



Draft August 2024

## Political Leadership in the Superintendency

Every child in the U.S. deserves access to learning experiences that will help them self-actualize, realize their full potential, and graduate prepared for post-secondary education, career options, and civic participation. Making this vision a reality is the responsibility of many people and organizations working together for the good of the nation's schoolchildren. Of all those charged with making this vision a reality, however, it is possible that no one is held more publicly accountable than school district superintendents. It is an extremely challenging job with high stakes— as the quality of our children's education affects not only their future livelihood but the vibrancy of our communities and the health of our democracy.

The job of the superintendent has always been broad and deep. Superintendents are charged first and foremost with establishing a local vision for teaching and learning and creating the conditions necessary to bring that vision to life in every classroom, every school, every day. But they must also be talented managers, given their organizations are often the largest employers in their communities, have large and complicated budgets, and provide various services to students and their families. Even more, they need to be politically astute. Given that superintendents are generally appointed by elected officials, and so many people are interested in their local schools' success, it is easy to get distracted or lost in a sea of competing demands.

In recent years, however, we believe the job of the superintendent has increasingly become a **predominantly political one**. This has long been true in large urban districts. But today, it is also the case in mid-sized urban districts and smaller suburban and rural communities where demographics have changed swiftly and opinions about how to engage a larger swath of students in school is at the center of local debates. No matter the political landscape, it means the superintendent's job is largely about keeping the organization's focus on children and youth while strategically navigating the interests of adults.

It is with this acknowledgement that we've formed the **Collaborative on Political Leadership in the Superintendency (CPLS)**. This collaborative, which consists of seasoned superintendents, politics of education scholars, and the leaders of major organizations who train and support superintendents nation-wide, is focused on equipping superintendents with the political acumen to make positive change in a complex environment.

To be clear, we believe that superintendents must still attend to the core work of the district which requires strong instructional and managerial skills bolstered by a talented team of central office leaders and principals. We are simply calling for increased preparation and support for the political work that superintendents invariably **must** do that **only** they can do. Political competencies are often lacking or even missing from existing leadership frameworks, and therefore, leadership programs. Yet leading for positive change in public schools requires an advanced set of political skills, and many superintendents are hungry for guidance.

In this paper, we provide an overview of today's political landscape, offer an emergent framework that captures the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for superintendents

to be successful as political leaders, and share our next steps. We hope this work can be a touchstone for those who prepare and support superintendents nationwide.

## **What is unique about today's political landscape?**

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, navigating anything, including politics, means to *successfully find a way from one place to another*.<sup>1</sup> We emphasize this definition because many school district leaders are understandably wary of “politics” and perceive the work of navigating them negatively— as coercion, telling people what they want to hear, and glad-handing.<sup>2</sup> Practicing politics, however, does not need to be dirty or sinister. As a former-superintendent explained, “Politics is simply the exercise of common sense and sensitivity to the interests of others in a sometimes highly volatile environment.”<sup>3</sup>

It is also worth noting that education politics are not new. Public schooling in the U.S. has been political since its inception, starting with early advocacy for “common schools” by Horace Mann in the 1830s. Early reformers saw publicly funded schools as a potentially “unifying force” and aimed for students from every social class to be included in schooling. But some resisted paying to educate other people’s children, particularly children of all races and ethnicities.<sup>4</sup> In other words, navigating the competing interests of stakeholders is a necessary component of the work of education leadership, especially when trying to increase access to education as a public good.

While public education has always been political, today's political landscape has unique aspects. Pew Research points to stark national political divides that are not budging.<sup>5</sup> “Partisan polarization remains the dominant, seemingly unalterable condition of American politics. Republicans and Democrats agree on very little – and when they do, it often is in the shared belief that they have little in common.”<sup>6</sup>

Concerningly, these partisan politics have recently found their way into local communities. In a convening we held on the politics of the superintendency, Jeff Henig, a scholar who studies education politics, shared that the political landscape in education used to be smaller and non-partisan, composed of the typical local stakeholders (e.g., board, media, union, parent groups). Today, however, decision-making on education has moved to new venues, like courts, special counsels, and state legislatures led by politicians who are not educators and may not even have a direct stake in schools.<sup>7</sup>

In that same convening, superintendents described how national partisan politics are playing out in real-time in their school districts. They expressed concerns about board takeovers driven by

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. “navigate,” accessed February 10, 2024, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/navigate>

<sup>2</sup> Blase, J. & Bjork, L. (2010). The micropolitics of educational change and reform: Cracking open the black box. In A. Hargreaves (Ed.), *Second international handbook of educational change* (pp. 237-258). New York, NY: Springer.

<sup>3</sup> Quinn, T. (2010). In the arena: Building the skills for peak performance in leading schools and systems. (p. 52). Old Mission, MI: Quinn and Associates.

