



Identifying Today's Top Flashpoint Risks for K-12 Districts

A Compilation of Resources to Identify New and
Evolving Flashpoint Risks in Public Education

District Leadership Forum

Resource Overview

Important Takeaways:

- Use this guide of “evolving” and “evergreen” flashpoint topics to identify risks before they occur in your district and to avoid overlooking potential flashpoints
- Access the appendix of example risks that other institutions have included in their own flashpoint risk registers

What is a Flashpoint?



flash-point | *noun*

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

As such, a **flashpoint risk** is an issue that has the potential to escalate into a flashpoint because it is susceptible to public activism, criticism or causing reputational damage.

Resource Background

This resource was compiled with contributions from the risk lists of EAB partners and non-partners, along with flashpoint risks reported during EAB research calls in the first half of 2022.

This list is not exhaustive, nor is it a substitute for implementing a comprehensive flashpoint risk management process to identify and respond to risks to your district. Instead, this resource is an overview of “evolving” and “evergreen” risks currently impacting K-12 districts across the country.

Next Step: Help EAB Continue to Monitor Flashpoint Risks

Flashpoint risks are constantly changing. Each district’s flashpoint risk register should be a living document, and so too will this list of risks. Please submit your risk register to EAB to contribute to our database of risks by sending them to your dedicated advisor.

Evolving and Evergreen Flashpoint Risks for K-12 Districts

Six New & Evolving Issues for K-12 Districts Today

Compiled in September 2022



Increased interest in "parents' rights" legislation

[2 in 3 states](#) have passed legislation focused on curriculum transparency and increasing the role of parents in district decision-making. [Polls show](#) the public is most supportive of parents and teachers influencing school policies, in comparison to local or national legislatures.



Greater demand for social emotional learning but uncertainty about definition

Between Nov. 2019 – Apr. 2021, district spending on SEL grew [45%](#) nationwide. [34%](#) of educators reported that they received feedback from community members that SEL is teaching students controversial values and concepts.



Curriculum pushback escalating to the district level

In 2021, [the ALA reported](#) that 729 book challenges led to bans – the highest number of attempted book bans in over 20 years. [41%](#) of these book bans are tied to directives from state officials or elected lawmakers.



Rise in legislation targeting race, gender, sexuality conversations in the classroom

State lawmakers proposed [137 bills](#) in 2022 restricting trainings and classroom conversations about race, gender, or sexuality. This is a [250% increase](#) in proposed legislation since 2021.



Districts confronting a wave of student misbehavior

[56% of schools](#) reported a rise in classroom disruptions from student misbehavior. Now early into the school year, some districts are seeing misbehavior increase up to [200%](#).



Misinformation on social media challenging district communications

[71% of Americans](#) get at least some of their news through social media platforms. Additionally, false news stories are [6x as likely](#) to reach people before true stories.

Three Evergreen Flashpoint Risks for K-12 Districts

Topics that have always been risks for controversy and criticism in public education

1 **Uncertainty about student safety in school**
[44% of parents](#) fear for student safety, the highest in 20 years.

2 **Local, national elections centered on education policy**
[52% of registered voters](#) consider K-12 education a top ballot issue.

3 **Teachers citing burnout, indicating mental health crisis**
[57%](#) of educators worry about burnout, increasing from 25% in just 6 months.



Sample List of K-12 District Flashpoint Risks

Jump start your district's flashpoint risk register with these examples, pulled from the risk registers of EAB partners.

