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Leadership Edge Walking in Zones and Times of Tension

Ken Mitchell, EdD

Editor

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In 2002, Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky wrote, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, a work whose ideas have endured for decades. Describing leadership as a “perilous enterprise,” the authors offered their advice in a post 9-11 period. They described a world in which “the risk of leadership is both more important and more complicated than ever before. Globalization of the economy, the necessary interaction of cultures and ready access to information and communication through the Internet make interdependence palpable” (p. 4). Such contextual challenges - globalization, cross-cultural tensions, and the effects of the Internet and related digital technologies of today—have shapeshifted into forms that these authors may not have imagined.

The claim that one’s times are “more complicated than ever” has been said before and will be said again. These are indeed complex and tense times for leaders. Yet, over the past 75 years and since the post-WWII expansion of public schools, school leaders have experienced external political and socio-cultural pressures: McCarthyism, the Cold War, Vietnam War protests, Civil Rights, climate change, 9-11, social media, pandemics, school shootings, and so much more.

In recent years, we have seen an intensity of opposition to any instruction or materials related to diversity, equity, inclusion, gender identity, socio-emotional support, climate change, or ignominious historical events, such as slavery or the mistreatment of people of color, immigrants, and indigenous people.

Across the nation, governors and legislatures have banned content and materials related to African American studies, cultural or socioeconomic diversity, societal and economic inequities, and topics related to gender identity. Schools have become contested spaces and zones of tension, providing easy access to those seeking platforms for their political agendas.

Schools and board meetings have become battlegrounds in today’s culture wars. Leaders, trapped in these zones, strive to find ways to advance the work of their schools without compromising their values or abandoning evidence-informed curricular content or retreating from best practice. Heifetz and Linsky’s sub-title, “... *Staying Alive through the Dangers of Learning*,” implies that while the work is challenging and sometimes dangerous, leaders need to survive to achieve their missions.

According to the *Ecological Society of America*, bordering ecosystems can be in tension with each other, such as fresh and saltwater bodies or woodlands and pastures. Yet at the edge of these systems, ecotones emerge, forming border zones where convergence leads to newly formed eco-communities in which biodiversity is rich and resilience is strong. When today's leaders examine and assess the political, cultural, and perhaps pedagogical tensions and "ecosystems" within the larger school community, they can be challenged to see points of convergence. Yet such points are there and often in abundance.

To "stay alive" without compromising the mission of the schools, today's school leader must also become an "edge-walker." Beyond seeing the tensions and understanding the roots of them, the edge-walking leader adheres to morally defensible leadership principles while deploying skills for leading and surviving. These include an agility for stepping in and out of these zones of tension.

When I first became an administrator, my teacher colleagues half-jokingly teased that I was going to the "dark side." And once crossing over, I had an initial crisis of alienation and loss of identity – no longer a teacher but lacking the confidence that I would eventually need to lead. Entering a liminal space, I would have to grow into my new roles whatever form that would take.

Having been a teacher for 13 years and active in union leadership, I had a depth of experience. Similarly, serving as a principal for 15 years and as a union president in two districts, I had experience with school boards. I had attended decades of meetings, negotiated multiple contracts, and encountered diverse and changing perspectives that required adaptability. My "edge walking" skills and confidence developed through learning that much of the work is about building bridges

across these zones of tensions through partnerships built on transparency and an intentionality to dismantle rather than construct barriers.

In today's culture wars, those locked into a rigid conformity stay within their own zones. Without the edge walkers, distance between positions—personally, socially, and culturally—will continue to widen. Yet within such expanses, like the ecotones where different ecosystems converge, there is a potential to reduce divides.

Schools are socio-cultural micro-systems of a community. There are indeed centers within these systems—points of convergence where members of the "separate" systems can engage with, learn from, and support others across the bordered systems without surrendering their values. Such convergence has the potential for redefining the center, making it a place that will serve the interests of all – students and the communities into which they will be living.

It is the work of today's school leader that can move community members from their separate eco-systems to an acknowledgment that there are points of convergence to benefit all. Such a movement is not a concession or an abandonment of one's beliefs; it is an acceptance that those with diverse perspectives about life and society can indeed find common ground to benefit all of us.

The fall 2024 issue of the *AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice* is about such work, specifically as it relates to the superintendency. Rohde-Collins and Anglum in "Fostering Stronger Superintendent-School Board Relations" examine the work of the governance team, emphasizing the importance of superintendent-board relationships, especially in today's zones of tension. The authors provide readers with suggestions on how to

build relationships and reduce conflict. Interest convergence related to a district’s mission, vision, and student needs has the potential to be a unifying force across a community’s constituent “eco-systems.” (The piece is also loaded with statistics about the changing state of the superintendency which reflect the rapidly emerging diversity across the nation’s schools.)

Alberto and Lassiter’s study of Latinx superintendents, “Voices of Influence: How Verbal Persuasion Shapes Latinx Superintendent’s Careers,” first examines the contrast between the small number of Latino school superintendents to the overall school leadership population and Latinx student population: “According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, Latinx student enrollment rose from 23 percent in fall 2010 to 28 percent in fall 2021 (NCES, 2023). Latinx now represent the largest minority group in the country, with projections indicating that their numbers will continue to grow in the years ahead (Vespa et al., 2020).”

The researchers explored “the role of self-efficacy in the motivation to aspire to and ultimately attain leadership positions, such as the superintendency and the assistant superintendency, among Latinx school administrators in NY/NJ.” The findings revealed the effectiveness of encouragement from others—via verbal persuasion—in getting aspiring leaders to move to roles with greater responsibility. Finding leaders from diverse backgrounds who are culturally attuned to the needs of students is another form of leading for convergence.

In their commentary, “Connecting the Courtroom to the Classroom: How Educators Can Claim Their Agency through Legal Literacy,” Christopher Thomas of the University of Florida and Jamie Kudlats of University of North Carolina at Charlotte, decry a lack of legal literacy by educators and encourage efforts to counter the deficit. The

authors are concerned that in the past few years in over 20 states, there has been a proliferation of laws or policies that they define as “educational gag orders.” These laws place restrictions on instruction and materials related to “potentially divisive” topics. Some of the legal language used in such legislation is intentionally ambiguous, creating gray areas that fail to provide a solid legal basis for compliance but prevail through innuendo that intimidates and discourages educators from teaching or discussing a wide array of controversial topics that have been common in classrooms where critical thinking is encouraged.

The authors develop a comprehensive and practical set of suggestions for promoting legal literacy. These include “... attitudes such as courage and commitments to fairness, justice, and equality, along with skills like problem-solving, collaboration, legal research, and communication. Legally literate educators are empowered to navigate education law, ensuring legal compliance and allowing them to exercise their discretion to advance their educational aims.”