<sup>4</sup> Center on Education Policy.(2020). History and Evolution of Public Education in the US. The George Washington University Graduate School of Education and Human Development. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606970.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center (2020). <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/compare/party-affiliation/by/state/>

<sup>6</sup> Pew Research Center Report (2020). Amid Campaign Turmoil, Biden Holds Wide Leads on Coronavirus, Unifying the Country. <https://pewrsr.ch/3d9YZRf>

<sup>7</sup> Collaborative on Political Leadership in the Superintendency meeting, June 2-3, 2023

ideology rather than public service. They told stories about contentious and even unruly board meetings that put the safety of students and staff at risk. They shared their dismay about the presence and influence of people who did not live in the community and the spread of disinformation. They also highlighted the challenge of new state laws designed to define or constrain what is taught in schools. Leaders of color described feeling these challenges more intensely. And they explained that while the specific hot topics changed every so often, the students sitting at the center of each debate were primarily students who are historically marginalized (e.g., LGBTQ+ students, Black students, and immigrant students).

Tensions and challenges have produced burnout in educators nationwide. A RAND study found that superintendent turnover was at 18% in urban districts.<sup>8</sup> Although RAND research also points to turnover rates returning to 13%, joint insights with American School District Panel indicate that 95% of superintendents state that their job has gotten more challenging over the past ten years, with job-related stress as the top reason for turnover, followed by community politics.<sup>9</sup>

## An emergent framework

The superintendents we've talked to already use a variety of sound strategies to navigate politics in their communities, many of them based on what they've learned through years of practice. They develop shared visions, strategic plans, and communicate progress regularly and widely. They invest proactively in board relations, union relations, and media relations (including social media). They build strong alliances with local organizations that represent various student groups. Some invest time building relationships with state legislators and governors. It is astonishing how much time superintendents are already putting into their political leadership. And yet, the superintendents we know are desperately searching for a more nuanced set of strategies, attentive to personal identity and local context, given the challenges of today.

We've developed this emergent framework to guide our collective response to that need. But first, we name a few **underlying assumptions**:

- Underlying this framework is a belief that superintendents are public leaders charged with ensuring access to a high quality education for every child. As such, superintendents must, at their core, be **reflective leaders** who make decisions based on a principled vision of what is good for students. In other words, their decisions ought to consistently ensure that all students are protected from harm and nurtured to grow and thrive academically.
- Second, this framework represents the ideal, and the reality is that no superintendent can do all of this on their own while also functioning as an effective instructional leader and manager. For a superintendent to do their job well, they must be surrounded by an

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<sup>8</sup> Sawchuk, s. (2022). Superintendent Turnover Is a Real Thing. How Bad Is It? Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/superintendent-turnover-is-a-real-thing-how-bad-is-it/2022/02>

<sup>9</sup> Schwartz, H. & Dilberti, M. (2022). State of the Superintendent: High Job Satisfaction and a Projected Normal Turnover Rate [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR900/RR956-12/RAND\\_RRA956-12.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR900/RR956-12/RAND_RRA956-12.pdf)

**effective team** and likely one that includes roles that focus on public relations, governmental relations, and media relations.

- Finally, the political leadership of the superintendent is inextricably linked to the political leadership of their **school boards**. To navigate politics effectively, they need to work closely with school board members who understand how to perform their roles well too.

### Three dimensions

In order to be effective, we believe that today's superintendents must consider what is happening politically at the federal and state levels (the MACRO political environment), what is happening at the local school district level (the MESO political environment), and how their own political viewpoints and other identities/affiliations (the MICRO political environment) influence how they lead.<sup>10</sup> There are specific knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to navigate each of these inter-related dimensions of the political environment. And it is crucial for superintendents to hone these skills at every stage of their careers given that the political landscape continues to change, and it is different depending on context.

### Framework Draft



### MICRO | Self as Superintendent

#### A superintendent critically examines self as leader.

*The superintendent as a political leader reflects on the influence of their identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality), stays grounded in their personal values, and consistently strives to make principled decisions that support a school system to ensure all children thrive in school.*

<sup>10</sup> Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. | Guajardo, M., Guajardo, F., Janson, C., & Militello, M. (2016). *Reframing community partnerships in education: Uniting the power of place and wisdom of people*. Routledge.

