

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

5


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 Map¹ (2012-2022)



80%

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

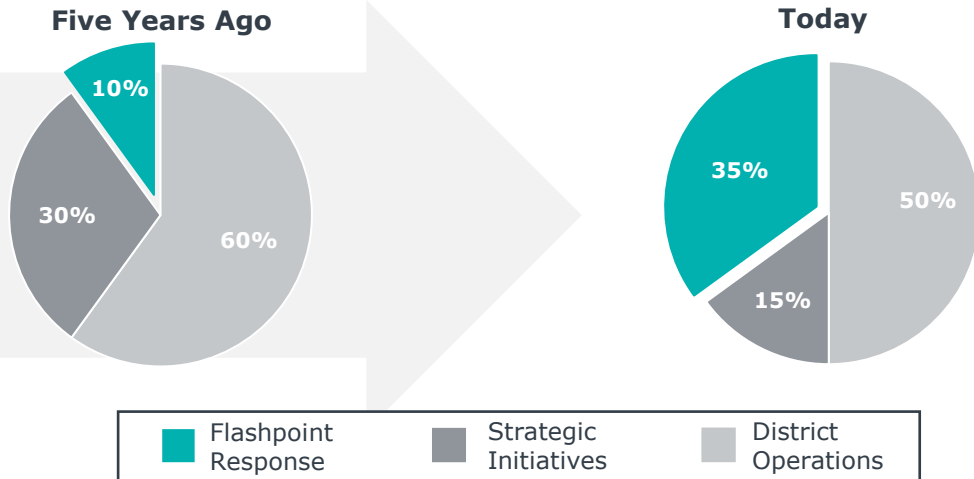
3,129 distinct flashpoints
reported in online news sources

1) Recreated and condensed for presentation

Flashpoints Take Time and Focus Away from Strategy

Time Spent Managing Flashpoints Triples in Five Years

$n = 24$

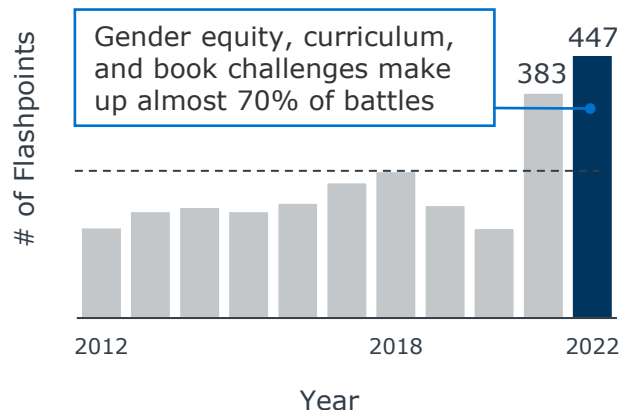


“15 of the 20 items on my to-do list have to do with a response to public criticism. I have no time to actually do my job, which is to impact students.”

*Assistant Superintendent of Strategic Planning
Midwest School District*

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

Quick Poll:



Which of the following topics has your district experienced as a **flashpoint** in the past year?
Select all that apply.

