

*Case Studies for
Aspiring and Current Building Level
Educational Leaders*

Jolene R. Battitoni, Ed.D. and Ann Cancilla Gaudino, Ed.D., Editors

®EEJ

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I hope that the practices discussed in this book will be helpful to you, our readers.

Sincerely,

Ann Cancilla Gaudino, Ed.D., Founder and Editor-in-Chief
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to K-12 educational leaders and aspiring educational leaders worldwide with sincere gratitude for your service to students.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: <i>Understanding the Boundaries of School Counselor Competence</i> Richard Joseph Behun	Page 7
Chapter 2: <i>Instructional Leadership in Action: Implementing a District-Wide Environmental Curriculum</i> Mindy Gumpert, William McConnell, Stacey Rodgers	Page 16
Chapter 3: <i>Leading for Equity in a Divided School</i> Christopher Keeler	Page 29
Chapter 4: <i>Ethics Under Pressure: Leading with Integrity When Family and Policy Collide</i> Elizabeth A. Domangue	Page 35
Chapter 5: <i>Flip-Flopping Visions: Challenges for Principals Who Outlast District Leadership</i> Samuel F. Fancera and Evan Saperstein	Page 49
Chapter 6: <i>When Inclusion is Just Integration by Another Name</i> Kenya M. Overton	Page 61
Chapter 7: <i>Building Trust, One Family at a Time: A New Principal's Journey Toward Community Engagement</i> Krisdhal Ugarte-Torre, Omar Riaz, and Jennifer Murray	Page 74
Chapter 8: <i>From Engagement to Investment: School Leaders (re)Engaging Families for School Success</i> Cathleen Cubelic and Kathryn Wiley	Page 82
Chapter 9: <i>Leading AI Integration in Schools: The Case of Hewill Middle School</i> LaMonica Williams	Page 91

Chapter 10: <i>Stronger Together: Uniting Families, Schools, and Communities Through the Community Learning Collaborative</i> Ashley Mungiello, Lorena Valer, and Samuel F. Fancera	Page 106
Chapter 11: <i>In the Interest of Equity: It's Not Easy Being Green</i> Emily Mulvihill	Page 116
Chapter 12: <i>Ethics, Equity, and Policy: How School Leaders Pursue Culturally Proficient Leadership for LGBTQ+ Students</i> Maria O'Connor and Miriam Ezzani	Page 123
Chapter 13: <i>Balancing Safety and Security with Least Restrictive Environment</i> Emily Nickerson and Amie Cieminski	Page 135
Chapter 14: <i>Is That the Best Use of My Time?</i> <i>Working with School Counselors to Address Student Behavior</i> Jessica Mulder and Rachel Roegman	Page 144
Chapter 15: <i>Shifting the Script: Dialogic Learning in a System Built for Monologue</i> Diana Schmidt and Rachel Roegman	Page 153
Chapter 16: <i>Addressing Equity and Cultural Responsiveness in Elementary and Middle Schools</i> Camille Hopkins	Page 164
Chapter 17: <i>Why DEI Matters in Teaching and Learning</i> María L. Gabriel	Page 173
Chapter 18: <i>Addressing Chronic Absenteeism through Equity-Driven Leadership Practices: Insights from an Urban High School</i> Gerald Maraia	Page 179
Chapter 19: <i>Responding to Anti-Black Racism on a High School Campus: A Critical Incident Case</i> Jennifer Goldstein and Tonikiaa Orange	Page 191

Chapter 20: <i>Turning the Tide:</i> <i>Shifting Student and Staff Mindsets Around State Assessments</i> Matthew Mawn, William Crispino, and Erin Posbergh	Page 199
Chapter 21: <i>Leading with Justice and Empathy: Implementing NELP Standard 3.3</i> Margart Mbindyo	Page 207
Alignment of NELP Standards and SLLA 6990 Content Categories	Page 221
Alignment of Chapters with NELP Standards and SLLA 6990 Categories	Page 222
Final Thoughts...	Page 223

Chapter 1

Understanding the Boundaries of School Counselor Competence

Richard Joseph Behun

Abstract

A job of the school counselor position has been historically misunderstood. The potential for ethical and legal issues arise when uninformed principals assign specific job functions to the school counselor. Some of these job functions may be deemed inappropriate by best practices or they may fall outside the boundaries of a school counselors' competence. This case will focus on NELP Standards 2.1., 2.2., 2.3. and SLLA Standards IV. A.1., A.4., A.8., B.2., B.3., and B.4.

Introduction

At the conclusion of the last academic year, Keystone school board voted to accept the early retirements of dozens of employees across the district as a resolution to keep up with inflation, balance the budget, and not raise taxes. Because Keystone School District does not mandate a minimum ratio for student support personnel, many school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists, who did not take the early retirement, were ultimately furloughed. Although this decision was celebrated by most taxpayers, it was received very poorly by school district educators and had significant negative impacts on employee morale.

Almost immediately after the school board vote, the Keystone superintendent (KS) began an emergency restructuring process for student support services, and informed the principal of Keystone Middle School (KP), that the 750 students in his building will no longer have access to a school social worker, a behavioral specialist, and that two of the three school counselors accepted early retirement. Unfortunately, the school counseling department had also lost all administrative support. On a positive note, students who receive services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act will still have access to a full-time special educator and students who need to undergo testing will still have access to a school psychologist who will transition from full-time to part-time.

The Case

Because the KP lost several key student support positions in his building, he was left with no options other than to restructure within and reassign some roles and responsibilities to remain compliant with federal laws. While KP believes his primary obligation in this situation is to ensure that students are getting the services they need to be successful, he also understands that the student support personnel cannot be successful without his unwavering support. KP recognizes that he is the direct supervisor to the special educator, school psychologist, and school

counselor in his building, but to fully support and advocate for their roles, he must first be sure he completely understands the intricacies of each of their positions.

KP believes that he is very familiar with the functions of special educators because he has worked closely with various instructional specialists during his extensive time as a classroom teacher and as an administrator. However, KP has not had the same types of experiences with educational specialists, especially those whose primary job functions fall outside of the classroom, and his understanding of the duties and responsibilities of their roles were not as clear. Unlike the dozens of IEP meetings KP has attended over the years, he has not participated in a counseling session with a school counselor or testing sessions with the school psychologist due to ethical concerns related to confidentiality. As part of the restructuring, to better understand the roles and responsibilities of student support services in his building, and to be transparent in his decision-making, KP scheduled meetings with the special educator, the school psychologist, and the school counselor.

Teacher 1 (T1) is one of the most seasoned educators on the faculty and has been in her position for over two decades. During the meeting with T1, she indicated that she will do exactly what she always has done and continue assessing student needs, identifying students for special education services, developing IEPs, and providing specialized designed instruction and support services to qualifying students. T1 stated that she will not be “punished for poor budget decisions made by the school board and incompetence at the district level.” T1 made it very clear that she will not be taking on any additional responsibilities because she does not “get paid enough to solve the districts’ problems and oversee special education services for an entire building.” At the conclusion of the conversation, KP agreed that T1 is already overworked, it would be impossible to add any more work to her current position, and there was no way of assigning students not eligible for special education services to her current caseload.

School psychologist (SP) has been employed with the district for nearly 30 years and is the only school psychologist in the district. She has always conducted testing at the middle school on Fridays, but with the restructuring, she will only be dedicated to the middle school every other Friday going forward. During the meeting with T1, she indicated that she would continue working to her contract and only complete tasks that she was originally contracted to do. T1 stated that she will be conducting psychological and academic assessments, providing learning and behavioral observations and interventions, and participating as an essential part of the special education process because that is what she was “hired to do.” She made it clear that she was not hired to write, coordinate, or manage 504 plans and will no longer have the time to do so with the new reduction in her working hours. She made it very clear to KP that he needs to “find someone else to write 504 plans or he could write them himself.” Similarly to the conversation with the special educator, KP agreed that T1 is overworked, it would be impossible to add any more responsibilities to her current position after the reduction of hours to her work schedule, and there was no way for T1 to be able to coordinate and write 504 plan with her current caseload.

The last meeting KP held was with the school counselor (SC). After losing two school counselors to early retirement and the administrative assistant to budget cuts, KP must reimagine how the school counseling department will function. The school counseling department must

now operate with one school counselor, no administrative support, and a case load of 750 students (250:1 is the recommended case load according to the American School Counselor Association). During their meeting, SC shared that she is extremely nervous about her significantly high caseload but states that she is a team player and will do whatever it takes to help her students achieve success. SC also recognized that although she has only been out of her school counselor preparation program for less than a year, she was confident that her quality training and motivation to support student success will outweigh her inexperience. Throughout the meeting, SC continuously reiterated that she will do anything she needs to do for her students to achieve their full potential. She stated that she is excited about the opportunity to reimagine how the school counseling department functions and she aims to make it better than ever.

Because the school counselor has been the most optimistic person KP has spoken with in all of his meetings, he quickly began to see SC as an asset to ensure students are provided with appropriate support services. KP has always relied heavily on the school counselors in his building to take care of students' academic and social/emotional, needs and has never asked questions about what happens in the school counseling department. His opinion is that the school counselors in his building have always been efficient in their work, required minimal to no oversight, and have never received a single complaint from anyone. In KP's own words, "they just get it done and get it done well!"

As their meeting continued, KP informed the school counselor that he recognizes that even though he is her direct supervisor, he is still learning her role and was still unclear of some of the duties and tasks related to her job but may need to add just one more responsibility to her already busy schedule. KP informs SC that because the SP has moved to part-time and will only be in the building every other Friday, T1 will no longer have the time to write, coordinate, and manage student 504 plans.

To remain in compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, KP informed SC that he will need her to act as the new 504 coordinator for the building. SC responded that she is honored that KP trusts her with such responsibility and recognized that she previously promised to do whatever she can to help support students. However, she states that a 504 plan is a legally binding document and she would need formal training in writing, coordinating, or managing these plans (Milsom & DeWeese, 2021). Citing the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (2025), SC states that coordinating 504 plans is considered an inappropriate task for a school counselor (ASCA, 2025) and that she believes any involvement with 504 plans beyond student advocacy (Lewis & Muniz, 2023) would constitute her participating in a practice outside the boundaries of her competency (ASCA, 2022).

The Dilemma

The ASCA National Model (2025) is considered the "Gold Standard" in guiding school counselors to act in accordance with a commonly accepted and clearly defined set of national standards. After conducting his own research on school counselor preparation requirements and the ASCA National Model, KP is convinced that SC is in an excellent position to be able to design and deliver a comprehensive school counseling program, driven by data-informed decision-making, that would exceed the academic, career, and social/emotional needs of each

and every student at their unique individual developmental levels. He is also convinced that his school counselor may not have the proper knowledge, education, and training and should not be involved in 504 planning beyond being a student advocate (Lewis & Muniz, 2023) and as a member of an interdisciplinary team (Milson & DeWeese, 2021). In evaluating the ethical dimensions of this issue, KP is considering the potential for any unfavorable legal and ethical outcomes if the students do not receive appropriate and reasonable accommodations because of a poorly written 504 plan. He has to decide whether to assign writing, coordinating, and managing 504 plans to the school counselor, as he originally planned, or reevaluate his initial plan and find another 504 coordinator.

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Multiple Choice Questions

1. The building principal in this scenario should:
 - a. Assign writing, coordinating, and managing 504 plans to the school counselor.
 - b. Take the advice of the school psychologist and write the 504 plans himself.
 - c. Advocate for a 504 coordinator with formal training and competency.
 - d. Send the school counselor to seek professional development on writing, coordinating, and managing 504 plans.

2. The building principal in this scenario should:
 - a. Recognize the potential for any unethical outcomes if the 504 plan is written by someone with no formal training.
 - b. Understand that a poorly written 504 plan by someone with no formal training may adversely affect the students it is designed to benefit.
 - c. Model professional ethics and not ask the school counselor to practice outside the boundaries of her competence.
 - d. All of the above.

3. How did the building principal demonstrate the capacity to evaluate ethical and legal decisions?
 - a. The building principal held meetings with instructional specialists and the educational specialists whose primary job functions fall outside of the classroom.
 - b. The building principal evaluated the potential for any unfavorable legal and ethical outcomes if the students do not receive appropriate and reasonable accommodations because of a poorly written 504 plan.
 - c. The building principal conducted his own research on school counselor preparation requirements and the ASCA National Model to better understand school counseling ethics and national standards of practice.
 - d. All of the above.

4. A school leader models professional ethics and expects the same of others. Based on this statement, the building principal in this scenario should:
 - a. Model professional ethics by not asking the school counselor to practice unethically outside the boundaries of her competence.
 - b. Model professional ethics by learning and understanding the ethical and professional obligations of those employees whose primary job functions fall outside of the classroom.
 - c. Model professional ethics by understanding the duties and responsibilities of educational specialists and not assigning them tasks in which they have no knowledge, education, and/or training.
 - d. All of the above.

5. According to the American School Counselor Association (2019), initiating, writing, coordinating and managing the 504 process are non-school-counseling tasks and inappropriate duties for a school counselor. Which of the following tasks are considered appropriate regarding school counselor involvement with 504 plans.

- a. School counselors serve as advocates, supporting both students and their families.
- b. School counselors serve as members of an interdisciplinary team of school personnel.
- c. School counselors advocate to dismantle inequities in the process of administering reasonable accommodations.
- d. All of the above.

Multiple Choice Questions Answer Bank

1. The building principal in this scenario should:

- a. Incorrect: The building principal should not assign writing, coordinating, and managing 504 plans to the school counselor because the school counselor has had no formal training and it would be considered unethical for her to practice outside of the boundaries of her competency.
- b. Incorrect: The building principal should not take the advice of the school psychologist and write the 504 plans himself because, like the school counselor, he has had no formal training and a school leader must delegate.
- c. Correct: The building principal should advocate for a 504 coordinator with formal training and competence to write the 504 plan which is a legally binding document ensuring equitable access to all students by providing reasonable accommodations.
- d. Incorrect: The building principal should not send the school counselor to seek professional development on writing, coordinating, and managing 504 plans because the American School Counselor Association states that coordinating 504 plans is considered an inappropriate task for a school counselor and would be inconsistent with a nationally recognized standard.

2. The building principal in this scenario should:

- a. Incorrect: A school leader implements practices that hold staff members accountable for their legal and ethical actions. There is the potential for unethical outcomes if the 504 plan is written by someone with no formal training.
- b. Incorrect: A school leader knows how to address unethical behavior as it may adversely affect students and takes appropriate action. A poorly written 504 plan by someone with no formal training may adversely affect the students it is designed to benefit.
- c. Incorrect: A school leader implements practices that hold staff members accountable for their legal and ethical actions, models professional ethics, and expects the same from others. An ideal model of conduct would not ask the school counselor to practice outside the boundaries of her competence.
- d. Correct: A school leader implements practices that hold staff members accountable for their legal and ethical actions, models professional ethics, and expects the same from others. An ideal model of conduct would not ask the school counselor to practice outside the boundaries of her competence. There is the potential for unethical outcomes if the 504 plan is written by someone with no formal training. A poorly written 504 plan by someone with no formal training may adversely affect the students it is designed to benefit.

3. How did the building principal demonstrate the capacity to evaluate ethical and legal decisions?

- a. Incorrect: The building principal demonstrated the capacity to evaluate ethical and legal decisions by holding meetings with instructional specialists and the educational specialists whose primary job functions fall outside of the classroom.
- b. Incorrect: The building principal demonstrated the capacity to evaluate ethical and legal decisions by evaluating the potential for any unfavorable legal and ethical outcomes if the students do not receive appropriate and reasonable accommodations because of a poorly written 504 plan.
- c. Incorrect: The building principal demonstrated the capacity to evaluate ethical and legal decisions by conducting his own research on school counselor preparation requirements and the ASCA National Model to better understand school counseling ethics and national standards of practice.
- d. Correct: The building principal demonstrated the capacity to evaluate ethical and legal decisions by holding meetings with instructional specialists and the educational specialists whose primary job functions fall outside of the classroom, by evaluating the potential for any unfavorable legal and ethical outcomes if the students do not receive appropriate and reasonable accommodations because of a poorly written 504 plan, and by conducting his own research on school counselor preparation requirements and the ASCA National Model to better understand school counseling ethics and national standards of practice.

4. A school leader models professional ethics and expects the same of others. Based on this statement, the building principal in this scenario should:

- a. Incorrect: School leaders understand and demonstrate the capacity to model ethical behavior and cultivate ethical behavior in others. The building principal in this scenario modeled professional ethics by not asking the school counselor to practice unethically outside the boundaries of her competence.
- b. Incorrect: School leaders understand and demonstrate the capacity to model ethical behavior and cultivate ethical behavior in others. The building principal in this scenario modeled professional ethics by learning and understanding the ethical and professional obligations of those employees whose primary job functions fall outside of the classroom.
- c. Incorrect: School leaders understand and demonstrate the capacity to model ethical behavior and cultivate ethical behavior in others. The building principal in this scenario modeled professional ethics by understanding of the duties and responsibilities of educational specialists and not assigning them tasks in which they have no knowledge, education, and/or training.
- d. Correct: School leaders understand and demonstrate the capacity to model ethical behavior and cultivate ethical behavior in others by not asking the educators to practice unethically outside the boundaries of their competence, by learning and understanding the ethical and professional obligations of those employees whose primary job functions fall outside of the classroom, and by understanding of the duties and responsibilities of educational specialists and not assigning them tasks in which they have no knowledge, education, and/or training.

5. According to the American School Counselor Association (2019), initiating, writing, coordinating and managing the 504 process are non-school-counseling tasks and inappropriate duties for a school counselor. Which of the following tasks are considered appropriate regarding school counselor involvement with 504 plans.

- a. Incorrect: Initiating, writing, coordinating and managing the 504 process are non-school-counseling tasks and inappropriate duties for a school counselor. An appropriate duty for a school counselor is to serve as an advocate, supporting both students and their families.
- b. Incorrect: Initiating, writing, coordinating and managing the 504 process are non-school-counseling tasks and inappropriate duties for a school counselor. An appropriate duty for a school counselor is to serve as members of an interdisciplinary team of school personnel that might also include administrators, nurses, and teachers.
- c. Incorrect: Initiating, writing, coordinating and managing the 504 process are non-school-counseling tasks and inappropriate duties for a school counselor. An appropriate duty for a school counselor is to advocate to dismantle inequities in the process of administering reasonable accommodations.
- d. Correct: Initiating, writing, coordinating and managing the 504 process are non-school-counseling tasks and inappropriate duties for a school counselor. Appropriate duties for a school counselor are to serve as an advocate, supporting both students and their families, serve as members of an interdisciplinary team of school personnel, and always advocate to dismantle inequities in the process of administering reasonable accommodations.

Essay Questions

1. It is incumbent upon the principal to understand the field of school counseling in addition to best practices for school counselors. The potential for ethical and legal issues may arise when uninformed principals assign specific job functions to the school counselor that may be deemed inappropriate by best practice standards or those in which would constitute a practice outside the boundaries of the school counselors' competency. What are some steps that a building principal can take to become more familiar with the training, competency, and best practice standards in the field of school counseling?
2. The coordination of 504 plans is considered by many school counseling experts to fall outside the boundaries of competency based on the level of knowledge, education, and training received in school counselor preparation programs. However, the coordination of 504 plans is commonly assigned to the school counselor by the building principal. With the ethical issues raised by the school counselor based on the competency to coordinate 504 plans, what other steps should be taken by the building principal to ensure compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973?

Activity

Referencing the table “Appropriate and Inappropriate Activities for School Counselors,” discuss your experiences with school counselors in the buildings in which you have worked and whether their job functions fall under the appropriate or inappropriate column. For every example of the counselor conducting an inappropriate activity, provide a solution that reassigns the inappropriate task to another staff member whose roles and responsibilities are more aligned.

Appropriate and Inappropriate Activities for School Counselors

Appropriate Activities for School Counselors	Inappropriate Activities for School Counselors
Appraisal & advisement for academic planning	Building the master schedule
Academic advising for new students	Coordinating paperwork and data entry of all new students
Presenting school counseling lessons based on the ASCA Student Standards to address students’ developmental needs and needs identified through data	Covering classes when teachers are absent or to create teacher planning time
Consulting with teachers about building classroom connections, effective classroom management and the role of the ASCA Student Standards in student success	Supervising classrooms, common areas, in-school suspension or time-out rooms
Interpreting cognitive, aptitude and achievement tests	Coordinating school/district cognitive, aptitude and achievement testing programs
Analyzing schoolwide and school counseling program data	Serving as a data entry clerk
Analyzing GPAs in relationship to achievement	Computing GPAs
Interpreting student records	Maintaining student records
Protecting student records and information per state and federal regulations	Keeping/filing clerical records
Providing short-term individual and small-group counseling services to students	Providing long-term counseling in schools
Providing counseling to students who are frequently tardy or absent	Signing excuses for students who are tardy or absent
Providing counseling to students who have disciplinary problems	Disciplining students or assigning discipline consequences
Consulting with the school principal to identify and resolve student issues, needs and problems	Assisting with duties in the principal’s office
Advocating for students at individual education plan and 504 meetings, student study teams and school attendance review boards, as necessary	Coordinating schoolwide individual education plans, 504 plans, student study teams, response to intervention plans, MTSS and school attendance review boards



Chapter 2

Instructional Leadership in Action: Implementing a District-Wide Environmental Curriculum

Mindy Gumpert, William McConnell, Stacey Rodgers

Abstract

This case study examines how instructional leaders implemented a district-wide environmental science curriculum using Adult Learning Theory and Communities of Practice. Through sustained professional development, data-driven decision-making, and community partnerships, leaders strengthened teacher capacity, improved accessibility, and reduced achievement gaps, demonstrating effective alignment with NELP and SLLA leadership standards.

Introduction

What separates professional development (PD) that transforms classrooms from the kind that teachers dread? Nearly all school administrators start as teachers (NCES, 1993), giving them a unique vantage point because they know what PD feels like from the inside and now must lead it from the top. As you step into administration, this dual perspective is critical for understanding why some initiatives spark enthusiasm, and others meet resistance.

The measure of effective PD is whether or not it improves student outcomes. Yet, in today's complex school environment, implementing PD that works is far from simple. While there is some disagreement on what characteristics are evident in the most successful programs, there is consensus that effective PD is collaborative, sustained, subject-specific, practical, and supported by teacher buy-in (Jenkins, 2020). Despite awareness of these principles, many teachers still report frustration with PD experiences (Furlong & Spina, 2022). Bridging this gap requires leadership that turns theory into meaningful practice.

Change is a necessary constant in our educational system, and thoughtful implementation can make all the difference in a school. How change is managed determines whether it drives improvement or deepens frustration. Falling test scores, widening achievement gaps, evolving standards, and shifting societal expectations often necessitate programmatic and curricular changes. Yet, implementing school-wide or district-wide initiatives can feel daunting even for experienced administrators. Knowing the characteristics of effective PD does not guarantee success, as structural constraints, limited resources, and competing priorities frequently complicate implementation. Strong leadership is essential in these moments. Administrators must foster clear communication, shared decision-making, and teacher agency, inspiring educators to make purposeful choices that enhance instruction and student outcomes (Jenkins, 2020).

To navigate these challenges, leaders need a guiding framework. The next section introduces two complementary theories: a) Adult Learning Theory, and b) Communities of

Practice (CoP). These theories provide practical strategies for designing collaborative, relevant, and sustainable PD. These frameworks also align with NELP Standards 3 and 4, which emphasize equity, inclusive school culture, and coherent curriculum and instructional leadership. Together, they can help administrators transform PD from a top-down mandate into an engaging process that empowers teachers and improves student learning.

Theoretical Framework

The deliberate, strategic design of PD is essential to ensure effective, sustainable implementation. Two theoretical frameworks that can assist in the design and implementation of successful PD are Adult Learning Theory (Hartree, 1984) and Community of Practice (Mortier, 2020; Patten & Parker, 2017). These frameworks acknowledge that adult learners bring a unique set of experiences, motivations, and challenges to the table, guiding training sessions that tap into learners' real-world context. Principles of Adult Learning Theory suggest that adults: a) bring a wealth of life experience and prior knowledge to the learning process, b) learn best when learning is relevant to their lives and work and they carefully consider *why* they are doing something, c) learn by doing and prefer hands-on experiences, and d) learn best when the learning is problem-centered and focused on real-world issues (Hartree, 1984).

The CoP framework is one in which the learner shifts from a passive recipient to an active participant in an interactive process grounded in shared practice. In this framework, shared focus, practice, and continuous dialogue result in unique knowledge (Mortier, 2020). Unlike traditional PD, the CoP framework aims to reduce the hierarchical bounds of top-down PD, facilitating a collaborative environment where diverse stakeholders have equal voice and value. Structured and open evaluation of the CoP goals and outcomes provides data to inform activities and to share firsthand experiences among participants, helping guide the learning process.

Traditionally, educational PD often delivers information *to* teachers, while a CoP model drawing on Adult Learning Theory engages teachers *with* one another, PD leaders, and other external partners in sustained, reflective collaboration. This approach builds collective expertise, fosters innovation, and ensures that instruction within PD is both accessible and meaningful. Importantly, research consistently shows that CoP fosters sustained and collaborative teacher learning grounded in authentic contexts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Wenger, 1999). However, scholars caution that time constraints, inconsistent participation, and insufficient administrative support can undermine their effectiveness (Trust et al., 2016).

A crucial final element of successful PD is duration. Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2017) suggest that a greater chance of transforming teacher practices and student learning is provided when PD offers multiple opportunities for teachers to engage in learning around a single set of concepts. Ongoing learning within and between sessions over time provides teachers with an opportunity to apply their understanding of the material in their classrooms (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

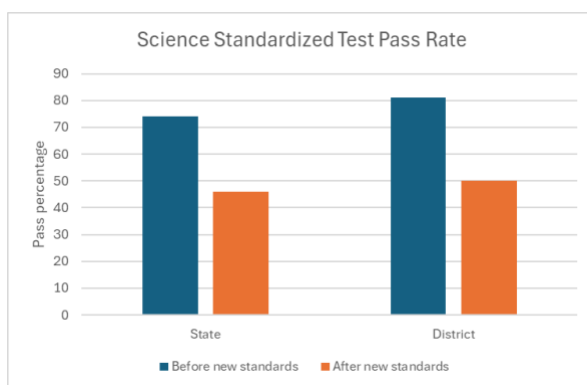
Now armed with the theoretical underpinnings of this blended framework, the practical context for the upcoming case study warrants exploration. This context sets the stage for investigating the successes, barriers, and lessons learned in aligning theory, leadership standards, and practice.

Practical Context

A multi-state political agreement outlining several environmental goals inspired slow, but methodical curriculum change over a decade ago. One goal was that all kindergarten through twelfth grade students were to participate in meaningful environmental investigations at least once in each of the elementary, middle, and high school grade bands. Grant funding was available for teacher training and to implement a quality environmental science curriculum in their classrooms. In the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, amid a critical teacher shortage, a medium-sized, rural-suburban district faced atypical challenges. State standardized science test scores declined sharply after the adoption of new standards emphasizing application over memorization. Local data mirrored this trend, with overall science performance lagging (Figure 1) and a widening science achievement gap from 23 points to 29 points between students with disabilities (SWD) and their peers (Figure 2).

Figure 1

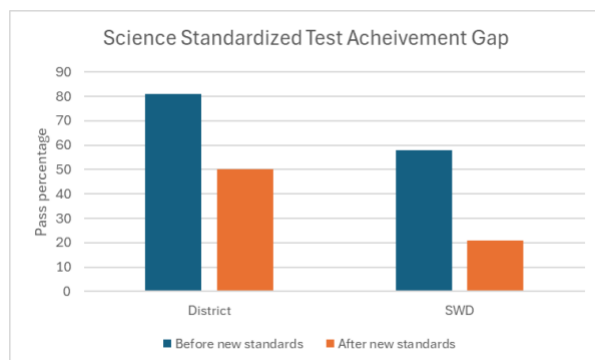
State and District Science Standardized Test Pass Rates Before and After New Standards



Note. The figure shows the decline in science pass rates at the state and district levels following the adoption of new science standards that emphasize application over memorization.

Figure 2

Science Standardized Test Achievement Gap Before and After New Standards for Students with Disabilities (SWD)



Note. This figure compares the district's overall science pass rate with the SWD pass rate before and after the implementation of new standards.

Against this backdrop, the district's elementary science coordinator, Dr. Deegan, was approached by a nearby university faculty member, Dr. Ren, who was seeking partners for a federal grant project. The proposal offered funding for a hands-on, phenomena-based science curriculum, sustained PD, and stipends for teachers and principals, along with resources for classroom implementation. The initiative promised a focus on curricular accessibility, the integration of instructional technology, and outdoor investigations, all key elements aligned with equity and PD goals. However, implementing a district-wide curriculum reform posed significant challenges. Teacher fatigue, competing priorities, and structural constraints threatened buy-in. Research on Environmental Education underscores that successful adoption requires clear articulation of benefits, strong administrative support, and collaborative PD (Lee & Williams, 2001). Addressing teacher concerns, such as clarity in the curricular implementation timeline, ongoing support, and leadership engagement was important for successful implementation.

This context sets the stage for the case study that follows, which examines how district leaders and partners navigated these challenges while striving to promote equity, inclusive school culture, and coherent curriculum and instructional leadership.

Lessons in Leadership: A Case Narrative

“Dear Dr. Deegan, I am excited to announce that our collaborative grant proposal has received full funding! I am greatly looking forward to getting started!” While Dr. Deegan may have been excited about this email from Dr. Ren, it was clear that it was time to get to work. Soon after the initial email, the project lead and university partner, Dr. Ren, called a meeting with Dr. Deegan, the principals of participating schools, local community partners, and the funding agency to discuss an outline for the project's recruitment, PD, and implementation. Yes, the real work was just beginning.

Dr. Deegan reached out to the elementary principals to share the good news about the funding and explain the rationale for the curricular shift. Thankfully, funding included stipends for not only general education teachers, but also for gifted specialists and special education teachers, groups that are often left out of this type of training.

Dr. Deegan already had an idea of which principal would lead the implementation during Year 1 of the three-year project, Mrs. Jones, and this case study will mainly focus on her. Mrs. Jones' background is in special education, and the fact that this initiative was focused on accessibility of the science curriculum was especially suited to her background. Further, a teacher at her school was an exceptional science teacher and had just won a state award for her classroom performance.

While Mrs. Jones was excited about the prospect of narrowing the science achievement gap, she worried about the upcoming faculty meeting. The first agenda item would focus on presenting the state, district, and school assessment results from the previous year, highlighting strengths and weaknesses, including the low science scores and the widening achievement gap in that area. This, she believed, set the stage for her pitch to all third-grade teachers for the new environmental science initiative. She wondered if evidence alone would be the catalyst for teacher buy-in.

Step 1: Recruitment

At the faculty meeting, Mrs. Jones presented last year's scores, highlighting the achievement gaps within subgroups and the lower overall science scores across the state. She provided an explicit link between the low scores, the updated standards, and the traditional curriculum that is taught in the school district. When discussing the need for a curricular shift to better align with the rigor of new standards, it was hard not to see the concern on teachers' faces. Mrs. Jones had seen this concern in her teachers' faces before, when they were forced to modify instruction during the difficult context of COVID-19.

Mrs. Jones then began to outline the carefully designed support for this initiative. She mentioned that teachers who attended the two-day summer training, participated in coaching sessions, and fully implemented the new science unit would be awarded monetary stipends. She informed the teachers that this training would not be a one-off training. It would be sustained, would include premade lesson plans and materials, and would already be classroom-tested. Further, she described a PD structure designed to leverage her teachers' expertise and student data to determine the best way to implement the new curriculum. To her surprise, while there were a few questions and some murmuring at the outset of the discussion, all but one teacher volunteered to take part in the first-year pilot.

Step 2: Initial Professional Development

Acknowledging that environmental literacy education was not within her expertise, Mrs. Jones leaned on the support of Dr. Deegan and her external university partner, Dr. Ren. During initial meetings, Mrs. Jones helped identify external stakeholders (e.g., local parks, local environmental organizations, and other community partners) who could provide resources and support for the teachers.

The initial PD drew from a CoP framework, where a diverse group of stakeholders engaged in a 2-day PD Summer Institute emphasizing:

- 1) Active participation in lessons,
- 2) Collaborative critique of the curriculum, and
- 3) Adding accommodations to the curriculum based on perceived student needs.

The project lead met with external stakeholders and shared plans and challenges with Dr. Deegan and Mrs. Jones. A full-day PD was held at a local park, where master naturalists guided teachers on a nature walk aligned with the curriculum and discussed accessibility solutions for students with learning differences and physical disabilities. Mrs. Jones ensured safety issues were addressed during the meetings and provided technology support through her Technology Integration Specialist. Some teachers did not complete pre-session tasks, so Mrs. Jones assigned a staff member to support and remind them.

Step 3: Implementation of Curriculum

During PD planning, the new curriculum was incorporated into the pacing calendar. Just prior to implementation, all participants met virtually to discuss last-minute questions, and Mrs. Jones and her partners remained accessible throughout the process. With support from Dr. Deegan, university faculty, and other external partners, all teachers implemented the curriculum in the fall. Issues did arise, as some instructional technology proved developmentally inappropriate. These issues were discussed in virtual check-ins. Implementation varied across rooms, but fidelity remained high. Mrs. Jones was ecstatic that two of her teachers had organized a family event at the local park, where over 70 students, staff, and parents completed a guided tour of local ecosystems. The implementation of the curriculum culminated in multiple environmental action projects that also included families and external partners. A few of the projects were presented to the school board as models.

Step 4: Sustained Support

Sustained virtual CoP support sessions facilitated by Dr. Ren allowed teachers to share challenges, reflect, and offer ideas for curricular refinement. Discussions about accessibility and outdoor learning opportunities continued. Some of the changes to the curriculum are illustrated in Table 1. In Years 2 and 3, while teachers from other schools will be trained for the first time, all teachers will be invited to share their stories and to take part in any aspects of the training they feel necessary.

Table 1
Suggested Accommodations to Curriculum

Disability	Accommodation
Other Health Impairment	Intentional grouping, assign clear, independent roles within group, visual cues, proximity, preview and review expectations
Autism	Modeling for communication, step-by-step checklist, sentence starters, parallel participation (working beside peers, not with them)
Gifted	Lesson extension for early finishers
Specific Learning Disability	Audio or read aloud options, science journal
English Learners	Pre-teach vocabulary, Vocabulary cards
Emotional Behavioral Disorder	Set expectations, incentivize participation, additional staff for activities and field experiences

Note. Other health impairment refers to students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Step 5: Systemic implementation

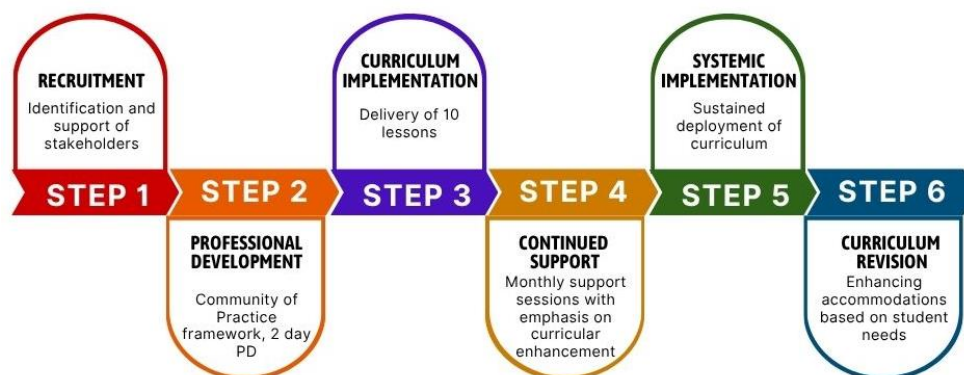
To implement the curriculum across all district elementary schools, funding was allocated for “master” teachers to lead PD for Years 2 and 3. Mrs. Jones met with project leaders to decide who to invite to fill these roles and then selected two teachers who graciously and enthusiastically agreed to serve. These teacher leaders will be integral in collaborating with project leaders to guide participants over the next two years through the PD and implementation of the curriculum. Each year, new ideas for accommodations will be incorporated into the curriculum, improving its accessibility and, hopefully, its outcomes.

Step 6: Evaluation

Through the CoP PD, curriculum implementation, and debriefing among members, project leaders can assess whether changes are needed to the current curriculum using multiple measures. In Year 1, standardized test scores aligned to the unit were measured between schools that used the new curriculum and those that did not. Scores were also disaggregated by subgroups to examine whether the PD's focus on accessibility affected the achievement gap. Unit test scores, teacher and student comments, and parent comments were all considered during the project evaluation. While outcomes for the Year 1 participants were significantly higher than those of non-participants on most questions related to the learning standard, they scored similarly on one question. Most importantly, the achievement gap between SWD and their typically developing peers narrowed significantly. During a Year 2 planning session with stakeholders, all data were shared, and a discussion ensued about modifying the content to better address the standard. Data were also shared with Year 2 participants as a rationale for the project.

Figure 3

Steps in the Curriculum Implementation Process



The scenario described in the case study is inspired by the implementation of a three-year project funded by a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) grant. Figure 3 illustrates the yearly outline of activities. External evaluation and participants’ anecdotal evidence indicate that without Dr. Deegan’s and Mrs. Jones’ active participation in all aspects of the project, it would not have been as successful.

Explicit Alignments to NELP and SLLA Standards

The paper as a whole aligns closely with NELP Standards 3, 4, and 5, as well as with key content domains on the School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA 6990). It demonstrates how leaders use data-driven, equity-centered decision-making to support inclusive instruction; design and implement coherent, standards-aligned professional learning; and cultivate purposeful community partnerships. Through its emphasis on disaggregated data, accessibility-driven curriculum design, and targeted supports for diverse learners, the paper reflects NELP Standard 3 (Equity and Cultural Responsiveness) and aligns with SLLA Domain III: Climate and Cultural Leadership – Equity and cultural responsiveness (III.B) and Domain II: Instructional Leadership – Assessment and accountability (II.C), which call on leaders to analyze subgroup performance, close opportunity gaps, and ensure fair access to effective instruction. The integration of Adult Learning Theory, Communities of Practice, and sustained, job-embedded PD illustrates NELP Standard 4 (Learning and Instruction) and corresponds to SLLA Domain II: Instructional Leadership – Professional development and building capacity (II.A) and Rigorous curriculum and instruction (II.B), highlighting leaders who create coherent instructional systems, foster collaborative professional learning, and use ongoing evaluation to refine curriculum and teaching practices. Finally, by highlighting collaboration with university partners, parks, environmental organizations, volunteers, and teacher leaders, the paper addresses NELP Standard 5 (Community and External Leadership) and aligns with SLLA Domain VI: Community Engagement Leadership – Collaborate with families and other community members, Community interests and needs, and Maximizing community resources (VI.A–C), demonstrating how effective school administrators build and sustain productive relationships with families, community organizations, and external experts to enhance instructional capacity and student learning. Collectively, the paper illustrates how leadership practices grounded in both NELP and SLLA standards can transform PD, strengthen teacher buy-in, and promote equitable student outcomes.

Course Activities and Discussion Topics

1-Which leadership move most directly strengthened equitable access to high-quality instruction and supported teacher buy-in? (NELP 3.1, 3.2; SLLA Domain II.A, II.C, III.B)

- A. Making participation mandatory
- B. Providing stipends, sustained PD, premade materials, and coaching support
- C. Focusing only on test score declines
- D. Requiring written participation commitments

2-When Mrs. Jones identified community partners to contribute expertise and resources for PD, which leadership competency was she demonstrating? (NELP 5.1, 5.2, 5.3; SLLA Domain VI.A-C)

- A. Delegating instruction to students
- B. Structuring meaningful partnerships that support student learning
- C. Limiting PD participation to district personnel
- D. Reducing teacher autonomy

3-The PD required teachers to participate in lessons, critique the curriculum, and add accommodations. Which adult-learning principle does this most strongly align with? (NELP 4.1, 4.2; SLLA Domain II.A)

- A. Passive lecture is most effective
- B. Adults prefer uniform experiences
- C. Adults learn best through hands-on, relevant, problem-centered experiences
- D. Adults require minimal rationale for learning

4-The evaluation used disaggregated test scores, unit assessments, and teacher/parent/student feedback. What benefit does this multi-measure approach provide? (NELP 4.4, 5.3; SLLA Domain II.C)

- A. Eliminates the need for test scores
- B. Produces a comprehensive understanding of teaching and learning
- C. Guarantees identical outcomes across schools
- D. Makes school board approval unnecessary

5-Which instructional leadership action helped reduce teacher anxiety during implementation? (NELP 4.1, 4.2; SLLA Domain II.B)

- A. Scheduling the curriculum at the end of the year
- B. Embedding the new unit into the pacing calendar before the school year
- C. Asking teachers to align the unit on their own
- D. Canceling other science units

6-According to the cited research, which PD characteristic most strongly predicts changes in teacher practice? (NELP 4.1, 4.5; SLLA Domain II.A)

- A. One-time workshops
- B. Repeated opportunities for practice, reflection, and application
- C. Compliance-driven PD
- D. PD unrelated to teachers' content areas

Constructed Response Questions

Directions:

In approximately 250 words each, respond to the following prompts using insights from the case study and your own professional or field experiences. Ground your responses in your leadership philosophy and decision-making approach.

Short-Answer 1 (NELP 3.1, 3.2, 3.3; SLLA Domain II.C, III.B)

Using evidence from the full paper, explain how school leaders can reduce achievement gaps and expand equitable access to high-quality instruction during a curriculum or PD initiative. Address how leaders use data, stakeholder collaboration, and instructional supports to improve outcomes for diverse learners.

Short-Answer 2 (NELP 4.1, 4.2, 4.5; SLLA Domain II.A & II.B)

Describe how school leaders develop coherence across curriculum, instruction, and assessment when implementing a new initiative. Using examples from the case, explain how pacing guides, PD design, instructional materials, coaching, and data cycles were aligned to support successful implementation.

Discussion Questions (KEY)
Course Activities and Discussion Topics

1-Which leadership move most directly strengthened equitable access to high-quality instruction and supported teacher buy-in?

- A. Making participation mandatory
- B. Providing stipends, sustained PD, premade materials, and coaching support**
- C. Focusing only on test score declines
- D. Requiring written participation commitments.

Rationale:

Providing stipends, materials, coaching, and sustained PD directly reduces barriers to participation and increases teacher readiness. These supports improve equity (NELP 3.1, 3.3) by ensuring all teachers, not just the most experienced or confident,—have what they need to succeed. Research also shows that robust support structures significantly improve teacher buy-in.

2-When Mrs. Jones identified community partners to contribute expertise and resources for PD, which leadership competency was she demonstrating?

- A. Delegating instruction to students
- B. Structuring meaningful partnerships that support student learning**
- C. Limiting PD participation to district personnel
- D. Reducing teacher autonomy

Rationale:

Mrs. Jones strategically engaged local parks, environmental nonprofits, and master naturalists. This reflects NELP 5.1 and 5.2, which emphasize developing and sustaining community partnerships that enhance learning opportunities and instructional capacity.

3-The PD required teachers to participate in lessons, critique the curriculum, and add accommodations. Which adult-learning principle does this most strongly align with?

- A. Passive lecture is most effective
- B. Adults prefer uniform experiences
- C. Adults learn best through hands-on, relevant, problem-centered experiences**
- D. Adults require minimal rationale for learning

Rationale:

Adult Learning Theory stresses relevance, hands-on engagement, and problem-centered tasks. The PD design, teachers experiencing lessons, analyzing them, and planning accommodations,—directly reflects these principles and aligns with NELP 4.2's emphasis on effective, job-embedded PD.

4-The evaluation used disaggregated test scores, unit assessments, and teacher/parent/student feedback. What benefit does this multi-measure approach provide?

- A. Eliminates the need for test scores
- B. Produces a comprehensive understanding of teaching and learning**
- C. Guarantees identical outcomes across schools
- D. Makes school board approval unnecessary

Rationale:

Using multiple datasets, —including qualitative and quantitative sources, —provides a fuller picture of implementation success and instructional impact. This aligns with NELP 4.5, which emphasizes the use of varied and valid data sources for decision-making.

5-Which instructional leadership action helped reduce teacher anxiety during implementation?

- A. Scheduling the curriculum at the end of the year
- B. Embedding the new unit into the pacing calendar before the school year**
- C. Asking teachers to align the unit on their own
- D. Canceling other science units

Rationale:

Integrating the new unit into the pacing guide proactively addresses concerns about time, workload, and feasibility. It aligns with NELP 4.1 (coherent instructional systems) and 4.5 (structures that facilitate effective implementation)

6-According to the cited research, which PD characteristic most strongly predicts changes in teacher practice?

- A. One-time workshops
- B. Repeated opportunities for practice, reflection, and application**
- C. Compliance-driven PD
- D. PD unrelated to teachers' content areas

Rationale:

Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) and other PD scholars emphasize duration and sustained engagement as the strongest predictors of changed practice. This aligns with NELP 4.2 (high-quality PD) and NELP 4.5 (cycles of feedback/implementation).

Constructed Response Questions

Directions:

In approximately 250 words each, respond to the following prompts using insights from the case study and your own professional or field experiences. Ground your responses in your leadership philosophy and decision-making approach.

Short-Answer 1 (NELP 3.1, 3.2, 3.3)

Question:

Using evidence from the full paper, explain how school leaders can reduce achievement gaps and expand equitable access to high-quality instruction during a curriculum or PD initiative. Address how leaders use data, stakeholder collaboration, and instructional supports to improve outcomes for diverse learners.

Expected Components:

- Analyze disaggregated data (3.1)
- Communicate purpose and rationale transparently (3.2)
- Ensure inclusive PD for SPED, gifted, and general ed (3.3)
- Embed accessibility and accommodation practices (3.3)
- Partner with the community to expand equitable learning opportunities (3.2)
- Provide differentiated teacher support to ensure full participation (3.3)
- Continuously refine based on evaluation.

Short-Answer 2 (NELP 4.1, 4.2, 4.5)

Question:

Describe how school leaders develop coherence across curriculum, instruction, and assessment when implementing a new initiative. Using examples from the case, explain how pacing guides, PD design, instructional materials, coaching, and data cycles were aligned to support successful implementation.

Expected Components:

- Standard alignment and coherent curriculum development (4.1)
- PD that models the instructional shifts teachers must make (4.2)
- Embedding curriculum into pacing guides early (4.1, 4.5)
- Coaching, modeling, collaboration (4.2, 4.3)
- Using data to refine curriculum and instruction (4.5)

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Chapter 3

Leading for Equity in a Divided School

Christopher Keeler

Abstract

A first-year principal faces growing resistance while implementing inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities in a culturally diverse middle school. Caught between special education compliance, community pressure, and competing definitions of "equity," the principal must navigate through the intersection of empathy and accountability.

Case Narrative

Context

Dr. Elena Martinez is the first-year Middle School Principal in a diverse suburban school district. The Middle School serves 700 students, many of whom come from multilingual families and a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. The faculty at the school comprises a mix of veteran and early-career teachers, with a strong union presence. When Dr. Martinez took the position, the staff and community reception was warm but weary as they welcomed their third principal in five years.

For Dr. Martinez, the work began not with test scores or staffing charts, but with faces. Her focus was on the students whose daily experiences depended on decisions made by school leaders like herself. The Superintendent's first official charge for the new Middle School Principal was to expand inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities. The Superintendent's priority on inclusion, especially for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) who have previously been taught in separate schools or programs, stemmed from the district's *Equity and Excellence Strategic Plan*, IDEA obligations, and parent complaints raised at recent board meetings. He explained that the district had already begun to place more students with disabilities in their home buildings and that, as the new principal for the program, the initiative was now hers to carry forward. After learning of the superintendent's charge and the controversies, Dr. Martinez came to suspect that the vision of inclusion and dignity she expressed in her interview for the position had gotten her the position. In response to the Superintendent's charge and strategic plan, the opening faculty meeting included ample time to discuss and review inclusive practices and scholarly literature on inclusion to support the school's changing approach to educational supports for students with ID. The faculty were quietly inquisitive and, Dr. Martinez thought, optimistic.

Rising Conflict and Challenges

By the second month of the school year, the optimism that had defined Dr. Martinez's opening faculty meeting had begun to fray. The conversations around a shared commitment to

inclusion were being replaced by murmurs of doubt and "initiative fatigue." Some of the veteran teachers gave voice to the refrain of "We don't have the training for this" and "This is too much, too fast." Mr. Daniels, a respected 20-year veteran social studies teacher of the school district, was the first to request a meeting with Dr. Martinez. During his meeting with Dr. Martinez, he was professional and respectful. Still, he made it clear that he viewed inclusion as a "watering down" of the academic expectations that the district had worked so hard to establish.

More often than not, however, the tension did not surface in meetings but in the spaces between formal meetings and instruction. During the brief minutes before the bell rang or among the clusters of teachers talking by their mailboxes, Dr. Martinez would overhear whispered frustration mixed into their weekend plans and lesson-planning chatter. Her secretary also informed her of the fragments of conversation she overheard: "They don't understand what they're asking us to do," and "We're already stretched thin." Not every conversation carried a tone of frustration, however. Ms. Nguyen, a second-year special education teacher, stopped by her office one afternoon and gently and cautiously knocked on her door. She didn't come to complain. She entered with an arm full of folders and a book from her undergraduate studies. She had a hopeful tone and wanted Dr. Martinez's support in piloting a co-teaching model between special education and regular education teachers to support and solidify the inclusion initiative. She left Dr. Martinez with a lot to think about.

