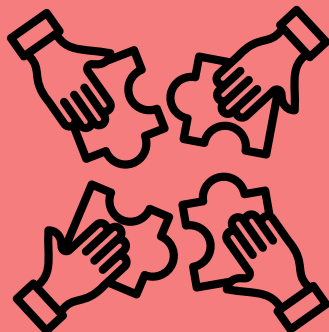
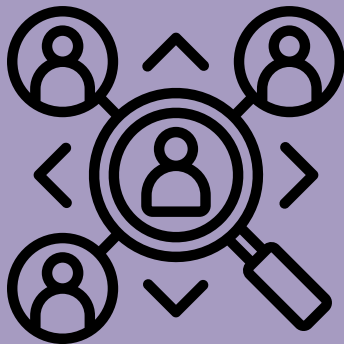
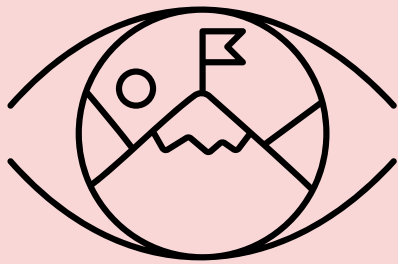


The Superintendent's Political Leadership Field Book



Developed by the
Collaborative on
Political Leadership
in the
Superintendency

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Overview

ABOUT THE COLLABORATIVE ON POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN THE SUPERINTENDENCY (CPLS)

The Collaborative on Political Leadership in the Superintendency (CPLS) was formed to equip public school district superintendents across the United States with the knowledge and tools to effectively navigate the politics of education in service of healthy and supportive school communities that cultivate excellent teaching and student learning for all.

The Collaborative consists of:

- Leaders of prominent organizations who prepare and support superintendents
- Top scholars of education politics
- Experienced current and former superintendents

Together, we are focused on ensuring superintendents have the political acumen they need to make positive change in complex environments.

OUR WORK



Research: Our research has been focused on identifying and building the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for superintendents to effectively navigate the political realm.



Collaborative Action: We leverage insight and knowledge from the field to develop timely guidance, tools, examples, and resources for superintendents.



Communication and Outreach: We codify and widely communicate our learning to the wider community.

Our goal is to provide resources that can be used by organizations that support public school district superintendents across the United States.

To learn more about CPLS and our work visit our website: <https://cpl-s.org>



THE SUPERINTENDENT'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP FIELD BOOK

Superintendents already use a variety of sound strategies to navigate politics in their communities learned through years of practice. And yet, many of the superintendents we know are searching for a more nuanced set of strategies that are attentive to personal identity as well as local and national context, given the challenges of education leadership today. The Framework for Political Leadership in the Superintendency and associated field book that follows was created in response to that need.

How this field book is organized

To be successful in the political realm, superintendents must do a lot well, but above all, they must be proactive. According to the Oxford dictionary, being *proactive* is defined as “taking action by causing change and not only reacting to change when it happens.” In other words, the focus must be on leading, not responding reactively.

Accordingly, this field book is organized around a set of five interrelated proactive skills that are critical for effective political leadership in the superintendency. These practices include visioning, communicating, political mapping, relationship building, and mobilizing.

Each section focuses on one proactive practice. The sections begin with a scenario accompanied by discussion questions, grounding the reader in problems of practice related to political leadership in the superintendency. A description of the proactive skill follows along with a set of exercises designed to guide the reader in applying the practice in their own context. Each section ends with suggested tools to support implementation. While we think there is a natural progression from one proactive practice to the next, the order in which you choose to delve into each practice is up to you.

Using this field book

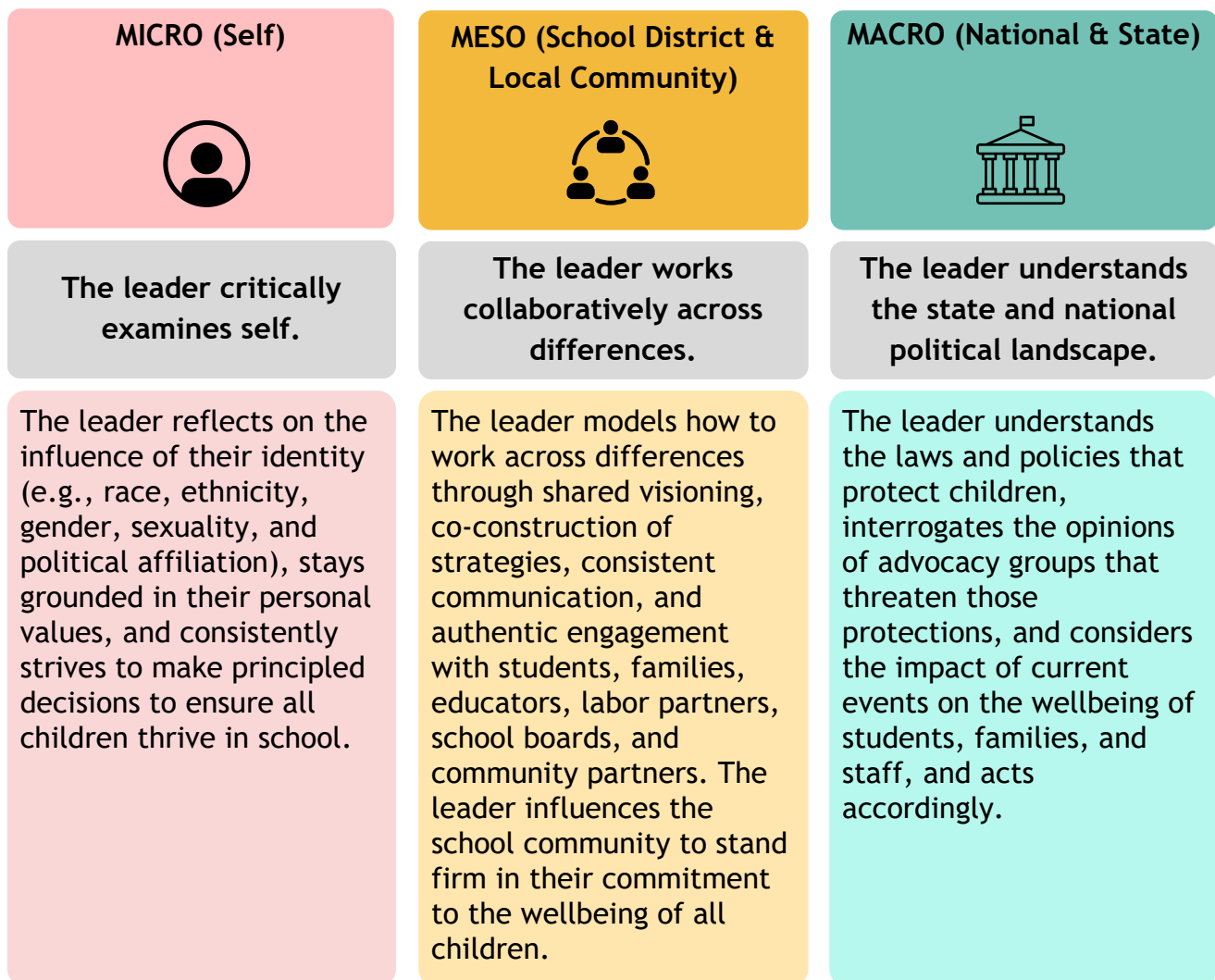
This field book is meant to help superintendents develop and leverage political leadership in their districts. It can be used as an individual learning and reflection tool or with a leadership team or executive coach. Superintendents can also use the field book as the basis for a community of practice. Most importantly, this is a resource superintendents can go back to whenever they are attempting to navigate political complexity in order to make positive change.