APPENDIX

Topics include:

- Curriculum & Instruction
- Student Success
- Board Governance
- Compliance
- External Relations
- Facilities
- Financial
- Human Resources
- Information Technology

NOTICE

***This list is non-exhaustive** and is provided as a brainstorming tool for districts beginning their own Risk Registers. Not all risks may be relevant to your district.*

Sample K-12 School District Risk List

Curriculum & Instruction

Curriculum/Teaching Pedagogy

- Parents or community members push back against district curriculum or assignment
- Schools fail to appropriately accommodate and educate students with IEPs
- Local colleges and universities accuse district of poor academic preparation
- Community raises concern that academic programming lags in comparison to neighboring and peer districts
- Parents claim school pedagogy is out-of-touch with most recent developments in educational research

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

- Students feel excluded in the classroom based on their background (e.g., ability, race, religion)
- Sensitive material presented in class is offensive to a subset of students
- Students sense that their political views are unwelcome in classroom discussion
- Students refer to athletes as “less smart” than peers

Extra-Curricular Programming

- Students damage public property or otherwise come into conflict with law enforcement while participating in an off-campus activity, trip, or community service project
- Parents blame the district after a serious student injury on a district-sponsored student trip
- Parents claim that the district is withholding adequate resources for equitable participation in extracurriculars
- Parents claim that a lack of college preparation and advising programming is leaving their children unprepared for the college admissions process
- Parents criticize decline in quality or number of extra-curricular programs

Administrators

- Higher number of administrators resign. due to burnout
- Untrained and overburdened principals unable to drive school academic improvements
- Misalignment between principal’s and board/superintendent’s curriculum and teaching vision

Teachers

- Teachers strike and refuse to teach classes, citing overwork and underpay
- Teacher management of behavioral issues creates division between parents and district
- Teacher and student meeting one-on-one results in allegations of misconduct
- Parents discover teachers have withheld information about their children
- Parents complain about inexperienced teachers and a high student-to-teacher ratio
- Teacher inflates grades leading to media controversy
- Publisher finds out that teachers are using copyrighted material without appropriate permission in classes
- Insufficient pool of qualified substitute teachers leads to large student class sizes and pushback from parents

Sample K-12 School District Risk List

Student Success

Enrollment

- Parents are increasingly choosing alternatives to the district (e.g., independent schools)
- District and community no longer attractive to families in the region
- Local politician raises the issue that low-income students are not served equally by the district

Climate Flashpoints

- Student vandalism features inappropriate slur
- School security officers accused of prejudice, racism by students of color
- Teacher shares personal views that go against district policy or are defamatory to the district
- Statue of public figure on campus discovered to be sexist, racist
- School yearbooks found to have coded derogatory language or rude references
- Students see teacher or staff member at a counter-demonstration they are participating in

Extra-Curricular Programming

- Students damage public property or come into conflict with law enforcement while participating in an off-campus activity, sport, trip, or community service project
- Schools fail to curtail dangerous traditions like hazing underclassmen
- Student lost or left behind during school outing
- Booster club claims that the district has allowed the quality of the district's athletics programs to decline through neglect

Student Misconduct/Discipline

- Local news criticizes district's inadequate response to student behavior
- Allegations of student/student sexual misconduct, abuse, or harassment
- Teacher hold inconsistent disciplinary actions against students of different demographics

Policies, Procedures

- Forms or student PII improperly stored
- Communication between teacher and student or parent through unauthorized channels (e.g., social media, personal text)
- Failure to collect doctor approved physicals for athletic participation
- Failure to collect appropriate permissions slips for activity participation
- Failure to provide and collect release forms when recommending health professionals

Student Mental and Physical Health and Wellness

- School unprepared to respond to flu, or other, epidemic among community members
- PTA raises concern that students are left unsupervised on school grounds before and after school
- Injury, bullying occur due to lack of supervision in locker rooms
- Student makes self-harm or desire to self-harm public
- Student death or injury outside of school
- Injury or death due to improper use of AED (Automated External Defibrillator)
- Student injured while off campus for lunch or field trip
- Student experiences a severe allergic reaction on campus
- School cannot locate students in case of parent/guardian request or emergency
- Student struck by lighting on campus

Sample K-12 School District Risk List

Board Governance

Board-Superintendent Relationship

- Superintendent suddenly resigns from post, is dismissed, or is otherwise unable to lead the district
- Unproductive and antagonistic relationship between board chair and superintendent apparent in public town hall proceedings

