack thereof; (2) the three typical levels of policy texts with which music teachers interact, including the ways that music teachers can learn about and access these policy texts; and (3) specific policy actions that music educators might take, including questions they might ask when critically considering policy texts. These three processes—understanding one's policy context,

keeping updated about policy information, and taking action—are key to ongoing policy understanding and responsiveness.

Policy is Everywhere

Imagine a typical teaching day. Perhaps attendance must be submitted by 8:20a.m., and the second bell marks the start of first period. Inspired by the national or state music standards, a music educator prepared a lesson on composition. Following yesterday's email reminder that grades are due on Friday, the teacher decides to give the second period class a summative playing test. While teachers may conceive of policy as top-down mandates, the aforementioned actions all involve policies and are themselves a form of policy.

Policy can range from formal to informal and obvious to subtle.[3] For example, if state or local leaders require that music educators teach toward a prescribed set of standards, then those standards constitute a formal policy. Alternatively, while a school may not specify the minimum amount of assessment, a music educator might feel obligated to assess individual students at least twice per term. In such contexts, assessment practices function as an informal policy.

If the music educator received multiple reminders about the deadline for turning in their grades, then they may understand grade submission as an obvious policy. In contrast, while the teacher is almost certainly aware of the bell schedule, because they have grown accustomed to it throughout their own schooling, they may see it as a more subtle form of policy. Additionally, policies such as bell schedules are extremely local; while a teacher might assume that they would hear bells ringing in a neighboring school, they would not presume that the timing was identical to that of their home school. Conversely, educators may expect that colleagues throughout the

state rely on the same music standards documents. (In the following section, we discuss how music educators might stay updated about local, state, and federal policies.)

This leads to a crucial point: Policy is as much documents and materials as it is a set of practices.[4] Stated differently, policy is realized through action. While a school may have a stated policy about submitting grades, if teachers in that school routinely submit grades a week late without facing repercussions, then the weeklong grade submission practice constitutes the actual policy. However, since English words rarely function as both nouns and verbs, individuals may find using the term "policy" in reference to both materials and actions difficult. Often, music educators default to understanding policy primarily as a thing.[5]

In response, Richerme suggests using the terms "policy texts" and "policy actions."[6] For example, music standards documents constitute a policy text, and teachers' enactment of standards—or lack thereof—constitutes a policy action. These policy actions might include emphasizing some standards, purposefully ignoring specific standards, attending to all standards equally, or writing one's own locally-conscious standards (see Figure 1). As discussed in more detail below, considering possible consequences of each potential policy action as well as the needs and values of one's local community can inform which policy actions music educators take.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Categorizing policies as formal or informal, obvious or subtle, local or widespread, and text or action can assist teachers in acknowledging the range of policies with which they interact on a daily basis. However, these labels are fluid and subjective; one teacher may categorize newly revised state music standards as an obvious policy text, while another teacher may categorize them as a subtle policy text. Regardless, awareness of these various possible

categories promotes an understanding of policy as more than just top-down mandates. For instance, music educators typically have significant control over how to enact music standards within a given class, and they often create their own assessment policy texts.

A more objective way of categorizing policy texts involves distinguishing between those that use rewards and punishments to ensure the achievement of specific ends and those that encourage actions without direct coercion. This distinction is a key difference between what Jones terms "hard policies" and "soft policies," respectively.[7] (For more information about hard and soft policies, see Abril and Gault in this issue.) In many schools, teacher evaluation based partly on student growth serves an example of a contemporary coercive government policy text. This mandate usually relies on the punishment that administrators can dismiss teachers with poor evaluations. It may also involve the reward of pay bonuses for teachers demonstrating superior student growth.

Conversely, policies can shape values, perceptions, and personal goals indirectly, without coercion. For instance, if a state music educators association primarily focuses on organizing competitions, then such policy actions may encourage local music educators to value competing over community concerts or other cooperative events. While direct admonition will not necessarily occur if a music educator chooses not to compete, colleagues and parents influenced by the music educators association's voluntary policy texts and actions may encourage them to value competition.