FRAMEWORK FOR POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN THE SUPERINTENDENCY

We define *political leadership* in the superintendency as the set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to navigate competing interests in a way that facilitates positive outcomes for our nation's youth. The Framework for Political Leadership in the Superintendency is designed to help leaders consider aspects of their political leadership that are crucial for student success.




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, what is happening at the local school district level, and how their own political viewpoints and other identities/affiliations influence how they lead.



Overview

Each dimension requires a specific set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions (detailed in the table below) for superintendents to navigate politics successfully.

MICRO (Self) 	MESO (School District & Local Community) 	MACRO (National & State) 
Knowledge: 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
Skills: Critical examination + Proactive leadership* + Sense making		
Examining self as leader Exhibiting emotional intelligence Practicing cultural awareness	Visioning & communicating Political mapping Movement building & mobilizing Ongoing relationship building	Influencing, interpreting, and implementing education laws and policies Learning across communities
Dispositions: Grounded + Present + Cognizant		
Resilient Curious Centered	Transparent Courageous Visible	Informed Active Connected

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

Using This Field Book

GETTING STARTED: GROUNDING EXERCISES

Before exploring each proactive practice, we invite you to engage in the grounding exercises below. Political leadership only matters in relation to meaningful change focused on improving outcomes for children and youth, so we ask that you start by identifying a high-leverage strategy aimed at improving outcomes that matter to your community. You will continue to come back to this strategy as you read through each section of the field book.

Exercise 1

This exercise is designed to clarify what you are trying to accomplish in your community and why.

Name one high-leverage strategy that you are focused on this year to make a positive impact on student outcomes, especially those positioned furthest from opportunity, and why.

What you choose should:

1. Aim at improving the conditions necessary for excellent teaching and learning,
2. Require navigating complexity, and
3. Implicate you (meaning, it can't be done without your leadership).

My high-leverage strategy is...

This is how it will positively impact student learning, if achieved:

Exercise 2

This exercise is meant to further contextualize what it is you are trying to accomplish, including how your work is situated in the larger national context.

Describe the context which makes this complex.

MICRO (Self)



What are your views on the problem that the strategy aims to address? Are your views shared? How might your identity inform your views? How does your perception of the problem influence your thoughts on the work to be done to implement the strategy? Consider both special insight and blind spots.

MESO (School District & Local Community)

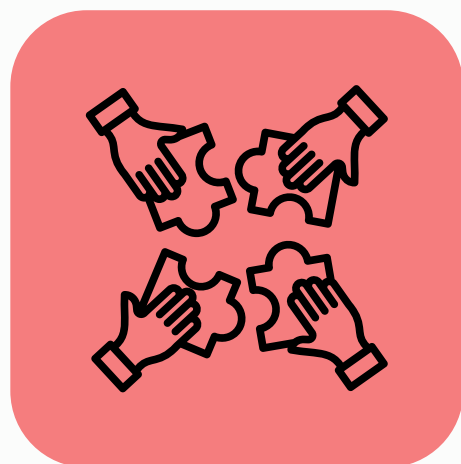
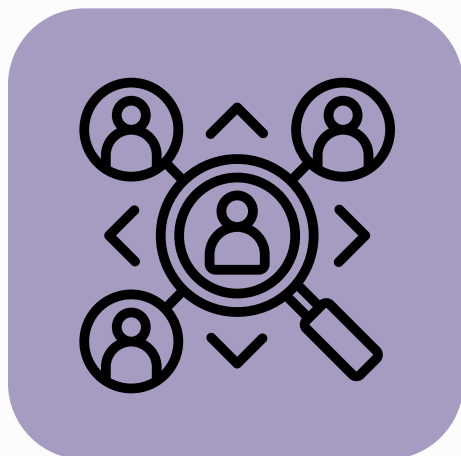
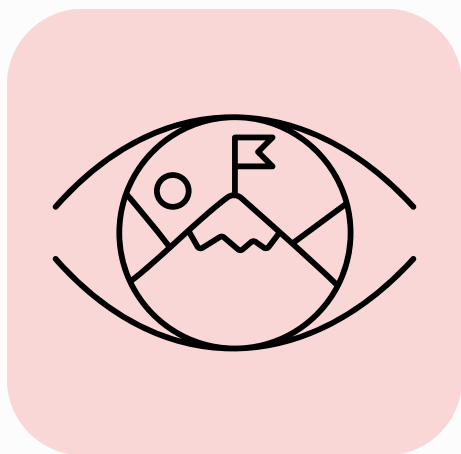


What is the history of this strategy? Have others tried to do something similar? To what extent were they successful or not? Why? To what extent have your stakeholders been involved in defining the strategy?

MACRO (National & State)



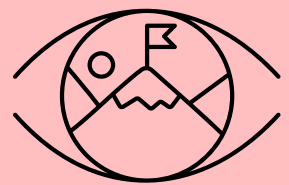
What is happening at the state or national level in relation to the strategy? What are the enabling conditions? What are the constraints? What are the threats?



Proactive Practices

Now that you've identified a focus strategy, we invite you to explore the proactive practices that can support your political leadership, always considering how you might use the practice to make progress on both implementation and outcomes.

Proactive Practice 1: Visioning



Proactive Practice 1: Visioning



As you read through the section, think about your strategy from the Getting Started Grounding Exercise. What is your vision for success?

SCENARIO

Following an incident in which a derogatory, transphobic phrase was written on the wall of a high school bathroom, a group of local students advocated for greater support of LGBTQ+ students at school. In response, District A launched an initiative focused on creating a sense of belonging for all students. The superintendent pushed for focused attention on supporting LGBTQ+ students and families by increasing visible support for them. Teachers were encouraged to display Pride flags and safe space signs in their classrooms. Additionally, the district developed publicly available resources for supporting LGBTQ+ students and families. The resources were posted on the district website and made available in hard copies across schools in the district.

While many community members expressed their support for the district initiative, others expressed concern regarding the inclusion of the Pride flags and resources on the district website. They feared the influence the displays would have on students and felt that some of the resources on the district website were not developmentally appropriate for students of different ages. These community members felt their perspectives and concerns had been ignored because they were not involved in developing the initiative. Given their small numbers, and his own strong views, the superintendent didn't worry about them, labeling them as "resistors" to inclusive efforts. The superintendent knew this initiative was student-centered and that was the main priority.

District A had a school board that included both progressive and conservative members. Despite their differences, the superintendent had typically succeeded in generating bipartisan support by highlighting initiatives that were good for kids in the community. However, when a new, politically conservative board member joined the board, things began to shift. This new board member was supported by regional and national organizations that didn't believe that pro-LGBTQ+ efforts had a place in schools. This board member made a concerted effort to influence other board members to support his position and actions while also intimidating school staff through unannounced walkthroughs of district schools. Meanwhile, the board member conducted listening tours with concerned families and community members regarding the availability of LGBTQ+ resources. Because public commentary had not been solicited throughout the process of



developing the initiative, members of the community felt like the only person listening to their concerns was the board member. Ultimately, this board member called for the removal of Pride flags, safe space signs, and the resource lists posted in school buildings.

