

## Leadership Edge Walking in Zones and Times of Tension

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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.

## References

Heifetz, R. A. & Linsky, M. (2002). *Leadership on the line: Staying alive through the dangers of leading*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press.