Determining whether or not a policy text includes specific incentives or negative consequences can assist music educators in deciding how to engage with it. Not attending to mandated policy texts usually results in administrative reprimands and may eventually lead to termination of employment.[8] Principals and other administrators risk their own employment

when teachers do not follow coercive policy texts.[9] As such, even when neglecting such policy texts does not result in teacher dismissal, inaction can damage music educators' relationships with local administrators and may eventually lead to decreased support for their programs. In other words, music educators who remain unaware of currently local, state, and federal education mandates may frustrate key allies. Conversely, the more music educators know about policies, the more they can contribute to policy conversations. Such awareness may also result in shared policy-related leadership responsibilities.

When interacting with policy texts that do not have rewards and punishments, music educators have considerable leeway. For instance, if a music educator does not believe that current competition practices serve students' needs, then regardless of the emphasis a state music educators association may place on them, music educators can decide not to participate. Additionally, as long as they keep administrators informed, music educators can usually take policy actions that deviate from non-mandated policy texts such as existing repertoire, methods books, and curricula. Music educators might approach such policy action decisions gradually and dialogue with parents and other stakeholders about their process. Yet, they need feel not confined by such policy texts. While the lack of rewards and punishments associated with soft policy texts can empower music educators to make decisions most meaningful for their own contexts, it can also cause non-coercive policy texts to go unrecognized and therefore unchallenged.[10] Without a reason to think critically about ongoing policy texts such as curricula, music educators may end up simply repeating their policy actions from year to year.

In short, understanding policy as encompassing far more than just government mandates can remind music educators about their own agency in creating and shaping policy texts and taking policy actions. While music educators inevitably author only some of the policy texts that

they encounter, they frequently have substantial freedom in their policy actions. Before explaining important considerations surrounding policy actions, we turn to how music educators might find out about current policy texts.

Staying Connected to Policy Texts: Local, State, and Federal

Music teachers typically interact with policy texts from three levels – local, state, and federal. While each of these levels appears distinct, they are often interconnected. By paying attention to policy texts at each of these levels, music educators can come to understand how they do and might interface with their instruction.

Everyday interactions with policy texts typically occur on the local level and are often derived from building-level or district-level polices. Music teachers may not think of these policy texts as policies, as they understand them to be part of their expected workload and their contribution to the overall success of the school. While these policies may seem commonplace, these policy texts (and their subsequent actions) make up the majority of music teachers' interactions with policy.

One way that music teachers can understand their building and district level policy texts is by staying up-to-date on any available teacher handbooks. These documents usually articulate topics such as lesson planning policies, attendance and substitute policies, teacher observation and evaluation policies, and policies about students with special needs. Revisions and updates to these documents often occur before the start of the school year, although sometimes they also occur during the school year. Music teachers may be able to contribute in revisions of these policy texts at the school or district level.

The policy texts that are typically regulated at the state level include (but are not limited to): state-level standards, teacher evaluation requirements, state-level instruction requirements (including graduation requirements), assessment requirements, and teacher licensure requirements. Policy texts that are initiated at the state level are often interpreted by those at the local level, and the policy actions that take place as a result of state policy texts may vary across different local settings. It is possible, however, for music teachers to understand the current state-level policy texts that may impact their work in the classroom without relying on communication from their building or district.

One example of this kind of interpretation might be understood through a graduation requirement. A state may create a policy text that indicates that students in secondary schools should have at least one fine arts credit to graduate. This policy text is then taken up by a district or secondary school building to decide how to implement this requirement (see also Hellman in this issue). The interpretation of the requirement typically means that each secondary student can choose from a menu of options in order to earn their fine arts credit. Leaders in different school districts or buildings may limit the choices for meeting this requirement to only a few options. In this example, the state creates a policy text, but it is written in such a way that it gives latitude to district or building leaders to interpret the requirement in accordance with their local needs. Some other state-level policy texts may be more prescriptive and rigid. In order to stay up-to-date on state-level policy texts, music teachers could bookmark state level websites that directly relate to understanding the policy texts. These websites include their state-level department of education and the state board of education (elected or appointed officials who work with state legislatures to author policy texts).

