



Leading Now



Do you just want your son to learn separately from everyone else?

96% of students in our school system are not currently diagnosed with COVID and we believe that having the school day run as normally as possible is best for students.

I've gotten 8 letters about COVID cases in my child's class in the last 10 days.

The national news doesn't match the reality of what's happening in our schools.

I have heard that my child didn't have a teacher for the first hour of a day last week because his teacher is out and there's a substitute teacher shortage.

I'm concerned about the number of COVID cases in my child's class, and I know students are faced in groups towards one another. Can they be spread out?





Leading Now

MISSION

We support superintendents and system leaders to navigate political complexity and strengthen public trust as they advance their commitment to all students.

BELIEFS

Public Education

Our democracy depends on public schools to prepare the next generation of engaged, independent thinkers.

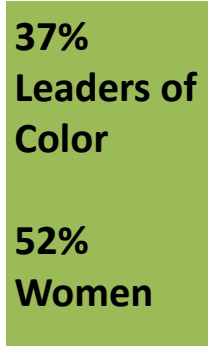
Common Ground

Shared values help keep the focus on student learning and away from politics.

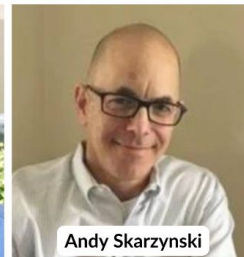
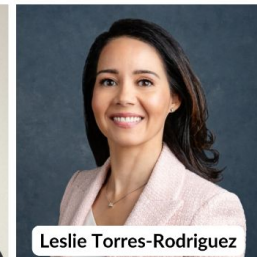
School System Leaders

They carry a profound responsibility on their shoulders and deserve the highest quality support in a trusting community.





Connecticut Members



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OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

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New
COVIDResults
reading

Another K-12 Education Disaster

High school seniors score record lows in reading and math on the NAEP test.

By The Editorial Board

Follow

Sept. 9, 2025 5:46 pm ET

By Matt Barnum

Follow

July 4, 2025 10:00 am ET

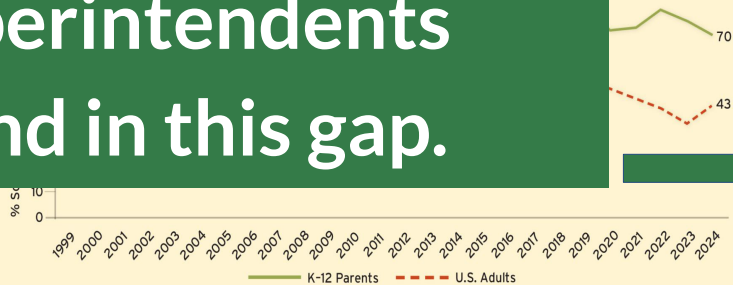
Carolina Fabian, a member of the Waukegan Community Unit School District 60 Board of Education, has extensive experience working closely...

EWS-SU

Pessimism about Condition, Direction of K-12 Education (Figure 2)

Parents continue to be more sanguine than the general public about the state of U.S. schools, but a majority of both groups feel that K-12 education is headed in the wrong direction.

Superintendents stand in this gap.



Perceptions of future trajectory of K-12 education



Local context > national sentiment

But most parents are satisfied with the education their child is receiving

Survey: <https://www.education.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Questionnaire-10ymrnc-pu>

of education students
satisfied, somewhat sat-

education your oldest
that dissatisfied, or com-

22 education are generally
K?

vice, 2024, "Schooling in America





“Change moves at
the **speed of trust.**”

-Stephen Covey

Think of a professional relationship you have that is characterized by high trust.

The Trust Equation: Making the Implicit → Explicit

$$T = \frac{C + R + I}{S}$$

➤ **T = Trustworthiness**

➤ **C = Credibility**

This includes my expertise and experience. You have to believe in my credibility to find me trustworthy.

➤ **R = Reliability**

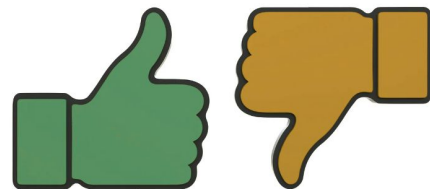
This is about consistency in how I behave, my dependability, and my follow-through in my interactions with you.

