Building Community to Support Inclusion and Reduce Intolerance:

Factors that Shape Principals Efforts

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ABSTRACT

Contention from partisan and racial hostility has intensified in U.S. public high schools. In responding to such conflicts, educational leaders should address root causes of hostility by fostering an inclusive community amongst students. This research brief explores quantitatively which school and principal characteristics are associated with community building, drawing from a nationally representative survey of U.S. public high school principals. We find that principals are more likely to be committed to community building when they themselves are more civically engaged, when they feel that civic engagement is supported at the district level, and when they identify as non-White. These findings suggest priorities for educational leaders, policy-makers, and leadership training programs to help mitigate the harmful effects of partisan and racial hostility in schools.

INTRODUCTION

Public schools are not insulated from the partisanship and racial hostility that threaten democracy. In U.S. public schools, acts of intolerance have increased dramatically in the past several years. According to the most recent data, between the 2015–16 school year and the 2017-18 school year, the United States Government Accountability Office (2021) found that hate crimes in U.S. Schools (which most commonly targeted students because of their race and national origin) increased by 81%. Many public schools also have become sites of heightened partisan contention since 2016, and, not infrequently, political conflict between students has been expressed in the form of racist assaults (Costello, 2017; Rogers et al. 2017; Rogers et al. 2019).

School leaders, and principals in particular, are tasked with ensuring a safe and respectful environment for student learning. There are several ways that principals seek to advance this goal amidst partisan and racial hostility. Rogers & Kahne (2022) outlined 4 general approaches that principals take. These include 1) Directing teachers to avoid discussion of controversial issues; 2) Disciplining students for hateful behavior; 3) Communicating the importance of tolerance and respect; and 4) Building community to establish inclusive school culture. Avoidance and discipline are largely reactive solutions—at best they may offer temporary respites from harm. Communication can be a more proactive approach, though in practice it often is a mere extension of a disciplinary framework—"be tolerant or there will be consequences." For the most part, these three responses do not address the social and relational roots of conflict and hence offer limited promise for reducing harm.

The principals who do most to counter acts of hostility at their schools emphasize proactive community building. By promoting inclusion and fostering a broad sense of belonging, these principals encourage students not only to refrain from hateful speech, but to look out for and advocate on behalf of their classmates, particularly those students who would be more likely to experience bullying or marginalization. Community building is a transformative approach to the conflict and hostility associated with partisan and racial hostility. It is a strategy through which educational leaders can foster some of the skills and commitments associated with a multiracial democracy.

In this research brief, we examine patterns of community building in U.S. public high schools. In particular, we ask: Which principals (and which schools) are more likely to take a community building approach? To address this question, we explore the rela-

tionship between community building and various school- and principal-level characteristics. Our analyses are based on a nationally representative survey of high school principals that was conducted in the summer of 2018 (Rogers et al., 2019). In our analyses, we highlight three findings that may be actionable levers of change for policy makers, leadership programs, and educational leaders to cultivate community building practices.

METHODS

Dependent Variables

Four survey items were designed to understand principals' commitment to community building. These questions were included within a broader section exploring the degree to which schools had experienced division and incivility. Principals who had indicated that there had been instances division or incivility at their school within the past year were asked what actions they had taken in response to these issues. Four binary ("yes" or "no") items dealt specifically with community building (Table 1). Additional details regarding survey wording, construction, and administration may be found in the appendices of Kahne et al. (2021). These appendices also include details regarding sampling, response rate, and handling of missing data.

TABLE 1
Community building survey items

We know that principals' time is limited and that you face countless competing priorities. We are wondering if, during the past year, you have taken any of the following actions in response to these issues?		
1. Did you meet with different student groups to ask for their help in fostering civility and respect?	Yes	No
2. Did you create student activities aimed at building relationships across difference and fostering civility?	Yes	No
3. Did you initiate professional development aimed at supporting teachers to create more civil and respectful learning environments?	Yes	No
4. Did you create professional development for your staff about restorative justice approaches?	Yes	No

Note. Only respondents who indicated that division or incivility had occurred at their school in the past year were asked about actions they had taken towards community building.

