



Navigating Divisive Conversations and Preventing District Flashpoints

A Framework for Creating Order
in Today's Complex Environment

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3 Questions We'll Answer Today



What is different about today's flashpoints?
Why does this matter for district leaders?



How can district leaders learn from comparable professions to reduce flashpoints response time?



What strategies can district leadership teams apply to expedite flashpoint response or prevent escalation?

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Superintendents Battered After 2+ Years in the Spotlight


The Grim Profile of a Superintendent in 2022




15% increase in hours worked per week



42% have been verbally harassed by community members this year



60% report stress has negatively affected their physical health



46% are considering or planning to leave their role within the next 2-3 years

“

“This year has chipped away at my inspiration.

That might be okay if I had a different job, but for the superintendency, that’s not okay.”

Superintendent
East Coast School District

”

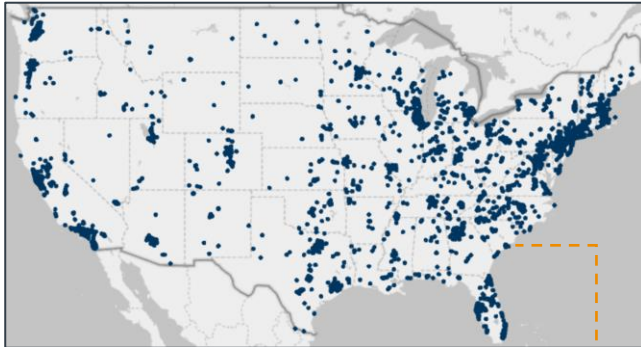
Top Reason for Superintendent Stress: "Flashpoints"

flash-point | *noun*

1 : a controversy causing disturbance in the district due to public activism, criticism, or reputational damage

Superintendents Across the Nation Plagued with Flashpoint Stress

*Cato Institute Public School Battle Map*¹ (2012-2022)



80%

of superintendents agree **managing politically divisive conversations** is the most challenging aspect of their role today

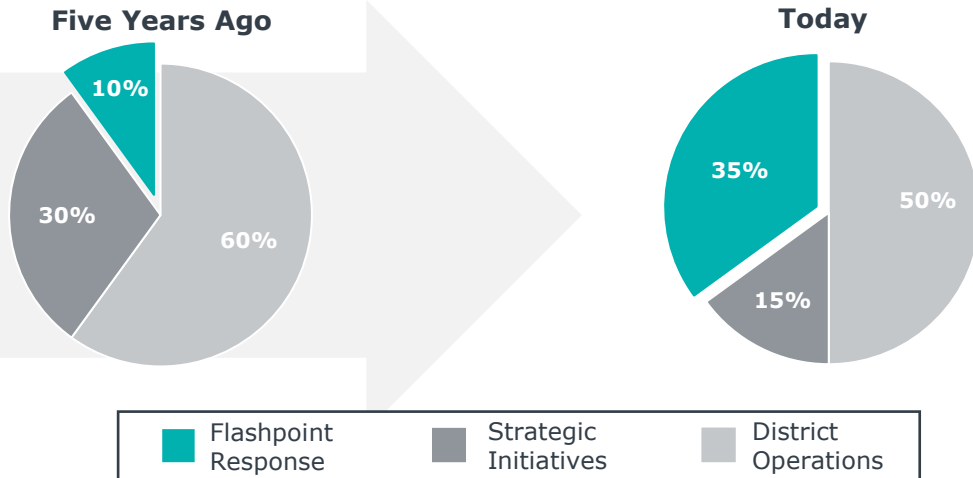
3,041 distinct flashpoints reported in online news sources

1) Recreated and condensed for presentation

Flashpoints Take Time and Focus Away from Strategy

Time Spent Managing Flashpoints Triples in Five Years

n = 24



“15 of the 20 items on my to-do list have to do with a response to public criticism. I have no time to actually do my job, which is to impact students.”

