

21CSLA Research-Practice Webinar 13

Educating for a Diverse Democracy: Leading Schools and Districts in a Time of Political Conflict

**Educating for a diverse democracy:
Leading in a time of political conflict**

21CSLA
Research-Practice
Webinar
April 26, 2023

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Webinar Participants

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Researcher: *Dr. Joseph Kahne*, Ted and Jo Dutton Presidential Professor for Education Policy and Politics, UC Riverside

Practitioner: *Dr. Kelly Bowers*, Former superintendent, Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District

Practitioner: *Mauro Bautista*, Principal, Mendez High School

Context

California is home to more than 9 million diverse youth facing unprecedented social and environmental challenges; it's imperative that young people develop the skills necessary to build relationships across differences, address shared problems, and envision a more promising future. As a state, we must provide rich opportunities for youth to enhance their creative and intellectual capabilities, and foster their respect for one another. California must educate for a diverse democracy. How do we do so? A diverse democracy happens when people from different communities and different ways of thinking come together to address common problems and build a shared future.

The heightened political polarization and conflict, course rhetoric, and intense polarization in American politics writ large have come to life in our public schools.

The research presented at the webinar explored the following questions:

1. How widely felt are the highly politicized attacks on public schools? Is the prevalence of these attacks related to the partisan makeup of surrounding communities?
2. To what extent is political conflict impacting the ways that public high schools educate students to participate in a diverse democracy? Does this differ across select communities?

Research Findings

Through a survey conducted in the summer of 2022 with principals of 692 nationally representative high schools across the United States, the partisan lean of high schools within their congressional districts and votes for Donald Trump from the 2020 presidential election were compared through blue, red, or purple color codes.

Finding 1: Political conflict is pervasive and growing.

Finding 2: Political division and community-level conflict is shaping student interaction.

Finding 3: Many California students experience hostility and intolerance in schools.

Finding 4: California schools experience similar challenges as schools nationally, but there are some hopeful signs that California educators may be responding differently.

Principals should lean into these three tensions of educating toward a diverse democracy:

1. Educating for a diverse democracy means supporting the inclusive participation of parents and community members, even when some current forms of engagement heighten conflict, violence, and exclusion.
2. Educating for a diverse democracy means fostering youth voices, even at moments when some of those voices create a threatening and hostile climate for other youth.
3. Educating for a diverse democracy means acting politically to build support for shared values, but not leading in a partisan way.

Practicing diverse democracy can look like this:

- Communicating in ways that diminish the sense of existential threat from the “other side” and avoiding partisan scripts.
- Creating opportunities for members of the school community to participate together in projects that require them to negotiate differences as they work toward shared goals.

Practitioner Perspectives

Dr. Kelly Bowers: The challenge is always to make everyone feel safe, to work with everyone, and to humanize everyone. If you move past titles and build relationships one on one, one by one, you can humanize and meet people at a different level and build relationships that will withstand some of these other pressures.

We felt very polarized. We felt under attack. We would take the brunt of people's anger. At the root of that was fear. Fear came out of people who were afraid of things they heard and read; afraid of things they thought were going to happen if change happened in any way. A lot of those fears are not based on real experiences. It's about meeting people one on one and saying, 'So you hear about all these things about critical race theory. Show me an example where that is happening with your student,' and people really couldn't because it wasn't usually happening. It is usually propaganda that was spread and people get anxious over it.

The murder of George Floyd and the tragedy that happened shook everyone in many ways and activated some voices we hadn't heard. We reconnected with our young alumni and students of color who had come back from college and had years under their belt and different perspectives to bring back to us. We spent that summer listening. I like to talk, and I'm a very passionate speaker, but I just listened and absorbed their experiences of what it was like to be a student of color or in the suburbs. They weren't coming in with a political agenda. They weren't running for office. They weren't being told what to say by their parents. They were kids who formed their thoughts about their experiences. We immediately began to implement their suggestions because people will listen to the voices of our youth in a much different way than they will to bureaucratic administrators or someone with a political agenda.

Mr. Mauro Bautista: Professor Rogers shared that one of the ways to lead during this difficult time is to make sure that different voices are involved in decision-making, even if the voices don't always agree. One of the positive outcomes from the 2019 strike was joining the first cohort of 'community schools' in LAUSD, where shared leadership is a core tenet. I think one of the most difficult things for school leaders is to give up some of that control. In these local school leadership meetings, you do get the opportunity to share different perspectives, whether they be political, or just in terms of school policy, we have to figure it out together, we have to make decisions together.

Another powerful thing from the presentation was the second point, which was the student's voice. I consider myself very blessed to be working in the community where I grew up. Mendez High School is located in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of LA, which is east of downtown. I think sometimes as adults, we may fall into this trap of 'I've been there, I know what I'm talking about,' or 'You young people have to listen to us because we are the adults,' when the reality is, our young people have important experiences and insights to share that we as adults don't have access to.

Q&A posed by Dr. Jabari Mahiri

Were there specific examples of how principals engaged and leaned into difficult situations that were reflective of findings?