Superintendents reading the piece might consider how they can enhance legal literacy of teachers and school leaders that builds confidence and serves to protect the academic integrity of the instructional program. Such learning can also be a dose of prevention. According to the authors, “Legally literate educators are empowered to navigate education law, ensuring legal compliance and allowing them to exercise their discretion to advance their educational aims.”

Superintendents as edge walkers in contested spaces and zones of tension navigate and bring others into the work. They lead by seeking convergence through partnerships but also by encouraging future leaders sitting outside the margins to take their place or educating those working within the system to

better understand the limits as well as the potential of the tensions. Such work has the potential to help leaders “stay alive” to

accomplish the mission set before them in these very complex and contentious times.

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Fostering Stronger Superintendent-School Board Relations

Dorothy Rohde-Collins, MEd
Doctoral Candidate
School of Education
Saint Louis University
St. Louis, MO

J. Cameron Anglum, PhD
Assistant Professor
School of Education
Saint Lewis University
St. Louis, MO

Abstract

This commentary explores the governance partnership between the board of education and the superintendent, a relationship that sets the tone for the leadership and administration of the entire school district. Though important during more conventional times, the establishment of strong rapport between board members and the superintendent now warrants particular attention amid the backdrop of increasing turnover of district leadership and a politically charged atmosphere around education policy. Dorothy Rohde-Collins and J. Cameron Anglum identify contemporary trends in the superintendency and public school boards, which inform six strategies district leaders, including new and returning superintendents, might pursue to strengthen their governance teams.

Key Words

school district governance, superintendents, school boards, educator turnover, leadership diversity, board president

Introduction

At their very core, school districts are built on relationships. Nearly 50 million people, or one-sixth of the United States population, spend portions of their weekdays in a school either as staff or student (NCES, 2022; U.S. Census, 2023). School-based relationships, like those between students, families, and staff, easily come to mind, but other relationships may be less obvious.

The governance partnership between the board of education and the district's superintendent represents one such example and is a relationship which sets the tone for the entire school district (Hackett, 2015). It might be considered the most important relationship of all, yet it receives relatively little attention in scholarly literature or professional development, leaving each party on an island of governance when a team approach likely would benefit all involved.

Too often, the relationship between members of the governance team is reduced to a division of labor, outlining board and superintendent responsibilities with an emphasis on policy and oversight. However, "governance is not just passing policies; it is what boards and superintendents do together and how they do it" (Campbell & Fullan, 2019, p. 16).

Neither the board nor the superintendent directly carries out the district's mission of education. Instead, they set high expectations for student learning and academic achievement (Iowa Association of School Boards, 2007) and work "through" the organization (Rice et al., 2000, p. 62) to achieve their goals. For this reason, a healthy, productive, and effective relationship between the board and the superintendent represents a high-impact mechanism to improve district outcomes.

In this piece, we highlight several contemporary issues in educational practice which pose particular challenges to effective school district leadership, including those amplified in the COVID-19 era. We also offer several recommendations geared to improve school governance, focusing on the relationships between school superintendents, school boards, and district administration.

Representation of School District Leadership

A school district's ultimate goal is to provide high quality educational experiences for all students. Therefore, it is important to consider differences between the people who make policy and those who experience them, particularly in light of some potentially problematic trends in public school employment.

Superintendent and school board member demographic characteristics often do not reflect those of their students and teachers across race, ethnicity, and gender. In 2021, 54.8% of students identified in a nonwhite racial/ethnic group, sharp growth from 35.2% in 1995, primarily due to an expanding Hispanic student population (NCES, 2022). The teacher workforce has become more racially and ethnically diverse over time (20.1% nonwhite in 2021 relative to 13.5% nonwhite three decades prior) but has failed to keep pace with the rapid diversification of the nation's public school students.

Meanwhile, only 8.2% of superintendents (Grogan & Nash, 2021) and 22% of board members are nonwhite (National School Boards Association, 2018). Though the superintendency is slowly diversifying (only 5% identified in a nonwhite category in 2000), a staggering nearly sevenfold discrepancy

between superintendent and student racial and ethnic diversity remains.

Similar imbalances persist along gender lines as well, which run counter to the roughly 50-50 split among students. First, in 2022-23, 72% of superintendents identified as male. In addition, no state in the country employs more female superintendents than male superintendents and the gender disparity ranges from nearly non-existent in Vermont to a ninefold difference in Utah (White, 2023).

The teacher labor force is also unbalanced; only here do females predominate. It has become increasingly female, growing from 72% three decades ago to 77% today (NCES, 2022). Conversely, board gender representation is much more even. Approximately 50% of board members identify as female (Blissett & Alsbury, 2018), important given research that links larger female board representation with a greater likelihood of female superintendent hiring, both today (National School Boards Association, 2020) and historically (Marietti & Stout, 1994).

Why might superintendent and school board member demographic characteristics lead to successful school environments? Though 90% of all superintendents say it is important or very important to “lead conversations about race” in their districts, one in five superintendents state they are *not sufficiently* prepared to do so.

Furthermore, among White superintendents one in five indicated they are *not at all* prepared in this area (Tienken, 2021). The benefits of greater Latino/a, Hispanic, and Black school board representation include more diverse racial and ethnic representation among school administrators, district leaders, and teachers (Blissett & Alsbury, 2018), improved student academic performance among students

from underrepresented racial groups (Kogan et al., 2021; Fischer, 2023), increased financial investment in schools (Fischer, 2023), and reduced teacher turnover (Fischer, 2023).

A quickly expanding research base (e.g., Gershenson et al., 2022; Grissom & Keiser, 2011) also supports the positive effects of diversity among both teachers and school and district leaders in improving student outcomes, especially among Black students and educators. This scholarship is particularly important in the aftermath of the pandemic, as achievement gaps between racial groups have widened (Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2023).

Instability in School District Leadership

The pandemic has also impacted the stability of both superintendents and school board members, reinforcing the urgency of strong relationship building. Superintendent turnover spiked significantly over the past three years; for example, 20.4% more superintendents left their positions between the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years as compared to those who left in the year just prior (White, 2023).

While recent superintendent turnover figures range from as low as 3.2% in Oklahoma to as high as 35.9% in Alaska, the vast majority of states experience turnover ranging from one in ten to one in four superintendents annually, a total exceeding 2,000 across the nation each year.

Far less is known about school board turnover trends, but the data that does exist is concerning. In one recent survey of school board members, only 38% indicated they are planning to run for reelection, a substantial decrease from the 2016 election when 70% of incumbents sought re-election (Ashley & Douglass, 2022). Board members who decide against seeking another term frequently cite a

need to focus on other aspects of their life (e.g., personal, family, business) or the lack of monetary compensation as justification.