Around the time Dr. Martinez had decided she would need to intervene with the faculty, the community emails began to arrive. At first, they were just brief notes from parents asking for clarification about the new inclusion initiative they had heard about. Within days, however, the tone shifted. A multilingual parents' group had formed online. The form began by sharing translated summaries of district updates, but slowly evolved into frustrated questioning on why they hadn't been consulted on the initiative. By the end of the week, the thread had grown into an online community conversation that excluded her.

The last bell of the week had rung, but the week's tension hadn't cleared at all. As Dr. Martinez walked the halls of the empty building, she felt the weight of every conversation, those that included her and even those that she knew the community and teachers were excluding her from. She couldn't fault them for feeling overwhelmed and passionate; she felt the same. Moreover, a quiet impatience stirred beneath her empathy, a restless wish for progress that never came fast enough. As she packed up for the day, she made a note to herself to contact the mentor her district assigned her next week, if the mentor had availability.

The Community Reaction

Over the next month, the murmurs grew too loud to ignore. What had begun as passing hallway conversations and online posts culminated in a request from the school board for a presentation on the inclusion initiative and its progress. To accommodate the expected turnout, the meeting was moved to the high school cafeteria. Despite the change in location, the venue filled quickly. In a presentation at the beginning of the meeting, Dr. Martinez stood near the back, the projector light flickering across walls displaying IDEA compliance numbers, district goals, and the district's vision and values, as the large, diverse audience whispered to their neighbors. She could see parents of students with disabilities, veteran teachers, and multilingual family advocates in attendance.

After 30 minutes of pouring her heart into the board presentation, Dr. Martinez's time was up, and she took questions from the school board. While one board member seemed openly excited about the initiative, most were more cautious, leading with questions about its political risk, and a couple sat silently and stone-faced.

When the floor opened for public comment, the tension Dr. Martinez felt while presenting became audible. The first to the microphone was Mr. Daniels, the veteran social studies teacher who had visited Dr. Martinez's office weeks earlier. Adjusting the microphone, he began carefully, but his voice carried. He spoke of commitment and professionalism, of wanting what was best for all students, but then shifted to the training and readiness of the teaching staff and "the pace of change." He cited colleagues who "hadn't been given the tools to succeed" and urged the board to "slow down before setting everyone up for failure." As he stepped away from the microphone, a few teachers nodded, others stared straight ahead, and some members of the community murmured. He was the only teacher to make a public comment.

The remaining public comments came from parents, community members, and a middle school student. While a couple of parents expressed concerns that the initiative could diminish academic rigor or "positive culture of the school," the majority of the parents who spoke were from the multilingual online parent group. None impacted Dr. Marteniz more than Ms. Alvarez, a mother of two students with disabilities at the school, who was accompanied by an interpreter. She held a sheet of paper that trembled slightly in her hands. Through the translator, her question was simple and piercing: "If inclusion means my child belongs, why is he still treated so differently? Why isn't he with the other children more?" The interpreter's voice echoed in the silence that followed, translating not just words but disappointment.

Dr. Martinez remained seated near the back, hands folded, listening. Board policy prohibited her or the board members from responding during public comment, but her thoughts moved faster than the discussion. She wondered whether she should have rolled out the initiative differently. Her mind raced with the piles of training logs, staffing rosters, and the faces of students whose futures depended on getting this right. Around her, the whispering resumed.

Following the public comment period, the board president thanked Dr. Martinez and the public and reminded the room that public comment was now closed and that the board would return to the issue at a future board meeting before moving on to the rest of the meeting's agenda. Dr. Martinez sat numbly and quietly through the rest of the board meeting. Things she wished she could say raced through her mind. Sometimes these things took the form of an apology, sometimes a defense, sometimes an explanation, and sometimes anything to ease the weight of the room.

The Leadership Crossroads

After the meeting, Dr. Martinez sat alone in her office staring at the open laptop on her desk. The board meeting had clarified one thing: the path forward would not be easy. She began drafting two versions of the same memo to guide her next steps, one grounded in policy and

accountability, and the other in empathy and collaboration. She knew that whichever one she sent would define the tone of her leadership.

Somewhere in the quiet, the words of a professor from her leadership coursework surfaced in her thoughts, "authentic leadership holds progress and belonging in the same hand; lose either, and you lose both." She stared at the two memos on her screen. The first was built on accountability and policy, while the other was built on empathy and relationship. Neither felt wrong. Neither felt complete. After a long moment, she closed the laptop without sending either draft. Tomorrow, she would start again with people, not plans.

Connection to Standards

NELP 3.2: Cultivating inclusive culture/balancing compliance with cultural empathy.

NELP 3.3: Advocating equitable access/systems serve multilingual/disabled students equitably.

NELP 6.1: Promoting safe, caring environments/attending to morale, psychological safety, and belonging.

SLLA 6990, III: Climate and Cultural Leadership — Demonstrating how leadership decisions influence climate, trust, and inclusivity.

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. Dr. Martinez's superintendent emphasizes IDEA compliance and equity goals. What is the most appropriate first step for Dr. Martinez in balancing these expectations?
 - A. Postpone the inclusion initiative until more professional development occurs
 - B. Communicate only compliance requirements to staff
 - C. Facilitate shared understanding through collaborative professional learning opportunities
 - D. Delegate responsibility to special education teachers
2. Which leadership action most directly aligns with NELP 3.3 (advocating equitable access)?
 - A. Sending a translated letter to parents after the decision is made
 - B. Hosting a multilingual family forum early in the planning process
 - C. Sharing IDEA compliance data at the board meeting only
 - D. Allowing staff to opt out of the initiative
3. Mr. Daniels's statements about "watering down academics" reflect which type of barrier to change?
 - A. Structural
 - B. Cultural
 - C. Political
 - D. Technical
4. What key misstep in communication likely intensified parent frustration?
 - A. Posting IDEA data during the board meeting
 - B. Not including parents early in the initiative
 - C. Asking the board to move the meeting location
 - D. Not including the teacher's concerns in the board presentation

5. Which of the following best represents how Dr. Martinez could promote psychological safety among staff during the inclusion rollout?

- A. Setting non-negotiables about initiative fidelity
- B. Publicly celebrating early adopters as models for the resisters
- C. Creating structured forums for candid discussion without fear of reprisal
- D. Avoiding discussions on inclusion until tensions decrease

Discussion Prompt

At the end of the narrative, Dr. Martinez wrote two memos, one grounded in compliance and the other in empathy. Describe how an effective leader might integrate these competing priorities. Which frameworks of leadership may apply? Have you ever had to weigh these two priorities?

Activity: The Two-Memo Dilemma

Divide participants into groups. Give each group one of Dr. Martinez's "memos" (Accountability or Empathy).

- Have each group defend its approach.
- Then, ask them to collaboratively draft a *third memo* that merges both perspectives.

Answer Key with Notes

1. Dr. Martinez's superintendent emphasizes IDEA compliance and equity goals. What is the most appropriate first step for Dr. Martinez in balancing these expectations?

Correct Answer: C – Facilitate shared understanding through collaborative professional learning opportunities.

- Why it's correct: Builds staff ownership and shared purpose while addressing both compliance and equity goals.
- Incorrect options:
 - A: Postponing the initiative delays progress and undermines urgency.
 - B: Communicating only compliance isolates IDEA from equity principles.
 - D: Delegating to special education staff reduces collective responsibility.

2. Which leadership action most directly aligns with NELP 3.3 (advocating equitable access)?

Correct Answer: B – Hosting a multilingual family forum early in the planning process.

- Why it's correct: Engages families in authentic partnership, demonstrating equitable access and inclusion.
- Incorrect options:
 - A: Translation after decisions excludes families from meaningful participation.
 - C: Sharing data alone lacks engagement or advocacy.
 - D: Allowing opt-outs undermines systemwide equity.

3. Mr. Daniels’s statements about “watering down academics” reflect which type of barrier to change?

Correct Answer: B – Cultural.

- Why it's correct: Represents a values-based resistance rooted in beliefs about rigor and disability, not logistics.
- Incorrect options:
 - A: Structural barriers involve policies or systems.
 - C: Political barriers concern power dynamics or factions.
 - D: Technical barriers relate to skills or knowledge gaps.

4. What key misstep in communication likely intensified parent frustration?

Correct Answer: B – Not including parents early in the initiative.

- Why it's correct: Excluding stakeholders from the design phase erodes trust and transparency.
- Incorrect options:
 - A: Sharing data publicly is less damaging if inclusion occurs earlier.
 - C: Changing meeting logistics is procedural, not relational.
 - D: Omitting teacher concerns affects staff morale more than parent trust.

5. Which of the following best represents how Dr. Martinez could promote psychological safety among staff during the inclusion rollout?

Correct Answer: C – Creating structured forums for candid discussion without fear of reprisal.

- Why it's correct: Encourages dialogue, reflection, and risk-taking which is essential for culture change.
- Incorrect options:
 - A: Non-negotiables create compliance, not safety.
 - B: Public praise can alienate hesitant staff.

D: Avoiding discussion signals avoidance, not leadership.

Chapter 4

Ethics Under Pressure: Leading with Integrity When Family and Policy Collide

Elizabeth A. Domangue

Abstract

School districts function as interconnected ecosystems where relationships among employees, students, and board members can complicate ethical dilemmas. This case examines how a principal navigates conflicts of interest while safeguarding due process, protecting students, and upholding staff accountability, thereby maintaining a safe, supportive, and ethically grounded school culture.

Author's Note

This teaching case is a work of fiction. All names, characters, institutions, and events are entirely imaginary. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to real events is purely coincidental. The case was developed for instructional use in educational leadership programs.

Alignment to Standards:

- Aligned with the Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP, 2018) Program Recognition Standards (Building Level) of Components 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 3.2
- Aligned with the School Leaders Licensure Assessment (2022) components:
- Climate and Culture Leadership III—A5, B1, B3, B4, B6a, B7C, C1, C2, C5
- Ethical Leadership IV—A1, A8, B2a, B4

Background

The interpersonal nature of schools creates spaces where familial relationships are not uncommon and often span classrooms, departments, school buildings, and district offices. In education, the challenge is heightened because school leaders must balance transparency with confidentiality, collegial trust with accountability, and community expectations with ethical and legal responsibilities. This is a great responsibility that school leaders hold, as “administrative leaders who are ethical and able to make ethical decisions are critical to the future of education” (Edmonson, Fisher, & Polnick, 2005, p. 83), and “there has never been a more important time to teach ethics than in this era” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022, p. x).

While there is substantial scholarship in education and ethics (e.g., Begley & Johnsson, 2003; Berkovich & Eyal, 2018; Branson & Gross, 2014; Campbell, 1997; Gurley & Dagley, 2021; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Zirkel, 2014), comparatively few publications address how school leaders navigate conflicts of interest (COI). In fact, the term conflict of interest does not appear in the book titled *Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education* (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022), which is widely used in school principal and administrator preparation and

graduate-level courses. Therefore, this case study seeks to contribute to this underexplored area by providing context and insight for current and aspiring school leaders as they prepare to lead in situations where COI may be present.

Conflicts of interest may be real or perceived and can occur in both current and anticipated professional contexts (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2005). The term “conflict of interest” has been defined as a situation in which financial or other personal considerations have the potential to compromise or bias professional judgment and objectivity (Holt, 2024, p. 4986) regarding a primary or secondary interest (Thompson, 1993). Conflicts of interest, both actual and perceived, complicate school leaders’ work because these COI can intensify already difficult situations that are frequently multi-layered (OECD, 2005). The table below provides definitions and education-related conflicts for the three types of COI.

Table 1

Examples of the Three Types of Conflicts of Interest in Kindergarten to 12th Settings

Types of Conflicts of Interest	Definition	Educational Examples
Actual or Real	Exists when an individual’s or organization’s interests directly conflict with their public duties, creating a genuine risk that decisions may be influenced by personal or organizational benefit.	- Principal’s spouse is a teacher in the building and receives a performance evaluation from the principal. - The athletic director owns a private sports-training company that contracts with the school.
Perceived	When a situation looks or seems like a conflict to others, even if no actual conflict exists. The appearance alone can undermine trust in the official and the organization.	- An assistant principal oversees a disciplinary incident involving a student whose parent is a close personal acquaintance. - A school board member’s neighbor does not like the decision the baseball coach made regarding the starting line-up and wants to talk with the coach.
Potential	Exists when an individual’s or organization’s private interests could, in the future, conflict with their public role, depending on how circumstances develop or decisions arise.	- A teacher is engaged to a district administrator and may later transfer into a department supervised by their partner. - A teacher is considering running for the school board in the district where they currently work.

These conflicts complicate and influence processes, decision-making, communication, professional relationships, and stakeholder trust.

While school districts across the United States are required to adopt conflict of interest policies that pertain to their school boards and employees, there can be variability across those policies based on state statutes and school district needs (Bull & McCarthy, 1995; Canaday & Duke, 1991). State and local school boards can determine policies specific to nepotism, gifts, employment practices such as hiring, supervision, and evaluation, as well as contracts, grants, and multitude of other situations. For example, the Colorado Association of School Boards' (CASB, 2024) sample policy for Staff Ethics/Conflict of Interest (GBEA) states:

No district employee shall engage in or have a financial interest, directly or indirectly, in any activity that conflicts or raises a reasonable question of conflict with his or her duties and responsibilities in the school system....

It shall be understood that all confidential information an employee is privy to as a result of district employment shall be kept strictly confidential....

Moreover, to avoid a conflict of interest, the district prohibits an employee from exercising supervisory, appointment, or dismissal authority, or taking disciplinary action, over a member of the employee's immediate family.

These excerpts from this larger sample policy outline expectations that are frequently referred to as primary COI regarding financial conflicts, confidentiality, and supervisory roles, yet these educational COI policies often do not account for the impact of secondary COI (Fink, 2020; Romain, 2015). Secondary COI may be either financial, non-financial, or both. For example, a principal may want to hire a teacher because the new hire is the school board member's daughter. While there is no direct relationship between the principal and the teacher, a secondary interest exists because the principal desired the board member to view the decision favorably.

Even with policies in place, school leaders cannot anticipate every potential conflict of interest they may encounter or its ramifications. Ethical decision-making processes, grounded in consistent frameworks, help ensure that students and staff receive due process and work in environments free from discrimination, internal harassment, and bullying.

When school leaders navigate actual or perceived conflicts of interest, the complexities and potential impact of those conflicts often become more apparent. Some leaders may attempt to minimize or ignore these conflicts, while others address them openly and ethically, even when doing so may create difficult professional or political consequences.

A New Principal's Early Introduction to Conflicts of Interest

Imagine it is July, the first day of the new principal's term at a high school. As the principal walks the campus, the summer atmosphere feels relaxed, and staff members are informally preparing for the year ahead. In the front office, the school secretary proudly shares that she graduated from the local high school 20 years ago and now has a child in second grade

and another in seventh grade at the nearby middle school. Moments later, the principal meets the school's social worker, who mentions that her husband serves as the district's Head of Security.

Continuing the introduction rounds, the principal meets a third-grade teacher whose relative serves on the district's board of education, and who is also related to the Director of Human Resources. Later, the principal learns that the physical education teacher's son is a star athlete on the high school basketball team and that the teacher also coaches the team.

At first, these connections may seem like evidence of strong community ties, a hallmark of close-knit schools where families and educators have deep roots. Yet, upon reflection, the principal begins to recognize the complex web of relationships that shapes the school's culture, climate, and ethical decision-making. The overlapping familial and professional roles in many districts, regardless of size, location, or demographics, can quickly create situations in which personal relationships intersect with professional responsibilities. For new school leaders, the unspoken question quickly becomes: *When will I unknowingly or knowingly kick a metaphorical hornet's nest when it comes to conflicts of interest?*

This case study examines the ethical dilemmas a high school principal faces when an administrator's daughter, a star athlete, is accused of bullying a student with a disability and consuming alcohol at a school event. The administrator, a longtime district employee and the district's Human Resources Director's relative, intervenes by asking players to write character statements and by pressing the coach about the potential impact on the team's performance if his daughter is suspended. The principal must navigate the complexities of impartiality, conflicts of interest, students' rights, and the integrity of the athletic program.

Ethics-Based Principles for Navigating Conflicts of Interest

This case analysis takes a different approach by using the Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative (DFEI) principles to support ethical decision-making, accountability, and professional integrity in educational leadership (Daniels Fund, n.d.). The DFEI provides eight interrelated principles that serve as an ethical compass for leaders across all sectors, including education. These principles include Integrity, Trust, Accountability, Transparency, Fairness, Respect, Rule of Law, and Viability. These foundational principles can serve to guide ethical reasoning when competing loyalties, personal relationships, and organizational duties collide (Marlatt & Korang, 2021; Snyder & Tan, 2020).

This case study uses the DFEI principles as the lens, given the complexity of COI situations in schools and the limited scope of research and case studies specifically on COI. The DFEI principles, according to the Daniels Fund (n.d.), are:

Integrity—Act with honesty in all situations.

Trust—Build trust in all stakeholder relationships.

Accountability—Accept responsibility for all decisions.

Transparency—Maintain open, truthful communication.

Fairness—Engage in fair competition and create equitable and just relationships.

Respect—Honor the rights, freedoms, views, and property of others.

Rule of Law—Comply with the spirit and intent of laws and regulations.

Viability—Create long-term value for all relevant stakeholders.

Conflicts of interest are rarely single-issue problems. They sit at the intersection of roles, relationships, policy, community pressure, and student well-being.

The Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative principles, if at the forefront of decision-making, can help leaders convert broad expectations into concrete actions that can be monitored, documented, and explained (Snyder & Tan, 2020). Table 2 below provides a connection between the tenets of the principles and conflicts of interest in schools.

Table 2

Application of the Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative Principles to Conflicts of Interest in Schools

Ethical Principles	Application of Principles to Conflicts of Interest
Integrity	When school leaders maintain integrity to processes and policies, this can help prevent decisions that privilege relationships over policy even if the decision may be difficult. (OCED, 2005)
Trust	Trust erodes when decision making appears politically motivated. Stakeholders may become wary when loyalty or personal ties supersede ethical judgment. (Palmer & Fleig-Palmer, 2015)
Accountability	Leaders must take responsibility for decisions and maintain clear documentation that demonstrates principled reasoning. Thorough records strengthen conflict management and ensure defensibility of the actions that were taken or not taken. (Cossin & Lu, 2021; West, Peck, & Reitzug, 2010)
Transparency	Clear, open processes reduce misinformation and reinforce institutional confidence. Transparency supports credible decision making in cases where relationships may complicate perceptions. (Dennis, 2024)
Fairness	Fairness ensures that all individuals receive equitable treatment. It requires leaders to eliminate and/or acknowledge biases and safeguard the dignity of students and staff in matters where COI are real or perceived. (Abrahamsen & Gunnulfsen, 2024; Riggio and Saggi, 2015)
Respect	Respect affirms the inherent worth of each individual. For example, it is especially critical for students with disabilities who may be more vulnerable to harm when unethical conduct occurs. (Arora, 2024)
Rule of Law	Decision making must align with statutory requirements and district policy. Legal adherence protects leaders from misusing power and ensures consequences are grounded in established expectations. (Ford & Ihrke, 2021)
Viability	Viability emphasizes long-term organizational stability. Unresolved conflicts of interest can create lasting fiscal, cultural, and structural consequences for schools. (Rogers et al., 2024)

When applied together, these principles can guide complex decision-making, protect student rights, and sustain community trust in cases involving conflicts of interest.

Teaching Case Narrative

Dr. Lisa Carter leads a suburban high school of approximately 1,100 students. Known for its academic strength and athletic reputation, the HS represents the intersection of community pride and competitive ambition. When an incident involving the athletic director's daughter tested these values, Dr. Carter faced one of the most challenging ethical decisions of her career.

Dr. Carter's leadership journey at the HS began with optimism and purpose. She inherited a divided staff and a reputation for athletic dominance that occasionally eclipsed academics. By her third year, she had cultivated a culture emphasizing student achievement and continuous staff development. Yet, the Homecoming Dance incident would test every ethical conviction she held.

After the Homecoming Dance

The Monday after the dance, Daniel (11th-grade student) arrived in the Special Education Office visibly shaken. His case manager listened as he described being mocked by older students at the dance. When he named Lauren Thompson as the instigator, the case manager recorded the details and informed Dr. Carter. Another student confirmed hearing slurred speech and smelling alcohol near the group in question.

Later that morning, a security report mentioned a group of students, including Lauren, who were seen drinking in the parking lot. The officer did not intervene but filed a note for administrative review. Dr. Carter began the investigation immediately, meeting with Lauren that afternoon. Lauren admitted to "a sip" of alcohol but denied mocking Daniel. Her tone was dismissive. She claimed the story had been exaggerated by jealous peers. That evening, Dr. Carter received an email from Mr. Thompson requesting "a conversation about Lauren's situation." She agreed to meet with Mr. Thompson the following morning.

Meeting with Parent/Athletic Director

Initially, the discussion was civil, but as it progressed, the tone changed. Mr. Thompson reminded Dr. Carter of the team's upcoming playoff match and emphasized his daughter's role as a starter. He slid a folder across her desk. The folder included five letters from teammates attesting to Lauren's kindness and integrity.

Dr. Carter Learns More

After Dr. Carter met with Mr. Thompson, the volleyball coach approached Dr. Carter privately. She looked uneasy. "I feel pressured," she stated cautiously. "Mr. Thompson asked me to defend Lauren, but I saw the footage. She was clearly unsteady, and Daniel looked hurt. Two of my players also told me that Mr. Thompson approached them after school yesterday to write those letters of support. They did not want to, but they felt like they had to since he is the Athletic Director. The weight of institutional politics pressed heavily on Dr. Carter's shoulders. She believed that she had finally disrupted the metaphorical hornet's nest related to conflicts of interest.

Recognizing a conflict of interest, Dr. Carter recused Mr. Thompson from any involvement and alerted district legal counsel and the Student Services Director. The

investigation continued under the supervision of the assistant principal, which included student and staff interviews. One student confidentially revealed that Mr. Thompson had asked them to “help keep the team intact, so they could win the playoff match.” Security footage later confirmed the mocking gestures. Though audio was unavailable, Daniel’s distress was immediately visible as Lauren can be seen interacting with him, with no one else around.

Final Decisions and Actions

Dr. Carter made her decision: a three-day suspension for Lauren, excluding her from the next playoff game. She sent formal notices referencing the district’s conduct code, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protections, and discrimination/harassment policies (both the school handbook and district administrative policies). She also directed Mr. Thompson to avoid any contact with staff or students regarding the incident. He was also issued a Letter of Reprimand in accordance with the district’s progressive discipline practices for employees.

News of the suspension spread quickly. Some staff privately praised Dr. Carter’s integrity; others warned she might face political backlash. The volleyball team lost the semifinal match, and rumors circulated that Dr. Carter had “cost the season.” Lauren’s parents filed an informal complaint alleging unfair treatment, but an external review confirmed the process had been lawful and equitable.

In the following weeks, Dr. Carter initiated several restorative and systemic measures:

- a. Athletics and Ethics Task Force – To review conflict-of-interest boundaries.
- b. Restorative Conversation – A meeting between Daniel and Lauren, where Lauren apologized, and Daniel expressed how deeply the incident hurt him. This was facilitated by the school’s Counselor and Assistant Principal, who conducted the investigation.
- c. Professional Development – Training on ADA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and ethical decision-making.
- d. Policy Review – A district-wide reassessment of familial relationships in supervisory roles.
- e. Volleyball Players’ Parent Meeting

Additionally, as part of her daily practice, Dr. Carter writes in her reflective journal to process each day’s activities and the lessons she learns. After the restorative meeting with the parents of volleyball players, she wrote, “Leadership isn’t about avoiding discomfort; it’s about choosing integrity over convenience. I lost sleep that week, but I didn’t lose myself. When I look in the mirror, I know that I made the right decisions.” She left school that day, thanking the assistant principal for his courage to navigate a difficult investigation.

Teaching Notes for Preparing School Administrators

This case allows aspiring and current school leaders to examine ethical leadership under pressure when conflicts of interest are actual or perceived. This case presents school leaders with the challenge of ensuring a fair, unbiased investigation while addressing the dynamics

surrounding the Athletic Director's involvement and protecting students' rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 2008.

This case has an additional layer of complexity because the Athletic Director is married to a district-level leader. The core issues include maintaining impartiality in the investigation, navigating any conflicts of interest, protecting student rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 and the district's student code of conduct, and upholding the integrity of the school's athletic program.

Effective communication with all stakeholders, including students, staff, and the broader community, is an essential component of this case. The following teaching points align with the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP, 2018) Program Recognition Standards (Building Level) for Components 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, and 3.2.

Strategies for Recognizing the Possible Impact of COI (NELP 2.3, NELP 3.2)

This relevant teaching point stems from the understanding that schools function as complex human systems where relationships, roles, and informal influence patterns shape decision-making and perceptions of fairness. As with safety planning in schools, which requires leaders to anticipate risks and conditions that may compromise physical security, recognizing the potential impact of conflicts of interest requires leaders to anticipate relational risks that may compromise ethical security. When familial or supervisory relationships intersect with disciplinary or evaluative responsibilities, leaders must identify areas where impartiality could be questioned. This recognition is essential for maintaining a climate in which all students and staff experience equal access to due process and support throughout that process.

With a focus on conflicts of interest, school leaders need to review district policies, supervisory assignments, and patterns of influence to identify situations where personal relationships may shape outcomes. Leaders must consider how staff members' overlapping roles may affect investigations, communication patterns, and students' experiences. By identifying these risks in advance, leaders can position themselves to uphold fairness, transparency, and the well-being of each student, especially those with disabilities or those who may be vulnerable for various reasons.

One strategy to be proactive rather than reactive when making ethical decisions is for school leaders to adopt their own professional code of ethics (Czaja & Lowe, 2000; Edmonson et al., 2005). If the time comes, a school leader can return to their code of ethics in tandem with school and district policies. This allows the individual to maintain focus on the responsibility they have, rather than being "right" about their decision-making process and final decisions (Fasching, 1997), with the understanding that leaders must make hard decisions that some will like and others will dislike.

Strategies for Conducting an Ethical Investigation When There Are Real or Perceived COI (NELP 2.1, NELP 2.2)

Another important teaching point is the recognition that ethical investigations require structures that protect impartiality, procedural fairness, and the legal rights of students and staff. As with crisis communication in school safety planning, leaders must develop clearly defined procedures to ensure that the investigative process remains free from influence, pressure, or the appearance of bias (Battitori & Walsh, 2023). When real or perceived conflicts of interest exist, the need for a structured, transparent process becomes even more critical for maintaining trust among students, families, staff, and the broader community.

To conduct ethical investigations, school leaders need to ensure that roles are clearly separated, evidence is consistently documented, and communication aligns with district policy and legal requirements. A neutral investigator should be assigned when conflicts are present. Leaders must ensure that students receive due process, including notice, an opportunity to respond, and access to supportive adults when needed. By adhering to consistent procedures and modeling professional norms, leaders uphold fairness, transparency, and integrity while maintaining a school environment where all students and adults feel safe, respected, and treated equitably.

Checks for Understanding: Questions, Activities, and Discussions

The following multiple-choice questions, constructed-response items, activities, and discussion topics can support the development of school leaders as they navigate conflicts of interest and other ethical dilemmas.

Multiple Choice Questions

1. Dr. Carter's primary ethical challenge in the case centered on:

- A-Maintaining academic performance during playoffs
- B-Balancing loyalty to colleagues with her duty to fairness and due process
- C-Protecting district finances during a personnel dispute
- D-Avoiding negative media attention

Correct Answer: B

Rationale: Option B highlights Dr. Carter's ability to uphold fairness and due process even when personal or professional loyalties created a complex ethical dilemma. This is a core competency under NELP 2.2 (ethical and legal decision-making).

2. When Dr. Carter assigned the assistant principal to continue the investigation, which leadership quality did she demonstrate?

- A-Avoidance of responsibility
- B-Transparency and impartiality
- C-Deference to political pressure
- D-Personal bias toward staff

Correct Answer: B

Rationale: Option B shows the significance of a leader's ability to ensure impartiality and model ethical conduct by delegating investigations appropriately, especially when creating a separation between the final decision-maker. This aligns with NELP 2.3 (modeling ethical behavior and cultivating it in others).

3. After the incident, several staff members privately supported Dr. Carter's actions, while others warned she might face political backlash. From a leadership perspective, this scenario best illustrates the tension between:

- A-Upholding organizational accountability and maintaining collegial harmony
- B-Implementing district mandates and promoting instructional innovation
- C-Ensuring parental engagement and enforcing extracurricular participation
- D-Prioritizing community traditions and aligning with athletic priorities

Correct Answer: A

Rationale: This question targets leaders' ability to balance ethical firmness with staff relationships and morale. Option A is the only option that holds a school leader accountable to fair decision-making processes, even under pressure. This aligns with a high-level competency under NELP 2.3 (modeling and cultivating ethical behavior).

4. Dr. Carter's written communication citing the student code of conduct and ADA protections illustrates her ability to:

- A-Delegate authority to the athletic department
- B-Enforce policy without legal review.
- C-Apply district policies and federal laws.
- D-Prioritize athletics over academics.

Correct Answer: C

Rationale: This question targets leaders' ability to apply district and federal policies to ensure legally sound disciplinary investigations and decisions. Option C is the only one that focuses on federal laws and district policies that align with them. This is a competency of NELP 3.2 (advocating for equitable access and due process).

5. If Dr. Carter's decision had been overturned by district leadership due to external pressure, what would be the most appropriate next step to preserve institutional integrity and trust?

- A-Publicly challenge the district's reversal to demonstrate transparency.
- B-Seek mediation with the Athletic Director to repair professional relationships.
- C-Document and communicate her ethical reasoning through official channels
- D-Delegate future disciplinary cases to assistant principals to avoid conflict.

Correct Answer: C

Rationale: This question assesses the ability to apply reflective, evidence-based leadership practices under political and ethical pressure. This question aligns with NELP 2.2 (advocating for ethical and legal decisions) and 3.2 (ensuring equitable systems and accountability).

Constructed Response Items

1. The Timberline High School case demonstrates how internal relationships within a school can affect policy enforcement and due process.
 - Describe two potential leadership risks when personal or familial relationships influence decision-making.
 - Explain how a principal can maintain fairness and credibility when these relationships exist within the district.
 - Reference specific moments from the case to support your analysis.
2. Expand the table below by adding at least two additional leadership actions from the case. Write a constructed response reflection (200–300 words) on how these actions demonstrate the balance between policy compliance, ethical leadership, and community trust.

Table 3
Evaluating Leadership Actions in an Ethical Dilemma

Leadership Action	Related Policy/Guideline	Intended Ethical Outcome	Possible Unintended Impact
Assigning assistant principal to lead investigation	Student discipline procedures	Ensures impartial process	May be viewed as lack of confidence in Athletic Director (AD)
Hosting restorative meeting between students	School climate initiatives	Restores relationships	Emotional challenge for both students

Activities & Discussion Topics

A-School leaders should reflect on the ethical situations that can arise in daily decision-making. Working with a partner, create a list of 10 ethical dilemmas that school leaders face each day. For example, a student cheats on the last final before graduation. Should the student be able to participate in the Graduation Ceremony?

1. Evaluate each ethical dilemma using the Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative Principles.
2. For each dilemma:
3. Identify the principle(s) that are most relevant to resolving the situation.
4. Explain how applying the principle can support leaders in making the most ethical decision.
5. Are there any tensions between the principles that might complicate the school leader's final decision?

B-School leaders should explore how investigative processes may unfold under pressure. In small groups, conduct a role-play that reenacts the following parts of the case

Dr. Carter's initial investigation
The assistant principal's full investigation

Roles: Principal, Assistant Principal, Athletic Director/Lauren's father, Volleyball Coach, Daniel, Lauren, Volleyball players, Students in the parking lot, additional staff members

Following the role-play of the investigations, debrief on the following questions:

- What steps ensured fairness and neutrality?
- Where did biases or assumptions appear?
- How did relationships or conflicts of interest influence the investigation?
- What communication choices strengthened or weakened trust?

C-School leaders should examine how well they understand the policies that guide decision-making. With a partner or small group, complete the following actions:

- 1-Review your school's student and staff handbook and district policies related to:
Conflicts of interest, Student discipline (including consequences)
Staff discipline
Harassment and discrimination (including policies related to students with disabilities)
- 2-Identify strengths and gaps in the handbooks and policies.
What policies are clear, current, and easy to implement?
What policies are ambiguous or outdated?

Debrief the following questions.

Do you fully understand the requirements of the policies and the steps that are necessary to be in compliance?

Where are there gray areas in the policies that might challenge a school leader's ability to make ethical decisions? What would make those areas of the policies less "gray"?

What questions do you still have about conflicts of interest, investigation and discipline procedures, or projections under the Americans with Disabilities Act?

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Chapter 5

Flip-Flopping Visions: Challenges for Principals Who Outlast District Leadership

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Abstract

This teaching case presents multiple challenges a principal encountered in a district with frequent leadership changes. The objective of this fictional case is to identify strategies school leaders can use in practice to focus on ethical and legal decision-making (NELP 2.2) and to create a professional culture (NELP 7.2).

Teaching Case Narrative

Test-Centric School Leadership

The Midcoast School District was on a roll. One of the larger and more economically, racially, and ethnically diverse districts in the state, Midcoast included 30 schools and nearly 25,000 students. And its test scores were great! The district exceeded the adequate yearly progress benchmarks for all disaggregate groups established by the No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002). If improvement continued at the established pace, Midcoast was projected to reach the target of 100% student proficiency in math and reading/writing before NCLB's 2014 deadline. This success was the result of an unwavering commitment to prepare students for the state test. The district's superintendent and assistant superintendent established Midcoast's vision - *100% of our students will score proficient on the state test and receive acceptance to an institution of higher learning*. These district leaders believed in their vision and successfully improved the percentage of students who achieved proficiency on the state test year after year. They began promoting the district's success in both test scores and college acceptance rates.

In addition to the district's vision, the assistant superintendent had a mantra - "*teach what's tested, the way it's tested, before it's tested*" - that they shared with anyone who would listen. It became a rallying cry at the district's monthly principals' meetings, and the mantra was displayed in administrators' offices in several schools. This vision and mantra caused significant dissension among the principals in Midcoast, but the district leadership kept most principals in line. The majority regularly shared messages, strategies, and directives from the monthly principals' meetings with teachers in their schools, emphasizing the importance of performance on the state test. The dissenting principals, however, questioned most of these practices. When they talked among themselves after the monthly meetings, they often raised ethical and legal concerns with many of the strategies. None of them, however, dared to challenge or question the district leadership during their monthly meetings, because they knew it would most likely result

in a verbal attack from the assistant superintendent. One of the dissenting principals, Dr. Seasoned, offered the following when he reflected on his early years as a principal in Midcoast:

It was brutal. The sole purpose of our district at the time was to improve test scores. We basically shut down the curriculum after winter break each year to focus on test-prep. You know, the drill-and-kill approach. This was a directive from district leadership, and they would often send district supervisors to the school to check if teachers complied. Something out of the Theory X manager's handbook - inspect what you expect. Our assistant superintendent was an authoritarian leader, and test performance was at the top of their agenda. I recall several principals' meetings over three to four years during which they verbally abused us for not meeting district expectations. Talk about an unprofessional work environment. Most principals feared this assistant superintendent, though, especially those leading some of the elementary schools. Perhaps more surprising to me was watching our superintendent give the assistant superintendent free rein. The superintendent did little to curtail the abusive remarks, intimidation, and bullying.

Overall, the test-centric district vision created a competitive rather than a collaborative culture throughout the district. Rather than sharing strategies for improving test scores that seemed to work for individual schools, principals remained silent at the monthly principal meetings. This filtered into schools, too, where teachers at the same grade levels began competing with one another. As their students' scores improved, teachers kept their strategies to themselves rather than sharing them freely. Looking back, Dr. Seasoned believes principals kept quiet because they condoned some of the unethical practices the district leaders disseminated, and perhaps even encouraged cheating to improve their test scores.

A small group of us paid little attention to the directives the district leaders doled out at the principals' meetings, because we knew they were pushing the envelope. For example, they would often encourage us to get creative and find ways to provide students with different accommodations for taking the test, such as small-group settings or extended time. And this was for our general education students, not for those students who truly needed some accommodation to demonstrate their performance on the test. So, not only were some of the practices they encouraged unethical, but some were also blatant cheating.

Test scores throughout Midcoast continued to improve during this period. Neighboring school districts became curious about how Midcoast achieved these levels of improvement and often asked for assistance. Midcoast's assistant superintendent was always happy to promote the district's successes, especially regarding improved test scores. The assistant superintendent often cited the high-quality curriculum and teachers' skillful implementation of all programs with fidelity as the primary reasons test scores continued to rise in Midcoast. They argued that the curriculum was designed to improve student performance on accountability measures and was the right approach for all students in Midcoast. This also became the assistant superintendent's selling point at the monthly principals' meetings. They often proclaimed that if schools in Midcoast were not nearing 100% of students passing the state test, it was because district principals were not fulfilling their instructional leadership responsibilities. Dr. Seasoned and the

dissenting principals suspected that some Midcoast schools had such high levels of success for reasons other than a robust curriculum and instruction.

The assistant superintendent's directives became even more questionable when several schools reached 100% student pass rates on the state test. For those of us leading schools who weren't even close to achieving this result, things became intolerable. The assistant superintendent began telling us that if we made sure our teachers taught the curriculum, our scores would improve. Nonsense!

The dissenters believed they effectively led curriculum and instruction in their schools. Their teachers worked hard to implement the curriculum and follow the district-mandated programs, but they did not get the results district leaders expected. The assistant superintendent scheduled individual meetings with principals whose schools did not meet district expectations regarding test scores to identify the cause and develop an improvement plan. As the principal at one of these schools, Dr. Seasoned reflected on this meeting.

The assistant superintendent visited me once at the school and offered to provide additional funds so I could hire another teacher to provide targeted instruction to our bubble students. You know, those students who scored within a few points of passing the test. At first, this seemed great, but once I peeled back the onion, I realized they were asking me to sign off on using federal funds for an unintended purpose. When I questioned the assistant superintendent about this, they abruptly ended the meeting and stormed out of my office. That was the last time I saw the assistant superintendent at my school. That's how they rolled, though. When they couldn't get a principal on board, they moved on to the next one. And this is how some of our principals got into trouble. They listened to the assistant superintendent and carried out the plans, but the principals never questioned them. They were afraid.

Things began to unravel in Midcoast. The Department of Education identified 30 schools across the state that experienced testing irregularities during the most recent administration of the state test, and 20% of those schools were in Midcoast. The state indicated some of the testing irregularities included: a higher than expected percentage of students from a school who earned a perfect score on one or more sections of the test; an excessive number of erasure marks on student answer booklets; and similar essay/short answer responses from several students in the same classroom. In response to these testing irregularities, the state directed the involved school districts to conduct internal investigations to determine the source, if any, of the irregularities.

Midcoast complied and required district-level supervisors who also served as test coordinators to investigate testing procedures, personnel, and students at the six identified schools. This internal investigation did not uncover any testing irregularities. The Midcoast district leadership team was satisfied with the investigation and the subsequent report they submitted to the state. The state, however, was not satisfied, so it began its own investigation of the schools. And this was when the trouble began, not only for the district leadership in Midcoast, but for several certified and non-certified staff members throughout the district.

The state's nearly yearlong investigation revealed testing irregularities at the six Midcoast schools, findings that were quite troubling for many district staff. The state's report on its investigation revealed four major improprieties by school leaders and teachers. Several teachers in these Midcoast schools provided students with answers to test items, either directly or indirectly through coaching during test administration. One or more of the principals allowed teachers to review the test items before administering the test to students, thereby compromising test security. Some principals permitted students to take the test outside the state's designated testing dates, thereby compromising test security. Additionally, some teachers who administered the test to students allowed for extensions on timed sections without justification or approval for more time. These findings were a jarring blow to Midcoast, especially when the state released its report less than a month away from the start of another school year.

The Midcoast board of education responded swiftly to the state's report. It accepted the assistant superintendent's resignation within days, then suspended four principals and nine teachers from the investigated schools before the start of the school year. At the next month's public meeting, the board publicly notified the superintendent that it would not renew their contract at the conclusion of the school year. This ultimately resulted in the superintendent's separation from the school district. So, at the start of a new school year, the assistant superintendent position was vacant, and four interim principals took over leadership at four of the six schools investigated. Just two months later, the district also found itself without a superintendent. Things were certainly unsettled in Midcoast, but the board did its best to distance itself from the district leadership team that seemed responsible for the cheating and unethical practices. Dr. Seasoned candidly summarized this period in Midcoast.

The test-crazed culture that the superintendent and assistant superintendent created and cultivated led some principals to engage not only in unethical practices but also in outright cheating. The state investigated, educators throughout the district lost their jobs, and the board appointed a new district leadership team that did a complete 180. So, we went from a culture of testing to a culture of "the test doesn't matter" seemingly overnight. Admittedly, this came as a welcome relief, but none of us really knew where we were going.

Content-focused School Leadership

By the midpoint of the school year, the board of education had hired a superintendent and an assistant superintendent to lead the district out of this cheating scandal. Unfortunately, this new leadership team quickly learned that the cheating and unethical practices extended far beyond the six schools initially identified by the state. The state's investigation of the district's schools uncovered testing irregularities at four additional schools, prompting further investigations that would continue for years. Nevertheless, the new district leadership team developed a district vision contrary to that of the previous district leadership team - *to engage the entire community in instructing and inspiring our students to be life-long learners beyond our classrooms*. To disconnect from the previous administration, the newly appointed superintendent's vision did not mention test scores, college acceptance, or any other quantifiable student outcome measures. Although the state identified testing irregularities in 10 of the

district's 30 schools, 20 schools appeared exempt from wrongdoing. The new district leaders seemed relieved the scandal was not rampant throughout Midcoast, as did most of the principals.

When the state completed its investigation of the four additional schools in Midcoast, its publicized report identified a few minor testing irregularities, which did not result in any staff discipline, suspensions, or terminations. Things seemed to settle down in Midcoast, and the new district leadership team's vision emphasized teaching the full curriculum. The prior district leadership directed principals to abandon non-tested content areas to focus on math, reading, and writing. Although most principals had been uncomfortable with this approach to teaching and learning, the pressure to improve test scores compelled most to comply with the directive. So, when the new superintendent and assistant superintendent encouraged teachers and principals to teach all content, a sense of rejuvenation spread among all district personnel. The district leaders also permitted individual principals to initiate specific programs in different content areas to better meet students' needs in their schools. This autonomy brought many changes throughout the district, because principals and teachers were quick to move away from the test-prep programs that were so commonplace throughout Midcoast's curriculum.

Several principals moved so quickly to transition away from the test-prep programs; however, they failed to examine the evidence supporting the implementation of specific programs in their schools. Even worse, principals selected programs simply to change. Although it seemed principals and teachers enjoyed their work in this more content-focused atmosphere, test scores began to decline rapidly in the majority of Midcoast schools. Around this time, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (Every Child Succeeds Act [ESSA]) into law (2015). Although district leadership knew the specifics of ESSA's annual assessment requirements, they remained focused on their mission despite the continued decline in student performance. After four years, the state categorized 13 schools in Midcoast as in need of improvement. Again, under the state's microscope, Midcoast was forced to turn its attention back to student performance on the state test.

Refocusing on Test Scores

Unhappy with another round of negative publicity, the board informed the superintendent and assistant superintendent that this would be their last year leading Midcoast. Although they offered stability to Midcoast throughout the state investigation, this team's de-emphasis of test scores led to their demise. Another search was underway for new district leaders whom the board would charge with improving test performance. Dr. Seasoned lamented yet another change in the district leadership team and what it meant for him as a principal trying to improve his school, build professional capacity, and lead from a professional orientation.

We all know what's coming, no matter who the board hires to run the show. The next district leadership team will tell us to improve test scores, but I can only hope they take a different approach than was forced upon us before the state came in to investigate. I've been a principal in Midcoast for 12 years now, and this will be the third team of district-level administrators. For me, changing the players doesn't matter as much as flip-flopping the district's vision. It's difficult to lead a school, but when you add on the uncertainty of where we want to go as a district, well, that's what makes the wheels fall

off. I sure hope the board gets this next team right. We need to stop the dysfunction that has become synonymous with Midcoast's district-level leadership.

Teaching Notes

Although this fictional case centers on a district-wide state-test cheating scandal, we wrote it to highlight the challenges principals can encounter regarding the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Standard Components 2.2 and 7.2 (NPBEA, 2018).

NELP 2.2

NELP Standard Component 2.2 expects building-level leaders to “understand and demonstrate the capacity to evaluate, communicate about, and advocate for ethical and legal decisions” (NPBEA, 2018, p. 14). Aspiring school leaders should be regularly exposed to scenarios that require them to consider the ethical and legal dimensions of their decision-making in schools, because “...school leaders must be prepared to protect all students with knowledge of law when educational access is compromised, question whether laws are just, and be ready to use sound ethical decision-making skills” (Crawford, 2017, p. 171).

In this case, Dr. Seasoned seemed to keep his distance from some of the practices the test-centric district leadership team proposed about performance on the state test and the need to achieve 100% student proficiency. Sound ethical and legal decision-making seemed to be the foundation of Dr. Seasoned's building-level leadership. Test performance seemed to trend in the right direction at his school, albeit not to the expectations of the test-centric district leaders. This can, however, pose a challenge for both novice and veteran school leaders to navigate, especially given the continued reliance on accountability tests to assess educators' influence on educational outcomes (DeMatthews & Serafini, 2021; Ehrich et al., 2015). The district's test-centric vision during this time seemed to have caused other principals throughout Midcoast to jeopardize their ethical and legal responsibilities as school leaders, and some evidence indicates the accountability pressures we described in Midcoast may influence immoral, unethical, and otherwise questionable school leadership (Frick, 2011; Frick et al., 2013; Yollu & Korkmaz, 2024). As public educators throughout the US await changes at the federal level, given ESSA's (2015) current accountability test requirement, test-centric curriculum and programs are likely to persist in many P-12 schools. Future school leaders must be prepared to manage ethical and legal dilemmas arising from district-level directives that prioritize student performance on accountability tests and require teaching to the test.

Another relevant teaching point this case brought to light was the autonomy the change in district leadership gave principals, which emerged from the flip-flopping district vision that deemphasized test scores. This flip-flopping vision not only deemphasized test scores but also supported the implementation of the full curriculum that the previous district leadership team had directed principals to abandon in favor of test-prep. Additionally, the new vision permitted district principals to implement specific programs aligned with individual school communities to support the curricula. Faculty can use this point to more closely examine how principal

autonomy in curriculum, instruction, and learning might pose challenges to implementing evidence-based practices and to ethical and legal decision-making in schools.

Some evidence indicates that when principals are given greater autonomy to lead their schools, they place greater emphasis on ethical decision-making (Ahmed, 2025; Arar et al., 2016; Arar & Saiti, 2022). Our case narrative did not address this point, but the autonomy the second district leadership team afforded to principals may have contributed to several schools underperforming state-level expectations. It is relevant to examine this performance decline through the lens of ethical decision-making and autonomous building-level leadership. The strict directives from the previous district leaders to improve test scores, along with the focus on test prep, left principals in Midcoast yearning for changes to teaching and learning in their schools. It seems, however, many of the principals in Midcoast were unprepared to initiate these changes. We believe this represents a critical teaching point for instructors to use with future building-level leaders, especially to stress the importance of using evidence to guide practice when district leadership provides autonomy.

NELP 7.2

NELP Standard Component 7.2 expects building-level leaders to “develop and engage staff in a collaborative professional culture designed to promote school improvement, teacher retention, and the success and well-being of each student and adult in the school” (NPBEA, 2018, p. 28). Maintaining and cultivating a professional school culture among staff is paramount to improving student learning (Francois & Weiner, 2024; Liu & Benoliel, 2022; Weiner & Higgins, 2017). We think this case presented the greatest challenge for future school leaders to consider when developing and maintaining a collaborative professional culture. Early in the case, test scores throughout Midcoast continued to increase, but Dr. Seasoned’s school did not experience similar improvements. Additionally, the district’s vision flip-flopped throughout this case from one that was test-centric to one that de-emphasized the test and again to a more test-centric vision because of another change in district leadership. Future building-level leaders should consider how they might overcome such district initiatives that make their way into schools. Educational leadership faculty can use this case to more closely examine the challenges building-level leaders might encounter when trying to build and maintain a more professional school culture for school improvement in the face of unethical, illegal, and ineffective district-level leadership teams.

Multiple Choice Questions

1. What was the original vision promoted by Midcoast’s district leadership?

- A-To promote lifelong learning and community engagement
- B-To ensure 100% student proficiency on state tests and college acceptance.
- C-To implement a balanced curriculum across all subjects
- D-To reduce standardized testing pressure on students

2. What ethical dilemma did Dr. Seasoned face during his meeting with the assistant superintendent?
- A-Being asked to falsify student scores
 - B-Being pressured to use federal funds for unintended purposes
 - C-Being told to fire underperforming teachers
 - D-Being asked to ignore state testing dates
3. What was one consequence of the test-centric culture in Midcoast?
- A-Increased collaboration among teachers
 - B-Improved curriculum diversity
 - C-Competitive behavior and unethical practices
 - D-Reduced emphasis on student performance
4. What did the state's investigation reveal about Midcoast's testing practices?
- A-All schools followed proper procedures.
 - B-Only one school had minor irregularities.
 - C-Multiple schools had serious testing improprieties.
 - D-The district's curriculum was the root cause of failure.
5. What was one unintended consequence of the autonomy granted to principals under the second leadership team?
- A-Increased teacher turnover
 - B-Decline in test scores due to poor program choices
 - C-Improved student engagement across all schools
 - D-Reduced ethical concerns in decision-making

Answer Key

1. Correct Answer: B. Explanation: The original vision was test-centric, aiming for 100% proficiency and college acceptance. A and C reflect the latter vision. D contradicts the initial emphasis on testing.
2. Correct Answer: B. Explanation: Dr. Seasoned was accused of misusing federal funds. A and D were broader district issues, not specific to his meeting. C was not mentioned.
3. Correct Answer: C. Explanation: The culture led to competition, secrecy, and unethical behavior. A and B are outcomes of the latter leadership. D contradicts the test-centric focus.
4. Correct Answer: C. Explanation: The investigation uncovered serious irregularities in multiple schools. A and B are false. D was not the focus of the investigation.
5. Correct Answer: B. Explanation: Autonomy led to rapid changes without evidence, resulting in declining scores. A and D were not discussed. C is inaccurate.