Given the momentum behind the board member's efforts, the superintendent felt he had no choice but to back away from the district's work to actively support the LGBTQ+ community. Instead, he pivoted to a new, broader initiative focusing on the belonging of all students.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Micro:** In this scenario, what are the superintendent's values, beliefs, and potential blind spots? What kind of self-examination must a superintendent do when crafting a vision for their district? Why is this important?
- **Meso:** In this scenario, how might the superintendent have framed the strategy and related problem in a way that spoke to a greater swath of constituents? What shared values might have been centered? To what extent must a leader engage the community in creating a vision for success?
- **Macro:** In this scenario, how might the superintendent have used an awareness of national context to inform his work? How does national context affect the development of a district vision that is supportive of all students, families, and staff?

This scenario is meant to demonstrate the importance of developing a vision for success that is embraced by the largest possible swath of people before enacting the strategy. Our suggestion is not to back away from hard topics or efforts that serve marginalized groups of students, but to engage your community in agreeing on universal goals, like safety and belonging, which can help a leader better express the need for targeted strategies.

WHAT IS VISIONING?

A district's vision articulates the aspirations of a community by explicitly defining what **excellence** in education looks like for every child and outlining the **values** that guide decision-making. The vision must be grounded in what we know about great teaching, including the importance of belonging for students to learn at high levels. A clear, consistent, and student-centered vision will help build community trust and confidence, enabling the district to move forward in its pursuit of educational excellence for all students. A compelling vision anchors a district's theory of change and guides strategy development, especially when addressing issues of equal opportunity and access.



YOUR TURN!

Vision for success exercise

Consider the strategy you outlined earlier. What does success look like in relation to this specific strategy? In other words, if your strategy was successful, what would be true for kids, teachers, or your community?

If we are successful at...then...

Visioning discussion questions

If working with a partner or a team, use these questions to strengthen your vision for success.

- To what extent does the vision communicate a well-rounded definition of success in both implementation and outcomes?
- To what extent does the vision draw on and tap into district/community core values?
- Who might be most motivated or inspired by this vision? Who would be least motivated or inspired? Why?

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT VISIONING

The following strategies are listed to address the micro, meso, and macro levels of political leadership.

Understand how identity and personal values influence leadership.



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. Superintendents must be mindful of their political biases and commit to understanding multiple perspectives with persistence in learning. When developing a district vision, using a co-constructive process can help check our personal values and biases to ensure the vision centers the needs and desires of local students and families.

To implement this strategy, ask yourself the following questions:

- How have my personal values and beliefs informed the vision for our district?
- Where are there gaps in my thinking because of my own personal experience?
- Are the vision and values shared?

Look for common ground across constituent groups.



It is crucial to understand what your community values within and across cultures. For that reason, people representative of local community groups must be included in the process of crafting the vision, especially people from marginalized groups. The goal is to ensure different groups and individuals, even across lines of difference, can see themselves and their children in the district vision.

To implement this strategy, ask yourself the following questions:

- Who needs to be a part of crafting the vision and values for our district so that it is representative of the community we serve? Whose voices might need to be centered?
- How will we explore differences in values and beliefs in working to craft a collective vision for our district?
- How can I seek understanding around differences of opinion, while centering the voices of students, parents, and staff?



Understand state and federal laws.



Superintendents must develop a local vision for success, but this vision needs to align with federal and state laws with a focus on those regulations that exist to protect children, especially marginalized youth. Consider key legislation, like the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Title IX, the Equal Education Opportunities Act of 1974, and Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The priorities set in these laws to ensure equal access to educational opportunity for every child should inform the development of your local vision.

To implement this strategy, ask yourself the following questions:

- To what extent does our local vision speak to the importance of access to a high quality education for every child?
- How do our core values reflect a commitment to the inclusion and belonging of young people?
- How will I keep my own community grounded in a local vision and values that reinforce key tenets codified in law about access, fairness, and excellence?

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE VISIONING

- Be aware of how who you are influences your vision of success.
- Ask questions that help to elicit the hopes, dreams, and possibilities that inspire your community members.
- Listen for insights about what your community values most.
- Create opportunities for ongoing community input and feedback on the extent to which your strategies are aligned to your community's vision for success.
- Seek out different perspectives, especially the perspectives of those most deeply experiencing the problems you are trying to solve.
- Allow the vision for success to evolve as you learn together about what matters most in your community while staying grounded in the laws that support and protect children.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Opportunity to Learn, Responsibility to Lead (Aspen Institute)

This report from the Aspen Institute's Education and Society Program outlines a set of bipartisan principles for improving public education and student experience in schools. (<https://tinyurl.com/yrybps6z>)

New Superintendent Transition Toolkit (Hanover Research)

This toolkit provides resources and guidance that newly hired leaders can deploy in their first 100 days to build positive relationships, use data to inform planning, and craft a common vision for moving the district forward. (<https://tinyurl.com/2vhdbrrbc>)

Targeted Universalism: Policy and Practice (Othering and Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley)

This primer explains the importance of setting universal goals for all groups while pursuing targeted strategies for some groups when making change in a politically volatile environment. (<https://tinyurl.com/2wfvdt26>)

Proactive Practice 2: Communicating



Proactive Practice 2: Communicating



As you read through the section, think about your priority strategy from the Getting Started Grounding Exercise. How will you communicate about your strategy in a way that speaks to community values?

SCENARIO

An evaluation of school buildings in District B revealed that one of the school buildings was structurally unsound for occupation, but the school year had already gotten underway. The school included a cluster program to support autistic students. The superintendent informed the board that all students would have to be relocated during an upcoming fall break to two other neighborhood schools for the remainder of the year. She sent out digital and hardcopy communications to the impacted schools to inform the school communities of the planned restructuring that would move students and staff. The communication stressed the importance of student and staff safety. However, the information sent out was not clear about how the decision to move students and staff had been made.

Within minutes, the superintendent and school board were bombarded with emails, phone calls, and social media posts. Many families supported the immediate moving of students and staff from the defunct school building due to safety concerns, but others in the community raised red flags. Some families in the receiving schools worried about the strain on teachers, as both schools were already struggling with staffing shortages. There were also concerns about the impact that this shift would have on the school climate and culture. Special education advocates representing the families of students in the cluster program expressed concerns as to whether the receiving schools would be able to effectively meet student needs, given that they already had a disproportionate number of students with IEPs compared to other schools in the district.

While the school board didn't need to vote on the decision to move kids, they would need to vote on allocating the resources necessary to address the school safety issues. The school board became split on what to do considering the length of time it might take. Some board members felt it would be a misuse of funds to demolish and rebuild the school as real estate prices had risen in the area. They pushed for remediating the safety issues to expedite the process and get students back to their home school. Other board members felt this was an unnecessary risk to student and staff health and safety as it was unclear whether remediation would be enough to make the building suitable for occupation again.