School board turnover also may be linked to political or apolitical rationales, a key distinction in an era increasingly characterized by partisan policy debates. Even though most school board elections are non-partisan, school governance is and has always been political (Alsbury, 2014), and politically linked board member turnover can lead to an increased chance of subsequent superintendent instability (Alsbury, 2008).

In recent years, political debates have entered the world of public education more frequently, exemplified through pandemic-era contention regarding school reopening (Singer et al., 2023), curricula including Critical Race Theory (Ray & Gibbons, 2021), and district book bans (Collins, 2023; Kim, 2022), which have magnified the spotlight on school boards and superintendents.

While it is always appropriate to prioritize building strong relationships among members of the governance team, establishing strong rapport may now be especially critical amid the backdrop of increasing turnover of district leadership and a politically charged atmosphere around education policy.

Advancing Superintendent-School Board Relationships

In this context, we highlight six strategies district leaders, including new and returning superintendents, might pursue to strengthen the governance team.

- **Work together with the board to develop trust, establish role clarity, generate shared norms and beliefs, and create clear and consistent communication procedures (NSBA, 2006).** This pursuit can begin with a governance retreat to

include the superintendent, all board members, and the superintendent's cabinet or other high-level administrators. Consider holding the retreat soon after a new superintendent is installed and annually thereafter.

Retreats present a worthwhile opportunity to develop a shared vision, identify common values, and set goals for the upcoming year. Throughout this work, maintain a focus on the larger community. Recall that the district's mission does not merely reflect the wishes of the governance team; instead, it must also incorporate the experiences and desires of students, families, teachers, and other community stakeholders.

- **Remember that relationships are built among individuals.** While the official work of the governance team typically occurs in board meetings, rigid public meeting protocols may fail to foster robust relationship building opportunities. As such, it is important to dedicate time to this endeavor outside official meetings. The governance team can encourage fellowship by sharing a meal together before board meetings, engaging one-on-one over coffee, or attending professional development together.

The superintendent should also participate in these activities including scheduling regular meetings with each board member individually. Additionally, the superintendent must not apply a one-size-fits-all approach to all board members. Board members are unique individuals with their own goals, priorities, and preferences. It is incumbent upon the superintendent to identify these differences and, along with the support of the board president, find a way to weave them together to pursue shared goals. Promoting the importance of a

healthy board and facilitating its development ultimately helps the superintendent to be more successful; board conflict often decreases board effectiveness, contributing to negative superintendent relationships (Grissom, 2014).

- **Prioritize establishing strong board president-superintendent relationships.**

While the superintendent must have a trusting relationship with each individual board member, their interactions with the board president are unique. In addition to the responsibilities that all board members hold, the board president also serves as a spokesperson and liaison for the entire board.

As the leaders of both district governance (board president) and operations (superintendent), they must each place a high priority on developing and maintaining healthy communication. This includes meeting regularly to plan, monitor, and implement district strategy; proactively address internal issues with the board; identify patterns of concern in stakeholder relationships; and determine professional development goals for the governance team.

The superintendent may be tempted to focus their time and attention on the board president, especially if the board is large, delegating board relations and communications to the president, this strategy may ultimately backfire. Although the board is often thought of as a singular entity, it is comprised of individuals and all board members deserve meaningful access to the superintendent.

- **Don't underestimate the importance of the board meeting.** The school board serves a critical purpose in local government, one carried out publicly

through the school board meeting. Although formal and ritualistic, board meetings blend the bureaucratic with the democratic creating the “big picture organizational symbols, identities, and boundaries” (Kenney, 2020, p. 731) that allow the district to sustain itself over time.

District policies cannot be extricated from the meetings in which they are produced; the procedures of a board meeting shape both the meaning and the consequences of policy (Kaufman, 2001). Over the course of the year, the meeting agenda and minutes should demonstrate the district's priorities and honestly portray the district's challenges and successes.

- **Keep the board informed.** One of the superintendent's main responsibilities is to provide “thorough and objective data to support recommendations and ultimate decisions for authorizing an allocation of resources,” (Balch & Adamson, 2018, p. 61) yet many board members exhibit inaccurate knowledge of district conditions (Shober & Hartney, 2014).

It is critical that superintendents not only provide accurate information to board members but that they also provide ample time for questions, responding with transparency and honesty.

The superintendent cannot allow themselves or other administrators to view questions or requests for information as cumbersome; instead, they offer valuable opportunities to gauge board member engagement and identify priorities.

In the event board members lose sight of their governance role and use these queries to micromanage, the superintendent and board president should work together to redraw attention to governance.

- **Build political skill.** As a person with high standing in the district and community, politics represent a mandatory component of a superintendent's job (Melton et al., 2019). Rather than shy away from these responsibilities, the superintendent should be proactive and seek opportunities to build relationships and maneuver between groups of stakeholders.

This will prove to be especially useful in times of controversy. While little scholarly research exists on how school boards and superintendents navigate times of crisis, maintaining solid relationships certainly offers a strong initial foundation. Board members and superintendents must recognize they are all on the same team and cannot permit politics as an entry point to foster division.

At first glance, this list may seem daunting. The role of superintendent is demanding and requires that time be allocated across all district functions from academics to public relations.

While some may view the board as something to be managed or appeased, it is critical that it be given appropriate time and attention. In fact, a survey of 1,218 superintendents in 45 states revealed board relations to be the fourth most time-consuming issue, only trailing issues of school finance, personnel management, and conflict resolution (Tienken, 2021).

And that is time well spent. The relationships formed between superintendents and their school boards have been found to predict superintendent longevity—both positively and negatively.

In rural district case studies, for example, Kamrath (2022) found stable school boards contributed to a stable superintendency, including defining and maintaining respective roles and responsibilities. Conversely, superintendent turnover increased in board contexts of micromanaging and conflicting leadership philosophies and practices.

Conclusion

Though research examining superintendents and school boards still lags scholarship focused on teachers and principals, there exists a wealth of experience from tens of thousands of such school leaders across the country from which to draw promising lessons.

On the other hand, increased superintendent and board member turnover and a persistent lack of racial, ethnic, and gender representation among those leaders challenges their collective leadership during an era of heightened political tension in education policy.

In this vein, scholars in the fields of education, public policy, and political science should consider turning increased attention to matters of school district governance, elevating the voices and experiences of district leaders.