Constructed Response/Essay Questions

1. Reflect on the ethical responsibilities of school leaders when district directives conflict with legal or moral standards. How should principals navigate such situations, and what support systems are essential?
2. Analyze the impact of shifting district visions on school culture and instructional practices. What strategies can principals use to maintain a collaborative professional culture and staff morale during leadership transitions?

Answer Key

Acceptable responses to the two constructed response/essay questions follow.

1. School leaders are entrusted with safeguarding the integrity of their schools, including making legally sound and ethically responsible decisions. When district directives conflict with these standards, as illustrated in the Midcoast teaching case narrative, principals must rely on their professional judgment and moral compass to guide their actions. Dr. Seasoned's refusal to misuse federal funds and his resistance to unethical testing practices exemplify the kind of leadership that prioritizes student welfare and institutional integrity over compliance with questionable mandates. Navigating such dilemmas requires courage and clarity. Principals should document all directives and their responses, seek professional organization and legal counsel when necessary, and engage in dialogue with trusted colleagues or professional networks to validate their concerns. Support systems such as mentorship programs, ethics training, and access to legal advisors are essential to empower school leaders to act responsibly. Ultimately, ethical leadership demands that principals advocate for what is right, even when challenging authority, to protect students, staff, and the educational institution's credibility.
2. Frequent changes in district vision can destabilize school culture and instructional practices, as seen in the Midcoast case. The abrupt transitions from a test-centric approach to a content-focused model, and then back again, created confusion and eroded educators' trust. Teachers and principals were left uncertain about expectations, which led to inconsistent practices and declining morale. These shifts also undermined collaborative efforts, as staff struggled to align with constantly changing priorities. To counteract this instability, principals must establish a clear and consistent school-level vision that reflects core values and educational goals, regardless of district-level changes. Transparent communication is paramount; leaders should keep staff informed, explain the rationale behind changes, and provide opportunities for input. Encouraging evidence-based decision-making and professional autonomy can help maintain instructional quality and contribute to a more professional culture. Additionally, fostering a supportive and inclusive school culture can buffer the effects of external disruptions. By anchoring their leadership in stability, collaboration, and ethical practice, principals can sustain morale and guide their schools through periods of uncertainty with resilience and purpose.

Discussion Topics to Extend Thinking

- 1-Navigating ethical leadership in a culture of compliance: When should principals push back?

This topic invites participants to explore the tension between ethical leadership and compliance with district mandates. Using the Midcoast case as a foundation, participants can examine how fear, intimidation, and pressure to meet performance metrics can lead to unethical behavior, even among well-intentioned educators. The discussion should consider:

What are the risks and consequences of pushing back against unethical directives?
How can principals build moral courage and resilience in hostile environments?
What role do professional codes of ethics, legal frameworks, and peer support play in guiding decision-making?
How can districts create structures that encourage ethical dissent and protect whistleblowers?

2- Sustaining school culture amid district-level instability: Leadership strategies for continuity and trust.

This topic centers on the impact of frequent changes in district leadership and vision on school culture, staff morale, and instructional coherence. Participants should analyze how principals can maintain a sense of purpose and stability when district priorities shift dramatically. Key points for discussion include:

How do vision changes affect teacher motivation, collaboration, and instructional focus?
What strategies can principals use to preserve core values and long-term goals?
How can leaders communicate effectively during transitions to reduce uncertainty and build trust?
What role do distributed leadership and shared decision-making play in maintaining continuity?

Answer Key

1. The goal of this discussion topic is to deepen understanding of ethical leadership and empower future school leaders to act with integrity, even when facing systemic pressure or personal risk. The discussion should include the following points:
 - Recognizing ethical boundaries: Principals must be able to identify when directives cross ethical or legal lines (e.g., misuse of funds, inappropriate testing accommodations).
 - Moral courage: Ethical leadership requires courage to challenge authority when student welfare or legal compliance is at risk.
 - Documentation and transparency: Keeping records of directives and responses protects leaders and promotes accountability.
 - Support systems: Legal counsel, peer networks, and professional organizations can provide guidance and protection.
 - Whistleblower protections: Districts should have policies that allow ethical dissent without fear of retaliation.
 - Balancing advocacy and diplomacy: Principals must advocate for ethical practices while maintaining professional relationships.

2. The goal of this discussion topic is to explore how school leaders can act as anchors of stability and culture, even when district-level leadership is inconsistent or disruptive. The discussion should include the following points:
 - Impact of vision shifts: Frequent changes in district vision can lead to confusion, low morale, and inconsistent instruction.
 - School-level vision: Principals should develop and communicate a stable, school-specific vision that aligns with core values.
 - Transparent communication: Keeping staff informed and involved reduces anxiety and builds trust.
 - Distributed leadership: Empowering teacher leaders and teams fosters resilience and shared ownership.
 - Evidence-based practices: Anchoring instruction in proven methods helps maintain consistency despite external changes.
 - Emotional support: Recognizing and addressing staff stress during transitions is key to sustaining morale.

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Chapter 6

When Inclusion is Just Integration by Another Name

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Abstract

This case study uses Williams et al.'s (2021) racial microaggressions taxonomy to examine the experience of a Black teacher at a predominantly White high school, illustrating how persistent microaggressions perpetuated exclusion reminiscent of the *Brown v. Board* era and highlighting the need for leaders to confront racialized school cultures.

Framing the Purpose

In 1954, the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision mandated the integration of Black students into all-White schools. Yet this ruling failed to consider the schools' organizational culture that often reflected White hegemonic traditions (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). By ignoring these ideologies, the Court and school officials became complicit in the persecution of Black children in the name of integration. A similar dynamic emerged in 2020, amid the racial reckoning following George Floyd's murder and the Black Lives Matter movement, as U.S. institutions rushed to include more Black professionals without examining their own organizational cultures that still had vestiges of White supremacy. As a result, Black people who enter such institutions continue to face hostility and dehumanization.

Schools are no exception. As research continues to highlight the benefits of having Black teachers for students (Grissom et al., 2020; Klopfenstein, 2005; Vaidya & Battey, 2022), school leaders aim to diversify their staff. Yet Black teacher representation remains stagnant at less than 7%, and their turnover rate is the highest of any racial group (NCES, n.d.). Frank et al. (2021) attribute this to hostile workplaces riddled with aggressive, racially traumatic experiences that Black teachers experience. Recruiting Black teachers without addressing the environments that push them out reproduces the failures of past integration efforts. School leaders must focus not only on recruitment but also on retention by confronting anti-Black racism.

Anti-Black racism, defined as the unique form of racism that assaults, erodes, and confines Black people's humanity to maintain their subjugation (Bartholomew et al., 2021), is often expressed today through subtle acts such as racial microaggressions. These are the verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities that communicate hostile or derogatory racial slights (Pierce, 1970; Sue et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2021). Their subtlety makes them easy to minimize, yet their cumulative impact is profound. Applying Williams et al.'s (2021) racial microaggression framework allows us to understand the experiences of Black educators who, though physically integrated into schools, continue to be excluded.

Recognizing these behaviors is the first step for school leaders who aim to create truly inclusive environments. Leaders must then move beyond awareness to active intervention since evidence shows that race-based discrimination is not only emotionally damaging but also

physiologically harmful (Nazroo et al., 2020). For educational leaders, addressing and eliminating microaggressions is therefore not simply a matter of professional ethics; it is essential to safeguarding the health, dignity, and success of Black educators and the students they serve.

Case Narrative

Gamma Nu High School (GN), located in a predominantly White (91%) and affluent suburb, enrolls about 500 students from 30 towns across the county. Guided by its mission to create “a caring, diverse community grounded in Catholic teaching,” GN recruits students internationally from China and locally from a neighboring city through scholarships. As a result, GN’s student demographics are 55% White, 20% Black, 15% Latine, and 10% Asian, while its 50-member staff remains almost entirely White. In its 45-year history, GN had never employed a full-time Black teacher.

Ms. Keisha Phillips became the first. She previously accepted a Math Department Chair position in an urban district, but was abruptly told days before school started that the position was no longer available. Facing financial pressure, she interviewed with Gamma Nu’s administration. Dressed in an Afrocentric dress and natural hairstyle, she immediately sensed Assistant Principal Bruce Novak’s discomfort, but Principal Steven Schmidt hired her on the spot. Catholic, private, and located in a very White, wealthy town more than an hour from her home, GN was far from her ideal. But Keisha needed the work and reasoned she could tolerate anything for a year.

The afternoon before her official start, Ms. Phillips went to GN for onboarding and setting up her classroom. While meeting with the head of IT, she noticed many people, faculty and students, staring as they walked by the room; no greetings, no smiles, just multiple stares. She unpacked and rearranged desks with Earth, Wind & Fire playing in the background. “Hi, Miss!” Startled, Keisha looked up to see a smiling student at her door. “My name is Jamal, and I just wanted to stop by to welcome you to GN!” After formally introducing herself, Jamal commented on her music selection, and Keisha quipped, “Yeah, I didn’t think the people here would appreciate me playing Jay-Z or Biggie.” They both laughed and rapped the first verse of Biggie’s “Juicy” together, then laughed some more. After 10 more minutes of conversation, Jamal stated that he had to get to football practice and said, “I’m really glad you’re here, Miss. Welcome to Gamma Nursery School! Puzzled, Keisha responded, “Gamma Nursery School?” Jamal chuckled, “You’ll see, Miss.” Keisha thanked him for stopping by and thought to herself, this may not be so bad.

Ms. Phillips had a grueling schedule, leaving her home at 5:30 every morning to get to GN before homeroom started. She taught six classes, four preps, 149 students, and lost her planning period at least twice a week due to GN’s sliding, alternating, special events class schedule. After staying late to help students, Keisha then drove to teach her college courses.

In the first week, Ms. Phillips spent time getting to know her students, establishing norms, and setting expectations for her classes. “Miss, you realize that this is a gut course, right?” Julie, interrupted. “What’s a ‘gut course’? I’m not familiar with the term,” Keisha answered. Julie continued in the most condescending tone Keisha had ever heard:

Miss, we took this class to get an easy A. We don't like math, and we aren't good at it. You're talking about homework every night, projects, and math warm-ups, that's just not what we do! And, it's not what we're going to do!

Keisha reflected on Jamal's words, *Gamma Nursery School, indeed!* She smiled and calmly answered:

Julie, I don't teach 'gut courses', but if you do the work and get help when needed, I'm sure you will be fine. But let me present to you your options. You have the option of doing the work that I assign to the best of your ability so you can pass this course and graduate in June. Or, your other option is to drop this course, take it over the summer, and graduate in August. Please note that neither of those options ever tells me what is done in my classroom. Are we clear?

Ms. Phillips stared at a red-faced Julie until she nodded in agreement, then continued with class.

After students left her classroom for the day, Keisha mentally prepared herself for another meeting with Principal Schmidt and AP Novak. The second meeting this week, and it was only Wednesday! After a month, Keisha felt she spent as much time defending her actions as she did teaching. Monday, AP Novak touted GN as a warm and welcoming community, then accused her of disrupting it with her teaching style. *'Warm and welcoming' community, what a joke!*

Since arriving at GN, Keisha observed her White AP Calculus students completely ignore her Chinese exchange students until she assigned them to groups. Black students, including those not in her classes, told her that faculty and students often made derogatory remarks towards them. Students tossed tests at her rather than handing them to her; parents and students constantly questioned her intelligence and classroom authority; and staff often entered spaces without acknowledging her. One faculty member even interrupted her AP Calculus class mid-lesson, spoke to a student, and left without saying a word to her. It also did not escape her notice that of the 28 students in AP Calculus, none were Black.

At the meeting, Keisha listened for 20 minutes as AP Novak yelled at her, while Principal Schmidt listened from his desk. He berated Keisha, claiming students were leaving her classes "in unprecedented numbers" and complained about the time he spent answering parents' calls/emails concerning the "excessive amount" of work she gave students. He finally ended with, "You need to adjust your standards!"

Keisha smiled to keep her true feelings in check. She glanced at Principal Schmidt to see if he had anything to add, and when he said nothing, she answered each allegation as it was presented. Six students switching out of Keisha's classes may seem "unprecedented", but she reminded AP Novak that with 149 students on her roll, six students, less than 5%, was hardly a crisis. Students sometimes decide the rigor of a college or Honors-level course is more than they anticipated. Keisha also suggested that AP Novak have complaining parents contact her directly and further explained that she cannot adjust standards that she did not set. She was simply following the College Board and GN curricula standards.

"You always have an answer, don't you?!" AP Novak barked before storming out. Principal Schmidt was about to speak, but Keisha held up her hand and said calmly, "The two-year anniversary of my father's death is next week, the *only* man who had the license to raise his

voice to me. It seems these meetings' only objective is to discuss others' experiences of me, but not my experiences of this place. And that changes now." For the next 45 minutes, Keisha detailed her experiences of GN's "warm and welcoming" community by describing the isolation and hostility she endured since arriving. She also recounted the stories of her students, and ended with, "Steven, you hired me for a reason. So, you have a decision to make because I will *not* attend another meeting like this."

It had been over a month since that meeting, and although students were no longer transferring out of Ms. Phillips's classes, she still received calls/emails from students and parents. No longer questioning her intelligence since that proved futile with two advanced degrees and 15 years of experience to her credit, they moved to attacking her character, appearance, and methods. And with racial incidents escalating at the school, Keisha believed that they would only stop when she resigned. Black parents met with the superintendent, upset about the lack of disciplinary action towards the students who called their children 'porch monkeys'. In response, Principal Schmidt held a student body assembly to denounce acts of discrimination. Keisha did not attend, but students reported that it was "a big waste of time!"

Before Keisha tackled the latest emails during her 20-minute lunch, she went to wash the ink off her hands. Because McKayla was waiting in her room, Keisha moved quickly past two teachers chatting outside the restroom door, smiling and excusing herself. While washing her hands, she heard the rest of their exchange. "I'd better go." The other voice asked, "I thought you needed to use the restroom." She answered, "I'll just use the one downstairs." Keisha shook her head knowingly. *It's been two months, and they still don't even want to use the same bathroom as me! These people are something else!*

McKayla, a junior in Keisha's Probability & Statistics and AP Calculus classes, ate her lunch daily in Keisha's room. At first, McKayla would come to lunch to ask a question or two, but soon it became an everyday occurrence, and they seldom discussed math anymore. In the middle of their conversation, Brian walked into the classroom without a greeting and asked for the homework assignment. Keisha reminded him that all assignments were posted on Google Classroom, and he walked out without a word. After watching the exchange, McKayla whispered, "Be careful with him, Miss. Some of the stuff he says...he just gives me a bad feeling." Keisha nodded, knowing that as a White student, McKayla was privy to certain conversations.

Brian was a senior who had been giving her trouble from the start. His actions prompted Keisha to change procedures for students to submit work. He and his parents contacted the administration weekly about something that Keisha did or said in class. Because of them, she had to stop tossing Jolly Ranchers to her students for correct answers. "It is inappropriate, and she could hurt someone." Keisha even had to write an essay to AP Novak explaining why, when Brian asked if he could go to the restroom, she responded, "Honey, I don't care. Go ahead"

The week before Thanksgiving Break, Brian fell asleep in class, and to awaken him, Keisha gently rubbed his arm. Not thinking anything of it, she continued with class. Two periods later, the secretary appeared in her classroom saying that she was needed immediately in Principal Schmidt's office. Wondering what could be so important, Keisha gave her class instructions and headed to the principal's office. Before Ms. Phillips could close the door, AP Novak yelled angrily, "You hit a student?!" "What?!?" Keisha asked, "What are you talking about?" Principal Schmidt, seated at his desk, calmly asked, "What happened in your first period

class today?” Puzzled, Keisha answered, “Nothing out of the ordinary.” “Out of the ordinary, that’s rich!” AP Novak scoffed. Keisha ignored him, “Steven, what is this about?” Brian, with Julie as a witness, accused Keisha of “assaulting” him in class. Keisha was momentarily too shocked to speak, then walked over to Principal Schmidt, explaining that Brian was sleeping and demonstrating on Principal Schmidt’s arm exactly how she had awakened him. She encouraged Principal Schmidt to ask the other students in class what happened, then returned to class. After dismissal, Principal Schmidt and AP Novak informed Keisha that 13 students from her class, representing all racial groups, corroborated her account of the incident. Apparently, Brian and Julie exaggerated what happened to get Ms. Phillips fired. There were no consequences for the lying students and no apology from anyone. Thanksgiving Break could not come quickly enough for Keisha; she definitely was thankful for a break from this place.

Hopes of new attitudes during the new year were quickly dashed for Keisha after a morning meeting with Heather and Anne, two seniors from her AP Calculus class. They needed help on an assignment, and Keisha, who enjoyed starting her day working with students, didn’t mind coming in early for morning office hours. Until Anne said, “Miss, don’t forget that Senior Auction is today, so your seniors will be late to class and will have to leave early.” Confused, Keisha asked, “What’s Senior Auction?” “It’s the senior class fundraiser,” Anne explained. “Underclassmen bid on seniors to be their sla...” “Helper for the day,” Heather interrupted as Anna turned bright red. Heather continued, “Seniors have to dress how the underclassman that won them tells them to, carry their books to and from class, serve them their lunch, etc.” Unable to speak, Keisha just nodded and watched them leave, wondering how she was going to make it through the day.

In mid-March, Ms. Phillips finally took a day off. GN’s special schedule meant that she would drive 2.5 hours round-trip to teach for less than 90 minutes. With parents and colleagues continuing their antics, Black students now reporting that their White classmates called them niggers on social media, and three of her AP Calculus students caught cheating, Keisha just needed a break. She slept for an additional hour, did a load of laundry, had lunch with a friend, and spent the remainder of the day answering students’ emails, correcting papers, and lesson planning. Keisha went to bed earlier than usual only to awaken nauseated and with excruciating pain in her chest and left arm. After an hour of persistent pain and vomiting, she went to the hospital, where doctors discovered she was having a heart attack.

Keisha spent a week in the hospital recovering. Her doctor reluctantly cleared her to work half days until Spring Break so she could teach AP Calculus every day. With the exam only five weeks away, she was determined to prepare her students. Principal Schmidt adjusted her schedule to accommodate this plan. On Keisha’s first day back, Jamal and another student met her at her car, refusing to let her carry her bags into the building. More students met her at the building’s entrance and hugged her, while McKayla and a few others waited in her classroom with tears in their eyes, relieved that she was okay. Moved with emotion, Keisha thanked them and assured them she was fine. With one last hug, the students left as Ms. Anderson, the secretary, presented Ms. Phillips with an African violet and a get-well card signed by 9 of her 50 coworkers.

“Miss!” Ms. Phillips looked up from her huge stack of papers, a result of her ‘half-day’ schedule, to see Denise closing her door. Denise was a Howard-bound senior and one of Keisha’s “adopted babies” – students that she formed relationships with but were not enrolled in

any of her classes. Feeling something was wrong, Ms. Phillips said, “Hey, Denise. You good?” Denise answered angrily, “No, I’m pissed! I just got suspended!” Shocked, Keisha got up to sit closer to a pacing, animated Denise as she told the story. Apparently, Denise and two of her White Volleyball teammates ‘skipped’ school together. With their parents’ permission, they went to breakfast and an indoor amusement center to celebrate getting accepted into their first-choice colleges. Yet, Denise was the only one of the three who got suspended; the other two received an after-school detention. When Denise asked why she received a different punishment, AP Novak told her that she “has a record.” Denise yelled, “Miss! I’ve been late to homeroom a few times, but last year they were caught *cheating*!” Keisha stayed longer than usual that day to calm Denise down. And it worked, until AP Novak showed up at her door.

Before Ms. Phillips could completely open the door, AP Novak, staring and pointing at Denise, barked, “*She* is suspended and needs to leave the premises immediately before I have the police escort her off!” Keisha, now angry herself, smiled and answered, “Hello, Mr. Novak.” Ms. Phillips waited for him to make eye contact with her before she continued, “Denise, exemplifying GN’s warm community, was kind enough to offer to help me carry my things to my car. We’ll be leaving shortly. With my health issues, it takes me a while to gather my things. I’m sure you understand.” AP Novak glared at Ms. Phillips, who met his glare, no longer smiling. AP Novak appeared as if he wanted to say something else, but Ms. Phillips’s demeanor and stance caused him to pause and walk away without another word. Keisha closed the door and turned to Denise with an exasperated, “Girl!” They were both shaking their heads when Keisha said, “Let’s outta here before the cops come and take us both!” Denise chuckled dryly, “Maaaaan, graduation can’t come soon enough!”

The following weeks after spring break were business as usual for Ms. Phillips. AP Novak joined the ranks of those coworkers who ignored her, and parents still called/emailed complaining about something. Black students asked her to coach them on what to say in their upcoming meeting with the superintendent concerning the racial attacks on them. And Keisha just left an assembly that honored all Senior Class teachers except her, despite teaching more seniors than anyone else. Checking her email before leaving, Keisha saw that Principal Schmidt had asked her to stop by his office before she left; he would like to discuss next year. Keisha gathered her things and headed to Principal Schmidt’s office.

Theoretical Framework: Williams et al.’s Microaggressions Framework

The concept of racial microaggressions was first introduced by Pierce (1970), who described them as subtle, often automatic, degradations directed toward Black people. Building on Pierce’s foundational work, Sue et al. (2007) categorized microaggressions into three forms: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Williams et al. (2021) advanced this framework, expanding the concept of racial microaggressions into 16 categories and situating them within the broader institutional context, emphasizing that these are not merely interpersonal slights but manifestations of systemic racism (See Table 1).

Table 1:
Racial Microaggressions Chart

Racial Microaggressions The subtle verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities that communicate hostile or derogatory racial slights towards marginalized groups.		
Broad Type (Sue et al., 2007)	Category (Williams et al., 2021)	Definition / Description
Microassaults (overt, often intentional racial attacks)	Racial Slurs & Epithets	Direct verbal or written racial insults, e.g., calling Black students derogatory names.
	Avoidance / Social Exclusion	Deliberate efforts to avoid interacting with or acknowledging members of a racial group.
	Racial Profiling / Criminality Assumption	Treating individuals as threatening or criminal because of their race.
	Symbolic Displays of Racial Hostility	Visual symbols or gestures conveying explicit hostility (e.g., displaying racist images, nooses).
	Discriminatory Discipline / Unequal Treatment	Imposing harsher penalties or consequences based on race.
Microinsults (often unintentional, communications that demean a person's racial identity)	Assumption of Inferiority / Intellectual Incompetence.	Suggesting a person is less capable or intelligent due to their racial identity.
	Second-Class Status / Erosion of Authority	Treating individuals as less respected or ignoring their professional authority based on their racial identity.
	Pathologizing Cultural Values or Communication Styles	Labeling culturally grounded behaviors (e.g., dialects, dress, hairstyles, interaction styles) as inappropriate or unprofessional.
	Exoticization / Objectification	Highlighting cultural traditions or physical traits as strange, "different," or for curiosity.
	Tokenism / Burden of Representation	Singling out a person as the spokesperson for their racial group.

Microinvalidations (communication that dismiss or negate the experiential reality of minoritized people)	Color-Evasion / “Color-Blindness”	Denying the significance of racism in shaping experiences (“I don’t see color”).
	Denial of Individual Racism	Insisting that one’s own actions or the institution are not racist.
	Minimization / Dismissal of Racism	Suggesting that racism is no longer a significant problem or that reported incidents are exaggerated.
	Myth of Meritocracy	Attributing success or failure solely to effort or ability, ignoring systemic barriers.
	Cultural Deficiency / Blaming the Victim	Explaining disparities by deficit views of the marginalized group’s culture rather than structural inequities.
	Environmental Exclusion / Racially Hostile Climate	The absence of minoritized people in leadership roles, curriculum, symbols, or decision-making spaces.

Williams et al.’s (2021) expansion of the racial microaggressions framework provides a more nuanced approach for examining Ms. Phillips’s experience at Gamma Nu. Persistent exposure to normalized racism contributes to racial battle fatigue—the emotional, psychological, and physiological toll of enduring hostile environments (Smith, 2008). By highlighting institutional complicity, the framework links individuals’ daily experiences to broader patterns of structural racism.

Case Analysis

Viewed through Williams et al.’s (2021) taxonomy, the experiences of Ms. Phillips reveal a layered system of racial microaggressions operating at interpersonal and institutional levels. The taxonomy illustrates how seemingly minor indignities cumulate to form a racialized organizational culture that espouses inclusion but upholds Whiteness as the standard for belonging.

Microassaults

There are several moments in this case when overt expressions of racial hostility were present. The use of racial slurs and *epithets* by White students on social media demonstrates the anti-Black animus within the student body. The White student’s false claim that Ms. Phillips had physically assaulted him and AP Novak’s readiness to believe it, or his *Criminality Assumption*, evokes longstanding stereotypes of Black people as dangerous. Similarly, he threatened to call the police on Denise, a Black student who was a target of *Discriminatory Discipline* practices.

She was suspended while her White peers received lesser punishment for the same infraction. Further, GN's Senior Auction fundraiser functioned as a normalized microassault rooted in racialized histories of enslavement. The silence of leadership and peers around this *Symbolic Display of Racial Hostility* underscores institutional complicity.

Microinsults

Parents and students' repeated questioning of Ms. Phillips's intellect and credibility, despite her advanced degrees and experience, and their *Assumption of Inferiority*, were what Williams et al. identified as microinsults. Students tossing test papers at Keisha and a colleague speaking with a student mid-lesson without a word to her were examples of how they communicated their belief in her *Second-Class Status*. Because Keisha is Black, she was not worthy of respect. Additionally, the notion that she was "disrupting" the school's "warm community" by enforcing the College Board standards reflects a racialized framing of her professionalism as a problem. Such a framing, or *Pathologizing Communication Styles*, condemned her professional rigor and directness, traits celebrated in White educators.

Microinvalidations

The most insidious were the microinvalidations that dismissed or reframed Ms. Phillips's concerns about racism. When she mentioned the mistreatment of her and Black students, Principal Schmidt's *Minimization/Dismissal of racism* was illustrated by his treating those incidents as isolated interpersonal conflicts. His failure to act on Ms. Phillips's accounts of racialized disrespect shows a denial of racism as a reality in the school climate. Further, GN's *Environmental Exclusion*, or failure to hire a full-time Black teacher in 45 years, and the overwhelmingly White faculty and leadership, signaled to Ms. Phillips and students that the institution centered Whiteness.

Discussion

Applying Williams et al.'s (2021) framework to the Gamma Nu case illustrates that microaggressions are not isolated incidents but interconnected dynamics sustained by institutional culture. This case demonstrates that integration without change perpetuates racial harm. The administration's failure to acknowledge racism within its community allowed that harm to continue as experienced by Ms. Phillips and her students. The cumulative effect of these microaggressions, combined with heavy workload and little support, caused significant emotional and physical stress, resulting in a heart attack that underscores the reality of racial battle fatigue. For educational leaders, this analysis illustrates the necessity of moving beyond performative diversity initiatives toward cultivating racially literate, anti-oppressive leadership (Khalifa, 2018). Leaders failing to properly address the racialized organizational culture, GN reproduced the same conditions that marginalized the integrated Black students post-*Brown*.

For educators like Phillips, daily microaggressions divert time and emotional energy away from instruction, erode authority with students, and imperil health. These conditions also sent harmful messages to students about whose knowledge and presence were valued. As Williams et al. (2021) and Pierce (1970) argue, addressing microaggressions requires both individual accountability and institutional transformation to create safe, inclusive educational

environments. Inclusion requires leaders to identify, name, and redress the racial microaggressions embedded in policies, practices, and interpersonal interactions. Otherwise, inclusion is just integration by another name.

Teaching Notes

While a comprehensive table of microaggressions is included, readers are encouraged to engage with Williams et al. (2021) alongside the case for deeper context and understanding. The following are suggested questions and activities to encourage dialogue.

Multiple-Choice Questions

Q1. According to Williams et al. (2021), which of the following best describes *microinvalidations*?

- A. Openly expressed racial hostility or slurs.
- B. Actions that question the competence of a person belonging to a minoritized group.
- C. Communications that dismiss or negate the lived experiences of racism.
- D. Curiosity that treats cultural practices as exotic.

Answer: C

Q2. The description of Ms. Phillips being the first full-time Black teacher at GN for 45 years best illustrates which category of racial microaggression?

- A. Tokenism / Burden of Representation
- B. Criminality Assumption
- C. Pathologizing Cultural Values
- D. Microinvalidation

Answer: A

Q3. Which leadership action most aligns with NELP Standard 2 and SLLA Domain II for responding to microaggressions?

- A. Waiting for parents to express concern before taking action.
- B. Establishing clear policies and providing professional learning on microaggressions.
- C. Recruiting more teachers from historically marginalized groups.
- D. Referring targeted students to external community agencies.

Answer: B

Q4. The Senior Auction fundraiser, which resembled a “slave auction,” can be seen as which type of microaggression in Williams et al.’s framework?

- A. Environmental microaggression
- B. Microinvalidation
- C. Microinsult
- D. Interpersonal microassault

Answer: A

Q5. The lack of disciplinary action for students who used racial slurs against Black classmates reflects which form of microaggression in Williams et al.’s taxonomy?

- A. Environmental Exclusion
- B. Dismissal of Racism
- C. Burden of Representation
- D. Myth of Meritocracy

Correct Answer: B

Essay Question

Describe examples from the case study that illustrate how environmental or structural conditions in the school conveyed exclusion to Ms. Phillips. Using Williams et al.’s taxonomy, explain the impact this type of microaggression can have on teacher retention.

Scoring Rubric (10 pts):

- 4 pts – Correctly identifies structural/environmental examples (e.g., being the first Black teacher in 45 years, lack of acknowledgment by colleagues, or restroom incident).
- 3 pts – Accurately categorizes it using the Williams et al. framework.
- 3 pts – Explains implications for teacher well-being and retention.

Activity: Policy Audit and Redesign

- **Setup:** Ask participants to conduct a mock “equity audit” of school policies or traditions (e.g., fundraising practices, discipline assignments, hiring practices) using the case study as a model.
- **Task:** Identify one policy or tradition that enables microaggressions. Propose a new version that is inclusive.
- **Discussion:** Link findings to SLLA Standard 3 (Managing Organizational Systems and Safety) and Standard 5 (Integrity, Fairness, and Ethics).

Standards Alignment

This case underscores critical implications for leaders aligned with **NELP Building-Level** and **SLLA** standards:

- **Equity and Cultural Responsiveness (NELP 3; SLLA Domain 2):**
Leaders must conduct equity audits to examine how school norms, traditions, and disciplinary practices perpetuate racialized harm. Superficial acts of diversity, like token hiring or performative assemblies, must give way to ongoing professional learning and anti-racist policy enforcement.
- **Ethical Leadership and Professional Culture (NELP 2; SLLA Domain 1):**
Principals are ethically obligated to intervene when faculty undermine a colleague's authority or engage in racially coded disrespect. Silence is a form of consent. Establishing systems for restorative dialogue, bias reporting, and accountability can begin to disrupt a culture of complicity.
- **Community and Stakeholder Engagement (NELP 5; SLLA Domain 4):**
Families and community members must be partners in shaping an inclusive culture. When parents weaponize complaints against Black teachers, administrators must resist appeasement and instead engage families in conversations about cultural respect.

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Chapter 7

Building Trust, One Family at a Time: A New Principal's Journey Toward Community Engagement

Krisdhal Ugarte-Torre, Omar Riaz, and Jennifer Murray

Abstract

A newly appointed principal at a Title I elementary school initiates a comprehensive plan to reestablish trust and rebuild meaningful partnerships with families and community stakeholders after years of strained relationships, chronic absenteeism, and inconsistent academic outcomes.

Context

Elementary School, located in a densely populated urban center in the southeastern United States, serves approximately 600 students from pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. The student population is linguistically and culturally diverse, with 94% qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. Over 60% of families identify Spanish as their primary language, and a growing number of households speak Haitian Creole. The school's enrollment has also included several newcomer students whose families are recent immigrants to the country. Many parents work multiple jobs, face housing instability, or are recent immigrants navigating a new cultural and educational system.

Once a vibrant school known for its annual multicultural fair and robust parent-teacher association, Elementary School has seen a significant deterioration of community trust over the past five years. This decline was exacerbated by frequent administrative turnover, inconsistent communication from school leaders, and district-imposed mandates. Academic performance has remained stagnant with minimal gains, while school enrollment has decreased, student absenteeism has increased, and family engagement has dwindled to surface-level participation at required meetings.

When Ms. Ana Delgado is appointed principal, the school community views her arrival as a potential turning point. Having served as an assistant principal at a neighboring school with similar demographics, she has a reputation for building authentic relationships and launching successful community-based programs. The district charges her with not only improving instructional quality and student outcomes but also with increasing student enrollment and reigniting family and community partnerships that have withered over time.

The Case

In her first month, Ms. Delgado embarks on a deliberate campaign to understand the experiences and needs of all school stakeholders. She holds a series of listening sessions that include one-on-one meetings with every teacher and staff member, evening coffee chats with parents in the cafeteria, and outreach visits to local churches, community centers, and small businesses. Through these conversations, she hears a recurring theme of disconnection. Parents express frustration at receiving communications only in English and feeling unwelcome at the school. Several recount instances where they were spoken to dismissively or felt judged because of language barriers or cultural differences.

Teachers, for their part, describe a sense of burnout and cynicism, citing a lack of autonomy under district-imposed protocols, a decline in state test scores, insufficient administrative support, and too many short-lived initiatives. Unrealistic expectations around lesson planning and pressures to teach to the test exacerbate cynicism. Additionally, feelings of a lack of acknowledgment of a teacher's expertise, coupled with rising student needs, foster an environment in which teachers don't feel equipped or supported to address daily challenges. Chronic stress and a diminished sense of purpose further contribute to a culture of apathy and skepticism.

Community partners report being contacted only when donations or volunteer support were needed, without true collaboration or recognition. Local business owners shared that their contributions often went unacknowledged, while faith leaders noted that invitations to school events rarely reflected the ongoing support their congregations already provided to families. Representatives from neighborhood organizations recalled being left out of planning discussions for after-school programs, despite their long histories of working with youth in the community. Collectively, these partners emphasized a desire for more meaningful, two-way relationships in which their expertise, cultural knowledge, and resources would be valued as integral to the school's success rather than engaged only in moments of need.

Recognizing the need for systemic change, Ms. Delgado launches a three-pronged initiative centered on community voice, partnership, and inclusion. First, she strengthens communication channels by developing a multilingual monthly newsletter, overhauling the school website to include translation tools, and introducing Class Dojo for each grade level led by the Assistant Principal. She assigns the school's family liaison as the point person for families and as the coordinator of language access for all school events.

Second, she focuses on building sustainable community partnerships. Ms. Delgado reaches out to a local health clinic to co-sponsor a back-to-school wellness fair offering immunizations, dental checkups, and nutrition counseling. She collaborates with the neighborhood Home Depot to develop a school garden and requests that teachers integrate a nutrition program into the science curriculum. She also meets with leaders from faith-based organizations, immigrant resource groups, and after-school providers to develop a shared community calendar and identify opportunities for mutual support.

Finally, Ms. Delgado introduces inclusive events that honor the diverse cultural heritage of the school's families. She initiates a Fall carnival with a "Festival of Nations" focus, co-designed by a committee of parents, staff, and students, and ensures that planning meetings are held at flexible times with childcare provided. The event becomes an opportunity for families to share food, stories, and traditions while also accessing resources from community organizations.

Despite these early successes, challenges emerge. A vocal parent advocacy group criticizes the principal's efforts as performative, arguing that the school has not created mechanisms for shared decision-making. At a scheduled evening coffee chat, members of this group push for the creation of a formal parent advisory council that would review school policies, participate in budget discussions, and co-design family programs. Without such structures, they contend, parents remain on the margins, heard but not empowered.

During a grade-level planning session, a veteran teacher questions the time and resources devoted to events and partnerships, expressing concern that instructional rigor is being sidelined. She points to frequent requests for staff to attend community events after long teaching days, sparking a candid debate among colleagues about competing priorities.

At the district level, officials issue reminders that while family engagement is important, accountability metrics, particularly test scores and attendance remain the primary indicators of success. In a mid-year leadership briefing, they emphasized that while engagement is important, measurable academic gains must take precedence.

Taken together, these perspectives underscore the central dilemma facing Ms. Delgado: how to balance the urgent need to rebuild trust and community partnerships with the equally pressing demands of instructional rigor and district accountability expectations.

Decision point

Ms. Delgado must determine how to maintain trust and momentum among families and partners while addressing internal skepticism and aligning with district expectations. Her next steps will influence not only the school's direction but also the culture of collaboration she is working to build across the community.

Assessment Items

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. What is one key strategy Ms. Delgado used to build authentic communication with families?
 - A. Creating a standardized email update in English only
 - B. Launching a multilingual monthly newsletter and using Class Dojo
 - C. Hosting parent meetings only during school hours
 - D. Removing translation services for budget reasons

Key:

B is correct because in the case study, Ms. Delgado revamped communication channels with a multilingual newsletter, website translation, and Class Dojo for each grade level. These steps addressed families' complaints about English only communications and built authentic, ongoing contact.

A is incorrect because a standardized English-only email update would reinforce the language barrier and is exactly what families criticized.

C is incorrect because limiting parent meetings to school hours would make it harder for working families to participate. Ms. Delgado deliberately held events at flexible times with childcare so as to include as many participants as possible by removing barriers.

D is incorrect because removing translation services would reduce access rather than build communication and participation.

2. Why did Ms. Delgado initiate a "Festival of Nations" Fall carnival?

- A. To align with a new state policy
- B. To save costs on school-wide events
- C. To honor the school community's cultural diversity and promote inclusion
- D. To reduce attendance at school events

Key:

C is correct because Ms. Delgado replaced the traditional carnival with a Festival of Nations co-designed with families to showcase food, traditions, and stories. This was an explicit move to reflect the community's cultures.

A is incorrect because no state policy required this event; it was a school-level initiative.

B is incorrect because the case study makes no mention of cost savings as a motivation.

D is incorrect because the event was designed to increase, not reduce, family attendance.

3. What challenge did Ms. Delgado face from a vocal parent advocacy group?

- A. Concerns about lack of shared decision-making
- B. Criticism for excessive testing policies
- C. Support for more homework assignments
- D. Requests to cancel community outreach events

Key:

A is correct because parents wanted a formal advisory council and criticized efforts as "performative" without mechanisms for true shared decision-making.

B is incorrect because excessive testing policies were not their main concern.

C is incorrect because they did not advocate for more homework at any point.

D is incorrect because the desire was for more involvement, not cancellation of outreach events.

4. Which community partnership did Ms. Delgado pursue to support student health?
- Local auto repair shop
 - Real estate firm to sponsor PTA
 - City council to install security cameras
 - Local health clinic to co-host a wellness fair

Key:

D is correct because Ms. Delgado partnered with a health clinic to provide immunizations, dental checkups, and nutrition counseling at a back-to-school fair.

A is incorrect because an auto repair shop was not mentioned.

B is incorrect because a real estate firm sponsoring the PTA is not in the case study.

C is incorrect because a city council/security cameras scenario is not supported by the narrative.

5. How did Ms. Delgado involve families in academic programming?
- She excluded families from planning curricular events
 - She assigned families academic tutoring duties
 - She partnered with local businesses to support nutrition lessons tied to curriculum
 - She replaced academic content with cultural programming

Key:

C is correct because Ms. Delgado's partnership with Home Depot to develop a school garden included integrating nutrition into science lessons, which linked this community support to academics.

A is incorrect because she did not exclude families from planning events or curricular activities.

B is incorrect because she did not assign tutoring duties to families.

D is incorrect because the cultural programming was to complement, not to replace, the academic content.

Constructed Responses/Essay Prompt:

Activity One

Consider the competing priorities Ms. Delgado faces. How should she navigate the tension between community engagement efforts and pressure for academic performance? What leadership practices would support a balanced approach?

Possible Response Key Points:

Address and identify the tension: District accountability metrics (test scores, attendance, etc.) versus long-term investment in rebuilding trust and engagement. Discuss what the balanced approach involves:

- Integrate community engagement into instructional goals (e.g., embed a nutrition program into the science curriculum).

- Use data to show how family engagement improves attendance, behavior, and student motivation, which are precursors to academic gains.
- Pilot small, high-impact events that directly connect families to student learning.

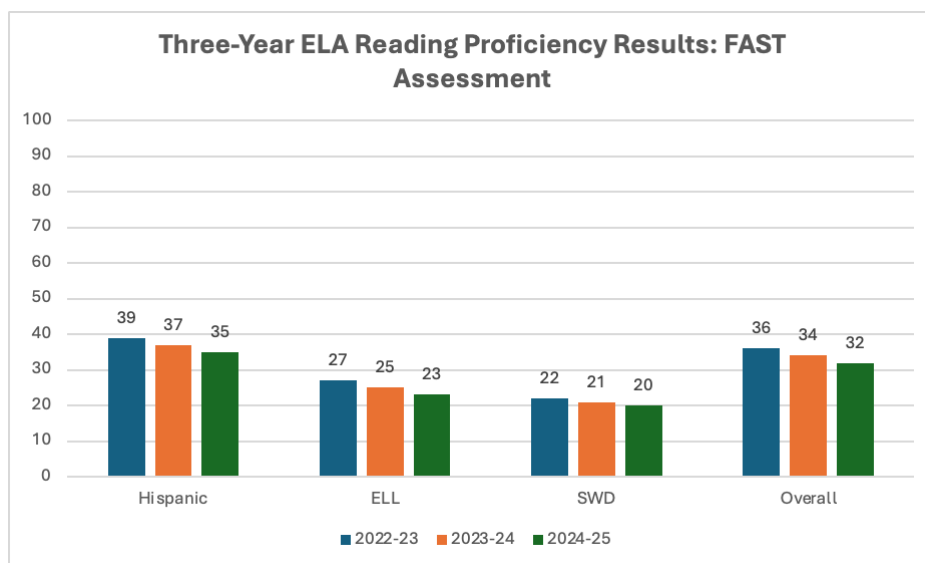
Discuss leadership practices evident in the case study:

- **Shared Decision-Making:** The formation of a parent advisory council to give families a voice and satisfy calls for transparency.
- **Distributed Leadership:** Empowers staff and community liaisons to share the workload, reducing teacher burnout.
- **Evidence-Based Advocacy:** Present progress updates to the district, highlighting short-term wins such as increased attendance, positive school climate survey results, and increased school enrollment.
- **Professional Development:** Train staff on the value of engagement and culturally responsive pedagogy.

The thought is to position community engagement not as a competing priority but as a driver of academic improvement.

Activity Two

This chart shows English Language Arts (ELA) Reading proficiency on the statewide exam over the past three years for Elementary School. What patterns do you notice across student groups, and what do these trends suggest about issues of equity at the school? Based on your analysis, what strategies should Ms. Delgado prioritize to close achievement gaps while simultaneously strengthening trust with families?



Possible Response Key Points:

ELA Reading proficiency at Elementary School has declined steadily across all subgroups over the past three years. Hispanic students dropped from 39% to 35% proficiency, English Learners (ELL) from 27% to 23%, Students with Disabilities (SWD) from 22% to 20%, and the overall student body from 36% to 32%. While all groups show downward trends, the gaps are most pronounced for ELL and SWD students, whose proficiency rates remain well below their peers.

These patterns highlight serious equity concerns, particularly the persistent achievement gaps faced by linguistically diverse learners and students with disabilities. Without targeted support, these groups risk falling further behind, exacerbating disparities and undermining the school's improvement goals.

To address these gaps while strengthening trust with families, Ms. Delgado should prioritize strategies that blend instructional improvement with authentic engagement. This could include:

- Expanding bilingual supports and ensuring instructional materials are culturally and linguistically responsive.
- Providing targeted interventions for ELL and SWD students, such as small-group tutoring or literacy-focused after-school programs.
- Engaging families as partners by offering workshops on supporting reading at home, delivered in Spanish and Haitian Creole, and co-developing literacy goals with parent input.
- Building trust through transparency, regularly sharing progress data with families and celebrating incremental gains to demonstrate that improvement is possible.

By linking equity-focused instructional strategies with intentional family engagement, Ms. Delgado can begin to close achievement gaps while fostering sustained community trust, which is critical for long-term school improvement.

Discussion Topics:

1. How can a principal ensure that family engagement activities are not only inclusive but also sustained over time?

Possible Response: Sustainability of engagement in activities requires building an infrastructure, shared ownership, and responsiveness. Ms. Delgado ensured planning meetings were inclusive by providing childcare and flexible time. She also designated a family liaison for ongoing communication and co-developed a community calendar with partners. This distributed leadership model not only empowered others but reduced the reliance on the principal.

2. What are the risks and benefits of prioritizing family and community engagement in a school labeled as underperforming?

Possible Response: Ms. Delgado encountered both outcomes as she gained community momentum but faced internal resistance and district pressure tied to accountability metrics. In any such case, the benefits may include rebuilding trust, improving student attendance and motivation, and enriching instruction with community knowledge.

The risks include staff skepticism or district concerns that time and resources are diverted from academic instruction.

Standards Alignment

NELP Standards: 5.1, 5.2, 5.3

SLLA Standards: Standard VI. Community Engagement Leadership

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Chapter 8

From Engagement to Investment: School Leaders (re)Engaging Families for School Success

Cathleen Cubelic and Kathryn Wiley

Abstract

Partnering with families strengthens student success. This case study shares a principal's shift from engagement to investment, sparked by a challenging incident. By building trust, relationships, and shared purpose, the school reframed parent involvement as co-investment. The result: stronger partnerships, deeper trust, and improved student experiences despite limited resources.

Narrative

Introduction

Parent engagement is a positive lever for student outcomes and impacts academic performance at all educational levels and across all student groups (Jeynes, 2005, 2007, 2024). For educators, forging partnerships with parents (including caregivers and families) is a powerful way to support student success. Educators, researchers, and policymakers have emphasized the role of families in supporting learning, shaping student attitudes, and reinforcing school values, and in recent decades, “parent engagement” has become a central pillar in the conversation about student success. Yet in many schools, “parent engagement” has been reduced to participation in traditional events—open houses, parent–teacher conferences, volunteer opportunities, or school fundraisers—without developing the deep, strategic, and sustained collaboration required to realize student achievement goals. Traditional ‘parent engagement’ models are often one-directional, with information flowing *from* schools *to* parents. Traditional parent engagement efforts have often been limited and lacked depth in the following ways:

- **One-Way Communication** – Too often, schools distribute information to parents without inviting them into the decision-making process. Parents receive updates but are rarely asked to co-create solutions.
- **Event-Based Involvement** – Engagement is frequently assessed through quantitative measures, such as event attendance, rather than the quality of the ongoing relationship or its impact on student outcomes.
- **Undefined Expectations** – Without shared goals and clearly stated roles, “engagement” becomes ambiguous, making it difficult to measure progress or hold anyone accountable.

In an era where students' needs are increasingly complex—affected by shifting technology, social-emotional challenges, diverse learning styles, and varying access to resources—this surface-level engagement is insufficient. This approach leaves school leaders, staff, and families

uncertain and reluctant to deepen relationships, making it difficult to cultivate a positive school community. Many schools may think of parent engagement in narrow ways, such as involvement in school-based activities, which overlooks other forms of parental engagement, including high expectations and cultural and social capital (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2020; Jeynes, 2010; Warren et al., 2009; Yosso, 2005). Parents bring a wealth of knowledge about their children that, when combined with classroom teachers' expertise, can greatly enhance a child's learning trajectory.

While parents and educators both bring specific expertise to the table, each is limited in interpersonal and disposition tools to engage in joint work that supports a child's learning journey, underscoring the need for both school staff and parents to build capacity (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Classroom teachers, in particular, who, within a school's walls, are often closest to a child's learning, can begin the shift from an 'engagement' to an "investment" mindset by fostering daily interactions with parents and caregivers that are conducive to stewarding a child's success. An "investment mindset," cultivated regularly and sustained over time, offers an avenue for deepening educators' capacity for family-school partnerships at increasingly broader levels within the school environment (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). School leaders can also benefit from this shift by recognizing that while broader opportunity conditions and capacity work must occur across school staff and families, adopting the metaphor of an "investment" mindset can also help educators change mental models, seeding buy-in and capacity among staff to (re)engage families in promoting school success.

Several useful frameworks exist to improve parent-school relationships. One of those is the Dual Capacity framework for building family-school partnerships. This tool explains the challenges and "opportunity conditions" necessary for schools to fully realize sustainable relationships with families (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). This framework also includes policy and program goals, as well as the kinds of outcomes families and school staff might anticipate from its use. While addressing this framework in its entirety is out of scope for this chapter, herein we offer a metaphor for building capacity among school leaders who, in turn, can share this heuristic with classroom educators closest to the educational pathway, a process that may be seeded to grow in increasingly expansive ways for schools and parents over time. By examining their practices and embracing an *investment mindset*, school leaders can foster a gradual shift in how educators engage with parents. This mindset values the ongoing, reciprocal contributions of both parties as essential to achieving lasting educational results.

