



Session 1

Preparing For Your Next District Flashpoint

What Every District Leader Should Do Now to Help Navigate Divisive Conversations In The Future

The District Leadership Forum Research Team



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Objectives for This Workshop Series

1 Session 1: Today and October 6th



Define why the flashpoints of today require a **new approach** to preparation and response



Identify and prioritize the **top flashpoint risks** in your district today

2 Session 2: October 18th or 21st



Compile best-practice **communication strategies** for navigating divisive conversations

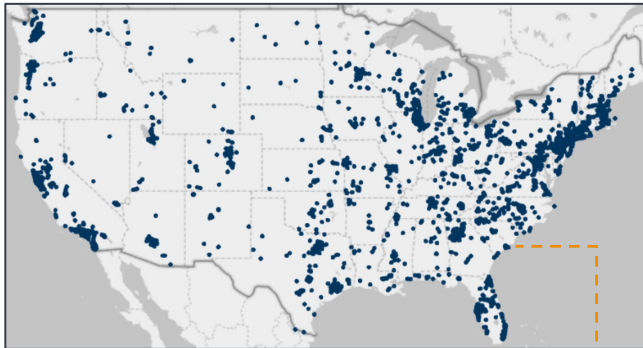
Top Reason for Superintendent Stress: "Flashpoints"

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%

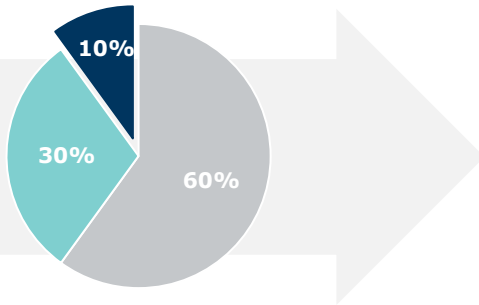
of superintendents agree **managing politically divisive conversations** is the most challenging aspect of their role today

3,041 distinct flashpoints reported in online news sources

1) Recreated and condensed for presentation

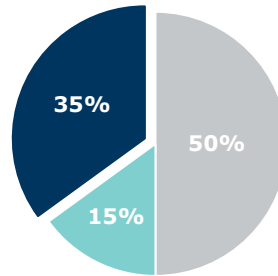
Focus on Flashpoints Distracts from Strategic Initiatives