Author Biographies

Dorothy Rohde-Collins is a PhD candidate in education policy and equity at Saint Louis University. She served as president of the board of education for Saint Louis Public Schools from 2018 to 2021. E-mail: dorothy.rohdecollins@slu.edu

J. Cameron Anglum is an assistant professor at the Lehigh University College of Education. Anglum's research is focused on educator labor markets and school finance, concentrating on policy and program effects experienced by underserved students, educators, schools, and their communities. E-mail: jca424@lehigh.edu

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Voices of Influence: How Verbal Persuasion Shapes Latinx Superintendent's Careers

Ligia Alberto, EdD
Assistant Professor
School of Education
University of North Carolina, Wilmington
Wilmington, North Carolina

Amber Lassiter, EdD
Assistant Professor
School of Education
Felician University
Rutherford, NJ

Abstract

This study explores the impact of self-efficacy, with a specific focus on verbal persuasion, on the career trajectories of Latinx school administrators. Grounded in Bandura's (1986) theory of self-efficacy, the research investigates how verbal persuasion has influenced the paths of Latinx school administrators toward achieving top leadership roles. By contributing to the literature on educational leadership, this study offers practical insights for promoting diverse leadership within school settings.

Key Words

Latinx school administrators, self-efficacy theory, verbal persuasion, career advancement

Introduction

In the United States, Latino school superintendents are rare, constituting only a small fraction of the overall school leadership population. Conversely, the Latinx student population within K–12 education is steadily increasing nationwide. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, Latinx student enrollment rose from 23 percent in fall 2010 to 28 percent in fall 2021 (NCES, 2023). Latinx now represent the largest minority group in the country, with projections indicating that their numbers will continue to grow in the years ahead (Vespa et al., 2020).

The State of School Diversity in the United States report released by the U.S. Department of Education (2023) highlighted the importance of increasing the number of Latinx school teachers and school administrators of color: “Finding effective ways to recruit, prepare, and retain diverse educators is therefore key to supporting better outcomes for students of color” (p. 9).

Despite their underrepresentation, some Latinx school leaders have ascended to central office administration roles, including superintendent or assistant superintendent. This research investigates the influence of self-efficacy on the motivation and career success of Latinx leaders.

Purpose

This study examined the role of self-efficacy in the motivation to aspire to and ultimately attain leadership positions, such as the superintendency and the assistant superintendency, among Latinx school administrators in NY/NJ.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- 1) How does self-efficacy affect the performance and motivation of school leaders?
- 2) What is the role of verbal persuasion in seeking and attaining leadership positions?

Conceptual Framework

Albert Bandura (1986), within the framework of social-cognitive theory, conceptualized self-efficacy as the way people believe in their ability to achieve or perform a task. In his work, he identified four ways people achieve self-efficacy: enacted attainment, vicarious experience, physiological state, and verbal persuasion.

Enacted attainment refers to how positive or negative experiences influence people’s ability to perform tasks. Vicarious experience is related to how observing similar people perform successfully can increase self-perceptions of efficacy based on the assumption that if one can achieve, others can as well. Physiological state refers to how people rely on their emotions to judge their capabilities. Additionally, verbal persuasion refers to the encouragement of others to make people believe they can perform a task.

Verbal persuasion is enhanced when the person with performance experience is encouraging, positively affecting the person receiving the encouragement. According to Bandura (1986), “People who are encouraged that they possess the capabilities to master given tasks are likely to mobilize greater sustained effort than if they harbor self-doubts” (p. 400). Situmorang (2022) studied 42 nursing students by giving them pre- and post-tests to measure whether verbal persuasion increased their self-confidence and improved their academic English test scores. In addition, the students also completed a written reflection to

measure how their teachers' verbal persuasion influenced their motivation to achieve.

The study showed that the students had higher scores when the teacher used verbal persuasion in each class to encourage them. Lamarche et al. (2013) measured the ability of 68 healthy young adults to complete a tandem eight-minute walk. Their findings demonstrated that verbal persuasion can influence task choice. In their study, the participants had to complete a pre-feedback tandem walk. After this walk, the participants were divided into poor and good feedback groups.

All participants in the good and poor feedback groups reported that they believed the feedback provided to them. Specifically, poor feedback was associated with choosing the least challenging task, while the participants in the good feedback group were more likely to choose the most challenging task.

Zhang et al. (2022) investigated the influence of feedback language, including emotional support and constructive feedback on peers, by analyzing data from an online household sector innovation community that provides free access for registered members to release their ideas and designs.

The data were collected over 18 months, from May 2020 to October 2021. The researchers found that emotional approval positively influenced peer idea contributions, especially if the encouragement came from someone of higher status.

The researchers analyzed over 30,526 ideas and 90,813 comments. Their findings revealed that interactions with emotional approval and status positively affected the individuals' idea contributions. Their findings confirmed the crucial role of verbal persuasion in stimulating the participants' innovation and contribution to the website.

Methodology

This study was designed to explore the participants' lived experiences. For that reason, a qualitative methodology was considered the most appropriate (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 1998, 2009). A narrative research design was used. Narrative inquiry collects people's stories, narratives, or descriptions to understand their lived experiences (Clandinin, 2007).

Narrative research is focused on interpreting the participant's perspective through the lens of a framework (Wertz et al., 2011). Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured, open-ended, face-to-face interviews. Responses to the interview questions were recorded using an audio tape device after obtaining permission from the participants. Before the interviews, biographical questionnaires were used to gather general descriptive information about the participants.

Participants

To complete this study, a solicitation letter was sent to the respective chapters of the New Jersey and New York Association of Latino School Administrators. A solicitation flyer was posted on social media, and individual participants were also invited to participate. Participants had to meet specific criterion sample (Miles et al., 2020) to participate in the study:

1. Be of Hispanic/Latinx descent.
2. Have a NY/NJ school administrator certificate in NY/NJ.
3. Have attained an assistant superintendent/superintendent position in a public school in NJ/NY.

Sixteen participants met the qualifications and agreed to take part in the study (eight females and eight males). The data

showed that five participants were assistant superintendents, 11 were superintendents, three were between the ages of 30 and 40, seven were between 40 and 50, and six were between 50 and 60 years of age. Ten participants worked in urban districts, and six worked in

suburban districts. However, all participants had worked in urban districts at some point in their careers, working with predominantly minority students. Seven participants earned a doctorate, while nine had a master's degree.

Table 1

Characteristics of the Participants

#	State	Gender	School	Age	Position	Degree
P1	NY	Female	Urban	50–60	Assistant S.	Masters
P2	NJ	Female	Urban	50–60	Assistant S.	Doctorate
P3	NJ	Female	Urban	40–50	Assistant S.	Doctorate
P4	NY	Female	Urban	40–50	Assistant S.	Doctorate
P5	NJ	Male	Suburban	40–50	Superintendent	Doctorate
P6	NJ	Male	Urban	40–50	Superintendent	Doctorate
P7	NJ	Female	Suburban	50–60	Superintendent	Masters
P8	NJ	Female	Urban	50–60	Superintendent	Masters
P9	NJ	Male	Urban	40–50	Assistant S.	Masters
P10	NY	Male	Urban	30–40	Superintendent	Doctorate
P11	NY	Female	Suburban	50–60	Superintendent	Masters
P12	NJ	Male	Urban	40–50	Superintendent	Masters
P13	NJ	Male	Suburban	30–40	Superintendent	Doctorate
P14	NJ	Female	Urban	50–60	Superintendent	Doctorate
P15	NY	Male	Suburban	40–50	Superintendent	Masters
P16	NJ	Male	Suburban	40–50	Superintendent	Masters

Data analysis

The collected textual data were analyzed using a process that allowed the systematic analysis of sixteen transcripts. The **initial** step of the data analysis process involved performing transcript verification and formatting the interviews. **Second**, we read all the transcripts to comprehensively understand the participants' responses.