Board Procedures, Policies

- Community claims district is not holding school board accountable to values of the community
- Improper conflict of interest by board members
- Failure to comply with 403b limits
- PTA claims excessive/insufficient board term length leads to ineffective participation
- Investment policy statement not being followed
- Out-of-date governance policies
- Insufficient insurance policies

Board Succession Planning

- Community member complains that new board members are largely ineffective due to lack of or insufficient transition planning between board members
- Community members point to unfilled board chair seat due to a lack of qualified candidates as a sign of district incompetence

Board Membership

- Private communications between board members, or board member to school employee (text, personal email, etc.) hacked or otherwise revealed to community at large
- Board member fails to maintain confidentiality about board discussions, district matters
- Community accuses board member of pushing a personal agenda
- Parents deem board negligent because of members' lack skills to ensure proper oversight in key areas (e.g., finance)
- Local media shares that a board member withdraws child from district and enrolls them at an area independent school
- Board members fail to participate in required governance meetings
- Board member holds a party at their house during which students are found drinking alcohol

Sample K-12 School District Risk List

Compliance

Federal, State, Local

- Failure to comply with government regulations
- Improper tax filing leading to fines and loss of funding
- Non-compliance with Title IX leading to litigation, loss of funds, and reputational damage
- Non-compliance with ADA leading to litigation and reputational damage
- Non-compliance with OSHA leading to injury and litigation
- Failure to comply with HIPAA leading to fines, litigation, and reputational damage
- Non-compliance with EPA regulations leading to health consequences and fines

Policies, Procedures

- Crisis communications plans unwritten, unclear to relevant to teachers, staff
- District whistleblower policy does not adequately protect whistleblower
- Failure to comply with college admissions expectations and requirements (e.g., sending transcripts on time)
- Insufficient insurance coverage

Recordkeeping

- Failure to appropriately destroy personal information of students, teachers, and staff
- Media exposes that district misreported teacher certifications
- District records missing, incomplete
- Student records improperly stored (electronically or in hard copy)
- FOIA and FERPA information and requests improperly handled and archived

Sample K-12 School District Risk List

External Relations

Reputational Risks

- Board member is discovered using district resources to support a political candidate
- Superintendent or board member engages in inappropriate behavior, which is then covered by local news media
- Relationship with a heavily politicized organization exposes school to reputational damage
- Authorities investigate recommendations or practices of school district
- Parents' inappropriate behavior tied to school reputation through social media, word of mouth
- Alumni in news for gross misbehavior during their time in the district
- Case of historical employee misconduct comes to light

Social Media

- Inappropriate or offensive use of social media by staff or students picked up by local news sources
- Political actors aim social media criticism at school district for teacher action or position
- Conflicting official school district social media statements with personal student, parent, and staff accounts of an event
- Community member creates a social media group criticizing a school district position
- Slow social media flashpoint response leads to community outcry
- Hackers post offensive content on a district-affiliated social media account
- Student uses social media to bully and harass other students and/or parents
- Communications team confuses personal social media account with school accounts, makes an inappropriate post
- Superintendent or board member posts unvetted and unsanctioned personal opinion that the community claims represents the district's official position
- Responding to inappropriate social media actors or posts invites further bad-faith actors to reach out to the district

Sample K-12 School District Risk List

Facilities

Physical Safety/ Security

- Improper response to an active shooter on campus
- Injury due to inappropriate storage of school safety supplies (e.g., chemicals, sports equipment, cleaning supplies)
- Injury due to construction on school campuses
- Injury due to poor building maintenance and inadequate procedures for addressing damage to school facilities/property
- Outdoor maintenance staff report unsafe working conditions
- Lack of clarity around lockdown procedures resulting in confusion and panic during drills
- Community members accuse district of not accurately tracking guests on school campuses
- Community disapproves of use of facilities by a third party
- Teachers complain about lack of policies and procedures for natural disaster response (e.g., earthquake, severe weather event) for a district that resides in an area prone to inclement weather
- Employees of outsourced relationships (e.g., cleaning crews, groundskeepers, IT support) complain of maltreatment by the district
- Student property damaged as a result of unkept district facilities