Five Years Ago



Today

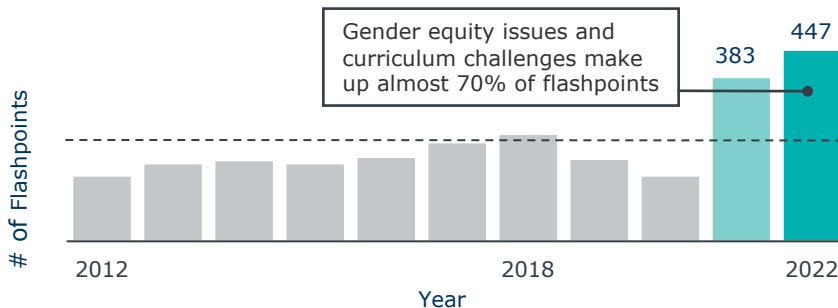
n = 24



- Flashpoint Response
- Strategic Initiatives
- District Operations

Number of Flashpoints Projected to Rise

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



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

7

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



Virility of social media, GroupThink, bandwagoning



Involvement of the press



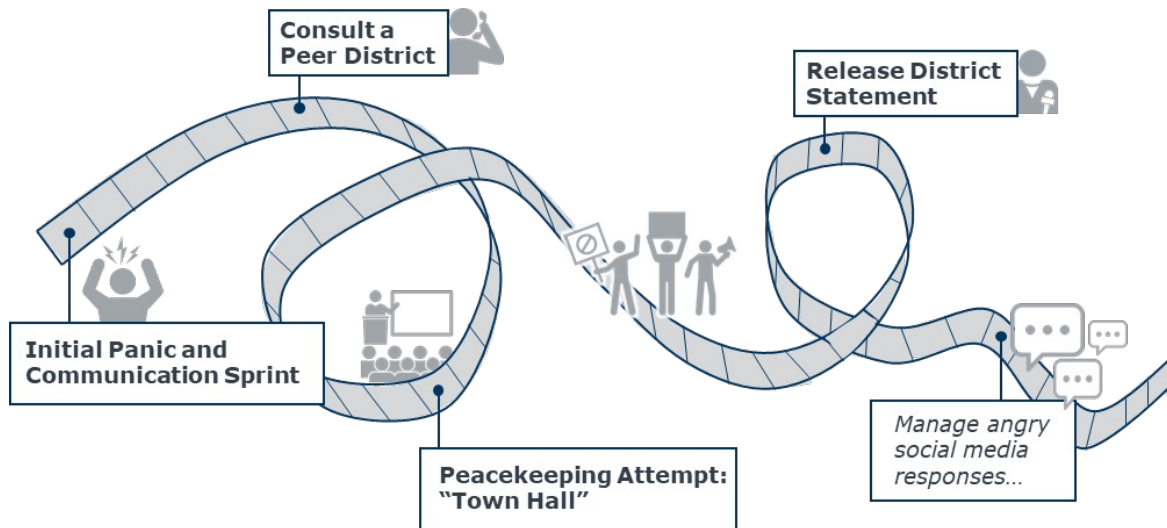
Contentious political environment

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

Source: Grossman, H. [Rhode Island parents enraged at school board for removing honors classes in 'equity obsession'](#), 2022; Hawkins, B. ['The Hate Is Just Too Much': Threatened by Neighbors and Trolled on Social Media, Minnesota School Board Members Are Quitting in Record Numbers](#), 2022; EAB interviews and analysis.

Reactive Crisis Management Can Spiral into Chaos

8



“ 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, Midwest School District

A Framework to Find Solutions and Respond More Quickly



Cynefin *kuh-NEH-vin* | noun

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



How to Keep Future Flashpoint Response “Clear”



Action #1: Prioritize Flashpoint Risks with a Risk Register



Action #2: Compile a Flashpoint Communications Toolkit

The Danger of Letting Risks Go Unidentified



District Focus on Traditional Risks...

- Inclement weather
- Public health protocols
- Building security



...Fails to Identify Increasingly Common Flashpoint Risks

- Unstructured board meetings
- Increasing book challenges
- Social media and click-bait news
- Pushback on SEL curriculum
- Rise in student misbehavior, discipline
- "Parents' Rights" legislation

“**Our weakness is that we think in the more traditional way of risk management – a tornado, a fire, etc., but don’t think about more modern risks, like posting on social media or angry parents at board meetings.”**

- Superintendent, Southeastern School District

Avoid Surprises with a Flashpoint Risk Register

risk reg-i-ster | *noun*

1 : a document that lists flashpoint risks and ranks them based on likelihood and impact, helping to elevate otherwise overlooked risks



Characteristics of an Exemplary Risk Register

Exhaustive



- Includes all potential risks to district, regardless of likelihood
- Individual risks are described thoroughly with specific, simple language

Encyclopedic



- Organized by total score highest to lowest
- Accessible to *all* district leadership by using collaborative data collection

Evolving



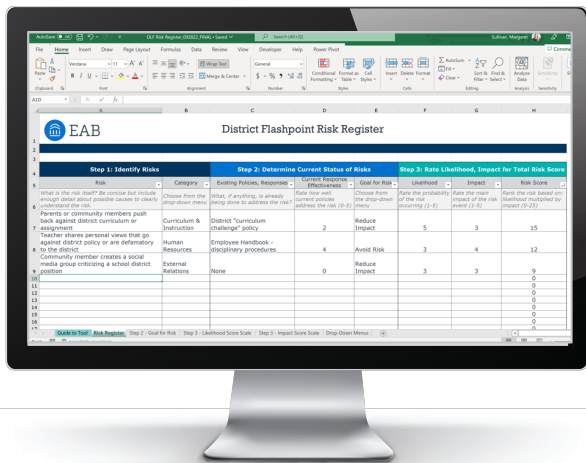
- Updated at least once a month during Climate Risk Team meetings
- Tracks response strategies for past risks

Who Owns the Risk Register?