Re-reading the transcripts helped us identify the general concepts discussed by the participants, which were recorded in a reflective journal. **Third**, we imported the transcripts into Dovetails and performed initial coding, which involved bracketing text chunks and formulating representative terms (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A second cycle of codes using descriptive codes was then generated (Miles et al., 2020). The salient identified codes were self-efficacy and verbal persuasion.

Findings

The participants' experiences provided insight into how they became interested in the field of education, how they were praised for their work, how they were encouraged to pursue leadership programs, and how they knew when it was time to leave when they perceived they were not being supported or were passed over for promotions. Moreover, the findings show how self-efficacy, specifically verbal persuasion, led to career advancement opportunities that allowed them to reach the top leadership positions in school administration.

Entering the teaching profession

Fifteen of the 16 participants entered the leadership ranks after becoming teachers. The participants entered the teaching profession in multiple ways. Three participants knew they wanted to be teachers in high school and indicated having positive memories of teachers or counselors. For example, P8 said, "My teachers were encouraging. I always had a good relationship with my teachers." Similarly, P2 indicated, "I got very positive experiences ... I grew up in the schools where I now work, and the community was amazing ... my mom was friendly with the teachers because she was part of the community at the school."

However, some participants reported that they had negative experiences in high school. For example, P10 recalled, "All I heard out of this counselor's mouth was no, that I was not good enough for anything I wanted."

Additionally, inductive coding was used to formulate three themes associated with verbal persuasion: words of encouragement, praise and recognition of work, and intrinsic self-motivation.

Fourth, we created themes in Dovetails' node folder by (a) clicking on create, (b) selecting the node feature, and (c) typing the first theme in the pop-up window. Processes b and c were repeated when creating all themes. We coded the relevant participants' responses to the specific themes by (a) opening the first transcript, (b) selecting the relevant chunk of the participants' responses, and (c) coding the content to the selected node.

Finally, we repeated the process for all the transcripts and nodes, facilitating a systemic thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Wertz et al., 2011).

P7 shared a similar experience: My experience was negative ... My guidance counselor said to me ‘Perhaps you should not consider college and you should consider more of a technical school or a clerical school and going to, you know, maybe secretarial school’ (counselor) which is nothing wrong...we need great secretaries and things like that. But it wasn’t something that I wanted to do. I wanted to pursue college. So, I didn’t apply to those schools that she said. And one of my aunts actually helped me a little bit in terms of trying to navigate the college application.

Other participants did not consider education, as they wanted to pursue other careers. However, they realized they wanted to help children and eventually changed their careers to education.

P13 changed his mind after his first year in college: It was after my first year in college. I was a criminal justice major. I started to reflect on some of the experiences I had in high school, where I saw a lot of students that look like me that were ending up either in jail or they were ending up getting shot and killed. And so, I really wanted to do something outside of criminal justice because I didn’t want to be sort of like, like dealing with the byproduct of, of what happens in a society when students don’t have access to opportunities and resources ... I worked as a camp counselor and then that’s what started to change my, my view on what I wanted to do as a career.

Praising hard work

One of the salient themes was that participants recalled receiving verbal persuasion in their careers related to their work ethic. They had a strong desire to learn and frequently went above and beyond their responsibilities. P1 stated, “My very first year, my principal came to the classroom and said, ‘you are putting the work in, and I like what I see. I want to make your room a lab site.’” Her principal took an interest in becoming her mentor, and ultimately, she was promoted to become a vice-principal in that school.

P11 recalled being praised by her principal about her ability to work with children: Her principal said, “You know, I think you have really good skills. I think that you work really well with students.’ Similarly, P8 said she was praised for her skills by her supervisor and told about her potential. She remembered her supervisor telling her “No, no, you need to get out of the classroom. You’re a shining star, you need to shine.” Not only supervisors but also peers noticed the participants’ talents. This recognition motivated them to take on more leadership duties in their schools. For example, P4 shared that she started taking on more leadership duties to help her school operate more efficiently. She stated, “My colleagues would frequently nominate me to serve in various leadership roles in our building. I accepted the leadership roles because I just wanted to help the school function better.”

P14 shared that while working as a reading coach, she was praised by her peers and school administrators for her ability to take the initiative and think outside of the box by strategically and creatively implementing a school-wide literacy initiative. She further explained, “I developed a reputation for finding a better way to help children learn and help support teachers embrace change” (P14)

Encouragement to seek advanced degrees

To become a public-school administrator in New York or New Jersey, educators must obtain a master's degree or complete a school leadership certification program to become certified. Most of the participants completed their master's degree while working as teachers. Seven participants were verbally persuaded to obtain their school leadership certification by someone in their schools, frequently their supervisor.

Although the participants were already taking on leadership duties in their schools, they only perceived themselves as a leader once it was mentioned to them, as noted by P9: My colleagues would say that I should become an administrator. At first, I thought they said it because I dressed professionally, always wearing a shirt, tie, and jacket. I thought maybe they think this because of the optics... My supervisor said 'you really need to consider this'... He said, 'you should also get your principal certificate' is what he said to me. I said, I don't want to be a principal. He said, 'listen I think you could do it.' So that's when I really started to think about it.

Similarly, P10 only perceived himself as a school leader once he was encouraged by his vice principal to obtain his school leadership certification: "My vice principal said, 'I think you have a future in administration.' That was the first time I ever thought about it."

Not all participants experienced verbal persuasion within their school organizations. Some exhibited an intrinsic high level of self-efficacy due to other experiences and encouragement outside of their schools. For example, P2 developed her self-efficacy through enacted attainment experiences. She was passionate about learning and began to increase her professional social networking group, which allowed her to facilitate professional development training.

As a result, she was motivated and inspired to obtain her credentials to become a school leader. P5 knew early on in his career that he wanted to be an administrator as a result of his personal motivation to provide for his family: I knew I always wanted to be a father and a husband, and I knew I wanted to be a provider. So, I knew I was going to take a path that was going to eventually get me to a point where I could earn the highest wage possible so that I could provide for my family and my future to the best degree possible. So, in the back of my mind, I always knew an administrative degree in education would have been my greater chance of earning the highest wage. So, when I became an educator, it was always with the expectation that at some point I would ascend through administration.