*Assistant Superintendent of Strategic Planning
Midwest School District*

Focus on Flashpoints Distracts from Student Learning

"The Loudon County Effect"



5%

of a year's progress lost in math on average for students in districts experiencing cultural flashpoints

3-4x

larger academic decline for districts experiencing flashpoints centered on **race and human origins**



Effects on academic performance still visible **4 years later**

Cost of Distractions Compounded by Current Context



Growing teacher and staff shortages



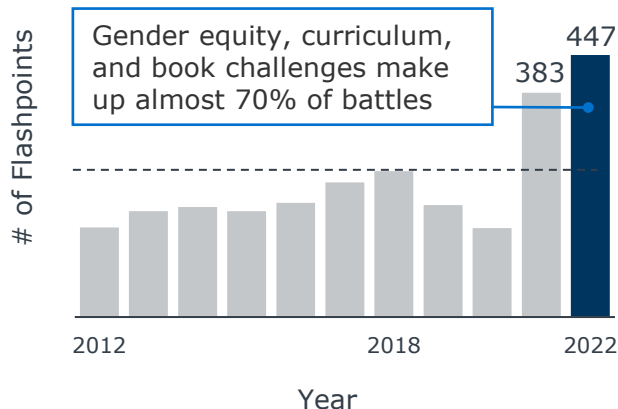
District leaders exhausted and under-supported



Teacher and student mental health at all-time lows

Unfortunately, Number of Flashpoints Projected to Rise

Flashpoints per year across the US
2012 to 2022 (Projected)



Education at the Center of Local Politics

35+

States with "Parental Rights" and "Curriculum Transparency" legislation

25%

Of voters say education is the most important voting issue



Politicians continue to rely on controversy in public education to drive campaigns

“ We used to have two to four people attend board meetings; at my last board meeting, we had 110 in person and 90 over Zoom.”

Superintendent, Midwest School District

Today's Flashpoints Are Complex and Multi-Layered

Example of What Lies Beneath Today's Flashpoints¹



Rhode Island parents enraged at school board for removing honors classes in 'equity obsession'

A local resident, said, 'Equity' has become an unhealthy obsession, and parents are seeing the impact.'

Surface-level incident



Strong moral or religious beliefs



Declining community trust



Virality of social media, GroupThink, bandwagoning



Involvement of the press



Contentious political environment

1) Not an exhaustive list; examples of the 5 most common drivers of flashpoints across the nation

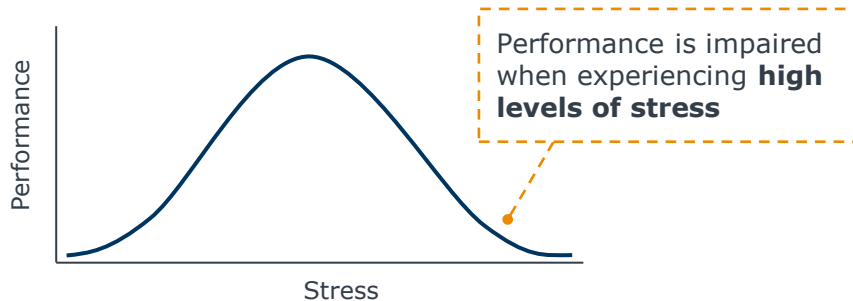
Tackling Multi-Layered Problems Causes Stress and Paralysis

“**Decision fatigue with this job is very real.** I’m making mistakes that otherwise I would have caught – like choosing the wrong word in a tweet. And now I have to clean that mess up.”

*Superintendent,
Midwestern School District*

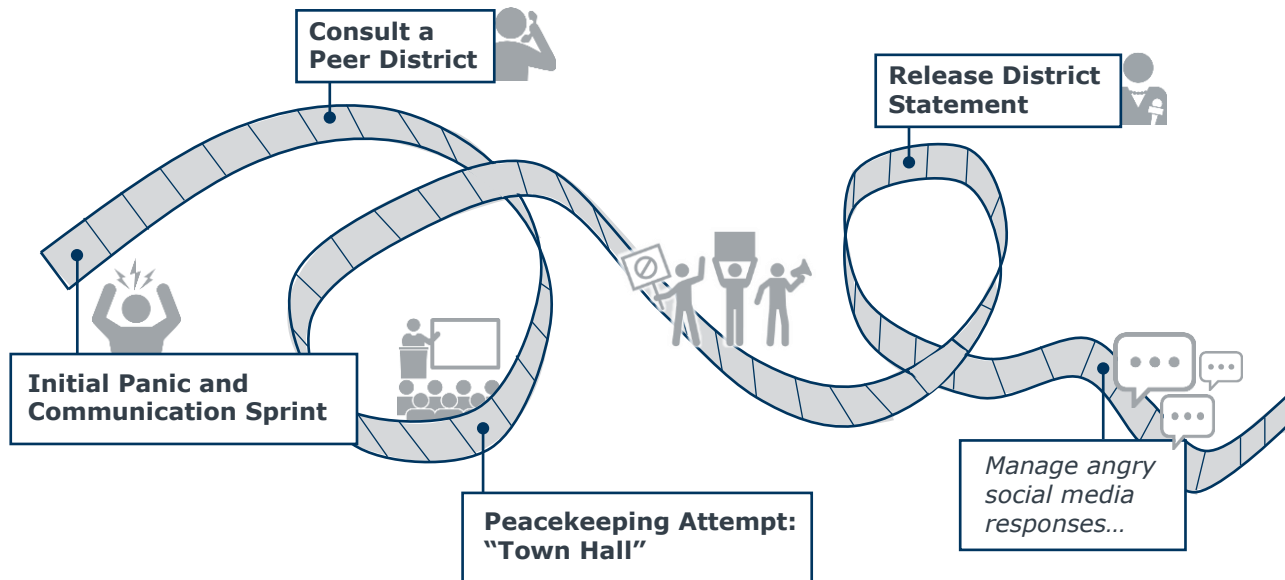
Too Much Stress Leads to Lower Cognitive Performance

