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on Public Schools in the United States

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The University of Texas at Austin
College of Education



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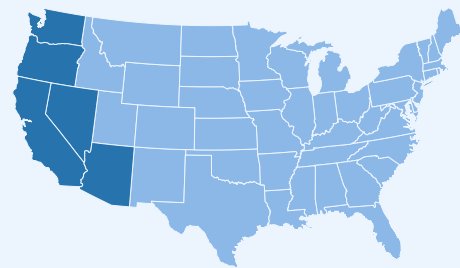
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A SUPERINTENDENT'S STORY

"IT'S GOTTEN INCREDIBLY CONTENTIOUS"



Steven Machi* is an award-winning superintendent of a mid-sized school district in a Western state. Dr. Machi notes that, historically, his board members have been moderate Republicans who "care about kids and trust the district leaders." But recently, a couple new board members, who he characterizes as "extremists," have been elected with support from Moms for Liberty and "other special interest groups." These new board members use social media to challenge the district's LGBTQ+ policies and attack individual educators: "It's daily," notes Dr. Machi, "they are spreading false propaganda, fear mongering." Fellow board members have been "slandered as pedophiles"—which Machi says are "completely false fabrications." The length of board meetings has grown from 90 minutes to five and a half hours, and much of this time is taken up by speakers claiming that local schools "are indoctrinating kids" with "ideologies around sexual health," even as the district uses state-approved curriculum. "It's gotten incredibly contentious," Dr. Machi agonizes. "They're just trying to disrupt."

For Dr. Machi, this "awful behavior" is not just disruptive, but also very expensive: "This is costing us general fund dollars." In the 2023-24 school year, the district spent an additional \$100,000 for security, hiring "armed plainclothes off-duty officers ... because people coming to the board meetings are unpredictable and sometimes violent." The district incurred more than a half a million dollars in legal fees associated with lawsuits "stemming from the one trustee's behavior and the campaign against our LGBTQ+ community." Attacks at board meetings on the LGBTQ+ community have led a social service agency to withdraw nearly a quarter-million dollars of in-kind services for district students. Similarly, a local technology company that had provided roughly \$150,000 a year to the district withdrew its partnership, saying "We don't like being talked about negatively at your public meetings." The district also has faced additional costs in excess of \$80,000 for recruitment and development of new staff members to replace teachers, counselors, and administrators who left their positions because they did not want to work in such a divisive setting.

*"Steven Machi" is a pseudonym. We use pseudonyms for all superintendents named in this report.

**Icon created by Ariyanto Deni from Noun Project.

"It's gotten incredibly contentious," Dr. Machi agonizes. "They're just trying to disrupt."

These direct budgetary costs and losses are dwarfed by the more than one million dollars in staff time last year that was focused solely on grappling with the heightened conflict. Dr. Machi estimates that 20 staff each spent 20 hours a week responding to media inquiries, addressing misinformation and falsehoods, fulfilling public records act requests, and more: "Our staff are spending enormous amounts of time, just doing stupid stuff ... producing things that serve nobody." Dr. Machi concludes: "The fiscal costs to the district are enormous, but [so are] the cultural costs of not standing up to the extremists. If someone doesn't, then the students and employees lose. ... It's the worst it's ever been."



THE COSTS OF CONFLICT

We launched this study to assess the fiscal costs of conflict associated with the divisive fights that have become prevalent in public schools today. Our research questions were:

1. How common are the kinds of dynamics that Superintendent Machi experienced?

2. How much is it costing schools and school districts to respond?

THE CONTEXT:

Conflict in schools and school districts has grown dramatically since the 2020–21 school year.

Beginning in the 2020-21 school year, conflict directed at schools and districts and taking place during school board meetings became a national phenomenon. Speakers used common talking points, often not based in fact, expressing concerns about responses to COVID-19, teaching about race and racism, and policies and practices related to LGBTQ+ youth. The scope of activity and vitriol has been striking. One study, drawing on media reports, found that during the 2020-21 school year alone, at least 894 school districts, enrolling 17,743,850 students, or 35% of all K-12 students in the United States, were impacted by local “anti-CRT” (Critical Race Theory) efforts.¹ A different study found that during the 2021-22 school year, almost a third (31%) of district leaders reported that parents and community members made written or verbal threats against educators in their districts for teaching politically controversial topics.²

In addition, this conflict, accompanied by political mobilization, has contributed to the passage of new legislation—more than 300 bills were introduced between 2021 and 2024 at the state level to restrict teaching about race and racism, to enable book bans, and to shape policies regarding access to educational opportunities for LGBTQ+ youth.³ Studies indicate that these laws are impacting what students learn (or don’t learn) in classrooms—often through their chilling effect.⁴ Some examples of this are breathtaking. Greg Wickenkamp, an eighth grade teacher in Iowa, was explicitly told by his superintendent that he could not teach that “slavery was wrong” as it might violate the vaguely-worded law which said educators cannot teach “that the United States of America and the state of Iowa are fundamentally or systemically racist or sexist.”⁵ More broadly, these laws seem to be promoting avoidance by

educators of teaching certain topics. A study of 8,000 teachers by the RAND Corporation found that 25% of teachers reported that their school or district told them to limit discussions about race, gender and other political and social issues. In addition, because of concern regarding conflict, 65% decided on their own accord to limit such discussions.⁶

What is the fiscal cost of this conflict?

The headlines detailing conflicts in school board meetings that were so prevalent in 2021 may be less common today, but this conflict has not disappeared. Although they may be attracting less attention from the press, the pressures of culturally divisive conflict have remained intense. And, the threats of culturally divisive conflict continue to impact schools.

In addition, as we’ve spoken with educators from varied locations throughout the country, another concern has surfaced: the fiscal cost of this conflict.

Again and again, we heard stories of sizable expenses related to all this tumult—the money schools and school systems needed to spend on these issues, many told us, meant less money was available for other educational priorities. Some of these costs were straightforward—many districts said they were hiring increased security officers for board meetings and at district offices. Others reported needing additional staff to handle communications and legal expenses. And some costs, while sizable, seemed less obvious. Educational leaders spoke of increased staff turnover, sizable time spent responding to Freedom of Information Act (or public records act) requests, and time spent in endless meetings responding to unsubstantiated rumors and blatant misinformation. Across rural, suburban, and urban areas and in communities of all political persuasions, we heard that these costs could be sizable, and that they were meaningfully impacting the quality of education students received.