In terms of response rate for community building survey items, 11 (out of 500 respondents) indicated that there was no racial conflict or political incivility at their schools in the past year. Two principals did not answer at least 1 (out of the 4) questions about community building. In total, 13 principals were excluded from analyses of community building, yielding a total sample size of 487 for regression analyses.

Principals' responses to community building survey items were summed to create an aggregate score ranging from 0-4. Overall, few principals (*n* = 34) indicated that they had taken no actions toward community building, 71 took 1 action, 153 took 2 actions,

126 took 3 actions, and 105 took all 4 actions toward community building. Principals who answered "yes" to at least 3 (out of the 4) community building activities were defined as being *committed to community building*. The decision to use 3 as the cutoff point, as opposed to all 4 actions, was based on supposition that a large (perhaps majority) proportion of principals might not have associated restorative justice practices with community building.

Independent Variables

We included several school and community variables in our analyses. Most school variables were derived from the Common Core of Data (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018); these variables included school enrollment, percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL), percentage White students, and geographic locale (i.e., urban, suburban, town, or rural.) In addition, we considered the partisan leaning of the congressional district where the school was located, operationalized by the percentage of voters supporting Trump in 2016 (Daily Kos, 2018).

The remaining independent variables were derived from the survey itself. School districts' commitment to civic education was based on principals' responses to 3 related survey items. In the survey, principals also indicated their years of experience, gender, race/ethnicity, and personal civic engagement. The latter variable represents the extent to which principals regularly followed the news, talked about social issues with friends and family, and participated in efforts to improve their community. Principals were defined as being *personally committed to civic engagement* if they responded "Daily" to all 3 civic engagement items; this equates to being 1.84 standard deviations higher than average. Additional details regarding independent variables may be found in the appendices of Kahne et al. (2021).

Correlational Analyses

Weighted Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated using R 4.1.2 (R Core Team, 2021). Details regarding sampling weights may be found in the appendices of Kahne et al. (2021). The false discovery rate of conducting multiple significance tests was controlled using the Benjamini-Hochberg technique (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995), which has been shown to limit Type 1 errors to the nominal level while also maximizing statistical power (Williams et al., 1999). In terms of practical interpretation, B-H adjusted *p*-values limit the probability of the alternative hypothesis—that estimates have the opposite sign—to a family-wise error rate of 0.025.

Regression Analyses

Community building was regressed on a set of community, school, and principal variables. Modeling was conducted with R 4.1.2 (R Core Team, 2021). Model fit was adjusted using sample weights. Because the dependent variable (on a scale from 0-4) was treated as continuous, we calculated robust standard errors using the estimatr package (Blair et al., 2022). As some of our independent variables were highly correlated, we checked for possible multicollinearity by examining variance inflation factor (Fox & Weisberg, 2019). Additional modeling considerations and diagnostics may be found in the appendices of Kahne et al. (2021).

Point Estimates of Ratio of CDFs

Several point estimates were computed as the ratio of (a) the probability that a principal would be *committed to community building* and *personally committed to civic engagement* (or some other characteristic), to (b) the probability that a principal would be *committed to community building* and whose civic engagement was average. In mathematical notation, the quantity to be estimated is:

$$\frac{P(CB \geq 3 \,|\, CE_{high})}{P(CB \geq 3 \,|\, CE_{avg.})}$$

where *CB* refers to Community Building (with *commitment to community building* being defined as a score of 3 or more), CE_{high} represents principals who were *personally committed to Civic Engagement*, and $CE_{avg.}$ represents principals whose civic engagement was average. Coefficients from the full regression model were used to predict principals' commitment to community building, for principals on average and for principals who were personally committed to civic engagement. Assuming normally distributed residual error, we used a robust estimate of residual variance and a normal cumulative distribution to estimate the probability that principals were committed to community building. Standard errors were computed using bootstrap sampling (Efron & Tibshirani, 1994).

