

Embargoed: For Publication and Broadcast, Wednesday, October 23, 2024, 12.01 a.m. (EST)

News:
October 23, 2024

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Cultural Conflict Comes with a Cost For Public Schools

Survey of school superintendents provides first-time estimate of fiscal cost to US schools of dealing with divisive conflict over LGBTQ+ student rights, race, and access to books, underscores cost to education and society.

(Los Angeles) A new survey of 467 school superintendents across the nation finds two-thirds experiencing moderate to high levels of culturally divisive conflict that is disrupting school districts, negatively impacting schools and classrooms, and needlessly costing schools millions of dollars that could better be used to serve students.

The survey, “The Costs of Conflict, The Fiscal Impact of Culturally Divisive Conflicts on Public Schools in the United States,” examines the societal and fiscal cost of culturally divisive conflicts that have wracked schools in recent years, such as those over LGBTQ+ issues, teaching about race and racism, and efforts to ban books. Conducted by a team of researchers at UCLA, the University of Texas at Austin, American University, and UC Riverside, the survey offers insight into the level and frequency of conflicts and the personal toll and disruptive impact on school districts of misinformation and hostile and violent rhetoric and threats. In what the researchers believe is the first study to do so, the research analyzes the financial costs incurred by school districts in responding to culturally divisive conflict, estimating the cost for the nation’s public schools at approximately \$3.2 billion during the 2023-24 school year.

“This research makes clear that culturally divisive conflicts in the nation’s schools are generating fear, stress and anxiety that is disrupting school districts and taking a personal toll on the educators and staff members who work in them,” said UCLA Education Professor John Rogers, the lead researcher for the survey. “Sadly, as superintendents have told us, the cost of these conflicts not only has a financial impact but is also eroding teaching and learning and undermining the trust between schools and the communities so essential to our democracy and civic life.”

“It’s gotten incredibly contentious”

Of the 467 superintendents responding to the survey, almost all experienced some sort of culturally divisive conflict during the 2023-2024 school year. For the survey analysis, the researchers established a “conflict score” based on the level and frequency of conflicts experienced by superintendents, ranking schools with Low, Moderate, and High Conflict. Thirty-eight percent of school districts experienced Moderate levels of culturally

divisive conflict. More than one-quarter (27.5%) reported experiencing High levels of conflict, with conflict occurring regularly across several issue areas, often accompanied by violent rhetoric or threats.

The conflicts have had a direct impact on the well-being of superintendents. In survey responses and follow-up interviews, superintendents told of personal threats to themselves and their staff. Fifty percent of superintendents reported they experienced at least one instance of harassment in the 2023-24 school year. Ten percent received threats of violence, and 11% experienced property vandalism. School districts were also plagued by the spread of disinformation, baseless allegations, and personal harassment. In the words of one superintendent, "Our social media accounts were effectively bombed ... full of messages of hate. My 60-plus-year-old administrative assistant was bombarded with phone calls to the point where she wanted to quit."

Such culturally divisive conflict likely has a direct impact on superintendent turnover. Previous research has shown superintendent turnover has increased from 14.2 % to 17.1% over the last four years. The "Cost of Conflict" survey found that among those superintendents who have sought out another position in the last year, 42% indicated their decision was related to school board conflict, stress, and politics.

"The role of a superintendent is one of constant visibility and responsibility. The relentless demands of leading a district can easily overshadow their own well-being, which, if neglected, not only affects their personal health but also the health and stability of students, educators, and families they serve," said Rachel S. White of the University of Texas at Austin. "Reducing the extent to which superintendents experience unwarranted divisiveness is an important step to change the trajectory of increasing superintendent churn."

Almost a third (29%) of superintendents also reported that teachers and other staff members left the district or the profession due to culturally divisive conflict. Superintendents in High Conflict districts were most likely to report heightened levels of staff turnover.

Culturally divisive conflict has also undermined staff well-being and increased rates of staff absenteeism. Seventy-two percent of superintendents in Moderate Conflict districts and 94.3% of superintendents in High Conflict districts said culturally divisive conflict had a negative impact on staff stress and mental health. Thirty-five percent of superintendents in Moderate Conflict districts and more than two-thirds (69%) of superintendents in High Conflict districts said such conflict had a negative effect on staff absenteeism. Some superintendents also said they experienced difficulties in the recruitment of new staff due to divisive conflict.

Responding to culturally divisive conflict and its impact comes with significant financial costs for school districts. Superintendents reported increased direct financial costs for services such as additional security, communications, and legal work. They also reported increased indirect costs for redeploying staff time to address challenges created by culturally divisive conflict,

such as dealing with misinformation or threats on social media, responding to news media inquiries about book bans, or addressing dramatic increases for public records requests. Increased staff turnover created by culturally divisive conflict also increased costs for employee recruitment and training.

In what the researchers believe is the first analysis of its type, the survey report estimates fiscal costs for school districts in responding to culturally divisive conflict. HIGH Conflict districts have substantially higher costs of responding to conflict than any other type of district. On average, a school district serving 10,000 students and experiencing Moderate levels of conflict is spending nearly \$500,000 annually. Those districts experiencing High levels of culturally divisive conflict are spending an average of \$812,000. If a district with a High level of conflict decreased to a LOW level of conflict (\$250,000), the district would save roughly \$562,000.

“There is a real opportunity cost to this conflict. These are funds that school districts may not have and may be diverted from support for student learning,” said Robert Shand of American University “For example, one superintendent told us that increased costs forced the district to divert funds from planned professional development aimed at improving instruction.”

While the survey report highlights fiscal costs, the researchers underscore the broader education and societal costs of culturally divisive conflict.

In interviews, multiple superintendents expressed concern over the impact on teaching and learning, saying that dealing with conflict has taken away time spent on school campuses and instructional teams to improve instruction. As one said, “I never met with them once last year. Not a single solitary time because I was so busy embroiled in all of this other mess that I did not have time to do it.” Others cited concerns about teachers, fearing community backlash, avoiding teaching important curriculum.

Superintendents also cite broader societal costs. “What we don’t talk about is how fearful everybody is,” said one superintendent. Said another, speaking of fierce community conflict over district policies toward transgender students, “all of a sudden, we found ourselves caught in the crosshairs of a societal war.”

Responding to the survey, many superintendents said it is vital for educational leaders and the broader public to work to diminish the opportunities for conflict entrepreneurs to disrupt, distract, and gain power in school board meetings and elsewhere.

“It’s important for the public and policymakers to be aware of ways culturally divisive conflicts are harming the schools our children attend,” said Joe Kahne of UC Riverside. “These conflicts come with a very real cost.”

“The Costs of Conflict, The Fiscal Impact of Culturally Divisive Conflicts on Public Schools in the United States” is published by the Institute for Education, Democracy and Access at the

UCLA School of Education and Information Studies. The research was conducted and analyzed by a team of university researchers, including John Rogers at UCLA, Rachel S. White at the University of Texas at Austin, Robert Shand at American University, and Joseph Kahne at the University of California, Riverside, with the support of graduate students in the Costs of Conflict Research Group. The findings are based on a national survey of 467 K-12 public school district superintendents in 46 states conducted in the summer of 2024. The researchers also conducted follow-up interviews with 42 superintendents in 12 states. The research report is available on the [UCLA IDEA website](#).