

Culture Wars in Seaview Public Schools

Case Study and Note-Taker for Case Analysis



**Developed by the
Collaborative on
Political
Leadership in the
Superintendency**

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Case Study



“I really think you should tell the Board to keep that parental rights proposal off the agenda, Corey. Otherwise, you give those parents a bite of the apple, so to speak, and they might eat the whole thing. They will feel more empowered to make trouble. And the Board might actually vote to pass it. Then what do you do?”

“Well, I’m quite sure the majority of my Board would not vote for a parental rights policy. And I’m worried about accusations that my Board members are blocking the voices of their constituents. That could have dire consequences because my main supporters are up for re-election.”

“This is a tough one, my friend. Again, I would play it safe, but you know best. Sleep on it, in any case. And let me know what happens.”

“Thanks for the advice, Doug, and I’ll keep you posted.” Corey Murphy ended the phone call and felt the tension in his neck along with a slight throbbing in his temple. He poured a glass of bourbon, stretched out in the recliner, and reflected on his dilemma. As Superintendent of Seaview Public Schools, Corey had to advise his School Board about whether to put a proposed parental rights policy on the next meeting agenda. This issue was just the latest one in a series of challenges he’d faced these last four years - the most difficult set of challenges during his thirty-year career in education.

In last week’s meetings with various Board members, he’d been told that a group of parents had approached them with the proposed policy. Clearly this was the latest move in a power grab organized by a nationally organized right-wing group called Parental Rights Now. They had shifted from targeting schools for teaching Critical Race Theory to banning books to protesting against transgender students in bathrooms. The policy included a requirement that teachers notify parents within 48 hours if a student expressed a different gender identity than their biological sex. The Board was waiting for Corey to advise them about what to do, as he habitually went over the monthly agenda with them.

Corey sipped the bourbon and thought hard. His gut told him that not putting the proposal on the agenda could have dangerous consequences. Was there a way to include parental rights on the agenda and ensure the proposal would not pass?

Corey was an acclaimed educator who had risen through the ranks from classroom teacher to school superintendent in a steady progression. Having grown up in a large multicultural



family and gone to school in a racially and socio-economically diverse city, Corey understood the problems of disparity and discrimination in public schools. His commitment to the success of all students was steadfast and he had a clear vision of what educational equity and excellence looked like and how to get there. After several years in the superintendency, he was known as an effective instructional leader, enterprising innovator, and excellent communicator. He had built relationships with various sectors, including the business community. He knew how to discuss issues across lines of difference and persuade stakeholders about what was right for kids. But the job of superintendent had become increasingly difficult, almost crushing in its demands - not only on Corey's expertise, time, and energy, but also his emotional fortitude.

Seaview Public Schools was a large district in a prosperous city, approximately 50% White, 25% Black, 10% Latino, 10% Asian American, and the rest mixed-race or unidentified. Young families were moving to Seaview because some of the schools were regarded highly but, across the district, schools' reputations varied tremendously based on test scores, graduation rates, and rumors about school safety and climate. During his first year as Superintendent, Corey tackled the problem of inequality by having his demographer create maps vividly showing that the lowest performing schools were located in areas with a majority of low-income and Black and Latino families. He framed the purpose of working towards equity as an ambitious endeavor to become the best school district in America by providing all students with learning opportunities that would lead to their success. Corey remembered celebratory conversations that changed the narrative about Seaview schools, which reflected higher achievement levels.

Over time, Corey and his School Board were able to build a robust agenda that prioritized equity work in the district through creating new policies and practices that focused on achievement, enrollment in gifted programs and advanced courses, discipline rates, and graduation rates. Professional development for staff and administrators focused on culturally responsive practices. The curriculum and instruction department reviewed all curriculum materials for bias. Supplementary programs helped reduce disparities in achievement and enrollment in higher level courses. Corey and his colleagues were proud of their accomplishments.

Then the Covid pandemic hit. Starting in March 2020, Corey confronted a completely unfamiliar and intense bundle of problems, shared by school leaders around the country. First was the challenge of ensuring that all students continue to be educated while schools were closed. Then came criticisms from parents about how the pandemic was being handled, especially when students came back to school and masking was required. People seemed to become angrier even as steps were taken to return to a new normal.



Less than a year later, a new crisis emerged. At a School Board meeting in February 2021, Mary Jones, a recently elected School Board member, sounded an alarm when she accused Seaview Schools of indoctrinating students with “Critical Race Theory.” People had never heard that term before, but it - and the abbreviation, CRT - soon became a catch-all phrase taken up by school critics who were, seemingly, everywhere.