Superintendents must start by reflecting on who they are (e.g., their race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation), their own political views on a variety of issues, and how it influences their leadership in relation to the context in which they lead. That is because while our identities influence our value systems, and hence, what we are willing to stand for, they can also produce political blind spots. Sometimes, drawing on our personal experiences can give us the courage to lead for justice. Black female leaders, for example, have arisen as a group that deeply upholds values such as education, liberation, and love.<sup>11</sup> Other times, our identities, or rather, our egos, work against us and can lead to defensive postures, dodging of responsibilities, and avoidance of criticism.<sup>12</sup> Self-work, whether it is connecting to one's values or addressing implicit biases, is the work of political leadership. It requires emotional intelligence (self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill)<sup>13</sup> and cultural responsiveness.<sup>14</sup>

Dispositions such as humility, self-care, and a growth mindset support superintendents to anticipate, embrace, and navigate political situations. Humility provides a space for bridging political divides since it “helps people let go of defensiveness, take in information that challenges their political views, and see the humanity in people on the other side of the political spectrum.”<sup>15</sup> Growth-mindset expert Carol Dweck cautions leaders to be aware of fixed mindsets when facing challenges.<sup>16</sup> Superintendents must be mindful of one's own political biases and commit to understanding multiple perspectives with persistence in learning. Argyris and Senge's “ladder of inference” advises a reflective focus on data and ability to observe phenomena in its purest form while refraining from jumping into conclusions too soon.<sup>17</sup> Resilience is the “ability to adapt to life's misfortunes and set-backs.”<sup>18</sup> Building inner strength and wellbeing rituals support superintendents in proactive and responsive ways.

## MESO | School District | Community Context

### ***A superintendent leads a school district by working across differences.***

*The superintendent as a political leader models how to work across differences through shared visioning, co-construction of strategies, consistent communication, and authentic engagement with students, families, educators, labor partners, school boards, and community partners. The superintendent influences the school community to stand firm in their commitment to the wellbeing of all children.*

Superintendents must have deep knowledge of the typical local constituent groups (school board, union, media, and parent organizations), how they work, and how to engage them

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<sup>11</sup> Bailey, T., Alston, J.A. “African American Women Superintendents.” In *The Palgrave Handbook of Educational Leadership and Management Discourse*. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, 2021. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39666-4\\_92-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39666-4_92-1)

<sup>12</sup> Bertrand, M., & Sampson, C. (2022). Exposing the White Innocence Playbook of School District Leaders. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2021.2021669>

<sup>13</sup> Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., McKee, Annie. (2002). *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*. Harvard Business School Publishing. Boston, MA.

<sup>14</sup> Hammond, Z., & Jackson, Y. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin, a SAGE Company.

<sup>15</sup> Suttie, J. (2020) How humility can help us bridge our political divides. *Greater Good Magazine* [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how\\_humility\\_can\\_help\\_us\\_bridge\\_our\\_political\\_divides](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_humility_can_help_us_bridge_our_political_divides)

<sup>16</sup> Blad, E. (2016). Nurturing Growth Mindsets: Six Tips from Carol Dweck. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/nurturing-growth-mindsets-six-tips-from-carol-dweck/2016/03>

<sup>17</sup> Senge PM. *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization*. Broadway Business; 199

<sup>18</sup> Mayo Clinic (2023). Resilience: Build skills to endure hardship. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/resilience-training/in-depth/resilience/art-20046311>

productively. But in a polarized political environment, some skills may be more important than others.

Constituent engagement<sup>19</sup> across lines of difference requires a next-level skill set:

- Visioning: Superintendents need to develop affirmative visions for public education that focus on the well-being of all children that speak to a broader swath of constituents.
- Communications: Superintendents need to learn how to use more descriptive, unifying language and provide access to the real work that is happening in schools through data, information, stories, and examples.
- Discernment: Superintendents need to identify which political issues to take up and which need to be deflected or avoided. They also can be more thoughtful about when to be transparent and when it is unnecessary. In other words, transparency is important for public accountability, but not when it puts students or teachers in danger.
- Support and Partnership: Superintendents need to consider how to support, guide and protect students, teachers and principals and how to create strong partnerships with parents, community organizations, and other institutional leaders.
- Political Mapping and Movement building: Superintendents need to practice political empathy, understand power and how to map it and leverage it, and learn about community organizing. This includes creating opportunities to engage the silent majority and amplify student voice.

These days, however, it isn't enough to proactively build relationships across constituent groups. Superintendents who hold an empathetic mindset are able to listen to diverse input and support school systems to land on courageous actions that support students with integrity and in healing-centered ways. Margaret Wheatley suggests "To bring health to a system, connect it to more of itself... In order to change, the system needs to learn more about itself from itself."<sup>20</sup> Superintendents must support the collective to build a climate that upholds the sharing of different and even extreme perspectives in ways that uphold respect, dignity and humanity.