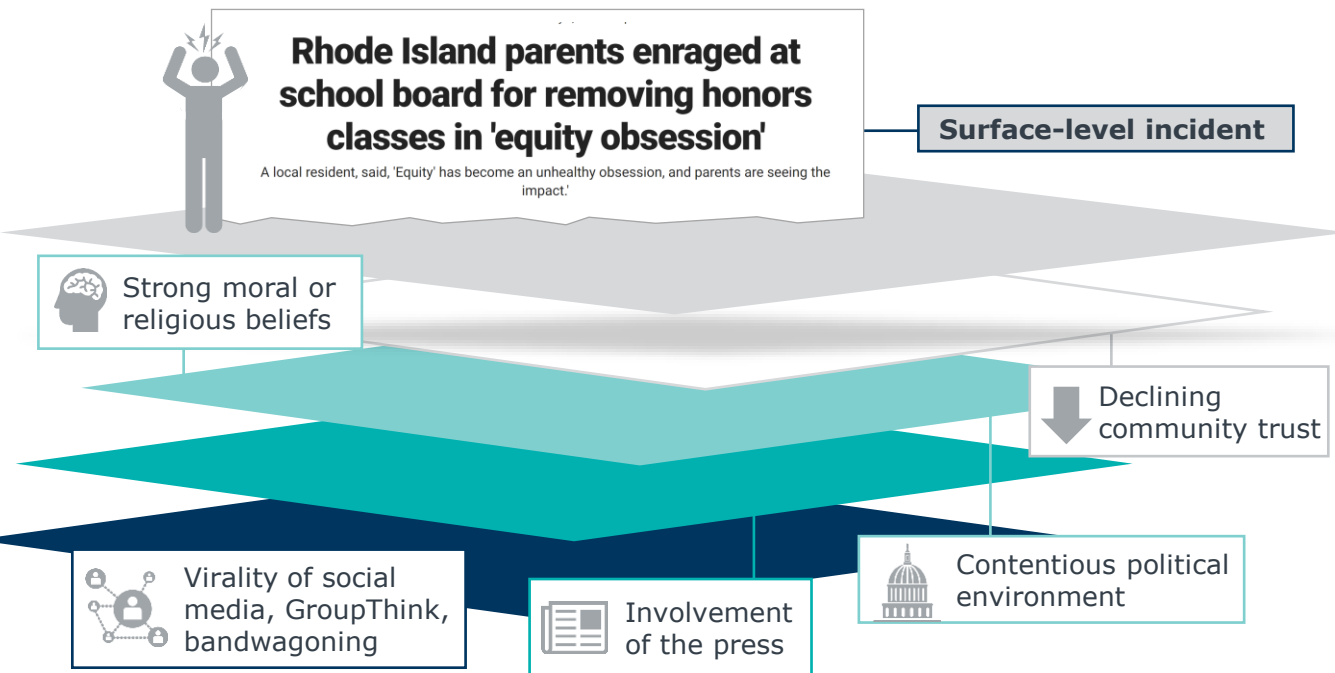
- a) "Parent's rights" legislation
- b) Curriculum/book challenge
- c) Debate over social-emotional learning
- d) Misinformation about district operations spread on social media
- e) Policies targeting conversations on race, gender, or sexuality in the classroom
- f) Other



Today's Flashpoints Are Complex and Multi-Layered

10

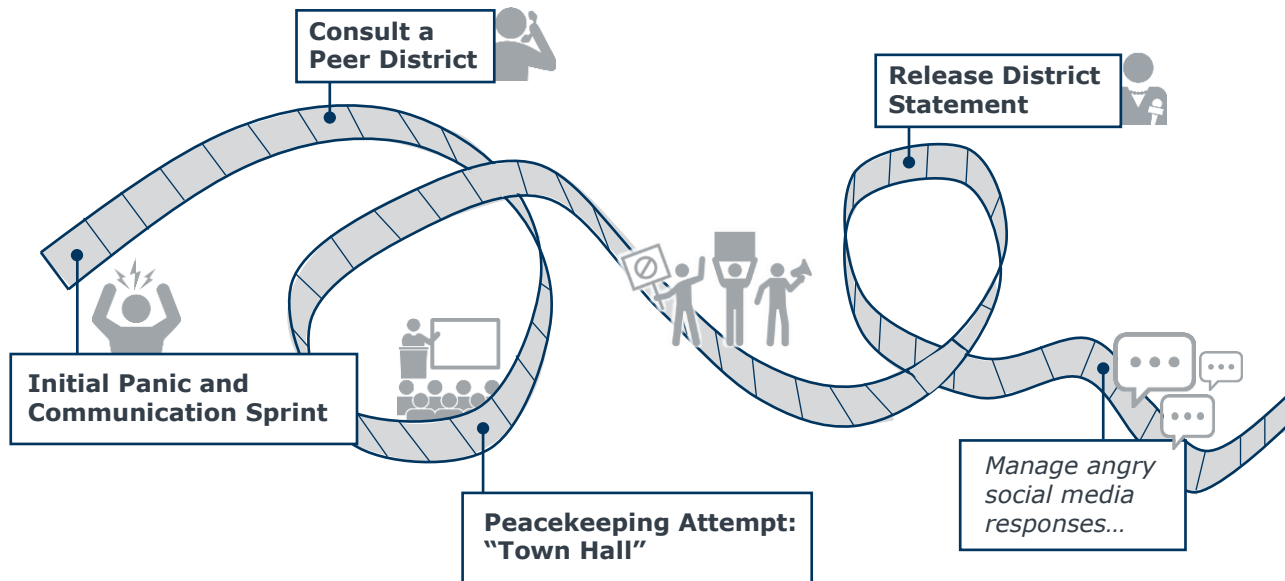
Example of What Lies Beneath Today's Flashpoints¹