The "Investment" Metaphor

One way to think about the investment mindset shift is to imagine a person seeking advice on long-range planning. For this, some people get advice from a financial planner, typically with the goal of taking steps to achieve desired outcomes. Together, the family and the financial planner draw on separate knowledge, information, and expertise to make decisions that support long-term goals. This relationship works as a result of five defining characteristics:

- Collaboration – Both the advisor and the client bring knowledge to the table. The advisor offers expertise in strategy; the client shares their vision and priorities.
- Joint Commitment – Both parties agree to take action and remain invested over time, knowing results won't happen overnight.

- **Shared Goals** – Clear, measurable objectives guide every decision, from short-term budgeting to long-term investment.
- **Accountability** – The advisor must deliver sound recommendations and track performance; the client must follow through with agreed-upon actions.
- **Expectation of Positive Outcomes** – Both parties expect progress, even when the path includes adjustments along the way.

In this metaphor, both the school and the family bring distinct but equally valuable expertise. The parent, like a client seeking financial guidance, possesses deep knowledge of the child's goals, strengths, and resources—spanning academic aspirations as well as cultural and social assets. This expertise helps define priorities, risk tolerance, and long-term objectives. The teacher serves as the financial planner, contributing professional insight into academic content, pedagogy, and learning strategies that support the child's growth. Just as a financial planner understands markets and develops investment strategies, the teacher interprets learning data and instructional methods to guide decisions. Together, the parent and teacher form a partnership that designs, monitors, and refines a personalized plan to maximize the child's potential. For educational leaders, this metaphor suggests a model of parent–school collaboration that moves beyond basic “engagement” toward a true partnership grounded in shared goals, accountability, and mutual commitment to student success.

Just as with finances, this partnership depends on parents and educators sharing their expertise, recognizing each other's contributions, and investing their time and care toward a shared, meaningful return: student learning and growth. The depth of investment shapes the quality of outcomes and is demonstrated through cultural diversity, co-creation of goals, transparency, and capacity building. Schools demonstrate shared investment by moving beyond one-directional communication to foster genuine partnerships. While educators and parents both make unique contributions, here we describe how educators can adopt an “investment mindset” to drive micro-changes in their everyday interactions with parents in the service of a larger goal. When educators lead in this mindset shift, it can be a powerful lever for change, as parents, particularly those most marginalized by schools, both historically and today, may bring a sense of distrust, doubt, and generationally-compounded experiences of rejection, exclusion, and disappointment to parent-educator interactions. Educators can use micro-shifts in disposition and framing to initiate reinvestment into the family-school relationship.

Collaboration: From Information-Sharing to Co-Creation

In the traditional model, schools provide information and updates while parents listen. In the partnership model, both parties are active participants, crafting and guiding the child's learning journey. Schools invite parents into conversations about curriculum priorities, intervention tools, support strategies, and enrichment opportunities—not just as a formality, but as genuine partners in a shared investment. For example, a school may share reading achievement data with a parent and then jointly work to develop a tailored plan that includes defined in-school strategies and at-home practices. The plan reflects both professional expertise and the parent's valuable insight into their child's personality, interests, and routines.

Joint Commitment: Investing Over the Long Term

Like a financial plan, a child's educational experience requires long-term commitment. Progress isn't always immediate. In the plan, parents commit to supporting learning at home, monitoring progress, and communicating regularly, while schools commit to providing high-quality instruction, timely feedback, and meaningful resources. A hallmark of this commitment is consistency. Sporadic bursts of engagement, much like irregular investment deposits, are likely to yield weak or short-lived returns. A true partnership thrives when both sides consistently invest in the mutually agreed-upon actions.

Shared Goals: Aligning Vision and Strategy

The advisor–client relationship works best when both share the same end goal: to increase financial security. In education, the shared goal is student success, which must be defined with clarity and specificity to enable genuine participation for both parties. Instead of vague, generic aims like “do well in school,” effective, shared goals might state:

- Achieve grade-level reading proficiency
- Improve math problem-solving skills by 20% on benchmark assessments
- Build self-regulation skills, completing homework independently four nights a week

Clear goals enable the development and implementation of targeted strategies, the tracking of progress, and necessary adjustments, thus mirroring the way a financial advisor adjusts and rebalances a portfolio when market conditions change.

Accountability: Mutual Responsibility for Results

In a highly effective advisor–client relationship, accountability is a two-way street. The advisor is responsible for providing performance monitoring and sound advice. The client is responsible for following through on contributions, savings plans, or investment changes.

In the educational partnership model:

- Schools are responsible for tracking student progress, communicating results regularly, and providing actionable guidance and next steps.
- Parents are to implement agreed-upon supports at home, monitor progress, and provide regular and timely feedback to the school.

In both scenarios, when either party falls short in their commitment, the partnership provides a process for addressing the gap, not by assigning blame, but through review and a recalibration of the plan.

Expectation of Positive Outcomes: Planning for Success

A financial advisor never enters a relationship expecting failure. Rather, they intend and expect growth, even when the journey requires patience and long-term commitment. Similarly, schools and parents begin their relationship with the belief that their child(ren)/students can and will succeed when intentionally supported. This mindset establishes a foundation and fosters connection and persistence. Setbacks become opportunities to reassess strategies rather than reasons to disengage. Celebrating progress, no matter how small, reinforces the shared belief that the partnership is working and that continued investment is worthwhile.

In the next section, we offer a case narrative of one school leader's paradigm-shifting experience with a parent. This critical incident inspired the leader to take new action. After the narrative, before describing how the school leader responded, we offer questions for readers to consider about how they would handle such a situation.

Case Narrative: Part 1

Having spent 20+ years in affluent, high-performing school districts as both a teacher and administrator, I was confident in my understanding of parent engagement. In my experience, it was all but guaranteed. Parents were highly visible at open houses, volunteering for parties and events, cheering at sporting events, and fighting for the front row at every performance. It seemed like the school environment was overflowing with support. In all honesty, there were times when I had wished for maybe a little less "involvement."

Looking back on that environment, I cannot say that the nature of the investment was always authentic. Presence did not always equate to partnership. Many families were active in the life of the school, but their involvement was primarily transactional, focused more on events, visibility, and reputation than on the deep, intentional collaboration needed to drive student success.

That realization became even clearer to me as my career path took me to districts with challenging demographics: single-parent homes, high poverty, and parents working multiple jobs. Parents in these settings loved and cared for their children just as deeply as those in more affluent schools. Their desire to encourage success was the same, but what was missing were the conditions that would allow them to fully embrace their role in the partnership.

One afternoon last spring, I was reminded of how deeply impactful the home-school relationship can be. I met with Mrs. Alvarez, whose son, Daniel, had been struggling academically. During our conference, the teacher and I reviewed his progress and grades and recommended after-school tutoring. Mrs. Alvarez sat quietly, nodding, but her expression told another story. When I asked if she had questions, she hesitated before saying, "You always tell us what's wrong, but no one ever asks me what I think. I don't come to these things much because, honestly, it feels like the decisions about my child have already been made and you don't really need me here."

She went on to explain that when she was a student, school conferences were intimidating. "My mom never spoke up," she said, "and when she tried to, she didn't feel heard. It's the same now. You are telling me that Daniel should attend tutoring, but you don't ask about my work schedule or how we'll get him there without a car. It feels like you don't think I have anything of value to contribute."

Her words really had an impact on me. Mrs. Alvarez was not resisting due to a lack of interest; she was resisting because past experiences had led her to believe that her input would not matter. She felt excluded from the process and intimidated by the formal, top-down way we conducted these meetings. Instead of being a partner in her child's education, she felt merely like a bystander, just watching it all unfold.

Questions for Readers:

- Imagine yourself as the administrator in this situation. What types of reactions might you have had to what Mrs. Alvarez shared, and why?

- In what ways could previous life experiences, backgrounds, cultures, social class, and the traditional hierarchies of school staff and parent relationships have impacted the interaction between the administrator and Mrs. Alvarez?
- How would you characterize the *quality of relationships* between administrators, teachers, and parents in your own school?
- How would you characterize the *types of engagement* between administrators, teachers, and parents in your own school? Traditional? One-way? Is there a mutual investment? Shared power and decision-making?

Case Narrative: Part 2

After this powerful conversation with Mrs. Alvarez, hearing her deep concern and commitment to her child's success despite economic challenges, I realized the danger of assuming that poverty or lack of formal education equates to a lack of interest in education. That moment prompted meaningful changes across our school. I led staff training to challenge biases and implement strategies to build more respectful relationships with families. We made communication with parents more accessible through multimodal messages, home visits, and flexible meeting times - approaches that invited dialogue and discussion rather than simply sharing information. We created varied opportunities for engagement, including virtual conferences and weekend events, and partnered with community organizations to offer parent resources and support. Most importantly, I worked with our entire team and made concerted efforts to prioritize listening to parents, establishing regular forums for feedback, and encouraging collaboration.

As a result, we have begun to nurture our shared investment. We have seen increased parent participation, self-initiated involvement, improved student outcomes, and a stronger sense of trust and partnership between home and school—demonstrating the power of genuine connection and a shared commitment to student success.

It was clear that Mrs. Alvarez was showing me how the traditional model of parent engagement presented challenges. The measures we were typically using -- event attendance, family volunteers, and the distributed information home -- didn't require us to acknowledge or address the limitations of these practices and the barriers parents face. We had failed to create structures for real two-way dialogue, collaborative goal-setting, or shared decision-making. Families like the Alvarezes want to support their children, but when organizational and process conditions are restrictive and do not foster authenticity, goals can feel predetermined or dismissive. This dynamic reinforces the perception among many parents that they do not expect to be considered.

As a district leader, I see the need for a paradigm shift. Parents and families bring deep expertise about their children's strengths, needs, and circumstances. Schools bring expertise in curriculum and instruction. Together, we can build a relationship grounded in transparency, trust, and mutual accountability, one that is like that of a financial advisor and client, thus co-creating a plan that works for both the school and the family. Until we move beyond one-way communication, event-based involvement, and ambiguous expectations, parents like Mrs. Alvarez will continue to feel disengaged or, even worse, disregarded or disrespected.

Implementing the Shift: Practical Steps for Schools

For this paradigm shift to take root, schools must make intentional changes like these:

- **Redefine Engagement** – Move from measuring attendance at events to measuring contributions toward shared goals.
- **Build Structured Communication Channels** – Schedule regular “strategy meetings” with parents, similar to a financial portfolio review, to assess progress and adjust plans.
- **Co-Create Learning Plans** – Develop individualized learning roadmaps that clearly outline the responsibilities of both school and family.
- **Provide Tools and Resources** – Equip parents with actionable strategies they can realistically implement at home.
- **Create Accountability Systems** – Track both school and parent-delivered actions to ensure balance and follow-through.
- **Celebrate Milestones** – Recognize joint efforts and progress toward goals to reinforce commitment.

Conclusion: A More Powerful Partnership

Parent engagement will always be important, but it is no longer enough on its own. Today’s students need an investment-mindset partnership that mirrors the relationship between a consumer and their financial advisor. This model demands collaboration, joint commitment, shared goals, accountability, and an unwavering expectation of positive outcomes. When schools and families adopt this intentional approach, they move beyond surface-level involvement to create a dynamic alliance that results in a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Just as a sound financial partnership can change the trajectory of a client’s future, this type of educational partnership has the power to transform the trajectory of a child’s life.

Multiple Choice and Constructed Response Questions

Mapp & Kettner (2013) provide a [Dual-Capacity framework](#) for building family-school partnerships. Components of this tool explain the challenges and “opportunity conditions” necessary for schools to fully realize sustainable relationships with families. While an “investment mindset” can initiate a shift in school leader and educator capacity, it is important to consider the opportunity conditions, including the policies and programs necessary for long-term, sustainable family-school partnerships. Using this framework, consider the following:

1. The school shares mid-year reading data with a parent and invites them to co-create a plan for at-home reading routines. Which capacity does this collaboration help to build?

- A. Confidence – an individual’s level of self-efficacy
- B. Connections – relationships between staff, families, and community
- C. Capabilities – knowledge and skills to act on strategies
- D. Cognition – personal assumptions and perspective

2. Constructed Response: Use an asset-based perspective to make a list of knowledge and contributions a parent and teacher might each already have and can bring to the process of co-creating a reading plan for a child.
3. During a parent-teacher meeting, the teacher shares reading strategies, while the parent offers insights into the child's home interests and routines. This type of collaboration primarily supports which key principle of the Dual Capacity-Building Framework?
 - A. Building trust through top-down school directives
 - B. Enhancing capabilities through shared expertise
 - C. Limiting family involvement to academic spaces
 - D. Encouraging passive observation of student progress
4. Constructed Response: Thinking beyond the teacher-parent interaction, make a list of knowledge and skills a school leader might need to have to support deeper parent engagement schoolwide. Bonus Question: What structural and policy changes might a leader need to undertake to support deeper parent engagement schoolwide?

Answer Key

- (1) B - Sharing data and co-creating a reading plan are likely to help build connections between school staff and family through interaction and shared input.
- (2) Parent: Child's common vocabulary words, interests, family traditions and culture, home language. Teacher: Evidence-based literacy instruction, differentiation, and scaffolded academic challenge.
- (3) B - in each example, the parent and the teacher both contribute unique information to support the child's reading progress.
- (4) Leaders can benefit from a collaborative, interactive, and transformational or servant leadership style, including a knowledge base of local history, cultures, and social networks, and building in systemic, integrated time for shared capacity building among teachers and families while making resource, scheduling, and staffing decisions that support these goals.

Activities for Further Exploration: As part of building capacity for parent engagement, educators can utilize community asset mapping to identify and leverage local resources, skills, and networks to deepen engagement. For a free downloadable resource, see the [Learner Centered Collaborative](#).

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Table 1***NELP and SLLA Numbers that Support the Case Study***

NELP Standard	NELP Component	SLLA 6990 Content Standard
Standard 3.3 Equity and Cultural Responsiveness	Strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices.	Climate and Cultural Leadership Advocating for equitable and inclusive school environments.
Standard 5.1 Community and External Leadership	Engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways.	Community Engagement Leadership Building strong relationships with families and community stakeholders.
Standard 7.3 Building Professional Capacity	Develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel.	Instructional Leadership Supporting staff development and instructional improvement.

Chapter 9

Leading AI Integration in Schools: The Case of Hewill Middle School

LaMonica Williams

Abstract

Artificial intelligence is quickly transforming the landscape of K-12 education, representing a major innovation in teaching and learning. This paper focuses on National Educational Leadership Preparation Program (NELP) Building Standards 6.2, 6.3, and 7.3, and the School Leader Licensure Assessment (SLLA) standards II.A.4, II.B.7, and II.B.8.

Introduction

What if the next great innovation in K-12 education isn't a new curriculum, but the intelligent partnership between educators and artificial intelligence (AI)? For today's school leaders, the rise of AI marks not just a technological shift but a defining moment to redesign how teaching and learning unfold. Since the release of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in November 2022, school leaders have been working to understand its capabilities and implications for integrating it into instructional practices and organizational systems. Although AI has been available for many years, in more nuanced forms, such as educational software that differentiates learning paths based on user input, these uses were supplementary and did not generate new information outside of the user's input (Roberts & Richardson, 2024). GenAI (a subset of AI that refers to tools like ChatGPT and Copilot (OpenAI, 2025), which produce new content or responses) has rapidly evolved from an abstract technological concept to a tangible presence in K-12 schools. For school leaders, the question is no longer *whether* to adopt this technology, but how to integrate it properly into the school community, especially when there are no proven methods to follow.

The rapid rise of this disruptive technology and its use in education has necessitated more tech-savvy school leaders (Tyson & Sauers, 2021), with knowledge and technical expertise on how AI technology can be effectively utilized in schools to support teaching and learning outcomes and be supportive of teachers' and students' technology use in classrooms (Zhang et al., 2023). As AI continues to transform and impact education, leadership is necessary to manage the shifts it brings (Huang et al., 2019). This necessitates school leaders to adopt a strategic approach that navigates the complexities of adoption and maximizes its potential benefits across diverse educational contexts (Renta-Davids et al., 2025).

Theoretical Framework

As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly embedded in educational practice, its integration presents school leaders with a critical opportunity to redefine instructional design, professional learning, and student engagement in contemporary K-12 settings. Yet, despite this powerful potential, AI has instead introduced nuanced layers of uncertainty regarding its integration into teaching and learning (Roberts & Richardson, 2024). Some educators are excited about AI's potential and see it as poised to significantly transform K-12 teaching and learning (Adams & Chuah, 2022; Adams & Thompson, 2025; Dobrin, 2023). Skeptics, on the other hand, argue that AI is too impersonal, too invasive, and can perpetuate the biases and inequities that schools and districts are working hard to eliminate (New Leaders, 2024).

As key decision-makers, school leaders play a central role in shaping how AI is viewed, adopted, scaled, and aligned with educational goals (Roberts & Richardson, 2024). This requires school leaders who can both inspire the change that AI integration brings to educational philosophy and values and facilitate deep professional transformation that serves as an impetus for redefining teaching and learning in technology-rich environments.

This case study uses a hybrid framework that integrates transformational leadership, transformative learning theory, and the guiding principles of the National Educational Leadership Preparation Program (NELP) standards to demonstrate how effective school leaders facilitate the cognitive, emotional, and professional transitions required for the ethical and effective integration of AI. By inspiring vision, fostering reflection, and cultivating adaptive expertise, leaders become architects of tech-savvy school cultures that continually learn and evolve. As the number of emerging technologies that school leaders will encounter during their tenure continues to increase, the leadership behaviors and learning processes outlined in these two frameworks can support the responsible adoption of other emerging technologies, thereby deepening our understanding of how innovation can meaningfully enhance teaching and learning (Woodruff et al., 2023).

Building on this hybrid framework, the NELP standards can be woven throughout as the professional foundation that operationalizes the enactment of transformational leadership and transformative learning in practice. Within this model, the standards provide a coherent structure to guide school leaders in translating the framework's core tenets into observable leadership behaviors that promote teacher growth, collaborative inquiry, and continuous school improvement. In doing so, the framework not only illustrates how leaders navigate the human dimensions of technological change but also demonstrates how the competencies outlined in leadership preparation standards are put into practice through the ethical and transformative use of innovation.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership provides a critical foundation for understanding how principals can guide schools through the complexities of AI integration. This leadership approach has been shown to enhance teacher efficacy, organizational commitment, and instructional improvement, making it particularly relevant in the context of technology-mediated

change. Hou et al. (2024) emphasize that transformational leadership equips school leaders to adapt to rapidly shifting educational environments and leverage AI to enhance teaching and learning outcomes. Their analysis highlights that transformational leaders “set directions” (p. 135), “develop people” (p. 136), and “redesign the organization” (p. 137) to create conditions that support innovation and continuous learning, as essential competencies for navigating AI-driven transformation. Moreover, transformational leaders serve as catalysts for change by modeling ethical behavior, inspiring shared visions for AI-enhanced instruction, and fostering collaborative cultures that enable teachers to build confidence with emerging technologies. By aligning strategic vision with the human dimensions of teacher learning, transformational leadership provides an essential framework for principals seeking to implement AI in ways that uplift both instructional quality and organizational capacity.

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory deepens the framework by explaining how teachers and principals undergo the cognitive and emotional shifts necessary for meaningful, sustained change. According to Mezirow (2012), transformation begins with a disorienting dilemma that prompts learners to question previously held assumptions and engage in critical reflection. AI integration poses a dilemma of this kind; it disrupts long-standing beliefs about instruction, assessment, and teacher expertise. Kim’s (2018) study on principals’ transformative learning shows that such disruptions are powerful catalysts for leadership development. It reveals that principals reshape their leadership assumptions and strategies through experiences that provoke cognitive and emotional disequilibrium, followed by reflective meaning-making. In the context of AI, this means principals must help teachers grapple with uncertainty, reinterpret their roles, and reconstruct professional identities that embrace ethical, adaptive, and inquiry-driven approaches to technology.

The AI-Savvy School Leader

The integration of transformational leadership and transformative learning theory closely aligns with the competencies outlined in national leadership preparation expectations, such as the NELP standards. These standards articulate the principles of what effective school leaders should know and be able to do. The hybrid framework operationalizes these expectations by showing how school leaders lead both the organizational dimensions of AI implementation and the human dimensions of educator change. Through this alignment, the framework provides a cohesive theoretical foundation for understanding how school leaders develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to guide the integration of AI in ways consistent with professional leadership standards.

By aligning these theoretical perspectives with the expectations embedded in leadership preparation standards, the case study demonstrates how effective school leaders must guide their schools through the multifaceted transitions necessary for responsible AI adoption. In doing so, it shows that leading AI integration is not merely a technical endeavor but a profoundly human one, requiring school leaders to shape conditions for organizational change and to support the adult learning processes that enable teachers to reconstruct their assumptions, build new competencies, and engage confidently with emerging technologies. This framework therefore

positions school leaders as pivotal agents who translate theory into practice, ensuring that AI integration enhances teaching and learning in purposeful, ethical, and sustainable ways.

Teaching Case Narrative

Hewill Middle School

Hewill Middle School, a Title I school in a large Midwestern city, serves approximately 780 students in grades 6–8. The student body is racially and linguistically diverse, representing 52% Black, 28% Latino, 15% White, and 5% Multiracial or other ethnicities. Over 70% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and nearly 30% are English learners. The school is part of the Hewill Unified School District and has a reputation for being a community hub, offering wraparound services and strong family engagement.

The district recently adopted an initiative that encourages schools to integrate artificial intelligence (AI) and emerging technologies into instruction. The initiative aims to improve student engagement and close achievement gaps. Hewill Middle was chosen as a pilot site due to recent declines in academic achievement linked to economic decline and significant demographic shifts. Dr. Kam Cori joined Hewill Middle as principal after serving eight years as principal in a neighboring school district and ten years as a technology teacher and district coordinator. A respected leader with a strong background in instructional technology and a commitment to equity, he was endorsed by the district for hire to address ongoing challenges and reverse the decline in academic performance. However, there is growing tension between innovation and tradition, particularly regarding the use of artificial intelligence technology in classrooms.

In July, Dr. Cori scheduled a leadership retreat for the AI Innovation team to review the results of the previous academic year's pilot and to plan for the upcoming school year. The AI Innovation team included:

Ms. Kendall Morr is the Assistant Principal for Instructional Innovation. Kendall is tasked with coaching teachers on AI integration. She is deeply committed to the district's vision but feels torn between the pressure to produce quick results and her belief that meaningful change requires time and trust-building. Kendall worries that pushing too hard could alienate skeptical teachers and damage morale, yet delaying progress might jeopardize district funding.

Ms. Lauren Bryce is an 8th-grade ELA teacher, veteran educator, and union representative. Lauren is respected by her peers and influential in shaping staff opinion. She values instructional autonomy and fears that AI tools will diminish teacher judgment and creativity. Her skepticism is heightened by recent accusations of plagiarism involving English learners. While she advocates for equity, her resistance to AI risks slowing innovation. The principal must decide how to engage Lauren without creating a perception of coercion or undermining teacher trust.

Mr. Eric Ken is a 5th-grade math teacher enthusiastic about AI tools. He is a data-driven teacher who sees AI as a game-changer for personalized learning. He frequently shares success stories in PLCs, but his enthusiasm can sometimes come across as dismissive of colleagues' concerns. His push for rapid adoption creates tension with teachers who feel unprepared, raising questions about whether innovation is being driven by evidence or by personal advocacy.

Ms. Katie Issacs, a parent representative with the Parent Coalition for Digital Equity, is adamant about protecting student rights. She has raised concerns about data privacy and bias, citing instances in which AI has unfairly flagged English learners. Her advocacy resonates with families, and she has hinted at escalating the issue to local media if transparency is lacking. While Katie's involvement is crucial to community trust, her stance adds urgency and pressure to resolve ethical issues before expanding AI use.

The pilot year of the initiative aimed to provide teachers with a safe environment to integrate various AI tools into classroom instruction. The leadership team agreed on four goals for the initiative:

- Build teacher capacity to use AI tools, as teachers need training and support to integrate AI meaningfully and equitably.
- Align AI integration with instructional goals and district priorities to improve teaching and student outcomes.
- Address ethical concerns and build community trust to ensure transparency and credibility.
- Use data to guide the implementation of AI tools and to evaluate their impact on student outcomes.

At the leadership retreat, Dr. Cori presented preliminary data from the AI pilot, showing mixed results.

- Some teachers praised AI for increasing student engagement, using tools such as adaptive learning platforms, or for reducing their grading time.
- Others felt overwhelmed by the learning curve and unsure how to integrate AI meaningfully.
- Teachers are divided: some want more training, while others want to opt out entirely.
- Teachers are concerned about student over-reliance on AI tools.
- Student achievement data is inconclusive—some subgroups are showing gains, while others are not.
- Some students don't have access to technology or the internet outside of school.

Email from Teacher PLC

"We need clarity. What does success look like? Some tools help, but others create more work. We need training and time to adapt—not pressure to 'perform' for visitors."

For school-wide implementation, teachers began using an AI-powered writing assistant to help students revise their essays. However, a recent incident sparked controversy when the AI flagged several essays written by English learners as plagiarized. When questioned by their teachers, the students insisted they had not plagiarized their work. Nevertheless, parents of these students were upset and expressed concerns that the AI writing assistant might be biased against non-native English speakers, penalizing linguistic patterns common in second-language writing.

Additionally, it was found that the AI tool was storing student writing samples on external servers, raising concerns about data privacy, FERPA compliance, and whether parents had provided informed consent for the use of their data. The Parent Coalition for Digital Equity requested a pause on AI use until a formal review of the plagiarism accusation was conducted and/or resolved. They also want formal policies for the use of AI to be established. They raised

concerns shared by their students that AI tools reinforce stereotypes through hallucinations or incorrect responses.

Email from Parent Coalition

“We demand transparency. Why were student essays stored on external servers without explicit consent, and why are English learners disproportionately flagged for plagiarism? Until these issues are resolved, we want AI use paused.”

Email from an Accused Student

“AI feedback is wrong! It said I plagiarized, but I didn’t! I’ve always been a good writer. We want tools that help us, not harm us!”

Meanwhile, surrounding districts began requesting interviews and school visits, and the district office viewed this attention as an opportunity to secure future funding to expand the initiative by adding more schools. They urged Hewill Middle to present the pilot as a success, even though internal discussions revealed uncertainty about what success should look like.

Email from Superintendent

“We need Hewill Middle to present the pilot as a success. The attention from other districts is an opportunity to secure future funding. Please prepare a showcase plan for next month.”

Adding to the tension, the AI Innovation team is divided not only between AI enthusiasts and skeptics but also over whether the school should pause implementation to address concerns raised by teachers, parents, and students. With pressure mounting from the district, unclear success metrics, a growing school-community divide, and public scrutiny, the team faces a critical question: What problem are they trying to solve?

Given these concerns, the AI Innovation team is unsure how to proceed.

- Is the central issue a lack of teacher training, a flawed implementation plan, deeper concerns about equity and trust, or conflicting definitions of success among stakeholders?
- Should the school pause the initiative, revise it, or push forward under pressure from the district, knowing that each choice carries risks to funding, community trust, and teacher and student morale?
- How can the school strike a balance between innovation and caution while complying with legal requirements, addressing ethical concerns, and meeting the district’s demands for positive publicity?
- What unintended consequences might arise if AI integration continues without addressing bias and data privacy issues?
- How should school leadership prioritize competing goals, such as teacher capacity, equity, district expectations, and measurable student outcomes, given limited resources and time?

Teaching Notes

The discussion and activities developed for this case help aspiring and current educational leaders explore the benefits and challenges of integrating artificial intelligence in schools. In this scenario, building administrators encounter various AI-related challenges, including uncertainty, ethical concerns, and the need for ongoing professional development. Integrating AI into instruction presents a unique opportunity to reimagine teaching and learning to address achievement, opportunity, and equity gaps. This case encourages leaders to think critically about how to guide this transformative change in ways that are inclusive, transparent, and grounded in research-based best practices. This case touches on:

- NELP 7.3/ SLLA II.A.4, which emphasizes the leader's role in building teacher capacity through professional learning. In the context of AI integration, this is a critical component, as leaders must provide training that equips teachers to use AI tools effectively and ethically, and support their ongoing learning to adapt to other emerging technologies that continue to enhance learning for both teachers and students.
- NELP 6.3/SLLA II.B.7, which emphasizes the importance of a leader's ability to evaluate emerging educational challenges and trends and apply research when assessing how these issues are being addressed in the school environment ethically and equitably. In the context of AI integration, this means leaders must collaborate with stakeholders to evaluate the instructional value of AI tools and use research to guide the adoption and implementation of solutions that promote equitable student outcomes.
- NELP 6.1 and 6.2/SLLA II.B.8, which emphasizes the leader's ability to use data-informed and research-based methods to guide decisions and implement strategies that promote equity and improve outcomes, to close opportunity gaps in schools. In the context of AI integration, this means leaders must ensure that the adoption and implementation of AI tools do not widen opportunity gaps but instead enhance access and achievement for all students.

Multiple Choice Questions

Question 1

Several veteran teachers resist using AI-based formative assessment tools, citing concerns about data privacy and the loss of professional autonomy. Newer teachers, however, are eager to experiment with these tools but lack confidence in interpreting the data they produce. What should the principal do to address both concerns and strengthen instructional practice? (SLLA II.A.4)

- A-Create differentiated professional learning pathways that pair experienced teachers with early adopters for peer mentoring and joint data analysis.
- B-Host an all-staff meeting to mandate consistent use of the AI tools to ensure uniformity.
- C-Meet with each veteran teacher individually to address resistance before proceeding with implementation.
- D-Provide district policy documents on AI data privacy and instruct staff to review them before using the technology.

Question 2

Eighth graders have historically scored below grade level on a standardized writing exam. A group of teachers at your school is struggling to integrate a new AI-powered writing assistant into their instruction to improve students' writing skills. How can a school leader best support teachers' development in technology integration? (SLLA II.A.4)

- A-Suggesting that teachers develop and maintain a digital classroom space for sharing work.
- B-Incorporating technology into a predetermined number of instructional activities weekly.
- C-Organizing a professional learning community to discuss technology integration.
- D-Demonstrating and coaching teachers on best practices for using technology tools during instructional time.

Question 3

Your leadership team recommends adopting an AI-based formative assessment platform. Which action best demonstrates research-informed decision-making? (SLLA II.B.7)

- A-Approve the platform because it is widely used in other districts and has positive anecdotal reviews.
- B-Review independent research studies and district performance data before making a decision.
- C-Implement the platform immediately to stay ahead of technology trends.
- D-Conduct a teacher survey to gauge interest, then proceed cautiously.

Question 4

Faculty members propose using AI chatbots to support homework. While the tool could provide access outside of school hours, some teachers express concern that the chatbot might offer explanations that differ from classroom methods, leaving students confused when they return to school, or inadvertently reinforce misconceptions if students misunderstand how to ask a question or interpret the responses. How should the principal responsibly evaluate this trend while addressing the ethical concerns? (SLLA II.B.7)

- A-Approve the immediate use of AI chatbots to demonstrate support for innovation.
- B-Require all teachers to integrate the AI chatbot into homework assignments to maintain consistency across the school.
- C-Pilot the AI chatbot in a few classrooms and provide teacher training on monitoring student interactions.
- D-Reject the proposal entirely to avoid the ethical risks associated with AI use in homework support.

Question 5

Your school is exploring AI-driven personalized learning platforms to accelerate math growth for students performing below grade level. Several vendors claim impressive results from neighboring schools, yet the tools vary widely in quality and design. Which action best reflects a commitment to evidence-based decision-making and continuous improvement? (SLLA II.B.8)

A-Select the platform highlighted in a widely followed national education blog.

B-Prioritize a platform recommended by a close colleague who has seen success, and develop a plan to monitor implementation and student performance.

C-Move quickly to adopt a platform midyear so the school can be an early adopter of this technology.

D-Encourage each math teacher to experiment with various AI platforms and share anecdotal success stories.

Constructed Response Question 1 (SLLA II.A.4)

Scenario:

The district has recently adopted AI-based tools to support lesson planning and formative assessment. However, teachers are unsure how to use them effectively and ethically. Early feedback indicates varying levels of readiness and differing opinions on the value of AI in instruction. As the principal, explain how you would conduct an assessment to determine teachers' current understanding of, confidence in, and professional learning needs related to AI integration.

Then describe the steps you would take to:

1-Establish clear expectations for the appropriate and ethical use of AI.

2-Provide differentiated opportunities for teachers to strengthen their content knowledge, technological skills, and instructional practices to improve student learning outcomes.

3-Provide ongoing monitoring and support.

Constructed Response Question 2 (SLLA II.A.4, SLLA II.B.7, SLLA II.B.8)

Scenario:

Consolidated School is a culturally and linguistically diverse school where nearly 40% of students are identified as multilingual learners (MLs). Students complete district literacy benchmarks three times per year, aligned to state ELA and language development standards. The district recently introduced an AI-supported language and reading tool that provides vocabulary scaffolding, oral language practice, translation support, and personalized reading passages to help MLs strengthen academic language proficiency.

As the new school leader, you review benchmark and ML progress-monitoring data. Schoolwide, ML students showed steady improvement in vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. However, you notice a decline in performance in Mr. Alvarez's class, which serves a large cluster of multilingual learners, compared with their peers.

To investigate, you conduct several walkthroughs, review lesson plans, and speak with students and staff. You observe the following:

- Lessons closely follow the ELA pacing guide but rarely provide explicit instruction in academic vocabulary or structured language supports.
- The AI language tool is used sparingly in Mr. Alvarez's classroom, whereas other teachers report high engagement and improved ML progress.
- ML students report that they "mostly work quietly on their packets" and use the AI tool only "if we finish early."

- Teachers who regularly use the AI tool report that it helps them identify vocabulary gaps, monitor patterns in oral language practice, and adjust their instruction.
- Benchmark results show that ML proficiency increased from 47% to 55%, while Mr. Alvarez's ML subgroup dropped from 44% to 40%.
- Walkthroughs reveal that ML students often work independently without language scaffolds, sentence frames, or opportunities for structured speaking practice.
- During the grade-level PLC, team members analyzed ML growth indicators, discussed research-based supports, and planned targeted interventions. However, Mr. Alvarez did not bring student data and participated minimally.

Mr. Alvarez is uncertain about the “usefulness of AI tools for language learners” and prefers “traditional workbook routines” because “they keep students focused.”

You want to help Mr. Alvarez strengthen his language-based instructional practices, use the AI support tool effectively, and improve ML students' reading and language skills.

Using the scenario and supporting information:

Identify three leadership actions the school leader should include in a comprehensive plan to improve instruction and student outcomes for multilingual learners in Mr. Alvarez's classroom.

For each action:

1. Justify how the action addresses AI as an emerging trend and is grounded in evidence-based practice.
2. Explain how the action will build Mr. Alvarez's professional capacity.
3. Describe how the action will support efforts to close opportunity gaps for multilingual learners.

Discussion and Analysis Questions

Drawing on information from the case study, discuss in small groups:

1. What do you consider the most urgent issue in this case, and why?
2. How would you approach identifying the root cause(s) of the current challenges?
3. What leadership actions would you take in the short term? In the long term?
4. How can you engage teachers, students, and families as partners in shaping the next steps?
5. What data would you collect to inform your decision-making?

Extended Learning Activities

Activity 1: Bolman and Deal's Four Frames Theory is a helpful guide for analyzing organizational challenges. The four frames: (1) structural, (2) human resources, (3) political, and (4) symbolic, offer a comprehensive way to understand and address the complexities of school

leadership in the context of integrating AI into educational settings. If students are unfamiliar with this framework, have them read the following:

Duran, A. & Ermiş, U. F. (2025). Integrating generative AI in education: Implications for school leadership from policy documents through Bolman and Deal's four-frame theory. *Journal of Faculty of Education*, 14(2), 416-440. <https://doi.org/10.14686/buefad.1435086>

Each group should also identify one current, research-based strategy or policy example (from credible sources) to inform their recommendations. Note: Encourage the use of scholarly databases, district resources, or policy briefs.

Divide students into groups of four, with each group representing one of Bolman and Deal's frames. Have students first discuss the case study from the perspective of their assigned frame. Then have the groups develop a brief proposal (1-2 paragraphs) outlining how their frame's perspective, in the context of the case study, informs:

- A professional learning plan for teachers.
- An evidence-based policy or strategy to promote equitable use of AI.

Remix the groups so that each new group has one member from each "frame".

- Share key takeaways
- Identify overlapping insights between the frames.
- Develop a comprehensive school improvement recommendation that integrates all four perspectives to inform and guide future decisions.

Facilitate a reflective discussion.

- How did each frame shape your understanding of leadership decision-making?
- How did using the four frames help you identify evidence-based leadership strategies to build teacher capacity and support student learning outcomes?

Activity 2: Imagine observing a 7th-grade English Language Arts (ELA) classroom where the teacher is piloting an AI writing assistant. Students are using the tool to revise their essays, but are relying too heavily on AI suggestions without fully understanding the feedback. The teacher is unsure how to balance AI support with student agency and critical thinking.

Respond to the following questions as part of a group discussion:

1. What professional learning opportunities would you design to help this teacher strengthen their instructional practice with AI?
2. How would you ensure the teacher understands both the technical and pedagogical aspects of AI integration?
3. How would you evaluate whether this AI tool is improving student learning?
4. How might AI tools unintentionally widen achievement gaps? How would you address this?

Draft a one-page AI Coaching Integration Plan that includes:

- A goal for teacher growth.
- A strategy for modeling or co-teaching.
- A method for collecting evidence of impact on student learning.

Leading AI Integration in Schools: The Case of Hewill Middle School Activity Answer Key

Multiple Choice Questions

Question 1 Answer Key:

A-Correct: This leverages peer expertise, supports the growth needs of both groups, and fosters a collaborative culture grounded in shared practices and ethical use.

B-Incorrect: Mandates compliance rather than fostering authentic engagement.

C-Incorrect: Individual meetings address resistance but not collective capacity building.

D-Incorrect: Providing documents raises awareness but doesn't build practical understanding or instructional skills.

Question 2 Answer Key:

A-Incorrect: Creating a digital classroom space can encourage technology use, but it doesn't necessarily build teachers' capacity.

B-Incorrect: Mandating a set number of technology-based lessons focuses on compliance rather than on capacity building.

C-Incorrect: Organizing a PLC is a good leadership action that promotes collaboration, but it lacks the direct modeling and coaching that are effective for developing skills.

D-Correct: Demonstrating and coaching provide the professional learning support needed to effectively develop new skills.

Question 3 Answer Key:

A-Incorrect: Popularity and positive anecdotes do not equate to effectiveness.

B-Correct: Using research and data ensures that decisions are grounded in evidence.

C-Incorrect: Acting quickly without vetting and evidence can risk poor outcomes.

D-Incorrect: Teacher interest is important, but it cannot replace evidence-based evaluation.

Question 4 Answer Key:

A-Incorrect: Supporting innovation is good, but approving without safeguards overlooks the ethical risks.

B-Incorrect: Mandating use without safeguards increases the ethical risks.

C-Correct: Balances innovation with responsibility to address ethical risks.

D-Incorrect: Rejecting outright avoids risks but stifles innovation and fails to responsibly assess potential benefits.

Question 5 Answer Key:

A-Incorrect: A popular education blog doesn't replace rigorous research.

B-Correct: Selecting a tool vetted by colleagues and proven effective, along with a plan for implementation and monitoring, supports evidence-based leadership.

C-Incorrect: Prioritizing speed over research and vetting could undermine efforts to improve instruction.

D-Incorrect: Teacher experimentation can lead to isolated success stories and increase the risk of inconsistent implementation and monitoring.

Constructed Response Question 1

An exemplary response should include elements such as:

1. Conducting a Needs Assessment

- Collect baseline data through surveys, focus groups, or informal interviews to assess teachers' knowledge, comfort, and perceptions of AI.
- Conduct classroom observations and review instructional artifacts to identify natural opportunities to integrate AI tools in formative assessment.
- Analyze student learning data and teacher feedback to align professional learning needs with instructional outcomes.
- Use findings to organize staff by readiness levels (e.g., beginner, developing, advanced) to guide differentiated support.

2. Establishing Expectations

- Communicate a clear vision that aligns AI use with instructional goals, ethics, and equitable student outcomes.
- Develop shared norms or guiding principles for responsible AI use in teaching and assessment.

3. Building Teacher Capacity

- Design targeted, professional learning aligned with identified needs.
- Facilitate PLCs or coaching cycles where teachers explore and reflect on effective AI integration.
- Provide exemplars and modeling that demonstrate how AI supports content rigor, formative assessment, and feedback.

4. Ongoing Monitoring and Support

- Monitor implementation through observation and teacher reflection logs.
- Gather evidence of impact on instruction and student learning.
- Adjust professional learning plans based on follow-up needs assessment data.

Constructed Response Question 2

An exemplary response should include elements such as:

1. Clear Identification of Leadership Actions

Each action should be:

- Specific, actionable, and connected to the scenario
 - Directly tied to data in the scenario.
 - Leadership-centered (what *the principal* will do)
2. Evidence-Based Justification for Each Action
- Explicit academic vocabulary instruction
 - Structured speaking and listening routines
 - Scaffolded reading supports
 - Use of formative data to guide instruction
3. Explanation of How Each Action Builds Teacher Capacity
- Job-embedded coaching
 - Modeling strategies for ML support
 - Structured PLC collaboration
 - Opportunities for practice, reflection, and feedback
 - Access to research-based instructional resources
 - Support for learning the AI tool (guided practice, demonstrations)
4. Explanation of How Each Action Closes Opportunity Gaps
- Disaggregated benchmark data
 - ML subgroup performance declines (40% vs. schoolwide 55%)
 - Low usage of the AI support platform
 - Need for systematic scaffolds.

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Chapter 10

Stronger Together: Uniting Families, Schools, and Communities Through the Community Learning Collaborative

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Abstract

This teaching case illustrates how equity-driven leadership transformed family engagement at a diverse middle school. Through culturally responsive communication, community partnerships, and co-designed events, the initiative fostered trust, increased participation, and reshaped school culture. It aligns with NELP Standards 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3 to support leadership development.

Teaching Case Narrative

Observing the Disconnect

When Mr. Daniels accepted the position of assistant principal at the Middle School, he arrived with energy, optimism, and a strong belief in the power of relationships. The school served a highly diverse student population, with more than 20 languages spoken across the community, and nearly 60% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. While the school's diversity was one of its greatest strengths, it also revealed substantial challenges in family engagement. Attendance data and teacher observations confirmed that engagement was low across academics, athletics, and extracurricular activities (AAEs), and the school needed a new approach.

Within his first few months, Mr. Daniels attended a wide range of school events, including soccer games, class celebrations, choir concerts, and Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings. Despite these efforts, participation data showed that the same small group of parents consistently attended, while many others remained absent. Teachers reported that communication with families was inconsistent, especially for those whose primary language was not English. Many families expressed uncertainty about how to support their children academically during parent-teacher conferences, often relying on their child to translate for them. Others reported they felt intimidated by the school environment or disconnected from the staff.

During initial interactions, some families reported limited knowledge and understanding of school activities and schedules. This was often due to work commitments, as most activities began before parents finished work for the day, or to language barriers (relying on interpreters or children to translate).

In response, Mr. Daniels reviewed research on family engagement and found that meaningful connections between home and school are directly linked to student success, not only academically, but also socially and emotionally (Martinez-Yarza et al., 2024). Traditional engagement approaches, such as newsletters or annual open houses, often favored families with flexible schedules, strong English proficiency, and comfort navigating school systems.

Recognizing these limitations, Mr. Daniels emphasized the importance of disrupting deficit-based narratives and fostering reciprocal, equity-oriented partnerships between schools and families (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017). He found that some families had limited English proficiency, while others were unsure how to support their children academically, underscoring the need for multilingual, culturally responsive communication strategies.

The patterns of low family participation, inconsistent communication, and reported uncertainty among families indicated that the existing engagement structures at Franklin Middle School were unintentionally excluding many families. Effective engagement would require new strategies, broader partnerships, deeper empathy, and approaches that were more collaborative, inclusive, and responsive to the community's needs. Mr. Daniels recognized engagement would need to be designed around families' lived realities to achieve meaningful outcomes.

Phase 1: Launching the Community Learning Collaborative

After several weeks of observing school events and conversations with teachers, staff, and families, Mr. Daniels proposed a new initiative called the Community Learning Collaborative (CLC). The initiative was designed to deepen connections between the school and community while addressing engagement across AAEs. The idea was to host monthly sessions that brought families, educators, and community partners together around shared goals, supporting student learning, strengthening family-school relationships, and celebrating the community's cultural assets. Each session would focus on a specific theme drawn from parent feedback and staff recommendations. Early topics included *Helping Your Child with Homework*, *Navigating Sports and Extracurricular Activities*, and *Supporting Middle School Mental Health*.

Teachers volunteered to lead short workshops, and community organizations contributed resources or services. To shape the first event, Mr. Daniels created a survey (translated into Spanish, Arabic, and Mandarin) asking families to rank topics and suggest convenient times. The data from this survey would be essential for decision-making. He also invited representatives from the public library, a local health center, and a youth mentorship nonprofit to participate, demonstrating how strategic community partnerships can enhance student learning and engagement (Palencia & Siegel-Hawley, 2023).

Recognizing that communication was a major barrier, Mr. Daniels introduced an additional strategy to improve accessibility and family participation. He launched a digital newsletter highlighting upcoming events, student accomplishments, and community resources. He also created a school podcast in which teachers, parents, and students shared their experiences and insights. The podcast quickly became a meaningful bridge between home and school, especially for families who preferred to listen while commuting or cooking dinner. Both platforms offered translation into 125 languages through a partnership with Maestra, which agreed to sponsor the school's membership for three years, after Mr. Daniels wrote to the company to describe the school's family engagement challenges. Families expressed excitement that even extended family members could now stay informed and connected to school life. These communication efforts not only improved access to information but also modeled how inclusive outreach can build trust and strengthen the sense of community within the school.

The first Community Learning Collaborative meeting was scheduled for a Thursday afternoon at 3:30 p.m., just after dismissal. Volunteer teachers were prepared to lead sessions on study skills and middle school transitions. Despite the careful planning of the first event, only three families attended. Teacher feedback suggested that the timing of the event may have

contributed to the poor attendance. Other contributing structural barriers may have been limited childcare and competing work schedules.

Although the survey data Mr. Daniels had previously collected indicated that late afternoon was a preferred time for many families, the limited turnout suggested that self-reported availability did not always align with families' daily realities. Factors such as shift work, transportation, and childcare responsibilities seemed to play a greater role than anticipated. This outcome highlighted that the primary challenge was not the lack of family interest but other structural barriers that continued to limit access and participation.

Phase 2: Listening, Learning, and Adapting

Instead of abandoning the project, Mr. Daniels approached the limited turnout as an opportunity to learn. The following week, he met with the PTO, teachers, and several bilingual liaisons to reflect on the event and discuss potential contributing factors to the low attendance. Together, they identified four major barriers:

- Timing: Most families could not attend before 5:00 p.m. due to work schedules.
- Childcare: Parents need safe supervision for younger children.
- Communication: Some families lacked reliable internet access and never saw the digital flyers or other advertisements.
- Language: While printed materials were translated, the event lacked live interpreters for real-time conversations.

This reflection marked a turning point in Mr. Daniels's leadership. He recognized that family engagement is not about organizing events. Rather, it is about co-designing opportunities to reflect families' lived realities. The first phase had centered around the school's convenience, while the next phase would center around the community's needs.

Mr. Daniels began to redesign the initiative through a collaborative, data-informed approach. Each afternoon during dismissal, he positioned himself near the school's entrance to speak with parents to gather direct feedback. Using Google Translate, Mr. Daniels practiced simple greetings such as, "Hello, I'd like you to learn how we can better involve families in our school." He also invited a dual-language teacher to join him for 30 minutes each day to support translation and deepen conversations about family needs. For a full week, Mr. Daniels focused on listening to understand the barriers and aspirations of families across the school community. Beyond the school gates, Mr. Daniels sought input from local community partners who offered insights into the neighborhood work schedules and family routines. Observations at the local community center revealed that many students were already participating in after-school activities. Conversations with the center's director and staff indicated that family engagement was occurring, just not through school-sponsored events. This insight highlighted the importance of aligning school life with the community's existing rhythms.

With the new information, Mr. Daniels convened a leadership team, including two bilingual teachers, two PTO board members, and two community representatives, who together reimaged the Community Learning Collaborative as a family-friendly evening event. They renamed it *Dinner and Dialogue: The Community Learning Collaborative*. The changes were both practical in addressing immediate barriers and symbolic of a shift toward shared ownership between the school and its families. The redesigned initiative incorporated multiple new strategies:

- Meetings were rescheduled to 6:00 p.m. to accommodate working families.
- The PTO organized childcare in the gym, led by adult and student volunteers.
- A local pizza shop offered to sponsor dinner, demonstrating how community partnerships could be leveraged for mutual benefit. The school promised to include the pizzeria's name and phone number in the weekly podcasts and newsletters in exchange for 10% off up to 20 pies each month.
- The ESL department arranged live interpreters at every meeting to ensure meaningful participation for non-English-speaking families.
- The school purchased simple audio equipment to record sessions and post them online and on the podcast for families unable to attend.
- Flyers for *Dinner and Dialogue* were printed in multiple languages and distributed at neighborhood grocery stores and faith centers, as well as via social media platforms. Students also took them home in backpacks, along with a handwritten note: "*We hope to see you there!*"

The adjustments demonstrated equity-oriented leadership, collaboration with community partners, and strategic use of data to inform programming. These required collaboration, creativity, community trust, and advocacy at the district level for small budget reallocations. Within weeks, the new plan was in motion, providing more equitable access to school events and strengthening connections among families, school staff, and community members.

