



# Reclaiming the Narrative

Pushing back to protect good teaching, important content and students' sense of belonging **BY SHELDON H. BERMAN**

In the past three years, public schools have become culture war battlegrounds as politically motivated groups targeted initiatives around race, equity, social emotional learning, gender identity and diversity and inclusion concepts.

In Florida, adopted textbooks were removed for supposedly promoting social emotional learning, social justice and critical race theory. The Forest Hills, Ohio, school board eliminated the district's annual Diversity Day and banned from student instruction, staff training and hiring practices anything perceived as critical race theory, intersectionality, identity or anti-racism curriculum. In Texas, the Grapevine-Colleyville Independent School District board restricted how teachers discuss race, gender and sexuality and which bathrooms transgender students may use.

A UCLA study titled "The Conflict Campaign" found nearly 900 school districts serving 18 million students were subjected to anti-CRT campaigns in 2020 and 2021. Nationwide, superintendents were ousted or resigned as newly elected board members challenged directions around equity and other district priorities.

## Compromising Progress

School leaders face an onslaught of deeply challenging and even harmful legislation, policies and public debates around programs that make a positive difference for students and staff. Many attacks are distortions and false narratives about the programs' intent. Others reflect zero-sum thinking in which addressing the needs of one group is seen as compromising the progress of another.

As school leaders, we must protect good teaching, important academic content and students' sense of safety and belonging. At the same time, we need to reassure our communities, especially parents, as they try to make sense of the turmoil.

How can we effectively respond and reclaim the narrative so that parents and the community support this crucial work? How do superintendents navigate these treacherous waters while pursuing their educational goals and honoring personal ethics?

As district leaders, we are also community leaders with a vital role in educating parents and the public on the importance of ensuring every child's success. Today's cultural conflicts require

both courage and instructional skills to enter the fray with calmness and respect for others' perspectives but also with clarity about the value of the efforts we are pursuing.

### Core Purposes

Our first priority is to bring people together around shared goals and experiences. We must become adept in approaches and messaging that move the public away from inflammatory rhetoric and slogans and toward the core of what we want to accomplish. This core often constitutes common ground for the majority of parents and community members.

For example, parents strongly support the essential skills embodied in social emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making. The common ground we can articulate is that social emotional learning is the most effective way for schools to create safe, positive and productive learning environments for all students that prepare them with life skills for success in school and work.

Common ground around equity and teaching about race and ethnicity is less universal, but still attainable. Michael Petrilli, Fordham Institute's executive director, identifies five general agreements in his article "The Common Ground on Race and Education That's Hiding in Plain Sight": implementing culturally affirming

materials; diversifying the education profession; maintaining high expectations for all students; teaching students to empathize with others; and presenting painful chapters in America's history in an honest, unflinching way.

For most parents and community members, the essential common ground is wanting all students — regardless of race, economic status, gender or country of origin — to feel included and be successful. That is the essence of our equity work.

When countering censorship, the common goal is to help young people become knowledgeable and responsible citizens in our democratic society. They need full and accurate information, as well as multiple perspectives on historical and

current events, to enable them to draw informed conclusions. As for culturally responsive teaching, to feel included and respected, all students need to see their cultures reflected in the books they read and the instruction they receive. There is no place in schools for hate or intolerance. Schools must be safe places for all students.

Aaron Spence, superintendent of Virginia Beach City, Va., Public Schools, has attempted to educate the public, stake out common ground and calm the chaotic environment engendered by an anti-CRT campaign. Among his communications efforts, he published an op-ed in the local newspaper stating, "We know empirically that academic achievement requires an environment where students feel socially and emotionally secure and able to take the intellectual risks necessary to learn and flourish. Building that environment means having schools and classrooms and a school division where all students feel seen, known, cared about, included and supported — where the diversity of thought and culture and background that defines us all is welcome and where children and adults feel they belong. Surely, we can all agree on the importance of that."