➤ **I = Intimacy**

Demonstrating emotional vulnerability, that I care, that your success matters to me, and that you are not “just another stakeholder.”

➤ **S = Self-Orientation**

This is the denominator because the more that I focus on you, the less I focus on myself, and my trustworthiness (T) increases.





Why It Matters

- **Opinions:** Observable, specific to a topic and time, rational, and changeable
I don't think pineapple would taste good on pizza.
- **Attitudes:** Predispositions governing likes and dislikes; inferred through indirect questioning
I don't like sweet and savory mixed together.
- **Beliefs:** Tenets people live by
Foods should stay true to their cultural roots.
- **Values:** Explicit standards for evaluating right and wrong
**Respecting traditions matter.
<tradition, respect>**





Why It Matters

- **Opinions:** Observable, specific to a topic and time, rational, and changeable **This training assumes we're not already doing these things.**
- **Attitudes:** Predispositions governing likes and dislikes; inferred through indirect questioning **I don't like feeling unappreciated; I am doing everything I can in a very difficult environment.**
- **Beliefs:** Tenets people live by **Student growth requires more than mindset — it requires addressing the very real challenges we face.**
- **Values:** Explicit standards for evaluating right and wrong **Don't imply we're the problem when we're already carrying so much. <dignity, respect, fairness>**





Why It Matters

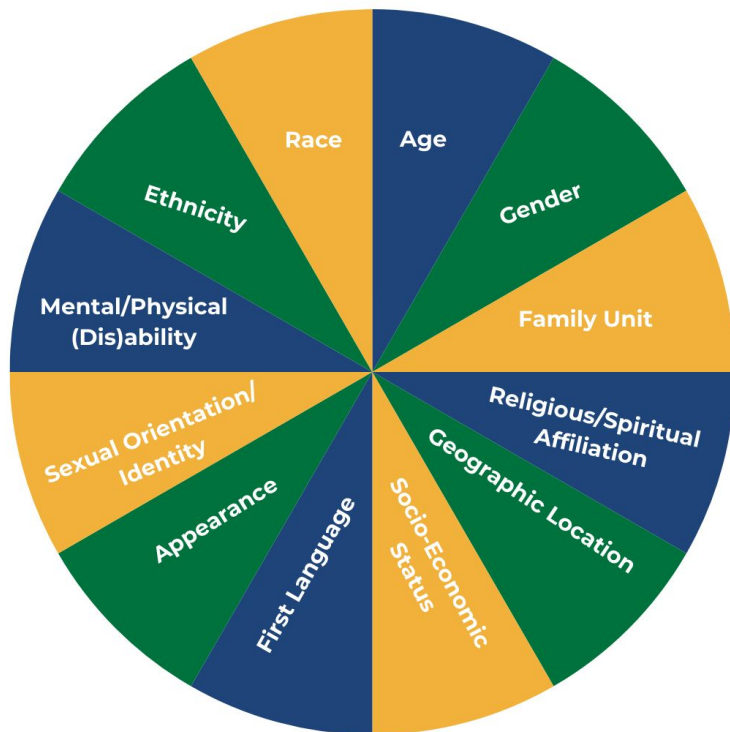
- **Opinions:** Observable, specific to a topic and time, rational, and changeable
Curiosity and coaching can reduce behavioral escalation and increase engagement.
- **Attitudes:** Predispositions governing likes and dislikes; inferred through indirect questioning
I prefer solutions that strengthen adult practices we can control, even when external conditions are hard.
- **Beliefs:** Tenets people live by
All students can grow, and adult belief in that growth matters.
- **Values:** Explicit standards for evaluating right and wrong
Students deserve educators and systems that don't give up — even when circumstances are difficult. <commitment, student-centeredness, responsibility>





“This training is **not about fixing teachers**. It’s about strengthening tools we already see many of you using. We **all share the belief that our students have tremendous potential** — that who they are today is not the limit of who they can become. This work is about reinforcing that shared commitment, while also **acknowledging the very real challenges many of our students face and the extraordinary effort you put in each day.**”