The Yerkes-Dodson Law



Flashpoints Spiral, Drag on with Districts' Current Approach

► **Flashpoint Example:** A parent's tweet accusing a teacher of racism goes viral.



There Has to Be a Better Way

“

I'm constantly spinning my wheels. There has to be another district who's gone through this before – but every time I ask, it seems like we're all in the same storm.”

*Superintendent
Midwestern School District*

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High-Stress Occupations with Problem-Solving Solutions

Management Professionals that Excel in Chaos and Complexity



First Responders, EMTs, Trauma Doctors

93



Military Commanders, Explosives Engineers

96



Search and Rescue Workers

99



Crisis Management/ PR Consultants

90



Air Traffic Control Operators

91

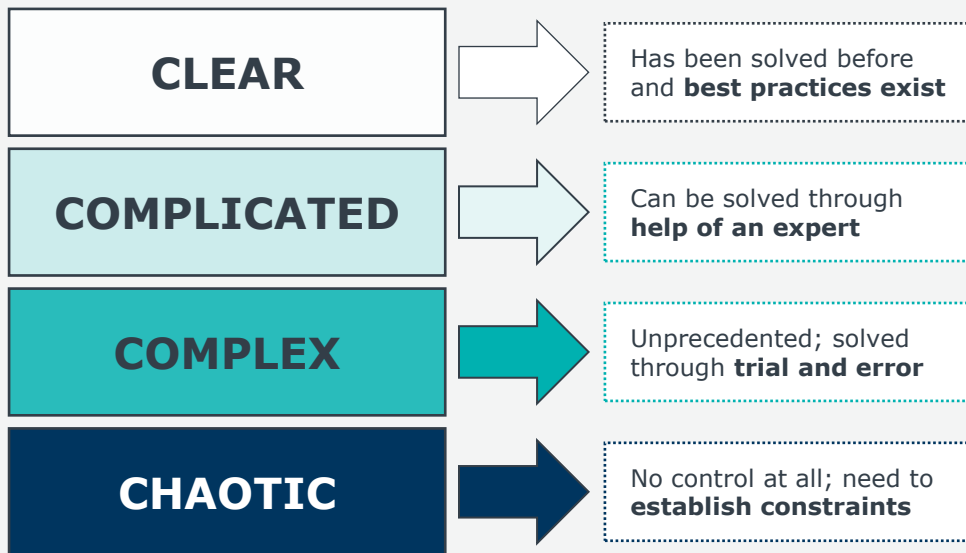
Stress Tolerance Score

Cynefin Prioritizes Solution Strategies to Avoid Paralysis



Cynefin *kuh-NEH-vin* | noun

- 1 : A problem-solving framework that sorts problems into **four domains** and leads executives to solutions that work best