EAB recommends that a district leader with experience in communications owns this document and shares the document's location with the full district leadership team.

2 Tools from EAB to Start Flashpoint Risk Identification

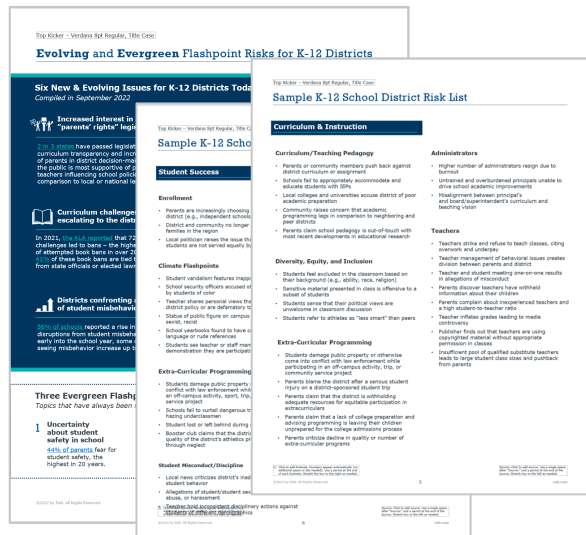
Flashpoint Risk Register Spreadsheet



Risk register allows districts to:

- ▶ **List District-Wide Risks**
Use spreadsheet to track all potential risks to district
- ▶ **Prioritize Risk Responses**
Capture risk scores, response strategies, monitoring in one place

Guide for Identifying Flashpoint Risks



Guide allows districts to:

- ▶ **Identify Top District Risks**
Learn today's "evolving" and "evergreen" risks to districts, as well as a sample list from EAB partners

Identify and Prioritize Possible Flashpoint Risks

The screenshot shows an Excel spreadsheet titled "District Flashpoint Risk Register" from EAB. The spreadsheet is organized into three main steps:

- Step 1: Identify Risks** (Columns A-D)
- Step 2: Determine Current Status of Risks** (Columns E-G)
- Step 3: Rate Likelihood, Impact for Total Risk Score** (Columns H-I)

The table contains the following data:

| Risk | Category | Existing Policies, Responses | Current Response Effectiveness | Goal for Risk | Likelihood | Impact | Risk Score |
|---|--------------------------|---|--------------------------------|---------------|------------|--------|------------|
| Parents or community members push back against district curriculum or assignment | Curriculum & Instruction | District "curriculum challenge" policy | 2 | Reduce Impact | 5 | 3 | 15 |
| Teacher shares personal views that go against district policy or are defamatory to the district | Human Resources | Employee Handbook - disciplinary procedures | 4 | Avoid Risk | 3 | 4 | 12 |
| Community member creates a social media group criticizing a school district position | External Relations | None | 0 | Reduce Impact | 3 | 3 | 9 |
| | | | | | | | 0 |
| | | | | | | | 0 |
| | | | | | | | 0 |
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| | | | | | | | 0 |
| | | | | | | | 0 |
| | | | | | | | 0 |

Navigation tabs at the bottom include: Guide to Tool, Risk Register, Step 2 - Goal for Risk, Step 3 - Likelihood Score Scale, Step 3 - Impact Score Scale, Drop-Down Menus.

Identify and Prioritize Possible Flashpoint Risks

STEP 1 Identify Risks



Use **EAB's Guide for Identifying Flashpoint Risks** for a list of possible risks to include

DLF Risk Register - DR0022_FINAL - Saved

Sullivan, Margaret

Step 1: Identify Risks

| | Risk | Category | Exi |
|----|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 5 | | | |
| 6 | <i>What is the risk itself? Be concise but include enough detail about possible causes to clearly understand the risk.</i> | <i>Choose from the drop-down menu</i> | <i>What's the impact?</i> |
| 7 | Parents or community members push back against district curriculum or assignment | Curriculum & Instruction | Distr challenge |
| 8 | Teacher shares personal views that go against district policy or are defamatory to the district | Human Resources | Emploi disciplin |
| 9 | Community member creates a social media group criticizing a school district position | External Relations | None |
| 10 | | | |
| 11 | | | |
| 12 | | | |
| 13 | | | |
| 14 | | | |
| 15 | | | |
| 16 | | | |
| 17 | | | |