Common ground with values
acknowledgment



2 minutes each

List of VALUES

Accountability
Achievement
Adaptability
Adventure
Altruism
Ambition
Authenticity
Balance
Beauty
Being the best
Belonging
Career
Caring
Collaboration
Commitment
Community
Compassion
Competence
Confidence
Connection
Contentment
Contribution
Cooperation
Courage
Creativity
Curiosity
Dignity

Diversity
Environment
Efficiency
Equality
Ethics
Excellence
Fairness
Faith
Family
Financial stability
Forgiveness
Freedom
Friendship
Fun
Future generations
Generosity
Giving back
Grace
Gratitude
Growth
Harmony
Health
Home
Honesty
Hope
Humility
Humor
Inclusion
Independence
Initiative
Integrity

Intuition
Job security
Joy
Justice
Kindness
Knowledge
Leadership
Learning
Legacy
Leisure
Love
Loyalty
Making a difference
Nature
Openness
Optimism
Order
Parenting
Patience
Patriotism
Peace
Perseverance
Personal fulfillment
Power
Pride
Recognition
Reliability
Resourcefulness
Respect
Responsibility
Risk-taking

Safety
Security
Self-discipline
Self-expression
Self-respect
Serenity
Service
Simplicity
Spirituality
Sportsmanship
Stewardship
Success
Teamwork
Thrift
Time
Tradition
Travel
Trust
Truth
Understanding
Uniqueness
Usefulness
Vision
Vulnerability
Wealth
Well-being
Wholeheartedness
Wisdom

Write your own:



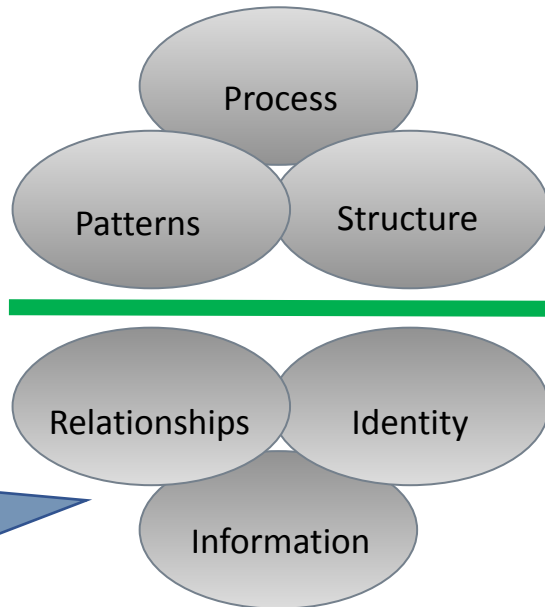
**How did that feel? What
did you learn?**



Above and Below “The Green Line”

There are always two conversations happening.

We create subtext when we don't talk about what's going on “below the Green Line.”



-Margaret Wheatly, 1992

- Observable actions
- Words that are said
- Technical work we do together

- Triggers
- Emotions
- Stories
- Values
- Identity and Power
- Relationships
- Impact of behavior





**Facts don't change
people's minds, and
certainly not if they don't
trust the messenger.**

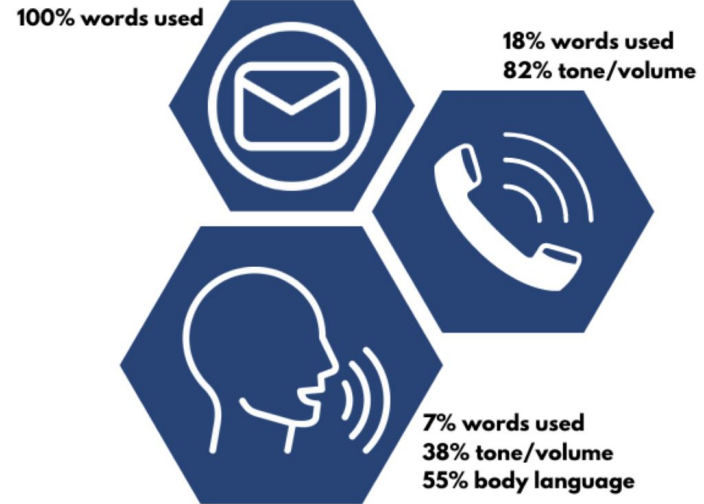


How you communicate is even more important than the words you say


$$T = \frac{C + R + I}{S}$$

➤ **I = Intimacy**

Demonstrating emotional vulnerability, that I care, that your success matters to me, and that you are not “just another stakeholder.”