Our method for studying the cost of conflict

Economists have increasingly used cost analysis as a form of economic evaluation to better understand education policy issues from a resource perspective—whether to understand the resources required to implement an intervention or policy, to gauge whether a given

intervention or policy is worthwhile, or, as in our case, to understand the fiscal impact of a social phenomenon. We use standard cost estimation techniques grounded in the economic concept of opportunity cost—including all resources that have alternative use or value, regardless of who pays for or provides the resource and whether there is a direct financial expenditure—gathered and analyzed using the ingredients method to estimate the fiscal impact of culturally divisive conflict.⁷ Data for our analysis comes from a national survey and follow-up interviews with school superintendents. We draw on this unique dataset to examine the scale of the impact and how different levels of conflict, as well as other contextual factors, influence the costs incurred by districts.

In summer 2024, we conducted a national survey of K-12 public school district superintendents. We used the National Longitudinal Superintendent Database (NLSDB) housed at The Superintendent Lab to administer an online survey via Qualtrics of nearly all K-12 public school district superintendents across the U.S. (n~12,500).⁸ The survey included three key sections with questions related to (1) the nature of conflict related to culturally divisive issues (e.g., frequency, by whom, toward whom, in what spaces), (2) frequency of and topics associated with personal or professional threats of superintendents and district staff, and (3) financial and human resource costs of conflict related to culturally divisive issues. 467 superintendents from 46 different states completed the survey. Survey respondents largely reflected the universe of school districts nationally. (For details on the survey method and the demographics of respondents and of their districts, see the [methodological appendix](#)).

To learn more about the stories of conflict and efforts of district leaders to respond to this conflict, we conducted interviews with 42 superintendents from 12 states during the summer of 2024. 12 of these superintendents had taken our survey and were invited to participate in the interview because they reported moderate or high levels of conflict. The other 30 superintendents were invited to be interviewed through leadership networks. When we reached out to them, we did not know whether they had experienced conflict. The interviews were conducted by our research team on Zoom and generally lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. Superintendents were promised confidentiality and asked whether and how their district experienced conflict and, if so, what sorts of costs they incurred responding to this conflict.

Culturally divisive conflict

This study examines the extent to which school districts and superintendents are experiencing culturally divisive conflict, and the costs of such conflict incurred by school districts during the 2023-24 school year. In the last couple of years, the three topics that have surfaced the most culturally divisive conflict are: 1) Teaching about issues of race and racism; and 2) Rights and protections for LGBTQ+ students; and 3) Student access to books in their school library. Conflict around these topics has frequently been accompanied by the spread of misinformation, hostile or violent rhetoric, and threatening behavior.

To be clear, culturally divisive conflict differs from political contention in education more broadly. There always will be different viewpoints in a diverse society about the purpose of public education and how schools should advance societal goals. Disagreement about educational policy and practice is not just inevitable, but also potentially a source for democratic engagement and an appropriate expression of civic energy. Our public schools are strongest when young people, parents, community members, and educators are actively involved in educational governance. Such active involvement often emerges from strongly felt interests and concerns tied to the distinct experiences and perspectives of different members of the public. Yet, amidst this diversity, the project of democratic governance requires shared commitments to acknowledging the dignity of all community members, embracing respectful dialogue and evidence-based decision-making, and engaging others with mutual respect and civil discourse. Thus, our measures assess conflict that violates these democratic principles, with a particular emphasis on threatening behavior, violent rhetoric, and the spread of misinformation.

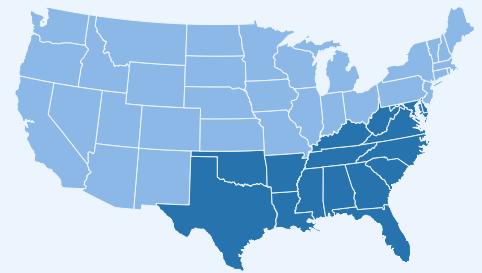
A road map for the report

In the remainder of the report we draw upon our superintendents' survey and interviews to report on the experiences of culturally divisive conflict and its impact. We categorize districts by level of conflict and find that districts that experienced high levels of conflict also experienced dramatically heightened costs. Throughout, we present stories of superintendents, like Steven Machi, whose districts experienced high levels of conflict. Their stories bring to life the ways in which conflict and the costs of conflict have been experienced across the country.



A SUPERINTENDENT'S STORY

“COMPLETE AND UTTER CHAOS”



Eric Fournier, a nationally recognized superintendent, leads a large Southern school district that experienced substantial culturally divisive conflict during the 2023-24 school year. Such conflict is relatively new to his district. When Dr. Fournier started his tenure, he and the board worked together as “a very collaborative and cohesive team.” But this dynamic began to change after new board members won seats on “red-meat issues,” vowing to protect “parent rights” and “chase the CRT boogeyman.” For a while, these more extreme voices held only a minority of the board seats. But then, a moderate board member could not finish her term, and her absence left the board evenly split. The ideologically divided board was not able to agree upon a replacement and, at this point, “it just descended into complete and utter chaos.” Dr. Fournier recalls a “turning point” when all board interactions “became personal attacks.” The contentious board relationships brought heightened public and media attention. Televised board meetings—which had never drawn a sizable audience—suddenly became must-watch “reality TV.”

passages from the books—passages chosen, Dr. Fournier points out, for their “shock and awe value.” Adding to this “very ugly” situation, several threats were made against district leadership. Dr. Fournier has learned to take such threats seriously. “Due to how hostile” the situation has become in a state where citizens can openly carry firearms, community members are now required to pass through metal detectors in order to attend school board meetings.