Despite the competing concerns across the community and school board, the superintendent moved ahead with the decision to move staff and students into another district school. The superintendent felt that the decision should be based on what was best for children and staff regardless of other concerns. The rest they would figure out after getting students settled in a safe school environment.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Micro:** In this scenario, what are the superintendent's values, beliefs, and potential blind spots? What kind of self-examination must a leader do in order to communicate effectively with the wider community? Why is this important?
- **Meso:** In this scenario, how might this superintendent have engaged in proactive communication that speaks to the concerns of different constituent groups? How might the superintendent have prioritized the order of those communications? To what extent must a superintendent be aware of the constituent groups in their district communities and how they work when developing a plan for communication?
- **Macro:** In this scenario, how might the superintendent have used an understanding of the larger context to inform their work? How does an understanding of federal and state education policies and laws impact planning for communication?

This scenario is meant to demonstrate the importance of effective communication. Effective communication requires listening, first and foremost, but it also requires verbal and written communication that activates key values.

WHAT IS COMMUNICATING?

We know that words matter. However, effective communication goes beyond simply sharing information. By uplifting student stories and using unifying language that is grounded in data, superintendents can **combat disinformation, strengthen trust, and make connections** between the use of district resources and outcomes. District communication and messaging should always remain student-centered to build community confidence in the district's efforts to foster positive change.



YOUR TURN!

Communicating the vision exercise

Return to your priority strategy and vision for success. Now try re-writing your vision for success in **the way you would talk about it publicly**, drawing on your community's shared values without compromising your own.

If we are successful at...then...

Communicating discussion questions

If working with a partner or a team, use these questions to strengthen your approach to communication.

- What has been your approach to communicating about your strategy? What is your consistent core message? Who is delivering these messages and how?
- To what extent are you using descriptive, unifying language to describe the strategy so that it speaks to the different constituent groups in your community?
- To what extent are you providing information through data, stories, and examples that addresses community concerns?



STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT COMMUNICATION

The following strategies are listed to address the micro, meso, and macro levels of political leadership.

Examine yourself as a leader.



Each person approaches the work of communicating differently because of their identity, values, experiences, and beliefs. Superintendents should regularly self-assess to ensure that biases, triggers, and blind spots do not inadvertently influence their messaging. Doing so will help ensure both authenticity and alignment with community values. Self-examination can also help a superintendent stay out of a recursive cycle of moral superiority (“I do what is best for all kids”) and blame (“you only care about your own kids”).

To implement this strategy, ask yourself the following questions:

- How do my identity and values influence my leadership and perceptions of others? How does my identity influence others’ perceptions of me?
- What styles and methods of communication do I most value? What styles and methods of communication do others value?

Be transparent.



Superintendents should be proactive in communication efforts, regularly engaging with their local communities in person, virtually, and in writing, rather than waiting for issues to arise. This transparency allows the superintendent to share their thinking, build relationships, address questions and concerns early, and establish a foundation of trust, which is crucial when challenging conversations are needed.

To implement this strategy, ask yourself the following questions:

- What mechanisms do I use to regularly communicate with community members about district strategy?
- What do I do to ensure access to groups that are hard to reach? What are the unique needs of each constituent group?



Stay informed.



Superintendents need to stay informed about national issues and how they are influencing local community members. Regularly checking (or having your staff check) national publications, social media channels, and local news media can help you gauge to what extent national issues that may conflict with your local vision and values are gaining local attention. In some places, local controversies have been fueled by outside groups, so it is crucial to pay attention. It is also important to know when to respond to national news or events. As a general rule, superintendents may choose to respond when it directly affects local children and families.

To implement this strategy, ask yourself the following questions:

- How do I stay apprised of national and local discourse?
- What national news does our district need to be prepared to respond to? What is my rationale for responding? Am I ready to respond to potential criticism for doing so?

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATING

- Be mindful of how who you are influences who you engage and how.
- Regularly engage a variety of constituents through two-way listening sessions via focus groups, advisory groups, or town halls, when appropriate.
- Look for and create opportunities to tell your district's story.
- Educate the community on new initiatives, describing the benefits for every child and the challenges.
- Communicate tough messages with empathy, and lean on community values, especially those that prioritize student and community wellbeing.
- Avoid triggering words or phrases that can be easily misinterpreted given the national context.
- Build in time to respond to feedback especially when communicating difficult messages.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Messaging Guidance (Campaign for Our Shared Future)

This guidance offers tips on messaging with a focus on how to engage in dialogue about education issues without escalating emotions, fueling misinformation, or compromising the dignity of any child. (<https://tinyurl.com/zdzrs43x>)

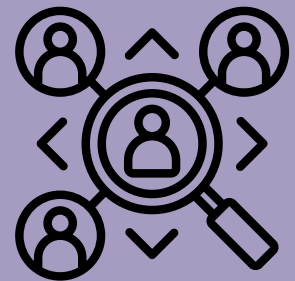
Social Media: Best Practices for K-12 Districts (Leading Now)

This tip sheet resource provides tips on using social media to build community support. (<https://tinyurl.com/yc4emath>)

Public Engagement: Reflect, Proactive, and Responsive Approaches (Leading Now)

This resource outlines proactive and responsive communication tips. It starts with emphasizing how important it is for education leaders to shape their personal narratives (why they do the work they do) and regularly share versions of that narrative to connect with others. (<https://tinyurl.com/5cumuvm>)

Proactive Practice 3: Political Mapping



Proactive Practice 3: Political Mapping



As you read through the section, think about your priority strategy from the Getting Started Grounding Exercise. Where do your constituents stand on the strategy?

SCENARIO

Despite COVID-era school closures ending years ago, District C teachers and staff continued to see the negative impact that isolation had on students' socioemotional wellbeing and mental health. Students in middle school and high school particularly continued to struggle with peer-to-peer interactions, and teachers consistently cited disciplinary issues with students as one of the biggest challenges they faced. Consequently, teacher attrition across the district worsened, with middle and high schools experiencing the most significant turnover in teaching staff.

In an effort to promote student socioemotional and mental wellbeing, the superintendent launched an initiative to support student belonging and school connectedness. A key pillar of this initiative included the district-wide adoption of a restorative justice approach to address student disciplinary issues, something that the majority of the school board supported. The school board was fairly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, and professional experience, all of which influenced their various perspectives on how to best deal with student discipline in schools. Most board members were very attuned to the need for socioemotional learning, as they saw the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted students. Like many teachers and parents, these board members wanted to take a restorative approach because of its positive effects including supporting student socioemotional development and creating a sense of community in schools. However, there were still a few board members who believed, like some teachers and parents, that the district needed to clamp down on student misbehavior by creating clearer rules and consequences. They believed lenience during the pandemic response had created a lack of structure that was now leading to problems.

Despite a common policy, due to the differing views on how to best handle student discipline, implementation of the restorative justice approach varied across schools and individual classrooms. This variability created tensions among staff, as some teachers felt like the restorative justice strategies did not adequately discourage student misbehavior since they could not refer students to school administrators or suspend students for low-level infractions like swearing in class. Teachers that supported the use of restorative



justice strategies named that while they did not want to shift away from this approach, the variations in implementation and staff tensions were pushing them to revert on occasion to a more traditional disciplinary approach.

