From Conflict to Collaboration

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During the long history of public education in the United States, schools have provided a strong foundation for our communities and our country. More than 150 years old, our public schools have strived to provide opportunities for all children to learn, grow, and succeed in an ever-changing world.

There have been numerous transformations in all aspects of our educational system from teaching methods, curriculum, assessments, and other areas during that time; however, never have we faced such a challenging time in public education as during the advent of the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Closing schools for more than a year caused unprecedented turmoil for communities and parents, incredible learning losses for students and overwhelming stress and mental health issues for teachers and all school staff. School leaders faced formidable conflict and hostility on all fronts over the past three years since the onset of the pandemic.

Having a playbook to address conflict in schools in a constructive manner becomes essential in navigating our public schools’ critical circumstances. Authors Feirsen & Weitzman offer such a framework in their new book, From Conflict to Collaboration. There has never been a more propitious occasion to provide leadership lessons in addressing conflict.

Their manuscript is configured so that practitioners can understand the relationship between the impact of conflict on schools and communities and how different strategies (both positive and negative) mitigate conflict. In the first chapter, Feirsen & Weitzman describe the myriad ways that conflict can erode school climate and impact student achievement.

They describe three alternative strategies (the 3 A’s) organizations can deploy; (1) Avoid contentious issues; (2) Attack by disparaging opponents, invoking threats, and imposing punishments; and (3) Address conflict to remedy a problem situation while engaging faculty, staff, and community (p.13).

The next chapter provides models and scenarios regarding the sources and types of conflict. Since there are innumerable ways to classify conflict, the authors suggest a model by Jehn that provides an unambiguous structure that can be applied by school leaders. This model describes three types of conflict: relationship conflict (interpersonal interactions); task conflict (topics like assessments, curriculum implementation, schedules); and process conflict (how will...
goals be accomplished, how resources will be employed, and who is accountable for achieving the goal). School leaders will be able to easily identify these classifications with the realistic examples provided, detailing how conflict impacts the schoolhouse.

The importance of effective leadership in addressing conflict is aptly illustrated in the third chapter. Feirsen & Weitzman discuss in more detail the three leadership approaches to conflict (Attack, Avoid, and Address).

Further illustrated are practical strategies for principals to change school culture through establishing trusting relationships and using conflict-agility practices to encourage stakeholders to view conflict in a productive way. According to the authors, successful implementation of these strategies establishes a positive school climate that focuses on student achievement.

The introduction of “design thinking” in chapters four and five, utilizes a process from the engineering field. The authors delineate a model comprised of five steps: emphasize (where individuals involved in the conflict appreciate and understand the views and needs of others), define (participants identify the issues and a resolution), ideate (encouraging creative solutions).

Step four, prototype, is the implementation of the creative solutions identified during ideate, but other options for conflict resolution can still be considered.

The final step, test, requires the assessment of the desired outcomes and the potential of needing to effectuate another cycle (applying a prototype and testing). Feirsen & Weitzman suggest that the continual use of the last two steps in the model enables the school to engage in a continuous process of evaluation thus leading to the goal of addressing conflict. Many cogent antidotes typically experienced in today’s school settings are offered to illustrate the application of this model.

In the final chapter, the authors provide additional evidence that school leaders must develop a “conflict-agility mindset.” Feirsen & Weitzman state, “the principles and practices of conflict-agility ultimately generate a critical mass that produces a more deeply committed, cohesive school, a place where collaborative work leads to greater engagement … schools can ascend to new heights of effectiveness and become productive, synergistic communities capable of surmounting seemingly intractable challenges” (p.113).

Given the incredible challenges facing our public schools today, there is no better time to consider implementing the strategies suggested in this timely book. Moreover, the authors include questions at the end of each chapter, titled “Contemplating Conflict,” encouraging readers to reflect on the contents of the chapter considering their own circumstances.

This feature facilitates the use of From Conflict to Collaboration as a professional book study tool for school leaders, faculties, or school improvement teams. As educational leaders in today’s era of conflict and turmoil, we need to have more than the art of compromise in our back pockets, we need to build relationships and collaborations with all stakeholders to provide the best possible outcomes for our students.

From Conflict to Collaboration provides the formula to assist school leaders and educational policy makers in making conflict a powerful tool to promote collaboration in public education today.
Reviewer Biography

Karen Salmon has worked in public education for over 45 years as a teacher and administrator in local school systems and served as a local district superintendent in both Maryland and New York. She most recently retired as the State Superintendent for Maryland public schools.