Knowing when to leave

In this study, the participants had the ability to self-identify when they should move to another district. Some participants had developed a high level of self-efficacy through their prior enacted attainment experiences and verbal persuasion from others. These experiences validated their abilities to leave the district and accept other opportunities.

For example, P7 resigned from her administrative position after advocating for higher pay while working as a director with many responsibilities explained that she started looking for another job and became an assistant superintendent and subsequently the superintendent in that district: The reason I left was because I did not feel that I was compensated fairly for my position ... So, I began to advocate to be compensated fairly. I started to look, for jobs ... actually, my current superintendent had reached out to me and said, 'I heard that you are great at what you do. Would you be interested in

meeting and learning about the position here and potentially applying?’ And that’s kind of how it happened.

Eight participants were passed over for leadership positions when there were positions available in their districts. However, they did not let that stop their determination to succeed as school leaders. When this happened to them, they had a strong sense of self-efficacy and were confident in their leadership abilities.

For example, P12 was passed over for a promotion in his district after he had tried to help the district. He immediately sought other opportunities and found a leadership position in another school. He described his experience: I felt I was the most qualified person ... I came to that interview, gave him my best, and had a vision for where we should go and how to unify everybody and the whole deal. And they just passed, and I said, OK, that means you don’t believe in me. I didn’t have anybody come back and give me any feedback ... and that’s when I started looking, and that’s when I got the job with the other district because there was a lack of care.

P9 was disappointed not to get the principal position he wanted, as he had been encouraged to apply for the position by his soon-to- retire principal, who had been his mentor and who had groomed him to take the position: “My heart sank when I was told ... unfortunately, they went with another candidate ... then I took a deep breath, I knew I had just to look out, you know, move on. So, it was tough.”

Mastered self-efficacy

When the male participants already held central office positions, they had mastered self-efficacy and were confident in their ability to lead schools. However, the data revealed that females still needed the validation of others. Seven of the eight male participants obtained their position as assistant superintendent or superintendent by leaving their previous districts. Additionally, they no longer needed verbal persuasion while seeking positions.

For example, P6 realized he could serve as a superintendent through the enacted attainment leadership duties he completed while working in a central office administrator position. He said, “It was the next logical advancement once I became assistant superintendent; I knew I wanted to be a superintendent” (P6).

P5 exhibited high self-efficacy when he decided to apply for two superintendent positions after being appointed interim assistant superintendent. He recalled, “I was doing the job anyway. I had spent enough time working in complex environments that I could do this wherever I go. So, I never doubted my ability to do the work” (P5).

P16 demonstrated high self-efficacy when he decided to apply to be superintendent after working in the central office as a business administrator. He shared the following experiences: You really just need to put yourself in other people’s shoes and determine how things are done. So, I did just that and I thought, ok, if I was the superintendent, I didn’t really know a lot about what the superintendent has to do other than just running the school, low and behold, there’s a lot more than just running the school. So, I thought if I could do that, then maybe I could do something really worthwhile. And do something to where we can improve the outcome for a lot of these students. (P16)

On the contrary, most of the females in this study received their big break from within their districts, as five were promoted to assistant superintendent or superintendent positions within their districts. Supervisors or board members recognized their talents and skillsets and encouraged them to apply for positions. For example, P3 shared, “I think matching the right leader to the need is why I was encouraged to apply.”

Similarly, P1 was encouraged to apply for an assistant superintendent position, but she declined the position twice before ultimately accepting to move to central office: At the time he asked me if I would be interested in moving forward into district office work ... I said no, twice. I turned it down twice. I did not want to leave my principalship when we had that conversation. Then my superintendent said you can take the body of work you have done in your school and begin to translate it throughout the district.

Another example of the need for validation and verbal persuasion was presented by P14. She was already working as an assistant superintendent and had a strong desire to become a superintendent. However, she indicated she needed the approval of her longtime mentor, who had already retired at the time she was offered the position of superintendent: The first thing I did, I called my mentor and said, do you think I should apply for it?” I won’t do it unless I have your blessing... she said, ‘Your madrina (god-mother) is giving you her blessing ... I think you are gonna be good there. I think that you can do it. I think that you can get that job. I think you have good experience. I’m giving you permission. Go.’ Cause I wouldn’t leave unless she told me that I was good. (P14)

Discussion

The study’s findings demonstrated how verbal persuasion increased the participants’ self-efficacy levels. Verbal persuasion included positive feedback and encouragement from others, such as praising their work ethic, encouraging them to obtain their school leadership credentials, and encouraging them to apply for and accept leadership positions.

As a result of verbal persuasion, the participants were able to believe in themselves and their abilities to teach and consequently become school leaders. Self-efficacy was a critical factor in motivating the participants to pursue career paths toward becoming assistant superintendents/ superintendents. Some participants had a stronger sense of self-efficacy due to their enacted attainment of leadership opportunities, which produces the highest level of self-efficacy. In other words, these participants felt confident in their

capabilities to be effective leaders and did not need validation.

However, others needed validation to believe they could be effective school leaders. The male participants in this study exhibited stronger self-efficacy compared to the female participants. When the male participants decided to become assistant superintendents or superintendents, they had no doubt they could do those jobs. However, their female counterparts needed verbal reassurance in their leadership abilities and encouragement to believe they were going to be successful in those roles.

Implications for Practice/Future Research

To increase the pool of Latinx school leaders, districts must purposefully prioritize the recruitment and retention of Latinx teachers. Additionally, administrators should be trained

to be aware of their influence and how they can profoundly impact the career trajectories of future Latinx school leaders. To foster this objective, school districts and higher education institutions should establish collaborative partnerships aimed at offering professional development opportunities focused on self-efficacy. These initiatives should target prospective high school students, aspiring educators, certified teachers, and individuals aspiring to become school leaders.

The findings of this study underscore the positive relation between self-efficacy and

career advancement opportunities among Latinx participants. However, further research is essential to determine whether these outcomes are specific to race or if self-efficacy is the primary determinant of career advancement, regardless of gender and ethnicity.

Further research should explore the potential significance of alternative forms of self-efficacy, such as enacted attainment, vicarious experience, or physiological state, in terms of enhancing leadership prospects for Latinx individuals.