Given the already high rate of teacher attrition, even supportive board members and principals began to waver on their commitment to the restorative justice approach. They feared exacerbating teacher turnover if they continued to enforce implementation of restorative justice strategies.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Micro:** In this scenario, how might the superintendent have met the resistance to change with empathy? How can a leader leverage emotional intelligence (e.g., self awareness, motivation, empathy, social skills, self regulation) when dealing with differing interests, perspectives, and priorities in their communities? Why is this important?
- **Meso:** In this scenario, how could this superintendent have better identified key stakeholders and understood their perspectives on the restorative justice initiative? How might the superintendent have explored the power dynamics among those stakeholders? How might a superintendent leverage political mapping to better understand typical constituent groups and how they work in their community?
- **Macro:** In this scenario, how might the superintendent have learned from other communities to inform their work? How might learning from other communities support superintendents in political mapping?

This scenario is meant to demonstrate the importance of political mapping. Knowing the landscape of stakeholder perspectives and power dynamics can empower superintendents to make strategic connections that support their overall vision, a particular goal, or strategy.

WHAT IS POLITICAL MAPPING?

It is crucial that the superintendent continually works to understand **who is in support and who is in opposition to change and why**. Through political mapping, superintendents can identify, analyze, and understand the relationships and power dynamics among key stakeholders in their community. Political mapping also enables superintendents to identify members of the “silent majority” - people who are likely to support district direction but are not yet visible supporters.



YOUR TURN!

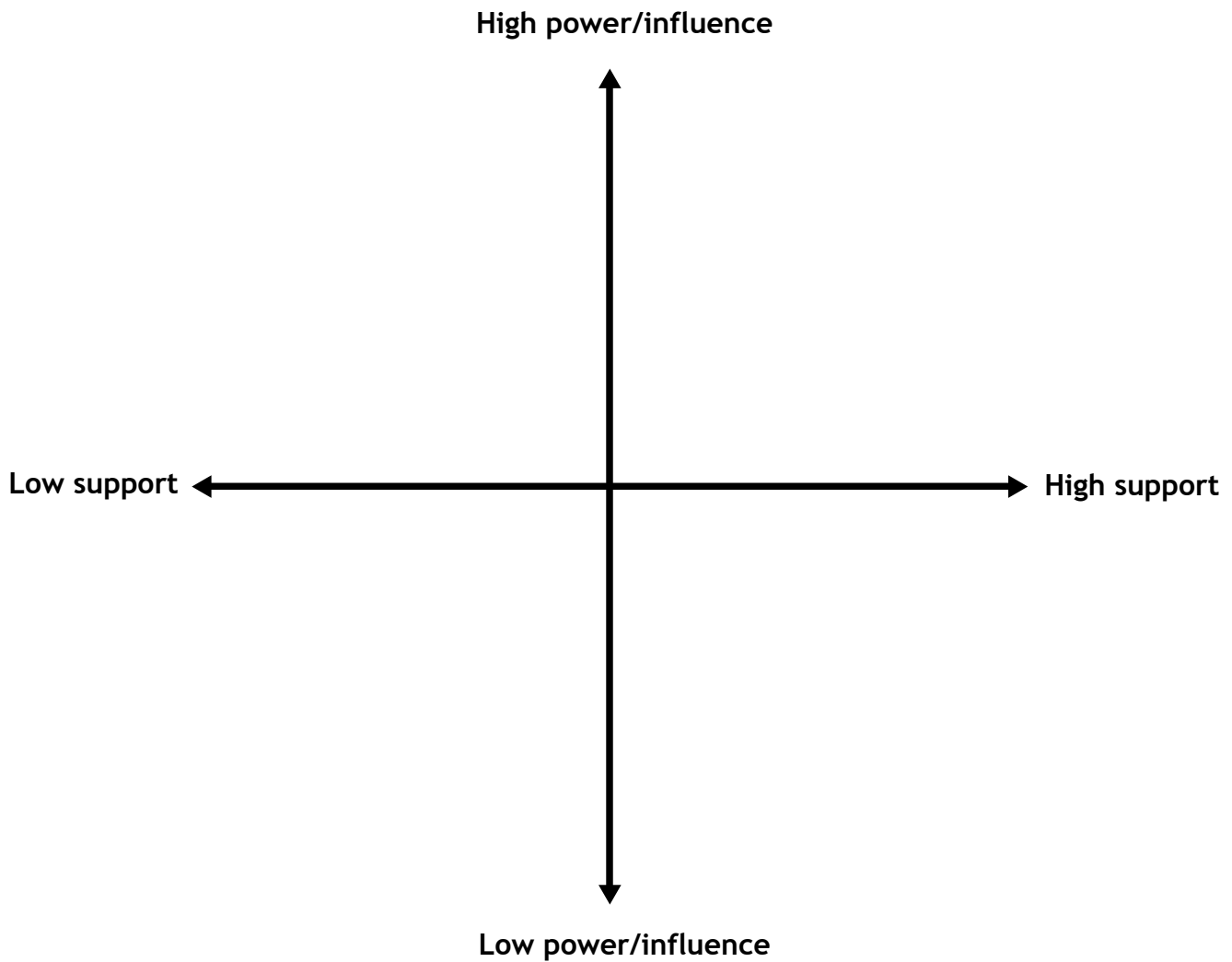
Political mapping exercise

Part 1: Return to your priority strategy. Who do you need to work with to implement your strategy successfully and achieve related goals?

Name of key person or group , starting with decision makers, then influencers.	Where do they stand on your strategy: are they for, against, or undecided? (Highlight major supporters or opponents.)	Why are they supportive? Why are they concerned? Why are they undecided?	Consider your vision and core values. Where do you see alignment or opportunity to increase support?



Part 2: Use initials (or some other symbol) to map each of the constituents with a focus on power, placing them on the matrix based on their support and power/influence.



Political mapping discussion questions

If working with a partner or a team, use these questions to strengthen your political mapping skills.

- Who is missing from your map?



- Where might you be making assumptions about values, interests, or concerns?
- Who do you need to learn more about?
- Who has the power to influence others? Are there particular relationships that could be protective in a volatile political environment?

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT POLITICAL MAPPING

The following strategies are listed to address the micro, meso, and macro levels of political leadership.

Listen with curiosity and empathy.



Empathy allows superintendents to effectively understand the aspirations, motivations, and concerns of constituents in the district. Those who seek understanding of other's perspectives with curiosity and empathy can manage conflicts and maintain positive relationships, even when disagreements emerge. You don't have to agree, and sometimes it is important to disagree, but it has to start with authentically trying to understand hopes and fears of others.

To implement this strategy, ask yourself the following questions:

- What are the hopes and fears of each stakeholder group?
- How might I empathize with the concerns of each stakeholder group even when they differ from mine?
- In moments of tension or conflict, how do I maintain curiosity to foster productive dialogue?

**Develop awareness of typical constituent groups and how they work.**

One core characteristic of the superintendency is the need to understand and collaborate across many constituent groups, like teachers' unions, parent associations, and local businesses. Understanding each group's influence, interests, and pressure points allows you to tailor your strategies, form effective partnerships, and engage stakeholders in a way that aligns with district goals. This awareness of group dynamics ensures that superintendents can navigate the often competing demands in education politics effectively.

