

Leadership, Culture, and Continuous Improvement: Advocacy in Times of Research Opposition

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Editor

AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice

Spring 2025

I have been editor of the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* since 2015, when I served as a co-editor to Chris Tienken before assuming the chief editor role a year later. The JSP's mission has been to provide school leaders, primarily superintendents and other central office administrators, along with higher-ed scholars studying K-12 education, the research-supported content to help guide their stewardship of districts.

Our contributors have been scholars and practitioners from the ranks of top research institutions, graduate programs preparing teachers and leaders, and K-12 public school systems from across the nation, representing rural, suburban, and urban communities. *JSP* issues have included diverse voices and controversial topics, often around themes that reflect current challenges facing superintendents and their teams. *JSP*'s editorial team has sought studies and commentaries to help our readers better understand the commonality of such challenges, along with the barriers and the opportunities.

School districts are complex, dynamic, and contested environments. Those inhabiting them represent a microcosm of the larger society with its cultural and political influences and tensions. Leading schools require a diverse set of skills and attributes, including but not

limited to courage, compassion, patience, adaptability, intellect, and curiosity.

It is presumed that *JSP*'s readers are curious about what works, why, and why promising initiatives sometimes fail. It is also presumed that both researchers and readers exit the exchange of ideas and the examination of problems, not only with solutions, but with more questions that lead to more research. This is the nature of inquiry.

Basic and applied research have served all of America's institutions: education, healthcare, science, technology, economics, and much more. Research that balances the theoretical with the practical has helped us to build the strongest economy in the world, lead in all categories of technological innovation, and serve as an international model in the sciences. The United States has consistently led the world in such economic indicators as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the global competitiveness index, the production of scientific papers, the number of utility patents for innovation, and Nobel prize winners.

Behind these indicators is a strong public school system that feeds into a world-renowned higher education system. It is a myth that America's public schools are failing. In fact, they have succeeded despite facing the headwinds of social and economic inequities

that have contributed to an income gap between the wealthiest and the middle- and lower-income groups. The United States has one of the largest income gaps of all industrialized countries, yet for many, public schools have been a refuge from such inequities, serving as a springboard to life-transforming opportunities.

Today, America has begun a new and uncharted path that appears to be moving away from a reliance on scholarship. The new administration in Washington has begun defunding major research institutions: academic, scientific, health-related, and higher education. The medical, energy, environmental, scientific, and education research sectors are among many being dismantled for reasons, other than “efficiency,” that have yet to be explained.

Leaders of institutions that rely on a combination of scholarship and practice understand that to do the best work for our students, there needs to be continual assessment towards improving that which we need to do better. These are productive approaches to applying our research. Such leaders also recognize their responsibility to advocate for those we represent - our students and their futures. This advocacy relies on intellect and knowledge gained through practice and scholarship. That is the easy part. True advocacy depends on threat awareness and courage.

For superintendents reading this column, it is hoped that you have established relationships with your local, state, and federal leaders—congressional representatives and senators. These representatives must be held accountable to answer questions about the radical defunding of major learning institutions. These institutions are in place to advance and not weaken our nation nor make us less healthy, less secure, less prosperous, and more dangerously uneducated.

This is not a red or blue state problem. It is an American problem. No matter the state or region within it, all will be affected by living in a society that no longer respects the importance of science and research. There will be serious downstream consequences.

As curious, informed, and responsible scholar-practitioners, we should be demanding answers to basic questions about the dismantling of America’s research agenda: *What are we doing? Why? How do we know or think it will work?* The answers should be founded on evidence, not speculation or hearsay about inefficiencies or corruption.

Superintendents have a powerful voice in their communities and beyond. Regional groups of leaders bring an even stronger voice. They should be asking their congressional representatives how *they* understand the current defunding efforts and how *they* envision an America without robust and scientifically driven research. Superintendents in their advocacy roles must reject broad, evasive, or diversionary responses. Educational leaders are experienced in guiding students and faculties through discussion via questioning that probes for clarity and depth of response. It is a moment to apply these skills on behalf of our students and our nation’s future.

Many entered the work of school leadership understanding that the mission is to serve students and society. This happens by providing the best education possible through advocacy for resources and management of what has been provided. But the work is more than this. Advocacy takes many forms. We are at a moment when our school leaders’ role as the scholar-practitioner is insufficient. Our collective voice may be one of the last guardrails to challenge and question our legislators about what has made America an international leader in the science of knowing and what is happening to reverse generations of

advancements. Now may be a final opportunity.

What makes the *JSP* so unique is that aside from some technical support from AASA, the journal is developed by volunteer editors and reviewers, many of whom are current or retired superintendents, central office leaders, building leaders, professors, and researchers. This is a labor of dedication to the field and our students. The reward comes from the satisfaction of serving those leading schools and their students.

As I leave this role, I want to offer a special thank you to Barbara Dean, who has been an assistant editor for almost twenty years and pulls the issues together after the editing and reviewing. She has brought insights, wisdom, and technical expertise to every issue.

Final Issue's Theme: *Leadership, Culture, and Continuous Improvement*

We try to find themes from a synthesis of articles that are submitted each year. The Spring 2025 issue's theme of *Leadership, Culture and Continuous Improvement* was developed back in the summer of 2024. Its focus may have been prescient as the articles in the issue underscore the importance of grounding educational practices in research to ensure they are effective and sustainable. Specifically, the articles address such topics and themes as the synergy between community involvement, effective leadership practices, strategic decision-making, and change management.

By engaging the community and fostering culturally responsive leadership, schools can create supportive environments that enhance educational outcomes. Additionally, informed decision-making and structured change management approaches are essential for sustaining improvements and adapting to

various influences and power dynamics within the school system.

Researchers Axelbank and Howick write, "It has become a bedrock principle in school administration that community engagement is desirable and even essential in improving our schools. In the current era of conflict over school policies and the resulting contentious School Board meetings, community engagement has become both more critical and more difficult to accomplish effectively." Parker, Brown, and Frazer contend, "Decision making at the school district level is subject to both external and internal influences and that the school district as an institution remains the main arena where decisions are made about a variety of features - from local educational politics and governance to enrollment and leadership. Effectively run school districts can be sites of powerful instructional change."

Cardona, Miller, Corrales, and Peters present research that suggests, "Superintendents need to be aware that principals who carry on culturally responsive leadership practices will create high teacher effectiveness, and sustainable school success. When principals develop their ability to guide a campus through a common goal, they can create high expectations monitored around goal attainment for the benefit of students and teachers. It is imperative that superintendents understand the magnitude of the relationship between school principal cultural proficiency and transformational leadership for the success of their school communities."

Finally, Flumerfelt and Ellis warn that "While the need to improve school outcomes is widely recognized and practiced for a variety of reasons (i.e, equity, the moral imperative of education, etc.), the journey into the creation and sustaining of change is something that schools and all organizations struggle with.

And because change management itself requires a space within leadership and organizational sciences, this indicates that change is hard to implement and maintain. It requires a framework and discipline to engage well.” The issue’s scholar-practitioners make

their cases with evidence. Healthy systems function best when using it. Advocacy is an opportunity for today’s school leaders to influence for necessary change but also use their voices to preserve that which benefits our students and society.

It is also what great leaders do best. Advocate!