Influencing Policy Outside Your Research Comfort Zone

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Challenges

Assumptions
• “I don’t have the expertise”
• “I’m just one person... no one will listen”

Tradeoffs
• Professional development/expectations
• Time
Topic: Armed Guards in Schools

- Bloomfield, NJ
  - ~50,000 people
  - 12 miles east of NYC
  - Third most racially diverse school district in NJ
    - 8% Asian, 29% Black, 36% Latinx, 26% White

- Spring 2018
  - Board of Education (BOE) approved budget that included $550,000 for armed guards in public elementary schools and preschool
  - Bloomfield Families for Sensible Safety (BFFSS) formed
But, it’s not my area of expertise...

- No one in the group (BFFSS) had expertise in this topic... nor did anyone creating the policy!
- But, we know how to synthesize research!
  - Reviewed SPSSI’s website (policy section)
  - Contacted Sarah Mancoll
  - Literature review
  - Created Fact Sheet
  - Created talking points
- Key point: We’re researchers. We know how to review literature and synthesize research.
“But will people listen?”

- Next steps happened organically... and quickly!
  - Needed to raise awareness of the issue
  - Needed to get information to stakeholders
Actions

• Created online presence with links to fact sheets & talking points (website, Facebook page)
• Circulated fact sheets & petitions
• Informal conversations with parents
• Formal communications (email, phone calls) to BOE members, superintendent, elected officials, etc.
• Contacted the media
• Attended BOE meetings—organized speakers
• Organized protests & distributed fact sheets
Did people listen?

Challenges engaging folks with the research and data

• “I’m not a numbers person.”
• “You can find data to say anything...”
• “I just feel safer.”

As psychologists, we often understand the mechanisms underlying this thinking.

• We can try to address the faulty thinking (e.g., logical fallacies, etc.)
Tradeoffs

• Impact on career development
  • However, can often be put in promotion/tenure packages
    • Service to community
    • Consulting

• Time consuming
  • Important to set boundaries
Epilogue

• Summer 2018–BOE delayed decision (armed guards would not be placed in the schools in Fall 2018)
• Convinced folks to run for BOE in Fall 2018 election
• Campaigned for BOE candidates
• Succeeded in persuading some BOE members; voted out other members
• Fall 2018 – BOE announced it was no longer considering armed guards in schools; money would be redirected
• BFFSS approached by parents in other communities for support in starting similar action groups
Thank You!

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