

## A Guide to Proactively Navigate Policy Conflict for Rural Educational Leaders

Daniella Sutherland

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator>



Part of the Education Commons

---

## **A Guide to Proactively Navigate Policy Conflict for Rural Educational Leaders**

**Daniella Sutherland**

As the U.S. ramps up for another presidential election, state and local politicians are leveraging major societal concerns to influence voters. While their policy interests vary, local schools are often caught in the middle of this partisan conflict. Over the past year, policymakers have proposed a wide array of social issue policies in schools. The issues vary by region, and range from proposals banning social-emotional learning instruction to proposals expanding it (Stanford & Meisner, 2023); overhauling reading instruction or preserving it (Neuman et al., 2023; Schwartz, 2023); supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts or opposing them (Odabaş & Aragão, 2023); and requesting schools ban books as diverse as *The Bible* (Wilson, 2023) or *Everywhere Babies* (Natanson, 2023).

Education policy conflicts are acutely felt in rural communities, where politics are personal (Sutherland & Red Corn, 2023). Superintendents, principals, and school board members can quickly be overwhelmed by political conflict. Leaders who fail to adeptly respond may find themselves out of their positions, either by being fired or losing their elected positions (Sutherland & Red Corn, 2023). Leaders who hope to avoid conflict by waiting until challenging events “blow over” may inadvertently generate more conflict than if they had responded directly when issues first arise, particularly when issues directly impact students and families. So, what are rural educational leaders to do in this heightened political climate? In this policy brief, I offer recommendations for rural leaders to prepare, navigate, and hopefully survive political storms in their local communities, drawing from research on rural leadership and policy including Red Corn et al. (2023) and McHenry-Sorber et al. (in press), to identify strategies leaders have used to effectively negotiate political conflicts. These research-based strategies are intuitive and intended to help leaders both navigate political challenges in the short term and to develop long-term community trust and support.

### **Know and Engage with Your Community**

Rural educational leaders are de facto community leaders (Sutherland et al., 2023), whether they want to be or not. It is therefore crucial for rural leaders to build relationships within and across the community. Leaders who effectively navigate political challenges have already built strong relationships with families who are connected to the school system by attending school events like varsity sports, fundraisers, elementary school band concerts, kindergarten graduation, and other big and small activities, and interacting with the loved ones there to support their students. But it is important to also take time to meet people who do not regularly engage with educational events or meetings. Leaders can build good will in advance of any political challenge by being present in community spaces beyond the school system including the local post office, grocery store, gas station, farmer’s market, or Tractor Supply. You might attend local governmental meetings or join the Rotary or other social clubs where residents gather, or visit local churches and religious institutions for services. Being present at community events can provide informal opportunities to build good will for the schools and districts among community members who may not have children enrolled in school.

Other leaders create opportunities to engage their communities in their schools. This can include offering gatherings at various times of day and year, such as an evening open house, morning coffee hour, or afternoon socials where you might invite community members to ask questions, share ideas for improvement, and share celebrations. Some leaders hold virtual drop-in office hours for community members who want to ask questions after work hours. Informal meetings allow leaders to make note of concerns, questions, and celebrations shared during conversations, and follow up with community members after. These types of engagement help rural leaders develop relationships across their communities for long-term trust and communication.

Developing collaborative networks is another promising practice for strengthening community capacity (Ishimaru, 2019). School-community partnerships have always been important for creating connections in rural communities (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). However, research suggests that leaders who facilitate these networks can build community capacity, empathy, and extend understanding of diverse cultures within the community at large (McHenry-Sorber et al., in press; Sutherland et al., 2023). Building and fostering relationships can occur at any level in an educational system. Community networks can be developed through family and community liaisons, non-profit organizations, community organizations, political networks, local businesses, and technical and community colleges (Red Corn et al., 2023). Additionally, Red Corn et al. (2023) advise leaders to “critically examine” which communities and institutions are included in professional networks, and to “build relationships to bridge gaps to establish a foundation for formal partnerships” (p. 31). By connecting diverse participants across a region, leaders can strengthen community engagement in the schools, while also developing shared inclusivity and understanding. This can help reduce “us versus them” discourse, while also facilitating networks of communication during times of conflict.