Guide to Tool Risk Register Step 2 - Goal for Risk Step 3 - Likelihood

Identify and Prioritize Possible Flashpoint Risks

STEP 1

Identify Risks

The screenshot shows an Excel spreadsheet titled 'DLF Risk Register - DR0822_FINAL - Saved'. The spreadsheet is in the 'Risk Register' tab, which is part of a multi-step process (Step 1: Identify Risks, Step 2: Goal for Risk, Step 3: Likelihood). The table has columns for 'Risk', 'Category', and 'Existence'. The 'Category' column has a dropdown menu with custom categories: 'Curriculum & Instruction', 'Human Resources', and 'External Relations'. A callout box highlights the 'Category' column and the dropdown menu, with an arrow pointing to a text box that says 'Select custom categories from the drop-down menu'.

| | Risk | Category | Existence |
|----|--|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 3 | | | |
| 4 | Step 1: Identify Risks | | |
| 5 | | | |
| 6 | <i>What is the risk itself? Be concise but include enough detail about possible causes to clearly understand the risk.</i> | <i>Choose from the drop-down menu</i> | <i>What is the risk's existence?</i> |
| 7 | Parents or community members push back against district curriculum or assignment | Curriculum & Instruction | District Challenge |
| 8 | Teacher shares personal views that go against district policy or are defamatory to the district | Human Resources | Employee Discipline |
| 9 | Community member creates a social media group criticizing a school district position | External Relations | None |
| 10 | | | |
| 11 | | | |
| 12 | | | |
| 13 | | | |
| 14 | | | |
| 15 | | | |
| 16 | | | |
| 17 | | | |

Select **custom categories** from the drop-down menu

Identify and Prioritize Possible Flashpoint Risks

STEP 2

Determine Current Status of Risk

Does the district already have a plan for response?

| Step 1: Identify Risks | | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|---------|
| Risk | Category | External | Example |
| <i>What is the risk itself? Be concise but include enough detail about possible causes to clearly understand the risk.</i> | <i>Choose from the drop-down menu</i> | <i>What is being done to address the risk?</i> | |
| Parents or community members push back against district curriculum or assignment | Curriculum & Instruction | District challenge | |
| Teacher shares personal views that go against district policy or are defamatory to the district | Human Resources | Employee disciplinary | |
| Community member creates a social media group criticizing a school district position | External Relations | None | |

| Step 2: Determine Current Status of Risks | | |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| Existing Policies, Responses | Current Response Effectiveness | Goal for Risk |
| <i>What, if anything, is already being done to address the risk?</i> | <i>Rate how well current policies address the risk (0-5)</i> | <i>Choose from the drop-down menu</i> |
| District "curriculum challenge" policy | 2 | Reduce Impact |
| Employee Handbook - disciplinary procedures | 4 | Avoid Risk |
| None | 0 | Reduce Impact |

Identify and Prioritize Possible Flashpoint Risks



STEP 2

Determine Current Status of Risk

Step 2: Determine Current Status of Risks

| Existing Policies, Responses | Current Response Effectiveness | Goal for Risk |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| <i>What, if anything, is already being done to address the risk?</i> | <i>Rate how well current policies address the risk (0-5)</i> | <i>Choose from the drop-down menu</i> |
| District "curriculum challenge" policy | 2 | Reduce Impact |
| Employee Handbook - disciplinary procedures | 4 | Avoid Risk |
| None | 0 | Reduce Impact |

How well do you believe this plan addresses the risk?