To implement this strategy, ask yourself the following questions:

- What are the most influential constituent groups within my district?
- How do constituent groups in my district typically operate? How do they exert pressure or push for change (e.g., lobbying, organizing protests, or leveraging media)?
- How well do I understand the specific interests and agendas of each group?
- How can I align district priorities with their goals or address potential conflicts?

Make sense of laws and regulations.

It is not enough for superintendents to map their local constituents; they need to map the policy environment as well. It is their job to interpret and implement laws, regulations, and policies at the local level. Regularly connecting with legal counsel and state association leaders is key. It is also crucial to have clear school board routines for local policy examination to ensure alignment with laws and regulations. These routines can inform your district as to whether or not a local policy is having unintended harmful consequences.

To implement this strategy, ask yourself the following questions:

- What routines do we have in place for formal school board review of policies?
- How do we ensure that local implementation of laws, regulations, or policies does not unintentionally harm any student group?



TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE POLITICAL MAPPING

- Be curious about the views of community members and groups and don't make assumptions.
- Proactively engage different constituent groups to understand their desires, hopes, and fears.
- Ask for support from influential and trusted community members when seeking to build relationships with hard-to-reach constituent groups.
- Practice perspective-taking to better understand the different viewpoints that might hinder or advance your vision, goal, or strategy.
- Remember that your political map exists within a larger national policy context.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Power Mapping (National Education Association)

This resource outlines a process for community power mapping. Power mapping is a way to identify who has power in the community, and to determine an approach that will move those individuals or institutions to ally themselves with your cause.

(<https://tinyurl.com/4efw8u83>)

Tools for the Toolbox: Political Mapping & Conversation Preparation (South Carolina Department of Education)

This slide deck includes guidance for education leaders on political mapping to support their strategies and goals. (<https://tinyurl.com/mwwbbhx5>)

Why Emotional Intelligence is Important in Leadership (Harvard Business School)

Emotional intelligence is critical for effective political mapping. This article reviews the four components of emotional intelligence and strategies to strengthen them to be a stronger leader. (<https://tinyurl.com/4mjy7jn>)

Proactive Practice 4: Relationship Building



Proactive Practice 4: Relationship Building



As you read through the section, think about your priority strategy from the Getting Started Grounding Exercise. What relationships do you need to build? How will you do so?

SCENARIO

At the end of a school day, an altercation suddenly broke out between two eighth grade boys at the District D middle school. Only trained teachers are permitted to restrain students during fights, so they called the school resource officers (SROs) for support. Students walking through the hallways witnessed the SROs physically restraining the students to safely separate them until administrators and the counselor could provide additional support. In the days following the incident, some students reached out to the school counselor to share their discomfort with seeing two of their classmates being restrained by the officers. Families also reached out to the middle school principal expressing concern about officers physically restraining students.

District D had a multi-year agreement with the local police department to staff each school in the district with two SROs. The officers at each school were generally well-liked across the community and were a consistent presence in their schools. However, following the incident at the middle school, some members of the community wondered whether it was appropriate for students to have to deal with the police while in school. Local advocacy groups became involved by attending board meetings to express concerns about students of color in particular being restrained by officers, as men of color are already more likely to have interactions with law enforcement. The district community, families, and local advocacy groups called for re-evaluating whether the schools needed to have SROs. There were also calls for school support staff, including counselors and administrators, to receive de-escalation training to address instances of student conflict. The superintendent and the board called for the creation of a task force that would conduct an evaluation of the SRO agreement and create an action plan for addressing student altercations in a way that avoided interaction with law enforcement.

The police chief strongly disagreed with the creation of the task force as he felt this unfairly targeted the SROs for having done their jobs. The SROs that responded to the student altercation also felt personally attacked by the initiative, perceiving that this was a politically motivated stunt by the advocacy groups, some of whom were part of the “defund the police” movement across the state. The superintendent attempted to reach



out to the police chief and the SROs, but they were defensive or unresponsive when they did engage with the district. Principals reported that the SROs were less responsive to requests for support in their respective buildings following the creation of the task force. While the superintendent and board members had personal relationships with the police chief and SROs, there was a breakdown in the relationship with the district as a whole. The superintendent wondered how to balance the concerns raised by students, families, and advocacy groups while maintaining a productive relationship with local law enforcement that would support the community as a whole.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Micro:** In this scenario, how might the superintendent exercise empathy to achieve their goal? How can a leader leverage and display empathy when dealing with differing interests, perspectives, and priorities in their communities? Why is this important?
- **Meso:** In this scenario, how could this superintendent have proactively built relationships or leveraged existing relationships to navigate the concerns around the presence of school resource officers in schools? How might the superintendent have navigated the different priorities and reactions to the creation of the task force? How might a leader leverage relationship building to better understand typical constituent groups and how they work in their community?
- **Macro:** In this scenario, how might the superintendent learn more from other districts about their use of school resource officers? How could learning from other communities support superintendents in relationship building in support of a particular goal or strategy?

This scenario is meant to demonstrate the importance of relationship building, especially across lines of difference. Reflecting on the state and nature of existing relationships can support superintendents in strengthening their connections to key individuals and constituent groups.

WHAT IS RELATIONSHIP BUILDING?

Relationships are built through **daily interactions that express respect and care**, so it is critical for superintendents to get to know individuals and groups in their community with no immediate agenda, laying a foundation of collegiality before help is needed. Individual conversations can also help a leader understand diverse perspectives and anticipate areas of tension before bringing people together, enabling them to better manage group dynamics and foster productive dialogue across lines of difference.



YOUR TURN!

Relationship building exercise

Part 1: Return to your priority strategy. Fill out the table, drawing on key constituents you placed on your political map. Who do you need to build a stronger relationship with?

Name of key person or group , with a focus on those with the most influence but lack of support .	How do you currently meet with them? How often? In what settings? Using what conversational tools and strategies?	What are the strengths and challenges of your approach?	What else might you try? What aspects of relational trust and emotional intelligence might you draw upon?



Part 2: Now examine a relationship you want to strengthen. This should be a person or group that has a different perspective than you, and perhaps someone you perceive as being a barrier to progress.

Who are you in the relationship (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, role, age, political affiliation, etc.)? What do you value? What do you want?

Who is/are the stakeholder(s) in this relationship (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, role, age, political affiliation, etc.)? What do they value? What do they want?

What kinds of interactions characterize this relationship?

What, specifically, could you do to strengthen this relationship?



STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

The following strategies are listed to address the micro, meso, and macro levels of political leadership.

Practice emotional intelligence.



Leaders with high emotional intelligence are adept at recognizing and managing their own emotions, as well as reading and responding to the emotions of others. It requires both self-awareness and social skill. Note that this does not mean you shouldn't show emotion: emotional expression and sensitivity enable you to connect with the humanity of others. A superintendent, however, ought to avoid being a victim to their emotions. Ultimately, leading with emotional intelligence will help you to strengthen relationships even across lines of difference.

To implement this strategy, ask yourself the following questions:

- How do I better understand and anticipate my own emotional triggers?
- How might I adjust my approach to engagement with attention to emotional engagement?
- What is my initial response when I notice signs of stress, frustration, or resistance within my community? How can I change my behavior to turn these into opportunities for support?