Cynefin Prioritizes Solution Strategies to Avoid Paralysis

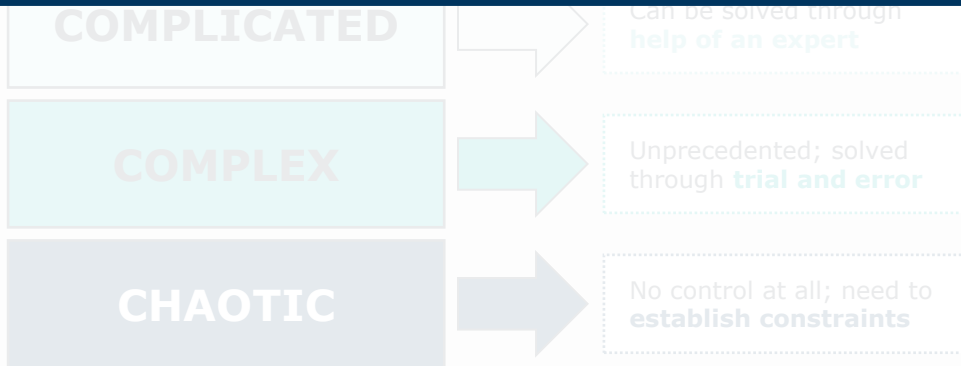


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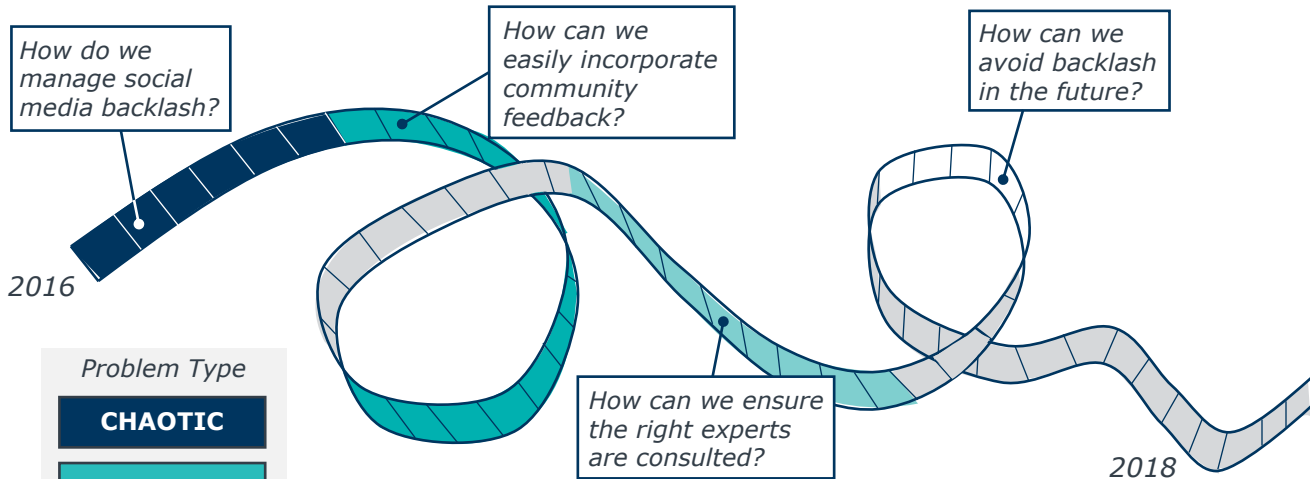
How do I know what kind of flashpoint we're facing?



A Cynefin Case Study: North Shore School District



Flashpoint: In 2016, severe community backlash on social media caused a \$200M referendum ballot initiative to fail.



Problem Type

- CHAOTIC**
- COMPLEX**
- COMPLICATED
- CLEAR



2 years

of inaction and ineffective district response

North Shore SD Significantly Reduces Response Time



A New Approach: In 2018, Superintendent Mike Lubefeld, his Board, and the leadership team applied strategies optimized for each type of problem they faced to rebuild community trust in a fraction of the time.



Solution Type

CHAOTIC

COMPLEX

COMPLICATED

CLEAR



5 months

from first new strategy to **ballot passing**

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6 Strategies to Address Flashpoints Faster

		<u>STRATEGIES</u>
CLEAR	<i>Has been solved before and best practices exist</i>	1. Triage “Stoplight” 2. Flashpoint Response Checklist
COMPLICATED	<i>Can be solved through help of an expert</i>	3. Peer-Informed Risk Register 4. Rapid Response Teams
COMPLEX	<i>Unprecedented; solved through trial and error</i>	5. Engaged Parents Toolbox
CHAOTIC	<i>No control at all; need to establish constraints</i>	6. Large Group Constraints

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Should We Respond?



Respond

“As a community leader, I'd rather discuss openly on whatever the political issue may be. We're not a political organization, but politics still enters our schools.”



What is the Superintendent's Responsibility?

Do Not Respond

“It's not the district's job to take a political stance on any non-education issue, but to equip our students with the critical thinking that they may do so independently.”