Identify and Prioritize Possible Flashpoint Risks



STEP 2

Determine Current Status of Risk

Does the district accept the risk, reduce impact, or avoid it entirely?

| Step 1: Identify Risks | | |
|---|--------------------------------|---|
| Risk | Category | Existing Policies, Responses |
| What is the risk itself? Be concise but include enough detail about possible causes to clearly understand the risk. | Choose from the drop-down menu | What is being done to address the risk? |
| Parents or community members push back against district curriculum or assignment | Curriculum & Instruction | District challenge |
| Teacher shares personal views that go against district policy or are defamatory to the district | Human Resources | Employee disciplinary |
| Community member creates a social media group criticizing a school district position | External Relations | None |

| Step 2: Determine Current Status of Risks | | |
|---|---|--------------------------------|
| Existing Policies, Responses | Current Response Effectiveness | Goal for Risk |
| What, if anything, is already being done to address the risk? | Rate how well current policies address the risk (0-5) | Choose from the drop-down menu |
| District "curriculum challenge" policy | 2 | Reduce Impact |
| Employee Handbook - disciplinary procedures | 4 | Avoid Risk |
| None | 0 | Reduce Impact |

Likelihood Score Scale Step 3 - Impact Score Scale Drop-Down Menu (+)

Identify and Prioritize Possible Flashpoint Risks



STEP 3

Rate Likelihood and Impact for Total Score

Risk Impact: The level of **disruption** or **damage** as a consequence of risk occurrence

Step 3: Rate Likelihood, Impact for Total Risk Score

| Likelihood | Impact | Risk Score |
|---|---|---|
| <i>Rate the probability of the risk occurring (1-5)</i> | <i>Rate the main impact of the risk event (1-5)</i> | <i>Rank the risk based on: likelihood multiplied by impact (0-25)</i> |
| 5 | 3 | 15 |
| 3 | 4 | 12 |
| 3 | 3 | 9 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
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| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |

Risk Likelihood: The chance of a risk occurring in your district (both **probability** and **frequency**)

Identify and Prioritize Possible Flashpoint Risks



STEP 3

Rate Likelihood and Impact for Total Score



Step 3: Rate Likelihood, Impact for Total Risk Score

| Likelihood | Impact | Risk Score |
|---|---|---|
| <i>Rate the probability of the risk occurring (1-5)</i> | <i>Rate the main impact of the risk event (1-5)</i> | <i>Rank the risk based on: likelihood multiplied by impact (0-25)</i> |
| 5 | 3 | 15 |
| 3 | 4 | 12 |
| 3 | 3 | 9 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
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| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |

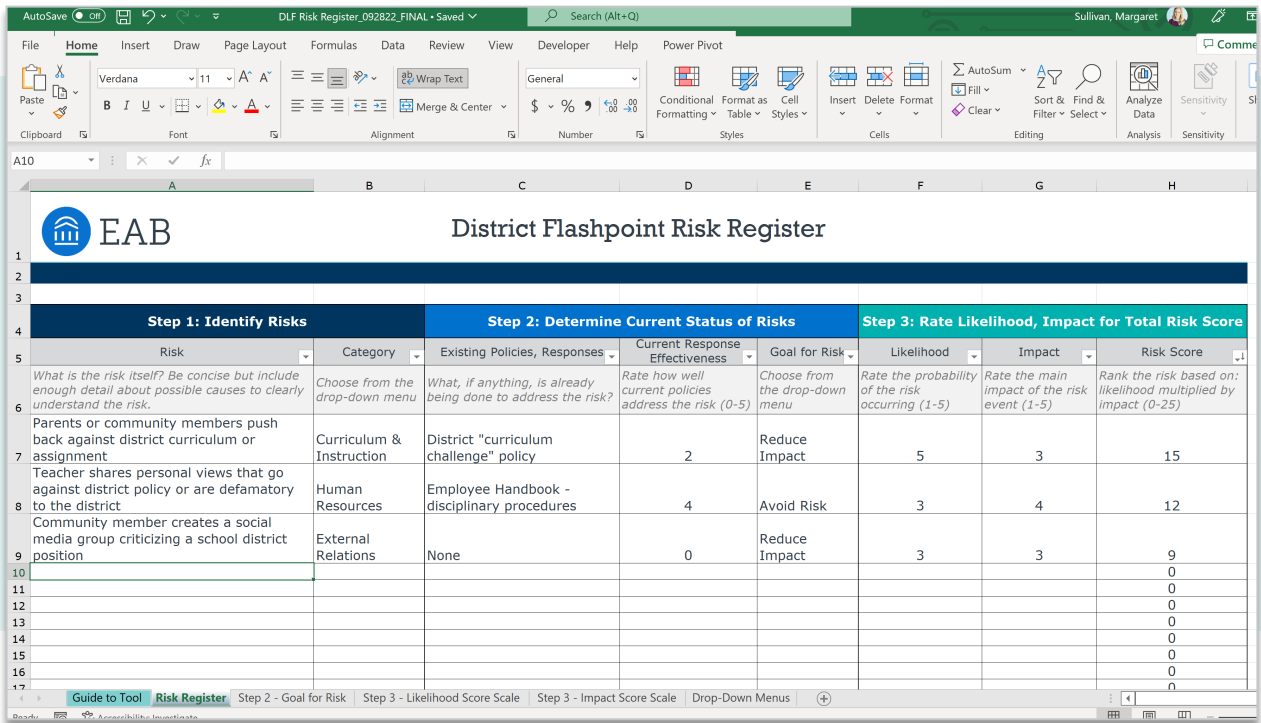
Sort risks by score to determine top concerns