Author Biographies

Ligia Alberto is an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. She has experience in K–12 education as a director, principal, counselor, and teacher. She holds certifications, including district administrator, building administrator, counselor, and teacher. E-mail: albertol@uncw.edu

Amber Lassiter is an assistant professor in the school of education at Felician University, Rutherford, NJ. She has held administrative and teaching positions in K–12 and higher education. She is certified as a reading specialist, schoolteacher, supervisor and principal. E-mail: lassiteram@felician.edu

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Connecting the Courtroom to the Classroom: How Educators Can Claim Their Agency through Legal Literacy

Christopher D. Thomas, JD; PhD
Assistant Professor
Educational Leadership and Policy
School of Human Development and Organizational Studies in Education
University of Florida
Gainesville, FL

Jamie Kudlats, PhD
Assistant Professor
Educational Leadership
Department of Educational Leadership
University of North Carolina, Charlotte
Charlotte, NC

Abstract

Teachers and administrators must regularly navigate a host of complex issues influenced by ever-changing laws and often ambiguous legal guidance. Recent trends in legislation aimed at restricting curricula and educators' actions have only complicated educators' efforts to do what they feel is in children's best interests. Additionally, recent cases like *Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L.* or *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* have upended legal precedent and educational practice in ways that could significantly impact the daily actions of teachers and administrators. Recognizing that educators have limited preparation in the law and often view it as a source of anxiety, this article proposes that increasing educators' legal literacy can empower educators to claim their agency and become more confident to pursue their educational goals within *and through* the law.

Key Words

school law, legal literacy, educator agency, curricular bans, the Supreme Court

The law seems distant and intimidating to many educators. It's seen as this far-away, complicated, and disconnected force that weasels its way into schools and classrooms for educators to simply cope with. What often results is teachers feeling powerless to do what they may feel is best for their students. But even small amounts of legal awareness and understanding can lead to more empowered and confident teachers; teachers who can successfully pursue their educational goals within and even through the law. With the ever-growing number of complex laws, policies, regulations, and court decisions that directly impact the work of teachers and school leaders, understanding the forces at play can better prepare educators to advocate for their students and more confidently focus on what they came there to do: teach.

It often feels like educators are caught in an ever-growing and often-changing whirlwind of regulations and legal obligations. Legislative acts restricting or restraining schools from teaching (or sometimes simply mentioning) certain topics or ideas have increased exponentially in recent years.

One of the most widely publicized of these laws is Florida's *Parental Rights in Education* law, commonly called the "Don't Say Gay" law. But similar legislative acts have been proposed by the hundreds over the past few years, and while most have ended up "dead in committee," according to a recent "PEN America" report, as of November 1, 2023, about 40 of these types of laws or policies now exist in more than 20 states. PEN America aptly refers to these regulations as "educational gag orders."

With no signs of slowing down, these acts directly impact educators at practically every level, but most especially teachers and

building administrators. From restrictions on particular types of discussions about race (both in contemporary and historical contexts) to the removal of content that acknowledges certain identities, like those in the LGBTQ+ community, educators are faced with an ever-changing barrage of topics that now may or may not be legally acceptable to cover and language that may or may not be lawful to use in the classroom. Entire courses are being removed from curricula. Anything labeled as a potentially "divisive" topic is being avoided. Pronoun usage comes with caveats. The list goes on.

These legal restrictions, often ideologically driven and championed by non-educators (like politicians and parents' rights groups), have only added to the considerable strain on teachers who feel like they are "under the microscope" like never before.

But these vaguely worded laws and the often limited or ambiguous guidance coming from state education agencies can leave teachers and school administrators to navigate these turbulent and uncharted waters on their own. Moreover, these curricular gag orders are only one of many examples of recent developments in education law and policy that have compounded ambiguity and added further legal concerns for educators.

In addition to other legislative trends at the state level, the United States Supreme Court has issued several recent decisions that profoundly impact schools. These decisions have both introduced new uncertainty, like with its student off-campus speech decision in *Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L.* (Author, 2023b), and unsettled established practices, like with the recent case *Kennedy v. Bremerton Area Schools*, which could substantially alter the relationship of religion and public education (Author, 2024a; 2024b).

On many of these issues, along with so many others, schools rely heavily on top-down directives and cookie-cutter guidance to help educators stay within the guardrails of the law. But the law already gives us plenty of valuable guidance, salient examples, and critical advice that can help us navigate the highly nuanced contexts in schools.

Unfortunately, as many educators do not know much about the law and how it shapes education, they can lack the ability to interpret, implement, or affect the law in ways that align with their beliefs about what is best for students. This is likely one reason why so many educators have experienced laws like these “educational gag orders” in such negative ways (Woo et al., 2023). Without the tools to unpack these laws and confidently navigate their gray areas, educators can feel powerless and demoralized in the face of laws that run counter to deeply held educational ideas like equity and culturally responsive teaching.

Increasing educator legal literacy can change that. Legally literate educators could better assess the appropriateness of top-down policies and more confidently advocate for change. They could more easily fill in the gaps created by ambiguous or non-existent guidance. Legally literate educators can be empowered to balance their professional discretion with their legal obligations. Most importantly, they will be better able to adapt policies and practices to their unique contexts even as they claim their agency within larger public policy debates about what the law should be and what it should mean for schools.

What is Legal Literacy?

Legal literacy refers to the ability to “spot legal issues, identify applicable laws or legal standards, and apply the relevant legal rules to solve legal dilemmas” (Decker & Brady, 2016, p. 231). It encompasses the skills and attitudes necessary for educators to take appropriate

action within the law. This includes attitudes such as courage and commitments to fairness, justice, and equality, along with skills like problem-solving, collaboration, legal research, and communication. Legally literate educators are empowered to navigate education law, ensuring legal compliance and allowing them to exercise their discretion to advance their educational aims.

This includes being able to understand and participate in the process of how the law is made, interpreted, and implemented. Understood this way, legal literacy is an important component of educators’ “civic agency,” their ability to be active participants in the creation of educational policy (Author, 2022).

A missing piece of the puzzle

Unfortunately, legal literacy is not prioritized in most teacher and administrator preparation programs. Thus, most educators are not sufficiently knowledgeable about the law or adequately prepared to navigate it successfully. Most school administrators take only a single law course during their licensure program or graduate work, and teacher preparation programs almost universally lack such a course (McCarthy, 2008).

This lack of legal training has significant implications as teachers look to more experienced teachers and administrators for guidance on how to navigate the law, and even then, administrators often do not have sufficient access to legal resources, like a school board attorney, to assist with all of the daily decisions that may have legal dimensions. Further emphasizing the importance of increasing educator legal literacy, Militello, Schimmel, and Eberwein (2009) found that not only did school leaders have insufficient legal knowledge, but 85% of them also said they would change their behavior if they knew more about the law.

More knowledge, more confidence, and better decisions

Fortunately, increasing legal literacy has significant benefits for educators. Decker, Ober, and Schimmel (2019) found that 88% of students who were enrolled in an administrator preparation program and who took a school law course had increased confidence in and about the law. Echoing prior research, they also found that 85% of those students indicated that the legal training changed their behavior. This emerging research suggests that more training in the law can empower educators and improve their practice as they transition away from issue avoidance or poor decisions to more empowered, knowledgeable actions that better meet the needs of their students. Simply put, increased legal literacy can assist educators in making better decisions (Bull & McCarthy, 1995).