### **Communicate with the Community**

Effective and proactive communication is essential for building trusting relationships in rural communities (Sutherland et al., 2023). News travels fast in small towns, especially in the age of instant communication through multiple channels. Furthermore, rapid and continuous news cycles have acclimated a generation to expect immediate notification of events. To ensure school and community members can regularly access timely information, implement a reliable schedule for education-related news, including celebrations, event notices, and upcoming policy issues. Make it easy for people to find news. Share the responsibility for communication and dissemination with interested, reliable people (district staff, principals, teachers, students). Clearly define roles, timelines, and expectations for communication, with time for a final review by district leadership. If multiple people are already leading school communications, pull together the team to coordinate for consistency.

It is also important to disseminate news across multiple sources. News should be widely accessible to school staff, students, and families, but also to community members. Use traditional print or news sources as well as social media to share information.

Build relationships with local TV, radio, and print news organizations. Some principals and superintendents regularly meet with local news reporters to establish lines of communication (Jenkins, 2007). Invite reporters to school events and create press releases to distribute in advance. Again, there is significant value in building positive relationships before a crisis occurs.

### **Understand Board Meeting Norms**

School boards meetings are regulated by state policy for elected governing bodies. Many components of board meetings are required by open meeting policies, enabling community members to attend and engage in policy discussions. However, attendance at meetings is typically low, with periodic periods of significant turnout. Researchers call this phenomenon punctuated equilibrium: political processes are typically stable, but occasionally generate significant change (True et al., 2019). One rural school board chair explained, “We like people coming to our meetings. We like to talk to them... But, you don’t get a lot of people at the meetings, so we kind of view that as a good sign that we’re not pissing people off,” (Sutherland, 2022, p. 19). In other words, people show up at meetings when there is an issue of interest or concern. Understanding normal fluctuations of attendance can help educational leaders make sense of sudden surge of attendance. Well-attended meetings likely signal community interest in (and concern about) a topic. However, meeting attendance is not a proxy for the majority opinion—sometimes an issue will galvanize a small group who may not represent the larger community. Educational leaders may want to assess community attendance to check if any groups are under- or over-represented (Red Corn et al., 2023). It can be important to listen to small groups who are raising concerns, to make sure that all voices are being heard and the needs of your schools’ most vulnerable students, such as students with disabilities, are being considered in policies, but it can also be important to balance the concerns of a small but loud minority against the well-being of the majority of students or teachers. In addition, it is increasingly common for outside organizations to coordinate protests over specific policies (Carrillo et al., 2023) that might be politically divisive. It can be helpful for leaders to determine whether concerns are being raised by individuals connected to the community or groups hoping to gain media attention or promote an agenda and respond accordingly.

To prepare for potentially active or contentious meetings, ensure all meeting officials understand the issues to be discussed. Prior to public meetings,

leaders may want to check in individually with board and district members to ensure everyone is on the same page about the topics discussed. There should be no surprises at board meetings, at least not from the board or district leadership. Glenn Lineberry, a rural educational leader, explained:

I always have believed it's my job to prevent my superintendent/board from being surprised. They may not like what I'm telling them, but they're getting difficult information in context that they can process and repeat. This eliminates the likelihood of board and leadership ending up on opposite sides of the table, (personal communication, November 18, 2023).

In preparing for board meetings and dealing with challenging issues, leaders can allow for open and shared discourse, with clear process for finalizing decisions. It is also important to be sure that everyone attending, including board members and administrators, review and understand current policies for public comment, such as time limits or pre-registration, and assess alignment with open meeting laws. For more guidance, contact your state superintendent and school board associations, as they often have useful resources for the structure and operation of board meetings.

### **Proactively Develop and Implement Inclusive Policies**

Most local conflict over education policy is inspired by national conflict (e.g., book bans, gender inclusive bathrooms, Critical Race Theory curriculum) (Carrillo et al., 2023). Keeping abreast of policy trends can therefore help educational leaders proactively prepare for future conflicts. It can be helpful to have strong relationships with state policy makers before issues arise, and to pay attention to their education priorities long before the start of the legislative session. Build relationships with local and state politicians by attending meetings, inviting them to educational events, or going to their office hours. Subscribing to newsletters, listservs, or news updates for state and national professional associations is another effective way to stay informed. Of note, state organizations that advocate on behalf of schools – in particular, rural education associations and professional associations for school leaders – often summarize state level policy for educational leaders. These organizations and may also provide training or resources related to current issues and effective advocacy. If you already receive too much communication to manage, consider asking a politically engaged colleague or government teacher to share a weekly or monthly summary of major

topics. These colleagues may also be able to facilitate interactions with policymakers for school events.