Common Understories

Common Understories

Every conflict has the thing it seems to be about—and the thing it's really about.
Usually, the understory features one or two of these deeper concerns:



Power and Control



Closeness and Care



Respect and Recognition



Stress and Overwhelm

- **Power and Control:**
Conflict creates powerlessness/lack of control
- **Respect and Recognition:**
Conflict leaves you feeling unappreciated, disrespected
Loop to check for understanding.
- **Care and Concern:**
Conflict leaves you feeling disconnected
- **Stress and Overwhelm:**
Conflict leaves you feeling more strain and anxiety — which you already felt at the beginning



To Get to the Understory

Listen

That's not fair. We've explained multiple times that reserves are a long-term solution. We can't spend money we don't have.

I can't support a budget that cuts classroom staff while we're relying on reserves. This makes it look like we don't value our teachers.

STEP FOUR

Sounds like math is more important to you than your people. Got it.

"Tell me more."

Dig deeper. Invite the person to investigate underneath

Families won't understand that. They'll see layoffs and assume we mismanaged funds.

Check in

When we need to do a better job of explaining it. The math does change.



www.TheGoodConflict.com



To Get to the Understory

I hear you – you're thinking this looks like we are choosing savings over people? Is that fair?

I can't support a budget that cuts classroom staff while we're sitting on reserves. This makes it look like we don't value our teachers.

Yes. That would really help me.

"Tell me more."

Dig deeper. Invite the person to investigate underneath

Yes. That's exactly what families will think.

beliefs & emotions.

Would it be useful to walk through what happens if we rely on reserves now versus making phased reductions?

any
other
Step





**“It seems like you’ve
got a reason for
saying that.”**

-Chris Voss, former FBI hostage negotiator and
author of *Never Split the Difference*

Fire **Starters**

Accelerants that lead conflict to explode, including group identities, conflict entrepreneurs, humiliation, and corruption.



Humiliation

A forced and public loss of dignity, pride, or status



Corruption

When institutions cannot be trusted



Binary Group Identities

Us vs. them, Republican vs. Democrat, Black vs. White



Conflict Entrepreneurs

People who exploit conflict for their own ends



Amanda Ripley | Goo...



**Look for ways to give
folks a path back.**



Conflict Entrepreneurs

How to Deal with a Conflict Entrepreneur

1. Remove the Audience
2. “Speak to the 10%”
3. Redirect
4. Try at Least 3 Times
5. BIFF (High Conflict Institute)
6. Gray Rocking



**Not every “difficult”
person is a conflict
entrepreneur.**





**No one is the villain in
their own story.**



SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY

What is one practice
you've used that has
helped when facing a
contentious conversation?



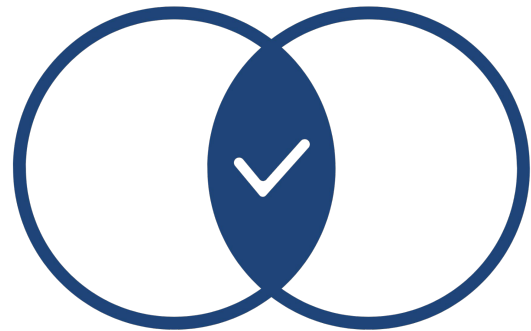
LARGE GROUP SHARE

What is one practice
you've used that has
helped when facing a
contentious conversation?