There may not be one “right” answer: educators can use their discretion

Legal literacy also recognizes that the law is not black and white but often varying shades of gray. For the legally literate educator, the question is not whether a decision, action, or policy is lawful or unlawful. Rather, the question is whether the decision adequately balances educators’ instructional and pedagogical goals with their legal obligations and the potential for adverse legal consequences. This understanding reinforces the important and often overlooked fact that the law does not always provide clear answers and that educators have significant discretion to both interpret and implement the law.

Like the weather, the law is always changing ... and we can be a part of that change

The law is always in motion, and legal literacy acknowledges the messy, complicated, and ever-changing nature of law. Legal literacy allows us to understand and participate in the formal and informal processes by which the law is created and translated into practice. The

formal mechanisms of the law, like courts, legislatures, and the executive, create legal obligations. Legal literacy can provide a roadmap to access these institutions and affect their outcomes by helping us understand how they work, what interests are at play, and how to influence the relevant policy actors. Equally as important, though, legal literacy also encompasses a concern for the informal mechanisms of law. These include all of the ways in which the law goes from words on a page to practice.

Within these informal mechanisms, legal literacy offers two important lessons to consider. First, the law is ambiguous and subject to an ongoing push and pull to determine its meaning. The law is made of words, and words themselves are subject to interpretation (Chafee, 1941). For example, consider the rule: “No Vehicles in the Park.”

The legally literate individual will recognize that this rule hinges on how we understand the word ‘vehicle.’ Are cars vehicles? What about bicycles? Is a baby stroller a vehicle prohibited by this rule? What about modes of transportation that do not have wheels? Is a hoverboard a vehicle? Is a horse?

To implement this rule, we have to wrestle with the meaning of its words. The same is true for all laws, most of which are more complicated and, therefore, more open to interpretation than this one. While the formal mechanisms of law may be responsible for making the rules, the meaning-making process interprets and puts rules into practice. It is within this powerful space that the legally literate educator has the potential to truly influence the informal mechanisms of law and better attain their educational goals.

The second lesson is rooted in the relational nature of the law. The law, at its core, shapes how we relate to each other and the

state. As legally literate educators, we understand the significance of those relationships and how both the meaning-making process of the law and its implementation occur within relationships.

From this perspective, the law is not something abstract that exists outside of us but rather a process of shared meaning-making that we engage in with others. Revisiting the “No Vehicles in the Park” rule, the relational approach requires us to ask *who* is affected by this rule and *what they want*. Will we involve them in the meaning-making process? How will we communicate with them about the rule and its meaning? How will we enforce the rule and mediate disputes about its meaning or application? While teachers and administrators often ask questions like these with the many issues they face, becoming more legally literate can provide educators with clarity, additional options, and better answers to these questions.

Increasing Educator Legal Literacy Is Both Possible and Necessary

Get curious and question the law

The law has a tendency to take on a life of its own in schools. “We *have* to do it that way,” “we aren’t *allowed* to do that,” or “that’s what *the law* says” are common refrains in faculty break rooms. Often, these statements are assumptions about the law and aren’t always accurate. Statements like these treat the law as something external to us; something outside of our control or influence. But it doesn’t have to be.

We can interrogate the veracity of these claims. *As educators, we can and should acquaint ourselves with the actual statutes, regulations, collective bargaining agreements, and school board policies that guide our work.* Most educators have never read these key documents. Doing so, for example, could point out areas of disconnect between a district mandate and what actually may be required by

law. It could open opportunities for additional discretion in responding to the unique needs of a school community. It might even result in a much-needed change in the mandate itself. More often than not, legally literate educators will discover they have significantly more discretion than they thought.

Embrace AI

Artificial intelligence (AI) may be controversial in schools, but to increase educators’ legal literacy, **recent developments in AI tools** like ChatGPT by OpenAI (<https://chat.openai.com/>) or Bard from Google (<https://bard.google.com/chat>) have the potential to assist educators in identifying, interpreting, and applying the law.

In a recent exploratory study, Author (2023a) found evidence that existing AI large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT exhibited greater knowledge of the law than practicing teachers and school leaders. While this emerging research demonstrates the potential for these tools to assist educators in navigating the law, it is important to note that existing AI is not infallible and should not be relied upon as an authoritative source. Educators should approach AI with cautious optimism and adopt a “trust but verify” approach.

Leverage existing legal resources

While not all teachers and school leaders have adequate access to professional legal advice, some administrators often engage with their schools’ legal counsel (probably more than they would like). However, very few educators or school law attorneys receive explicit training on how to form productive, collaborative relationships with one another. Heubert (1997) suggests that educators and their lawyers ought to collaborate “early and often,” in ways that are “ongoing and in-depth” (p. 543). This recognizes that the unique professional knowledge of both educators and attorneys is

necessary when addressing legal issues within education. From this perspective, the conversation shifts away from “can I take some action” or “whether some action is lawful” towards “how can I accomplish my goals within the law.” Shifting from asking ‘whether’ to ‘how’ centers the educator’s ultimate goals and allows for robust collaboration and problem-solving.

Along these lines, school and district administrators should look for opportunities to allow their teachers to engage these resources as well. Providing teachers with access to professional development opportunities and training around matters of education law cannot only empower them in their classrooms, but the ripple effect of having more knowledgeable teachers making more “legally sound” decisions will likely mean fewer difficult

problems for administrators to resolve (Schimmel, Eckes, & Militello, 2010).

Conclusion

Educators’ legal literacy is not a panacea, and there are always limits to educators’ discretion within the law. However, increasing educator legal literacy allows us to navigate and impact the law in positive ways and gives us the tools to work more effectively within the law. With the recent “educational gag orders,” like Florida’s *Parental Rights in Education* law, educators can leverage their legal literacy to demystify these laws, explore their meaning and enforceability, participate in larger public policy debates surrounding these laws, and they can become more confident navigating their gray areas. Ultimately, embracing our legal literacy empowers educators to claim our agency within education law and policy.

Author Biographies

Christopher Thomas is an assistant professor at the University of Florida. A former K-12 educator, he hosts the education law podcast *Chalk and Gavel*. E-mail: christthomas@coe.ufl.edu

Jamie Kudlats is an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He is a former K-12 educator and hosts the education law podcast *Chalk and Gravel* with Thomas. E-mail: jkudlats@charlotte.edu

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12. 40-word biographical sketch

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- Name and affiliation of reviewer
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Editor

Kenneth Mitchell, EdD

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Submit articles electronically: kenneth.mitchell@mville.edu

To contact by postal mail:

Dr. Ken Mitchell
Associate Professor
School of Education
Manhattanville University
2900 Purchase Street
Purchase, NY 1057