While metal detectors cost a few thousand dollars, their expense pales in comparison with the costs of contracting for additional services or redeploying staff time to meet the needs created by extreme conflict. Dr. Fournier recounts that his district spent several hundred thousand dollars for additional security personnel, communications professionals, and attorneys. One staff member has been hired whose sole responsibility is responding to misinformation or removing people who are “hijacking” district platforms to advance their personal agendas. The district’s communications department invested “hundreds of hours dealing with media inquiries” about proposed

The ideologically divided board was not able to agree upon a replacement and, at this point, “it just descended into complete and utter chaos.”

The board meetings were only one of many sites for conflict. Some local community members established parental rights groups that used social media platforms to amplify conservative talking points from national organizations about LGBTQ+ issues. Dr. Fournier notes that these groups often would “twist stories” or make false and defamatory accusations in an effort to undermine public trust in district officials and the school district generally. Some of these parent activists volunteered at school libraries with the covert purpose of finding books that they believed contained objectionable material. They then used board meeting public comment time to read select

book bans or the sexual health curriculum. And staff have spent thousands of hours addressing public records requests which have grown from 150 a year to more than 600 a year. Dr. Fournier explains that sometimes district staff spend days pulling together requested papers for the public or board members only to find that the material has been ignored—“so the wasted hours and the effort that it took was ridiculous.”

The high level of conflict has made it difficult to recruit and retain staff. Dr. Fournier recalls encountering new challenges when trying to fill a senior position in his

**Icon created by Ariyanto Deni from Noun Project.

cabinet. When Dr. Fournier asked the headhunter in charge of the job search why they had not received any applications, he was told, “Look, nobody wants to come to you. They’ve seen the reports in the news. They’ve seen your board videos. They’re not interested in coming.” Dr. Fournier also laments the fact that conflict has prompted many teachers and school administrators to leave the district “because they just weren’t willing to do it anymore.” Their departure can be understood as a response to overwhelming stress. “When your altruistic work is constantly under attack, and you feel personally under attack,” explains Dr. Fournier, “it impacts your world.” He adds: “My chiefs are all on blood pressure medicine” and across all district employees, there has been a “200% increase in [prescriptions for] psychotropic drugs” (to address stress, anxiety, and depression).

Alongside concern for his employees, Dr. Fournier worries about the long-term effects of culturally divisive conflict on student learning. When he first became superintendent, he met every month with a special team of administrators charged with improving instruction in the district’s struggling schools. He would walk with these administrators through the school campuses and discuss ideas for supporting better teaching and learning practices. Because Dr. Fournier is convinced that such practices are essential, he is saddened by the fact that conflict has taken him away from this work. “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. My chief instructional officer was so embroiled in library books, and my chief of schools was so embroiled in [addressing LGBTQ+ issues] ... that their ability to support campuses, i.e. the students and staff, was so limited ... I’m still just starting to really realize how deep it goes.”

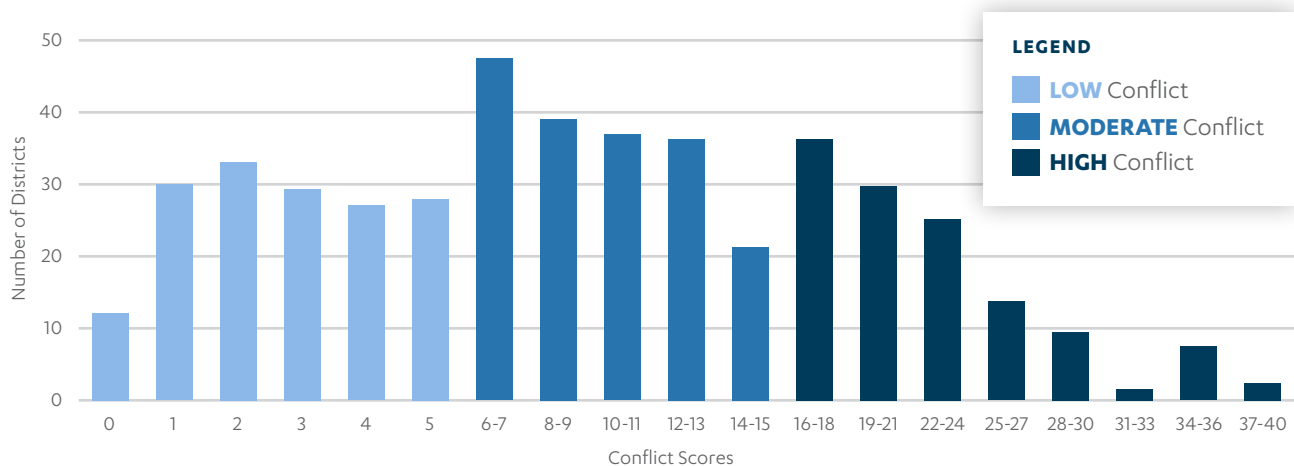
CONFLICT SCORES

Our national survey of school superintendents included a set of questions about whether and how often districts have been challenged on teaching and learning about race and racism, policies protecting LGBTQ+ students, and books available to students in the school library. It also explored the frequency with which conflict has prompted and employed misinformation, violent rhetoric, and threats. We combined responses to these questions to create a “Culturally Divisive Conflict Score” for each district and, based on those scores, identified districts as having experienced **LOW**, **MODERATE**, or **HIGH** levels of

culturally divisive conflict. (See [appendix](#) for a more detailed explanation of the Culturally Divisive Conflict Score.)

Generally, in **LOW** Conflict Districts (with scores of 0-5), if conflict occurred, it only played out in rare and isolated incidents. In **MODERATE** Conflict Districts (with scores of 6-15), conflict arose across a couple areas, and was a regular occurrence in one or two areas. And, in **HIGH** Conflict Districts (with scores above 16), conflict occurred regularly across several issue areas, and was often accompanied by violent rhetoric or threats.

