The Superintendent as Civic Leader: Stewarding the Future of Public Education

Council of Great City Schools· October 22, 2026

Jennifer Perry Cheatham

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"Public education is an essential American institution, an expression of what we do when we do things together, a precious social contract."

- *Cheatham, Grant, and Wiener, 2026*



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1918	Compulsory school attendance laws
1954	Brown v. Board of Education
1960s–70s	ESEA, IDEA, Title IX
1983	A Nation at Risk
1990s–2000s	Accountability and choice
Today	?



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Steering Committee



Susan Enfield
CEL, University of Washington



Kristine Gilmore
AASA



Christina Grant
CEPR, HGSE



Ray Hart
Council of Great City Schools



Richard Lemons
Partners for Educational Leadership



Meghan Mackay
LeveragED Foundation



Vicki Phillips
National Center on Education & the Economy



Julia Rafael-Baer
ILO Group



Paul Reville
EdRedesign Lab, HGSE



Christian Rhodes
Harlem Children's Zone



Bob Runcie
Chiefs for Change



John Silvanus Wilson, Jr.
McGraw Center for Educational Leadership



Caitlin Sullivan
Leading Now



Natasha Trivers
The Broad Center at the Yale School of Management



Jeff Wetzler
Transcend



Rachel White
Superintendents Lab, UT Austin



Lindsay Whorton
Holdsworth Center



Melissa Sadorf
National Rural Education Association



1 Public education stands at a generational crossroads.

2 Superintendents are on the front lines of American democracy.

3 Current training and support systems are not yet meetings the demands of this civic leadership role.

The Initiative on the Superintendent as Civic Leader



Leading the charge in transforming the way superintendents, their teams, and boards are trained and supported, so they can lead for the future of learning with civic imagination, democratic purpose, and political skill.