Superintendents Struggle to Determine When to Comment



Political
Elections



International
Incidents



Local
Incidents



Government
Policies and Laws



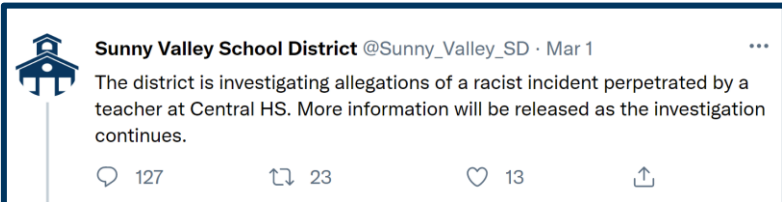
“Is It a Green, Yellow, or Red Zone?”

Simplify Decision Making for District Statements

	Impact	Flashpoint Topic Examples
GREEN ZONE <i>Mission Critical</i>	Direct impact on students and educational mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• District finances and administration• Student health and safety• Curriculum• Student DEIJ issues
YELLOW ZONE <i>Mission Indirect</i>	Indirect impact on students/staff, but not mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• National DEIJ issues• Religious events• Pop culture
RED ZONE <i>Mission Unrelated</i>	Unrelated to educational mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Political events• State and federal policies not related to the district, e.g., abortion rights, immigration policy

One Misfire Can Escalate into a Battle

A Single Social Media Misstep Floods a District in Public Response

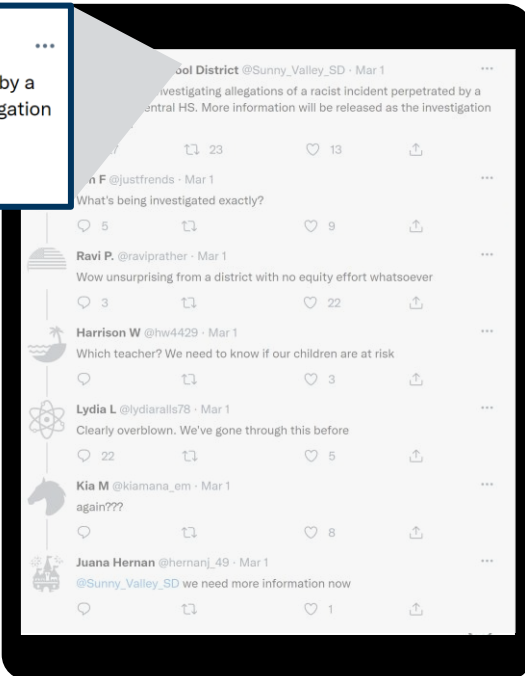


Sunny Valley School District @Sunny_Valley_SD · Mar 1

The district is investigating allegations of a racist incident perpetrated by a teacher at Central HS. More information will be released as the investigation continues.

127 replies, 23 retweets, 13 likes

- Vague message results in community unrest
- Teachers taken by surprise and under pressure to respond
- Local media covers story with incomplete information



...ool District @Sunny_Valley_SD · Mar 1

...vestigating allegations of a racist incident perpetrated by a ...entral HS. More information will be released as the investigation

...n F @justfriends · Mar 1

What's being investigated exactly?

5 replies, 9 likes

Ravi P. @raviprathar · Mar 1

Wow unsurprising from a district with no equity effort whatsoever

3 replies, 22 likes

Harrison W @hw4429 · Mar 1

Which teacher? We need to know if our children are at risk

3 replies, 3 likes

Lydia L @lydiarails78 · Mar 1

Clearly overblown. We've gone through this before

22 replies, 5 likes

Kia M @kiamana_em · Mar 1

again???

8 replies, 8 likes

Juana Hernan @hernanj_49 · Mar 1

@Sunny_Valley_SD we need more information now

1 reply, 1 like



The Overlooked Secret to Avoiding Mistakes

Costly Mistakes Are Rare in Many Highly Skilled Fields...

Air Travel:



1 in 29.4 million
likelihood of disaster

Construction:



0.0002%
likelihood of disaster

Surgery:



50% of deaths during surgery are **preventable**



Dr. Atul Gawande Explores the Promise of Checklists in the Surgery Room



↓ 36% reduction in surgery-related complications

↓ 47% reduction in surgery-related deaths



3 Requirements of a Reliable Checklist



Concise: 5-9 "critical" items and less than 60 seconds to complete



Field tested and revised regularly



Defines when to pause (i.e., before releasing a statement over social media)



Deploy EAB's Checklist Before Releasing a Statement

Flashpoint Statement Checklist

- 1 Has **legal** counsel been consulted?
- 2 Does your statement only include **factual** information, not speculation?
- 3 Does your statement speak to the **concerns** of those directly affected?
- 4 Does your statement reference tangible **action(s)** taken by the district?
- 5 Is the chosen **messenger(s)** appropriate for the severity of this flashpoint?
- 6 Are chosen **distribution channels** a good match for the intended audience?
- 7 Do your internal communications on this topic pass the **"front page" test**?
- 8 Has a **holding statement** been released within 30 minutes of the incident?