Phase 3: Reimagined Success and Collective Impact

The first Dinner and Dialogue night demonstrated a substantial increase in family engagement. By 6:15 p.m., the cafeteria was filled with families and staff interacting over dinner, while students participated in supervised activities in the gym. Local basketball players from the community center came to help organize games and lend a hand. Mr. Daniels opened the evening by thanking families for coming and acknowledging the learning process that led them there. "This event exists because you told us what you needed," he said. "Our goal is to build a school where every family feels seen, heard, and valued." The live interpreters translated his message for the non-English-speaking family members in attendance.

Teachers facilitated short, interactive sessions on helping students manage homework and balancing screen time. The local library offered free tutoring registration, while the community health center provided information on adolescent wellness. Additionally, a counselor from the nearby community college discussed early pathways to dual enrollment. Live interpreters ensured accessibility for non-English speaking families throughout the event.

Attendance nearly doubled to 59 families, a 20-fold increase over the first event. Observations and post-event surveys (translated into multiple languages) provided insight into families' experiences. The feedback indicated that parents found value in the opportunity to connect with other families, share strategies, and contribute ideas for future sessions. This allowed the school to continuously refine topics, session formats, and logistical considerations.

The success of the event exemplified how co-designed, community-centered approaches can improve equity in school engagement and strengthen relationships among families, educators, and community partners.

Parents lingered after the event ended to share phone numbers, stories, and ideas for future sessions. “I didn’t know other families were dealing with the same things,” one mother said. “This makes me feel like we’re in it together.” Over the next several months, the Collaborative expanded its reach and partnerships:

- A local bank sponsored a session on financial literacy for families.
- The youth soccer league donated practice jerseys for students in need and organized a family field day for all community members with games on school grounds and a family-style potluck.
- A group of parents volunteered to co-facilitate a bilingual workshop on supporting children with homework.

These efforts contributed to palpable changes in school culture. Teachers reported stronger, more consistent communication and partnerships. Family participation in extracurricular events increased noticeably, and student attendance improved. School safety and security measures were modified to facilitate greater parent-teacher engagement during student arrival and dismissal. His modified safety and security plan allowed parents to enter the school during student arrival and dismissal windows, and teachers were encouraged to head down for dismissal about five minutes earlier to allow parents to take a moment with a teacher, as needed.

The podcast became an important avenue for engagement. By the end of the second month, it had nearly 100 listener comments, fostering a sense of community and support. The podcast highlighted parent perspectives, interviewed community partners, and featured students sharing reflections. The school newsletter summarized the impact of each meeting and used it to advocate for sustained funding for translation services and family engagement materials. Data demonstrated a 300% increase in family participation across events following the Collaborative's initiative. These outcomes were recognized positively by district leadership, who requested that Mr. Daniels mentor other assistant principals in inclusive family and community engagement strategies. The district reinforced Mr. Daniels’ approach to family engagement by extending beyond attendance, requiring the establishment and cultivation of trust with parents and families, and flourishing when the school and its external partners collaborate and share ownership of student success.

Phase 4: Reflection and Leadership Growth

By the end of the school year, Dinner and Dialogue had become a signature feature of the Middle School. The most significant outcome extended beyond attendance at these events; it encompassed strengthened relationships among families, school staff, and community partners. Mr. Daniels wrote, “Family engagement isn’t a checklist. It’s a mindset. It’s not about doing more events. It’s about creating spaces where families feel ownership in their children’s education.” The process demonstrated that sustainable improvements in family engagement result from data-informed decision-making, collaboration, and culturally responsive approaches that prioritize the community’s needs. A very meaningful moment came at the final meeting of the year, when a parent approached Mr. Daniels after the event and shared, “I used to feel like this school wasn’t for families like mine,” she said. “Now it feels like our school.”

Epilogue

The story of the Community Learning Collaborative illustrates how educational leadership is not about implementing prepackaged solutions but about engaging authentically with the people schools serve. When leaders listen to families, adapt practices to community contexts, and advocate for equitable access, they transform schools into shared spaces of learning and belonging. Leadership is relational, not logistical. It is found in the shared power of centering family and community voices.

Teaching Notes

This teaching case centers on Mr. Daniels, an assistant principal who leads a transformative initiative to improve family and community engagement at the Middle School. The case offers rich opportunities to explore the complexities of equity-oriented leadership, culturally responsive practices, and strategic community partnerships through the lens of the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Standard Components 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3 (NPBEA, 2018).

Collaboratively Engage Diverse Families In and Out of School (NELP 5.1)

NELP Standard Component 5.1 calls for building-level leaders to “engage families in meaningful and reciprocal relationships to promote student learning and well-being” (NPBEA, 2018, p. 22). Mr. Daniels’s leadership journey exemplifies this standard through his intentional shift from one-directional outreach to co-designed engagement strategies. His initial efforts, which included attending events and launching a digital newsletter, were well-intentioned but revealed structural barriers that limited participation. Rather than viewing low turnout as disinterest, Mr. Daniels reframed it as a leadership challenge rooted in access, timing, and trust.

Educational leadership faculty can use this case to emphasize the importance of reciprocal engagement, where families are not passive recipients of information but active contributors to school culture. Mr. Daniels’s decision to gather feedback during dismissal, partner with bilingual staff, and redesign events to better meet family needs illustrates how leaders can foster authentic relationships. The case also highlights how reciprocal engagement requires humility, adaptability, and a willingness to learn from families’ lived experiences.

Students in leadership preparation programs can analyze how Mr. Daniels’s approach evolved from school-centered to community-centered. They can reflect on how reciprocal engagement differs from traditional models and explore strategies for building trust with families who feel disconnected from school systems.

Collaboratively Engage and Cultivate Relationships (NELP 5.2)

NELP Standard Component 5.2 expects leaders to “engage families in culturally and linguistically responsive ways” (NPBEA, 2018, p. 22). This case provides a vivid example of how culturally responsive leadership can dismantle barriers and foster inclusion. Mr. Daniels’s use of translated surveys, multilingual podcasts, and live interpreters demonstrates a commitment to honoring the linguistic diversity of the school community. His outreach extended beyond the school building, leveraging community spaces like grocery stores and faith centers to distribute materials.

Educational leadership faculty can guide aspiring leaders to examine how culturally responsive school leadership recognizes and values the cultural assets families bring to the school. Mr. Daniels's partnership with a local pizza shop and community center reflects an understanding of how engagement must align with community rhythms and values. His leadership also challenges deficit-based assumptions by positioning families as partners rather than problems to be solved.

Students can explore how cultural responsiveness intersects with equity and access. They can discuss how leaders can identify and respond to cultural and linguistic needs in their own school contexts, and how to avoid surface-level or scripted approaches to diversity.

Communication within the Larger Organizational, Community, and Political Contexts (NELP 5.3)

NELP Standard Component 5.3 emphasizes the leader's role in "building and sustaining productive partnerships with the community to promote student learning" (NPBEA, 2018, p. 22). Mr. Daniels's initiative illustrates how strategic partnerships can enhance engagement and support holistic student development. From collaborating with the public library and health center to securing sponsorships for dinner and childcare, the case shows how community organizations can be integrated into school life in meaningful ways.

Faculty can use this case to highlight the importance of shared ownership and mutual benefit in partnerships. Mr. Daniels's ability to advocate for resources, reallocate budgets, and build trust with external stakeholders demonstrates how leaders can leverage partnerships to address systemic barriers. The evolution of the Community Learning Collaborative into Dinner and Dialogue reflects a shift from isolated events to sustained, community-driven engagement.

Students can map potential partnerships in their own communities and develop plans to initiate and sustain collaboration. They can also examine how data, including surveys, attendance, and qualitative feedback, can be used to evaluate and refine partnership efforts.

Multiple Choice Questions

1-Which best explains the low family attendance at the first Community Learning Collaborative meeting?

- a. Families did not understand the purpose of the meeting.
- b. Structural barriers, such as work schedules and childcare, limited access
- c. The meeting was not advertised enough.
- d. Families were uninterested because they did not feel a sense of belonging within the school.

2-Which statement best describes Mr. Daniels' leadership response after only three families showed up to the first meeting?

- a. He delegated event planning to the leadership team to improve efficacy.
- b. He revisited the survey results to reflect on how to move forward.
- c. He engaged in collaborative inquiry, gathering data and feedback to redesign the initiative.
- d. He researched reasons why families are disconnected from schools.

- 3-Which best captures Mr. Daniels' mindset shift about family engagement?
- a. Engagement should move from a school-centered to a family-centered design.
 - b. Data collection alone cannot help improve engagement strategies.
 - c. Family engagement should begin with teachers in the classroom.
 - d. Without proper communication, engagement is not possible.
- 4-What evidence mostly indicated a positive cultural shift in the school?
- a. A rise in student attendance
 - b. The partnership with local communities
 - c. Families reporting ownership and teachers noting improved communication.
 - d. The district is requesting that Mr. Daniels mentor other assistant principals.
- 5-What leadership qualities mostly contributed to the initiative's success overall?
- a. Collaboration and innovation with the community
 - b. Empathy and active listening
 - c. Delegation and assertiveness to redesign the initiative
 - d. Reflection and action
- 6-What was the purpose of renaming the event Dinner and Dialogue?
- a. To attract more attention
 - b. To be transparent about what the event entails
 - c. To create a more welcoming, family-centered environment
 - d. To promote the partnership with community dinner options

Answer Key

- 1-B. Structural barriers, such as work schedules and childcare, limited access
Explanation - Mr. Daniels uncovered that families did indeed care deeply; however, many faced practical and systemic barriers such as timing, childcare, and access.
- 2-C. He engaged in collaborative inquiry, gathering data and feedback to redesign the initiative
Explanation - After reflection and research, he decided to listen, collect data, and co-design the initiative, demonstrating his adaptive and inclusive leadership
- 3-A. Engagement should move from a school-centered to a family-centered design
Explanation - The initial survey revealed that scheduling was not the issue; rather, attending the events did not meet the families' needs and realities.
- 4-C. Families reporting ownership and teachers noting improved communication
Explanation - Parents' volunteering feedback captures the deep transformation in trust and belonging, as evident in improved communication with teachers.
- 5-B. Empathy and active listening
Explanation - Mr. Daniels demonstrated a strong willingness to understand and learn about families in the community through observations and communication with community members.

6-C. To create a more welcoming, family-centered environment

Explanation - The name change symbolized a change in tone and purpose, from formal to a family-oriented collaboration.

Constructed Response/Essay Questions

1. Mr. Daniels stated, “Family engagement isn't a checklist. It's a mindset.” What does this statement mean in the context of leadership? Provide examples of how school leaders can move from event-based engagement to authentic connections and partnerships.
2. Language barriers were a recurring challenge at Franklin Middle School. Families that were not English proficient often relied on their children to translate. How could this dynamic impact communication, trust, and student identity? Propose strategies that school leadership can implement to reduce these barriers and further support equitable access for families.

Possible Answers

1. Mr. Daniels' statement means that family engagement is more than a series of tasks, such as hosting events and sending newsletters. Family engagement is an ongoing mindset rooted in relationships, trust, and shared ownership. A leader who truly values family engagement will seek to understand families' experiences, cultural assets, and needs before designing new initiatives. Success should be measured by the quality of partnerships, communication, and community empowerment, not by the number of events held. Authentic engagement invites families and community members as co-owners of the learning community. This can be achieved by creating continuous communication platforms, involving families in shared decision-making teams, and co-created sessions that reflect topics families find meaningful.
2. Language barriers can significantly affect communication. Specifically, when children are relied upon to translate for their parents, it can compromise accurate communication, undermine trust, and impact student identity. Through children's translation, misunderstandings can arise about school expectations, events, and student performance. Parents may feel a disconnect and exclusion, further reinforcing the narrative of families' disinterest in the school community. To address these language barriers, school leaders can implement several strategies to reduce barriers and promote equity. Requesting interpreters from the district and asking bilingual staff to translate could ensure accurate, timely communication. Multilingual communication platforms should be available to the community to ensure proper communication. Collaboration with local organizations can also provide language support to strengthen connections between families and schools. Offering cultural competence training to staff can help them work effectively across languages and cultures, demonstrating empathy and inclusivity. By proactively addressing language barriers, school leaders can build trust, empower families, and foster an inclusive school culture.

Discussion and Activity to Extend Thinking

Community Asset Mapping

Participants should map their schools, either real or hypothetical, and community partners to identify and consider the following:

- 1-All potential community partners to support the school's goals
- 2-Identify the asset(s) each partner might contribute to the school.
- 3-Map connections and relationships to demonstrate how partnerships can be reciprocated.
- 4-Identify gaps and opportunities in both the school and the community.
- 5-Strategies to strengthen relationships among and between the school and community partners

Discussion Topic

Reflective leadership and continuous improvement: The purpose of this discussion is to explore how self-reflection can support adaptive leadership and cultural responsiveness in schools. The following questions should be considered to prompt further discussions:

- How did Mr. Daniels' initial reflection on low attendance lead to new, more effective engagement strategies?
- What role did Mr. Daniels' observation and community involvement play in his decision-making and understanding of families' lived realities?
- How can Mr. Daniels or other school leaders foster a culture in which staff feel empowered to adapt and improve their practices to better meet families' needs?
- How can leaders balance the accountability for family engagement outcomes?
- In what ways can reflective leadership help address equity gaps in engagement for marginalized families?

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Chapter 11

In the Interest of Equity: It's Not Easy Being Green

Emily Mulvihill

Abstract

The case study, “In the Interest of Equity: It’s Not Easy Being Green,” presents the professional and ethical decision-making of Ms. Thompson, a first-year principal at a suburban middle school serving a changing community and grappling with achievement gaps. The case details her early initiatives to use data to inform instruction and professional learning around cultural responsiveness. While Ms. Thompson’s efforts receive support from some staff, others resist her initiatives, complaining about “initiative fatigue” and a “loss of tradition.” The case captures community members’ diverse reactions to the school’s shifting demographics and performance on subgroup accountability metrics. The conflict deepens as Ms. Thompson reallocates discretionary funds to support multilingual learners and mental health resources, angering long-tenured staff and a group of vocal parents. The case then invites readers to explore Ms. Thompson’s leadership, prompting them to consider navigating difficult conversations about equity, a shared vision, and holding staff accountable. This involves addressing community relations and engaging with systemic pushback. The case study provides an opportunity to dissect real-world school leadership challenges through the interplay of ethical considerations, data utilization, fostering a collaborative school culture, and political savvy. The discussion questions and potential next steps included in the case enable readers to reflect critically, consider possible actions, and connect to similar challenges they may face in school leadership.

The case provides a close-up look at a school leader's ethical and political decision-making as she leads equity-centered reforms in a changing suburban middle school. Participants are asked to assess resistance, manage stakeholder relationships, and connect decisions to data and the NELP and SLLA leadership standards.

NELP Standards Aligned

1.1, 1.2, 2.2, 3.1, 4.1, 5.1, 6.3, 7.2

SLLA 6990 Domains Aligned

I-A, I-C, II-A, II-C, III-B, IV-A, IV-C, V-B

Literature

To provide further context for the discussion of equity leadership at Valley Ridge, this section will synthesize the related literature that supports and/or explains many of the issues. As the demographics of US schools shift, school leaders are being called upon to address related challenges in achievement, discipline, and access through an equity lens (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). Studies have found that while school demographics shift quickly, educators’ mindsets and institutional structures are slower to adapt, leaving principals to lead in challenging territory requiring them to address both pedagogical and cultural change (Galloway & Ishimaru,

2017). Equity-centered school leadership, as defined by scholars such as Theoharis (2007), expects principals to confront and disrupt system-level patterns of policy and practice that reinforce inequities that, in turn, negatively affect historically minoritized students. This may include reforming disciplinary structures, resource distribution, and curricular and assessment practices, which can result in resistance from individuals attached to long-held traditions or who benefit from maintaining the status quo (Datnow & Park, 2018).

Research also confirms, however, that leadership must be grounded in moral purpose and cultural responsiveness in order to meaningfully narrow opportunity gaps (Khalifa et al., 2016; Horsford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011). Culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) is a conceptual framework for considering and identifying the “purposeful actions” that principals engage in to intentionally serve diverse learners (Khalifa, 2018, p. 2). The theory espouses four practices for enacting CRSL: critically self-reflecting on one’s identity as a leader and one’s biases, preparing culturally responsive teachers, fostering inclusive school environments, and authentically engaging with families and communities of minoritized students. PLCs and data teams, as implemented at Valley Ridge, can be leveraged to address instructional inequities. A study by Datnow and Park (2018) found that without a particular frame for data inquiry, data use is likely to reproduce existing inequities in schools. Their study, however, suggests that when teachers use data to inquire into educational processes through an equity lens that includes an understanding of race, language, and cultural identity, they are more likely to focus on systemic patterns of student achievement rather than on individual performance, thereby enabling instructional changes. For this approach to succeed, teachers need the capacity to both conduct equity-minded data inquiry and be willing to act on findings to change instruction, which is often an area of professional learning for schools that want to improve outcomes for multilingual learners and students of color (Love, 2019).

Resistance to efforts to promote equity in schools can also be a challenge, particularly when long-time teachers and school staff feel their autonomy or traditional practices are being threatened by a new leader. Evans (1996) writes about the emotional aspect of change and the ways in which school leaders must attend to both its psychological and political dimensions. Trust-building and consistent communication are key strategies for addressing pushback from faculty or staff (Ishimaru, 2019). Balancing the tensions between innovation and tradition, equity and comfort, by creating inclusive space for dialogue while remaining resolute in one’s beliefs and vision is also a key part of working with change resistance (Shields, 2010).

Finally, community engagement is an important aspect of leading change in education and must be a consideration for school leaders committed to advancing equity-focused reform. Ishimaru (2019) cautions that parents and families should not be treated merely as recipients of school communications, but as partners in building knowledge and co-constructing school and district priorities. As principals push for change and navigate controversy, ethical leadership is also important to keeping leaders grounded and focused on their educational purpose. Starratt (2004) advocates that educational leaders lead with a sense of morality, justice, and care, particularly when responding to the many demands of diverse stakeholders. Together, the literature shows that leading for equity in schools undergoing demographic change requires a combination of instructional and cultural leadership, an understanding of educational cultural dynamics, and clarity about ethical values and purpose

Case Narrative

Maya Thompson was the new principal at Valley Ridge Middle School, a rapidly diversifying suburban school with a widening achievement gap. In the past, the majority of students had been white and middle-class. Over the last five years, though, more and more multilingual families from immigrant and refugee communities have moved to the area. The school had become more diverse, but the staff, policies, and instructional practices had not yet caught up. After arriving, Ms. Thompson looked at school-wide data and quickly saw patterns that concerned her: multilingual learners and students of color were performing far below their peers in ELA and math; they were receiving far more disciplinary referrals; and far fewer of them were enrolled in gifted and talented classes. With her equity lens sharpened, Ms. Thompson set in motion school-level changes, including an updated school improvement plan, a redistribution of discretionary resources, and professional development on culturally responsive teaching and implicit bias. Her updated plan included implementing data teams to drive instruction, introducing professional learning communities focused on student engagement and assessment equity, and redistributing discretionary funds to hire more mental health staff and support multilingual learners. As might be expected, not everyone was happy with the changes. Some teachers were relieved to see overdue changes to policies and practices. Other teachers (many with more years of tenure) felt changes were unnecessary, disruptive, or divisive. They perceived the focus on equity as “political” or as an affront to “how we’ve always done things.” As with the staff, the community was divided. Some parent groups expressed gratitude for the school’s focus on inclusive practices. Other parents felt threatened and upset by the changes. One vocal group of parents accused Ms. Thompson of “lowering standards” and being responsible for the recent dip in the school’s overall test scores. Rumors spread on social media that the school had become “too focused on diversity” at the expense of academic excellence. The political climate further escalated when Ms. Thompson used building-level discretionary funds to hire a bilingual counselor and purchase culturally relevant instructional materials. Teachers accustomed to controlling discretionary grants to fund club stipends and classroom materials felt blindsided. In a staff meeting, one veteran teacher even asked, “What’s next—are we not allowed to teach Shakespeare anymore?” As tensions ran high, Ms. Thompson was left to decide her next moves. How could she stay true to her equity goals without alienating stakeholders? How could she ensure buy-in for culturally responsive practices without sacrificing academic rigor? What strategies could she use to hold staff accountable, meet ethical obligations, and navigate political pushback from parents and central office leadership?

Multiple Choice Questions

1. Which of the following best represents Ms. Thompson's ethical responsibility as a school leader?
 - A. Prioritizing test scores over equity initiatives
 - B. Following tradition to maintain staff morale
 - C. Ensuring all student groups receive equitable access to high-quality instruction.
 - D. Delaying reforms to avoid stakeholder conflict

2. What could be the primary purpose of using professional learning communities in this case?
 - A. Reduce the principal's workload
 - B. Share student discipline records
 - C. Collaboratively analyze data and improve instruction
 - D. Plan extracurricular events
3. The decision to hire a bilingual counselor most directly supports which leadership focus?
 - A. Facilities management
 - B. Stakeholder appeasement
 - C. Student services and well-being
 - D. Budget expansion
4. Which strategy is most effective in addressing initiative fatigue among staff?
 - A. Implementing multiple new initiatives at once
 - B. Ignoring resistance to maintain authority
 - C. Involving teachers in co-constructing the change process
 - D. Reverting to old instructional methods
5. Reallocating discretionary funds aligns most clearly with which NELP Standard?
 - A. 1.1 Vision and Mission.
 - B. 2.2 Ethics and Professional Norms
 - C. 4.1 Learning Environment
 - D. 5.1 Community and External Leadership

Constructed Response Questions

- Reflecting on the case, what leadership moves could Ms. Thompson make to strengthen staff trust while sustaining her equity goals? Provide two specific strategies and explain how they support both collaboration and accountability.
- Analyze how the use of data in this case helped inform ethical decision-making. What additional data would you recommend Ms. Thompson collect to further support her decisions?

Answer Key and Notes

- **C** – Ms. Thompson is ethically responsible for equitable outcomes.
- **C** – PLCs are used for data-informed, collaborative instructional improvement.
- **C** – Hiring the counselor supports students' socio-emotional and linguistic needs.
- **C** – Collaboration reduces resistance and builds shared ownership.
- **D** – Redirecting funds shows leadership in community engagement and equity.

Discussion Activities

Activity 1: Equity Stakeholder Council Simulation

Objective: To explore competing perspectives around equity reform and collaboratively problem-solve as school leadership teams.

Description:

Divide participants into small groups, each representing a stakeholder group from the case: new teachers, veteran teachers, multilingual family advocates, district officials, and concerned parent groups. Provide each group with a summary of their stakeholder's perspective, values, and concerns based on the case study.

Facilitate a simulated school leadership council meeting where Ms. Thompson seeks feedback on next steps for implementing the revised school improvement plan. Each group must articulate its concerns and propose two actionable recommendations that balance equity, academic standards, and community trust.

After the simulation, lead a debrief in which participants reflect on the tensions that emerged, how power and privilege shaped discourse, and how school leaders might ethically navigate competing values while staying rooted in their vision for equity.

Leadership Focus: Communication, ethical leadership, shared vision-building, and stakeholder engagement.

Activity 2:

Objective: To strengthen participants' ability to evaluate and prioritize leadership decisions that involve competing values, limited resources, and equity-centered goals.

Description:

In this follow-up activity, participants will work in small leadership teams to review a list of realistic, high-stakes decisions that Principal Maya Thompson must make in the wake of her school improvement efforts. Each team will:

Use a Decision Matrix Template that includes criteria such as:

- Equity impact (Who benefits? Who is burdened?)
- Feasibility (Political, financial, operational)
- Alignment with mission and values
- Stakeholder response
- Long-term sustainability

1-Prioritize the three decisions they believe Principal Thompson should act on immediately. For each, teams must justify their selection using evidence from the case and their matrix analysis.

2-Present and Defend Decisions to the full group in a brief leadership "press conference," during which other participants (acting as community stakeholders or district officials) may pose questions or raise challenges.

3-Debrief with a facilitator-led discussion exploring the emotional labor of leadership decision-making, the moral tensions of equity work, and how leaders can stay both strategic and values-driven under pressure.

Leadership Focus:

Strategic decision-making, resource allocation, ethical discernment, and navigating political and emotional complexity in equity-focused leadership.

Summary

This case study focuses on Principal Maya Thompson, a newly appointed leader at Valley Ridge Middle School, a suburban campus undergoing demographic transformation and persistent achievement gaps. Confronted with data revealing inequities in student outcomes, Ms. Thompson initiates equity-focused reforms, including culturally responsive professional development, revised instructional strategies, and reallocated resources to support multilingual learners and mental health services. While some staff and families support her efforts, others resist, citing concerns over tradition, declining test scores, and perceived political motives. The case highlights the leadership tensions inherent in equity-driven change, challenging readers to consider ethical responsibility, data-informed decision-making, collaborative culture-building, and community relations in a polarized environment. Aligned to NELP and SLLA standards, the case includes discussion prompts and assessments to promote practical reflection and application for aspiring and current school leaders.

Resources

Culturally Responsive Leadership: A Framework for School and System Leaders — Leadership Academy

This resource outlines a leadership progression framework aligned with national standards, focusing on culturally responsive dispositions and skills for systemic change.

blogs.gwu.edu/11leadershipacademy.org/11leadershipacademy.org/11leadershipacademy.org.

Equity Data Review Protocol Toolkit — Hanover Research (WASHINGTON, D.C.)

A downloadable toolkit guiding equity-centered data collection and analysis—including academic, disciplinary, and cultural indicators—through structured protocols:

news.med.virginia.edu/1en.wikipedia.org/1.

Three Ways for School Leaders to Champion Cultural Responsiveness — New Leaders blog

An accessible article offering practical strategies to promote culturally responsive teaching and learning environments blogs.gwu.edu/15newleaders.org/15verywellfamily.com/15.

Equity by Design Facilitation Tool — Minnesota State Colleges & Universities

This facilitation guide supports stakeholders in discussing systemic disparities and fostering equity-minded practices using data from cdn.niss.gsu.edu, minnstate.edu, and skylinecollege.edu.

A Culturally Responsive School Leadership Approach to Developing Equity-Centered Principals — The Wallace Foundation

A report applying the CRSL framework at scale, offering domain-specific insights into principal leadership development naesp.org/5wallacefoundation.org/5schoolsims.com/5.

Together for Healthy & Successful Schools Toolkit — Washington University in St. Louis

Integrates well-being with equity, helping leaders review staff, policies, and messaging to support whole-child outcomes.

hep.gse.harvard.edu+4healthequityworks.wustl.edu+4newleaders.org+4.

The Principal's Guide to Building Culturally Responsive Schools — NAESP

A free downloadable PDF offering four leadership competencies for equity and inclusion in school practice news.med.virginia.edu+15naesp.org+15hep.gse.harvard.edu+15.

Facilitating Data-Driven Conversations — Network for College Success (UChicago)

Provides structured protocols to guide equity-centered data dialogues in professional learning communities: aisp.upenn.edu +6, ncs.uchicago.edu +6, toandthrough.uchicago.edu +6.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership Institute (CRSLI)

An organization offering equity audits, leadership academies, and job-embedded learning focused on sustaining culturally responsive school environments, crsli.org.

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Chapter 12

Ethics, Equity, and Policy: How School Leaders Pursue Culturally Proficient Leadership for LGBTQ+ Students

Maria O'Connor and Miriam Ezzani

Abstract

In the context of a restrictive legal environment and nationwide turbulence affecting LGBTQ+ youth, this case examines how two high school leaders can demonstrate equity and cultural responsiveness, ethical values and beliefs, and the implementation of laws and practices to support LGBTQ+ students.

NELP Standards: 3.3, 6.3

SLLA Topics: 4B, 3B

Background

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) K-12 students account for 24% percent of all students nationwide (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). As of September 5, 2024, the American Civil Liberties Union tracked 530 anti-LGBTQ+ bills in 41 states and Puerto Rico (American Civil Liberties Union, 2024). Negative effects from harmful environmental conditions, such as discriminatory legislation, can include higher rates of school absences, lower academic performance, and increased bullying and victimization for LGBTQ+ youth (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024; Fields & Wotipka, 2022; Meckler et al., 2024; O'Malley, 2013; The Trevor Project, 2023).

Laws offering protection from discriminatory and dangerous practices can improve the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth (Fields & Wotipka, 2022; The Trevor Project, 2023). Data from a national survey of LGBTQ+ youth reveal that, despite 41% of respondents reporting suicidal thoughts and 14% attempting suicide, youth who had access to spaces that affirmed their identity were less likely to attempt suicide (The Trevor Project, 2023). When asked about ways to provide support, only 54% of respondents replied that school was a safe place, and 68% wanted the people in their lives to know more about creating safe spaces (The Trevor Project, 2023). A safe school culture can be cultivated through the interaction of formal and informal structures that serve to strengthen or mitigate the impact of legislation at the state or federal level (Meyer, 2009; O'Malley, 2013).

School-level administrators shape the culture of a school and have a wide level of influence on how policies are interpreted and applied, especially when trying to prevent bullying and harassment (McQuillan et al., 2025; Meyer, 2009). With the documented turbulence LGBTQ+ youth experience in schools, the current hostile political climate across the United States, and the potential for schools to serve as affirming safe spaces for students, it is vital for school leaders to work within policies as they engage in culturally proficient practices that provide safe and supportive learning environments for this systemically oppressed group

(Duarte et al., 2022; McQuillan et al., 2025). In light of this, it's crucial to examine the school-level challenges that school leaders must navigate in the context of legislative actions.

School Context

Rose Court High School (RCHS) is a 6-12 grade urban charter school operating as part of a statewide network in the southern United States. When collecting demographic data as part of annual school performance reports, the state education agency disaggregates data for students based on categories such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sex, disability status, English language status, homelessness, status as a migrant or immigrant, connection to the military, or placement in foster care.

The student population at RCHS consisted of 737 students with the following ethnic demographics: 69.9% Hispanic, 14% African American, 11% White, 2.3% Asian, 1.9% Two or More Races, 0.5% Pacific Islander, and 0.4% American Indian. 73.9% of students were classified as Economically Disadvantaged. There were 55 staff members on the campus with the following ethnic demographics: 51.3% Hispanic, 22.5% White, 14.5% African American, 5.6% Asian, and 2% each American Indian, Pacific Islander, and Two or More Races. 23.1% of teachers held a master's degree, and 60.5% of teachers had 1-5 years of experience. Noticeably absent from any collected demographic data is a record of LGBTQ+ students. These data are also missing from the Federal Report Card and the Campus Improvement Plan. This lack of data amounts to what Michael O'Malley calls "a silence," depicting schools as "presumable and exclusively heterosexual and gender conforming" (2013, p. 498).

The Rose Public Schools Charter Handbook is ambiguous in its protections for LGBTQ+ students. The only explicit protection for LGBTQ+ students is under the Offenses and Consequences section and includes sexual orientation as an identity for protection against "discriminatory, derogatory language or hate speech." However, it is not listed as an identity characteristic for prohibited conduct directed at a student. Included in the description of gender-based harassment is a statement that harassment is "regardless of the student's or the harasser's actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity," specifying not that harassment based on a student's SOGIE is prohibited, only that it does not give them immunity from *other* prohibited conduct.

Legislative Context

During the Spring semester, the state where RCHS is situated is in political turmoil. The legislative session sees a sharp rise in bills introduced that target LGBTQ+ youth both in and out of school, limit teachers' abilities to discuss "controversial topics" in the classroom, and put parents' rights at the forefront for curricular and extracurricular activities. There is a lot of misinformation and panic among both teachers and parents, with each side feeling like the other is against them. Despite lawmakers' and proponents' arguments that the bills are designed to protect children, they undermine what research has shown to make a difference in creating safe and supportive schools for LGBTQ+ students (Duarte et al., 2022). The majority of bills introduced do not pass, but the breakdown of trust in school communities across the state has left many individuals wary of what changes may come in the new school year. Parents' rights groups

are more active at school board meetings and are increasing their demands to know what is happening in both the classroom and in extracurricular clubs. Teachers are resentful about increased oversight from district-level administrators and parents. Campus-level administrators are left trying to heal the relationships between stakeholders while students are caught in the middle. Even in areas with stronger anti-discrimination laws, school leaders who are LGBTQ+ must balance playing by the rules of heteronormativity that are entrenched in schools with challenging societal expectations to create supportive, nurturing spaces (Koschoreck, 2003; Lugg, 2003). Even in environments where LGBTQ+ students are protected, that protection does not always extend to teachers and administrators (Lugg, 2003).

Theoretical Framework

Given the divisive legislative context in this southern state, understanding the dynamics at play and identifying pathways toward resolution requires a guiding theoretical framework. Thus, this study draws upon the work of Terrell et al. (2018). It offers a framework for cultivating culturally proficient leadership in schools. Cultural proficiency is an ongoing process of self-reflection and intentional action that shifts an educator's perspective from focusing on students as problematic to shining a transformational light on oneself as a leader, with the ultimate goal of inclusion and pluralism. In other words, it is more than a concept, but rather a "lens through which we view our role as educators" (Terrell, 2018, p. 26), despite the educational and legislative context. Our approach, in this case study, is guided by the following Essential Elements for Culturally Proficient Leadership (Terrell, 2018, p. 33).

Table 1

The Essential Elements for Culturally Proficient Leadership

-
- **Assessing Cultural Knowledge** – Leading the learning about others' cultures, about how educators and the school as a whole react to others' cultures, and about what you need to do to be effective in cross-cultural situations. Also, leading learning about the school and its grade levels and departments as cultural entities.
 - **Valuing Diversity** – Creating informal and formal decision-making groups inclusive of people whose viewpoints and experiences are different from yours and those of the dominant group at the school, and that will enrich conversations, decision-making, and problem-solving.
 - **Managing the Dynamics of Difference** – Modeling problem-solving and conflict-resolution strategies as natural and normal processes within the organizational culture of the school and the cultural contexts of the communities of your school.
 - **Adapting to Diversity** – Being the lead learner at your school about cultural groups different from your own and adjusting to acknowledging others' cultural experiences and backgrounds in all school settings.
 - **Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge** – Making learning about cultural groups and their experiences and perspectives an integral part of the staff's professional development. Establishing norms for a culturally proficient educational environment.
-

By adopting the Essential Elements of Culturally Proficient Leadership, we argue that school leaders can create a safe and supportive learning environment for LGBTQ+ students. These Essential Elements provide a practical roadmap for school leaders to enact meaningful changes on their campus, and they demand self-reflection and intentional action from leaders. In that vein, we encourage the application of each element as a lens to analyze the current school environment and identify actionable steps for improvement. Refer to the teaching notes section for the application portion, as well as guiding questions or points of inquiry that require the attention of the school leader(s).

Teaching Case Narrative

Stakeholder Perspectives

Ms. Morgan

Ms. Morgan is a new principal at Rose Court High School, and this is her first position as a campus principal. Due to her experience growing up in a military family, she moved often and was exposed to cultures around the world. She attributes her familiarity with concepts of cultural proficiency and inclusion to these experiences. She is bisexual but has only divulged this information to a few members of the campus leadership team. Her goal is to lead with an equity-focused approach, and she recently completed a Master of Education in School Leadership with a focus on social justice in education. Ms. Morgan is aware of a few students at the school who are part of the LGBTQ+ community, some of whom are open to their peers and some are not. However, she admits that there are some tensions and occasional bullying that goes unreported and suspects there are more LGBTQ+ students who have not been identified. She tries to stay up to date with the legislative changes affecting schools and feels confident that district leaders will support her decisions as long as she aims to do what is best for the students.

Mr. Archer

Mr. Archer is a counselor at RCHS. He is a Mexican American transgender man from a different neighborhood of the same city where RCHS is located. He is openly out to all members of the school community and uses elements of his identity to connect to both students and parents. He has faced backlash over being transgender, including being forcibly outed at a different school a few years ago. However, he is determined to make RCHS a safe space for students to be themselves and pursue their dreams beyond high school. When offering college advice for students, he provides information about supportive institutions to students who are open with him about their LGBTQ+ identities.

Quinn Johnson

Quinn is a junior at RCHS and, while reluctant to label their identity, has begun to tell classmates they are queer. For the past two years, Quinn has been the victim of bullying due to not conforming to gender stereotypes and hanging out with other students who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Quinn can't wait to graduate and has been encouraged by Mr. Archer's claim that things can get better after high school.

After attending an event sponsored by Mr. Archer, where a university recruiter mentioned an active Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) on campus, Quinn and other students gained an interest in starting a GSA at RCHS. The students approached Mr. Archer with a request to serve

as faculty sponsor for the club. Mr. Archer helped schedule a meeting with the students and Ms. Morgan to discuss requirements for implementing the club on campus.

Mrs. Johnson

Mrs. Johnson, Quinn's mother, is a member of a nationwide parents' rights group and a vocal supporter of new state legislation that restricts school staff from discussing controversial topics that are not part of the approved curriculum. A teacher at RCHS shared with Mrs. Johnson about the university recruiter and the students' plans. Mrs. Johnson rallied other parents to meet at the school in protest, with Mr. Archer the target of their campaign, arguing that he is influencing children against their parents' wishes. The parents demand that Mr. Archer be fired and that the GSA not be allowed to proceed.

While they don't sign their names to the parents' petition, several of RCHS's teachers stand with Mrs. Johnson during the protest. They make comments about LGBTQ+ students not needing special treatment and a desire to focus only on the academic curriculum.

Leaders' Dilemma

Ms. Morgan and Mr. Archer aim to expand beyond informal support for students and provide more institutional support for cultural proficiency, not just for LGBTQ+ students, but for all students from diverse cultural groups. As leaders of a public charter school, they still must balance requirements from the state, but district leadership has indicated they will be supportive if the campus leadership can find ways to stay within the bounds of the state legislation. Mr. Archer believes that the law regarding controversial topics only explicitly applies to teachers in the classroom, not groups meeting outside of school hours. However, Ms. Morgan feels pressure from her superiors to maintain high student enrollment, and keeping parents happy is a key component in recruitment. With tensions rising among teachers, parents, and students, school leaders must find a solution that balances their own values and beliefs with the elements of culturally proficient leadership and the bounds of current laws, policies, and regulations.

Teaching Notes

The increasing legislative hostility towards LGBTQ+ youth in K-12 schools (ACLU, 2024), coupled with the documented academic and mental health challenges they face (Moran et al., 2025), highlights a critical need for proactive, culturally proficient leadership. This teaching case narrative invites a deep analysis of a specific school environment through the lens of Terrell et al.'s (2018) five Essential Elements of Culturally Proficient Leadership and the application of the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards. Because many school leaders are not aware of strategies for leveraging laws and policies to protect LGBTQ+ students (McQuillan et al., 2025), this case study aims to guide aspiring educational leaders in identifying and implementing actionable steps to cultivate a safe and supportive learning environment for LGBTQ+ students, particularly in the context of contentious legislation and local school policies.

In considering the journey of aspiring school leaders and the requirement for them to pass the School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA), we contend that the assessment is not an exercise in rote memorization, but rather an evaluation of their ability to deeply conceptualize and practically apply the NELP standards. Beyond passing the SLLA certification exam, the true significance lies in how the NELP standards are ethically and effectively actualized by the school

leader to serve their school community. Of note, the activities that follow will focus on what school leaders *should know and be able to do*, specifically SLLA 4B and 3B.

School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA) Topics

SLLA 4B: Ethical Values and Beliefs

This standard delves deeper into the foundational ethical values and beliefs that guide a leader's actions. It implies that leaders possess a strong moral compass and are committed to principles such as equity, social justice, and the belief in the potential of every child. They are expected to articulate and model these values, fostering a school culture where ethical considerations are paramount in decision-making and where all stakeholders are encouraged to act with integrity and a sense of responsibility toward the common good.

Journaling: What core values about the purpose of education and the role of a school leader guide my decisions, and how do those beliefs shape my responsibility to ensure a safe and affirming environment for all students, especially those from marginalized groups like the LGBTQ+ community?

SLLA 3B: Equity and Cultural Responsiveness

This standard addresses culture as it relates to a student's identity, as well as the broader context of the school community. Leaders are expected not only to recognize and respect cultural differences but also to act with cultural competence and implement policies that address institutional bias. They must also be able to integrate a student's culture into the school environment while maintaining a shared commitment and communicating cultural competency to the faculty and staff to promote academic success and student well-being.

Journaling: Consider the details of the teaching case narrative by applying Terrell et al.'s (2018) five (5) Essential Elements of Culturally Proficient Leadership as it relates to the school leaders and their role and responsibilities concerning LGBTQ+ students on their campus. Analyze the current school environment and, most importantly, use the essential elements to identify actionable and necessary steps for campus improvement. Anchor and leverage your actions to the following standards.

National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Standards

NELP Standard Component 3.3

Program completers understand and demonstrate the capacity to evaluate, advocate, and cultivate equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive instruction and behavioral support practices among teachers and staff.

Table 2*NELP Component 3.3*

Content Knowledge	Educational Leadership Skills
Program provides evidence of candidate knowledge of: ● Culturally responsive instructional and behavior support practices ● Characteristics and foundations of equitable and inequitable education practice, especially among teachers and staff ● Research on implications for students of equitable, culturally responsive, and inclusive practices ● Broader social and political concern with equity and inequity in schools	Program provides evidence that candidate demonstrate skills required to: ● Evaluate root causes of inequity and bias ● Develop school policies or procedures that cultivate equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive practice among teachers and staff ● Support the use of differentiated content-based instructional materials and strategies ● Advocate for equitable practice among teachers and staff

NELP Standard Component 6.3

Program completers understand and demonstrate the capacity to reflectively evaluate, communicate about, and implement laws, rights, policies, and regulations to promote student and adult success and well-being.

Table 3*NELP Component 6.3*

Content Knowledge	Educational Leadership Skills
The program provides evidence of candidates' knowledge of: ● Laws, rights, policies, and regulations enacted by state, local, and federal authorities that affect schools, students, and adults. ● Implications of laws, rights, policies, and regulations for diverse student populations, subgroups, and communities. ● Research on emerging challenges such as privacy, social media (i.e., cyber-bullying), and safety.	The program provides evidence that candidates demonstrate skills required to: ● Reflectively evaluate situations and policies with regard to legal, ethical, and equity issues. ● Analyze how law and policy are applied consistently, fairly, equitably, and ethically within a school. ● Communicate policies, laws, regulations, and procedures to appropriate school stakeholders. ● Monitor and ensure adherence to laws, rights, policies, and regulations.

To prepare aspiring school leaders to attend to questions regarding SLLA 3B (equity and cultural responsiveness) and 4B (ethical values and beliefs), we ask students to engage in the following activities.

Discussion

Find 2-3 resources for a school leader interested in learning more about the legal context of their school (i.e., laws, rights, policies, and regulations implemented by federal, state, and/or local authorities). What, if any, laws or regulations are in place regarding LGBTQ+ students at school? Discuss what considerations a school leader would need to stay compliant while still promoting an equitable school environment.

Multiple Choice Questions

1. As the school principal, Ms. Morgan must decide how to diffuse the tension between the parents, teachers, and students. Which of the following actions is the most appropriate first step?
 - a. Schedule a joint meeting with the student and parent groups to hear everyone's concerns.
 - b. Contact the district's attorney and review other resources to gain a comprehensive understanding of the current state legislation.
 - c. Poll teachers regarding their thoughts on starting a GSA.
 - d. Fire Mr. Archer to comply with state legislation and keep parents from unenrolling their students.

Answer Key: Answer B is correct because a school leader must understand laws, rights, policies, and regulations that affect the school environment and the implications of such. Because there is a conflict over the interpretation of the law, Ms. Morgan needs to ensure that she understands it before making a decision. Answer D is incorrect because there is no indication that Mr. Archer's actions do *not* comply with the state legislation. Additionally, there are district policies that Ms. Morgan must follow to fire a staff member, and being disliked by parents is not an acceptable reason for termination. Answers A and C are incorrect because these actions would be insensitive to the subject matter. Scheduling the students and parents together would highlight an imbalance in power in the meeting and potentially harm the relationships between the two groups. While knowing the teachers' thoughts regarding a GSA might help address the overall campus climate, conducting a poll at this point would create further division and is ancillary to other, more effective actions.

2. An effective school leader analyzes how law and policy are applied within a school. Select the most appropriate action for Ms. Morgan to take regarding clubs/extracurricular activities.
 - a. Create a new schoolwide policy for implementing student clubs and activities that follows district and state guidelines.
 - b. Suspend all clubs until the GSA decision is finalized.
 - c. Eliminate non-academic after-school activities.
 - d. Allow any group of students to start a club, provided they can find a faculty sponsor.

Answer Key: Answer A is best because it would create a resource to guide a consistent, fair, equitable, and ethical application of the scenario by ensuring that all clubs/extracurricular activities follow the same guidelines and are offered protection through current laws or policies.

While answers B, C, and D would constitute a consistent application of policy by applying a blanket action to clubs and activities, other considerations make each one a less desirable choice. Answers B and C would not be a fair or equitable option since other clubs may not fall under the purview of the controversial topics law. Answer D may create additional concerns if students wish to start clubs that could be considered inappropriate for a school setting.

3. Review the Essential Elements for Culturally Proficient Leadership and NELP Standard 3.3. Of the following, which action is the best step to build culturally responsive practices among the faculty at RCHS?
 - a. Observe other administrators and teachers to ensure they are following neutral guidelines where factors such as a student's race, disability, sexual or gender identity, etc., do not influence decisions.
 - b. Lead a professional development session where teachers and administrators build empathy by telling stories about times they have been discriminated against.
 - c. Hire an expert consultant to conduct an equity audit and make recommendations to teachers who are struggling.
 - d. Plan a series of professional development sessions where teachers and administrators move from reflecting on their own identities, to sharing anonymous stories from students and teachers, then working in small teams to identify causes of discriminatory practices and suggest changes to school policies or procedures.

Answer Key: Answer D is best because it attempts to address the root causes of inequity while engaging teachers and staff in developing more culturally responsive practices. Answer A is incorrect because neutral or culturally evasive policies do not fit the standard of equitable, differentiated, culturally responsive practices. Answer B is incorrect because it creates an environment where participants are expected to reveal vulnerable emotional details with no structure for using the information to enact change. While hiring an expert consultant may help provide perspective that the school leaders are missing, Answer C is not the best choice because it passes responsibility away from the school leader and can make teachers defensive by being corrected by an outsider.

4. Quinn Johnson has reported being the target of bullying and verbal harassment by a group of classmates based on Quinn's perceived sexual orientation. What is the best response?
 - a. Schedule a mediation meeting with Quinn and the bullies, where each student can discuss the motivations behind their actions.
 - b. Tell Mrs. Johnson which students have been bullying Quinn so that she will understand why a GSA is important.
 - c. Provide schoolwide lessons that focus on appropriate student-to-student interactions and respect for others' identities.
 - d. Tell Quinn you can't punish the bullies unless they become physically violent.

Answer Key: Answer C is the best response because it addresses the issue in a way that strengthens the overall school climate while building a more inclusive environment. Answer A is incorrect because it would be inappropriate for a victim of bullying to listen to their tormentors

justify their actions. Answer B is incorrect because it violates the Family Education Rights and Protection Act (FERPA) and does not address the bullies' behavior. Answer D is incorrect because verbal harassment and other forms of bullying are also prohibited and should be taken as seriously as physical violence.

5. Based on the school and legislative contexts, what is the most appropriate course of action for the principal to take with the district superintendent regarding the demands not to create a GSA club and to fire Mr. Archer?
 - a. Independently decide to allow the GSA club and retain Mr. Archer, without consulting the superintendent, to show her support for all members of the school community.
 - b. Immediately inform the superintendent that she will fire the teacher and not allow the GSA club to be created, to quell parent protests and demonstrate her commitment to the community.
 - c. Send an email to the superintendent requesting a new school policy that clearly states the rights of GSA clubs and teachers, shifting the responsibility to the district office.
 - d. Request an urgent meeting with the superintendent to present a detailed plan for addressing the parent protests, which includes affirming the school's commitment to all students and staff while seeking guidance on district-level policy and legal protections.

Answer Key: Answer D is the best response because it shows proactive leadership and effective communication on the part of the principal. By requesting a meeting and presenting a plan, Ms. Morgan demonstrates that she is thoughtfully preparing to manage the crisis. Answer A is incorrect. Although Ms. Morgan's intention to show support is commendable, acting independently on such a high-profile issue is a significant error. It creates a disconnect between school and district leadership, potentially leaving the principal unsupported if the situation escalates. Answer B is incorrect. It is a premature and reactive decision driven by pressure. Firing a teacher or denying a student club based on their identity or association would likely violate anti-discrimination policies, district procedures, and potentially state or federal law. It would also set a dangerous precedent, revealing that the school capitulates to protest rather than ensuring a safe and inclusive environment. C is also incorrect as it abdicates responsibility. While seeking policy clarification is a valid goal, Ms. Morgan cannot delegate the crisis to the superintendent via email. The principal is the leader on the ground and must take primary responsibility for managing the campus-level conflict.

Constructed Response Questions

1. Given the social, legal, and demographic contexts of Rose Court High School, draft a plan of action for Ms. Morgan and/or Mr. Archer regarding the conflict described in the Teaching Case Narrative. The plan should address all stakeholder perspectives and utilize each of the Essential Elements for Culturally Proficient Leadership.
2. Review the demographic data of RCHS. Describe the implications of the data related to equitable and culturally responsive practices at the school and make one or more suggestions that cultivate equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive practices among teachers and staff.

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Chapter 13

Balancing Safety and Security with Least Restrictive Environment

Emily Nickerson and Amie Cieminski

Abstract

School principals must ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, have safe, inclusive, and supportive school environments. This case highlights the ethical and legal responsibilities of school leaders in threat assessment and decision-making, emphasizing equity, student well-being, and the impact of leadership decisions on the school community.