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

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

14

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

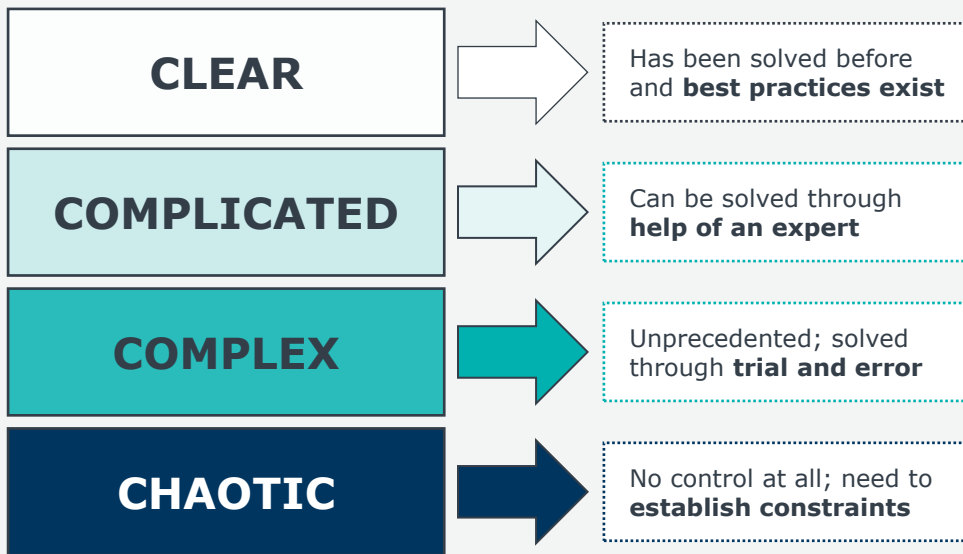
Stress Tolerance Score

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



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CLEAR

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

COMPLICATED

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

COMPLEX

Unprecedented; solved through **trial and error**

CHAOTIC

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

Area of Flashpoint Response

Issuing a district-wide statement

Identifying future flashpoint risks

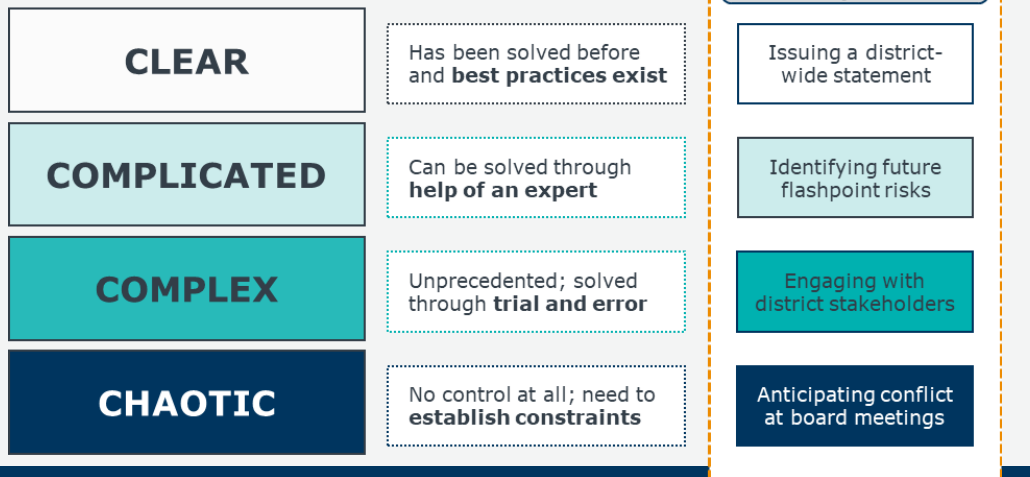
Engaging with district stakeholders

Anticipating conflict at board meetings

Discussion:



What **other pain points** or **problems** that your district has with flashpoint response/divisive conversations? Where would they fall into the four domains of Cynefin?



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6 Strategies to Address Flashpoints Faster

		STRATEGIES
CLEAR	<i>Has been solved before and best practices exist</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “Respond?” Decision Tree 2. Flashpoint Response Checklist
COMPLICATED	<i>Can be solved through help of an expert</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Peer-Informed Risk Register 4. Rapid Response Teams
COMPLEX	<i>Unprecedented; solved through trial and error</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Engaged Parents Toolbox
CHAOTIC	<i>No control at all; need to establish constraints</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Large Group Constraints

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Should We Respond?

Respond



What is the Superintendent's Responsibility?

Do Not 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.”

