

Policy on Paper, Protection in Practice: Stakeholder Assessments of Child Protection Policy Implementation in Manila Public Senior High Schools

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ABSTRACT

The Philippine Department of Education's Child Protection Policy (DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012) assigns specific responsibilities to division offices, schools, school personnel, learners, and school-based Child Protection Committees (CPCs); however, limited evidence exists regarding the consistency of its implementation in large urban school divisions. This study examined the extent of policy implementation in the Schools Division of Manila and determined whether assessments differed across stakeholder groups. A descriptive-comparative survey was conducted in January 2024 among 390 respondents from five public senior high schools and the division office, comprising 5 division personnel, 18 school personnel, and 367 senior high school learners selected through

proportional stratified random sampling. A 58-item researcher-developed instrument using a four-point scale assessed five implementation domains, while one-way ANOVA and Tukey post hoc tests examined group differences. Respondent-weighted means placed all five domains within the highest implementation band (3.56–3.80); however, these aggregate ratings were largely influenced by learners, who constituted 94% of the sample. School personnel rated four of the five domains lower than the other stakeholder groups. Significant differences emerged in four domains, with the largest effect observed in the establishment and functioning of CPCs ($F(2, 387) = 65.93, p < .001, \eta^2 = .25$). School personnel gave the lowest ratings to referral systems, identification of at-risk learners, and coordination with police and social welfare desks (2.72–2.89). The findings indicate that aggregate ratings may obscure implementation weaknesses at the operational level, emphasizing the need for stakeholder-disaggregated monitoring and targeted capacity-building in CPC referral and case-management functions.

Keywords: *child protection policy, school safeguarding, policy implementation, Child Protection Committee, Philippines, stakeholder perceptions*

INTRODUCTION

Schools are among the places where children are most often harmed and most often protected. Violence in school settings, from bullying and verbal abuse to sexual misconduct by peers or staff, is associated with poorer mental health and lower educational attainment (Fry et al., 2018). Schools are also where maltreatment occurring at home is most likely to be noticed by an adult outside the family (Münger & Markström, 2018). Whether a school protects children therefore depends less on whether it has a policy than on whether the people named in that policy actually perform their roles.

In the Philippines, the problem is well documented. The National Baseline Study on Violence Against Children found that 80% of 3,866 Filipinos aged 13–24 had experienced some form of violence at home, in school, at work or in the community, yet fewer than 10% had disclosed it (Council for the Welfare of Children & UNICEF Philippines, 2016; Ramiro et al., 2022). Low disclosure makes adults who see children daily, including school staff, central to detection. Adverse childhood experiences are common and linked to later health-risk behaviour (Ramiro et al., 2010). As of November 2023, the Department of Education (DepEd) recorded 213 reported cases of learner mistreatment in schools, led by verbal abuse (77), sexual abuse (70) and physical bullying (66) (Malipot, 2023). Earlier situational analyses pointed to weak data systems and limited capacity among local authorities to enforce child protection measures (Yacat, 2011).

DepEd's response is the Child Protection Policy, issued as DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012 (DepEd, 2012) under the framework of Republic Act No. 7610 (1992). The Order does not leave protection to general goodwill. It distributes specific duties across five levels: division offices (advocacy, capacity-building, consolidated reporting, monitoring and discipline); schools (adopting a policy, convening a committee, keeping records and coordinating a hotline); school personnel (acting in loco parentis and using non-violent discipline); learners (refraining from bullying, discrimination and violence); and a school-based Child Protection Committee (CPC). The CPC is the operational core. It is expected to draft and review the school policy, run a referral and monitoring system, identify learners at risk of significant harm, and coordinate with the Women and Children Protection Desks of the Philippine National Police and local social welfare offices.