Introduction

The 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado brought school shootings into the spotlight after 12 students and one teacher were killed. Although Columbine was not the first school shooting, it was among the first to be broadcast live on television. Since that time, Rapa et al. (2024) noted an increased prevalence of school shootings in the United States and stated that “the United States has had 57 times as many school shootings as all major industrialized nations combined” (2024, p. 2). Although not all school violence is gun-related, school safety remains a concern for students, parents, staff, and principals. School principals are responsible for establishing and maintaining safe and orderly school environments. Fein et al. noted that “Cultures and climates of safety, respect, and emotional support can help diminish the possibility of targeted violence in schools” (2002, p. 5-6). Following the 1999 incident, the “Columbine Effect” has led to significant nationwide changes aimed at improving school safety (Rapa et al., 2024). Enhanced safety protocols implemented in schools include lockdown protocols, active shooter drills, enhanced visitor procedures, and threat assessment protocols.

Threat Assessments as a Tool for School Safety

According to the United States Department of Education and the United States Secret Service (2002), behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) offer a robust model for identifying the risk of school violence, mitigating that risk, and enhancing school safety. When implemented effectively, BTAM protocols also support the identification and management of concerns related to the risk of harm to other students (National Association of School Psychologists, 2021).

According to current data, 38 states require school districts to have established threat assessment teams, and 85% of public schools have a BTAM team in place (National Threat Assessment Center, 2025). A BTAM team should be multidisciplinary, comprising school administrators, School Resource Officers, and mental health providers. Furthermore, if a student has a disability, it is recommended that a special education teacher or case manager be part of the BTAM team to discuss the impact of the student's disability and help determine if the threatening behavior is a manifestation of the student's disability. Additionally, the BTAM team must ensure

that students' rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) are protected.

While there is no specific profile of students who commit violence within a school, there are commonalities among such offenders. Fein et al. (2002) described that students who have enacted school violence have the following commonalities: they rarely act impulsively, their motives are rarely a secret, their past behavior has caused concern, they have experienced recent loss, and they exhibit an inability to cope with current stressors. As such, students' backgrounds are considered in the BTAM to determine risk levels.

Supporting Students with Disabilities

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2024), about 7.5 million U.S. public school students, or 15% of students, receive special education and/or related services under the IDEA (2004). Students with disabilities have lower academic outcomes and graduation rates and higher exclusionary discipline resolution rates when compared with their grade-level peers (NCES, 2024).

Students with disabilities are entitled to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) as outlined in the IDEA (2004). IDEA ensures that students with disabilities are educated in their Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), meaning that “students with disabilities be educated with their nondisabled peers in general education settings to the maximum extent possible” (McKenna et al., 2019, p. 588). In fact, the majority of students with disabilities (67%) spend at least 80% of their school day in general education classrooms with their typical peers (NCES, 2024).

In the article *"How Building Principals Made Sense of Free and Appropriate Public Education in the Least Restrictive Environment,"* Sumbera et al. (2014) noted that there is often confusion about how principals implement LRE in their buildings and support every student. Sumbera et al. highlighted that very few principals receive training related to special education law, thus “may be ill-prepared to handle the challenges inherent in implementing FAPE within the LRE” (Sumbera et al., 2014, p. 300).

Inclusive Schools and Principal Leadership

Inclusive schools are defined as “places where students with disabilities are valued and active participants and where they are provided supports needed to succeed in the academic, social, and extra-curricular activities of the school” (McLeskey et al., 2022, p. 4). Furthermore, inclusive principals “create strong school cultures and distribute leadership across staff to serve all learners well and ensure students feel safe, supported, and valued in school. In promoting equity for “all,” inclusive principals must respond effectively to each student's potential and needs. Inclusive principals ensure high expectations and appropriate support so that each student can excel in school (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2020, “What is Inclusive Principal Leadership?” section). According to DeMatthews et al. (2023), when principals are committed to supporting inclusion for students with disabilities, students are more likely to achieve positive social and academic outcomes. Inclusive principal leadership supports students with disabilities through collective equity and opportunities within the public school system.

While the push for inclusion of students with disabilities exists, the need to balance academic and behavioral progress for students with disabilities can create challenges for principals. Consequently, supporting students with disabilities who pose a threat to school safety while maintaining their right to the LRE creates unique challenges for principals. In safety situations, principals are often tasked with interpreting special education laws and determining how best to support both students with and without disabilities in their schools (Sumbera et al., 2014).

Case Narrative

Principal Montana is in his first year as principal at the Elementary School, a suburban school that serves 75% white, 10% Asian, 10% black, and 5% Latinx students in grades K-5. Prior to his arrival, staff implemented schoolwide behavioral expectations and consequences, including the use of out-of-school suspension only for incidents that pose a credible threat to student and staff safety.

Principal Montana is one of the few principals in his school district who strives to create an inclusive school environment for students with disabilities. He has provided several professional development opportunities for his teachers around the value of equity and inclusion for all students. While he has often received pushback from his teachers for placing students with disabilities in their classrooms, Principal Montana continues to encourage his teachers to support all students, regardless of ability or disability. This change has been a significant shift for the school and inclusion of students with disabilities continues to be an uphill battle. In this case, Principal Montana faces the challenge of balancing students' rights, as outlined in the IDEA through the Individual Education Program (IEP) process, with the perceived safety and security of the school.

On Valentine's Day, fifth-grade teacher Mrs. Cox required students to create a Valentine's Day box to collect cards from classmates. This activity involved working at home and at school. Mrs. Cox received a new student, Davion, an African American fifth-grader who receives special education services. According to Davion's IEP, he spends 80% of his time in the general education classroom and receives resource classes for English Language Arts and mental health support from the school psychologist. At his previous school, Davion exhibited explosive behaviors that resulted in a few suspensions from school for safety reasons.

The morning of the party, Davion had not finished his Valentine's Day box at home and was distressed about being unable to collect Valentines from his classmates. To participate, Davion brought supplies from home to work on the project during recess, including markers, scissors, his box, and a multi-tool with a 2-inch knife to cut open the area where students would insert their Valentines.

When recess began, Davion started working on his Valentine's Day box to finish before the class's Valentine's Day party. He was using the 2-inch knife when his classmate Claire saw him on the playground and promptly notified Mr. Montana and Mrs. Cox. Per safety protocol, Mr. Montana immediately called district security and the school resource officer. Montana remembered that Davion often faces challenges, including regulating his emotions and building

trust with staff. He is usually supported by the school psychologist, Dr. Drew, when called into the office. However, Dr. Drew was unavailable, so Davion met alone with Mr. Montana, School Resource Officer Peters, and District Security Director Perez. Davion showed signs of anxiety and refused to speak, which the adults perceived as defiance. They immediately searched Davion and found the multitool, leading to Davion being sent home right away. Mr. Montana explained to Davion's mother that Davion had been suspended and that the school was initiating the district's threat assessment process. She was told to keep him at home until this issue was resolved.

During lunch, Claire called her mother, Mrs. Carlisle, to report what she saw. Within the hour, Mrs. Carlisle arrived at the school, demanded to talk with Principal Montana, and insisted that Davion be immediately expelled. Despite Mr. Montana's explanation that the school was taking the incident seriously and was following the school district's required safety protocols, Mrs. Carlisle became angry and pulled Claire out of school, stating that she feared for her daughter's safety.

The following day, Mr. Montana received a call from the president of the teachers' union. The president also demanded that Davion be removed from the school and placed at the Alternative Academy, an alternative school setting for students with serious emotional disabilities. The president of the teachers' union cited "undue stress and fear" among teachers and the community due to Davion bringing a knife to school. Despite Principal Montana's commitment to full equity and inclusion for students with disabilities, his teachers had pushed back against this initiative. It was therefore not surprising that he received a phone call from the union president, whom he had met several times regarding his inclusion initiative at the school. Montana explained that he could not divulge the details of the incident but reiterated his commitment to the safety and security of all students and staff at the school.

Principal Montana initiated the BTAM process, and the team determined that the "imminent risk of violence was low," and Davion did not pose a significant threat to student or school safety. Despite these results, Mr. Montana was still under pressure to seek an alternative placement for Davion due to heightened concerns about safety and security in his building. Now, Mr. Montana is tasked with balancing LRE for Davion and complying with IEP laws, while facing pressure from both the community and teachers in the building to have Davion expelled or placed at the Alternative Academy.

Principal Preparation Standards

This case focuses on several standards related to principal preparation outlined by National Education Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards and the School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA), which are delineated below:

NELP 1.1 Program completers understand and demonstrate the capacity to collaboratively evaluate, develop, and communicate a school mission and vision designed to reflect a core set of values and priorities that include data use, technology, equity, diversity, digital citizenship, and community.

NELP 2.2 Program completers understand and demonstrate the capacity to evaluate, communicate about, and advocate for ethical and legal decisions.

NELP 3.2 Program completers understand and demonstrate the capacity to evaluate, cultivate, and advocate for equitable access to educational resources, technologies, and opportunities that support each student's educational success and well-being.

NELP 3.3 Program completers understand and demonstrate the capacity to evaluate, cultivate, and advocate for equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive instruction and behavior support practices among teachers and staff.

NELP 7.2 Program completers understand and have the capacity to develop and engage staff in a collaborative professional culture designed to promote school improvement, teacher retention, and the success and well-being of each student and adult in the school.

NELP 2.2 Program completers understand and demonstrate the capacity to evaluate, communicate about, and advocate for ethical and legal decisions.

SLLA Ethical Leadership IV A.2 Knows how to safeguard and promote the values of individual freedom and responsibility, equity, social justice, community, and diversity

SLLA Strategic Leadership I A.1 Understands how to develop an educational mission for the school to promote the academic success and well-being of each student.

SLLA Ethical Leadership IV A.3 Understands how to use appropriate systems and procedures to protect the rights and confidentiality of faculty, staff, and students

SLLA Ethical Leadership IV A.4 Understands that he or she is responsible for each student's safety, academic success, and well-being.

SLLA Climate and Culture Leadership III B.5 Knows how to confront and alter institutional biases toward protected social groups (e.g., race, class, culture and language, gender and sexual orientation, and special status students or students with disabilities) to promote each student's academic success and well-being

SLLA Climate and Culture Leadership III C.1 Understands how to build and maintain a safe, caring, and healthy school environment that meets the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of students

Multiple Choice and Constructed Response Questions

Multiple Choice Questions

1-If you were Principal Montana, what would your next step be?

- A. Consult with the school psychologist and special education teacher to determine if a review of Davion's IEP is necessary to address his needs.
- B. Call the Alternative Academy and tell the principal that you have a transfer student.
- C. Extend Davion's suspension until the end of the year and ask Mrs. Cox to collect student assignments to send home.
- D. Call Claire's mother and tell her the results of the threat assessment.

2-Because the threat assessment indicated little concern for the safety of other students or teachers and a safety plan was not necessary, who would you inform?

- A. Claire and her mother only.
- B. The whole school with a letter home to all families.
- C. Educational professionals within the school that have a "need to know" to support Davion's continued success.
- D. The teacher's union president to inform the teachers.

3-What other policies and procedures should the principal and special education team consider? Select all that apply.

- A. Initiate or revisit a Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP) for Davion.
- B. Determine the need for additional supports and interventions.
- C. Conduct a Manifestation Determination Review.
- D. Consider a special evaluation to determine Davion's LRE.

4-If Davion were a student without an identified disability, how would the threat assessment process and its results differ?

- A. The process would not change, and the results would be the same.
- B. No threat assessment would be conducted.
- C. Davion would be expelled from school.
- D. The results of the threat assessment would be made public.

5-Suppose Davion was transferred to the Alternative Academy. Which of Davion's rights did Mr. Montana violate?

- A. Due Process
- B. LRE
- C. Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)
- D. Federal Threat Assessment Safety Act

Constructed Response Questions

- Discuss how you ensure safety in the school environment and protect a student with a disability's right to LRE.
- Utilizing the details of this case and the Comprehensive School Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG) decision tree from the Florida Department of Education (2021) how would you respond to the incident? See <https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/19958/urlt/8-3.pdf>

Answer Key with Rationale

Multiple Choice

1-If you were Principal Montana, what would your next step be?

The answer is "A" (consult with the school psychologist and special education teacher to determine if a review of Davion's IEP is necessary to address his needs) because, before any change of placement can happen, an IEP meeting must be held to determine the LRE for a student with a disability. Thus, a transfer to the Alternative Academy ("B") would be a change of placement and not allowed. Additionally, "C" is not a viable option because, under IDEA, Davion must not be excluded from his general education peers for more than 10 days without a Manifestation Determination Review. "D" is also not the correct answer because Mr. Montana must uphold Davion's confidentiality under FERPA.

2. Because the threat assessment indicated little concern for the safety of other students or teachers and a safety plan was not necessary, who would you inform?

The correct answer is “C” because the threat assessment process was completed and the team determined there was no viable threat. Although a safety plan is not required, Mrs. Cox, Dr. Drew, and Davion’s special education teacher would be informed of the results. If a safety plan were required, any teacher or staff member working with Davion would need to be aware of it. “A,” “B,” and “D” are not the correct answers because Davion did not threaten anyone; thus, the “duty to warn” clause is not relevant. Also, sharing information about Davion’s suspension or threat assessment results would violate Davion’s rights under FERPA.

3. What other policies and procedures should the principal and special education team consider? Select all that apply.

“A,” “B,” and “D” are all processes that Mr. Montana and the educational professionals at the school might consider. By revisiting or initiating a Behavioral Intervention Plan (“A”), the team would assess the impact of Davion’s disability and how it manifests and provide appropriate interventions. The team should also consider whether Davion needs any additional interventions or supports to be successful at the school. If the team is concerned that they cannot meet Davion’s special education needs at the school, they would need to re-evaluate his needs through a special evaluation before making any changes in his IEP and LRE. “C” is not true because there is no indication that Davion has been suspended from school for 10 days, which is the Manifestation Determination Review requirement.

4. If Davion were a student without an identified disability, how would the threat assessment process and its results differ?

The correct answer is “A.” The threat assessment process is separate from the IEP process. Thus, students with or without disabilities are not exempt from threat assessments (“B”), nor does the process change for students without disabilities. Students still have a right to privacy (“D”). It is unlikely that a student would be expelled for this offense (“C”), since he did not brandish a weapon, and the knife was 2 inches long.

5. Suppose Davion was transferred to the Alternative Academy. Which of Davion’s rights did Mr. Montana violate?

“B” is the correct answer, as the current IEP indicates that Davion will be with his general education peers 80% of the time. Without a special evaluation finding that Davion’s needs require a separate school setting, Mr. Montana is violating Davion’s right to LRE. “A” is not correct because due process was afforded to Davion during the threat assessment process. “C” is also incorrect because FERPA concerns the privacy of data, and a transfer would not violate these rights. “D” is incorrect because there is no such thing as the Federal Threat Assessment Safety Act.

Constructed Response

1-Discuss how you ensure safety in the school environment and protect a student with a disability's right to LRE. The constructed response should include the following:

- Discussion of IDEA and LRE
- Discussion of the threat assessment process and resolution
- The importance of FERPA and not disclosing sensitive information related to Davion

2-Utilizing the details of this case and the Comprehensive School Assessment Guidelines decision tree (Florida Department of Education, 2021), how would you respond to the incident? See <https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/19958/urlt/8-3.pdf>

The constructed response should include taking these or similar actions:

- Interviewing Claire, Davion's teacher, and the school psychologist to determine if Davion made direct threats or has done this before.
- Gaining additional information related to Davion's motivation for bringing the multi-tool.
- Reviewing behavior records from Davion's past school.
- Determining the threat level and taking any next steps.
- Given that Davion has an IEP, reviewing Davion's IEP with the special education team and seeing what, if any, additional steps are needed.

Additional Activities

1. For further discussion, participants should consider how a principal might further a culture of care and inclusion. Consider professional development for staff, including general and special education staff, on safety protocols and on how to support teachers, students, and community members impacted by school violence.
2. Participants should investigate the threat assessment processes and regulations in their school, district or charter organization, and state. Analyze how the procedures align with best practices for threat assessments and identify any needed recommendations.

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Chapter 14

Is That the Best Use of My Time?

Working with School Counselors to Address Student Behavior

Jessica Mulder and Rachel Roegman

Introduction

Schools with comprehensive school counseling programs have better academic outcomes and are more effective at closing the achievement gap (ASCA, 2022). However, school counselors face many barriers to implementing a comprehensive school counseling curriculum. Some of these barriers include: inappropriate work duties, high student-to-counselor ratios, and low levels of collaboration between school counselors and building leaders (McConnell et al., 2020). At the individual program level, removing these barriers often lies in the hands of the school principal, who is responsible for hiring personnel, assigning duties and responsibilities, and fostering collaboration with school counseling staff.

Counselors, when utilized effectively, are important partners and leaders who can help principals achieve their school vision and mission. When school counselors and principals collaborate, the benefits include: higher counselor job satisfaction (Clemons et al., 2009; Fey et al., 2022); better performance within both the counselor and principal roles (Lashley & Stickl, 2016); less counselor burnout (Camelford et al., 2017; Rock et al., 2017); and a better overall school climate (Carey & Dimmitt, 2010; Rock et al., 2017).

Background of the Case

District is an urban school district near a major metropolitan area. It is a relatively large district with 10 elementary schools (K-5), 6 middle schools (6-8), and 3 high schools. The district is diverse in terms of students' racial and ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and languages spoken at home.

In part as a response to a state mandate as well as internal concerns about disproportionality in school discipline, the district needs to lower the number of suspensions of low-income students of color. As a result, the district has recently changed its discipline practices from more exclusionary to more restorative. Instead of suspensions, students have conversations and work to repair the harm that they caused.

The district has provided training for the new restorative discipline practices to key individuals in school buildings and is hoping to involve school counseling teams in each building in leading implementation. The counseling teams have been tasked with implementing a new, evidence-based school counseling curriculum in their buildings as a Tier 1 intervention. The district has also charged school counselors with collecting and using specific school-level data to help support and drive additional Tier 2 and 3 interventions at each school.

Specific School Information

Middle School (MS) has been considered a good middle school in the district for the past 10 years. It has had consistent ELA and Math assessment scores that are slightly above the district and state averages, and its staff turnover rate has been relatively low compared to other middle schools in the district. However, over the past few years, the school has also grappled with a small number of students with challenging behavior, and the increase in students' digital connectivity has led to frequent reports of online bullying.

The district's change in discipline practices has left teachers at the school frustrated by what they see as a lack of support from administration. When students misbehave, teachers are no longer allowed to send them to the office or a counselor. And when students' online interactions enter the classroom, teachers do not know how to respond. There is a shared sense amongst the teachers that there are no consequences for students' misbehavior, and that students also know there are none. Many teachers who have been happy to teach at MS for most of their careers do not feel supported, and several are thinking of retiring or leaving the district.

Personnel

School Principal

Principal Davis has worked at MS for the past eight years, and in that time, she has felt like the school has been successful both academically and as a community. She has been well-liked by her teaching staff. Principal Davis's teaching background has made her a great partner for curriculum initiatives, and she has created a space for teachers to innovate and develop thriving teaching practices. These practices are among the main reasons MS continues to make progress in Reading and Mathematics. Students and families have also appreciated Principal Davis' work. Parents feel welcome in the building, and many have had multiple children attend the school.

School Counselor

Ms. Jones has been a school counselor for six years, and her entire experience has been at MS under the direction of Principal Davis. When Ms. Jones first started working at MS, she was ready to hit the ground running by implementing a comprehensive school-wide curriculum that used the ASCA National Model—just like she had been taught in graduate school. However, she quickly realized that Ms. Davis did not think that school counselors needed to be teaching classroom lessons, running small groups, or participating on the school-wide leadership team. Ms. Jones found herself doing many things that she did not expect and that were not part of what counselors were supposed to do. She was made a case manager, even though she was not trained to do the work, and she was assigned to support a small group of students with behavioral challenges. She was also tasked with building the school-wide master schedule and was often asked to cover the phones in the main office so the school clerk could have a lunch break. The only true counseling she ever felt like she got to do usually involved a student in crisis or a restorative conversation with a student after an incident.

After Ms. Jones learned how to do all the things Principal Davis asked of her and felt she had earned Principal Davis's respect, she started advocating for more counseling-related tasks and the time to complete them. Principal Davis listened to Ms. Jones's concerns but felt like Ms.

Jones was already doing important school counseling work by supporting individual students, promoting positive behaviors through restorative conversations, and supporting students' academic success by building the master schedule. Eventually, Ms. Jones accepted her role at MS and sought every opportunity to provide school counseling services to students.

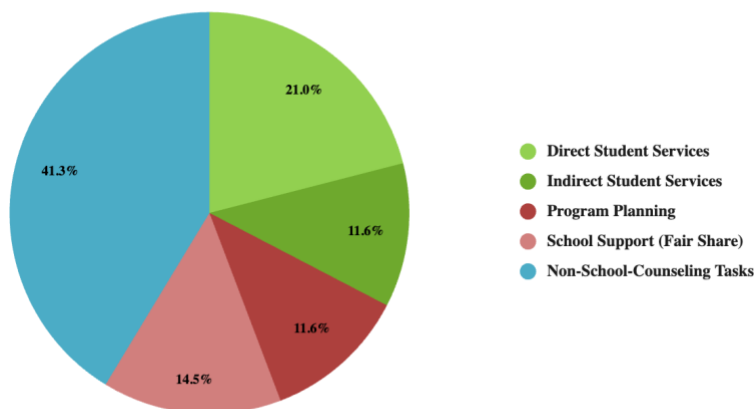
Case Narrative

Principal Davis has noticed a shift in recent years, with an increase in online and school-based misbehaviors that seem to be affecting the school's sense of community. When the district decided to change school discipline practices districtwide, Principal Davis applauded the changes, agreeing that suspensions were not the answer. She, Ms. Jones, and her school dean were trained in the restorative practices and on the new student code of conduct. Principal Davis felt confident that her teachers would also support the new discipline changes after she presented them in her beginning-of-the-year staff development meetings.

However, Principal Davis soon discovered that very few of her staff found the discipline changes to be effective in managing behavior. Teachers kept complaining about students being sent back to their classrooms without consequences and with little change in their behavior. Online bullying seemed almost impossible to address. As a result, teacher referrals for student behavior skyrocketed from 30 in the previous school year to 75 in the current school year. To help manage the overwhelming number of discipline referrals and the more time-consuming restorative justice practices, Principal Davis turned to Ms. Jones, her school counselor, to help support the increasing number of restorative discipline conversations.

The district, after seeing ES's significant increase in discipline referrals, reached out to Principal Davis to determine what support she might need to improve behavior and the overall climate at MS. The district also tasked Ms. Jones with conducting a school-wide needs assessment to help identify the underlying issues driving the school's significant behavioral change. The district wanted MS to use this data to implement a school-wide developmental counseling curriculum, as well as targeted small-group counseling interventions to address student behaviors. Ms. Jones had long used the ASCA National Model to guide her work, and she was eager to follow the district's suggestions because they closely aligned with the work she had wanted to do at MS all along. However, in previous school years, her attempts to run small groups or conduct classroom guidance lessons were hampered by her many non-counseling responsibilities. She was unsure how to follow the district's guidance and reached out to Principal Davis for support.

During the meeting with Principal Davis, Ms. Jones shared a time-use calculator. This data showed that Ms. Jones was spending more than 40% of her time on non-counseling tasks, and she did not see how she could comply with the district's expectations of implementing a school-wide counseling curriculum and implementing tiered counseling interventions for students identified through the needs assessment without some tasks being removed from her plate. Ms. Jones also indicated that she would want to work with the school leadership team to review schoolwide data to determine how the school counseling curriculum could support addressing changes in the school climate, the increase in discipline referrals, and the needs of their student population.

Ms. Jones' Use of Time Calculator ([One Week Sample Spreadsheet](#))**Ms. Jones' Use of Time Calculator****Teaching Notes**

This case examines the challenges in a school where the culture and climate are in flux due to changes in discipline practices and an increase in cyber bullying. Principal Davis is faced with a changing school community and new district mandates that have left her teachers feeling unsupported, and a longstanding sense of community within the school has been disrupted. Principal Davis knows that, as a school leader, she should use data to drive change in implementing school improvements (**NELP Standard 1, Component 1.2**), but she is struggling to fully understand how Ms. Jones can help her do so. Principal Davis relies heavily on Ms. Jones to complete the tasks she has already been assigned, and she isn't knowledgeable enough about Ms. Jones' training to envision how Ms. Jones' expertise could help facilitate meaningful changes at MS.

Educators should use this case to engage in dialogue about the role of school counselors within the school, and how school counselors can be best utilized to support school improvement efforts. School Leaders are rarely taught about the role of school counselors or how to effectively utilize them in their leadership programs (Mulder, 2025). This lack of knowledge appears to be one of the main stumbling blocks for Principal Davis (**ETS SLLA 6990; III C**).

For school counselors to effectively implement the ASCA model and lead change within their schools, they need to collaborate effectively with their administrators. In their 2010 evaluation of the developmental history of school counseling models, Wingfield et al. argue that advocacy for marginalized students and building partnerships with principals are central to the success of school counselors. They suggest that school counselors are uniquely qualified to “facilitate introspection” and work with all stakeholders to address inequities within the school

that may limit the success of students. Wingfield et al. (2010) stress that, by partnering with principals, school counselors can make a greater impact on student success.

Principal Davis's lack of knowledge of the school counselor role; her belief that Ms. Jones is already doing the work of a school counselor; her belief that Ms. Jones's current work is necessary for the running of the school; and the growing changes within the building are creating a stressful and negative working environment. What can Principal Davis do to put her school back on track to improve school climate and discipline?

ASCA National Model

Because few leadership programs address the ASCA National Model, a brief overview of the model is available [here](#). The ASCA National Model is a proactive school counseling model that centers the work of school counselors as an important part of all students' academic, social-emotional, and future career success. The ASCA Model requires counseling programs to take on an active role within the school community by collaborating with all stakeholders: school staff, parents, students, and community members. Because the counseling role spans all aspects of the school community, counselors are strategically positioned to serve as advocates and change agents within their schools.

The current edition of the ASCA Model, released in 2025, breaks the work of school counselors into four areas: Define, Manage, Deliver, and Assess. A school counseling program is defined by three sets of standards: the ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies, the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors, and the ASCA Student Standards: Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success. These standards guide the work of school counseling as they deliver, manage, and assess their school counseling programs.

The second and third areas of the ASCA Model are Manage and Deliver. These two parts of the Model are meant to provide tools that guide the structure, assessment, and implementation of a school counseling program that should result in positive outcomes for students. The tools provided by the Model are meant to guide counselors in understanding student needs by completing needs assessments and analyzing school data. Using this data, counseling teams can set outcome goals for students and create action plans to meet those goals through Tier 1 (classroom lessons and school-wide initiatives) and Tier 2 (groups and individual supports) programming. The Model also outlines ways to support counselors in planning how they will collaborate with administration and stakeholders to achieve their program goals.

The final area of the Model is Assess. ASCA suggests that school counselors assess the effectiveness of their program each year. School counselors can do this by completing an annual outcome and results report. This annual appraisal allows counselors to see how effectively their program has met their stated student outcome goals. This allows school counselors to gauge what changes need to be made within their program.

The entire Model is designed to be cyclical. School counselors are meant to continuously collect and analyze data from their school and students and use that data to adjust and maintain

their program each year. The Model's data-centered focus is intended to provide school counselors with the leverage and insights they need to advocate for student needs.

Multiple Choice- Questions

1. Why has MS decided to change its discipline practices?
 - A. There has been an increase in cyberbullying, requiring new disciplinary practices.
 - B. The state and district have decided to move away from exclusionary practices.
 - C. Teachers at MS have felt like the discipline practices don't work.
 - D. Mrs. Davis believes that restorative practices are a better fit for her school community's needs.

ANSWER:

B. While Principal Davis does think the restorative practices are a good idea, and she has seen an increase in cyberbullying at MS, the changes were due to decisions made at the state and district level.

2. Which of the following tasks does Ms. Jones consider to be a counseling task?
 - A. Drafting and managing IEPs for students in the building
 - B. Building the Master Schedule
 - C. Running a small group for students with anger issues.
 - D. Meeting with students who have received a behavioral referral to determine restorative consequences

ANSWER:

C. Ms. Jones would consider running a small group for students with anger issues to be a school counseling task. Writing IEPs, building the master schedule, and conducting discipline conferences are not considered school counseling tasks as outlined by the ASCA National Model.

3. What hasn't Principal Davis done to support the changes in discipline practices at MS?
 - A. She has examined schoolwide data to examine the possible root causes of the behavioral changes at MS.
 - B. She explained the new practices to teachers during the beginning-of-year PD.
 - C. She asked Ms. Jones to help have restorative conversations with students.
 - D. She, Ms. Jones, and her dean have been trained in implementing the new restorative practices.

ANSWER:

A. Principal Davis has not yet examined schoolwide data to determine the root causes for the behavioral changes. Her school counselor has been tasked with completing a needs assessment to support a root cause analysis, but this has not yet been done. Ms. Jones has brought up her difficulties with accomplishing this task.

4. Why doesn't Principal Davis think that Ms. Jones could be helpful in addressing the underlying issues at ES?
- A. Principal Davis doesn't know about the training Ms. Jones has received in her school counseling program?
 - B. Principal Davis relies on Ms. Jones too much to take anything off Ms. Jones' plate.
 - C. Principal Davis thinks Ms. Jones is already helping address disciplinary issues by facilitating restorative discipline conversations with students.
 - D. All of the ABOVE.

ANSWER:

D. Principal Davis has provided all of the following as reasons why she thinks Ms. Jones cannot be helpful in addressing the behavior issues at MS. Principal Davis lacks knowledge of a school counselor's work and roles, and she has not considered that Ms. Jones may have additional expertise that could help. She also has not considered taking any tasks off Ms. Jones' plate to give Ms. Jones the opportunity to better support the school on this issue.

5. After looking at Ms. Jones's Use of Time Calculator, specifically the one-week sample, what is an example of a direct student service that Ms. Jones was able to provide during the week? :
- A. Collaboration with the social worker, dean, and principal.
 - B. Support for a student in crisis
 - C. Arrival and Dismissal Hall Monitoring
 - D. Student observations related to IEP/504 management.

ANSWER:

B. One direct service to Ms. Jones provided support during the sample week to help a student in crisis. It looks like Ms. Jones supported a student in crisis on two separate occasions. One of the incidents appears to have involved a student who needed further intervention and an outside evaluation. ASCA suggests that 80% of a counselor's time should be spent providing direct student services, but Ms. Jones spent only 20% of her time doing so.

Constructed Response / Essay Response

1. NELP Standard 3, Component 3.3 States that: "program completers understand and demonstrate the capacity to evaluate, cultivate, and advocate for equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive instruction and behavior support practices among teachers and staff." The current rollout of the new restorative justice-focused discipline program does not seem to have the staff buy-in necessary for successful implementation. What could Principal Davis do to cultivate and implement the use of the district's new restorative justice-centered discipline framework at MS? How could we partner with her staff and Ms. Jones to improve implementation and support the school culture?
2. The role of school counselors is rarely taught within school counselor leadership programs. This leads to a lack of understanding of the counselor role for principals, and school counselors are then underutilized within schools. How could principal preparation programs better prepare future principals to work with school counselors? In what ways do the NELP and SLAA standards align with the role of school counselors? What would

programs need to include to prepare principals for engaging school counselors in school-wide decision-making?

Activity to Extend Learning

1. Review the [ASCA National Model 5th Edition](#). After reviewing the model, consider how this knowledge might change how Principal Davis could utilize Ms. Jones in addressing the school-wide improvements needed at MS. Draw up a school improvement plan that addresses the issues at Wynn and that includes the work of school leadership, the school counselors, and relevant stakeholders. What expertise could Ms. Jones provide for this plan?
2. Look at your school's improvement plan. Given your knowledge of the ASCA National Model and the role of school counselors, where might a school counselor be able to support in the implementation of the school improvement plan? Provide several ways a school counselor could support the SIP. If you were the principal at the school, how would you collaborate with your school counselor/ school counseling team to meet your school improvement goals? What barriers might exist that could hinder the school counselor from collaborating with the principal on school improvement?

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Chapter 15

Shifting the Script: Dialogic Learning in a System Built for Monologue

Diana Schmidt and Rachel Roegman

Abstract

As educators, we know that students learn more effectively by talking with one another. However, classrooms seem to remain monologic in nature, and often it is to no fault of the teacher. They are faced with obstacles both within the classroom and out that inhibit their ability to execute this kind of teaching. This case study illustrates how a middle school social studies teacher and their principal from a suburban school understand and sustain dialogic pedagogy amid systemic educational constraints. Dialogic pedagogy can be enacted and taught directly within the classroom and modeled throughout the schools in intentional ways. This case study examines the many constraints that exist for teachers and administrators when choosing to enact dialogue more frequently in schools, while also identifying underlying supports. Grounded in systems-level thinking, the educators both directly and indirectly imagine schools where student-led discourse and critical questioning are at its foundation. They also optimize on existing structures that support this kind of educational shift, as well.

Background

Middle School (MS) is a moderately resourced and moderately performing public school located in a suburban community. Its student population reflects incredible diversity, from socioeconomic status to languages spoken in the home. Between the pressure to increase test scores and the spectrum of needs of the students, choosing district priorities is often a challenge in this school district. And like most schools, MS operates in an accountability-driven system where instructional minutes, test scores, pacing guides, and curricular mandates shape daily practice.

Ms. Gonzalez, an eighth-grade social studies teacher, and Dr. Logan, the school principal, are deeply committed to preparing students for civic life. They believe in fostering dialogue in the classroom, real dialogue that values questioning, student agency, and multiple perspectives. Their shared belief is that this practice is essential for both academic and democratic development. However, they also recognize the challenge of executing this practice in a standards-driven system.

The Teacher Perspective

Ms. Gonzalez has taught for over a decade and is widely regarded by colleagues, administrators, and families as an exceptional educator. Her classroom is unlike most others: students routinely lead discussion, challenge one another respectfully, and refer to historical texts

and current events as they make arguments. Visitors to her classroom often comment on an atmosphere that promotes both productive struggle and deep engagement.

However, Ms. Gonzalez admits that sustaining this environment requires constant negotiation. She must balance pacing guides with teachable moments. She modifies the district curriculum to allow for discussion by building structures around dialogue and actively teaching students how to participate in this kind of learning. These are not practices that are delineated across content mandates or curricular materials; they are acquired after years of experience and a deep belief in their value.

She also faces resistance when it comes to these practices. Some colleagues, with whom she is supposed to be collaborating, believe that her approach is either not “rigorous” enough or that it requires too much teacher “lift” in order to implement. Ms. Gonzalez herself worries that these practices may not translate into measurements of success, such as increased standardized test scores. And with the newly appointed superintendent, she worries that the same level of trust and autonomy that she has had will dissipate. However, every time a student leads a conversation about systemic injustice or grapples with ethical questions in historical contexts, Ms. Gonzalez is reminded why she continues to push this practice.

The Administrator’s View

Dr. Logan sees Ms. Gonzalez not just as a strong teacher but as a leader. He believes that dialogic pedagogy should be more than a classroom strategy; it should be a school-wide norm. He has worked to create conditions that allow for teacher autonomy, including protecting instructional flexibility and reducing micromanagement. Dr. Logan has restructured professional learning to emphasize inquiry and reflection, and he often points to Ms. Gonzalez’s classroom as a model of these practices.

However, Dr. Logan too is constrained. District mandates require him to ensure fidelity to curriculum maps and benchmark assessments. Some families, especially those focused on high school placement, raise concerns when instruction doesn’t look “traditional”. Some of his principal colleagues from the other buildings within the district are also not convinced that teacher autonomy is the right avenue to take in today’s educational climate. Moreover, he has yet to have a gauge on where his new superintendent may stand on this philosophy.

Regardless, Dr. Logan continues to advocate for dialogic practices both within adult learning as well as student learning. He schedules time for cross-disciplinary planning, supports teacher-led professional learning, and pushes back against overly prescriptive directives from the central office. He knows that dialogic pedagogy can only thrive if it lives beyond isolated classrooms; it must be embedded in the culture.

Systemic Supports and Constraints

Through their work, Ms. Gonzalez and Dr. Logan identify a number of supports and constraints for dialogic practices.

Supports

The school community is strengthened by a foundation of autonomy and trust between teachers and administrators, creating the conditions for dialogic pedagogy to take root. Educators are encouraged to experiment with inquiry-based standards that prioritize open-ended

questioning and curiosity, while administrators reinforce these practices by modeling dialogue during professional learning, staff meetings, and restorative conversations with students, families, and colleagues. These practices signal that dialogue is not simply an instructional tool but a way of fostering relationships and collective problem-solving.

Structures for interdisciplinary collaboration deepen this work, particularly when teachers and specialists develop pacing guides that align curricular resources with student needs. Professional learning communities dedicated to dialogic pedagogy allow teachers to share strategies, engage in lesson studies, and collaboratively analyze student work, while modeling universal strategies that can be embedded across content areas. Administrators and instructional coaches play a key role by creating coaching cycles in which they observe, reflect, and provide feedback on dialogic practices, helping teachers refine their approaches. District administrators are also engaged in dialogue to determine how best to use curricular resources with fidelity, while still honoring student responsiveness.

Time and flexibility further support dialogic pedagogy. Block scheduling and interdisciplinary units create opportunities for extended dialogue within the existing curriculum, while evaluation of classroom practice includes examining the amount of dialogue versus monologue and the frequency of student opportunities to respond. Students and families are also drawn into this culture: families are invited to learn about the benefits of dialogic pedagogy and to see it in action during student-led events, reinforcing the value of student voice and inquiry as central to learning.

Constraints

At the same time, systemic constraints complicate these efforts. Curriculum maps often privilege breadth over depth, making it difficult to sustain the extended conversations and explorations required for meaningful dialogue. Teachers face competing demands as they plan for dialogic pedagogy while also needing to meet standardized curriculum requirements. These pressures are intensified by standardized testing schedules and accountability structures that narrow instructional flexibility and emphasize test readiness over deep learning. Parent expectations, shaped by traditional models of schooling, further constrain experimentation, as families question practices that deviate from conventional instruction.

In addition, existing evaluation systems frequently fail to recognize dialogic practices as evidence of instructional effectiveness. Tools often measure compliance rather than creativity, overlooking student-led discourse, inquiry, and relationship-building as valuable indicators of learning. Benchmarking systems may not align with the skills emphasized in dialogic pedagogy, leaving a disconnect between what is taught and what is assessed. Without revisions to evaluation frameworks, teacher case studies, research, and authentic student outcomes risk being undervalued.

Over their time working together, Ms. Gonzalez and Dr. Logan have made changes within the school. Ms. Gonzalez leads a school-wide professional learning session on dialogic protocols. Dr. Logan rewrites classroom walkthrough tools to highlight student agency and engagement strategies that relate directly to this pedagogy. They co-designed a pilot unit with another grade-level team that centers dialogue around civic issues. The work is slow, and the system pushes back, but momentum continues to build.

Then, in the middle of an engaging school year, a district memo arrives: all middle schools are expected to implement a new social studies curriculum with strict pacing, scripted lessons, and biweekly benchmark tests. The new curriculum leaves little room for open dialogue, student-driven inquiry, or teacher discretion.

At the next leadership team meeting, Dr. Logan shared the memo and opened the floor. He is met with silence from his teachers. Ms. Gonzalez eventually speaks up, “We just started to shift the script. Are we really going to go back to more teacher-centered talk?”

Dr. Logan leans forward, meeting the eyes of his team. “So,” he says quietly, “what do we do now?”

Problem of Practice

As a future/current school leader, what would you do next? How can you preserve space for dialogic teaching in a system that increasingly values standardization? What existing systems can you draw upon for support and against which constraints can you challenge to ensure that student voice doesn’t get lost in the noise of compliance?

Teaching Notes for Preparing School Administrators

Dialogic vs. Monologic Pedagogy

Future/current school leaders must recognize that the most effective middle school social studies teachers—the ones described as “exceptional”—are those whose evaluators observe students deeply engaged through collaborative practices and reduced monologic discourse. These teachers embody the potential for dialogic pedagogy, which research consistently links to heightened student engagement and deeper learning (Alexander, 2008). Foundational theorists such as Bakhtin (1981), Freire (1968), and Vygotsky (1978) emphasize that learning is inherently social, dialogic, and constructed through interaction. Bakhtin, for instance, argued that meaning itself emerges only through dialogue, where words and ideas are actively shaped by social contexts and multiple perspectives. Administrators, then, must look beyond surface-level measures of engagement and instead create conditions that value dialogue as central to both teaching and learning. Supporting structures such as professional learning communities, coaching cycles, and opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration can help cultivate teacher practices that shift classrooms away from monologic lecture toward dialogic interaction, fostering spaces where students build knowledge collaboratively.

At the same time, administrators must also be attentive to the structural and cultural constraints that limit dialogic pedagogy in schools. Research shows that classroom talk is too often dominated by teachers who lecture, ask all the questions, and rarely build on student responses (Nystrand, 1997/2003). This pattern persists across diverse settings, and its prevalence in lower-tracked classrooms raises equity concerns, as the most vulnerable students are disproportionately subjected to monologic instruction (Nystrand et al., 2003). Furthermore, grading systems and traditional forms of feedback can unintentionally undermine dialogue by reinforcing judgment rather than supporting inquiry and growth (Alexander, 2008; White, 2017). Administrators should encourage the use of formative feedback that is responsive to student contributions, thereby sustaining dialogue and motivation (Goering & Hensley, 2013; Lehman et al., 2018). By valuing student-led discourse, inquiry, and collaborative meaning-making as

legitimate indicators of instructional effectiveness, school leaders can reshape evaluation practices and shift institutional culture toward more dialogic, equitable, and engaging pedagogy.

Structures of Dialogue

For future/current school leaders, it is important to recognize that dialogic pedagogy does not emerge spontaneously; it requires intentional structures that support students in moving beyond monologic exchanges. Robin Alexander (2016), building on Freire's work, emphasizes that dialogue must be "planful," not episodic, with teachers designing routines and classroom environments that invite authentic student voice. Research shows that when structures encourage students to give lengthy, elaborated responses rather than seeking singular correct answers, engagement and learning deepen (Christodoulou & Osborne, 2014; Pimentel & McNeill, 2013). Yet common practices—such as rigid hand-raising protocols or overreliance on teacher prompting—can unintentionally limit opportunities for student talk and reinforce hierarchical power dynamics (Segal & Lefstein, 2016). Administrators, therefore, must guide teachers toward creating flexible, intentional structures—like groupings, routines, or scaffolds—that shift ownership of talk from teacher to student and provide space for contingent, exploratory responses.

Equally critical is the way structures are tied to pedagogy and relationships across time. Teachers should use a range of strategies, from rearranging physical space into small groups to providing sentence stems, timers, and question prompts to scaffold dialogue. These structures support not only immediate interaction but also the longer-term building of discourse norms and respectful collaboration (Boyd & Rubin, 2006; Lin, 2020). Importantly, dialogue requires explicit instruction: middle schoolers want to be heard, but they also need to learn how to listen, respond, and co-construct meaning (Lehman et al., 2018; Robbins, 2015). Administrators can reinforce this by encouraging pedagogical planning that intentionally sequences discourse development across the school year, while also modeling dialogic practices in faculty meetings, restorative circles, and family engagement. Doing so signals that structures of dialogue are not add-ons, but foundational to both classroom learning and the broader culture of the school (Habermas, 1979).

NELP and SLLA Standards

NELP Building-Level Standard addressed:

Standard 4, Component 4.2

Standard 7, Component 7.4

ETS SLLA 6990 area addressed:

II B

II C

Case Review

Multiple Choice:

1-What does Ms. Gonzalez identify as the greatest challenge in sustaining her dialogic classroom practices?

- A. Lack of student interest in historical topics
- B. Balancing district pacing guides with authentic dialogue opportunities.
- C. Limited access to curricular resources and technology
- D. Inconsistent administrative support for her teaching

2-Which of the following practices did Dr. Logan implement to support dialogic pedagogy at Maple Glen Middle School?

- A. Mandating fidelity to distinct pacing guides
- B. Protecting instructional flexibility and teacher autonomy
- C. Increasing the number of standardized benchmark tests
- D. Reducing time for cross-disciplinary collaboration

3-Which of the following is listed as a constraint to dialogic pedagogy in this case study?

- A. Student-led professional learning sessions
- B. Family engagement in student-led events
- C. Curriculum maps that privilege breadth over depth
- D. Administrator coaching cycles

4-In the scenario where the district mandates scripted lessons and biweekly benchmarks, what is the immediate reaction of the leadership team?

- A. Teachers enthusiastically agree to follow the directive.
- B. The team suggests revising the pacing guide collaboratively.
- C. Teachers remain silent until Ms. Gonzalez voices concern.
- D. Dr. Logan announces his refusal to implement the mandate.

5-Which of the following measures of success aligns most directly with preserving dialogic pedagogy in the face of standardization?

- A. Increased teacher-reported autonomy on surveys.
- B. Higher scores on district benchmark tests
- C. Faster pacing through the curriculum maps
- D. Reduced need for professional learning communities

Constructed Response:

As a future administrator in Dr. Logan's position, describe how you would respond to the district's directive for scripted curriculum. What strategies would you use to preserve dialogic pedagogy, and how would you balance compliance with innovation? In your response, draw upon specific supports and constraints identified in the case study.

Below is a sample chart from the school's Walkthrough Data:

Classroom Practice Observed	Percentage of Classroom
Teacher Monologue >75%	62%
Student Dialogue >50%	18%
Mix of Monologue and Dialogue	20%

Using this data, write a short analysis for your leadership team. How does the data reflect the systemic constraints discussed in the case study? What leadership moves could you make to shift the balance toward more dialogic practices across the school while still meeting district requirements?

Classroom Activities

Activity 1: The Leadership Decision Simulation – “The District Memo”

Objective:

Help future leaders practice decision-making when balancing district mandates with school-based priorities.

Process:

- 1-Divide participants into small groups of 4–5.
- 2-Provide each group with the **district memo** from the case study (the scripted curriculum requirement).
- 3-Assign each group a role perspective:
 - *Principal*
 - *Teacher leader (like Ms. Gonzalez)*
 - *Parent representative*
 - *District administrator*
 - *Student representative* (optional if larger groups)
- 4-Task groups to hold a **15-minute leadership team meeting** where each role argues their perspective.
- 5-After the discussion, each group must present a **two-part action plan**:
 - Immediate next step (how to respond to the memo now)
 - Long-term strategy (how to advocate for and sustain dialogic pedagogy within district constraints)

Debrief:

Facilitator leads a reflection:

- What tensions surfaced most strongly?
- Which supports could be leveraged immediately?
- How can leaders balance *compliance* with *innovation*?

Example District Memo (for Activity 1)

To: Middle School Principals and Instructional Leaders

From: Office of Curriculum and Instruction

Date: [Insert Date]

Subject: Implementation of New Middle School Social Studies Curriculum

Dear Principals and Instructional Leaders:

As part of our districtwide commitment to ensuring equity, consistency, and academic rigor across all schools, we are announcing the adoption and implementation of a new Middle School Social Studies Curriculum for grades 6–8. This initiative responds to state standards, accountability measures, and our district goal of aligning instructional practice across all schools.

Implementation Requirements

- **Scripted Lessons:** All teachers are expected to follow the provided daily lesson scripts with fidelity to ensure consistency in pacing and instructional delivery.
- **Pacing Guide:** Instruction will follow a common district pacing calendar. Deviations from this calendar must be approved by the building principal in collaboration with the Office of Curriculum and Instruction.
- **Benchmark Assessments:** Biweekly benchmark tests will be administered across all middle schools. Assessment results will be used to monitor student progress and guide reteaching opportunities.
- **Instructional Minutes:** Teachers are expected to adhere to designated instructional time for social studies to maintain equity across classrooms.

Professional Learning

The district will provide mandatory professional development sessions focused on:

- Effective implementation of the scripted lessons.
- Administration and analysis of benchmark assessments.
- Strategies for supporting diverse learners within the prescribed curriculum.

Accountability and Monitoring

- Building administrators are responsible for ensuring fidelity of implementation through classroom walkthroughs and regular monitoring.
- District instructional coaches will conduct site visits to provide support and feedback.
- Schools will be expected to submit quarterly reports detailing benchmark performance and instructional alignment.

Recognizing Teacher Expertise and Innovation

While fidelity to the curriculum is required, we recognize the expertise and dedication of our teaching staff. Teachers are encouraged to integrate dialogic strategies, student-led inquiry, and culturally responsive practices within the framework of the scripted curriculum, provided

pacing and assessment requirements are met. Our goal is not to limit innovation but to ensure alignment across the system while meeting state and district accountability expectations.

We understand that implementing a new curriculum requires adjustment and collaboration. As always, we thank you for your leadership, your commitment to our students, and your continued partnership in advancing our district's mission.

Sincerely,

[Name]

Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction

Activity 2: Mapping Supports and Constraints into Action

Objective:

Push leaders to translate abstract supports/constraints into concrete leadership moves.

Process:

1-Give participants a **two-column chart** labeled *Supports* and *Constraints* (already summarized from the case).

2-Ask participants to work individually or in pairs to:

- Select **two supports** and design specific strategies a leader could expand or institutionalize them.
- Select **two constraints** and brainstorm leadership moves that could mitigate or reframe them.

3-Once strategies are identified, ask participants to plot them on a **matrix** with two axes:

- Impact on Dialogic Pedagogy* (Low → High)
- Feasibility in Current System* (Low → High)

4-Each participant/pair shares one “high impact, high feasibility” strategy with the group.