These initiatives deserve our support and advocacy. Focusing on core purposes that unite people not only defuses hot-button issues but helps educate people about why we are engaged in this work.

### Finding Common Ground

We cannot do this work alone. The core-purpose approach builds allies among board members, staff, parents and community members. Reaching out and developing support is best achieved by sharing core messages, talking about the value of initiatives and inviting these groups into the dialogue. The strident voices of opposition should not drown out the voices of the majority of families and the interests of the traditionally marginalized.

We also must be open to conversations with those who express concern about initiatives, striving to understand their fears and encouraging them to recognize the programs' positive outcomes. However, we may not be able to dispel the zero-sum thinking, conspiracy theories or misinformation or to accommodate deeply held religious or political beliefs. We may not be able to persuade others that assisting traditionally marginalized students lifts all students. In those instances, we must affirm our core purposes and move forward.

We should avoid emotional debates with indi-



**Sheldon Berman, who serves as AASA's lead superintendent on social emotional learning, believes difficult leadership decisions in contentious times require clear, ethical stances.**



viduals who want to derail beneficial initiatives by distorting the district's work or maligning its staff. These individuals are a minority, and some may not even be community members. Responding calmly and respectfully, while focusing on why the work supports all students, is a more effective approach.

As superintendent in Eugene, Ore., I found myself in a public meeting vociferously defending a math program adoption. The school board chair leaned over and said, "Once you start defending, you're losing." He was right. Let others debate the issues. Our role is to stay focused on communicating the core goals, the potential common ground and the evidence.

### What Needs To Be Said

This approach demands courage. We may be required to voice deeply held values and demonstrate leadership within divisive and contentious environments. In such circumstances, it's not our role to say what is most popular, but rather to say what needs to be said — to lead by sharing our core purposes and helping people move toward understanding and concurrence.

To do that under pressure in a tense atmosphere demands a grasp of the data supporting programs' efficacy. For example, research demonstrates that social emotional learning is a proven strategy for enhancing positive youth development, academic performance, mental wellness and positive relationships between teachers and students. As district leaders, we need to use data with intentionality to demonstrate that our districts' approaches are backed by substantial research.

To reclaim the narrative, we must be clear about our values and our perspective — clear with ourselves, staff, board and the public. Such candor may place us at odds with decision makers who have a different perspective. Sometimes it's important to take a stand for our values, even if it risks our position. As employees of a governing board, we are responsible for following the board's direction. However, if that direction is antithetical to the values we hold dear, leaving a leadership position may demonstrate greater integrity and yield more productive consequences, personally and professionally.

I learned this lesson defending school integration as superintendent in Jefferson County, Ky. In response to a U.S. Supreme Court decision ruling the district's desegregation plan unconstitutional, my staff and I applied the court's guidance to design a plan to sustain integration. However, the plan engendered vocal opposi-



tion, contributing to a significant change in the board's stance that made it impossible for me to continue leading the district in accordance with my values.

(Read more about desegregation efforts in Jefferson County in the September 2011 and December 2013 issues of *School Administrator*.)

### Summoning Courage

The most difficult decisions call on us to have the courage to make a clear, ethical judgment or take a public stand. UCLA's study "Educating for a Diverse Democracy" affirms that our advocacy of schools' democratic mission makes a difference. By articulating core outcomes for students' education, pursuing common ground among constituents and offering positive direction, we can reclaim the narrative on the value and purpose of such important initiatives as equity, social emotional well-being, gender identity and diversity and inclusion.

As district leaders, we must be prepared to approach any controversy as community educators. In accepting a leadership position, we accept responsibility to lead with what is best for students, even in challenging times. Today, when students and communities need us most, we must summon the courage to speak up for consequential initiatives — and to reclaim the narrative around the inclusive and democratic purposes of schools. ■

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**To calm the chaos, Aaron Spence, superintendent in Virginia Beach, Va., has promoted the benefits of social emotional learning on students' academic outcomes.**