

Boundaries, Boards, and Battles

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We are in a moment of opportunity. The struggle over who controls the future of America's public schools may come down to a matter of trust.

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Perhaps unlike any moment in the history of American public education, superintendents have been drawn into a culture war whose battleground has included local school districts. Already contending with the challenges of leading a complex organization, district leaders are now expected to balance this work within a volatile political environment and an urgency to prepare a future citizenry to deal with unprecedented megatrends, such as the acceleration of artificial intelligence with its unknown capabilities and consequences.

Today's students—tomorrow's adults—must be prepared for shifting environmental, geo-political, and economic challenges that will require an evidence-based understanding of the issues and their root causes. To survive and thrive they will need to use an empirical problem-solving process. Our future citizens will also need to understand historical abuses of power to guard against emerging forms of authoritarianism that today threaten democracy across the globe.

Superintendents cannot lead this important work alone. They need strong teams to support them and school boards that understand and agree to the greater mission with policies to achieve the community's vision for students. Well-crafted visions call for outcomes beyond career or college readiness. Students must graduate with an education that prepares them to adapt to and contend with both the imminent and inevitable complexities of unknown futures. Such vision statements, if used as touchstones for decision-making, have the potential to move their use beyond symbolism.

Yet, today's public schools are serving as accessible battlegrounds in the nation's culture wars. Wars are about boundaries—the expansion or protection of them through confrontation. International conflicts in such places as the Ukraine, Sudan, Palestine, and Syria, are sparked by sectarian animosity and violence, economic inequities, and the consolidation and control of wealth by those in

power. Antagonists understand how to accelerate fear and create confusion to harden boundaries of culture, values, and ideas to separate and control.

Today's superintendents, school boards, principals, and teachers, amid their mission to prepare students for their complex life journeys, face similar tactics. The school has served as one of the remaining entities where parents from all backgrounds and with diverse viewpoints have come together to agree about what is best for what we value the most—our children. While agreement on everything is unrealistic, stakeholders have found a way to bridge differences. But as certain actors work to divide and create “cultural” boundaries, Americans risk losing a common space that has served to unite, not divide.

We are in a moment of confusion as well as conflict. With sides forming and sometimes re-forming, school leaders are seeking ways to better understand and help explain to others the arguments for the boundaries that divide on such topics as equity, diversity, race, gender, inclusion, sex education, climate change, vaccines, weapons in schools, prayer, privatization, textbooks, library collections, and so much more. What some deem as offensive, others argue are essential.

There are no blueprints for solutions, yet there are benefits to possessing clarity about such boundaries and applying that to leading. Harvard's Public Education Leadership Program offers a coherence framework with levels of influence, interference, or support from the external environment to local strategies developed by teachers and school leaders via the “instructional core”—the triad of teacher-student-content.

The framework's architects suggest boundaries, formal and informal, that are systemically integral with a value that contributes to student success. Yet, within the framework there are implicit leadership responsibilities to protect the core from that which disrupts or distracts educators from achieving the institutional vision for the learner through finding ways to use boundaries in a constructive rather than divisive way.

Boundaries serve multiple purposes with different forms. They can protect or divide. Robert Frost, in his poem “Mending Wall,” asks if the wall serves to ensure neighborly relationships or separate for protection or a self-imposed alienation. Boundaries can be paradoxical—they can help or cause harm. While most boundaries are artificial, illusory, and temporary, not all are bad. Within the debate over where lines should be drawn, leaders can find opportunity.

The Summer 2023 issue of the *JSP* explores the concept of boundary in different educational contexts: a study of school board member's beliefs about state policymaking; a collaborative project between university and public schools for developing principals; the influence of pre-K policy on teachers in the classroom; and the U.S. Supreme Court's recent decision on prayer in schools and how it changes and does not change leadership's obligation to protect the rights of students.

Researchers Watkins, Mucerino, and Person in their study, “School Board Members' Beliefs about State Education Policymaking and Policymakers,” examine the challenges facing school board members, many of whom lack experience in understanding the ramifications of their decision-making for aligning local policy with those generated by

federal and state agencies. The researchers describe a decision-making model driven by value preferences at a time when boards and superintendent are dealing with increasingly complex issues such as enrollment declines, inflation, the parental rights movement, and pandemic-related matters. While they have the authority to interpret and develop local policy, the authors ask how are they operating with empiricism?’

Authors Allen, Wallace, and Thomas, in their study, “Grow Your Own Programs: An Opportunity for Universities and School Districts to Collaborate and Reshape Principal Preparation,” propose a model that breaks down barriers between P-12 and post-secondary institutions to integrate theory and practice through expertise and resources to provide a rich and authentic experience.

In their study, “PreK-12 Is the New Reality: How Do We Make it Work?” Stipek and Coburn examine the void between stated policy and that which is happening in the classroom:

While the interactions between teachers and students within the classroom are what matter most, these are affected by myriad school and district policies and practices. Researchers have identified five elements that district leaders need to consider in their efforts to support effective instruction (Hopkins & Spillane, 2015; Hopkins & Woulfin, 2015).

The researchers call for a review and alignment of practices and policies to achieve effectiveness and continuity. They describe an interaction among policies and practices that

forms a necessary package for the delivery of quality instruction.

Shaffer, Decker, and Rippner, in “The Praying Football Coach Supreme Court Decision: Five Implications for School Administrators,” analyze the constitutional tensions over religious expression in public schools when the Free Exercise Clause conflicts with the Establishment Clause and prior judicial decisions. The authors provide school leaders with background on this important case, including an examination of constitutional paradox, to better understand the limits of the boundaries and offer suggestions for managing events *when* the superintendent is called to decide about such a conflict.

Conclusion

Today’s superintendents and their teams lead in a highly contentious political environment. Survival and success might be better achieved through a deeper understanding of the paradoxes within the conflict and the boundaries that divide.

Understanding that divisions can be an unintended consequence of the ambiguity that paradox can create or from the apathy of a disengaged public is essential. Moreover, school leaders must possess an awareness that many divisions derive from intentional tactics to seize control of public school decision-making to achieve ideological agendas.

School leaders, their teams, and boards must critically examine their beliefs, consider diverse perspectives, and navigate the complex boundaries and challenges they face in education governance and policymaking, especially if they have an agreement around a well- designed mission and well-informed vision for all their students our future citizens.