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Leading for School Change in a Divided Community

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Leading for School Change in a Divided Community

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Abstract

This case study examines the intersection of rural education, new leadership, and supervising teachers when a power imbalance exists. Using a real-life example of supervision and professional interactions, this case study focuses future administrators on the real-life conflicts inherent in supervision and employee rights. The case study examines the inherent power dynamics in some rural school systems, where changing demographics have resulted in the dissonance between what the Board of Education, the superintendent, and a newly appointed principal see as an educational environment for cultural responsiveness which acknowledges changes in the community and the pre-existing, established norms. The interactions between the principal, a veteran teacher, and a classroom environment during contentious discussions among students in a civics education class debate launched faculty discontent towards the new administration. The debate occurs during an already contentious moment during the stalled teacher's collective bargaining agreement.

Keywords

civics education; power dynamics; rural education; supervision; leadership

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Background

Since 2016, the United States and its educational system are experiencing profound upheavals. With the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 and the presidential campaign in 2020, a divisive thread emerged in American politics (McKay, 2021). With claims of “fake news” and “media lies” and repeated denigration of scientific expertise in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, the narrative in local communities became divisive and intense. There was also a migration from cities and dense urban environments to rural communities as COVID forced a change in office-based business setting to include more virtual working situations.

Rural/ Urban Educational Bifurcation

As the past 120 years of policy changes concentrated on education, reforms have revealed to many rural Americans, that state and federal policymakers do not truly understand rural Americans. As demonstrated in multiple works, including Jakubowski, 2019, Biddle & Azano, 2016, there has been some research into rural areas for over 100 years, yet most of the research has been urban normative and metro-centric (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2019). The primary goal of urban-based reformers examining rural education has been a push for the two “E”s of efficiency and effectiveness (Jakubowski, 2019). First, urban-based policymakers have continued to support a bigger is better mentality, and as such have championed rural school consolidation as the de facto solution to “correcting rural education problems” (Biddle & Azano, 2016). Second, urban-based reformers continue to ignore rural place-based needs, wants, and agency in promoting larger schools. This urban-based approach, which promotes a city-based view of society, while discounting rural realities as unimportant has been designated as “Urban Normative.” The urban normative approach, as identified by Fulkerson and Thomas (2019), values the urban viewpoint as the most logical and accepted approach to policy making. The 120-year history of urban reformers removing local, rural community agency, or ability to make one’s own decisions about governance, has led to a profound distrust of outsiders. With changing demographics in rural America, and limited media viewpoints, a reactionary movement has more closely hued towards the conservative party in the United States, from local elections up through national elections (Danmore et al., 2020).

In rural areas, before, but especially because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people moved from urban and inner ring suburban areas into the outer ring and rural communities. With the advent of telecommuting, and slowly improving internet connections, these new residents brought with them the ideals of a diverse society, and a greater understanding of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusionary social justice movements that were omnipresent in their original communities. These beliefs often lead to social and political advocacy at the grassroots level, and a bifurcation became apparent between the long-term residents and the newcomers (Sherman, 2021). These ideals and activism translated into new residents seeking election to local school board seats. Often these actions were in direct conflict with the local norms, where school board seats were held by local, long-term residents who had been recognized as leaders in the community. Essentially, the newcomers upset the status quo. In the case study community, located in a northeastern state with multiple urban areas, the elections happen yearly for open seats, seats with terms concluding, and a yearly budget vote presented to the voters for their

approval. The system in place of local voting can often mean year changes in ideology among a board of education, and policy direction whiplash.

Rural areas are often, especially in the northeast, perceived as homogenous (Biddle & Azano, 2016). In the last forty years, additional diversity is emerging, but in the community described in this case study, almost 97% of the residents are Caucasian. Due to the high intensity of farming, and greater light manufacturing from surrounding areas, the Latinx population is growing, and the community is beginning to see changes. A neighboring community, the site of an aerospace plant, has seen a growing number of South Asian and Middle Eastern populations, as the families moved to the area as one of the household members was hired as an engineer or scientist at the plant. Sherman (2021) describes demographic changes as bringing increased diversity, often arriving with different education credentials (more than a high school diploma) and value, politically and socially, differences from the long-term residents. It is important to remember that we cannot paint all rural areas with the same picture, as one rural area is one rural area (Biddle & Azano, 2016). A different rural area in the state has become a leader in embracing progressive ideology and encouraged the wholehearted adoption of Culturally Responsive goals which promote introducing children in school to a wide range of literature, history, arts, and civics education (Swan & Griffin, 2013).