Chart 1. Culturally Divisive Conflict Scores of Districts in Superintendent Survey



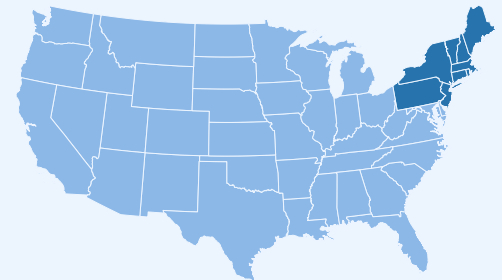
As Chart 1 shows, the 467 superintendents in our survey who answered the series of questions about conflict experienced a wide array of culturally divisive conflict. While 2.5% reported no conflict, almost all experienced some sort of culturally divisive conflict during the 2023-24 school year. Nearly two-thirds (66%) of superintendents reported that their districts experienced MODERATE or HIGH levels of conflict. In an open-ended question in the survey, several superintendents noted that culturally divisive conflict has grown in recent years. “I spent 25 years in school administration,” explained a Colorado superintendent. “The last 5 years were the most intense regarding conflict.”

Superintendents often described the conflict in detail. A superintendent from North Carolina wrote: “I have encountered organized efforts from some parents and community members aimed at undermining my work. These tactics often include the spread of disinformation, baseless allegations, and personal harassment.” Importantly, even some superintendents who had not yet faced the most intense forms of conflict recognized that it might soon be coming. “We have been very fortunate as a district in that these issues have not affected us as much as neighboring districts,” reported a Michigan superintendent. “However,” he added, “there is a sort of ominous sense that these potentially divisive issues could impact us at any time.”



A SUPERINTENDENT'S STORY

“HOW FEARFUL EVERYONE IS”



Martha Barron leads a small school district located in what she describes as “an intensely right-leaning pocket” of a blue state in the Eastern region of the United States. Barron believes that superintendents have a responsibility to ensure a safe environment for all students and to build goodwill with the broader community. Advancing these twin goals has proven extremely challenging the last couple years.

Barron traces much of the contention in her district to an incident during which one of her secondary students went to class and communicated messages that many teachers and students viewed as homophobic. The principal called the student out of class, explained why others felt unsafe, and encouraged the student to express his ideas in different ways. The student refused this request and, with support from his parents and attorneys from a conservative legal advocacy group, began to speak out publicly about how he felt the school was abridging his freedom. Realizing that the issue was dividing the district into distinct ideological camps, Barron released a statement “pleading with my community to not ... become a battleground for politics—that all we wanted was to create safe schools for our children.” But the student’s story went viral on social media. Soon, it was featured on national conservative media outlets and far-right politicians in other states were tweeting about his case.

All of this attention had disastrous effects on the district. Ms. Barron recalls: “Our social media accounts were effectively bombed ... full of messages of hate. My 60+ year-old administrative assistant was bombarded with phone calls to the point where she wanted to quit. She was crying because of the things that people would call and say into the telephone—none of whom were local.” The district was targeted by multiple threats. For example, a tweet shared with Barron included a link to one of her school’s staff directories and read: “Here are the people who work in this building, and if you see them in public, you know what to do.”

Long after the lawsuit was filed, the attention it attracted spurred disruption and chaos. Barron explains that “every time something would happen with the case, the crazy circus would start up all over again.” Hate mail, email, and phone calls came from across the nation. Because the calls would be directed both to the district office and individual schools, they would “jam the phone lines.” As Barron points out, this was a significant safety problem because, “if there’s a real emergency at a school building, you can’t have your phone lines lighting up.”

The contentious environment also spawned new parent groups in the local community that are connected with state and national far-right networks. One such group has

**Icon created by Ariyanto Deni from Noun Project.

led a campaign calling on parents to opt out of various school initiatives. For example, they have discouraged families from participating in programs that support student wellness, claiming falsely that such programs are tied to non-Western religions. And they have directed parents not to respond to district surveys that have been designed to gather information so that educators can better understand and respond to the health and social welfare needs of students. Speaking of the cultural conflict that has prompted such actions, Barron concludes: “What it has done to this community [has] undermined trust in the most grievous way.”

The heightened contention and diminished social trust have come at a high cost. Barron’s small district has added an additional school resource officer whose salary and benefits total nearly \$100,000. At a cost of \$30,000, she expanded a position in her communications department so that the staff member could dedicate substantial time to challenging misinformation. While this change was

Superintendent Barron believes that culturally divisive conflict has produced both personal and personnel costs. “What people don’t talk about,” she notes, “is how fearful everybody is.” She has noticed that members of her leadership team are on anxiety medicine and while she can’t say “100%” that this is due to the contention, she knows the climate is unhealthy. The administrators on her team are former teachers who “are not versed in conflict” and who “have no desire to fight with parents about these topics.” Even as she acknowledges that some stress comes with leading schools and districts, Barron reasons that those more common pressures are different from being “defamed and slandered and harassed and threatened.” Barron also is concerned with the “morale of teachers” who are the “recipients of some of these crazy emails” and who are “absolutely petrified to engage in conversations with families.” Noting that her district is “experiencing high turnover rates,” she adds: “If you can teach anywhere, why would you choose to teach in a place that’s embroiled in controversy?”

*Superintendent Barron believes that culturally divisive conflict has produced both personal and personnel costs. “What people don’t talk about,” she notes, “is **how fearful everybody is.**”*

expensive, Barron explains that a “PR firm would have cost me much more than that.” The largest hit on the district’s budget has been additional legal costs which are over \$100,000. Of course, some of these expenses are tied to the lawsuit brought by the student. But, more legal counsel has been needed as well to address the growing number of Freedom of Information Act requests which “spans everything from the personal to the ridiculous.” The superintendent and her administrative assistant always try to “tackle” those requests first, but some require additional legal review.

Perhaps the most significant social cost of the conflict is that it has distracted educators from the essential work of enhancing student well-being and learning. Barron relates that issues ranging from “security to legal to DEI” took up more than a quarter of discussion time during her executive team’s regular meetings. Because these “topics dominated,” the educators had much less bandwidth for the challenging work of “really pushing ... the rock up the hill in terms of instructional improvement systems, evaluation, feedback.” Barron worries that attending to conflict means that her leadership team is “not inside of classrooms” and that is how “you’re going to have the biggest impact.” With a deep sense of regret, she concludes, “I do think that’s a real cost.”