Debrief:

Discuss:

- Which strategies rose to the top?
- What does this reveal about where leaders should focus first?
- How does systems thinking (district–school–classroom) inform these choices?

Answer Key

Q1. Which of the following best describes Ms. Gonzalez's classroom practice?

Correct Answer: C. Students routinely lead discussions and engage deeply with texts and current events.

Rationale: The case highlights student-led dialogue, respectful challenges, and references to historical texts/current events as hallmarks of her practice.

Q2. What is Dr. Logan's primary belief about dialogic pedagogy?

Correct Answer: B. It should be embedded as a school-wide norm rather than isolated in individual classrooms.

Rationale: Dr. Logan consistently emphasizes expanding beyond Ms. Gonzalez's classroom to build a school culture of dialogue.

Q3. Which systemic constraint most directly limits dialogic pedagogy at Maple Glen Middle School?

Correct Answer: D. Curriculum maps that prioritize breadth over depth.

Rationale: Extended dialogue requires time and depth; breadth-focused pacing undermines this.

Q4. Why does Ms. Gonzalez worry about sustaining dialogic pedagogy under the new superintendent?

Correct Answer: C. She fears reduced teacher autonomy and stricter curriculum fidelity.

Rationale: She explicitly voices concern that the superintendent may not support autonomy and flexibility.

Q5. What leadership action has Dr. Logan already taken to support dialogic pedagogy?

Correct Answer: B. He revised classroom walkthrough tools to highlight student agency.

Rationale: In this case, Dr. Logan rewrites walkthrough tools to include indicators of dialogue and student voice.

Q1. Constructed Response:

As a future leader, what immediate actions could you take to preserve dialogic teaching in the face of a scripted curriculum mandate?

Key Points for a Strong Response:

- Protect teacher autonomy by encouraging adaptation of scripted lessons to include dialogic protocols.
- Use existing supports (e.g., interdisciplinary collaboration, inquiry-based standards, block scheduling) to build space for dialogue.
- Communicate with district leaders to advocate for flexibility within curriculum implementation.
- Frame dialogic pedagogy as supporting—not undermining—test preparation (students think critically, engage deeply).

Q2. Essay:

Drawing on theories of Bakhtin, Freire, and Vygotsky, explain why dialogic pedagogy is essential in preparing students for civic life. How should leaders navigate systemic pressures to ensure these practices thrive?

Key Points for a Strong Response:

- Bakhtin (1981): Meaning emerges through dialogue, not monologue; authentic discourse fosters deeper understanding.

- Freire (1968): Dialogue is central to liberatory, democratic education; students must be agents, not passive recipients.
- Vygotsky (1978): Social interaction is the foundation of learning; collaboration moves students through the zone of proximal development.
- Leaders must:
 - Advocate for evaluation tools that recognize student-led discourse.
 - Provide professional learning centered on dialogic methods.
 - Balance accountability with innovation by reframing dialogue as aligned with student engagement and performance outcomes.
 - Engage families and district officials in seeing the value of dialogic learning for both academic and civic goals.

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Chapter 16

Addressing Equity and Cultural Responsiveness in Elementary and Middle Schools

Camille Hopkins

Abstract

This set of four mini case studies explores how elementary and middle schools address equity and cultural responsiveness in daily practice. The first case involves a parent's concern over a racially insensitive library book, prompting a review of selection policies and representation. The second highlights a student's experience with racial harm, leading to broken trust and the need to rebuild relationships through a community of care. The third focuses on professional collaboration to support a student facing academic and behavioral struggles, emphasizing shared responsibility and consistent communication. The fourth centers on a student altercation during lunch, revealing gaps in supervision and the need for proactive, culturally responsive discipline. Across all cases, school leaders and staff worked to repair harm, affirm student identity, and engage families. These cases illustrate how schools can respond to challenges with empathy, collaboration, and a focus on creating safe, inclusive environments for all students.

Case Study 1: Library Book Equity and Cultural Responsiveness

NELP Standards: 2.2 and 3.1

A parent at Apple Elementary expressed concern after their child mentioned reading a book featuring two boys getting married. The parent felt such LGBTQ+ content was inappropriate for young students and questioned its presence in the school library. The principal responded by assuring the parent that all library materials are carefully reviewed and age-appropriate. They emphasized that none of the books contain explicit content. The principal explained that the inclusion of LGBTQ+ texts is part of a broader effort to ensure all students feel represented, just as books reflecting various races, cultures, and family structures are included.

Multiple Choice Questions

1. Which professional responsibility is most relevant when evaluating the inclusion of LGBTQ+ books in a school library?
 - A. Promoting uniformity in student beliefs
 - B. Ensuring materials reflect diverse identities and foster inclusion
 - C. Limiting access to controversial topics
 - D. Prioritizing only academic content over social themes

Correct Answer: B

Rationale: Educators have a duty to create inclusive environments where all students feel represented and respected.

2. If the school removed LGBTQ+ books solely due to a parent complaint, which core educational value would be most at risk?

- A. Academic rigor
- B. Freedom of expression and intellectual freedom
- C. Standardized curriculum alignment
- D. Budgetary efficiency

Correct Answer: B

Rationale: Removing books based on identity-related content undermines students' rights to access diverse perspectives.

3. How can the school best address concerns while upholding inclusive practices?

- A. Avoid discussing the issue to prevent conflict
- B. Hold a private meeting with the parent and remove the books quietly
- C. Provide transparency about book selection criteria and offer optional resources for families
- D. Require all students to read LGBTQ+ books

Correct Answer: C

Rationale: Transparency and choice allow for respectful dialogue while maintaining inclusive values.

4. What is the educational benefit of including LGBTQ+ literature in elementary libraries?

- A. It introduces complex adult themes prematurely
- B. It promotes empathy, representation, and social-emotional learning
- C. It replaces traditional family narratives
- D. It prepares students for standardized testing

Correct Answer: B

Rationale: Inclusive literature supports identity development and fosters a respectful school climate.

5. Which of the following best reflects a culturally responsive approach to library curation?

- A. Selecting books based only on majority culture norms
- B. Including texts that reflect the diverse backgrounds and identities of the student population
- C. Avoiding books that may raise questions from parents
- D. Prioritizing books that align with one cultural perspective

Correct Answer: B

Rationale: Culturally responsive education ensures all students see themselves reflected in the curriculum and resources.

Case Study 2: Navigating Racial Harm and Rebuilding Trust Through a Community of Care

NELP Standards: 5.1 and 5.2

Ms. Pickens met with administrators to express serious concerns about her son's experiences at Apple Middle School. The 30-minute meeting focused on racially offensive language and targeted bullying that had significantly impacted her child's emotional well-being.

In alignment with Standard 5: Community of Care and Support for Students, the school responded with a multi-tiered plan to ensure the student felt safe, supported, and valued. The administrator personally escorted the student to class upon his return and committed to ongoing communication and follow-up.

However, the situation was further complicated. She had previously cited concerns about discriminatory practices after her son was subjected to racial slurs by a peer. Ms. Pickens expressed a strong desire to avoid direct engagement with certain administrators, creating challenges in maintaining open communication and trust.

The school leadership team worked to uphold a supportive environment by:

Offering alternative communication channels (e.g., neutral liaisons, written updates).

Involving community partners and restorative support staff.

Prioritizing transparency, empathy, and student-centered care.

This case underscores the importance of culturally responsive, trauma-informed practices and the need for professional communities to remain flexible, reflective, and committed to equity and healing.

The school is working to build bridges by:

- Assigning neutral support staff (e.g., behavior support educator and restorative specialist) to work directly with the student.
- Offering alternative communication channels (e.g., written updates, third-party facilitators).
- Prioritizing transparency, empathy, and responsiveness in all interactions.

This case highlights the importance of flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and trauma-informed practices when supporting students and families in complex relational contexts.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Given the parents' strained relationship with school administration, which of the following strategies best supports Standard 5 while respecting the parents' boundaries?

- A. Insisting on in-person meetings with the principal
- B. Assigning neutral support staff and offering alternative communication methods
- C. Limiting communication to formal disciplinary notices
- D. Avoiding further contact to reduce tension

Correct Answer: B

Rationale: Standard 5 emphasizes care and support. Offering neutral staff and flexible communication builds trust while honoring the parents' preferences.

2. What is the most significant risk if the school fails to navigate the parents' mistrust effectively?

- A. The student may be transferred to another school
- B. The school may face budget cuts
- C. The student's emotional and academic well-being may deteriorate due to a lack of consistent support
- D. The school will be required to revise its curriculum

Correct Answer: C

Rationale: A breakdown in communication can lead to unmet student needs, undermining the supportive environment Standard 5 promotes.

3. Which of the following best demonstrates a trauma-informed approach to supporting the student?

- A. Increasing disciplinary consequences for all students involved
- B. Avoiding further discussion of the incident to prevent discomfort
- C. Providing consistent emotional support, safe spaces, and trusted adult check-ins
- D. Transferring the student to another school

Correct Answer: C

Rationale: Trauma-informed care prioritizes emotional safety, consistency, and supportive relationships.

4. How does the school's use of a Restorative Support Specialist align with both Standard 3 (Equity) and Standard 5 (Care and Support)?

- A. It provides a disciplinary alternative that avoids accountability
- B. It ensures all students receive the same consequences
- C. It offers culturally responsive, relationship-centered support that promotes healing and inclusion
- D. It removes the student from the classroom to avoid further incidents

Correct Answer: C

Rationale: Restorative practices support equity and care by addressing harm, building relationships, and affirming student identity.

5. What long-term approach would most effectively rebuild trust with families like Ms. Pickens'?

- A. Hosting mandatory parent-administrator meetings
- B. Creating a parent advisory council with diverse representation and shared decision-making power
- C. Sending weekly behavior reports home
- D. Limiting parent involvement to academic matters only

Correct Answer: B

Rationale: Shared leadership and inclusive engagement foster trust, transparency, and a stronger school-family partnership.

6. What is the most appropriate action the school can take to rebuild trust with Ms. Pickens while maintaining its commitment to a community of care?

- A. Require Ms. Pickens to attend all meetings with the full administrative team
- B. Avoid further engagement with the parent to reduce conflict
- C. Engage a neutral liaison or community advocate to facilitate communication and ensure transparency
- D. Focus solely on student discipline and avoid addressing the parents' concerns

Correct Answer: C

Rationale: Involving a neutral party respects the parent's boundaries while maintaining open communication and reinforcing the school's commitment to equity, care, and restorative practices.

Case Study: Strengthening Professional Collaboration to Support Student Well-Being

NELP Standards 3.3

Ms. Green, the parent of an elementary student, raised concerns about her child's treatment by staff, peers, and administration. This school year marked her child's first year at the school, having previously attended School X. Early in the year, the student overheard staff making inappropriate comments about their appearance and behavior. Ms. Green met with the principal and requested a classroom transfer, which was granted.

Communication between the teacher and Ms. Green was minimal, leaving the student feeling isolated and unsupported. The student experienced behavioral challenges, including multiple physical altercations.

Recognizing the breakdown in support, the school's leadership team initiated a collaborative response. They held multiple meetings with Ms. Green, implemented a daily check-in system for the student, and worked to rebuild trust and communication between the teacher, student, and parent.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Which aspect of Standard 7 is most directly challenged in this case?
 - A. Lack of curriculum alignment
 - B. Inconsistent disciplinary procedures
 - C. Weak collaboration and communication among staff to support a new student
 - D. Failure to implement standardized testing protocols

Correct Answer: C

Rationale: Standard 7 emphasizes the importance of a collaborative professional culture in which educators and staff work together to support all students—especially those who are new, vulnerable, or facing challenges. In this case, the student was transferred to a new classroom after a concerning incident, but the transition lacked coordinated support.

The absence of a strong student-teacher relationship, minimal communication with the parent, and the student's resulting sense of isolation all point to a breakdown in collaborative planning and shared responsibility among staff. These issues reflect a failure to engage in the kind of proactive, team-based problem-solving that Standard 7 promotes.

Options A, B, and D refer to other areas of school operations (curriculum, discipline, and testing), but they do not directly address the core issue in this scenario: the need for intentional, coordinated support from a professional learning community to ensure student success and well-being.

2. What would be the most effective next step for the school's professional community to support the students?

- A. Assign the student to a third classroom
- B. Increase disciplinary consequences for behavioral issues
- C. Facilitate a team-based reflection session to improve communication and relational strategies
- D. Limit parent-teacher communication to written reports

Correct Answer: C

Rationale: Standard 7 emphasizes the importance of collaborative problem-solving, reflective practice, and shared responsibility among educators and staff. In this case, the student is experiencing emotional distress, behavioral challenges, and a lack of connection with the new teacher. These issues are compounded by weak communication between the school and the parent. Facilitating a team-based reflection session allows educators to:

- Analyze what has and hasn't worked in supporting the student.
- Identify gaps in communication and relationship building.
- Develop a unified, student-centered action plan.
- Strengthen trust and alignment among staff and with the family.

This approach promotes a professional learning community that is responsive, inclusive, and committed to continuous improvement—core principles of Standard 7. In contrast:

Option A (assigning the student to a third classroom) may further destabilize the student.

Option B (increasing disciplinary consequences) addresses symptoms rather than root causes.

Option D (limiting communication) would worsen the disconnect between home and school.

3. How does the leadership team's response reflect the principles of a professional learning community?

- A. By delegating responsibility to the classroom teacher
- B. By involving multiple staff members in collaborative problem-solving and support
- C. By focusing solely on academic performance
- D. By avoiding direct engagement with the parent

Correct Answer: B

4. What systemic issues might this case reveal about the school's professional culture?
- A. Over-reliance on standardized assessments
 - B. Lack of diversity in extracurricular offerings
 - C. Inadequate onboarding and cultural sensitivity training for staff
 - D. Excessive parent involvement in classroom decisions

Correct Answer: C

Rationale: This case highlights a lack of awareness and responsiveness to the cultural and emotional needs of a new student and family. Staff were overheard making inappropriate comments, and the student experienced isolation and conflict in the new classroom. These issues suggest a systemic gap in staff preparation, particularly in cultural sensitivity, inclusive communication, and trauma-informed practices—all of which are essential components of a healthy professional culture under Standard 7.

5. Which long-term strategy would best align with Standard 7 to prevent similar issues in the future?
- A. Rotating students between classrooms more frequently
 - B. Providing professional development on trauma-informed practices and inclusive communication
 - C. Reducing the number of parent-teacher conferences
 - D. Limiting classroom transfers to academic reasons only

Correct Answer: B

Rationale: Standard 7 emphasizes collaboration, continuous learning, and shared responsibility. Ongoing professional development equips staff with the tools to build inclusive, supportive environments and respond effectively to student and family needs.

6. What professional standard was violated when staff were overheard discussing the student's appearance and behavior?
- A. Confidentiality and respect for student dignity
 - B. Curriculum alignment and pacing
 - C. Use of standardized assessments
 - D. Parent engagement protocols

Correct Answer: A

Rationale: Discussing a student's appearance and behavior in a non-professional setting violates ethical standards and undermines trust. Standard 7 emphasizes a respectful, collaborative professional culture that upholds student dignity.

Case Study: Physical Altercation During Lunch at Middle School

NELP standard: 6.3

During a lunch period at Middle School, a physical altercation occurred involving multiple students. The incident escalated quickly, resulting in injuries to staff members who attempted to intervene. Following the initial fight, several students were observed roaming the halls in search of the original victim, indicating a continued threat of violence.

Due to the escalating nature of the incident and the inability to reach the parents of the students involved, school administrators contacted law enforcement. Given the ongoing safety concerns and the students' threatening behavior, law enforcement officers responded promptly. The students were detained and placed in law enforcement custody for further investigation and to ensure the safety of all individuals on campus.

This incident triggered the activation of the school's crisis response protocol, including: Immediate lockdown of affected areas; medical attention for injured staff; incident reporting and documentation; and coordination with district leadership and school safety officers.

The school is now reviewing its supervision procedures, behavioral intervention strategies, and communication protocols to prevent future incidents of this nature. A debriefing with staff and a restorative response plan for the broader school community is being developed.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Which systemic issues are highlighted by students roaming the halls after the incident?
 - A. Lack of extracurricular engagement
 - B. Inadequate hallway supervision and crisis containment protocols
 - C. Poor cafeteria food quality
 - D. Insufficient academic rigor

Correct Answer: B

Rationale: Students' continued pursuit of confrontation after the initial incident suggests a breakdown in supervision and emergency response procedures.

2. What is the most appropriate role of law enforcement in this situation?
 - A. To discipline students academically
 - B. To provide long-term counseling
 - C. To ensure immediate safety and manage criminal behavior
 - D. To replace school administrators in decision-making

Correct Answer: C

Rationale: Law enforcement is called when there is a threat to safety or potential criminal activity. Their role is to stabilize the situation, not to manage school discipline or policy.

3. What long-term strategy should the school prioritize to prevent similar incidents?
- A. Reducing lunch periods
 - B. Increasing standardized testing
 - C. Implementing a school-wide behavior intervention and conflict resolution program
 - D. Limiting student movement during the day

Correct Answer: C

Rationale: A proactive, school-wide approach to behavior and conflict resolution addresses root causes and builds a safer, more supportive school culture.

4. How should the school respond to the communication breakdown with parents during the crisis?
- A. Avoid further contact to prevent conflict
 - B. Send a generic letter home
 - C. Develop a crisis communication protocol with multiple contact methods
 - D. Wait for parents to reach out

Correct Answer: C

Rationale: Effective crisis communication requires proactive, multi-channel outreach to ensure families are informed and supported during emergencies.

Chapter 17

Why DEI Matters in Teaching and Learning

María L. Gabriel

Abstract

Educational researchers have found that teaching and learning are incongruent with students' cultural backgrounds and knowledge due to mismatches between teachers' and students' cultural and racial backgrounds (Bernal, 2002; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nieto & Bode, 2017; Singleton, 2022). This case study focuses on the skill sets for educational leaders described in the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness, and in the SLLA Assessment Content Category: Climate and Cultural Leadership.

Introduction

We can no longer avoid discussing topics that make us uncomfortable. Our students, incessantly inundated with divisive rhetoric and reports of premeditated acts of violence (or even themselves targets of violence), don't have that luxury... We owe our students an education that centers on their lives and explicitly addresses the sociopolitical context. (Simmons, 2019, para. 8)

Between 2020 and 2025, education systems in The United States saw an increase in anti-equity and anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) movements, where “many educational leaders who were standing up for DEI were being silenced by their leadership through lack of support or being disciplined” (Gabriel, 2021, p. 10). In early 2025, the United States of America's presidential campaign promise to rid education of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) came true with the issuance of formal executive orders by the United States Department of Education that placed DEI employees on leave, ended DEI training contracts, and more (U.S. Department of Education, 2025).

Racially diverse students are the majority of students in many classrooms across the United States, with White students making up only 44% of the student population from kindergarten to twelfth grade (K-12) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Yet, in many schools, White teachers remained the predominant race at 80% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Teachers' perceptions of students' achievement can be influenced by their beliefs about students' abilities to learn. Student success is determined by teachers' beliefs that students can learn at high levels and are worthy of assessing and providing growth-producing feedback (Hattie, 2008).

Case Study Narrative

Teachers have multiple tools to ensure they are engaged in high-quality teaching and that their students are learning at high levels. Some policies and practices in place in schools include teacher evaluation, teacher observations, and school-wide frameworks such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). Many educators assume that MTSS is the process or meeting used to determine eligibility for special education services, in which students receive an individualized education plan (IEP) and additional support during the school day. Often, the support is held outside of the general education classroom. Among the processes that fit within MTSS, teachers collaborate to ensure students are learning the anticipated learning goals (academic and behavioral), and they devise a plan of remediation for those who have not reached their goal, and enrichment for those who met it early (Hannigan et al., 2020; Mattos et al., 2024). Many schools across the United States hold meetings in which specific students' needs are discussed using informal and formal data points.

Educational Leadership Standards

To further elevate the requisites of educational leaders, the three components within this standard include:

“...the capacity to use data to evaluate, design, cultivate, and advocate for a supportive and inclusive school culture; ...understand and demonstrate the capacity to evaluate, cultivate, and advocate for equitable access to educational resources, technologies, and opportunities... ; and understand and demonstrate the capacity to evaluate, cultivate, and advocate for equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive instruction and behavior support practices among teachers and staff. (NPBEA, 2018, p. 21)

One other example of an educational leadership assessment that demonstrates the need for high-quality culturally responsive training and school leadership preparation includes the School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA). In alignment with NELP's Standard 3, SLLA's Content Category III: Climate and Cultural Leadership requires similar skill sets. To illustrate the depth of the content, the category includes three distinct components:

- 1) How to create opportunities and a safe environment to examine and express beliefs, ideas, values, and practices about teaching and learning;
- 2) Understands that each student should be treated ...with an understanding of students' culture and context; and
- 3) How to confront and alter institutional biases toward protected social groups. (ETS, n.d., p. 5)

Each of the SLLA components listed above could be a year-long graduate-level course, and they each determine the success of both teaching and learning in schools. The following examples in this case study will highlight the standards listed here, provide context, and deepen understanding of the importance of equity, inclusiveness, cultural responsiveness, and climate and cultural leadership. They illustrate the power of DEI leadership in school settings.

Case Study Part 1

A White teacher stopped an administrator in the hallway within the first week of a student's arrival to inform them of several concerns, including that the kindergarten student needed to be tested to qualify for Special Education services. The teacher requested an MTSS meeting to assess the child's needs. The concerns included: the five-year-old child was not demonstrating mastery of letter writing, a skill desired by the end of the school year; they were not on task in the classroom as they got up and down often instead of staying seated; and they were often tardy or absent. The three main concerns were documented, and the teacher presented student writing samples as the data. Furthermore, it was significant that the child was an Indigenous kindergarten student, the child's family had recently relocated, was living in their car, and the child had no prior formal schooling experience.

Case Study Part 2

In one instance, the staff met to discuss the difficult behavior exhibited by a young White student who was new to the school. The behaviors included visible frustration, which led to loud bursts of yelling or screaming. And, at times, they were eloping from the building. Staff identified: The student was new to the school and had not yet built relationships with other students; the educational record showed inconsistent school experiences; visual impairment was noted in the school record, indicating the child needed glasses, and those present at the meeting said they had not seen the child wear them in class; and the parents were not living together which led to inconsistent communication being received from school.

Reflect and Write

Reflecting on these two case studies:

- Which aspects of the child's identity are relevant?
- What bearing, if any, do these diverse aspects of the child's identity have on the decision by the teacher to test them for Special Education services?
- What harm could be incurred if DHS were to take the case?
- How does a family's poverty impact a staff member's perception of neglect?

Conclusion

While some criticize DEI initiatives as programs that celebrate diversity, many DEI initiatives in schools take a more comprehensive approach, ensuring access, opportunity, and success for each child. These case studies, along with the questions and activities that follow, provide educational leaders with opportunities to examine how school leaders can facilitate and guide their staff to effectively engage with their diverse students and families. Even with limited personal experience, staff can build their skill to ensure academic success for each student.

That work begins with acknowledging that differences in perceptions, beliefs, knowing, and doing exist, and that those impact teaching and learning. Strong processes and protocols that utilize intentional focus on data can help eliminate bias and assumptions about students and their families. Second, the response to that acknowledgment is critical. Naming and valuing the

diversity of each child and their family through taking time to review student's school records, communication and relationship building, and leveraging community partners in each children's success are steps to ensuring equitable access to high-quality teaching and learning in schools.

Multiple Choice Questions

1. What additional learning might a new educator seek out if they do not match the ethnic, racial, or other cultural backgrounds of the students they serve?

A-Online content from racially diverse critical multicultural educators

B-Books written by racially diverse authors

C-Join and participate in professional organizations' learning offerings that focus on equity, diversity, and educational justice, such as the American Educational Research Association

(<https://www.aera.net/>), the National Association for Multicultural Education

(www.nameorg.org), or Courageous Conversation (<https://courageousconversation.com/national-summit/>)

D-All of the above

2. When a school leader hosts a meeting to address a student's academic or behavior needs, who should be at the meeting?

A-Parent, guardian, guardian ad litem (GAL)

B-Health providers supporting the child

C-Teachers of the child

D-All of the above

3. In Case Study Part 1, which aspects of the child's identity were not named by the author?

A-Race/ethnicity

B-Family income

C-Religion

D-Gender

Essay Questions

What bearing, if any, do diverse aspects of a child's identity have on the referral by a teacher to test them for Special Education services?

As an educational leader, how might you make it known that being a culturally responsive DEI educator in the school is important to you, and in fact, is part of your job expectations?

Discussion Topics

How might race, ethnicity, poverty, immigration status, home language, gender identity, gender expression, age, or other aspects of identity impact a student's readiness for kindergarten?

How might you lead a conversation to prevent staff from making judgments or using deficit thinking when they learn that a parent is panhandling during the school day?

Answer Key for Multiple Choice

MC 1. D. All of the Above

This is a short list of options for continuing to learn about identities one is not familiar with and how they connect to teaching and learning. There are more options than those listed here, but these are some easy and accessible options to begin with.

MC 2. D. All of the Above

This is the start of a list. It was a new practice for our problem-solving meetings to include health providers. Teachers appreciated learning about health concerns, the medications needed or being taken, and behavioral management tips being practiced at home as advised by medical practitioners. Valuing multiple perspectives in the meeting allows for greater knowledge and ideas to be realized, supporting the child's success.

MC 3. C. Religion

The child's religion was not mentioned throughout the conversations and problem-solving. Finding delicate ways to uncover a family's religion, particularly if there are religious observances that will impact their school attendance and/or access to learning, can be helpful to the child.

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Chapter 18

Addressing Chronic Absenteeism through Equity-Driven Leadership Practices: Insights from an Urban High School

Gerald Maraia

Abstract

This case study examines trends in chronic absenteeism (CA) over three years at an urban public high school in the United States. Centering multilingual learners (MLLs), the study highlights the importance of culturally responsive and equity-driven leadership practices, individualized supports, and collaborative approaches to foster improved attendance and strengthen students' opportunities for sustained school engagement.

Introduction

Chronic absenteeism, commonly defined as students missing 10% or more days of the school year, continues to pose a significant challenge for PK-12 schools across the United States (Diliberti et al., 2025). Although chronic absenteeism was a concern before the COVID-19 pandemic (Gottfried, 2011), rates have increased substantially in the years following across all student subgroups, particularly Black and Latinx students, as well as those attending high-poverty schools (Dee, 2024; Diliberti et al., 2025; Swiderski et al., 2025). Beyond missed instructional time, research indicates that chronically absent students experience academic challenges, reduced graduation rates, social isolation, and disengagement from school (Eklund et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2021). Consequently, it is now more critical than ever to examine the factors contributing to chronic absenteeism and to identify equity-driven interventions that ensure all students have opportunities to achieve their academic goals.

Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) classified chronically absent students into three broad categories: (1) students who cannot attend school, (2) students who will not attend school, and (3) students who do not attend school. Students who *cannot attend* school might be absent due to illness, mental health, parental influences, family obligations, housing instability, or the need to work. In the years following the pandemic, students and their families may be more cautious about illness and choose to stay home even for minor health concerns (Diliberti et al., 2025). Students who *will not attend* school may try to avoid bullying, unsafe school and neighborhood conditions, harassment, or embarrassment (Childs & Lofton, 2021). Lastly, students who *do not attend* school may be absent because they do not see the value in education or because they would rather be doing something else (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Edwards et al., 2025; Eklund, 2022). Diliberti and colleagues (2025) suggest that the increased availability of remote instruction and online materials may have changed some students' and parents' views on the necessity of being physically present in a brick-and-mortar school.

The call to action is clear: school leaders must address chronic absenteeism utilizing an equity-driven, multifaceted approach that addresses both individual and structural factors. They

must not only have the capacity to understand absenteeism data but also to examine their own leadership practices, school cultures, and community partnerships that foster school engagement and support all students. This case study examines patterns of chronic absenteeism at Academy High School and the role of school building leaders in addressing this persistent challenge. This case study contributes to the limited preparation and support school building leaders receive to equitably and responsively address chronic absenteeism in their schools.

A Diverse Learning Community: Contextualizing Academy High

Academy High School (pseudonym) is an urban public high school located in a major city in the United States. At the beginning of the 2025-2026 academic year, the school enrolled 240 students in grades 9-12, 74% of whom were Black or African American, 21% Hispanic or Latinx, 2% Asian, and 2% White. Approximately 90% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, indicating that the school served a high proportion of students from economically disadvantaged households. Additionally, approximately 22% of students were identified as students with disabilities (SWD), 32% were multilingual learners (MLL), and 12% were students in temporary housing (STH). Academy High had one principal with over 10 years of experience and one assistant principal with less than five years of experience. The school also had one school counselor, one part-time attendance specialist, and one MLL Coordinator who additionally served as the MLL teacher. Among the 26 teachers, approximately 55% were Black and 35% were White, with fewer than five identifying as Asian, Hispanic or Latinx, Native American, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. 50% of the teachers had three or more years of experience. Although the chronic absenteeism data presented in this case study spans three academic years (2021-2024), the demographic data from 2025-2026 generally reflects the student population during that period.

Note on terminology: Although official school and policy documents refer to students as English Language Learners (ELLs) when their home language is not English and their English proficiency level qualifies them for specialized English language instruction, this chapter intentionally uses the term Multilingual Learners (MLLs). This choice emphasizes the cultural and linguistic assets MLLs bring rather than the deficits implied by the term ELLs (De La Cruz Albizu, 2025).

Chronic Absenteeism Trends at Academy High

After analyzing attendance data across three academic years (2021-2024), the percentage of chronically absent (CA) students increased from 30% in 2021-2022 to 46% in 2023-2024, reflecting a substantial rise among all student subgroups. As shown in Table 1, CA rates more than doubled among Hispanic or Latinx students, increasing from 29% (2021-2022) to 61% (2023-2024), and rose significantly among Black or African American students from 31% (2021-2022) to 43% (2023-2024). Furthermore, although CA rates among multilingual learners (MLLs) declined to 28% in 2022-2023, the rate increased the following year to 56% (2023-2024). For students with disabilities (SWDs), CA rates decreased to 33% in 2022-2023 but rose again to 49% in 2023-2024. Finally, the CA rate for economically disadvantaged students increased from 30% to 47% over three years.

Table 1*End-of-Year (EOY) Chronic Absenteeism (CA) Rates by Student Subgroups, 2021-2024*

Student Subgroup	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Enrollment	252	249	242
EOY CA Rate	30%	29%	46%
Hispanic or Latinx	29%	46%	61%
Black or African American	31%	26%	43%
Multilingual Learners (MLLs)	38%	28%	56%
Students with Disabilities (SWDs)	41%	33%	49%
Economically Disadvantaged	30%	31%	47%

Note. Only the five student subgroups with the highest CA rates in 2023-2024 are included; not all student subgroups are presented.

According to the student subgroup data, multilingual learners (MLLs) experienced the largest increase in chronic absenteeism, with rates increasing by 28 percentage points between the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 academic years. This notable increase underscores the importance of this case study, which examines the contextual and systemic factors that may influence school attendance among MLLs at Academy High School.

Student Vignettes: Understanding Attendance

Although analyzing quantitative data is essential for understanding patterns of chronic absenteeism across student subgroups, equity-centered leadership prioritizes students' individual experiences and specific needs. To that end, this section presents three vignettes of Academy High students that highlight their intersectional identities, the unique challenges they face related to chronic absenteeism, and the individualized interventions implemented to address them. To protect anonymity and privacy, student names have been replaced with pseudonyms, and events have been altered.

Vignette #1: Marco

Marco is an 18-year-old multilingual learner (MLL) from South America who also has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). When arriving in the United States and entering high school in the 2021-2022 school year, he maintained a 95% attendance rate. In 2022-2023, his attendance declined to 84%, and by 2023-2024, it dropped significantly to 23%. This shift coincides with a significant change in his personal responsibilities: he is now employed full-time to provide financial support for his extended family, who are also recent immigrants to the

United States, as well as his elderly grandfather, his spouse, and his stepchild. These additional obligations and long work hours demanded his time and energy, affecting his ability to attend school and consistently meet academic expectations. He worked tirelessly to juggle it all. Marco has completed 77% of the required credits and all exam requirements for graduation.

The Academy High leaders, teachers, and school counselor collaborated to support Marco in reengaging with school to graduate. The team worked with him to enroll in an alternative learning program designed to accelerate credit recovery toward graduation and connected him with work-based learning opportunities that allow him to maintain part-time employment while continuing his education. The program includes a remote, asynchronous option, allowing him to complete assignments at his own pace. Since transferring into the program, he has demonstrated consistent engagement and steady progress. Most recently, Marco expressed his intention to share his anticipated graduation date, allowing his achievements to be formally recognized and celebrated by his family and school community.

Vignette #2: Debalina

Debalina is a 15-year-old multilingual learner (MLL) from Central America who consistently struggled to attend school due to significant mental health challenges. During the 2021-2022 school year, her attendance was 86% in 8th grade, but it declined significantly to 0% in 2022-2023 and to 6% in 2023-2024. According to her mother, Debalina experiences episodes of depression that cause her to isolate in her room for extended periods, and this intensified during her transition from middle to high school. She had limited communication with her family and was reluctant to access school-based support. As a result of her prolonged absences, she was significantly undercredited and urgently needed targeted intervention.

The Academy High team offered Debalina and her mother comprehensive assistance both in school and beyond, including psychological evaluations, counseling services, and referrals to community-based mental health clinics. The school social worker maintained ongoing communication with external mental health professionals to establish a connection between Debalina's care and school support. Additionally, the school social worker, who is fluent in Spanish, conducted multiple in-person home visits to facilitate communication with Debalina's mother in her home language.

The targeted mental health interventions for this student initially showed promise, as both Debalina and her mother agreed to pursue counseling and explore a potential referral for home instruction. While the student has not yet made significant strides toward re-engaging with in-person learning, she is slowly building a relationship with the school social worker and maintains regular phone contact with her. These check-ins provide connection, motivation, and space for her to share concerns and discuss plans for her eventual return to attending school.

Vignette #3: Kerven

Kerven is a 19-year-old multilingual learner (MLL) from the Caribbean who also has an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Since arriving in the United States at the beginning of 9th grade, he has completed all graduation requirements, including the necessary coursework and

exams in most subject areas. Despite receiving exam preparation, including assignment support and practice tests, he repeatedly falls short of passing the state-mandated standardized English language arts examination required to graduate from high school. His most recent scores were 46 and 53. Multiple appeals were submitted on his behalf to waive the requirement, but each appeal was denied. In accordance with applicable state graduation policy, students are permitted up to two exam waivers. This student has already used both waivers on prior exams; therefore, any additional appeals for further waivers will not be approved. The student has expressed deep frustration and discouragement, leading to disengagement from school and even discussions about dropping out.

In consultation with the Academy High leaders, the school counselor met with Kerven and his mother to develop an intervention plan to motivate him. He was provided with an alternative schedule that allowed him to attend only an exam preparation course, minimizing his physical presence at school and focusing specifically on the English language arts examination. He also disclosed difficulty waking up early, so his schedule was adjusted to start at midday to better suit his routine. These targeted accommodations aimed to reduce barriers to his attendance, rebuild his confidence, and provide consistent academic support to increase his chances of passing the exam and earning his high school diploma. Kerven has been attending his exam prep course daily, which suggests that the targeted interventions are helping him re-establish engagement with school.

School-Based Leadership Practices and Challenges to Address Chronic Absenteeism

Academy High leaders not only prioritized individual students' experiences and specific attendance needs by building strong relationships and providing differentiated support, but also focused on chronic absenteeism in schoolwide goals and related strategic interventions. Between 2021 and 2024, there were varying levels of systemic interventions to support multilingual learners (MLLs) and their families. This section not only includes specific strategies that Academy High leaders implemented but also the challenges they encountered.

Collaborative Team Approaches to Support Multilingual Learners (MLLs) and Families

Academy High utilizes a range of data platforms to identify and support its MLL population. This process begins at enrollment, when families complete a home language survey in their preferred language. Based on the information provided, students take an English language proficiency assessment administered by the MLL Coordinator, followed by individual family meetings to discuss appropriate programs, student placements, and available support services. The MLL Coordinator creates an "MLLs at a Glance" document for teachers that includes students' English proficiency levels and home languages to inform the level of linguistic support each student needs to access content and participate in classes.

In response to the 38% chronic absenteeism rate among MLLs in the 2021-2022 school year, Academy High's leadership team implemented weekly collaborative grade-team meetings for the following school year (2022-2023). These meetings intentionally included the MLL Coordinator, MLL teacher, one of the school social workers, the attendance specialist, and classroom teachers. During these meetings, the team not only developed accessible instructional

materials but also discussed students of concern related to both academic and non-academic needs. The team collaboratively focused on culturally responsive practices that affirmed students' home languages and identities, and they provided recommendations for additional in-class and after-school supports, such as tutoring during school breaks, attending stand-alone MLL classes focused on English, or receiving social-emotional support. Additionally, the attendance specialist shared attendance patterns and trends for individual students and subgroups, enabling timely interventions for students at risk of chronic absenteeism. Based on relationships, the team identified one staff member to conduct outreach to the student and/or family to learn more about their circumstances and identify possible strategies to increase their attendance. As shown in Table 1, the chronic absenteeism rate for multilingual learners was 28% in 2022-2023, representing a 10% decrease from the previous year. The collaborative team approaches implemented during 2022-2023, coupled with ongoing and consistent academic, linguistic, and social-emotional support, contributed to increased regular school attendance among this student subgroup.

Staffing Challenges and Impact on MLL Support and Attendance

However, in 2023-2024, budgetary limitations and shifting district priorities led to the departure of one of two MLL teachers, one school social worker, and the full-time attendance specialist. Despite data gathered from home language surveys, language proficiency assessments, and chronic absenteeism records, Academy High faced insufficient staffing to support not only multilingual learners but also students across all subgroups at the school. As one teacher shared, "While I try my best to support MLL students, particularly those who are chronically absent, I am stretched thin." The remaining MLL teacher, who had served as the MLL Coordinator the previous year, had limited time to administer assessments and provide push-in services, and the classroom teachers struggled to modify lessons without support. Additionally, the collaborative team meetings implemented the previous year no longer included critical support team members, such as the MLL teacher, school social worker, and attendance specialist, who were essential for discussing students' academic and non-academic concerns. With only a part-time attendance specialist physically in the building once a week, there were fewer opportunities for the team to address attendance concerns and identify possible interventions. Compounding these staffing challenges was a lack of targeted professional learning opportunities, which left school staff without the necessary tools to effectively support many MLLs and the unique needs of their families.

Lastly, since the school had only four staff members who spoke Spanish and three who spoke Haitian Creole, the two most commonly spoken languages in the school community, they became the primary points of communication for students and families who speak those languages. Given the lack of school-based linguistic support, the school leadership team provided all entering and emerging MLLs and their teachers with pocket translation devices to communicate in various languages. The decrease in support staff, lack of staff collaboration, and increased reliance on technology for language translation may also have contributed to the rise in chronic absenteeism, from 28% (2022-2023) to 56% (2023-2024).

Academy High's Family-Centered Approach: Connections Beyond the School

In response to the significant increase in CA rates in 2023-2024, Academy High's leadership team made strides in cultivating authentic partnerships with families to understand students' lived experiences and home contexts, while promoting the value of regular school attendance. Some intentional approaches included language translation services, home visits, and support for recently arrived immigrant families. The main office team, including the school secretaries and Family Support Coordinator, conducted daily outreach to check in with families using district-provided translation services. The school also ensured that all written communication, including informational flyers and materials, was translated for families as needed. In doing so, the school strived to maintain culturally responsive and inclusive communication with families who speak languages other than English.

The school also implemented home visits to build trust with families, uncover barriers to attendance, and create meaningful connections to re-engage students in school. Although home visits were typically conducted by the attendance specialist, school staff with a relationship to a specific student or family also conducted visits, reinforcing the school's commitment to holistic support and shared accountability. At Academy High, students received a home visit based on a combination of attendance data, communication history (all other communication methods, such as phone calls, emails, or mailed letters, have been unsuccessful), and student vulnerability indicators (concerns about a student's well-being, housing instability, or sudden disengagement). In the context of chronic absenteeism, the primary goal of a home visit was to establish in-person contact with anyone who could provide insight into the student's absences. This may include parents, relatives, neighbors, friends, landlords, or building superintendents. In many cases, community members offered valuable information, particularly when families have relocated or have been away for extended periods.

The attendance specialist shared that "The home setting often allows for more candid conversations, free from the formal pressures of school offices or conference rooms." Families may feel more comfortable expressing needs, concerns, or barriers that they have been hesitant to share. The attendance specialist witnessed students re-engaging in school within days of a visit and further stated, "I have received hugs, heartfelt thanks, and renewed partnerships with families who felt seen and valued." Home visits are never punitive but are grounded in empathy and a commitment to ensuring that every student feels connected and supported.

During the 2023-2024 school year, Academy High experienced an increase in the number of recently arrived immigrant students enrolled, coinciding with the highest chronic absenteeism rate (46%) across the three years of this case study. Considering that many newcomer families in this school community were placed in shelters and expected to relocate periodically, it was challenging for their children to remain enrolled in one school. The frequent moves often placed them farther away, making transportation to school even more difficult. Families expressed challenges with communicating with school staff and understanding school expectations, attendance policies, or how to access support services due to limited English proficiency. Lastly, many immigrant students had experienced significant disruptions, including displacement, family separation, or trauma during migration. These experiences were identified as important contextual factors that may have contributed to challenges with consistent school attendance.

School leaders at Academy High prioritized supporting immigrant families by addressing immediate communication concerns and fostering trust and safety within the school. For example, they hosted informational workshops for families that were focused on their rights and strategies for potential encounters with immigration enforcement. These sessions, led by Academy High's Family Support Coordinator and the district, were held virtually to protect anonymity and ensure families felt safe asking questions without fear of being targeted. In partnership with community organizations, additional workshops were offered, including a step-by-step preparedness plan for families. Staff also attended professional learning sessions on supporting students and families affected by immigration-related stress. Multilingual flyers were also distributed and posted throughout the school building, emphasizing how Academy High is a safe space where students are protected and welcomed. These practices were designed to foster a more compassionate and informed school environment, one where families felt seen, supported, and empowered to keep their children engaged in learning despite external fears. The coordinated efforts among district leaders, school staff, and community partners laid the groundwork for continued efforts to combat chronic absenteeism.

From Insight to Intentional Equity-Driven School Leadership Practices

Throughout this case study, it is clear that addressing chronic absenteeism (CA) must center on culturally responsive approaches that move beyond "one-size-fits-all" or punitive solutions. As evidenced by the Academy High student vignettes, CA was addressed on an individual, case-by-case basis, with careful consideration of each student's assets, challenges, and needs, as well as those of overlapping student subgroups. This requires distinguishing between motivational issues and underlying challenges (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Diliberti et al., 2025) and effectively involving school staff to support each student's unique circumstances. Recognizing and responding to students' intersectional identities is fundamental to this humanizing and personalized approach.

As with Academy High, it is also recommended that school leaders adopt a collaborative, team-based approach so that responsibility for student attendance is not placed solely on one person. These teams must be diverse, incorporating staff members with varying roles, experiences, and relationships to provide inclusive support. It is also recommended that school leaders hold weekly meetings on absenteeism to maintain focus and coordination. Ideally, these meetings include all staff members who are involved in the student's life.

Finally, sustainability, consistency, and advocacy must be prioritized to prevent initial gains from being lost. School leaders play a vital role in ensuring continuity, especially since progress often stalls once early signs of improvement emerge. It is recommended that leaders establish clear structures and systems to sustain effective, culturally responsive interventions for members of their school community. When positive outcomes begin to appear, they must avoid assuming the issue is resolved. On the contrary, this is the precise moment when ongoing attention, monitoring, reflection, and adaptive leadership are most critical. Continuous improvement requires a sustained commitment not only to initial solutions but also to the evolving needs of students, who are often most affected by systemic barriers to school attendance.

NELP and SLLA Alignment

The following *National Educational Leadership Preparation Program* (NELP) Building Standards (NPBEA, 2018) support this case study: NELP 1.2, NELP 3.1, NELP 3.2, NELP 3.3, NELP 5.1, NELP 6.1, NELP 6.2, and NELP 6.3.

The following *School Leaders Licensure Assessment* (SLLA) 6990 areas support this case study (ETS, n.d.): I/C: Continuous improvement toward the vision and goals; III/B: Equity and cultural responsiveness; III/C: Community of care and support for students; IV/A: Ethical and legal behavior; V/A: Managing operational systems; V/C: Protecting the welfare and safety of students and staff; VI/A-C: Community Engagement Leadership.

Multiple Choice Questions and Constructed Response/Essay Questions

1-After examining Table 1 (*End-of-Year Chronic Absenteeism Rates by Student Subgroups, 2021–2024*), which of the following statements best describes the trend in absenteeism disparities among student subgroups over the three years?

- A-Absenteeism rates decreased consistently across all subgroups, narrowing the attendance gap between groups.
- B-Hispanic or Latinx and Black or African American students demonstrated parallel trends in absenteeism rates, both decreasing steadily from 2021 to 2024.
- C-While overall absenteeism remained stable between 2021 and 2023, the gap between multilingual learners and other student groups widened significantly during 2023–2024.
- D-The increase in absenteeism among students with IEPs from 2021 to 2024 was the primary driver of the overall rise in chronic absenteeism.

2-Given the increase in chronic absenteeism among multilingual learners (MLLs) from 2021 to 2024, which of the following school-based strategies would most effectively address the root causes of absenteeism in these groups?

- A-Implementing universal attendance policies with strict penalties for absences.
- B-Increasing culturally responsive family engagement and providing targeted support services.
- C-Reducing academic rigor to lessen student stress.
- D-Limiting data collection on absenteeism to protect student privacy.

3-Which of the following actions best illustrates how school leadership can support a student like Marco (Vignette #1), who faces both academic and personal challenges that impact attendance?

- A-Require Marco to maintain full-time in-person attendance regardless of his work and family responsibilities.
- B-Delegate all responsibility for Marco's academic progress to his teachers without providing guidance or resources.
- C-Focus solely on monitoring attendance data and penalizing students for absences.
- D-Collaborate with staff to develop flexible, personalized learning options, such as alternative or asynchronous programs, and connect him with work-based learning opportunities.

4-How can school leaders most effectively use home visits to reduce chronic absenteeism?

- A-By personally conducting all home visits to ensure consistency.
- B-By establishing clear criteria for visits, supporting staff with training and resources, and fostering collaboration among teachers, social workers, and attendance staff.
- C-By relying solely on phone calls and emails to communicate with families instead of in-person visits.
- D-By making home visits a disciplinary measure for students with poor attendance.

5-Which leadership practice most directly contributes to fostering trust and safety for immigrant families at Academy High School?

- A-Assigning teachers to enforce attendance policies without additional support.
- B-Limiting family engagement to scheduled parent-teacher conferences only.
- C-Conducting virtual workshops on their rights, distributing multilingual resources, and collaborating with community organizations to address immigration-related stress.
- D- Providing standardized academic materials without considering students' cultural or language needs.

Constructed Response

- Based on Debalina's case (Vignette #2), analyze how Academy High's culturally responsive and individualized interventions address the intersection of mental health and chronic absenteeism. What strategies appear most effective, and what additional approaches might support her gradual re-engagement with school?
- Given the staffing reduction in 2023-2024 and resulting challenges at Academy High, consider the actions a school leader could take to maintain support for multilingual learners and students at risk of chronic absenteeism. Which strategies would prioritize both academic and non-academic needs, and how could leaders ensure effective collaboration despite limited staff resources?

Answer Key

1-Correct Answer: C. The gap widened in 2023-2023 because chronic absenteeism among MLLs increased sharply while rates for other student subgroups remained relatively stable.

2-Correct Answer: B. This approach addresses the underlying barriers to attendance, such as language, cultural, and family challenges, by providing tailored support and fostering meaningful engagement.

3-Correct Answer: D. Reflects a leadership approach that balances academic expectations with students' personal circumstances, demonstrates collaboration among staff, and provides individualized support to promote re-engagement and graduation.

4-Correct Answer: B. Effective school leadership involves organizing and supporting home visits as part of a coordinated strategy.

5-Correct Answer: C. By providing culturally responsive resources, virtual workshops, and community partnerships, school leaders create a safe and supportive environment that empowers immigrant families and encourages student engagement in attending school.

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Chapter 19

Responding to Anti-Black Racism on a High School Campus: A Critical Incident Case

Jennifer Goldstein and Tonikiaa Orange

Abstract

Students are asked to respond to anti-Blackness on a high school campus that is predominantly Latino. Specifically, there is prevalent use of the “N” word. Through the case, students engage in both a team performance task to address short- and long-term response, as well as an individual reflection paper on the experience.

Case Narrative (with Rubrics)

Comprehensive High School is located in Southern California, in a large urban school district. Its neighborhood was historically White, decades ago, but has become vibrantly multi-ethnic. The remaining White families, therefore, tend to have long roots in the neighborhood. A Latinx immigrant population now makes up the largest demographic group, with families originating mostly from Mexico, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Many of these families start out living with extended family in Comprehensive’s neighborhoods and then find housing near their families once they are on their feet with employment. A significant Vietnamese population is also present, with most Vietnamese families being second- and third-generation. Many African American families have also moved into the neighborhood over the past two generations from a neighboring community, seeking the single-family homes that make up much of Comprehensive’s surrounding area.