Messaging Effectively

- **Just the facts...just doesn't work.**
Leading with facts before relational work isn't effective.
- **Keep the main thing the main thing.**
Focus on what's most important with up to 3 supporting points.
- **Always remain the adult.**
Other people don't get to change how you react + remember to keep things proportional.



Difficult Conversations

- **People need to feel heard, respected, and valued — not to find total agreement.**
How people feel > final outcome
- **De-escalate and lower the temperature.**
Hint: don't say “calm down.”
- **Use language to bridge back to shared understanding.**
Redirect back to key messages.





Bridging Language



- “I’m glad you brought that up so I can clarify...”
- “Yes, and”
- “Thank you for sharing your perspective; while I know this wasn’t the answer you were seeking, I hope you know how much I value...”
- “That’s a great question and brings me back to...”
- “If you take one thing from this conversation, I hope that...”



Difficult Conversations Guide

Tough Conversations Strategies for Educational Leaders to Build Common Ground



Strategy	Details
Start with common ground. <i>There's always some overlap.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Find common ground – with parents and educators, all parties care deeply about children. Lead with shared values – such as how vital the family/school partnership is. Use plain language and avoid words that have become politically charged.
Just the facts... just doesn't work. <i>Leading with facts before doing relational work isn't effective.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> People tend to seek out information that validates what they already believe and are skeptical of information to the contrary – i.e. confirmation bias. It takes a lot of mental bandwidth to change deep-seated beliefs, making it difficult to get through with facts – i.e. avoidance of complexity. Facts are helpful and impactful in a conversation where common ground has laid the foundation.
Lean in with curiosity. <i>Listen to understand, not to respond.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Don't interrupt or go on the defensive. Realize that you don't have moral certitude – people are shaped by the collection of their lived experiences and so perspectives will vary. Listen for areas of overlap and agreement and build on those, rather than focusing on points of divergence.
Keep the main thing the main thing. <i>Focus on what is most important.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stay focused on what's happening in your district – not what's in the national news media. When a parent has a particular concern, keep the focus on their child rather than students in general. What matters most are high quality, safe, and welcoming learning environments for all students.
Always remain the adult. <i>Other people don't get to change how you react.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leaders set the culture and model for everyone what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Don't use your title or position to express authority. Being the adult doesn't mean being a doormat – if a conversation devolves into verbal and personal attacks, that can be met with silence and a statement that the meeting doesn't seem to be productive and can be picked back up at a later date.
Know what lines you won't cross. <i>Stay true to your values while navigating savvy concessions.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflective leadership is key so you are clear ahead of time where your lines are: being firm is different than being harsh and leaders will sometimes have to take a firm stance in service of all students. Be flexible where possible and look for creative solutions rather than long-standing barriers. Don't get trapped in a debate about morality or justice.



Adaptive Leadership Moves



Adaptive Leadership is
**the practice of mobilizing
people** to tackle tough
challenges and thrive.

RONALD HEIFETZ



**Help folks sit without
closure.**



Get on the Balcony

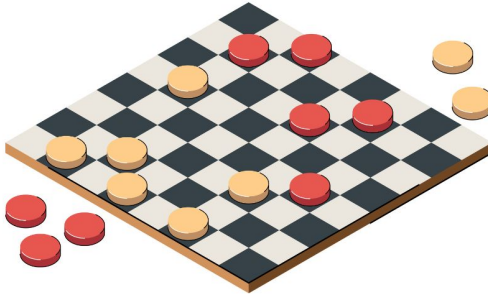


Trust is conveyed in tone. “I appreciate you sharing that and by the head nods, I can see others are feeling similarly. I know it’s tough, but we have to cut 10% of our budget. Our people, our staff, are 90% of our budget. There will be some impact and tonight, we want to get clear on what matters most to you.”

- “Before we go further, can we take a step back for a moment?”
- “What do we want this conversation to make possible for our kids?”
- “What do you wish others in the room understood about your experience?”
- “What’s one thing we could do differently after tonight that would help strengthen trust?”



Technical or Adaptive Challenge?



**Challenges are
often both.**

- Clear vs. unclear
- Handled by experts vs. requires behavior change
- Can be delegated vs. cannot be delegated
- Solved with authority vs. solved by leadership



Getting to the Underlying Dilemma

- Focus: role as a public official, a civic leader
- What's the underlying issue? What's really at play here?