Dr. John Rogers: We are just beginning to do a new set of interviews with principals around the country to try to gather stories about principals creating bridging opportunities about district leadership, creating buffers and space for school leaders to do this work, and importantly, stories about community and youth organizations who are forming alliances to support this idea of educating for a diverse democracy. One finding from our survey I think speaks indirectly to your question is that, across all partisan contexts, when principals themselves were specifically politically engaged when they regularly followed the news, and when they talked to friends and family about social and political issues, and when they participated in efforts to improve their communities in their own time, they were more likely to speak up against anti-gay legislation and take steps to talk about the importance of the need to have curriculum addressing issues of race and racism in our society. It was also the case that when districts spoke about and had policies that addressed the importance of civic education and educating for democracy, principals were more likely to engage in those activities. So leadership at the district and school level leads to democracy and more practicing of a diverse democracy.

What types of support are most impactful during your work?

Bautista: At Mendez High School we belong to the big district of LAUSD but we also belong to a network of schools called Partnership for LA Schools. I am understanding that these issues are not so black and white and there must be some flexibility in how we tackle them. At the school site level, what's very helpful is having team members willing to lean into the

work... The Boyle Heights neighborhood has Mexican roots, but our demographics are shifting and we have a lot more Central American immigrants in the community. We had to make adjustments, as a team, to make sure that we celebrate everyone and not just one group. Our school is about 98 percent Latinx, and our Black population is about three students... We got called out for not addressing [anti-black] racist behavior. That was something we were not seeing. We had to lean into that conversation.

What is the role of superintendents in terms of keeping their school board satisfied and advocating for these best practices amid contentious conversations?

Bowers: I think the most important thing to realize...about a [school]board is that they are non-partisan, but they are elected officials, so they are at risk of being voted out. A superintendent, with the support of the board, can accomplish a lot of things because they are not voted in or up for election. They are appointed. I had a very diverse board and we would find ways for me as an administrator to make things happen. Everything didn't have to go to a vote because a vote was going to be divisive by nature. When there was a lot of tension around having a pride resolution or flag, I met with the groups and what they wanted was for all kids to feel safe. Our kids were able to see a symbol that this is a safe space without a board action requiring rules or action.

Q&A

What are the implications of your findings on the tensions for research in terms of how it identifies education policy related to curriculum, leadership training, professional development, etc?

Rogers: We need to lean into our work, whether it's at a school site, district, or university level, with a big vision in mind. We have to have a larger purpose than raising test scores, even if we care about that. I think one of the purposes we should embrace collectively is the notion that we want to promote and deepen a multiracial democracy in California. We want to think about the ways our curriculum supports the ability of young people to analyze and engage in inquiry, participate with one another, recognize the full history of our society, demonstrate their respect and acknowledgment of the dignity of their classmates, etc.

The other point I would make is, I think there has been some tendency for good reasons to shy away from the notion that education leaders should embrace a civic role. Part of the reason we've been shy about that is that we don't want members of our school committees to feel excluded because the leader has a different position than they do. All members of the school community should feel like they have a stake in their public school. But at the same time, we want school leaders to have civic identity where they are talking about the importance of democracy and these values of diversity.

What can we say is needed to protect our most vulnerable populations and those who are marginalized because of race, second language issues, immigration status, or being disabled? How can we set up school systems and processes that are sure to protect those who are in the crosshairs of this controversy?

Bowers: It does come from first being aware of your own biases and aware of the kinds of things that are going on....We must get past the idea that if we are not racist, we are ok. We have to be anti-racist and become the kind of people that will stand up and make changes, and dismantle inequities when we see them. Children are watching and counting on us.

Bautista: Certainly, there has to be a strong sense of community so when you hear these critical observations, you don't take it personally or shut it down or dismiss it. We were able to create a policy that targeted the N and F words, two words very prevalent at the school site. I'm not going to say that if you walked into Mendez High School you won't hear it, but you will certainly hear it less. We were also able to start a BSU chapter, and we were able to send these students on trips. We were very proud of that.

About 21CSLA

The original California School Leadership Academy was established by Senate Bill 813 in 1983 and administered by the California Department of Education until 2003. Senate Bill 75 re-authorized the 21st Century California School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) in 2019. The grant is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. Headquartered at UC Berkeley Graduate School of Education, 21CSLA is led in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, the California Subject Matter Project, and seven Regional Academies across the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California that receive Title II funds. Programs are free to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve instruction and achievement outcomes for multilingual learners, students with disabilities, low-income students, and other historically marginalized students.

21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education, especially for educational leaders. We produce research briefs, practice briefs, and webinar highlights, which can be found at 21cslacenter.berkeley.edu. The webinar highlights provide written highlights from research-practice webinars. Please find the webinars at <https://bit.ly/21csla-webinars>.

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Closing Remarks

Rogers closes with a passage. At the close of World War 2, W.E.B. DuBois said, “Democracy has failed because so many fear sharing power. Their fear is grounded in the belief that a world full of intelligent, healthy, and free people is impossible, if not undesirable.” DuBois went on to declare that fear is false. He imagined a more hopeful future made possible by what he called, ‘a vital gigantic effort to realize real education for the broadest intelligence-evoking talents and genius on a scale never attempted in this world.’ Even with all of the crisis that’s been created by the political conflict, that world is still possible. Educators are trying to bring that forth.

Thank you to the California Department of Education, the California State Board of Education, and the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence for their support.