Be visible.



Visibility is a key component of relationship building for superintendents. You demonstrate investment in the district's day-to-day experiences and a commitment to the community when you are regularly and meaningfully present at schools, local events, and informal gatherings. Building familiarity and making connections is key for building supportive, enduring relationships with members of the district community.

To implement this strategy, ask yourself the following questions:

- What events, school activities, or community meetings should I prioritize to reinforce my commitment to connecting with the community?
- How am I following up with stakeholders after being visible at an event or visit? What mechanisms am I using to stay accessible and open for feedback?
- How frequently do I interact with individuals in their environments (e.g., classrooms, school cafeterias, and extracurricular events) rather than inviting them to my office or formal settings?

**Learn across communities.**

Superintendents need to build authentic relationships in their local community, but they must build them across communities as well. Connecting regularly with superintendents from demographically similar communities in the region, state, and nation can help you better come to understand the common challenges and opportunities that similar communities face. You can also better anticipate issues that might come up in the future.

To implement this strategy, ask yourself the following questions:

- What opportunities exist for me to build stronger relationships with leaders in my region?
- What opportunities exist for me to build relationships with leaders in school districts similar to my own across the state or the nation? Or in districts that have similarly changing demographics?

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

- Be present in schools and community events; your “external” presence is important.
- Regularly demonstrate your competence by providing clear rationale for district decisions and initiatives.
- Demonstrate respect by making space for reciprocal discussion in which you both listen to the community and provide information.
- Make yourself human through social media and in-person events.
- Intentionally reach out to individuals and groups across lines of difference to better understand perspectives and political viewpoints in the district community.
- Make a concerted effort to build relationships with leaders in districts that reflect your local demographics.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Mindful Listening Tool (Shane Safir)

This tool guides leaders through three steps to practice emotional intelligence in any challenging situation. (<https://tinyurl.com/yhnrfdeb>)

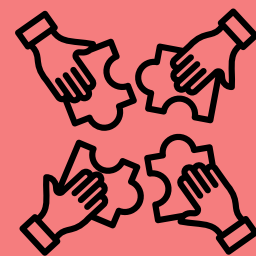
Tough Conversations: Strategies for Educational Leaders to Build Common Ground (Leading Now)

This tip sheet offers techniques for building common ground, de-escalation, and listening deeply with understanding and respect. (<https://tinyurl.com/mr3ztj5y>)

What's (Relational) Trust Have to Do with It? (ASCD)

This article documents seven practices that changed a school's culture into one built on relational trust. (<https://tinyurl.com/3akz7zfr>)

Proactive Practice 5: Mobilizing



Proactive Practice 5: Mobilizing



As you read through the section, think about your priority strategy from the Getting Started Grounding Exercise. Who can you mobilize in support of your strategy?

SCENARIO

District E is located in a state where constituents must vote to approve or reject their local school district budgets each year. The District E budget was coming up for annual approval by the board. In previous years, there had been a steady decline in community participation in the budget process. The district schools generally had positive ratings from both students and families on climate and culture surveys. However, this led many in the community to feel that participating in the budget process was not crucial since the district was operating well.

Meanwhile, as with many districts across the U.S., the District E community saw an increase of influence from national political groups. At one board meeting, some representatives from a group against the teaching of critical race theory attended the public commentary portion of the meeting to raise concerns about books in the district libraries. Following this board meeting, posts began to appear on the district social media channels raising questions about the use of district funds to purchase books that they deemed inappropriate. More social media posts appeared on the district channels in the time leading up to the district budget vote, alleging the misuse of funds to indoctrinate students in topics related to critical race theory.

The school board and the superintendent were concerned about the impact the social media campaign might have on the district. However, they were hopeful that the budget vote would pass as it had in previous years. The superintendent released district-wide communications as in previous years reminding the community of the upcoming budget vote. The school board worked with the superintendent to present a united front against the social media campaign that alleged a misuse of taxpayer funds. The budget vote date and location was also publicized on social media and robocalls were sent to all families in the district with a reminder to vote.

Despite the district reminders and communication, the budget vote failed by a small number. While the failure to pass the budget concerned the superintendent and the board, they were especially concerned at the historically low voter turnout. It seemed



that the community was overwhelmingly upset about the negative social media campaign and became further disengaged in the budget voting process. The superintendent feared that continuing with the same kind of communication and community connections that had been used in previous years had been the wrong approach to dealing with the negative social media campaign. In preparing for the appeal vote, the superintendent wondered how to best connect with constituents to allay their concerns about the allegations regarding the misuse of district funds, and build buy-in around the budget voting process.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Micro:** In this scenario, how might the superintendent have tested assumptions and blind spots? Why is this important?
- **Meso:** In this scenario, how could this superintendent have proactively mobilized constituent groups to generate stronger voter turnout and diminish the impact of the negative social media campaign? How might a superintendent mobilize constituent groups in their community?
- **Macro:** In this scenario, how might the superintendent have used their knowledge regarding national concerns about Critical Race Theory to inform their work? How might awareness of education issues in national and global media support superintendents in mobilizing around a particular strategy?

This scenario is meant to demonstrate how mobilizing different constituent groups, community organizations, and local leaders can affect district resources and decision-making. Superintendents must intentionally leverage their relationships to mobilize around their district vision, goal, or strategy.

WHAT IS MOBILIZING?

Mobilizing requires building a network of trusted relationships and allies that superintendents can rely on to support their district's goals and navigate challenging political landscapes. By cultivating these connections, superintendents are better positioned to mobilize allies in a variety of ways, depending on the issue and the need. Mobilization strengthens a superintendent's political leadership and ensures that they have a **solid network to lean on** during times of crisis or rapid change.



YOUR TURN!

Mobilizing exercise

Part 1: Return to your strategy. Who do you need to work with implement your strategy successfully?

Name of key person or group , with a focus on those with the most influence and support .	What role can they play?*(e.g., trusted authority, ambassador, communicator, advisor, partner, advocate)	How will you engage them?

**Below are some descriptions to offer, when identifying roles of key people or groups. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list:*

- **Trusted authority:** Shares reliable and credible information
- **Ambassador:** Carries important messages to community members
- **Communicator:** Shares information and returns with questions and feedback from constituents
- **Advisor:** Provides guidance
- **Partner:** Shares ownership and accountability for the work
- **Advocate:** Pushes for change



Mobilizing discussion questions

- Is there any person or group on the political map that is being underutilized?
- How are you mobilizing parents, community partners, and students?
- Are these relationships being maximized?

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT MOBILIZING

The following strategies are listed to address the micro, meso, and macro levels of political leadership.

Practice resilience.



Mobilization can be hard because you are asking people to do things, moving beyond the scope of your formal authority. It takes risk, and sometimes the risk doesn't pan out. Some constituents will gladly step up to support district efforts to make positive change. Some may not. Some may even use the information you provide to actively work against you. It is crucial for superintendents to remain undefeated when their bids for support do not work out. Instead of giving up or turning away, in most instances a superintendent should continue to show up, leaving the way open for partnership in the future.