The next big blow came a few weeks later, when Jones was featured on an immensely popular right-wing TV program. This time, she warned that schools were using words such as “equity” and “culturally responsive pedagogy” to hide what was really going on. Teachers were instilling the idea that the U.S. was an inherently racist country and that all White people were oppressors while all Black people were victims. She urged community members to vote for the right candidates for School Board and even run themselves. She also urged them to “speak up” and “stand firm,” concluding with this message: “God made us in his image - we are not innately racist.”

These events were the initial sparks that lit the tinderbox. At every School Board meeting, the public comments section was filled with angry accusations about how Seaview schools were making children feel ashamed of being White. Corey quickly learned that the same stories with the same accusation were being repeated at board meetings in other school districts around the state. Organized rallies shown on Fox News featured parents saying, for example, that their neighbors’ child came home and asked her mother why she was a bad person. One biracial couple accused the schools of pitting children against their parents.

Seaview was located in a “purple” state with moderate political leanings and a history of divided state government. In Fall 2021, a new governor was elected. He had run on a culture wars campaign, claiming without evidence that Critical Race Theory was pervasive in the state’s schools. When he took office in January 2022, he ordered the Department of Education to review curriculum and teaching to identify and remove divisive concepts.

In early 2021, Corey had initially been caught off guard, but over the subsequent weeks he devised his core strategy, which he clearly communicated to his cabinet at one of their meetings in Spring 2021. He had specifically brought them together to discuss how to respond to the accusations dominating the School Board meetings’ public comments.

The group of 14 sat around the oval table. Corey began by soliciting ideas. Jody Messing, Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, spoke first: “We need to keep hammering home the message that we are not teaching CRT. Parents need to be educated that critical race theory is a legal construct that is only taught in law school. Teaching about



historical inequalities is not the same thing.” Steve Schwartz, Director of Personnel responded: “Yeah, I saw that piece on NBC News about the teacher survey. The vast majority of teachers denied that CRT is in their schools.” Marjorie Keene, head of Curriculum and Instruction said, “I did too. But some people are interpreting CRT to mean any teaching about racism. We know that’s inaccurate. But can we really claim that the history of systemic racism in the U.S. isn’t being taught here?”

Corey stepped in: “I think you’re missing the point. Nobody’s going to care if you say we’re not teaching CRT, because it’s some legal construct. They’re not going to believe you. We need to build trust. So, what we need to do instead is say, here’s what we are doing, here’s what we are teaching. Put it all out there. Make everything, you know, public facing. Tell anybody who wants to examine our curriculum to come and look. We can put it in their hands. They can observe it because we’re not hiding anything. We can tell people, ‘Our curriculum is based on the state standards. They come from the Department of Education, and we’re an open book. You’re welcome to see it.’”

Joel Booth, Assistant Superintendent of Student Programs asked, “So we should actually invite parents in?” Corey replied, “Absolutely. We need to hammer on the message that parents have always been our first and most important partners. That way we undermine the complaint that parents don’t have rights in our school district. And if somebody says we’re teaching divisive concepts or making white kids feel bad, I’m going to ask for a concrete example.”

Steve remained anxious: “What happens when parents notice that we’re teaching controversial issues? That kids are reading and discussing conflicting viewpoints on topics like the electoral college, or gun laws, or . . . ?” Corey said, “We tell parents that we’re about helping kids think, not telling them what to think. You know, we’re teaching them how to think critically about information. And to do that, you have to be able to look at different perspectives. But we’re not saying those are the perspectives you have to agree with. We’re saying, what are you learning about the two different perspectives? And what do you think about that?”

After some back and forth discussion, Corey ended the meeting and asked everyone to help send a unified message: Seaview Public School teachers were teaching the standards, which did not include CRT. Anyone was welcome to come and look at the curriculum and how it was being taught. The strategy seemed to serve the district well under the scrutiny of the new governor’s state audit. But the political attacks continued.

The next challenge was over books. First the target was anti-racism books, then books addressing LGBTQ identities. Once again, Mary Jones was waging war and at one School Board meeting accused librarians in Seaview schools of being indoctrinators and handing



out pornography to children. Corey had worked so hard with all School Board members, meeting with them frequently in small groups and individually to answer questions and educate them about what the district was and wasn't doing. He had restrained himself from arguing with anyone at public meetings. But this time, Jones had gone too far. He found himself interrupting her and said, "That's enough. I'm done listening to this. You need to stop saying my staff is handing out pornography. You are spreading lies about our staff, and I won't tolerate it anymore."