6 Strategies to Address Flashpoints Faster



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Flashpoints Are Variable and Unexpected...

...But Effective Responses Are Not

“

Every time there's a controversy in the district, I'm scrambling to pull together past statements, and I'm Googling our peer districts to find what they're saying.”

Communications Director



What did we say last time?



What did we say last time?



Is this part of a larger national trend?



What resources should we share?



Should the superintendent comment?

“

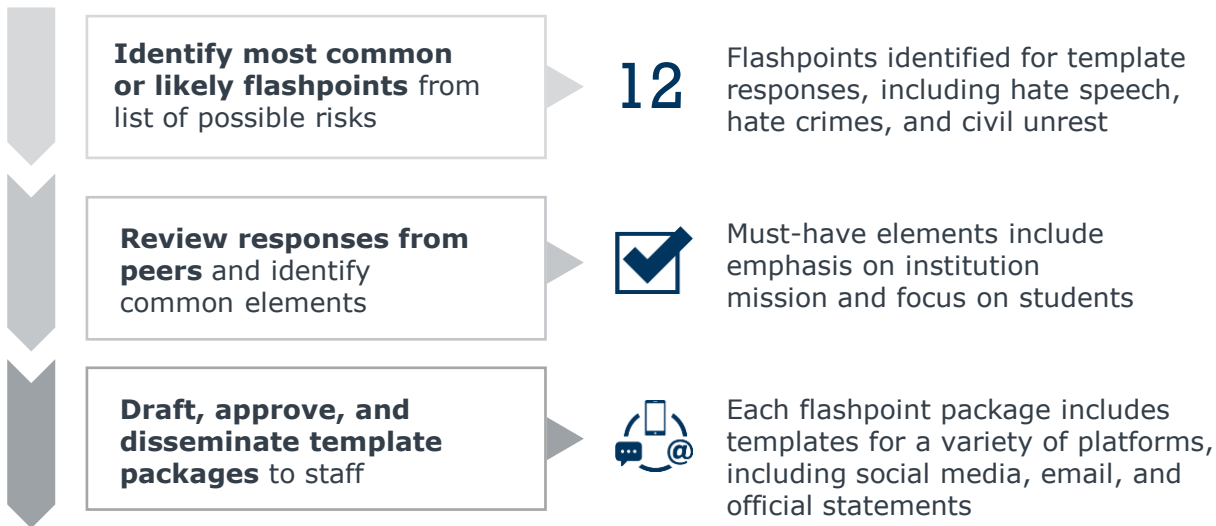
Even if we haven't had an incident in the district yet, there's no reason we couldn't be next. **What can we learn from the district down the road** that just had an incident in the news?

Superintendent



“If It Happens Once, It’s Going to Happen Again”

Templatize Flashpoint Responses to Expedite Initial Response Times






PennState

30 min.

Time from incident to Penn State’s initial response across platforms

Cross-Check Your Flashpoint Response with Peer Districts

IDENTIFY	VERIFY	CODIFY
 Conduct District-Wide Analysis <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Start with EAB's template of common risks• Use meetings or online surveys to source, surface additional risks to include	 Collaborate to Verify, Discover Risks <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collect and compare peer districts' risk registers• Remove risks that do not apply to your district• Consider risks that may have been overlooked	 Build/Update Risk Register <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use risks identified from meetings and peers to build district's register• Review, refresh risk register regularly to include new risks



Find EAB's template of common flashpoint risks for K-12 districts at eab.com

How to Assemble a Rapid Response Team

STEP 1



Determine Jobs to Be Done

Consider:

- Decision making
- Communication
- Operations

STEP 2



Determine Best-Fit Personnel

Consider:

- Who would best perform those functions?
- How would they interact with the core leadership team?

STEP 3



Determine Necessary Knowledge

Consider:

- Which types of experts need to be consulted?
- Who should be on speed dial?

Next Questions

Under what criteria will the team be activated?

How will you educate the team (and other stakeholders)?