Local studies agree that awareness of the policy is generally high, but they disagree on how well it is carried out. Teachers and school heads typically report being aware of their responsibilities (Rabina, 2019; Villanueva, 2022). Several studies, however, find that school responsiveness lags behind awareness (Asio et al., 2020; Bayuca, 2020). Committee functions in particular, such as periodic policy review, identifying children showing signs of harm and referral to outside agencies, are among the least implemented (Glariana & Saniel, 2022). Assessments also differ by who is asked. Compliance ratings varied by assessor classification in a Catholic school setting (Zamora & Madrigal, 2018), and school heads and teachers disagreed about who should enforce the policy (Baronia, 2020). Internationally, child protection content in teacher education remains narrow and focused on recognition and reporting (Walsh et al., 2023). Reviews of teachers' reporting duties find that limited training, uncertainty about what counts as reasonable suspicion and fear of error make many teachers hesitant to report (Falkiner et al., 2017; Selçuk & Phillippo, 2025).

Three gaps follow from this literature. First, most Philippine studies sample teachers or school heads only and treat their views as the measure of implementation. Learners, the intended beneficiaries, and division officials, who are responsible for oversight, are rarely included in the same design. Second, few studies assess all five duty-bearer levels of DepEd Order No. 40 together, so it is unclear where in the chain implementation weakens. Third, large urban divisions such as Manila, with high enrolment and dense referral networks, are underrepresented relative to provincial and rural divisions.

This study draws on policy implementation research, which holds that outcomes depend on the frontline actors who translate formal rules into daily practice (Lipsky, 1980) and on the organisational supports that allow them to do so (Fixsen et al., 2005). From this perspective, the staff who sit on Child Protection Committees are street-level implementers. Their assessments may differ from those of administrators, who see policy through compliance reports, and of learners, who see mainly its visible outputs. Empowerment evaluation adds that stakeholders who carry out a programme should take part in assessing it, because their knowledge is needed to improve it (Fetterman, 2005). Comparing the three groups is therefore not only a test of agreement but a way of locating where implementation is perceived to be weakest.

The study addressed two questions:

1. To what extent is the Child Protection Policy implemented in public senior high schools in the Schools Division of Manila, across the duties of division personnel, schools, school personnel, learners and the Child Protection Committee?
2. Do division personnel, school personnel and learners differ in their assessment of implementation in each domain?

The null hypothesis for the second question was that assessments would not differ across the three groups.

METHODS

Design and Setting

The study used a cross-sectional, descriptive-comparative survey design (Esser & Vliegthart, 2017). It was conducted in the Schools Division Office (SDO) of Manila and five public senior high schools in the districts of Tondo, Sampaloc, Santa Cruz and Urbiztondo. The schools were chosen to vary in size, location and programme offerings. They are reported here as Schools A to E.

Participants and Sampling

The accessible population comprised 15,743 individuals: 207 division personnel, 725 school personnel and 14,811 senior high school learners. The total sample size was set with Yamane's (1967) formula, also known as Slovin's formula, at a 5% margin of error:

$$n = N / (1 + Ne^2) = 15,743 / (1 + 15,743 \times 0.05^2) = 15,743 / 40.3575 \approx 390$$

The 390 respondents were allocated to the three strata in proportion to their share of the population (1.31%, 4.61% and 94.08%). This gave 5 division personnel, 18 school personnel and 367 learners after rounding. Respondents within each stratum were selected by simple random sampling, making the overall design proportional stratified random sampling. School personnel included teaching, non-teaching and guidance staff from the five schools.

Table 1. *Sample by stakeholder group*

Group	Population	Sample	% of sample
Division personnel	207	5	1.3
School personnel	725	18	4.6
Learners (Grades 11–12)	14,811	367	94.1
Total	15,743	390	100.0

Among division personnel, three held doctoral degrees and two had doctoral units; their service ranged from 6 to 20 years. Among school personnel, three held doctorates, five had doctoral units, five held master's degrees, three had master's units and two held bachelor's degrees. Eleven of the 18 had 10 years of service or less.

Instrument

A 58-item questionnaire was developed from the duties enumerated in DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012. Items were grouped into five domains: duties of division personnel (11 items), duties of the school (14), duties of school personnel (12), duties of learners (10) and establishment and functioning of the Child Protection Committee (11). Respondents rated each item on a 4-point scale: 1 = not implemented, 2 = least implemented, 3 = implemented, 4 = highly implemented. Mean scores were interpreted as 1.00–1.49 not implemented, 1.50–2.49 least implemented, 2.50–3.49 implemented and 3.50–4.00 highly implemented.