## **MACRO | National & State**

### ***A superintendent understands the national and state political landscape.***

*The superintendent as a political leader understands the laws and policies that protect children, interrogates the opinions of advocacy groups that threaten those protections, and considers the impact of current events on the wellbeing of students, families and staff and acts accordingly.*

While many superintendents focus rightly on their local politics, we believe it is crucial that they simultaneously deepen their understanding of state and national politics as well. This means not simply knowing what laws and policies exist, but being informed about the history of those laws and policies and their intent, so that they can successfully advocate for or against them,

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<sup>19</sup> Ganz, M. (2009). What Is Public Narrative: Self, Us & Now (Public Narrative Worksheet). Working Paper. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUI.InstRepos:30760283>

<sup>20</sup> Wheatley, M. (1992, 2006). Leadership and the New Science



interpret them with the support of legal counsel (without over-interpreting them), and implement them. It is especially important that superintendents have a deep understanding of laws that protect children, like Title IX and IDEA, while analyzing new laws that might threaten those rights. The role of superintendent in politics requires exhibiting leadership based on authentic core-values, in both words and actions, that may move beyond one's local community but carry to surrounding communities within and across state lines.

## Knowledge, skills and dispositions

Each dimension requires a specific set of knowledge, skills and dispositions essential for superintendents to navigate politics successfully. In the chart that follows, we highlight key examples.

	<b>MICRO (Self)</b>	<b>MESO (School District &amp; Local Community)</b>	<b>MACRO (National &amp; State)</b>
<b>KNOWLEDGE</b>	Identity + Typical local constituent groups + Major educational issues		
	Understanding of how identity and values influence leadership	Awareness of typical constituent groups and how they work  Including school board, local government, union, local news media, student groups, parent organizations, and advocacy groups	Understanding of federal and state education policies, laws, and school finance  Awareness of education issues in national and global media
<b>SKILLS</b>	Critical examination + Proactive leadership* + Sense making		
	Examining self as leader  Exhibiting emotional intelligence  Practicing cultural responsiveness	<b>Visioning and Communicating</b>  Political mapping  Movement building and mobilizing  Ongoing relationship building	Influencing, interpreting and implementing education laws and policies  Learning across communities
<b>DISPOSITIONS</b>	Grounded + Present + Cognizant		
	Resilient  Curious  Centered	Transparent  Courageous  Visible	Informed  Active  Connected

\*These skills represent the “core” of political leadership in education.

## Implications

Given the political challenges superintendents face today, we believe that the following next steps are crucial for the field in the short term. These are areas in which we will be taking immediate action.

- 1) **Superintendents need for spaces that promote resilience and emotional support:** While it is likely inadequate on its own, organizations that support superintendents can provide space for superintendents to recharge and heal. This ought to include space to connect with like-minded leaders and those who share similar identities, but also to examine one's own practice among trusted colleagues away from the school district. These spaces can also be created by superintendents themselves. We intend to pilot such a group with the cohort of superintendents who are members of our collaborative.
- 2) **Superintendents, and the organizations who support them, need new tools for analysis:** In many support programs, superintendents bring timely problems of practice for feedback. This is an excellent routine that could be enhanced with new tools for analysis, especially tools that help to discern the political pressures at play and help guide a superintendent on what to pursue and what to ignore.
- 3) **Superintendents need a playbook:** To increase access to specific ideas for navigating today's politics, superintendents need tangible examples, tools, and resources. They need a flexible playbook that can help them navigate politics effectively in their own communities with consideration to regional and local context. The playbook should focus on local politics, but include resources for self reflection and information about how to educate oneself on state and national politics as well.
- 4) **Superintendents from smaller or mid-sized districts need more access to support networks:** Too many superintendents have limited access to the support they need given that so many organizations focus on large, urban school districts. In addition to creating more tools and resources and making them publicly available, we believe existing organizations should consider new ways to increase access for mid-sized districts and smaller districts with rapidly changing demographics.
- 5) **Superintendents need executive coaching from proven political leaders:** Superintendents need consistent thought partners to keep them grounded. They need a network of seasoned leaders, potentially from across sectors, made available to them when they need it without (or with minimal) cost. We encourage every organization to include executive coaching as a component of their services.

## A call to action

In all, we believe that political leadership in the superintendency is crucial to the future of public education and our democracy. Our collaborative will be putting these ideas into action, but we encourage others to do the same.

Take any number of political issues today– a superintendent must understand their own values and beliefs and how that influences their leadership. They must understand the views of a variety of constituent groups. And ultimately, they must be able to make decisions with the best interests of students in mind.



**Acknowledgements**

*The emergent framework for Political Leadership in the Superintendency was prepared by Bonnie Lo and Jennifer Cheatham with input from Carl Cohn and Jenny Portillo-Nacu. The resources included were contributed by the generosity of scholars, superintendents, and associations involved in a joint effort with Harvard & Claremont Graduate Schools called the Collaborative on Political Leadership in the Superintendency with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The intent of this initiative is to bolster and support the work of superintendents to effectively navigate politics in education.*

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