To implement this strategy, ask yourself the following questions:

- How do I anticipate how I will feel if my bid for support is declined? What will I do or say?
- What can I do to keep the door open for ongoing relationship building and future support?



Be courageous.



You need to be courageous to mobilize your community, especially when it comes to addressing sensitive or polarizing issues that impact the district. Courageous leaders initiate tough conversations and stand firm in their commitment to equity and well-being. Practicing courageous action also includes explaining difficult decisions and being prepared to address any fallout. Doing so will demonstrate your dedication to your community's needs, inspiring others to rally in support.

To implement this strategy, ask yourself the following questions:

- How can I model courage to encourage others in my community to engage openly on difficult or divisive topics?
- In what ways am I prepared to respond thoughtfully and constructively when faced with criticism or pushback?
- How can I create a culture where taking calculated risks for the greater good is valued and supported?

Promote awareness of education issues in national and global media.



Staying informed on education issues at the national and global levels enables superintendents to anticipate challenges when mobilizing support within their district. You can practice awareness by setting aside time to regularly engage with reputable news sources, education journals, and thought leadership pieces on current education trends. This awareness will prepare you to provide informed insights when discussing issues with stakeholders and proactively address concerns in line with evolving national conversations.

To implement this strategy, ask yourself the following questions:

- What steps am I taking to stay informed about key education issues on a national and global scale?
- Who in my community can act as trusted authorities on various topics, to legitimize and clarify misinformation?
- How am I using insights from broader education trends to anticipate potential challenges or opportunities for my district?



TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE MOBILIZING

- Consistently encourage community participation in local political processes like board elections, referendums, and budget votes.
- Ask potential allies to share key information on social media to combat misinformation.
- Continually evaluate how existing structures, relationships, and policies impact the engagement of different groups in the district community; and create space to deliberately engage marginalized groups.
- Foster positive connections with various political institutions and civic leaders in the district community. Keep them informed and engaged in matters that affect the community.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Resource Guide for Superintendent Action (United States Department of Education)

This guide is intended to support superintendents and their leadership teams in their strategic efforts to engage stakeholders, assess the results and history of existing school climate and discipline systems and practices, implement reform, and monitor progress. (<https://tinyurl.com/39wmunvc>)

Becoming a More Resilient Leader (AASA)

This toolkit is designed to support superintendents as they implement practices to become more resilient, resonant, and nimble leaders. (<https://tinyurl.com/5hxcxzs>)

Conclusion

In today's political climate, proactive political leadership is crucial to the success of today's superintendents. This field book has provided a comprehensive framework to support superintendents in their pursuit of such leadership, organized around the key practices of visioning, communicating, political mapping, relationship building, and mobilization. Each of these strategies equips superintendents with the tools necessary to build and maintain strong relationships with key stakeholders, navigate complex political environments, and drive meaningful change within their districts.

As the challenges and demands on education leadership continue to evolve, superintendents can leverage the Framework for Political Leadership in the Superintendency to act with integrity and empathy at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Political leadership in the superintendency is about more than navigating challenges; it's about fostering an environment where all students can thrive. Superintendents who integrate the insights and strategies outlined in this field guide can strengthen their political leadership and be better prepared to lead with purpose in a complex, rapidly changing world.

Moving forward: Closing self-reflection exercise

This field guide closes similarly to how it began: with a self-reflection exercise. Now that you have examined your leadership practices, we invite you to take a moment to consider the following questions:

- What will you do differently moving ahead?
- What are the implications for your teams? Your board? Yourself?

Conclusion

Because this field guide is intended to support continuous learning, we urge you to consider your self-reflection as an ongoing process, too. We hope that you return to the reflection questions, leadership scenarios, practical strategies, and tools as needed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This field book was authored by Jennifer Cheatham (CPLS Co-Chair), Jenny Portillo-Nacu (CPLS Project Manager), and Marianna Stepniak (CPLS Communications Consultant) with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. This work is grounded in the Framework for Political Leadership in the Superintendency developed by Jennifer Cheatham and Bonnie Lo (2024).

The authors would like to acknowledge the CPLS member superintendents from across the U.S. who contributed to this publication. We would also like to thank Partners in Education Leadership as well as Professional Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education for their collaboration on the development of the Field Book exercises.

To learn more about CPLS and our work visit our website: <https://cpl-s.org>



SUGGESTED CITATION

Collaborative on Political Leadership in the Superintendency. *The Superintendent's Political Leadership Field Book* (2025). <https://cpl-s.org/field-book/>

Appendix

SUPERINTENDENT COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE GUIDELINES

Developed by the Collaborative on Political Leadership in the Superintendency.

Purpose

The purpose of this protocol is to support superintendents working in a learning community with political problems of practice. Through the act of giving and receiving feedback, leaders gain insight from one another about potential scenarios they may face in the future while learning about the practical actions they can take to address local challenges.

Guidance

We've learned that it is essential to create a safe environment for these conversations.

We suggest that you:

- Keep the group small- no more than 8 participants
- Keep the group consistent so that participants can build trust and community over time
- Meet regularly, while providing the opportunity to convene in person, if possible
- Create clear norms of confidentiality and routines that protect it (e.g. no names or other easily identifiable characteristics in note-taking sheet)
- Anchor the work in research and practice with a focus on learning

Resources

- Shareable note-taking sheet

PRE-WORK

- 2-3 superintendents will come prepared to share a tricky political situation, one that presents a barrier to progress on key goals or priorities or one that poses a direct risk to the safety and well-being of children, educators, or families.

Appendix

Time	Agenda
10 min	<p>Welcome and Framing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• By focusing on the challenging current and past scenarios, we hope to learn together about how to use our political acumen to be both <i>proactive and responsive</i> <p>Review objectives and agenda</p>
75 min	<p>Sharing Political Problems of Practice Protocol (see full protocol below)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Superintendent storytelling (7 mins): Share about a challenging current or past scenario.• Group members complete quiet quick write (3 mins)• Group shares affirmations, actions and strategies, advice (10 min)• Superintendent closing words (3 mins) <p><i>For three superintendents, each round is 23 minutes. For two superintendents, each round can be 35 minutes.</i></p>
5 min	<p>Closing Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are our take-aways? Feel free to reference key aspects of the Framework on Superintendent Political Leadership

Appendix

Time	Sharing Political Problems of Practice Protocol - 23 min
7 min Superintendent shares Group listens	Superintendent Storytelling <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Share a tricky political situation, one that presents a barrier to progress on key goals or priorities or one that poses a direct risk to the safety and well-being of children, educators, or families.<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Include details:• What is going on? (context and conflict)• What actions have you taken or strategies you have used? Why?• What have you observed as a result? (people, process, outcomes)• What is working or not?• What questions do you have?
3 min Quiet writing reflection	Quiet Quickwrite <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Group participants use the shared note-taking sheet to write down:<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Affirmations: What seems to be working?◦ Actions and strategy: What might the superintendent consider/re-consider?◦ Advice: What potential strategies may be supportive now?
10 min Group shares	Affirmation, Acknowledge Strategies, and Advice <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Participants acknowledge strengths (actions, approach, attitudes) and strategies that were heard.• Participants offer additional strategies and tools to support the specific context and situation.
3 min	Concluding Words <p>Superintendent/presenter shares thoughts and insights</p>