ISCL's three-pronged strategy for impact



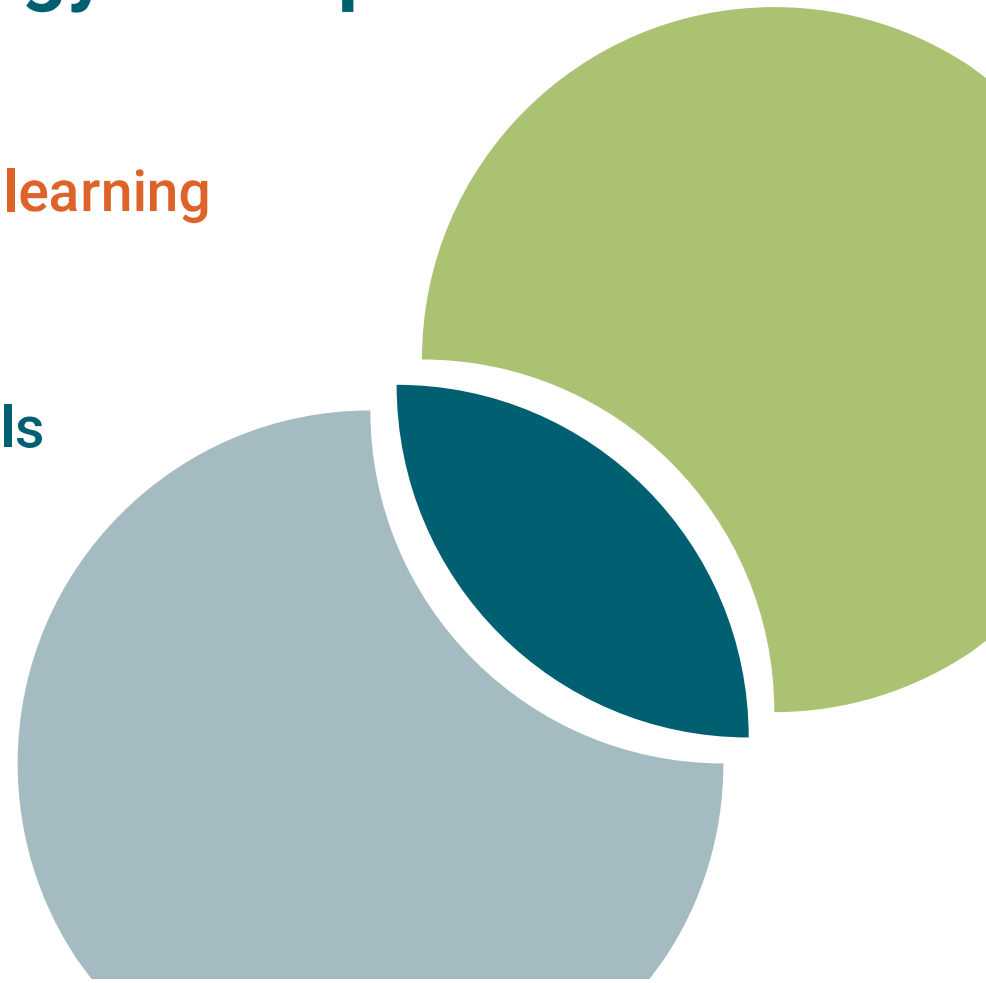
Provide exemplary executive learning



Generate research-based tools

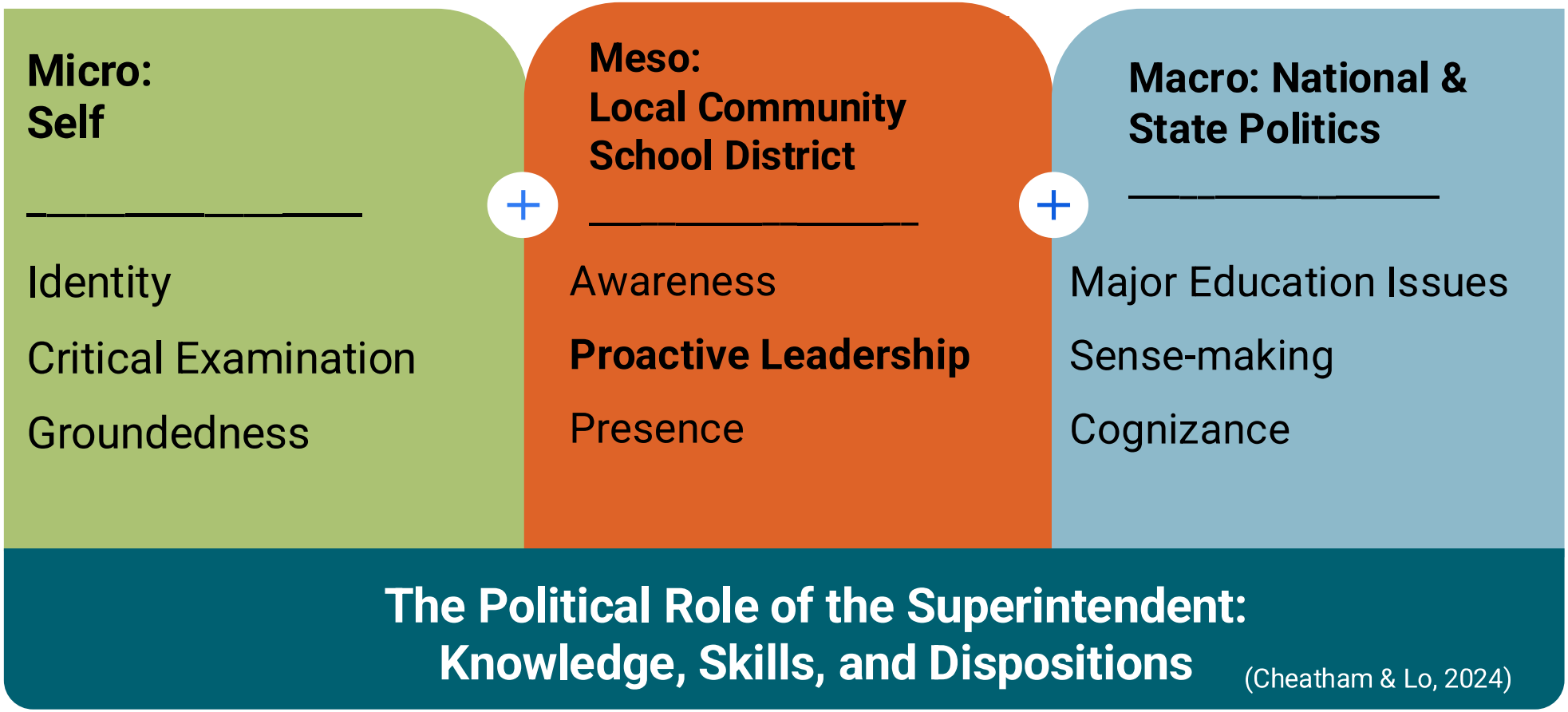


Catalyze field transformation



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Political Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions



Proactive Political Leadership Skills

- **Visioning** → creating visions for success that speak to the largest possible swath of constituents
- **Communicating** → listening and speaking in ways that touch on values and avoid common pitfalls
- **Political mapping** → knowing your community well (internal and external), especially their hopes and fears
- **Mobilizing** → using that knowledge to both mobilize support for positive change and to protect the most vulnerable in our communities
- **Relationship building** → continually building trust, especially across lines of difference

(Cheatham & Lo, 2024)

Panel Discussion



Fabiola Bagula
San Diego Unified



Adrienne Battle
Nashville Public Schools



Misty Her
Fresno Unified



Warren Morgan
Cleveland Public Schools

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What resonated? What questions came up for you?

What can ISCL do to support superintendents now?



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