THE COSTS OF CONFLICT FOR **LOW**, **MODERATE**, AND **HIGH** CONFLICT DISTRICTS

What costs do districts incur as the result of culturally divisive conflict? In this section, we draw on our superintendents' survey to quantify how much districts experiencing **LOW**, **MODERATE**, and **HIGH** conflict spend addressing this conflict. Of course, all else being equal, costs are lower in smaller districts and higher in larger districts because, for example, there are more schools that need security. To facilitate comparisons, we report all our results for an average size district—one enrolling 10,000 students.

As we report on costs, we consider three different sorts of expenses. First, we assess whether districts incurred direct financial costs, for example by contracting out for additional security, and if so, how much they spent on such services. Second, we explore the indirect costs associated with districts redeploying staff time to address challenges created by culturally divisive conflict; for example, district leadership may have to spend considerable time responding to the spread of misinformation related to district policies. Third, we examine costs (such as the need for new recruitment and training) associated with increased staff turnover created by culturally divisive conflict.

Table 1 shows how categories of costs, which include both direct and indirect expenditures, are distributed for districts reporting different levels of conflict. Direct expenditures are actual new budget lines and contractual services, whereas indirect costs reflect the value of staff time redirected from other activities to responding to conflict, based on the reported number of hours of staff time spent in each of these areas multiplied by the national average salary of school district administrators in the United States in 2024 as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, including fringe benefits. **HIGH** conflict districts had the highest total costs and highest costs for each category, totaling about \$350,981, **MODERATE** conflict districts were about \$271,035, and **LOW** conflict districts were substantially lower at \$101,575. For districts with all levels of conflict, legal expenses comprised the largest area of costs, followed by security and media expenses.

Table 1: Direct and Indirect Expenditures Incurred for a District of 10,000 Students, by Level of Conflict

	Type of Cost	Security 	Media 	Social Media 	Legal 	Community Relations 	School Board Relations 	Gov't Relations 	Other 
LOW Conflict	Direct Cost	\$11,800	\$6,500	\$3,200	\$10,100	\$3,100	\$1,700	\$800	\$200
	Indirect Cost	\$11,259	\$9,296	\$10,474	\$15,577	\$10,956	\$5,016	\$1,597	\$0
MODERATE Conflict	Direct Cost	\$27,600	\$13,300	\$10,800	\$29,300	\$10,400	\$6,300	\$2,300	\$1,500
	Indirect Cost	\$21,774	\$25,482	\$24,416	\$26,773	\$29,650	\$17,229	\$11,022	\$13,189
HIGH Conflict	Direct Cost	\$40,600	\$32,300	\$24,600	\$56,300	\$26,600	\$14,400	\$9,900	\$1,400
	Indirect Cost	\$20,694	\$22,240	\$18,337	\$24,450	\$21,915	\$13,795	\$9,691	\$13,758

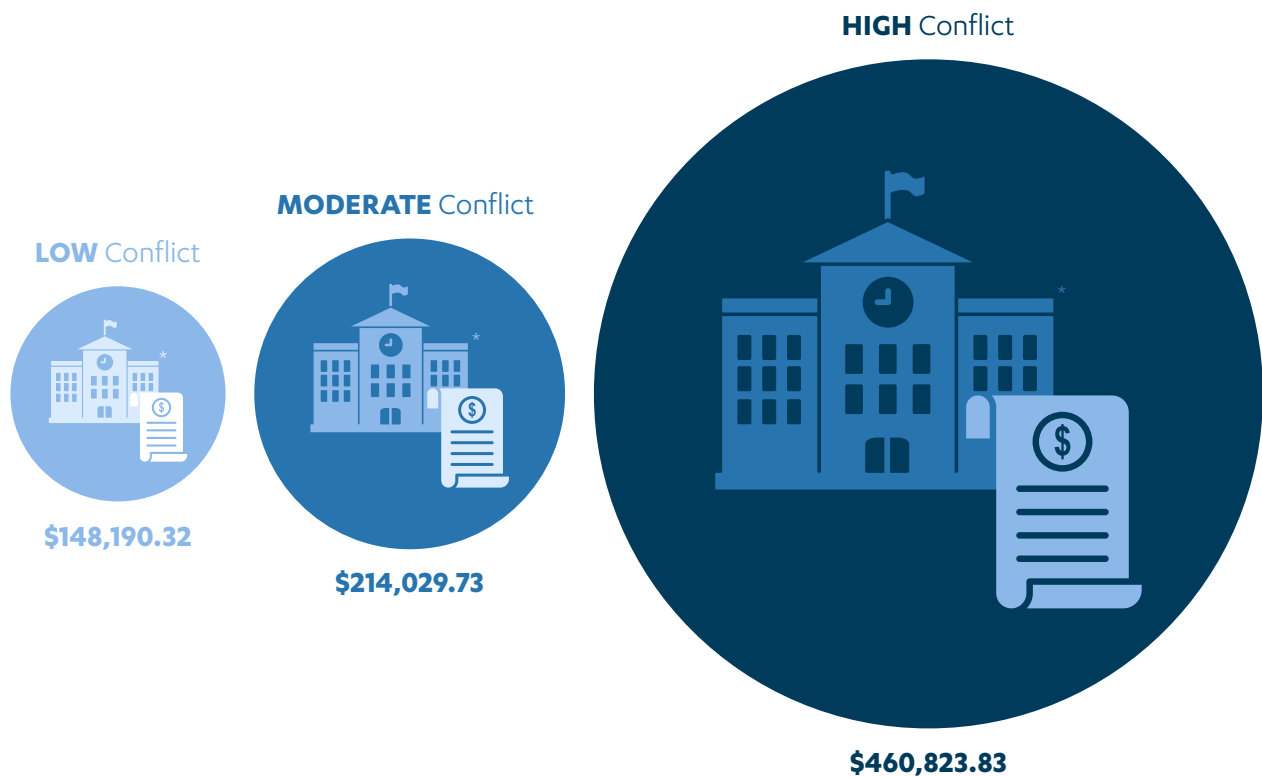
*Icon attributions: Made, kholifah, Articon, waqiahtul mukarromah, Andi wiyanto, Creative Mahira, Secondtoughest, and Nanang A Pratama from Noun Project.