Education policy conflicts can be emotionally charged and divisive; therefore, I recommend collaboratively developing inclusive, accessible, and community-centered policies. This enables community members to constructively engage with issues before they metaphorically explode. For example, Red Corn et al. (2023) describe how co-developed policy in one rural town,

led to the creation of affiliated community liaison positions in city government at the police department. In this role, community liaisons helped immigrants serve the community without requiring the same background requirements needed for the police force. This helped build relationships across the community and across institution, (p. 29).

Other examples in Red Corn et al.'s 2023 white paper include curricular policies co-developed with Tribal Nations, and community support for multi-lingual learners.

Sometimes, local leaders are required to implement controversial, and in some cases, expensive or harmful, education policies. In these cases, it is important to work closely with legal counsel or state leadership associations for guidance to ensure that you are complying with mandates in the most minimally invasive way. It can also be helpful to communicate the parameters of policy with school employees to ensure they understand requirements local implementation. Leaders may want to hold forums for different groups to share information and respond to questions. Consider inviting legal counsel, board members, and local legislators to provide perspectives and answer questions as well (Sutherland et al., 2023; Sutherland & Red Corn, 2023). Including policymakers in community forums creates shared ownership of policies and can diffuse pressure on local educational leaders.

### **Managing Communication During a Conflict**

Establishing communication systems are important for rural educational leaders. However, not all communication can be proactive, as conflicts can escalate quickly. When conflict arises, first ensure that staff and students are physically and emotionally safe. Next, gather information about the issue: what prompted the conflict, who is involved, what is the history of this issue in the community? Follow up with staff and community members to learn more about the issue and concerns. Once you understand the conflict, work with leadership (school board, district leaders, legal counsel, principals) to assess

possible responses, solutions, or interventions. Make sure everyone is clear about the major points of the response before sharing it publicly. Communication should be straightforward, clearly explaining the issue, current policies, and/or responses. Be upfront about missing information or possible next steps so that everyone understands the status. Indicate when and how community members can learn more about the issue and then follow through.

If a conflict generates significant attention, running communication through one primary contact may help reduce confusion. Depending on the amount of public outcry, assess if additional steps are needed to ensure the safety and well-being of the education community. This may include turning off comments on websites and social media platforms, creating a protocol for responding to phone calls, and working with School Resource Officers on other plans. If the conflict escalates, work with local law enforcement to ensure safety at school sites. Communicate the safety plans to school staff, students, and families. When possible, have legal counsel or trusted professionals review communication before dissemination. Also consider working with established relevant professional organizations for superintendents, principals, school boards. Many state branches of professional organizations have crisis guides and resources for different kinds of conflict.

### **Support Educators and Staff on the Ground:**

Educators and school support staff can be the most vulnerable to political conflict, due to their frontline roles working with families. Red Corn et al. (2023) report that some rural educators feel isolated and unsupported by culturally restrictive educational policies. This is particularly true for LGBTQ+ educators, who may be told to hide their identities when straight or cis-gendered colleagues do not. Micro- and macro-aggressions—ranging from small insults and side comments to full out exclusion or physical violence—are a real, lived experience for many educators and students. In these moments, “the usual wisdom behind letting things blow over needs to be ignored. The moment aggressive behavior towards students or staff surfaces, the administrator

must be present,” (G. Lineberry, personal communication, November 18, 2023).

Leaders should have a clear procedure in place to receive reports about and respond to harassment, threats, and micro-aggressions. It may be useful to allow people to submit reports anonymously, which protects individuals from retaliation while establishing a baseline of incidents in schools. Leaders can and should provide resources connecting students and educators to community organizations that offer support for discrimination and harassment and assess if more extensive supports are needed to ensure the safety and well-being of all employees in the community and students in the district. Interventions like these that establish trust and support to employees have the potential to reduce turnover (Frahm & Cianca, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

Conflict over education policy is a persistent, challenging issue for rural educational leaders. While it is not possible to avoid political conflict, there are strategies that can minimize its destructive impact.