Sort and filter

Step 3: Rate Likelihood, Impact for Total Risk Score

| Likelihood | Impact | Risk Score |
|------------|--------|------------|
| | | 15 |
| | | 12 |
| | | 9 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |
| | | 0 |

Identify and Prioritize Possible Flashpoint Risks



| Step 1: Identify Risks | | Step 2: Determine Current Status of Risks | | | Step 3: Rate Likelihood, Impact for Total Risk Score | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|--|---------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Risk | Category | Existing Policies, Responses | Current Response Effectiveness | Goal for Risk | Likelihood | Impact | Risk Score |
| <i>What is the risk itself? Be concise but include enough detail about possible causes to clearly understand the risk.</i> | <i>Choose from the drop-down menu</i> | <i>What, if anything, is already being done to address the risk?</i> | <i>Rate how well current policies address the risk (0-5)</i> | <i>Choose from the drop-down menu</i> | <i>Rate the probability of the risk occurring (1-5)</i> | <i>Rate the main impact of the risk event (1-5)</i> | <i>Rank the risk based on: likelihood multiplied by impact (0-25)</i> |
| Parents or community members push back against district curriculum or assignment | Curriculum & Instruction | District "curriculum challenge" policy | 2 | Reduce Impact | 5 | 3 | 15 |
| Teacher shares personal views that go against district policy or are defamatory to the district | Human Resources | Employee Handbook - disciplinary procedures | 4 | Avoid Risk | 3 | 4 | 12 |
| Community member creates a social media group criticizing a school district position | External Relations | None | 0 | Reduce Impact | 3 | 3 | 9 |
| | | | | | | | 0 |
| | | | | | | | 0 |
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| | | | | | | | 0 |
| | | | | | | | 0 |

5 Minute Independent Exercise

Start Using EAB's Flashpoint Risk Register:

1 **Click the links in the chat** to download EAB's Risk Register Template and Guide for Identifying Flashpoint Risks.

2 **Begin Step 1 in the Risk Register**, referring to the Guide for Identifying Risks for examples.

This does not need to be exhaustive, but a starting point.

Only focus on Step 1 for now.

| Step 1: Identify Risks | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Risk | Category | Existence |
| <i>What is the risk itself? Be concise but include enough detail about possible causes to clearly understand the risk.</i> | <i>Choose from the drop-down menu</i> | <i>What is the risk being</i> |
| Parents or community members push back against district curriculum or assignment | Curriculum & Instruction | District |
| Teacher shares personal views that go against district policy or are defamatory to the district | Human Resources | Employee |
| Community member creates a social media group criticizing a school district position | External Relations | None |
| 11 | | |
| 12 | | |
| 13 | | |
| 14 | | |
| 15 | | |
| 16 | | |
| 17 | | |

Ready... Accessibility: Invert colors... Guide to Tool Risk Register Step 2 - Goal for Risk Step 3 - Likelihood