As a parent, Corey believed that parents should have a say in what their kids read in school. He acknowledged that there was the rare book that really was not appropriate for K-12 schools. On the other hand, he felt strongly that kids needed to read books that exposed them to different kinds of people and perspectives. Wholesale book banning was unacceptable but how could he push back while allowing parental input?

Corey organized the development of a policy for book selection that set up a committee and provided clarification about what was allowed and how specific books could be challenged. In the end, 21 books were challenged, only two by parents other than Mary Jones. Those two books were deemed problematic and removed from the shelves. The others, which included Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Stephen Chbosky's *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, stayed. The committee explained their decisions. If parents didn't want their child to read a particular book, they could receive an alternate assignment or they could physically glue together the specific pages deemed problematic.

The committee members' names were not disclosed. Corey knew he could be taken to court because it was a public committee, but he was willing to risk it in order to protect the committee members from potential harassment.

As the locus of controversy moved from CRT to books to transgender students in bathrooms and on sports teams, Corey conducted listening sessions to provide a space for stakeholders to air their views, ask questions, and hear directly from their superintendent. While most of them were productive conversations that were facilitated in a way to ensure decorum, Corey thought back to one of the listening sessions he had held that was especially contentious - he had been bombarded by challenges by members of Parental Rights Now and other right-wing groups that showed up at the event. At the end of 30 minutes of facilitated table conversation, Corey made the tough decision to allow individuals to approach him one-on-one with additional questions. Despite feeling fatigued after meetings during the past few days with school librarians, Board members, his cabinet, retired teachers, and the rotary club, he felt he had to demonstrate his willingness to listen. About 15 people lined up, and one of the members of Parental Rights Now live streamed the back and forth. One girl claimed, "My friend plays lacrosse and got



her arm broken by a boy playing lacrosse as a girl.” Corey countered, “Okay, I hear you, but I know it didn't happen because we don't have any transgender students who play lacrosse as a girl in our county.” He also asked if she was familiar with the state’s school sports guidelines, which allow transgender student-athletes to participate on teams that match their gender identity. “I can show it to you on our school website,” he noted.

A parent asked, “Why are you letting boys in girls’ bathrooms?” Corey replied, “Well, I'm not letting boys in girls’ bathrooms. I think what you mean is, why are transgender girls going into girls’ bathrooms?” The parent countered, “There’s no such thing as transgender girls.” Corey responded, “I think that's where we differ -- you have an ideological perspective that the law doesn't support, you know, and I'm happy to talk to you about what the law says.” Corey proceeded to explain a federal circuit court case where the court ruled in favor of a transgender boy who sued his school district because he was forced to use the girls’ bathroom. He continued, “This is what the law says, and I can't, just because of an ideological belief, you know, flout the law. And by the way, we're not forcing your child to go into that restroom. We're creating other spaces for your child and others so that all children can feel comfortable.” Corey had made sure there were single use bathrooms in all the schools. Another parent called out, “You just hate girls. You just don't care about girls. Why should my kid have to use an accommodation?” Corey, who has daughters of his own, replied, “Well, you know, we're just gonna have to agree to disagree.”

The local Sinclair Media channel aired the livestream on the 11pm news, on social media and throughout the rest of the week. By the end of that week, Corey felt battered, but he had persevered.

Corey mulled over these trials and reflected on the strategies he had used to deal with them. He pondered Doug’s advice to keep the parental rights proposal off the agenda. But he kept going back to the real possibility that doing so might backfire and harm the re-election prospects for his most supportive School Board members. Corey tried to imagine how discussion of the proposal would play out. In this perilous political environment, could arguments for the rights of transgender students win against arguments for the rights of parents? Could it be that there was a parental rights policy that could affirm parental partnership and engagement while lifting up student voice? He decided that meeting with certain Board members, and members of his cabinet, most importantly Legal Counsel, could shed light on the way forward.

Note: This case was written by Judy Pace, April 8, 2025. It is a fictionalized case based on real events. All names of people, places, and organizations are pseudonyms.



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Note-taker for Case Analysis

Note where and how the leader demonstrated these crucial dispositions.

MICRO Political Leadership Dispositions

Resilient, curious, centered

MESO Political Leadership Dispositions

Transparent, courageous, visible

MACRO Political Leadership Dispositions

Informed, active, connected