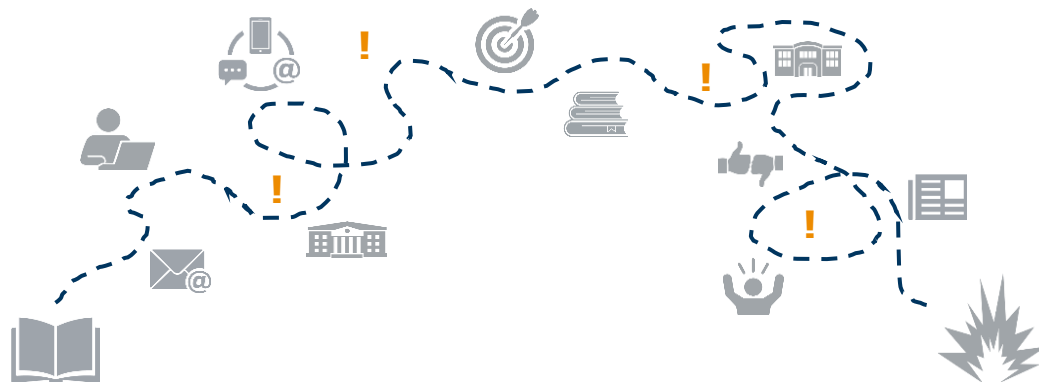
What internal/external communication channels will be standardized?

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Parents: The Most Complex Flashpoint Layer

How One Parent Transformed a Personal Grievance into National Controversy



! Parent sees their child is reading a schoolbook about a transgender child

! Unsatisfied with response, parent creates Facebook group accusing district of indoctrination

! Parent group, now supported by local political figure, begins lobbying district for parent-driven school library overhaul

! Parents go to state and national media, villainizing the district and calling for greater parental role in library book selection



Four Challenges Fuel Parent-Driven Flashpoints

How to Build More Productive Partnerships with Parents

1 **Lack of Clear Expectations for Parent Behavior**

Recommendation
Formalize Expectations for Parents

2 **Limited Ability to Influence and Intervene with Parents**

Recommendation
Leverage Peer Credibility to Influence Parent Behavior

3 **Misperceptions that Classroom Teaching Indoctrinates Students**

Recommendation
Increase Transparency About Classroom Instruction

4 **Parents Underprepared to Talk about Controversial Topics**

Recommendation
Equip Parents to Continue the Conversation at Home

Current Parent Strategy is “Vague, Reactive, and Informal”

Common Communication of Expectations for Parents...

...Leave Significant Room for Improvement



Mission Statement

Existing statements don't directly connect to **parent** behavior



Code of Conduct

Document language sets low bar; disciplinary **consequences rarely enforced**



Disciplinary Meeting with Principals

Addressing behavioral problems is **reactive, rather than proactive**



None of the Above?

No expectations for parents



Set Clear Expectations for Parent Conduct

Dupont High School's¹ Parent Statement of Shared Expectations

As parents in the Dupont community, we are dedicated to seeking the best for our children with civility and compassion, and we affirm the following:

Respect & Responsibility: We lead by example at all Dupont Academic, Athletic, and Arts Events and agree to support our students with positive encouragement, treat those within and outside our school community with respect, represent Dupont in a dignified way, and communicate in a respectful manner.

Interacting with Teachers and Staff: We commit to interact and communicate with teachers and staff with dignity, understanding we all seek the common good for our children.

School Parent Association Proactively Addresses Behavior

- 1 **Parent-Driven**
- 2 **Proactive**
- 3 **Tied to School Values**
- 4 **Communicated Widely to Parents**

1) Anonymized high school.



Give Parents an Active Role in Building Culture

Parent Reps Mediate Problem Behavior

“

“So many of our small conflicts stem from parking lot conversations and informal interactions like that. **We just aren't always there** to redirect the conversation.”

Middle School Principal

”

Bear Creek School's Parent Rep System: How It Works



Specially Trained Parents Serve as Reps

Reps receive district-level administered training on how to have constructive dialogue in school settings (e.g., parking lot)



Parent Reps Keep Pulse on Community

Parent reps meet regularly with school parent rep coordinator and the principal



Reps Mediate & Raise Issues to Principal

Reps mediate or intervene in parent misunderstandings and elevate emerging issues to the principal

Parent Reps Are Distinct from Other Parent Roles



Dedicated to improving discourse and building positive culture



Not responsible for fundraising or classroom activities



Formal liaison between parents and administrators



Misperceptions about Teaching Fuel Tensions

Rosy Retrospection Overrides Today's Instructional Best Practices

Parents Remember or Imagine Learning a Certain Way...