Content validity was established by subject-matter experts, whose suggestions were incorporated before administration. A pilot test with 10 respondents excluded from the main sample produced Cronbach's alpha values of .976 (division personnel duties), .985 (school duties), .973 (school personnel duties), .980 (learner duties) and .956 (Child Protection Committee).

Procedure and Ethics

The study received approval from the De La Salle University – Dasmariñas Research Ethics Office and written permission from the SDO Manila and the participating school heads. Data were collected in person throughout January 2024. Participants received an orientation on the study's purpose and procedures and signed informed consent. Parental consent and learner assent were obtained for respondents under 18. Questionnaires were anonymous, collected directly by the researcher and stored securely.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed in SPSS. Item and domain means and standard deviations were computed for each group. Two summary indices are reported for each domain. The *group-balanced composite* is the unweighted mean of the three group means, giving each stakeholder group equal weight. The *respondent-weighted mean* pools all 390 responses and is therefore dominated by learners. Differences among the three groups were tested with one-way ANOVA ($\alpha = .05$) followed by Tukey HSD post hoc comparisons. Effect sizes (η^2) were derived from the F statistics as $\eta^2 = (F \times df_1) / (F \times df_1 + df_2)$.

RESULTS

Overall Extent of Implementation

Pooled across all respondents, every domain fell in the "highly implemented" band (Table 2). The school's own duties ranked highest ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.28$), followed by school personnel duties ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.30$), learner duties ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.27$) and division personnel duties ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.32$). The Child Protection Committee domain ranked last ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.29$).

These pooled means reflect learners' ratings, because learners made up 94% of the sample. When each group is weighted equally, two domains drop out of the top band. The division personnel domain falls to 3.57, near the cut-off, and the Child Protection Committee domain falls to 3.31, which is "implemented" rather than "highly implemented".

Table 2. *Implementation by domain and stakeholder group, with one-way ANOVA results*

Domain	DP M	SP M	L M	Composite	Pooled M (SD)	F(2, 387)	p	η^2	Tukey HSD
Duties of division personnel	3.85	3.10	3.76	3.57	3.73 (0.32)	45.36	< .001	.19	SP < DP, L
Duties of the school	3.89	3.41	3.82	3.70	3.80 (0.28)	19.96	< .001	.09	SP < DP, L
Duties of school personnel	3.90	3.55	3.80	3.75	3.79 (0.30)	6.59	.002	.03	SP < DP, L
Duties of learners	4.00	3.68	3.75	3.81	3.75 (0.27)	2.75	.065	.01	n.s.
Child Protection Committee	3.44	2.90	3.59	3.31	3.56 (0.29)	65.93	< .001	.25	SP < DP, L

Note. Scale 1–4; 3.50–4.00 = highly implemented, 2.50–3.49 = implemented. DP = division personnel ($n = 5$); SP = school personnel ($n = 18$); L = learners ($n = 367$). Composite = group-balanced composite (unweighted mean of the

three group means). Pooled = respondent-weighted mean across all 390 respondents. η^2 derived from F and degrees of freedom.

Differences Among Stakeholder Groups

The null hypothesis was rejected for four of the five domains. In each of these, school personnel rated implementation significantly lower than both division personnel and learners, who did not differ from each other. The effect was large for the Child Protection Committee domain ($\eta^2 = .25$) and the division personnel domain ($\eta^2 = .19$), moderate for school duties ($\eta^2 = .09$) and small for school personnel duties ($\eta^2 = .03$). Ratings of learner duties did not differ significantly across groups, $F(2, 387) = 2.75, p = .065$.

School personnel were the only group to rate any domain below 3.50. Their lowest domain means were for the Child Protection Committee (2.90) and the duties of division personnel (3.10). Division personnel gave the highest ratings in every domain, including a uniform 4.00 on all ten learner items.