Score Flashpoint Risks with an Objective Scale



Likelihood

The chance of a risk occurring at your district, rated from 1-5

Questions to consider:

- *How likely is it that the risk will occur?*
- *Could this risk occur more than once in a school year?*
- *Have you noticed any increasing trends locally related to the risk?*



Impact

The outcome of a flashpoint affecting your district's mission, strategic plan, or operations, rated from 1-5

Questions to consider:

- *How would this impact students in the district?*
- *How would this risk affect district processes, budget?*
- *What are the legal consequences of the risk?*
- *How would the risk impact the districts reputation?*



Risk Score

Risk's magnitude, from 1-25, a combination of likelihood and impact

Prioritize Flashpoint Risks Based on Score

Risk Register Forces Schools to Address Most Pressing Risks First

Risk Register Ranked by Scores

| Risk | Score |
|---|-------|
| Parents push back against district curriculum | 16 |
| Teacher shares personal views that go against district policy | 15 |
| Student PII unintentionally shared publicly | 8 |
| Community member criticizes school district position online | 8 |
| Students damage property during athletic event | 3 |

Sort from Highest to Lowest

Use the filter button to sort risks by score

Identify Overlooked Risks

- Did a risk score higher than you thought it would?
- Are there no existing policies to address the risk?



5 Minute Independent Exercise

Practice Scoring Flashpoint Risks:

- 1 **Begin completing Steps 2 and 3** in the Flashpoint Risk Register.
- 2 **Practice sorting risks** by Category, Goal, or Score using the sort function.

| Step 2: Determine Current Status of Risks | | | Step 3: Rate Likelihood, Impact for Total Risk Score | | | |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| Existing Policies, Responses | Current Response Effectiveness | Goal for Risk | Likelihood | Impact | Risk Score | |
| <i>What, if anything, is already being done to address the risk?</i> | <i>Rate how well current policies address the risk (0-5)</i> | <i>Choose from the drop-down menu</i> | <i>Rate the probability of the risk occurring (1-5)</i> | <i>Rate the main impact of the risk event (1-5)</i> | <i>Rank the risk based on: likelihood multiplied by impact (0-25)</i> | |
| District "curriculum challenge" policy | 2 | Reduce Impact | 5 | 3 | 15 | |
| Employee Handbook - disciplinary procedures | 4 | Avoid Risk | 3 | 4 | 12 | |
| None | 0 | Reduce Impact | 3 | 3 | 9 | |
| | | | | | 0 | |
| | | | | | 0 | |
| | | | | | 0 | |
| | | | | | 0 | |
| | | | | | 0 | |
| | | | | | 0 | |
| | | | | | 0 | |

3 - Likelihood Score Scale | Step 3 - Impact Score Scale | Drop-Down Menu | (+)

Decentralized Information Hinders Risk Mitigation

Many Districts Have Access to Potentially Useful Risk ID Information



Curriculum and Instruction

"A teacher is requesting to teach a book that may be controversial."



Facilities & Operations

"We have a space request from a local activist group."



Information Technology

"Traffic on our website spiked today, we might want to check socials."



Health Services

"We've seen an uptick in families requesting mental health support for their students."

...But Uncertainty and Confusion Hinder Consistent Risk Elevation

- ▶ *"I'm not sure that this matters... is it worth raising this with someone?"*
- ▶ *"Who should I tell? I'm not sure who handles stuff like this."*
- ▶ *"I'm sure someone else noticed and informed who needs to know."*



Actionable info gets lost without established expectations on when and how to elevate potential risks

Create a Dedicated Space for In-Person Risk Discussions

District Flashpoint Risk Team



Purpose

Keep pulse on climate and catch potential flashpoints early



Membership

Members from a wide variety of district departments, school leadership teams



Logistics

1 meeting per month, with dates set well in advance to minimize conflicts



Structure

Superintendent facilitates open discussion that promotes honest dialogue about emerging concerns

Set Agenda Composed of Three Simple Questions

- 1** *How is my current work affecting the district climate for students?*
- 2** *Are there any national or local issues that may disrupt the district or school climates?*
- 3** *Are there data patterns that we all need to address together?*

Resource Spotlight: Flashpoint Risk Team Guidelines ³⁰

District Leadership Forum

Guidelines for Forming a Flashpoint Risk Team

District leaders and staff with information on potential flashpoints often lack clear guidelines on where or to whom to elevate concerns. Gather early intel from across the district by deploying a flashpoint risk team to establish upward risk updates and limit the impact of potential incidents.