Teachers use lectures and whole-group instruction



Students are taught from one perspective and memorize facts



Students learn primarily from textbooks



...But In Most of Our Classrooms, Learning Has Evolved



Teachers use interactive learning methods, often acting as facilitator



Students encouraged to think critically and consider multiple perspectives



Lessons use a wide range of media to engage with the topic

Proactively Show Parents Teaching Has Changed



Key Ingredients for Effective Parent Classroom Experience

Real Content

Class Topics Borrowed from Curricula

Select topics that have sparked controversy before among parents, on topics such as slavery and justice.

Benefits

- Confronts potential misperceptions head-on
- Parents learn and discuss a topic that will be covered in class

Immersive Experience

Parents Experience Class through the Eyes of a Student

Provide a discussion-based learning experience where parents can see the diversity of perspectives represented in assigned readings.

Benefits

- Parents better understand the role of teachers in the classroom
- Highlights viewpoint diversity

Convenient Offerings

Easy to Participate

Offer classes in the evenings during select parent association meetings. Provide a live-stream viewing option.

Benefits

- Reaches parents when they are already on campus; or allows them to participate from anywhere through the live-stream

Navigating Current Climate Is Not Easy for Parents

Controversial, Nuanced—and Pervasive topics in the News

Racial Reckoning

Conflict in Ukraine

COVID-19 Vaccines and Masking

Abortion

State and Local Elections

Unrest over Police Violence

#MeToo

Climate Change

It's a Tough Time to Be a Parent!



Children see controversial issues in the news and on social media every day



Children are looking to parents to help process political issues



Parents are feeling underprepared to talk to their children about difficult topics

Latin School Helps Parents¹ Continue the Conversation

LATIN LEARNING TOGETHER

Program Purpose

Education program for parents to learn about, discuss, and reflect on topics related to those students are discussing in school

How It Works

- ✓ Diversity coordinator works with parent association to **select topics spiking in the school community**
- ✓ 2-hour **guided discussion** facilitated by diversity coordinator
- ✓ Sessions centered around **shared text or video on topic**, so everyone begins with equal knowledge
- ✓ Past topics include **cross-cultural communication and talking to your children about politics**

Program Benefits



Parents learn, reflect, and ask questions about complex contemporary topics



Parents feel equipped to continue classroom conversations at home with their children

1) Latin School welcomes parents and adult family members to participate. References to "parents" on this slide are intended to be inclusive of parents and families.

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*Has been solved before and **best practices exist***

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*Can be solved through **help of an expert***

COMPLEX

*Unprecedented; solved through **trial and error***

CHAOTIC

*No control at all; need to **establish constraints***

STRATEGIES

6. Large Group Constraints

From Sleepy Board Meetings to Chaotic Battlegrounds ⁴⁵

3 Reasons Board Meetings Have Gone From Straightforward to Chaotic



Nationalization of local politics



Lack of news coverage and declining knowledge of district operations



Gravitation toward unfiltered communication on social media





The Art of Applying Constraints to Avoid Chaos

Risk for Chaos



Public comment



Media presence



Police/security interference



Political controversy

Appropriate Constraints

Standardize a process for allocating time and facilitating public comment

Invite reporters to interview district leaders after the meeting and prepare statements in advance

Define “disruption” prior to the meeting to avoid unnecessary police/security involvement

Do not engage in emotional debate; refer to district strategic plan and use student-first language

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Argument in Brief

1 Problem

- ▶ Today, district leaders are spending 3x more time responding to flashpoints than 5 to 10 years ago, taking away time from strategic initiatives and directly impacting student learning.
- ▶ Today's flashpoints are complex, multi-layered controversies that push executive functioning to its limits. As a result, district flashpoint response is dragged on, leaders feel overwhelmed, and significant time is wasted.

2 Recommendation

- ▶ District leaders can learn from a decision-making framework employed by other high-stress professions when managing the complexity of today's environment. The Cynefin framework helps district leaders quickly diagnose an optimal solution strategy for the different types of problems that comprise flashpoints today.
- ▶ EAB identified 6 of the most common problems district leaders face when mitigating flashpoint risk and used the Cynefin framework to diagnose the optimal solution strategy for each.

3 Strategies

- ▶ **Use these strategies to reduce wasted time when responding to future flashpoints:**

CLEAR	<i>Do we respond? What comprises a response?</i>	1. Triage "Stoplight" 2. Flashpoint Response Checklist
COMPLICATED	<i>Who can we call for help? What have other districts done?</i>	3. Peer-Informed Risk Register 4. Rapid Response Teams
COMPLEX	<i>How can I find what works best for <u>our</u> district?</i>	5. Engaged Parents Toolbox
CHAOTIC	<i>How can we stabilize a situation that's out of control?</i>	6. Large Group Constraints