RESULTS

Characteristics Related to Community Building

To explore the relationships between community building and other school and principal characteristics, we calculated bivariate Pearson correlation coefficients (Table 2). Associations were deemed significant if observed p-values were lower than Benjamini-Hochberg (B-H) critical p-values. Overall, community building was related to 7 of the 10 variables (4 of the 5 school or community characteristics, and 3 of the 5 principal characteristics).

TABLE 2

Correlations between Community Building and Variables of Interest, with Benjamini-Hochberg Adjusted Critical p-values

Variable	r	$p_{obs.}$	$p_{crit.}$	sig.
Years' experience	**0.010**	**0.832**	**0.025**	
Gender (female)	**0.051**	**0.260**	**0.023**	
% FRPL students [a]	0.073	0.095	0.020	
School enrollment	0.200	0.000	0.018	*
Race/Ethnicity (non-White)	**0.174**	**0.000**	**0.015**	*
District support	**0.174**	**0.000**	**0.013**	*
Civic engagement	**0.206**	**0.000**	**0.010**	*
Percentage White students	-0.200	0.000	0.008	*
Partisan leaning [b]	-0.257	0.000	0.005	*
Geographic locale [c]	0.271	0.000	0.003	*

Note: A total of 487 principals were included in the calculation of weighted Pearson correlation coefficients. Boldface type indicates principal-level characteristics; all other variables (except for partisan leaning) are school-level variables. Principals' Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and (Perceptions of) district support are binary variables. Principals' Civic Engagement is a z-normed construct of principals' personal civic engagement.

[a] FRPL refers to students who receive free or reduced-price lunch.

[b] As indicated by the percentage of voters in the community who voted for Trump in the 2016 presidential election.

[c] An ordinal three-point scale of increasing urbanicity (Rural/Town, Suburb, City).

With respect to school and community characteristics, community building was positively associated with schools that enroll a higher percentage of non-White students (r = 0.200, p < 0.001), with schools located in liberal congressional districts (r = 0.200, p < 0.001), and with schools located in urban settings (r = 0.271, p < 0.001). Note that these three variables are also highly related to each other.

In Table 2, variables representing principal characteristics and actions of districts are presented in bold. With respect to principal characteristics and actions of districts, community building was strongly associated with non-White principal (*r* = 0.174, *p* < .001), principals who perceived higher levels of district support for civic education (*r* = 0.174, *p* < 0.001), and principals who were themselves civically engaged (*r* = 0.206, *p* < 0.001).

Race, Civic Engagement, and Perceptions of District Support

We conducted regression analyses to further examine the relationship between the three principal characteristics that were found to be strongly associated with community building (i.e., principals' race/ethnicity, perceptions of district support, and personal civic engagement). Table 3 presents unstandardized coefficients of community building regressed on these 3 variables, separately and all together, controlling for other characteristics. By convention, we present significance levels at $\alpha = 0.05$, 0.01, and 0.001; in the full model, these findings were also significant at B-H adjusted critical p-values. We report unstandardized coefficients because, in this case, they are more directly interpretable than standardized coefficients.

Principals' personal civic engagement was strongly related to their commitment to community building, even after adjusting for covariates ($b = 0.124$, SE = 049, $p = 0.012$). These coefficients indicate that principals who were one standard deviation above the mean, with respect to their own personal civic engagement, offered 0.124 more opportunities for community building, on average, ceteris paribus. Similarly, principals' perceptions of district support for civic education were strongly related to their commitment to community building ($b = 0.414$, SE = 0.104, $p < 0.001$), as were principals who identified as non-White ($b = 0.361$, SE = 0.155, $p = 0.022$). In more practical terms, principals who were civically engaged were 36.1% (SE = 12.1%) more likely to be committed to community building, as compared to principals with an average level of civic engagement, ceteris paribus. Similarly, principals who reported that their districts were supportive of civic education were 35.8% (SE = 9.4%) more likely to engage in community building, as compared to districts that were not supportive of civic education; and non-White principals were 38.1% more likely (SE = 17.9%), as compared to White principals.