Launch a flashpoint risk team in your district by following these four steps.

Step 1: Determine Team Composition

Include 8-10 district leaders from a range of departments:

- Student health services
- Facilities & operations
- Information technology
- Communication & community relations
- Legal counsel
- Diversity, equity, inclusion
- Curriculum & instruction
- (optional) Parent-teacher association

› Consider whether you'll allow department leads to nominate members.

Step 2: Set Meeting Frequency

EAB recommends meeting at least once a month for 1 hour. Choose a meeting frequency and length that maintains participants' interest, ensures enough time for discussion, and allows for follow-up work to be completed between gatherings.

› Consider the size of your flashpoint risk team in choosing meeting frequency, as larger teams may require meetings set further in advance to minimize conflicts.

Step 3: Set Meeting Agenda

In each meeting, ask the same questions focused on data-driven, trending issues and district initiatives. This will reduce preparation time and incentivize participation from team members. Example agenda setting topics and questions:

- Why has there been an increase in [student discipline write-ups these past 3 weeks]?
- The district central office has documented [7 FOIA requests from one advocacy group].
- What topics may be in the spotlight for this month's board meeting?
- Are there any risks that are missing from our Risk Register?

› Consider questions about trending issues with students and how current initiatives or upcoming decisions may disrupt the district climate.

Step 4: Assign Post-Meeting Responsibilities

Delegate ownership of the following tasks to team members:

- Updating and owning the Risk Register
- Scheduling and sending reminders for the next climate risk team meeting

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1

Revised 7/2022 to add section on a meeting team plan "owners" and a variety of the end of the page. Districts from the end of the page.

eab.com

Manage District Risk Impact with Climate Risk Team Discussions



Hold meetings once a month to proactively track emerging concerns



Standardize meeting agendas to focus discussions on data-driven trends



Coordinate response tasks with team members before flashpoints ignite

Key Takeaways from Today's Workshop



Districts often overlook flashpoint risks

Avoid limited views of flashpoint risks by creating a comprehensive risk register or list of identified risks



Rank flashpoints with an objective scoring system to limit bias

Centralize flashpoint risk identification by using the register to identify, score, and prioritize the most likely and impactful risks without bias

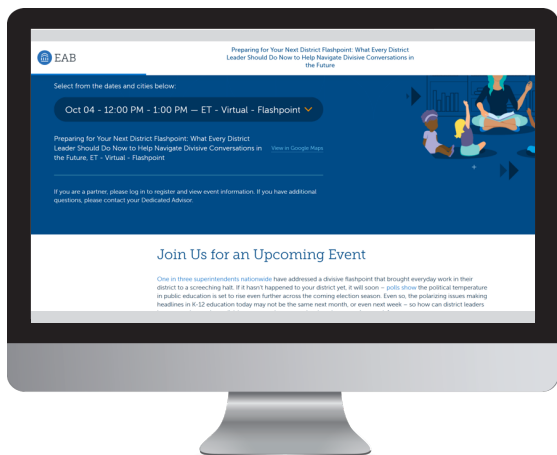


Source flashpoint risks with a District Flashpoint Risk Team

Organize flashpoint response with EAB's risk register to address the most pressing flashpoint risks and keep "clear" problems from spiraling into chaos

Join Us for Session 2

Best-Practice Communications for Navigating Divisive Conversations



October 18th or 21st, 12-1pm ET

Build a Flashpoint Communications Package That Includes:

- **Flashpoint Statement Checklist**
Find out what is essential to an error-free public statement
- **Media Communications Guide**
Learn how to vet reporters, stay on topic, and answer tough questions
- **Tips for Divisive Conversations**
Read curated talking points to navigate divisive conversations