Vehicles/ Transportation

- Injury to person or damage to school facilities due to visiting vehicle on campus (delivery truck, news truck, trash truck, etc.)
- Injury due to car accident during pickup or drop-off
- School bus accident
- Damage to school facilities by student drivers
- Damage to district vehicles while on campus
- Buses fail inspection

School Campus Structures

- Loss of electrical power/utility services due to facilities issue or weather event
- Gas leak on campus
- Power surge damages critical or costly equipment
- Community members complain about large amount of deferred maintenance
- Emergency lighting missing or fails to work when needed
- Non-functional or out-of-date locking mechanism in school building
- Alarms and/or PA systems missing, lacking, or fail to work when needed
- Injury due to poor athletic field maintenance

Sample K-12 School District Risk List

Financial

District Finances

- Misuse of school funds, embezzlement
- IRS audits district
- District savings insufficient for long-term capital needs
- Improper purchasing and budgeting practices across schools
- Improper interim reporting of financial health
- Expense reporting procedures are not followed
- Conflict of interest policy unclear, not enforced
- Improper documentation of business processes
- District has taken on more debt than can reasonably be paid back; community complains when district calls for increased local taxation

Sample K-12 School District Risk List

Human Resources

Background Checks

- Improper, infrequent, or inconsistent background check procedures for teachers, staff, volunteers, contractors, and/or third parties on campus
- School staff fail to follow procedures when giving a reference for a former employee

Disciplinary Procedures

- Employee/employee or employee/student sexual harassment
- Unprofessional behavior by teacher with students and/or parents
- Improper or mishandled dismissal of teacher or staff
- Harassment or bullying of employees
- Disciplinary action and dismissal process taken against employees is inconsistent, unclear, and/or slow-moving

Hiring

- Parents blame district's inconsistent and ad-hoc hiring practices for inability to attract and retain adequate teachers and staff
- HR staff, interviewers unaware of legal regulations around interviewing and hiring procedures

Data Privacy

- Human resources office suffers breach and private data exposed
- Lack of electronic records or improper electronic record keeping

Employee/HR Relationship

- Teachers, staff are dissatisfied due to improper management
- Employees fail to report relevant information to HR staff

Policies/Handbook

- School fails to comply with Department of Labor requirements (e.g., underage camp counselors)
- Inadequate reporting of worker compensation related incidents to insurance carrier
- Unclear/missing grievance procedures
- Lack of consistency in employee performance review and evaluation procedures
- Insufficient processes to address immigration status of teachers, staff, and students
- Inconsistent on- and off-boarding policies and practices across district and school departments
- Lack of documentation of hiring and termination processes

Sample K-12 School District Risk List

Information Technology

Cybersecurity & Data Privacy

- Hackers shut down school networks and demand ransom from district
- Teachers, staff, students, or family's personal data stolen, intentionally shared online
- Teachers, staff, students, or family's personal information unintentionally shared
- School equipment containing personal information is stolen or misplaced
- Questioning of district integrity after contracted vendors fail to protect institutional data (e.g., cloud providers, dashboards)
- Teachers not adequately trained to recognize phishing attacks and/or a teacher falls victim to phishing attack
- Insufficient data governance protocols and enforcement

School Technology (hardware, networks, etc.)

- School equipment used for inappropriate activity by student, staff, or community member
- Technological outage impacts business or classroom instruction, forcing parents to pick up their children in middle of the day
- Parents complain that out-of-date hardware, software, and networks is impacting their children's ability to learn
- School implements new technology without evidence of its usefulness or effectiveness leading parents to accuse district of wasteful spending