Where Implementation is Weakest

The Child Protection Committee domain contained the lowest item scores in the study (Table 3). Only the formal organisation of the committee (item 1) reached the top band on the group-balanced composite. The functions that turn a committee into a working protection system scored lowest. These were identifying learners showing signs of significant harm (composite 3.17), identifying and referring cases to the proper offices (3.18), and running a referral and monitoring system (3.22). School personnel rated these items between 2.72 and 2.89. Division personnel rated most committee functions at 3.40, the only domain where they did not give near-ceiling scores.

Table 3. *Child Protection Committee items, ranked by group-balanced composite*

Item (abridged)	DP	SP	L	Composite
1. Committee organised with head, guidance counsellor and four representatives	3.80	3.33	3.86	3.67
11. Children's right to be heard is upheld	3.40	3.06	3.68	3.38
2. School policy and code of conduct drafted and reviewed every three years	3.60	2.67	3.86	3.37
8. Parents assisted in securing expert counselling	3.40	3.22	3.44	3.35
3. School-based referral and monitoring system developed and implemented	3.40	2.89	3.71	3.33
4. Information dissemination and protection activities organised	3.40	2.83	3.58	3.27
9. Coordination with PNP Women and Children Protection Desks, social welfare offices and NGOs	3.40	2.83	3.46	3.23
10. Implementation of support measures for the child monitored	3.20	2.83	3.66	3.23
5. Referral and monitoring system template developed	3.40	2.78	3.48	3.22
7. Cases identified, referred and reported to proper offices	3.40	2.72	3.41	3.18
6. System for identifying learners suffering significant harm	3.40	2.72	3.38	3.17

Note. DP = division personnel ($n = 5$); SP = school personnel ($n = 18$); L = learners ($n = 367$).

Outside the committee domain, the lowest school-personnel ratings fell on division-level and external-coordination tasks. These included recommending policy measures to the Central Office (2.89), performing other assigned functions (2.89), recommending measures to the Regional Office (2.94) and

coordinating a child protection hotline with the Department of Social Welfare and Development (2.94). The hotline item also had the lowest composite in the school duties domain (3.54).

The highest-rated items related to everyday conduct and care. Learners rated school personnel's exercise of special parental authority highest (3.90), and composite ratings were highest for learners refraining from fights (3.85) and from bringing prohibited items to school (3.85). Item 9 in the learner domain, on respecting the rights of others regardless of status, gender, ethnicity or religion, had the lowest learner self-rating (3.55).

DISCUSSION

This study set out to assess how fully the Child Protection Policy is carried out in Manila's public senior high schools and whether stakeholders agree. The headline answer, that every domain is "highly implemented", holds only when learner responses dominate the average. Once each group is given equal weight, and once the frontline implementers are examined separately, a different picture appears. The committee structures that DepEd Order No. 40 relies on to detect, refer and follow up cases are perceived as the weakest part of the system, and the staff who run them see the gap most clearly.

Formal Compliance Versus Functioning Systems

The item pattern in the committee domain suggests a distinction between having a structure and making it work. Committees were reported as formally organised, but the tasks that require sustained effort, such as screening for signs of harm, maintaining a referral system and coordinating with police and social welfare desks, received the lowest ratings. This matches Glariana and Sanie (2022), who found the same functions least implemented in Misamis Oriental, and Atilano-Tang (2023), who linked weak child protection services to limited resources, leadership and inter-agency involvement. It also echoes earlier findings that school responsiveness trails teacher awareness (Asio et al., 2020; Bayuca, 2020). In implementation terms, the policy appears to have been installed but not yet fully operational (Fixsen et al., 2005).

The weak external-coordination items deserve particular attention. Referral to the Philippine National Police Women and Children Protection Desks, local social welfare offices and the hotline are the points where a school case becomes a protection case. If these links are weak, schools may handle serious incidents internally as disciplinary matters, which DepEd case data on sexual abuse in schools make especially concerning (Malipot, 2023).