At the federal level, the current primary policy text is the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA).[11] This is the latest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Through the ESSA policy text, states are required to develop documents called "state plans" that outline expectations in areas such as improving basic curricular programs, education of migratory children, programs for at-risk students, and supporting effective instruction, English-language learners, and rural schools.[12] Within these plans, each state can focus on the needs of their constituencies; this allows for flexibility and local-level decision-making.

In these state-level plans, some states specifically articulated ways in which music may be used to meet the expectations outlined in the plans.[13] For example, a few states included music in their accountability systems and explicitly supported music and arts education in their plan for Title I schools. Understanding these state-level plans may assist music educators in requesting support for their music programs or finding opportunities to expand their music programs to more students. Additionally, when it comes time to revise or update state-level ESSA plans, understanding the relationship between the federal-level ESSA policy text and the different resulting state-level policy texts can assist music educators in advocating for changes more supportive of music education.

Individuals who want to learn more about ESSA can use the United States Department of Education (USDOE) website. The National Association for Music Education also has a section of their webpage dedicated to ESSA and its relationship to music education.[14] State plans can be accessed through the USDOE website.[15] In addition, state-level department of education websites will typically have information regarding a state's ESSA plan. Periodicals such as *Education Week* and the *New York Times* Education section may also provide information about federal-level policy texts.

The scope of the policy texts that music educators interact with include all three of these levels – local, state, and federal. However, they will most often perceive their interaction with policy texts as coming from the local and state levels. Figure 2 provides information about where music educators can access and learn about current policy texts at all three levels. Yet, these texts tell only part of the story; policy actions are an integral complement to policy texts.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

To Act or Not to Act

Given that policy texts are realized only through policy actions, music educators confronted with a specific policy text will need to decide whether or not they will take policy actions. If they decide to act, they will need to determine what actions to take. Music educators might begin their engagements with any new policy text by playing what Elbow calls the "believing game."[16]

The believing game involves "accepting as possible to every idea we encounter: not just listening to views different from our own and holding back from arguing with them . . . but actually trying to believe them."[17] Elbow explains that individuals confronting new ideas often play the "doubting game," in which they quickly critique and dismiss alternative ways of thinking and being. Tyack and Cuban's work demonstrates that teachers often resist new education policies. After examining various American school reforms between 1903 and the 1980s, they concluded that educators typically assimilated reforms into existing patterns of schooling.[18] While music educators might thoughtfully reject or subvert problematic policy texts, such action is problematic absent "believing" how related policy actions might benefit students.

Trying to understand the potential positive outcomes that policy texts can foster dissuades music educators from retreating to the comfort of familiar habits. As Dewey summarizes: "Escape from the clutch of custom gives an opportunity to do old things in new ways and thus to construct new ends and means."[19] Imagine if music educators approached every new policy text through the believing game. The might ask: What would happen if I embraced this policy text? In what ways might this policy text address contemporary dilemmas or injustices? How could resulting policy actions benefit specific students or communities, both now and in the future? Since societies constantly change, new policy texts provide music educators opportunities to revisit students' and communities' current needs and to reconsider their practices in light of those understandings.

Next, music educators might consider whether or not there are specific consequences associated with a policy text. They might ask: What possible repercussions will teachers or administrators face if they do not enact a given policy text? What possible incentives might those abiding with this policy text receive? What range of policy actions does this policy text enable? What specific policy actions avoid negative consequences and promote positive ones?

In addition to playing the believing game and considering possible consequences, music educators might critically examine policy texts and policy actions. Thinking critically about policy texts involves asking questions related to authorship and potential exclusions. Considering who authored a policy text and what they might gain through its enactment can illuminate possible outcomes of different policy actions. For example, a state-level music standards document written by renowned band, choir, and orchestra teachers may further those leaders' reputations by favoring the music making in which they have expertise. Such a policy text may also minimize or exclude teachers and students with other types of musical skills and knowledge.

More locally, policy action resulting in a mandate that students participate in an evening ukulele concert may enhance the music program's visibility and benefit the school community at large; however, it may also exclude students with work or family obligations from participating in the group. Although every policy action will create inclusions and exclusions, beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, music educators who critically examine who and what might fall into those categories can use that awareness to inform their decision-making. Figure 3 includes possible considerations and questions that might serve as starting points for such judgments.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

While music educators have considerable freedom in their policy actions related to non-coercive policy texts, if they feel frustrated by current mandated policy texts, then they might consider taking political action. This can include making elected representatives aware of problems with current policy texts and encouraging parents and other stakeholders to do the same. Moreover, since many policy texts are created locally, music educators might volunteer for policy committees, ranging from standards writing groups to school governance groups to music educators association boards, whenever possible.