Build relationships within and across communities, communicate consistently, proactively develop inclusive policies, and maintain support for school staff. The recommendations may seem simple, but each takes time, energy, and resources to enact. Rural leaders can work closely with legal counsel and state professional organizations for guidance and support. Some leaders may want to collaboratively share and distribute responsibility with leadership teams within their districts. Additionally, leaders can partner with colleagues in nearby districts to increase the capacity within educational institutions. These actions may take time and effort, but may provide the support and resources leaders need to navigate, survive, and even thrive when challenging conflicts, inevitably, arrive. Lineberry explains, “The key to school leadership is understanding that one will never be right... But clear communication and close adherence to protocol, leavened by a heavy respect for the community’s right to participate, get you a long way,” (personal communication, November 18, 2023).

### **References**

- Carrillo, S., Sherridan, K., & Shockman, E. (2023, January 10). *A coordinated nationwide agenda dominated local school board elections last year* [Radio broadcast]. NPR. [www.npr.org/2023/01/10/1148211343/a-coordinated-nationwide-](http://www.npr.org/2023/01/10/1148211343/a-coordinated-nationwide-agenda-dominated-local-school-board-elections-last-year)
- Frahm, M. T., & Cianca, M. (2021). Will they stay or will they go? Leadership behaviors that increase teacher retention in rural schools. *The Rural*

- Educator*, 42(3), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v42i3.1151>
- Harmon, H. L., & Schafft, K. (2009). Rural school leadership for collaborative community development. *The Rural Educator*, 30(3), 4–9. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v30i3.443>
- Ishimaru, A. M. (2019). *Just schools: Building equitable collaborations with families and communities*. Teachers College Press.
- Jenkins, C. (2007). Considering the community: How One rural superintendent perceives community values and their effect on decision-making. *Rural Educator*, 28(3), 28–32. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v28i3.476>
- McHenry-Sorber, E., Seelig, J., Hartman, S., & Sutherland, D. H. (in press). Rural school leaders and U.S. education policy: Innovative practices for political engagement. In White, S., Downey, J., & Fuqua, M. (Eds.) *Sharing leadership stories in rural education: Leading rurally across Australia and the United States*. Springer.
- Natanson, H. (2023, July 12). “Racist,” “grooming”: Why parents are trying to ban so many picture books. *The Washington Post*.
- Neuman, S. B., Quintero, E., & Reist, K. (2023) *Reading reform across America: a survey of state legislation*. The Albert Shanker Institute. <https://www.shankerinstitute.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/ReadingReform%20ShankerInstitute%20FullReport%20072723.pdf>
- Odabaş, M., & Aragão, C. (2023, April 4). *School district mission statements highlight a partisan divide over diversity, equity and inclusion in K–12 education*. Pew Research. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/04/04/school-district-mission-statements-highlight-a-partisan-divide-over-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-in-k-12-education/>
- Red Corn, A., Seelig, J., Crumb, L., Sutherland, D., Berry, K. (2023). *Chartering a spatially just and equitable rural education research agenda*. [White paper]. The Spencer Foundation.
- Schwartz, S. (2023, May 10.) 4 more states pass “science of reading” mandates. *Education Week*.
- Sutherland, D. H. (2022). Tell them local control is important”: A case study of democratic, community-centered school boards. *Educational Policy Analysis Archives*, 30 (178). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.30.7439>
- Sutherland, D. H., McHenry-Sorber, E., & Willingham, J. N. (2023). Leading rural districts: Research synthesis of rural educational leaders. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 98(4), 414–429. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956x.2023.2238519>
- Sutherland, D., & Red Corn, A. (2023). *Rural education policy priorities for educational equity*. [Policy report]. The Spencer Foundation.
- True, J. L., Jones, B. D., & Baumgartner, F. R. (2019). Punctuated-equilibrium theory: explaining stability and change in public policymaking. In P. A. Sabatier (Ed.), *Theories of the Policy Process* (2nd ed., pp. 155–187). Routledge.
- Wilson, T. (2023, June 2). *A Utah school district has removed the Bible from some schools’ shelves* [Radio broadcast]. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2023/06/02/1179906120/utah-bible-book-challenge>

**Author:**

**Daniella Sutherland** is an Associate Professor in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at University of Vermont. Contact: [Daniella.Sutherland@uvm.edu](mailto:Daniella.Sutherland@uvm.edu)

**Suggested Citation:**

Sutherland, D. (2023). A guide to proactively navigate policy conflict for rural educational leaders. *The Rural Educator*, 44(4), 64–68.

© 2023. This work is licensed under a CC BY 4.0 license. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>