Why School Personnel See it Differently

School personnel rated four of five domains significantly lower than both other groups. One explanation is proximity. Teachers and guidance staff are the people who must identify a learner at risk, complete the referral and wait for the outside agency to respond. Their ratings may reflect direct experience of where the process stalls. This fits international reviews in which teachers cite limited training and unclear reporting thresholds as barriers to acting on suspected maltreatment (Falkiner et al., 2017; Selçuk & Phillippo, 2025). Division personnel, by contrast, see implementation mainly through consolidated reports, and their near-ceiling ratings, including uniform scores of 4.00 across all learner items, may partly reflect a desire to report their own domain favourably. Learners see the visible products of the policy, such as orientations, posters and codes of conduct, but are less able to judge back-office processes such as case referral or division-level monitoring.

This reading fits the street-level view of implementation (Lipsky, 1980) and earlier evidence that assessments of child protection compliance depend on the assessor's position (Al-Qaysi, 2018; Baronia, 2020; Zamora & Madrigal, 2018). It also supports the logic of empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 2005). If monitoring relies on administrator reports or pooled surveys, the perspective of the staff who carry the

heaviest load is diluted. In this sample, pooling lifted the committee domain from "implemented" to "highly implemented".

The one domain without significant differences was learner conduct. All groups agreed that learners largely refrain from fights, prohibited items and abusive behaviour. The lowest learner item, respect for others regardless of status, gender, ethnicity or religion, points to discrimination and exclusion as a quieter form of harm that rule-based codes of conduct may not address. This is consistent with evidence that verbal abuse is the most frequently reported form of school maltreatment in the Philippines (Malipot, 2023).

Implications for Policy and Practice

Three implications follow. First, division monitoring of DepEd Order No. 40 should report results separately for school personnel, learners and administrators rather than as a single compliance score. Second, capacity-building should move beyond awareness of the policy toward the operational skills the committee needs: recognising signs of harm, documenting cases, using a referral template and working with police and social welfare partners. Teacher education evidence suggests these practical skills are rarely taught (Walsh et al., 2023). Third, division offices could formalise referral pathways with the PNP Women and Children Protection Desks and local social welfare offices at division level, so that individual schools are not left to build these relationships alone. The study's companion intervention programme, "Safe Schools, Safe Futures", was designed around these priorities; its effectiveness has not yet been tested. Whole-school approaches can work when rigorously evaluated. In a cluster-randomised trial in Uganda, the Good School Toolkit lowered students' reports of past-week physical violence from staff from 48.7% to 31.0% (Devries et al., 2015). A comparable trial would be the appropriate next step for Safe Schools, Safe Futures.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations qualify these findings. The design was cross-sectional and relied on self-reported perceptions rather than records of cases, referrals or outcomes. The sample size was calculated for estimating overall implementation, not for comparing groups. Proportional allocation therefore produced only 5 division personnel and 18 school personnel, which reduces the precision of their means and may violate the equal-variance assumption of ANOVA. Learners were asked to rate division-level and committee functions they may not observe directly. The instrument was researcher-developed, and its reliability was estimated on a pilot of 10 respondents. Pilot alphas of .956 to .985, with two items showing zero variance, suggest some item redundancy. Ceiling effects were evident, particularly among division personnel. Finally, the five schools are not a random sample of Manila's schools, and private schools were excluded.

Future research should combine stakeholder surveys with administrative data, such as case logs and referral outcomes held by guidance offices. Larger samples of school personnel across divisions would allow multilevel models that separate school-level from individual-level variation. Qualitative interviews with committee members could explain why referral and identification functions lag. Parents and community partners, who are named in the policy but were not surveyed here, should also be included.

CONCLUSION

In Manila's public senior high schools, the Child Protection Policy appears well established in its visible and conduct-related elements, but its case-handling machinery is weaker than aggregate ratings suggest. School personnel, the people responsible for identifying and referring at-risk learners, rated committee functions and external coordination lowest, and their views differed significantly from those of administrators and learners. Monitoring that pools stakeholder responses can therefore overstate implementation. Strengthening child protection in schools will depend less on further awareness campaigns

than on equipping and supporting committees to identify, document and refer cases, and on building reliable links with police and social welfare services.

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