With respect to school and community variables, schools located in cities and liberal-leaning congressional districts were also associated with increased levels of community building. More specifically, schools in cities offered, on average, 0.357 more opportunities for community building than schools located in rural areas or towns ($b = 0.357$, SE = 0.171, $p = 0.015$). And, for every additional percentage vote for Trump in 2016 within a given Congressional District, schools in those district offered 0.010 fewer opportunities for community building ($b = -0.010$, SE = 0.004, $p = 0.007$).

TABLE 3

Multiple Regression Models of Community Building on Independent Variables

Variable	Null	Race/ethnicity	Civic engagement	District support	Full model
Intercept	2.314*** (0.053)	2.228*** (0.057)	2.325*** (0.052)	2.169*** (0.064)	1.984*** (0.102)
Partisan leaning [a]					-0.010** (0.004)
District support				0.427*** (0.110)	0.434*** (0.107)
Geographic locale					
Rural/town					
Suburb					0.201 (0.146)
City					0.357* (0.171)
School enrollment					0.011 (0.009)
Percentage White students					0.002 (0.003)
Percentage FRPL students					0.000 (0.003)
Principal characteristic					
Years of experience					-0.001 (0.008)
Gender (female)					-0.072 (0.113)
Race/ethnicity (non-White)		0.558*** (0.144)			0.361* (0.155)
Civic engagement			0.241*** (0.052)		0.157** (0.05)
R^2		0.030	0.043	0.030	0.168

Note. A total of 487 principals were included in the regression analysis. Calibration weights were used in all models. Rural/town is the reference group for Suburb and City. FRPL refers to students who receive free or reduced-price lunch. School enrollment is reported in the hundreds of students. Principals' gender and race/ethnicity are binary variables. Principals' civic engagement is a *z*-normed construct of principals' personal civic engagement.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

[a] As indicated by the percentage of voters in the community who voted for Trump in the 2016 presidential election.

DISCUSSION

Given the increasing volume of politically- and racially-motivated hostility at school, there is a pressing need for educational leaders to engage in community building practices. Our study sheds light on which principals and schools are associated with adopting this priority. We found that three principal and district characteristics—principals' own civic engagement, district support for civic engagement, and principals' self-identified race/ethnicity—all mattered a great deal. These factors are important because they signal ways that educational leaders, policymakers, and leadership programs can promote community building.

Educational policymakers and leadership programs should recruit and support leaders who are civically engaged. Our findings underscore the importance of a distinctively normative understanding of school leadership. Principals can promote and sustain the values of a multiracial democracy within their schools when they engage in their role as leaders for democracy. Similarly, districts need to lift up and communicate their commitment to multiracial democracy if they want educators to promote this ideal in schools. Our findings also suggest an intriguing relationship between principals of color and community building. It is possible that the personal and professional experiences of principals of color lead them to be particularly attentive to the needs for community building, particularly amidst a climate of racial hostility. Further, it seems likely that when educational policymakers and practitioners foreground diversity and inclusion in their hiring practices, community building will receive attention and care in the day-to-day life of schools. Clearly there is a need for further research to understand more fully this relationship between non-White principals and community building strategies.

The association between community building and community characteristics (such as partisan leaning and geographic locale) suggest something further about the nature of community building, as we have defined it. There are many possible ways to interpret these associations, and further research is needed to parse them out. Nevertheless, we suggest several interpretations, as possible avenues for further research. The relationship between community building and partisan leaning and geographic locale could reflect a cultural difference, viz., that community building is more appealing to liberal, city-dwelling principals and their constituents; conservative principals serving rural schools, by contrast, may be more likely to foster a culture of rugged individualism and self-sufficiency—goals which are anathema to community-focused practices. Alternatively, principals in conservative and rural areas may not be opposed to community building, but simply enact it in through different practices (that require different survey items).

Community building is multifaceted, and it has both a pedagogical and a curricular dimension, which clearly also requires attention. Although our study sheds light on community building, it is not clear how it is implemented, and what supports must be in place for it to take hold. Additional research is needed to explore these questions and, if educational leaders do act on these findings, it would be important to document how change is initiated and what effects it has on the school and district communities. Ultimately, our study contributes to a novel branch of research aimed at better understanding how school leaders can (begin to) engage in approaches that mitigate hostile acts while fostering a more inclusive school community.

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