~~Technical~~ → Adaptive

Example:

1. How should I message a new math curriculum with parents?
2. What evidence do I have that teachers are on-board with this change?
3. How have I made the case with principals that this change is worth it?
4. How might I invest time with principals this spring to help them see there is an instructional problem to solve that high quality instructional materials might address?

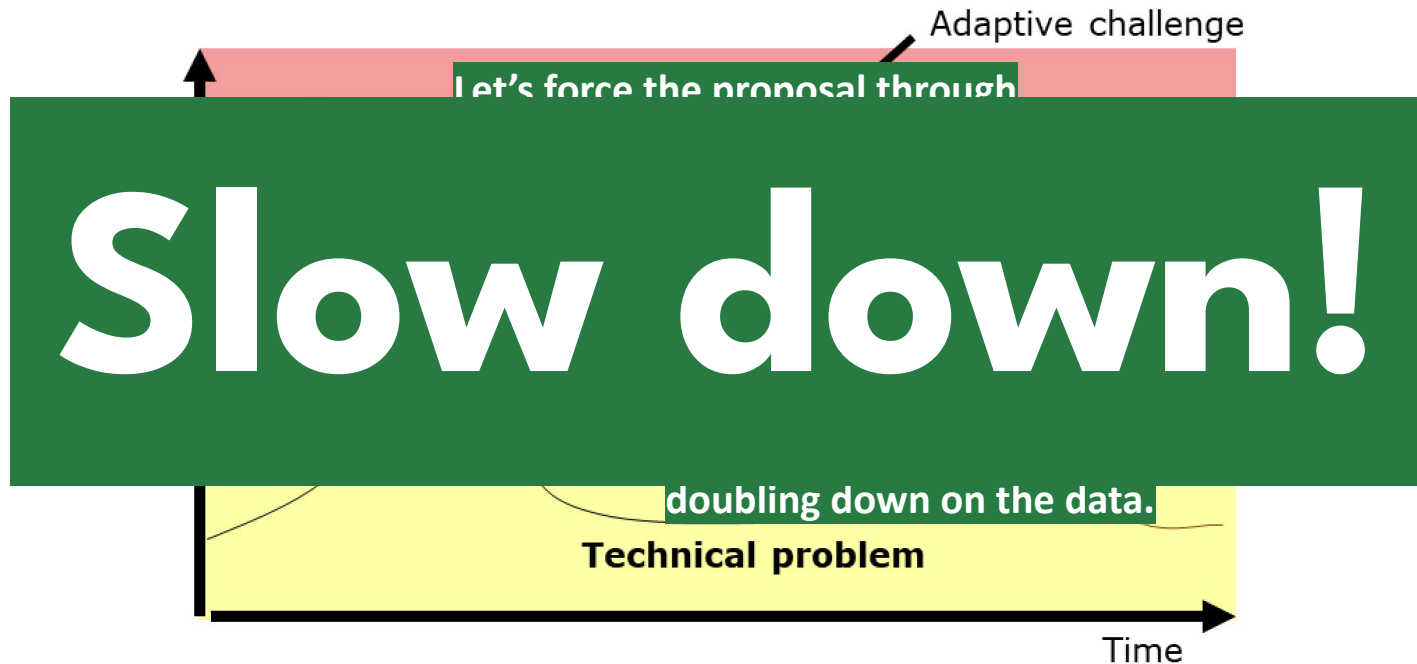




**Effective communication
involves effective action.**



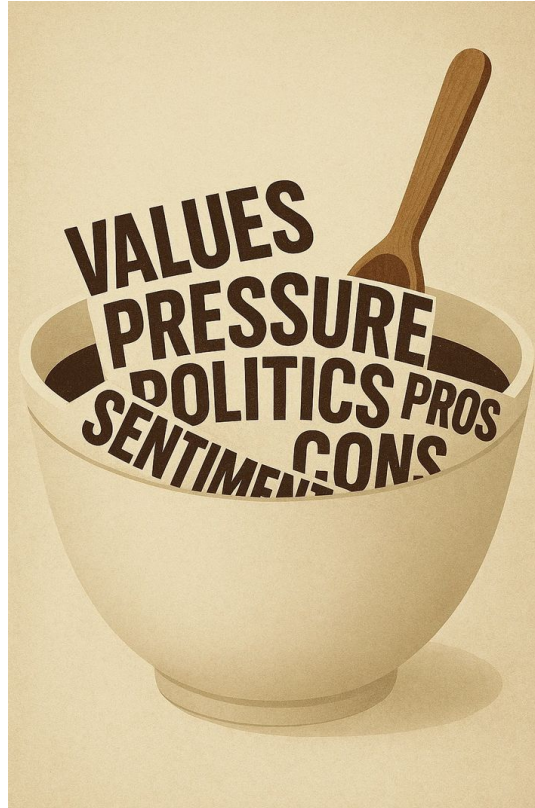
Creating a Holding Environment



from Ronald Heifetz's adaptive leadership framework



There's no magic recipe.





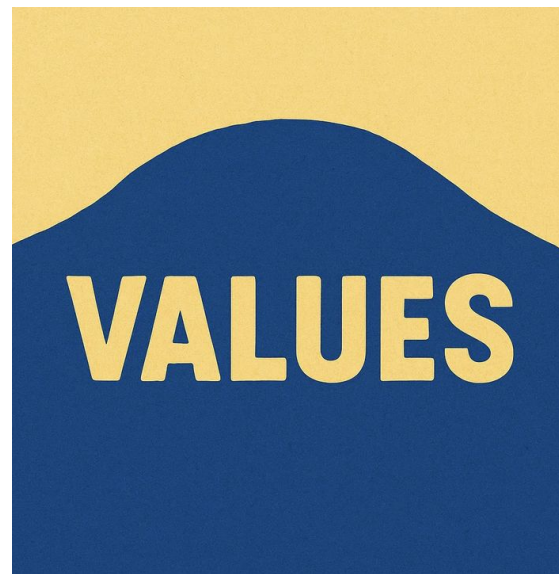
The Frame

Anticipate the *hills you are willing to die on* and the *savvy concessions you are willing to make* in service of your student-centered visions



Core Commitments

- Your non-negotiables
 - Your core values
 - Professional integrity
 - Not: personal opinions
 - Students at the center
 - No harm to students