The cost of staff turnover

In our survey, many superintendents 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 due to conflict. Chart 2 displays the average costs of staff turnover in **LOW**, **MODERATE**, and **HIGH** Conflict districts.

Chart 2. Costs Districts Incurred due to Staff Turnover Associated with Conflict, for 10,000 Student District



It is important to note that increased staff turnover in **HIGH** Conflict districts is often tied to what one superintendent in our survey described as “incredible stress on leaders and teachers as they navigate imaginary slights and online drama in the community.” Citing the “demoralizing ... attack on the character of public servants,” a superintendent in Pennsylvania wrote that “the emotional stress and anxiety can be nearly crippling.” A New Jersey superintendent explained, “The negative language bantered about education professionals and our schools is having dire consequences. This is the leading cause of the teacher shortage and burnout/retention issues.” As a superintendent in Wyoming shared with us during her interview, the recent attacks have been particularly hard for educators who have traditionally been respected in their communities. “It’s like the shift from how public schools used to be seen as a positive, a way to serve

every child, a way to bring us together. Now we’re being vilified and that is so hurtful, I think, and that contributes to my staff stress.”

In addition to staff turnover, culturally divisive conflict has undermined staff well-being and increased rates of staff absenteeism. 72% of superintendents in **MODERATE** Conflict districts and 94% of superintendents in **HIGH** Conflict districts indicated that culturally divisive conflict had a negative impact on staff stress and mental health. By contrast, 27% of superintendents in **LOW** Conflict districts reported this problem. Relatedly, 35% of superintendents in **MODERATE** Conflict districts and 69% of superintendents in **HIGH** Conflict districts reported that such conflict had a negative effect on staff absenteeism—compared with only 12% of superintendents in **LOW** Conflict districts.

*Icon attributions: Eskak and Akhmad Sobahus Surur from Noun Project.

Culturally divisive conflict also impacts superintendent well-being, absenteeism, and turnover. In our survey, 50% of superintendents reported that they experienced at least one instance of harassment in the 2023-24 school year. Ten percent of superintendents received threats of violence toward them, and 11% experienced property vandalism. To state the obvious: any level of such violence toward public officials is unacceptable.

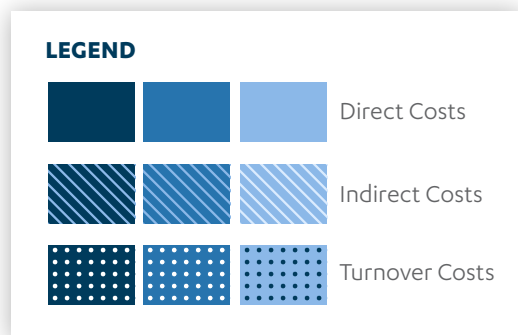
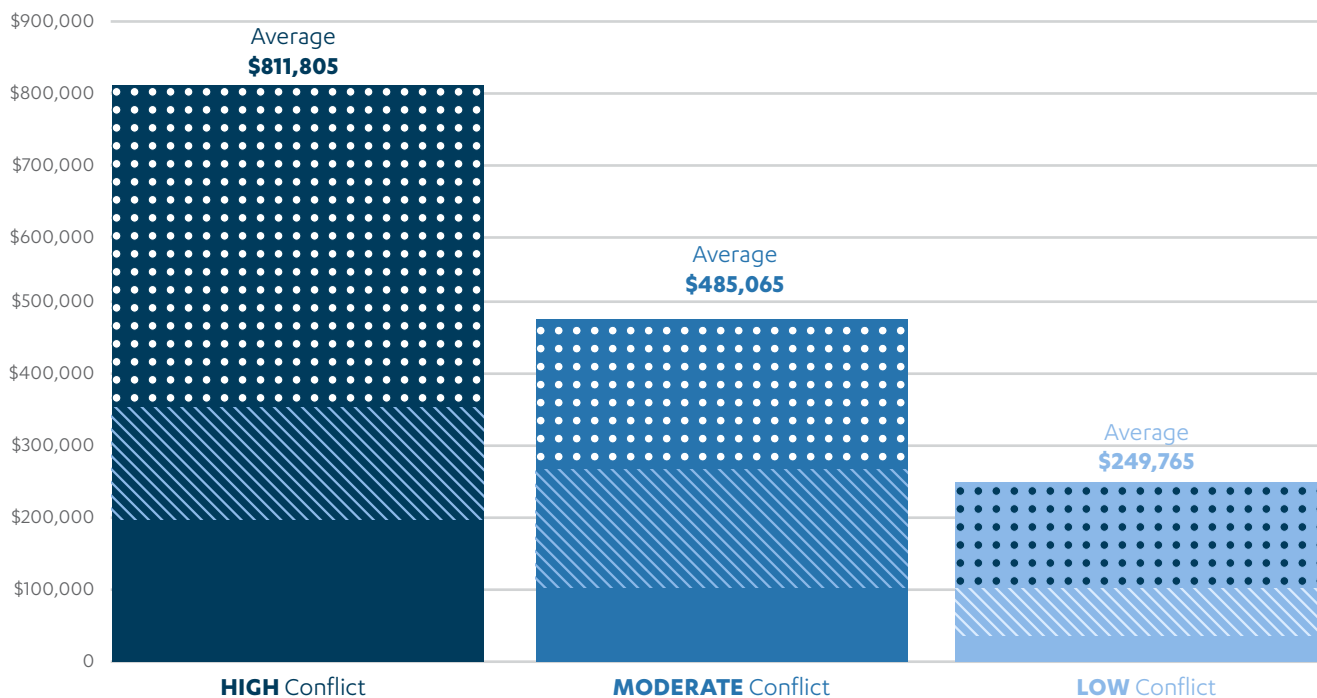
We know from other research that superintendent turnover has increased from 14% to 17% over the last four years. In 2022, a national survey found that the most common reasons superintendents were seeking another position were contentious school board relationships, followed by politics, and stress.⁹ In our survey, we found that among those who have sought out another position in the last year, 42% indicated their decision was related to either school board conflict, stress, and politics. For

example, one superintendent shared that she was seeking a new position due to “political tension, personal agendas and vendettas, [and] schools becoming political hot spots.” An Oregon superintendent shared, “While the persistent conflict has not prevented the district from making progress, constantly battling the conflict is tiresome. Is the grass greener elsewhere as a superintendent or as a building level leader, or is this just the new normal?”