Ultimately, decisions regarding policy actions—or lack thereof—involve selecting among competing values. Having a strong sense of one's values and continually revisiting those values in light of changing local, state, and federal circumstances is key to taking thoughtful policy actions. Working cooperatively with those in their multiple communities, music educators authoring policy texts might revisit their drafts and end products to ensure that they reflect those values.

Conclusion

Music teachers interact with policy texts and take policy actions on an everyday basis throughout their careers. Given this continual interaction, it is imperative that music educators acknowledge and understand different types of policy texts, such as mandated versus non-mandated policies, as well as relationships between policy texts at the local, state, and federal levels.[20] Using these organizers, music teachers can determine what policy texts are being required and what actions they must or might take in order to meet expectations typically set at the local levels.

Policy is not just documents distributed from above but actions that music educators create anew each day. Carefully considering one's policy actions can involve imagining the consequences, both beneficial and detrimental, enabled by a policy text. Teachers might keep students' and communities' needs as well as their own values at the forefront of such deliberations. By understanding their local, state, and federal policy contexts and responding to them through thoughtful policy actions, music educators might enact the everyday practice of policy in ways that best serve those at the heart of our work: students.

Notes

[1] Patrick M. Jones, "Hard and Soft Policies in Music Education: Building the Capacity of Teachers to Understand, Study, and Influence Them," *Arts Education Policy Review* 110, no. 4 (2009): 27-32.
[2] Ibid., 27.
[3] Patrick Schmidt, "Why Policy Matters: Developing a Policy Vocabulary within Music Education," *Policy and the Political Life of Music Education,* eds. Patrick Schmidt and Richard Colwell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 12.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Lauren Kapalka Richerme, "Reimagining Policy: Power, Problems, and Public Stories," *Arts Education Policy Review* 120, no. 2 (2019): 97.
[6] Ibid., 98.
[7] Jones, "Hard and Soft Policies in Music Education."
[8] See, for example, Daniel Koretz, *The Testing Charade: Pretending to Make Schools Better* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
[9] See, for example, John Dillon, "VUSD Superintendent Dr. Todd Oto Fired," *Valley Voice,* May 8, 2019. https://www.ourvalleyvoice.com/2019/05/08/vusd-superintendent-dr-todd-oto-fired/
[10] Richerme, "Reimagining Policy," 97.
[11] "Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)," United States Department of Education, accessed August 22, 2019, https://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn
[12] Ibid.
[13] Lynn Tuttle, "Music Education & Final ESSA Plans," National Association for Music Education, December 13, 2017. https://nafme.org/musiced-final-state-essa-plans/.
[14] "Everything ESSA," National Association for Music Education, accessed August 22, 2019, https://nafme.org/advocacy/essa/
[15] "ESSA Consolidated State Plans," United State Department of Education, last modified November 16, 2018, https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplan17/index.html
[16] Peter Elbow, "The Believing Game--Methodological Believing," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning* 14 (2008), https://scholarworks.umass.edu/eng_faculty_pubs/5.
[17] Ibid., 2.
[18] David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Towards Utopia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 83.
[19] John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (Amherst, MA: Prometheus Books, 1922/2002), 170.
[20] Jones, "Hard and Soft Policies," 27.