 - **THINK**: just because it's **T**rue doesn't mean it's **H**elpful





Sample Non-Negotiables



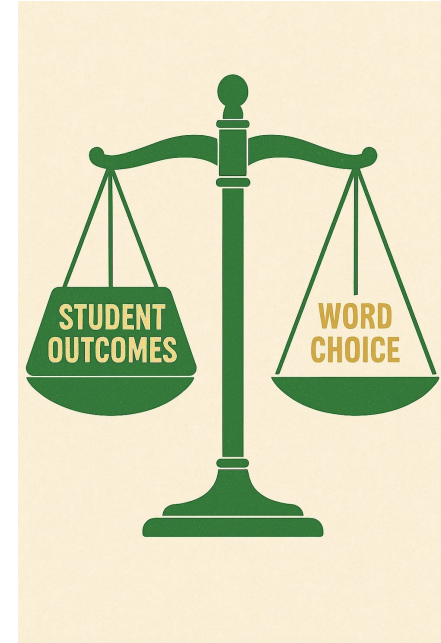
- I will not support policies that criminalize students or disproportionately push students of color out of classrooms.
- I will not allow political pressure to override data on student needs — whether it's reading interventions, nutrition programs, or mental health supports.

Local context > national sentiment



Strategic Trade-Offs

- **Adaptive moves to build coalitions**
 - How you frame ideas
 - Word choice
 - Flexibility around pace and process
 - Timing is everything
 - Principle vs. pragmatism



Sample Savvy Political Concessions

- I'm willing to frame inclusive programs as “parent choice” or “student success” rather than “equity” if it ensures broader support.
- I'll partner with business or faith-based leaders to co-sponsor initiatives — even if we don't agree on every value — if they help extend my coalition.
- I may back off certain public statements if it means protecting my ability to make internal, long-game progress.