The total costs of conflict

Chart 3 shows the breakdown of types of costs, including direct, indirect, and turnover costs, by level of conflict. For an average size district, the total costs of conflict are substantial. A **HIGH** Conflict district of 10,000 students spends on average \$811,805, a **MODERATE** Conflict district spends on average \$485,065, and a **LOW** Conflict district spends on average \$249,765.

Chart 3. Total Costs Incurred for 10,000 Student District



The cost of culturally divisive conflict across all schools in the United States

We calculated the per-student total costs of conflict to US public schools, inclusive of direct expenditures, indirect costs, and staff turnover costs, by applying the estimated per student costs of approximately \$80 per student for **HIGH** Conflict districts, \$50 per student for **MODERATE** Conflict districts and \$25 per student for **LOW** Conflict districts to the proportions of these districts observed in our sample weighted by enrollment. We then applied those weights to the approximately 49.5 million public school students in the United States.¹⁰ In total, the cost of conflict for the nation's public schools in 2023-24 was approximately \$3.2 billion. Recognizing that some degree of political conflict is inevitable, we also estimate the potential cost savings if **HIGH** and **MODERATE** Conflict districts were able to reduce culturally divisive conflict to the level of **LOW** Conflict districts, yielding \$1.96 billion in savings across the United States.

Decades ago, Illinois Senator Everett Dirksen reportedly said, "A billion here, a billion there, and pretty soon you're talking real money." By any measure, the fiscal costs to US public schools of culturally divisive conflict represents real money. There are many ways that public schools could benefit from these resources. With an additional \$1.96 billion, it would be possible to expand the national Free Breakfast program budget by 40%, ensuring that schools across the country could provide quality and nutritious meals for all students in need.¹¹ Or, such funds could be used to hire an additional counselor or psychologist for every public high school in the United States.¹² Certainly, it could be used to expand access to arts or after-school programs in STEM. The possibilities are nearly endless.

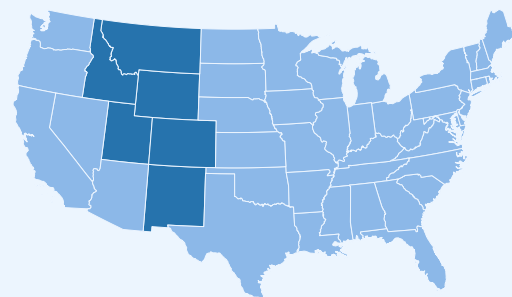


A SUPERINTENDENT'S STORY

"CAUGHT IN THE CROSSHAIRS OF A SOCIETAL WAR"

Rick Bauer is an experienced superintendent in a small Rocky Mountain community that has been home to his family for more than a century. Prior to COVID, he had always received positive reviews for his leadership. But, during the pandemic, "people started to get real mean and nasty." After the health crisis receded, the ongoing stress and anxiety created a "COVID hangover" that was further exacerbated by "far right" activists who targeted public schools with "scare tactics and half-truths." Parents threatened to pull their kids from the school system when they heard that the district had placed "kitty litter boxes" in their bathrooms—a false rumor so widely spread across the country that several national outlets felt compelled to debunk it.¹³ A "right-wing group" sent outside activists to the school libraries with a list of 1,000 books to ban—none of which were owned by the district. Bauer explains that, all of a sudden, we found ourselves "caught in the crosshairs of a societal war."

In the 2023-24 school year, the most fierce community conflict centered on district policies toward transgender students. For several years, Mr. Bauer had worked to ensure that transgender students felt safe in school and supported in their learning. "My job," he explains, "is to make sure every kid, regardless of what they believe and ... who they are ... [is provided with their] right to an education." When a student requested that the school not inform their parents about their gender transition, Bauer followed the advice of his attorney and protected the student's privacy. But a teacher who disagreed with this decision went public with the student's story. Hundreds of people—many whom Bauer had never seen—came to the next school board meeting to express their anger and call for Bauer to be fired. A local talk radio host charged that he was a "liberal outsider" whose goal was to "indoctrinate their children and ... make them become gay and transgender." Bauer relates that community members



**Icon created by Ariyanto Deni from Noun Project.

“verbally accosted me in public” telling him, “You’re gonna go to hell. You never read the Bible.”

Bauer reports that his small district contracted with outside consultants to address a growing array of legal, communications, public relations, and other issues to address growing conflict and contention. These added costs forced the district to divert funds from planned professional development aimed at improving instruction. In addition, district staff as a whole spent more than 40 hours each week on conflict-related issues. The stress of the contentious environment directly led to the departure of five educators, incurring costs of up to \$60,000 for the recruitment and training needed to replace them. Perhaps, the most substantial financial impact of the conflict has been on the public’s declining support for tax levies, leaving Bauer uncertain about whether the district will be able to maintain its current programs.

Bauer explains that, all of a sudden, we found ourselves “caught in the crosshairs of a societal war.”

But even as Bauer worries about the damage done to the district’s budget, he is most concerned about the long-term impact of culturally divisive conflict on students’ learning and the future of public education. He worries that teachers, fearing community backlash, have become wary of addressing certain important curricular areas, for example in health and social studies. More generally, it is becoming more difficult for educators to foster critical or creative thinking. “We are starting to get pushback when we ask kids to form their opinion,” he explains. We’ve had parents that ... say, ‘I will teach my kid what to think. You won’t. They don’t need to form their own opinion.’”

For Bauer, such pressures are a sign of a broader shift in his state from “common sense moderate” approaches toward more extreme education policies. “We are going to see [school] vouchers. We are going to see guns in school—that you only have to have a concealed carry [license] to pack a gun, and we cannot keep staff members from packing guns. You are going to see bans on books. ... We will probably have to put the 10 Commandments up. ... We are right at ground zero.”