It follows that the families that make up Comprehensive’s community have a range of economic statuses. Those who have been in the area longest, the White and Vietnamese communities, tend to be most financially stable, with the recent immigrant families more likely in need of additional support from the school. In total, 52% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Here is a snapshot of school student demographics:

Enrollment by Grade

	9th	10th	11th	12th
Students	587	602	587	544

Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity

	American Indian/ Alaska Native	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	White	Two or More Races
Students	—	697	443	1,060	7	105	8

Enrollment by Gender

	Male	Female
Students	1,204	1,116

Meanwhile, the school's core leadership team comprises a Latinx principal, Lupe Rodriguez, and a Latinx assistant principal (both Mexican American second-generation). There is also a White assistant principal and an Asian assistant principal (Korean American). As for the 90 teachers at the site, they are:

Teacher Employment by Race/Ethnicity

	AI/Alaska Native	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	White	Two or More Races
Male	1	4	2	14	1	11	1
Female	0	4	1	21	0	29	1

Comprehensive's Superintendent, Terry Franklin, is in their first year on the job. The School Board unanimously hired Terry for their history of successfully working in diverse schools and districts. In Terry's last district, student achievement improved dramatically, and the Superintendent was a unifying force in the community. The School Board is itself comprised of three White members, one African American, one Asian (Vietnamese American), and two Latino/a (a second-generation Nicaraguan and a first-generation Mexican American).

Unfortunately, Comprehensive High School is going through a challenging period. Multiple racially-charged incidents have occurred recently, specifically involving anti-Blackness among Latinx students (who comprise roughly half the school population). During Black History Month this past February, Black students on campus informally reported frustration and a pervasive sense of invisibility regarding Black culture, especially when compared to the attention spent (in announcements and assemblies) on the Vietnamese New Year. At prom in June, some

Black students, as they have in the past, complained that their input was not reflected in the music played.

To the extent that racial divisions on campus had been bubbling, they burst to the fore when one Latino student circulated a picture of an African American teacher with a tagline involving the “N word.” The perpetrator was suspended, but the teacher—and the students he leads in the Black Student Union—remain deeply hurt by what they see as a lack of leadership on the issue at the site and district level.

Against this tense backdrop, a new incident has just transpired. A group of multi-ethnic students (Group A) was hanging out in the quad on campus at lunch time. Another group of primarily Latino students (Group B) was hanging out at a nearby table. A Latino student from Group B was overheard using the “N word” as part of their conversation. A couple of Black students from Group A walked over to confront Group B about this. The argument escalated into a shouting match between a Black student and a Latino student, during which a physical altercation occurred. Roughly a dozen students from both groups jumped into the fight. Numerous students pulled out their cell phones, filmed the fight, and immediately posted to social media. Campus safety broke up the fight and escorted all involved students to the office.

Your Team’s Performance Task/Constructed Response

(You will participate on a team that is either A or B, depending on your current role)

A. You are the Principal (and the site leadership team) of Comprehensive High School. The new Superintendent wants a report from you on your plans to address chronic anti-Blackness at the site. In particular, the Superintendent wants to know how you will engage school personnel in the deep work needed to lead their students in reflection and repair at the site. Knowing that you have your hands full dealing with the immediate fallout from the fight, but also moved by a sense of urgency, the Superintendent has requested that you make a presentation on your plan for anti-racist professional learning (and related structural change). You and your team will have 10 minutes to present your plan to the Superintendent and their team. You should also fill them in on the steps taken so far in the intervening weeks.

B. You are the new Superintendent (and the Superintendent’s cabinet) of Urban District, in which Comprehensive High School sits. When you were hired, the School Board made you aware that chronic racial tension exists at Comprehensive High School and that they expected you to work with the principal to make improvements. In the hustle and bustle of your new job, you had not yet made Comprehensive a priority. Now that this new incident has occurred, the Board is up in arms. They want to know your plans for immediate changes moving forward, in particular for supporting the site principal to transform the site. You and your cabinet will present to the School Board at their next meeting. You and your team will have 10 minutes to present your plan to the Board. You should also fill them in on the steps taken so far in the intervening weeks.

Guidance

1. Attend to the Team Process Success Criteria to guide your team’s work together.
2. Attend to the Team Performance Success Criteria to guide your product (your presentation).
3. Invariably, details that you wish you had may be missing. Feel free to ask (the answer may be that you can make it up).

Team Process Success Criteria

Based upon the work of Patrick Lencioni (2002) *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*

Team Dimension	Meeting the Standard
Trust	· Team members are open and honest about their weaknesses, fears, mistakes and behaviors. · Team members quickly and genuinely apologize to one another when they say or do something inappropriate or possibly damaging to the team.
Conflict	· During team meetings, the most important – and difficult – issues are put on the table to be resolved. · Team members are not afraid to engage in passionate dialogue around issues and decisions that are key to the school's success. · Team members challenge and question one another in order to discover the truth, find the best answers and make the best decisions. · Team members take time to reflect on interpersonal issues and have strategies for generating effective resolutions. · Team members are able to come to agreement without compromising individual members' perspectives.
Commitment	· Team meetings end with clear and specific understandings of actions to be taken, timelines and distribution of responsibility. · Team members work as a group to equitably distribute the workload. · Team members know what their peers are working on and how they contribute to the group. · Team members leave meetings confident that their peers are committed to the decisions agreed upon, even if there was initial disagreement. · Team members share ownership of the learning and the product.
Accountability	· Team members have established group norms and hold one another accountable to adhering to those standards. · Team members call one another on their deficiencies or unproductive behaviors. · Team members are deeply concerned about the prospect of letting down their peers. · Team members have strategies for managing distractions and focusing on agreed upon goals in the face of conflicting priorities and pressures. · Team members have strategies for holding each other accountable and do not rely on the team manager as the primary source of accountability.
Results	· Team members establish clear and unambiguous measurements for success. · Team members stay focused on results in the face of distractions and competing priorities. · Team members willingly make sacrifices for the good of the team and the achievement of the goal.

Team Performance Success Criteria

Meeting with Superintendent/Board to present and discuss response to situation at Comprehensive HS

Dimension	Meeting the Standard
Content	· Plan seriously and substantively addresses racism on the campus. · Plan seriously and substantively addresses adult learning for the long-term. · Plan reflects significant research, reflection, discussion, and synthesis.
Attention to Audience	· The chosen approach to the meeting is appropriate and effective for audience. · You demonstrate in-depth understanding of your audience, their concerns, expectations, and understandings. · You provide clear responses to audience questions, demonstrating understanding of the questions and thoughtful consideration of audience members' concerns. · You make effective use of limited time. · Any visuals used are parsimonious and easy to read.
Teamwork	· Team comes across as one voice.
Style	· Any supporting materials are clear, free of errors, and align to your purpose. · Any use of visuals supports your presentation rather than detracts from it.

Individual Constructed Response/Essay Question

Reflecting on your team's work on the performance task, address the following questions:

- What new possibilities to design meaningful learning spaces for children and adults presented themselves to you from this experience?
- What did you or do you still feel uncomfortable about following the team task experience?
- What are the implications of these possibilities and discomforts for your own leadership moving forward?

Assessment Guidance for Team and Individual Constructed Response Questions

Team Task

The purpose of the team performance task is to support individuals in making informed decisions about how to design learning/professional development spaces and develop materials that support and challenge adults on campus to confront their own racial biases. Teams must recognize that, until adults engage in race-conscious inquiry, they may be ill-equipped to lead students in such inquiry. The team task is therefore directly tied to thinking about ongoing professional learning, educational philosophies, beliefs about issues of race, personal identity excavation, and ultimately, who sits at the table. Teams should challenge traditional institutional practices and articulate how they plan to attend to the different elements of the scenario.

Core Questions for Teams

Long Term Implementation:

What structures will you put in place to support a race-conscious culture of inquiry with adults?
 What kinds of tools/ practices might you use to support a race-conscious culture of inquiry?
 Who will lead this initiative (internal or external)?
 How does this compare to and/or challenge your current structures?
 How will you engage stakeholders in developing and implementing this race-conscious culture of inquiry?
 What kinds of challenges do you anticipate facing in implementation? How might you handle them?
 How will you monitor the progress of this initiative? What evidence will be used to determine progress?

Short Term Implementation:

Who do you notify immediately?
 Who should be invited into the conversation?
 How do you move students, those involved in the altercation and more broadly, towards repair of harm?
 How do you support teachers to hold space for the conversation in the short term (hours and days following the incident)?
 How do you manage family engagement around these complex and tension-filled issues?

Individual Task

The purpose of the individual constructed response question is to require each individual to reflect upon the team experience. This will give the instructor insight into individuals' engagement levels beyond their team's collective performance. While there is no "right" answer in a reflection, students should be able to identify both possibilities/hopefulness (or articulate why they cannot) as well as points of discomfort/stuckness. The student should then be able to *apply* these insights to their leadership position/setting and draw learnings from the experience at the individual level. Strongest responses will be concrete, with examples from teamwork, and will cite relevant literature.

Class Activity and Discussion Topics

- Conduct a racial autobiography (Radd et al., 2021, Chapter 4, p. 65).
 Write a reflective, personal narrative that explores how race has shaped one's identity, experiences, relationships, and worldview. Reflect on your story about racial consciousness: how you came to understand race, racism, and privilege. See page 65 in the Radd book for assignment details ("Personal Timeline").

- Conduct a community mapping of your school site or the district (Dunsmore et al., 2013).
Gather and analyze historical demographic data to understand community changes, trends, and needs over time, to support informed decision making.
- Role-play the following in triads (principal/parent/observer), then debrief in small and large groups.

You are the building principal. It is 30 minutes after students have been brought into the office. You are still gathering information about what has occurred. In the meantime, the parent of one of the African-American students involved, arrives at the office, demanding to speak to you. When you walk out to meet the parent, they demand to know when the Latino student who used the “N” word at their child will be expelled.

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NELP Standard Addressed by Case	NELP Component	SLLA 6990 Content Standard
Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Improvement Component 1.1	Develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission and vision for continuous school improvement.	I-Strategic Leadership Establishing and maintaining a school mission, vision, goals, and core values.
Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms Components 2.1, 2.2, 2.3	Act ethically and according to professional norms to promote student success.	IV-Ethical Leadership Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.
Standard 3: Equity and Cultural Responsiveness Components 3.2, 3.3	Strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices.	III-Climate and Cultural Leadership Advocating for equitable and inclusive school environments.
Standard 4: Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Components 4.2, 4.4	Design and implement coherent systems supporting student learning and well-being.	II-Instructional Leadership Implementing effective instructional practices, assessments, and supports for student learning.
Standard 5: Community and External Leadership Components 5.1, 5.2, 5.3	Engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways.	VI-Community Engagement Leadership Building strong relationships with families and community stakeholders.
Standard 6: Operations and Management Components 6.1, 6.2, 6.3	Manage school operations and resources to promote a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.	V-Organizational Leadership Managing school systems, operations, and resources.
Standard 7: Building Professional Capacity Components 7.2, 7.3, 7.4	Develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel.	II-Instructional Leadership Supporting staff development and instructional improvement.

Chapter 20

Turning the Tide: Shifting Student and Staff Mindsets Around State Assessments

Matthew Mawn, William Crispino, and Erin Posbergh

Abstract

This case study portrays how a school leadership team addressed declining state assessment scores and negative perceptions of testing. Leaders launched a schoolwide initiative to reframe assessments as growth opportunities. When results were mixed, they modeled resilience, used staff feedback, and adjusted their approach to improve alignment and support.

Introduction

At a suburban high school serving a diverse student population, state assessment performance and the testing mindset needed a revamp. Student engagement and motivation during state assessments were low, and perceptions of state assessments were negative across the building, despite previous curricular alignment efforts. The high school leadership team implemented various initiatives to change perceptions of state assessments across the building and raise student achievement scores on them. The leadership team focused on fostering a collaborative and shared vision amongst students, staff, and administrators. This approach aligns with findings by Albiladi et al. (2020), who concluded that instructional change is more likely to occur when a shared vision exists than when teachers are simply told to change their instructional practices.

Results were mixed, requiring the leadership team to evaluate their approach and refine their practice for the following school year. Ideas often sound great in theory, but do not produce the expected results. It is important for leadership teams to build in reflective time to build resilience and bounce back in the face of challenges and unexpected setbacks (Grimes et al., 2022). This chapter sheds light on how educational leaders approach initiatives that do not go as expected.

Reframing the Narrative

After debriefing on the coming months' schedule and recognizing that the first wave of state assessments was approaching, the leadership team began discussing how they wished state assessments were viewed as opportunities for growth and to showcase the knowledge and skills they had gained from their teachers, rather than as meaningless compliance. The leadership team questioned whether students truly understood the stakes of the New Jersey Graduation

Proficiency Assessment (NJGPA). Did they know it was a graduation requirement and that failing it meant additional coursework? More importantly, had they considered it an opportunity to honor the learning they had gained from their teachers?

The leadership team determined that this was most likely not the case and, in fact, that if students had additional knowledge and a mindset shift, their achievement levels might shift as well. The goals of the leadership team's mindset shift were to:

- Build a unified positive narrative around state assessments for students, staff, and administrators.
- Increase students' exposure to state-assessment-like questions in a competitive manner.
- Increase understanding of state assessments and why they mattered not only to students but also to their teachers.

These goals were created with an understanding that the culture surrounding state assessments can significantly influence student motivation. As Nichols and Dawson (2012) note, motivation often declines when learning is driven primarily by extrinsic rewards such as test scores. Rather than focusing solely on a passing score, the leadership team emphasized doing one's best and showcasing all that students were capable of.

Before rolling out the initiatives and going public with students and staff, the leadership team held four meetings to brainstorm and develop the activities for the mindset-shift rollout. Stakeholders for this initiative included the building principal, the two building assistant principals, the three curriculum supervisors, and one Math and one English teacher. One example of the planned strategies was a schoolwide daily practice question competition. The curriculum supervisors worked with the two teachers to design daily practice questions for the entire student body.

Each day, students would take either a Math, Science, or English state assessment practice question. At the end of the week, the homeroom with the most correct answers would win a bagel breakfast and school T-shirts. This went on for four weeks, culminating in the week before the start of the state assessments. With a clear vision and defined goals, the leadership team was ready to launch its month-long initiative to reframe the mindset around state assessments.

The Initiative in Action

Over the course of a month, the leadership team implemented five actions to shift the mindset around state assessments at our high school. These actions involved the students, staff, and administrators of the building. Each action was designed to build either an understanding and motivation for the assessments or foster an engaging, positive testing environment.

Building Understanding and Motivation

A kickoff assembly was held for students scheduled to take the state assessment. This assembly was designed to energize students and provide a clear understanding of the state

assessment's purpose. The assembly provided context, information, and the why behind the exam. This assembly was delivered in a high-energy format, with lights, a pump-up anthem, and multiple teachers cheering on the students. Several students remarked afterward that they had no clear understanding of the exam's importance prior to the assembly and were thankful for the information.

During the lead-up to the state assessment, the leadership team, along with the assistant superintendent, published a special podcast episode on the district's state testing podcast. This podcast episode explained in detail the rationale for the state assessment, its importance in fulfilling the state graduation requirement, and how parents and students could best prepare. This podcast was aimed at parents and students.

The leadership team hosted a final pre-assessment assembly for the students the day prior to the start of the assessments. At this assembly, a high-energy message was given to the students. Students were told positive, reaffirming messages and were once again reminded that the entire school is rooting for them. The leadership team went over again the importance of the test for their graduation, and all the items they needed to bring for Monday's assessment. In addition to building understanding and motivation for the state assessments, the leadership team implemented strategies to engage students and foster a positive atmosphere throughout the testing duration.

Fostering an Engaging and Positive Environment

A month-long homeroom competition challenge was held the month leading up to the start of the state assessments. This challenge included two English and two Math practice questions each week. Each day, every student would be sent a practice question via Google Forms to their email, which was to be completed in the homeroom. At the end of the week, the homeroom with the highest participation and correct answer percentage would receive a bagel breakfast with school t-shirts. This was done in hopes of drawing on the motivational potential of gamification in education, which has been shown to encourage student engagement (Dichev & Dicheva, 2017). Additionally, the correct answers and solutions were displayed on the weekly school news broadcast.

When students arrived at school during testing, two additional actions were put into place. The school operated on a modified bell schedule so that only students who were taking the exam were present and there would be no external distractions. The leadership team met the students at the front door as they entered, had positive uplifting music playing, and gave students high fives and encouraging comments. These actions created a more positive and purposeful environment within the building. Whether that would translate into increased student achievement, however, would only be clear months after the exam when results were released.

Mixed Results

The goal of this initiative was to shift the mindset of students and staff around state assessments and, in turn, increase student achievement scores on the state assessment. The results from this initiative varied, with positive results in some categories, while not achieving

the desired results we wished to achieve in others. While the results were not fully aligned with expectations, this initiative reinforced the idea that success in school leadership is not just about immediate wins, but about how you respond when outcomes fall short of goals.

Three major positive outcomes emerged from this initiative. The first positive outcome was that the daily attendance rate for the four days of state testing increased by 2% compared to the previous year. This indicated that the assemblies were effective in stressing the importance of the exam and emphasizing the need to arrive on time and not miss testing days.

The second positive outcome was an unexpected but meaningful one: multiple teachers emailed administration to compliment select students on taking their time, utilizing the full testing period, and maintaining appropriate behavior throughout the exams. After receiving almost twenty such emails, the leadership team made follow-up calls and sent emails to families to share the praise. Parents were highly receptive to this outreach, and the positive communication strengthened home-school connections. As a result, we plan to implement a similar recognition system for future assessments.

A third positive outcome came from adjustments made to staff proctoring. Staff were given flexibility to coordinate with their testing partners to determine schedules, provided that supervision expectations were upheld. This created a more positive experience for staff, increased their ownership of the testing process, and empowered them. Additionally, the technology department reported the lowest number of loaner Chromebooks requested in recent years. This indicates that students were more prepared and took testing more seriously this year than in years past.

Regarding student achievement, overall scores did not show the net gain the leadership team had hoped for. Some content areas improved slightly, others declined, and some remained the same. While the initiative fell short of its achievement goals, it revealed critical insights that will shape a more targeted approach for the following year. These reflective, data-driven future adjustments align with NELP Standards 4.1 and 4.4 and SLLA 6990 Domain II, which emphasize using assessment data to inform instruction and adapt leadership strategies to improve student learning outcomes.

Reflection and Adaptation

Immediately after receiving the scores from the state, the leadership team met to confer and debrief the data. Although the school did not achieve the desired results, it did see positive outcomes and strategized for improvements in the following year. In school leadership, resilience is not only standing strong during times of change and uncertainty, but also maintaining focus on the overall objective even when things don't go as planned (Southwick et al., 2016). It was important that the school stay grounded in data-driven decision-making and were honest about the effectiveness of our initiative. One major piece of feedback received from the staff was that the homeroom challenge in greater detail could have been explained in greater detail and given more advanced notice of the month-long challenge. Moving forward, the school plans on addressing this with staff at a faculty meeting at least one month prior to the challenge, and answering any questions during the meeting.

Additionally, the school plans to send a letter to parents and students at least one month prior to the start of the state assessments, highlighting all we are doing in the month leading up to testing. This approach is supported by Henderson & Mapp (2002), who highlighted a positive correlation between student achievement and a school district's efforts to engage families in the learning process. Providing this information early will help get parents and students on board and alleviate any questions they may have about the month's activities before they begin. It is important as a leadership team not to get down on yourselves when things do not go according to plan. As leadership reflected, it became clear that mindset shifts do not occur overnight. Shifting the mindset of a building requires sustained, consistent effort across multiple years. By committing to a review and revision process, we are ensuring that each year builds upon the last.

Leadership Takeaways:

- Big cultural shifts start with small, visible wins.
- The 2% increase in attendance during the four days of testing
- Clear communication is key.
- Staff feedback after month long homeroom challenge
- Look for unexpected wins.
- The positive teacher emails about students taking their time and behaving appropriately during testing
- Communicate with parents and stress the why
- The podcast communicated with parents, but an email/letter home would have ensured that all families were reached.
- Remain resilient and look for ways to improve, not abandon ship when things don't work at first.
- As a leadership team, we looked to improve in year two of shifting the mindset around state testing instead of giving up.

Standards Alignment

- NELP Standards:
 - 4.1 – Use assessment data to monitor and improve student learning outcomes.
 - 4.2 – Support staff in using data to improve instruction.
 - 4.3 – Evaluate instructional and organizational effectiveness using multiple data sources.
 - 4.4 – Adapt leadership practices based on analysis of student learning/school improvement data.
- SLLA 6990 – Domain II: Instructional Leadership
 - II.A.1 – Align curriculum and instruction to state standards.
 - II.A.2 – Promote high expectations for student learning.
 - II.A.5 – Support teacher use of assessment data to inform instruction.
 - II.A.6 – Monitor and evaluate the impact of instructional programs.
 - II.B.1 – Create a school culture focused on continuous improvement.
 - II.B.2 – Foster collaboration among staff to improve instruction and student achievement.
 - II.B.3 – Engage families and community members in student learning.
 - II.B.5 – Promote a positive and supportive learning environment.

Multiple Choice Questions

1. Which of the following was not one of the leadership team's primary goals for the state assessment initiative?
 - A. Build a unified positive narrative around state assessments
 - B. Increase exposure to test-like questions through a competitive challenge
 - C. Require all students to attend weekend test-prep bootcamps
 - D. Increase understanding of why assessments matter for both students and teachers
2. What was the purpose of the kickoff assembly?
 - A. To train teachers on proctoring procedures
 - B. To energize students and explain the purpose of the state assessment
 - C. To review the year's curriculum in detail
 - D. To announce test score results from the previous year
3. Which gamified element was central to the month-long homeroom challenge?
 - A. Student-created test questions
 - B. Weekly practice questions with leaderboard recognition
 - C. Lunchtime tutoring sessions
 - D. Teacher vs. student quiz competitions
4. What measurable positive outcome resulted from the initiative?
 - A. A 10% increase in graduation rates
 - B. A 2% increase in daily attendance during testing
 - C. All content areas increased in test scores
 - D. No change in student behavior during testing
5. According to Henderson & Mapp (2002), why is engaging families important?
 - A. It reduces teacher workload during testing season
 - B. It builds community pride in the school's athletic programs
 - C. It has a positive correlation with student achievement
 - D. It helps schools qualify for additional state funding

Constructed Response / Essay Questions

1. Based on the leadership team's reflection, what strategies could be added or adjusted to improve both student motivation and achievement outcomes in future state assessment initiatives? Provide at least two specific recommendations and explain how they align with leadership standards.
2. The initiative used gamification (homeroom challenge, competition, prizes) to engage students. Considering the mixed research findings on gamification's long-term effectiveness, analyze how the leadership team might adapt this approach to maintain engagement while deepening learning outcomes.

Multiple Choice Answer Key with Explanations

1. C – Require all students to attend weekend test-prep bootcamps

Correct: Nowhere in the paper was mandatory weekend prep included; the goals focused on changing perceptions, increasing exposure, and building understanding.

2. B – To energize students and explain the purpose of the state assessment

Correct: The kickoff assembly’s purpose was to energize students, provide context, and explain why the assessment mattered.

3. B – Weekly practice questions with leaderboard recognition

Correct: The month-long homeroom challenge used practice questions, tracked scores, and recognized top performers with rewards.

4. B – A 2% increase in daily attendance during testing

Correct: The initiative produced a measurable 2% increase in attendance during the testing period compared to the previous year.

5. C – It has a positive correlation with student achievement

Correct: Henderson & Mapp (2002) specifically found that family engagement positively correlates with student achievement.

Discussion Questions

1. Leadership Reflection Roundtable

Activity: Break participants into small groups and provide them with the “Mixed Results” and “Reflection & Adaptation” sections of your paper.

Discussion Prompts:

Which elements of the initiative would you keep for the following year?

Which would you modify or remove entirely?

How might you measure success beyond test scores?

Goal: Encourage leaders to think about resilience, iterative improvement, and data-informed decision-making in their own contexts.

2. Designing a Mindset-Shift Initiative in Your Context

Activity: Using the goals and structure from your “Initiative in Action” section, participants design their own mindset-shift plan for their school or district.

Discussion Prompts:

How would you adapt the homeroom competition or assemblies to fit your population?

What potential barriers might arise, and how could you address them?

How would you integrate parent and community engagement?

Goal: Apply the concepts of gamification, communication, and stakeholder involvement to a new setting to encourage the practical transfer of your model.

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Chapter 21

Leading with Justice and Empathy: Implementing NELP Standard 3.3

Margart Mbindyo

Abstract

This chapter explores the critical role of culturally responsive educational leadership in fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments, particularly for diverse student populations, including immigrants and those from low-income backgrounds. Drawing on the author's extensive experience as an ESL teacher, high school administrator, and researcher, the chapter argues that an unsupportive classroom culture can lead to negative outcomes such as imposter syndrome, a lack of belonging, academic dissatisfaction, and increased dropout rates (Cokley et al., 2013; Goodenow, 1993).

Introduction

The National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Standard 3 calls upon school leaders to champion equity, inclusiveness, and cultural responsiveness. Component 3.3, additionally, directs that educational leaders move their values from paper statements into daily classroom practice. The imperative to include NELP standard 3.3 in teaching is urgent as the growing global education market reveals the mobility of families to find opportunities in the United States (Young, Coggins, & Johnson, 2019). The growing diversity of students across the United States is a clear testament to the great opportunities and educational offerings in the USA. For that reason, there is no doubt that educational institutions, including K-12, have become more multicultural in nature. With more diverse students enrolling, it is critically important that school leaders ensure that all students have equitable access to high-quality education and that they are culturally responsive and aware of their students' needs (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016).

NELP standard 3.3 was created to ensure that teachers are truly culturally responsive and can be practical in applying classroom strategies that create a sense of belonging for all of their students (NPBEA, 2018). In addition, it was created to equip school leaders with the ability to encourage, support, and promote equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive practices to the building staff and teachers. The standard outlines the expectations for school leaders to create and sustain class environments that actively promote the success and well-being of every student by addressing issues of fairness, diversity, access, and social justice (Young, Coggins, & Johnson, 2019) and by ensuring the learning environment is peaceful.

Standard 3.3 encourages the common values of equality and human rights in the classroom. Social justice refers to the ideas of equity, intergroup compassion, and building respectful cross-cultural relationships to alleviate systemic historical injustices experienced by

disadvantaged and marginalized communities (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Given the intersection of social justice issues with race and identity-based discrimination, school leaders should be aware of what some students may go through. It is critically important to have school leaders who advocate for equitable policies and practices that promote fairness and social justice so that students thrive, grow, and learn in peace, while also honoring their backgrounds and/or identities (Newcomb & Mansfield, 2014).

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section discusses the role of a culturally responsive school leader in ensuring that standard 3.3 is implemented in all classrooms and in the spaces where extracurricular activities occur. The second section discusses the non-negotiable role of human rights in K-12 classroom. The third section gives examples of case study scenarios about NELP 3.3. These case studies offer a multidisciplinary perspective that address some of the issues that happen in schools. These case studies give an opportunity for the reader to reflect on their interactions with students.

The Role of the Culturally Responsive School Leader

Culturally Responsive School Leadership is an approach centered on understanding cultural backgrounds, and knowledge of students who experience racism and discrimination due to cross-cultural differences. The approach focuses on the entire school system to create a conducive climate for learning. It requires leaders to move beyond simply supporting diverse instruction to actively create a culture of care and respect (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). The school leader provides opportunities for teacher professional development geared towards learning how to implement strategies and support students in their classrooms, and providing the resources needed to ensure all teachers are proficient in culturally responsive teaching. Under this leadership, the school leader works to identify and eliminate institutional biases that result in marginalization of some students (NPBEA, 2018). This leadership approach directly aligns with NELP Standard 3.3 which mandates school leaders create and advocate for equitable access and culturally responsive practices.

The school leader empowers teachers to be fair and holistic in their approach to teaching, to hold high expectations for all students and to use culturally familiar methods to teach. The empowered teacher then ensures that the classroom instruction helps students affirm and maintain their cultural integrity while respecting other cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally responsive teaching encourages white students to critically analyze the world, recognize the existence of institutional biases, and understand how systems of power, privilege, and historical context have shaped their own opportunities and those of others. Further, by learning the authentic histories, experiences, and cultural frames of reference of their peers (and not just dominant narratives), white students develop genuine empathy and an understanding of different lived realities, which is vital for building positive relationships. This directly supports the intent of NELP 3.3, which requires leaders to cultivate practices that "recognize, confront, and alter institutional biases, student marginalization, deficit-based structures and practices, and low expectations."

The teacher may integrate students' language, stories, community issues, and cultural references into the curriculum and lessons in addition to using a wide variety of teaching

techniques and learning modalities that align with diverse student learning styles. The empowered teacher plays a crucial role in dismantling barriers, dispelling misconceptions, and promoting the value of diversity and peaceful co-existence. Through reflective conversations, students are encouraged to take ownership of their educational journey by collaborating and welcoming others in the learning space.

When a student is struggling with fitting in, a culturally responsive teacher acts quickly to help the student. This comprehensive approach ensures that students, regardless of their background, are provided with the support and guidance that they need to succeed, thereby honoring their right to a full and complete education (Goodenow, 1993).

To be culturally responsive requires that the teacher be willing to develop a deep understanding of students' cultural orientations as well as taking the time to actively listen with empathy (Khalifa et al., 2016). This requires honest interest for a deeper knowledge of the culture and the values of the families and students in their classes, as well as the community within which their school is embedded (Radd et al., 2021; Ishimaru, 2022). The empowered teacher works towards developing cultural competence (Gay, 2000) which opens their eyes to understand the students' backgrounds in relation to different cultural groups (Khalifa, 2018). This culturally responsive approach ensures that students, regardless of their background, are provided with the support and guidance they need to succeed, thereby honoring their right to a full and complete education (Gay, 2018). Responding to students being fully aware of their cultural differences is a holistic process that offers an avenue to student success. It also fosters a sense of belonging. In practice, successful school leadership entails promoting human rights, inclusion, ensuring equitable access to resources, and acknowledging the historical marginalization of certain groups (Ladson-Billing, 2006). Finally, a teaching practice to support NELP 3.3 is the teacher self-reflection and critical analysis to check for biases and self-correct to foster a more just and equitable educational experience for all students (Gay, 2018).

The Non-Negotiable Role of Human Rights: The Foundational Mandate

In addition to the NELP Standards document, a key document that should guide school leaders is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), drafted by the Human Rights Commission chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt in 1948 (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). It was established to provide for the fundamental dignity and equality of all people. While the UDHR is a recognized declaration and not a binding treaty, it is important in protecting human rights and social justice issues, the key issues in NELP 3.3. The UDHR promotes knowledge about fundamental rights and freedoms, encourages attitudes of respect for others (no matter where they may be in society), and advances skills to advocate for justice. Indeed, the 30 articles of the UDHR provide a comprehensive list of rights—including civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights—that are meant to protect all people from injustice and ensure their freedom and well-being, and that they are treated with dignity (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). Specifically, the UDHR also includes an article on education, and the United Nations emphasizes the role of education in building a universal culture of human rights. These are rights that institutions are obligated to protect, ensure other parties do not violate, and create the necessary conditions for exercising them (Nickel, 2007). Thus, school leaders must adopt a proactive stance, demonstrating a continuous willingness to learn, advocate, and protect student rights to

fully realize the foundational principles of human dignity and respect to meet the professional expectations set forth by standards like NELP 3.3.

Through intentional conversations, school leaders can introduce their teachers and staff to the concepts of UDHR, social justice, and equity and the foundational causes of the declaration (Furman, 2012; United Nations General Assembly, 1948). In situations where students are facing bias or exclusion, teachers can advocate for equitable treatment and connect them with school resources aligned with human rights values. Furthermore, a teacher has the power to make classroom learning relevant, rigorous, and reflective of all students. With respect to working with marginalized or underrepresented student populations, particularly students of color, immigrants, LGBTQ+ individuals, English as a Second Language Learners, and students with disabilities, the document provides information that can help school leaders to understand the history of the systemic barriers these students face. The teacher has the power to facilitate discussions that encourage students to critically analyze systemic issues, power structures, and the sociopolitical context of what they are learning, aligning with the "confront and alter institutional biases" goal of the standard. This knowledge can ensure understanding and equitable access to opportunities, and uphold students' rights to dignity, safety, and full participation in the classroom and in the school community (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

In practice, school leaders should embed human rights awareness into their leadership and school districts, and private schools must commit to training teachers in diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI), and ethical teaching practices. School leadership and teacher training should include modules on human rights, cultural competence, implicit bias, microaggression, imposter syndrome, student rights, and advocacy strategies. This ensures that teachers are aware of the human rights framework and can apply it meaningfully in their interactions with students (Furman, 2012).

School leaders should also collaborate with others in their communities to advocate for social justice and human rights. These partnerships help build a supportive ecosystem in which human rights are actively promoted and defended. For professional development, school leaders can refer teachers to relevant events, workshops, or activism opportunities that engage them in real-world human rights issues. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that teacher/student interactions flourish in an environment built on mutual understanding and respect (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016).

A caring school leader builds strong, empathetic connections, recognizing that students' academic paths are deeply intertwined with their individual experiences, which often include human rights concerns by some students (Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2016). The school leader's commitment to student achievement and the profession drives them to actively find information and tools that are helpful for student success. Furthermore, for the school leader values empowering teacher to spot injustice and the developing confidence to stand up for human rights, all the while maintaining a high degree of professionalism and respect for varied viewpoints and individual freedom (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

NELP 3.3 Case Studies

These scenarios were created by the author, through her experience, and were generated using open AI. Pseudonyms have been employed. Leaders may find it helpful to utilize them for critique and discussion of how they would handle similar circumstances in their schools.

Context	Evaluation	The School Leader's Role	Advocacy
15-year-old female, recently arrived in the U.S. after spending five years in a refugee camp in Kenya, originally from Somalia. Zahra is socially withdrawn, rarely makes eye contact, and often misses class due to anxiety. She enrolls in a large urban high school with diverse student body, but teachers lack specific training in trauma-informed care and supporting students with interrupted education.	Zahra exhibits signs of survival guilt and isolation, lacking the sense of belonging crucial for academic engagement. Teachers view her silence as disinterest, perpetuating her feelings of invisibility. The teachers are operating under a deficit model, viewing Zahra's silence and incomplete education as obstacles, rather than recognizing the school's lack of cultural responsiveness as the true barrier to her belonging and success.	The principal plans to incorporate a teacher training on trauma-informed care to help teachers understand these kinds of behaviors as a potential trauma response and learn how to implement non-threatening, culturally sensitive support strategies. The principal leads the revision of the school's discipline matrix to ensure that students with withdrawn behaviors (often trauma-related) are routed to counseling and support services rather than punishment. This protects Zahra's well-being. The principal uses NELP 3.3 to implement systemic changes that affirm Zahra's identity and ensure she feels safe and valued enough to participate fully.	Advocate for resource allocation to hire a cultural liaison who speaks Somali/Arabic and a trauma-specialist counselor. This protects Zahra's right to dignity and safety (UDHR) by bridging the cultural and emotional gap, which is essential for fostering her sense of belonging and academic success.

Context	Evaluation	The School Leader's Role	Advocacy
A young Black female student with long, natural hair regularly wears a satin scarf or bonnet, particularly when anticipating rain or humidity, as these environmental factors cause her hair to become extremely curly, difficult to comb, and prone to breakage. Protecting hair in this manner is critical, cultural and self-care practice. The school has a strict, long-standing policy banning all head coverings, citing "safety and identification," and the disciplinary teacher is unaware of the practical function of the student's protective covering. The student is repeatedly disciplined, and her parents argue that the policy is unfairly targeted and penalizes her cultural self-care practices.	The principal conducted a review (Section II) of all head-covering incidents, which confirms the disciplinary actions overwhelmingly targeted Black female students and other students managing protected cultural/religious styles. Critically, the school leader determines that the underlying issue is cultural ignorance among staff, teachers specifically, and that the disciplinarian viewed the covering as non-compliance, entirely missing its function as protective self-care. The policy's blanket nature, rooted in staff misunderstanding, is determined to be a direct violation of UDHR Article 2 (non-discrimination) based on cultural practice.	The school leader immediately pauses disciplinary actions related to the policy. She organizes a short, mandatory staff/teacher meeting to cultivate understanding of the functional necessity of protective styles, specifically addressing environmental concerns (like rain and humidity) and the labor involved in natural hair maintenance of certain student populations. Teachers are explicitly instructed that cultural and protective head coverings are no longer grounds for referral, shifting the focus from "compliance" to cultural affirmation.	The school leader collaborates with the Student Council and Parent Advisory Committee to rewrite the dress code. The revised policy explicitly carves out exceptions for cultural or protective hair coverings and religious attire, ensuring the policy is race-neutral and culturally responsive while retaining restrictions on true safety-hazard items (e.g., gang-related headwear). This advocacy secures the students' right to express their identity and protect their physical well-being without fear of punitive action.

Context	Evaluation	The School Leader's Role	Advocacy
John, a confident and high-performing 15-year-old Black student, raised his hand promptly in his history class whenever discussion questions were posed. He noticed, however, that the teacher consistently bypassed him, even when his hand was the first one up, to call on other students, often those who were white or of other race. John began to internalize this pattern, feeling unseen, undervalued, and excluded from the core intellectual life of the classroom, leading to feelings of alienation and disconnection from the teacher.	The principal was alerted to the issue by John's guidance counselor, who noted a drop in his self-efficacy scores. Instead of formal observation, a trusted teacher mentor was brought in not to evaluate, but to train John's teacher on self-reflection techniques using video footage. This approach provided non-confrontational evidence of the teacher's calling patterns without the threat of administrative penalty. The data revealed a clear pattern of unconscious bias in favor of certain students.	The principal entrusted the peer teacher mentor who used video to initiate a coaching cycle focused on self-awareness and intentional practice. The teacher was required to transcribe five minutes of a class discussion, specifically counting who was called on and who was bypassed. This allowed the teacher to cultivate their own awareness of the inequity they were creating, which violated John's right to non-discriminatory educational opportunity (UDHR Article 2). The resulting goal was to utilize "no-opt-out" strategies and equitable calling techniques (e.g., tracking a spreadsheet of student responses).	The principal created a student advisory panel on classroom climate. She coached John and other students to share their experiences of being "invisible" during discussions (without naming the teachers). The principal used these anonymized student narratives to advocate for a shift in the school's professional development focus, moving from general diversity awareness to critically focus on microaggressions in instructional practice, utilizing student voice to drive the urgency for change across all departments.

Context	Evaluation	The School Leader's Role	Advocacy
Xuan, a recently enrolled 9th-grade Chinese male student who is an English as a Second Language (ESL) learner, experienced severe discomfort on the school bus. Three older Black students would repeatedly stare at him in a coordinated, hostile manner, converse among themselves, and then burst out laughing. Because the harassment was covert (no explicit verbal threat or physical contact) and Xuan was less confident due to his new enrollment and ESL status, he felt unable to report the escalating situation, leading to intense feelings of being targeted, isolated, and extremely uncomfortable which teachers noticed and reported.	The principal first acknowledged that covert, non-verbal harassment is still bullying and discrimination. He interviewed Xuan using a translator to ensure his narrative was fully captured, honoring his right to be heard. They then evaluated the bus environment, interviewing the bus driver/monitor and examining incident logs for patterns of unchecked exclusion or hostility. This investigation determined that the bus environment failed to guarantee Xuan's right to safety and security (implied by UDHR Article 3) and violated Article 2 (non-discrimination) based on his race and national origin.	The principal initiated an intervention on multiple levels. He cultivates awareness by immediately training all bus drivers and school monitors on identifying subtle, non-physical forms of racial harassment (e.g., exclusionary body language, targeted staring, and covert laughing). Simultaneously, the principal used a Restorative Justice approach (Section II) with the three black students, focusing not on punishment, but on repairing the harm caused to Xuan's sense of belonging and dignity, emphasizing the devastating impact of their non-verbal actions.	Recognizing the bus as a vulnerable, unsupervised learning space, the principal advocated for a systemic change. He secured funding for new bus monitor training focused explicitly on cultural responsiveness and bystander intervention techniques. Furthermore, he advocated for the ESL department to incorporate explicit lessons on "reporting systems and safety protocols" in the native language, ensuring language proficiency is not a barrier to seeking help and thus securing Xuan's right to equal protection.

Context	Evaluation	The School Leader's Role	Advocacy
Javier is an 11th-grade male who identified as Hispanic/Latinx. He maintains a 4.0 GPA and is enrolled in Honors English and Honors History. Javier is subtly steered toward lower-tier courses and is discouraged from AP/STEM due to implicit bias among staff, who perceived him as academically talented but lacking the "foundational grit" or "cultural background" necessary for highly competitive tracks, effectively denying him equitable access.	The decision to steer Javier to lower-tier courses is based on subjective, non-academic criteria ("foundational grit," "cultural background") rather than objective merit (4.0 GPA, Honors enrollment). This creates an unfair barrier for Hispanic/Latinx students, regardless of their achievement. The staff's belief that Javier lacked the necessary "cultural background" is a direct application of the cultural deficit model, which blames the student's heritage for perceived shortcomings rather than recognizing the school's failure to affirm and utilize his cultural wealth and resilience.	The principal had to implement a clear, non-negotiable advising protocol that mandated objective merit and student choice as the only deciding factors for course placement. This protocol required counselors to justify writing any recommendation that steered a student away from an advanced course they qualified for. The administration ensured a school-wide culture where staff were trained to affirm the intellectual potential of all students and see cultural wealth as an asset, actively empowering students to pursue their highest academic aspirations.	The principal had to frame the steering as a matter of social justice and student human rights, ensuring the institution upheld every student's right to dignity and full educational participation (UDHR Article 26). In addition, the principal had to plan to publicly celebrate the academic achievements of students like Javier in challenging fields like AP/STEM to redefine the school's cultural narrative and challenge the pervasive, limiting stereotypes within the community.

Context	Evaluation	The School Leader's Role	Advocacy
In Northgate High School, the perception among Black students and their families is that they are constantly "blamed for everything" and unfairly funneled to the principal's office when compared to white peers engaging in similar behaviors. The issue here is the pervasive culture of blame and suspicion applied to Black students by specific, long-tenured staff members, which systematically denies their right to fair and equal treatment.	The principal needed confirm the perception. He initiated a School Climate Equity Survey (Section II) designed specifically for Black students and their parents, asking about feelings of being targeted, listened to, and respected during conflicts. The survey results validated the concern: over 70% of Black students felt staff approached them with suspicion.	The principal identified the staff members responsible and provided compulsory, individualized professional development focused on De-centering Whiteness in Conflict Resolution. This training required staff to analyze their own communication styles (e.g., tone of voice, body language) and how they perceive non-White, non-mainstream forms of communication (e.g., direct eye contact, challenging tone) as inherently aggressive.	The principal advocated for and secured resources to fund a student-led initiative: the Black Student Union (BSU) Leadership Council. He empowered the BSU to work with the administration to create a school-wide campaign, "See Me, Not the Stereotype," which used student-produced media to share positive narratives and combat the pervasive negative perception. This advocacy secured the BSU's right to self-representation and dignity, using student voice to drive systemic culture change.

Context	Evaluation	The School Leader's Role	Advocacy
Mapesa is an 8th-grade Black male student who is typically well-behaved and engaged in class at a large, diverse middle school. During a busy class change period as Mapesa walked down the crowded hallway, a group of three non-Black male students laughed loudly and called him a "n*****" while one of them made the explicit "whipping slave sign" (mimicking a whip or lash). Mapesa froze, visibly shaking, and immediately diverted into the nearest classroom, unable to speak. The perpetrators scattered, treating the act as a joke. Mapesa went straight to the counselor's office, crying, and reported profound shame, fear, and emotional pain, but there was minimal response. His sense of belonging had been instantly shattered, replaced by the acute awareness of his vulnerability and historical oppression---this time, within the school environment.	The school failed to uphold Mapesa's most basic human rights—his right to dignity and physical/emotional safety (UDHR). The school was legally and ethically responsible for the creation of a hostile environment. The environment permitted this behavior to manifest. The evaluation had to confirm that the school's discipline policy either lacked clear, zero-tolerance consequences for hate speech or failed to consistently apply them, making the school complicit in the oppression.	The principal had to ensure Mapesa received immediate and specialized trauma-informed support (counseling/social work). The principal had to personally contact the family to express unequivocal support, validate the harm, and guarantee the school's commitment to his safety and dignity. They conducted an immediate, thorough investigation. The principal had to impose severe, non-negotiable disciplinary consequences on the perpetrators. This action served two purposes: Justice for Mapesa; and a clear public message that racial violence was prohibited, thereby beginning to restore Mapesa's shattered sense of belonging.	The principal advocated for an immediate revision of the student code of conduct to include a zero-tolerance policy explicitly naming racial slurs and symbols of oppression, ensuring disciplinary consequences were transparent, strict, and restorative.

Context	Evaluation	The School Leader's Role	Advocacy
When a minority Hispanic student, Diego, attempted to join a large group of White students, the group members subtly "huddled in," claiming the group was "full" and that their materials were organized for a specific, pre-determined number, forcing Diego to form a group with another minority peer or work alone. During a recent project requiring shared materials, a teacher overheard one student whisper to another, "Don't ask the new kids, they don't speak English well enough to write the report," directly stereotyping a group of recently arrived students despite their academic proficiency. However, there was minimal response.	This scenario reveals a profound failure to meet the mandate of NELP Standard 3.3 (Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness). The acts of social exclusion ("huddling in") and explicit stereotyping ("don't speak English well enough") confirmed that the school environment was actively hostile and invalidating for minority students, destroying their sense of belonging and denying equitable access to collaboration.	The principal had to audit teacher practices by formally reviewing classroom rules to determine how many teachers allowed self-selection of groups and how many intervened to ensure heterogeneity. In addition, the principal issued a school-wide directive for assigned, mixed-group collaboration across all core subject areas for at least 75% of group work. This removed the agency students currently had to self-segregate and forced positive interdependence.	The administration implemented mandatory training for students (and staff) on implicit bias and the dangers of stereotyping based on language or background, advocated for this training, and framed the issue as an attack on student dignity and human rights.

Conclusion

The effective implementation of NELP Standard 3.3 (Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness) rests on the individual and collective practice of teachers. While school leaders are responsible for systemic structure and advocacy, teachers determine whether the school culture is truly inclusive and equitable for every student. They are responsible for ensuring students, regardless of their background, are provided with the support they need to succeed. The teacher is the daily link between a student's sense of belonging and a lack thereof. In short, teachers are the critical point of intervention and advocacy within the school. Their role is to intervene immediately, using their professionalism to diffuse any tense situations and protect the vulnerable ones. More importantly, teachers engage in constant self-reflection and critical analysis to check for their own biases and self-correct their practices. This continuous learning is essential for fostering the "just and equitable educational experience" demanded by NELP 3.3.

As we have seen, school leaders can help build resilient and inclusive campus communities that can withstand the negative effects of potentially institutionalized racism and discrimination by advocating for human rights. They can also empower students to be aware of their rights. By embracing standard NELP 3.3 that centers on fairness, ethical engagement, and advocacy, teachers can empower students to navigate the complexities of the discussed historical facts and contribute to a more just and interconnected world. This requires a collective commitment by everyone in the building--- including the principals, teachers, staff, and students--- to embrace and respect each other by promoting dialogue, and working towards a future grounded in human rights, social justice, and unwavering support from the school leaders.

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Alignment of NELP Standards and SLLA 6990 Content Categories

NELP Standard	NELP Component	SLLA 6990 Content Category
Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Improvement	Develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission and vision for continuous school improvement.	I-Strategic Leadership Establishing and maintaining a school mission, vision, goals, and core values.
Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms	Act ethically and according to professional norms to promote student success.	IV-Ethical Leadership Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.
Standard 3: Equity and Cultural Responsiveness	Strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices.	III-Climate and Cultural Leadership Advocating for equitable and inclusive school environments.
Standard 4: Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	Design and implement coherent systems supporting student learning and well-being.	II-Instructional Leadership Implementing effective instructional practices, assessments, and supports for student learning.
Standard 5: Community and External Leadership	Engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways.	VI-Community Engagement Leadership Building strong relationships with families and community stakeholders.
Standard 6: Operations and Management	Manage school operations and resources to promote a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.	V-Organizational Leadership Managing school systems, operations, and resources.
Standard 7: Building Professional Capacity	Develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel.	II-Instructional Leadership Supporting staff development and instructional improvement.
Standard 8: Internship	Complete a substantial and sustained educational leadership internship.	Potentially all categories.

Alignment of Chapters with NELP Standards and SLLA 6990 Content Categories

Chapter	NELP Standards	SLLA 6990 Content Categories
1	2	IV
2	3, 4, 5	II, III, VI
3	3, 6	III
4	2, 3	III, IV
5	2, 7	II, IV
6	2, 3, 5	I, II, IV
7	5	VI
8	3, 5, 7	II, III, VI
9	6, 7	II
10	5	III, VI
11	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	I, II, III, IV, V
12	3, 6	III, IV
13	1, 2, 3, 7	I, III, IV
14	1	III
15	4, 7	II
16	2, 3, 5, 6	III, IV, V, VI
17	3	III
18	1, 3, 5, 6	I, III, IV, V, VI
19	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	I, II, III, IV, V, VI
20	4	II
21	3	III

Final Thoughts...

This book began as a small project. I was hoping to receive a few publishable chapters. I am so pleased that there was a tremendous response to the call for submissions resulting in 21 publishable chapters written by 36 authors. Authors are current and retired university faculty, school administrators, school leaders, and graduate students. They represent the following institutions:

Batten University
Brooklyn College, City University of New York
California State University Fullerton
Chicago Public Schools
Colorado State University Pueblo
Duquesne University
Florida International University
Howard University
Millersville University
Purdue University
Ramapo College of New Jersey
School District of Lancaster, Pennsylvania
Solanco School District, Pennsylvania
Texas Christian University
University of California Los Angeles
University of Colorado, Colorado Springs
University of Connecticut
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
University of Northern Colorado
Westminster College
William Paterson University

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