“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

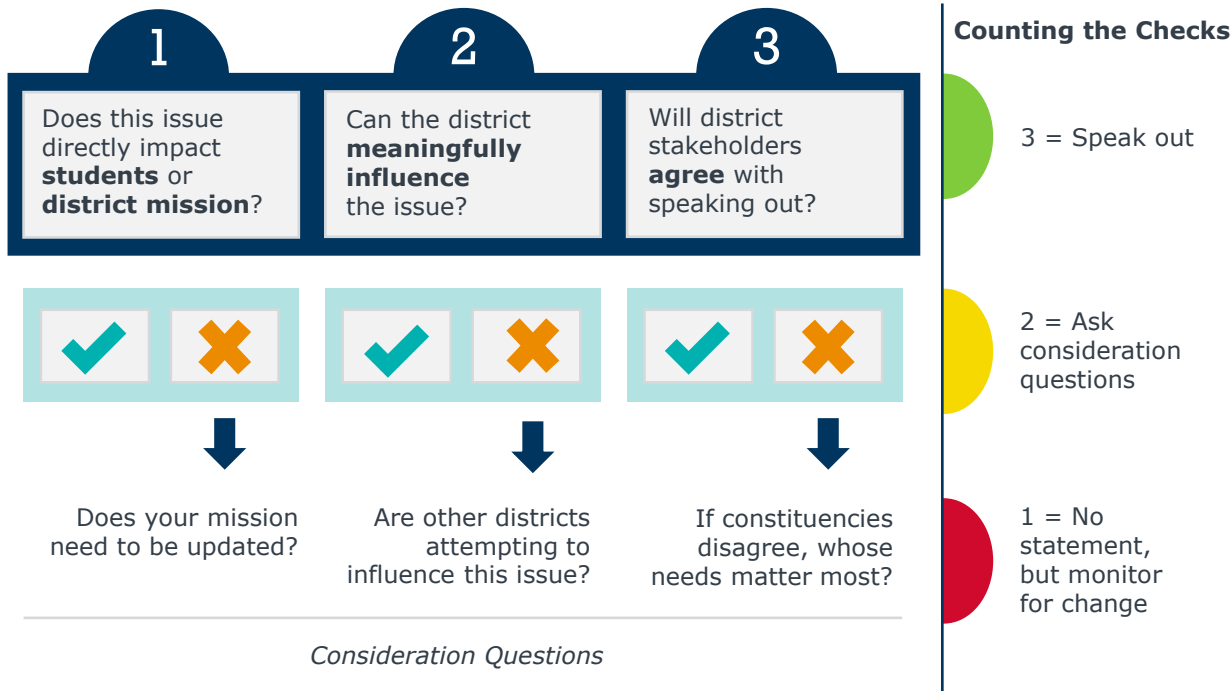


Local
Incidents



Government
Policies and Laws

Decision Criteria: When to Speak Out



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

23

13



- Vague message results in community unrest

- Teachers taken by surprise and under pressure to respond

- Local media covers story with incomplete information

Sunny Valley School District @Sunny_Valley_SD · Mar 1

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23

13



John F. @justfrends · Mar 1

What's being investigated exactly?

5



9



Ravi P. @raviprathar · Mar 1

Wow unsurprising from a district with no equity effort whatsoever

3



22



Harrison W @hw4429 · Mar 1

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

3



3



Lydia L @lydiarails78 · Mar 1

Clearly overblown. We've gone through this before

22



5



Kia M @kiamana_em · Mar 1

again???

8



8



Juana Hernan @hernanji_49 · Mar 1

@Sunny_Valley_SD we need more information now

1



1



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

Research Shows Not All Checklists Are Created Equal ²⁷



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?

Strategies for “Clear” Areas: Next Steps



EAB’s Recommendations:



When the next district flashpoint occurs, use the “**Respond?**” **Decision Criteria** to determine whether a public statement from the district is necessary.



Before releasing a district statement in response to a flashpoint, use **EAB’s Flashpoint Response Checklist** to avoid small-but-costly errors.

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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?