The broad and fundamental costs to public education

Fiscal impacts are only part of the story of how public schools have been impacted by culturally divisive conflict. While our report focuses on the fiscal costs, there are broader costs as well. Superintendents often addressed the costs associated with lost opportunities to improve learning and enhance student well-being. A superintendent in Illinois wrote about the “diversion of energy and focus away from [the] educational process.” Another superintendent from Michigan worried about “how much politics have stalled school improvement initiatives” due to “time spent on these discussions and preparing for how to manage them.” Similarly, a superintendent in Kentucky told us: “The politicization of public schools that began during the pandemic has

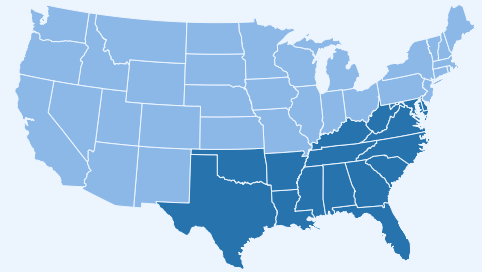
changed our work dramatically. Much more time must be spent dealing with misinformation and angry individuals. This is time that would be better spent on supporting teaching and learning.”

And there may well be sizable societal costs as well. Writing in response to our survey’s open-ended question, a New York superintendent told us: “The current social and political divisiveness in this country has spread to all things and severely impacts respect and trust in and between people [and] government institutions. ... The general ‘we are all in this together’ support system is coming apart. I fear ... the lack of civility is leading to general unrest in this country. ... The undermining of public trust and government operations is being intentionally inflicted on our population and many people do not realize the long-term effects this will have on our nation.”



A SUPERINTENDENT'S STORY

“SCHOOLS ARE SUPPOSED TO BE ... A PLACE FOR ALL”



Not all superintendents we interviewed were overwhelmed by the costs of conflict. Indeed, one superintendent, Gabriel Crespi, shared an account of how his Southern school district has thrived, even as conflict simmers beyond its borders. This is a story of what may be gained when prevailing political conditions allow educational leaders to join together with district staff and community partners and advance shared commitments to peaceful resolution of conflicts, respectful and evidence-based dialogue, and treating fellow community members with dignity.

Dr. Crespi believes that there is a certain responsibility that comes with “the power and voice and the position” of the superintendency: “To let our children know, and our parents know, and our staff know ... that schools are supposed to be ... a place for all ...[to] feel safe and comfortable and welcome, and a part of a community.” He is clear about his values: “What I am really proud of and I love,” he explains, is the “diversity of our school system.”

These values served as a north star when state leaders pressured districts to adopt policies that Dr. Crespi believes would make transgender students “feel excluded” and “targeted” for discrimination. With strong backing from his school board, he issued a public statement declaring that he and the district stand with the LGBTQ+ community, that transgender and non-binary students would continue to be valued and supported, and that the district would not adopt the state guidelines. Dr. Crespi acknowledges that this statement led to some threats against him from people outside the district. But, what he remembers more clearly are the calls from colleagues telling him, “Thank you for saying that, because we can’t say that. Our board wouldn’t want us to or wouldn’t let

us.” He recalls too that a staff member told him, “No one knows I’m transgender. ... I was very worried when I saw what was coming out of the Governor’s office, and now, hearing you say that, I was able to come to work.” And he holds closely a note from a LGBTQ+ student who previously had experienced severe depression that said, “Thank you for valuing me.”

The public commitment to diversity has brought new energy and resources to the district. Social studies teachers feel empowered to introduce thoughtful and challenging lessons on important social issues, knowing that district leaders will “have your back.” And, even as surrounding districts experience staff shortages, Dr. Crespi reports that more and more skilled people are applying to work in his district. He has encountered new staff members “who came to us from other localities in [the state], because they had heard [about our work and seen] our diversity, equity and inclusion website and our equity plan.” Dr. Crespi concludes: “Having those people here, good educators who are in it for the right reason, that adds value.”

“schools are supposed to be ... a place for all ...[to] feel safe and comfortable and welcome, and a part of a community.”

**Icon created by Ariyanto Deni from Noun Project.



CONCLUSION

Our findings are clear. Many (though not all) school districts are being forced to respond to culturally divisive conflict. Indeed, 38% of school districts are experiencing **MODERATE** levels of culturally divisive conflict, and 28%—like those districts run by Steven Machi—are experiencing **HIGH** levels of conflict. In response, these districts must allocate resources for increased security, communications efforts to correct misinformation, legal fees and a host of other expenses and staff time. On average, a school district serving 10,000 students and experiencing **HIGH** levels of culturally divisive conflict is spending \$812,000— funds that could otherwise be spent enriching students’ education. If this district’s level of conflict decreased to a **LOW** level of conflict, the district would save roughly \$562,000. And, in addition, such a district would experience far lower levels of stress among students and staff.

What to do? To be sure, there is no silver bullet. Part of the challenge, as pointed out by many of the superintendents with whom we spoke, is that the drivers of culturally divisive conflict are not rooted in schools, but in broader societal dynamics and incentives. As a result, a small number of active individuals on social media or at school board meetings can drive conflict framed by misinformation and various threats. These superintendents also told us that the election of one or two new school board members who are conflict entrepreneurs can dramatically shift dynamics. And, unfortunately, some agents of disruption believe that they stand to gain political advantage by fostering culturally divisive conflict in schools. As Steve Bannon explained the political strategy behind the Republican party’s focus on education in spring 2021, “Hey, this is how we are going to win... 50 [Congressional] seats.”¹⁴

Many superintendents we spoke with told us that it is vital for educational leaders and for the broader public to work to diminish the opportunities for conflict entrepreneurs to disrupt and distract and gain power—in school board meetings and elsewhere. Such efforts would not prevent evidence-based or value-based disagreements regarding school policies. Disagreement is appropriate and to be expected in diverse democracies. But rejecting this small number of conflict entrepreneurs would help ensure that community members communicate their disagreements in a manner consistent with democratic principles. This means upholding norms of respect, evidence based reasoning, and civil deliberation that embraces the well being and dignity of all. Such behavior would save a great deal of money that could then be spent to support our schools. In addition, modeling this behavior would also provide students with a powerful lesson about how those who think differently than one another can still work together on one of society’s most important endeavors: educating the next generation.

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