FIGURE 1: Example Policy Texts and Policy Actions

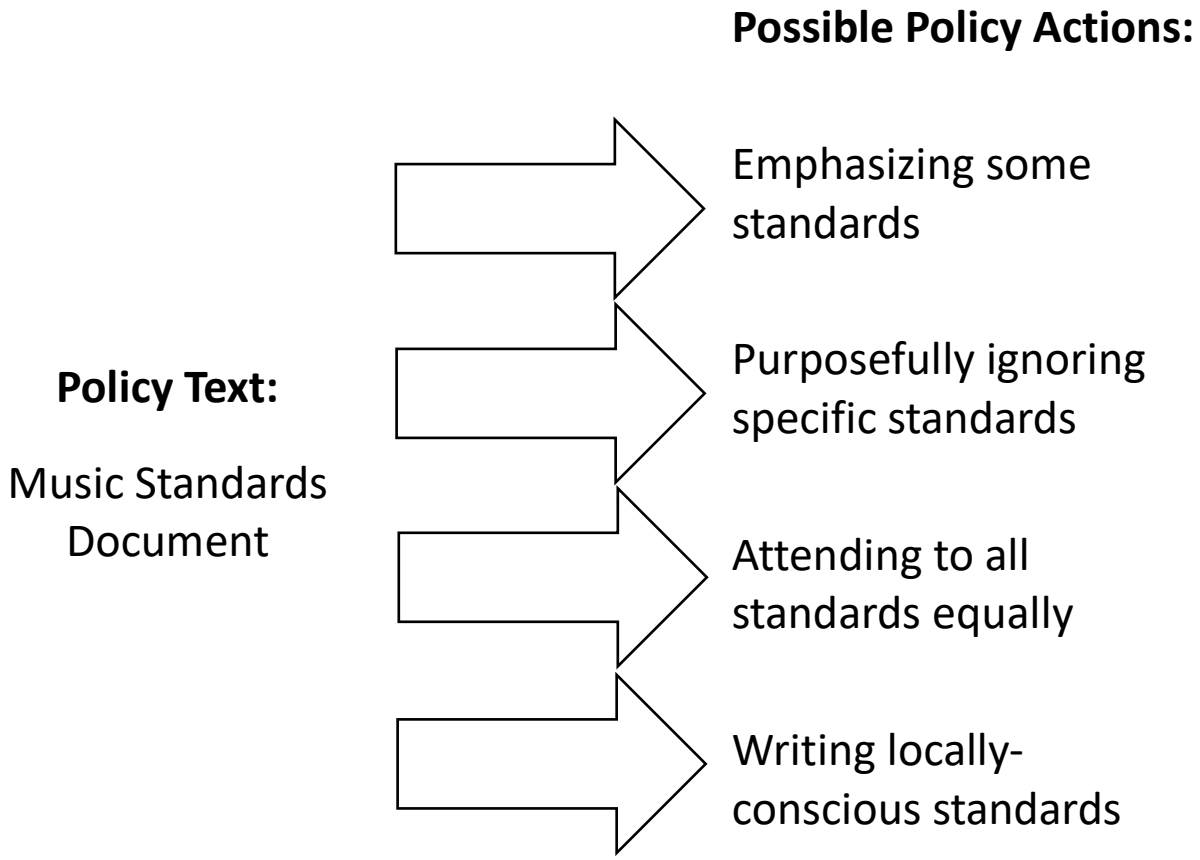

FIGURE 2: Access Points for Policy Texts

	Policy Text Access Points
Local	• Building Level Email Listserv • Building Level Newsletters • Building Level Published Handbook • District Level Email Listserv

	• District Level Newsletters • District Level Meetings • District Level Published Handbook

State	• State Department of Education Website
	  ○ State Standards
	  ○ State Teacher Evaluation Plans
	  ○ State Assessment Requirements
	• State Board of Education (elected or appointed)

Federal Level	• US Department of Education (www.doe.gov) • National Association for Music Education (www.nafme.org)

FIGURE 3: Policy Action Questions and Considerations

Practice	**Associated Questions**
Playing the Believing Game	• What would happen if I embraced this policy text? • In what ways might this policy text address contemporary dilemmas or injustices? • How could resulting policy actions benefit specific students or communities, both now and in the future?

Understanding Consequences and Possibilities	• What possible repercussions will teachers or administrators face if they do not enact a given policy text? • What incentives might those abiding with this policy text receive? • What range of policy actions does this policy text enable? • What specific policy actions avoid negative consequences and promote positive ones?
Thinking Critically	• Who wrote this policy text and what might they gain through its enactment? • How might this policy text exclude certain individuals, groups, or ways of being musical? • What ways of learning and knowing are inhibited by this policy text? • What negative impacts might students experience as a result of different policy actions inspired by this policy text?