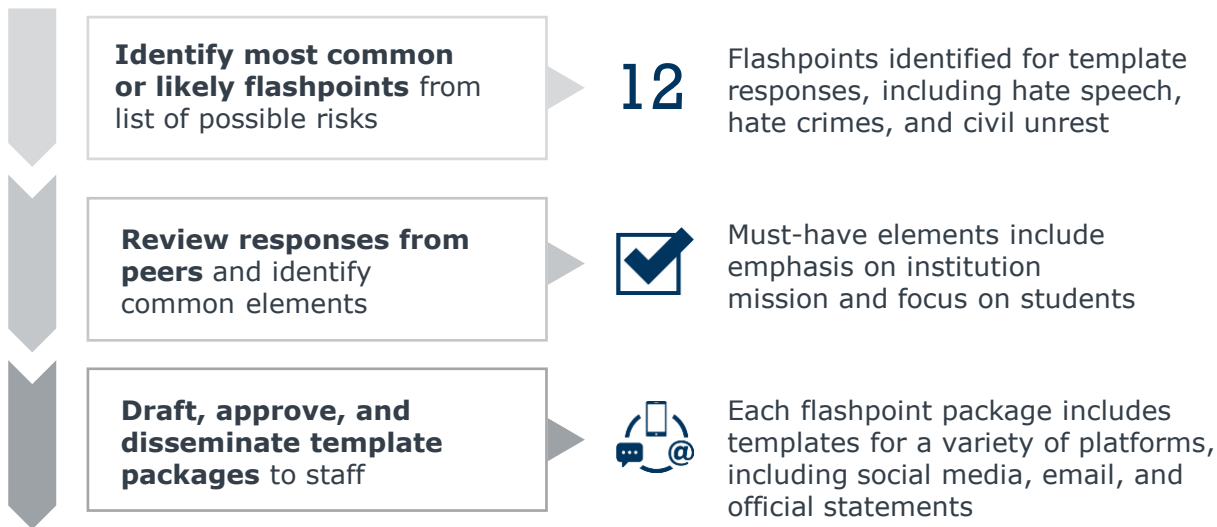
“

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

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?

Strategies for “**Complicated**” Areas: Next Steps



EAB's Recommendations:



Register for EAB's upcoming workshop on **Building a Flashpoint Risk Register** on October 6th or 8th



Draft a **flashpoint rapid response team** by listing:

1. Jobs to be done when a flashpoint occurs
2. Best-fit personnel for those jobs, and
3. Any subject-matter experts with whom you have connections and may reach out to.

Learn More About Flashpoint Communication Strategies in EAB's Upcoming Workshop Series

1 How to Identify Top Flashpoint Risks

October 4th or 6th, 12-1pm ET

Learn the step-by-step process for building a flashpoint risk register based on today's hottest divisive issues, as well as how to prioritize which flashpoint risks your team should prepare for the most.

2 Communication Strategies for Divisive Conversations

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Walk away with a host of best-practice communication strategies for navigating divisive conversations with the public, during board meetings, and within your district leadership team – no matter the topic.



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Join Us for an Upcoming Event

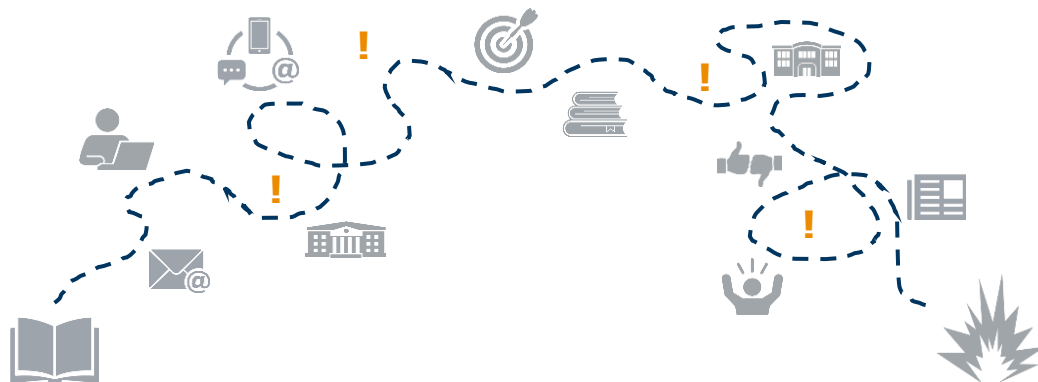
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Parents: The Most Complex Flashpoint Layer

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



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the Conversation at Home



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

Strategies for “Complex” Areas: Next Steps



EAB's Recommendations:



Discuss the pros and cons of implementing the four strategies in the **Engaged Parents Toolbox** during your next district leadership team meeting



Choose one of the four strategies from the Engaged Parents Toolbox and **assign implementation** to a district leadership team member

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From Sleepy Board Meetings to Chaotic Battlegrounds⁵⁰

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

Appropriate Constraints



Public comment

Standardize a process for allocating time and facilitating public comment



Media presence

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



Police/security interference

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



Political controversy

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

Strategies for “Chaotic” Areas: Next Steps



EAB’s Recommendations:



Revisit your district’s **written policies for public comment** during board meetings and refine/rewrite for clarity.



Attend EAB’s upcoming webinar on **Best-Practice Flashpoint Communication Strategies** to learn how to engage with the public, other board members, and the media following a controversial flashpoint in your district

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Quick Poll:



Which of the strategies in this presentation are you most interested in implementing in your district?
Select all that apply.

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