LARGE GROUP SHARE

- What is a savvy political concession you made – or one you didn't?
- How did you feel after?





**You are the right person
in the right seat
at the right time.**



Bonus Resources

Curated “Best Of” Tools and Templates



Leading Now

ACCESS OUR “BEST OF” RESOURCES

Topic	I am looking for...	Title + Link	Author
AI	A way my team and I can map where our district is on AI and what to do next	AI Readiness Framework	aiEDU
AI	An AI tool to make my writing more concise	AI for Busy Readers	Writing for Busy Readers by Rogers et al.
AI	The best overview on AI for me and my team	Preparing Students for Their Future in the Age of AI deck video	LearnerStudio's Babak Mohtaghimi
AI	How to ensure AI doesn't cause us to lose human connection	The Social Impact of Artificial Intelligence deck video	Rhythm Project's Michelle Culver
AI	Best of AI from 2024-25	Best of AI	Leading Now, ILQ Group, Learner Studio, aiEDU, Rhythm Project, Digital Promise
AI	Sample policies and board resolutions on AI	Resources on AI folder	Digital Promise
Board relationships	A reflection tool to use with my board on building trust, establishing structures, etc.	Top 10 Strategies for Superintendent/Board Collaboration	Leading Now
Board relationships	Questions to ask new board members to lay a relational foundation (empathy interview)	New Board Member Questions	Leading Now
Budgeting	An approach to strategic budgeting post-ESSER	Strategic Budgeting in Today's Complex Environment deck video	ERS
Budgeting	Best of Strategic Budgeting from 2024-25	Best of Strategic Budgeting	Leading Now, ERS, Edumetrics
Closing schools	A guide to maintaining community trust while closing a school or schools	School Closure Strategies and Key Messages	Leading Now
Crisis	Crisis toolkits for 10+ crises school systems face	Crisis Toolkits	Leading Now
Communications	How to ask better questions	The Ask Approach deck video	Jeff Walzler, Ask
Difficult conversations	A tool I can use with my team to best navigate difficult conversations	Navigating Tough Conversations	Leading Now
Education politics	Five factors to build cross-partisan support	Consensus the Partisan Divide in Education Policy	Aspen Institute
Education politics	Education politics data and messaging to build common ground	Public Sentiment Data and Building Common Ground deck	Leading Now
Education politics	Common ground, legal-based messaging regarding immigration	Immigrant Families and Students Messaging	Leading Now
Emotional intelligence	A way to increase my emotional intelligence as a leader	Operationalize Your Values deck video	Noble Story Group's Matt Taylor
Entry planning	Questions to ask stakeholders when new (or not) to a superintendency	Key Stakeholder Questions	Leading Now
Entry planning	An entry planning guide, with a sample 100 Day Plan	Entry Planning Guide	Leading Now
Entry planning	A fillable entry planning tool	Reflective Planning Tool for Equity-Focused Leaders	Entry Planning for Equity Focused Leaders by Cheatham et al.
Exit strategy	An exit strategy guide for when I'm thinking to leave my role	Superintendent Transition Guide	Leading Now
Exit strategy	A guide to social media and media interviews when leaving my role	Handling Media When Leaving the District	Leading Now
Immigration	Support and guidance for students and families, regardless of status	Immigration Resources Guidance and Messaging	ImmSchools, EdWeek, and more
Media	Help preparing for a media interview	Media Training one-pager: Media Training video	Leading Now
Public engagement	A public engagement and relationship stakeholder map	Stakeholder Map	Leading Now/Seek Common Ground
Public engagement	Public engagement and relationship stakeholder map	Public Engagement Associates	



Storytelling worksheet, stakeholder map, crisis comms toolkits, budget, board collaboration, and much more!



The Leading Now Experience

- Strategic communications and public engagement leadership development
- Six-month cohort experience, fully funded
- Offerings often include you and a member of your team
- Reach out directly to anisa@leadingnow.org or scan QR code to sign up for call