Supervision with Reversed Power Dynamics

The second part of this case study involves the considerations a supervisor should take when implementing guidelines concerning teachers' classroom instruction. A principal has significant abilities to direct a teacher in their classroom and influence curricular decisions. More "democratic" leadership styles encourage the principal to act as a "coach" with the teachers, suggesting rather than mandating improvements. The dynamics of the administrator-teacher relationships is an area of concern, especially for new administrators who need to build relationships with staff to be effective (Danielson, 2007).

Teachers' right to use multiple strategies within their instructional practice, and make curricular decisions, especially in the age of social dissonance in the classroom, is hotly contested and has become subject to increased state laws and regulations (Maxwell et al., 2018). One such example of state legislation limiting, and sometime criminalizing, teacher expression in the classroom is the laws that prohibits the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the elimination of narratives concerning slavery (McClain, 2021). Although the claims of CRT being taught in the in K-12 setting are dubious at best, the prohibition on the teaching of slavery narratives, or the experience of many other racialized or marginalized groups led may legislatures to believe the teaching students, especially in K-12, these topics will result in "anti-Americanism" (Romero, 2021).

Context for the Case

This case study examines a reverse power dynamic situation. Situated in a northeastern state with multiple metro areas, the case examines a long-established teacher and a new administrator. In the State, teachers are granted tenure after a four-year probationary period. With the due process rights granted by tenure, changing teaching practice is difficult. Disciplinary measures are

extremely difficult if the actions of the individual do not demonstrate change in practice. The process of removing a teacher with tenure is extremely difficult and requires significant monetary expenditure, time, and disruption to the district (Cantor, 2018). New administrators are appointed to tenure-track positions for a four-year probationary period as well. During probationary appointments, it is extremely easy to release a teacher or administrator. Superintendents are slightly different, as the position is appointed by the Board of Education to a minimum of a 3-year contract, with a maximum of five years. The position is, however, directly accountable to the Board of Education, and any election which results in a change in Board of Education majority ideology may mean souring of relations with the superintendent and subsequent dismissal. In other words, a tenured teacher may have more "staying power" in a school district than an untenured principal, or superintendent. This creates a dynamic, especially during a national teacher shortage, with power in the hands of the employee, and not the supervisor. Before, and exacerbated by COVID-19, rural areas were facing a shortage of teachers, and administrator turnover was increasing. The churn of staffing presents issues to rural districts that have seen change at the top, change in new staff, and a few "stayers" among the faculty who assume ever-increasing burdens of federal, state, and local changes demanded of the schools.

One area to consider in this case study is the presence of a Union, and the rights granted to the faculty. Further, the administrator is new to the district, and from outside the "community." The new administrator may have to worry about contractual rights as they attempt to supervise a well-established teacher in the district. The administrator is undertaking these duties during a potential labor dispute in the school, and a community that is divided over some of the Board of Education's goals for improving education for its community residents. For readers who are in non-union states, some background may be necessary. A union or collective bargaining agreement between a school district and its employees establishes procedures for union and management to negotiate terms and conditions of employment.; A collective bargaining agreement and an association can often aid members who believe that their rights were violated. One part of the collective bargaining agreement can be the setting of boundaries for the administrative supervision of teachers by defining the frequency of administrative observations formally and informally. Contracts may include definitive, specific language of the type of evaluative tool used for classroom observations, such as the Danielson Framework (Danielson, 2007). The contract may also identify what the administrator can and cannot do in the classroom during the observation. Often, for tenured teachers, the principal's ability to observe and comment on the classroom practices may be extremely limited, for example, a "walk-through" may have been defined as no more than 15 minutes, and no formal written record may exist. One informal observation lasts no longer than 15 minutes and may happen only twice in a school year. A formal observation may not last for longer than one period, once a year. Formal observations must be communicated to the teacher no later than 48 hours ahead of the designated date and time. The teacher and the administrator may have an "informal" conversation after an informal observation, but no written record in a teacher's permanent file may exist after the discussion. A formal observation is followed up by a formal post-observation debriefing, and the teacher may include a written rebuttal to anything in the observation they disagree with. If a teacher feels that their contractual rights were violated, they can initiate a grievance process, where they notify their union, and the union notifies the principal. At the second stage of a grievance, the superintendent may be involved to correct the perceived grievance. In the third

stage, the Board of Education may become involved. During the fourth stage, an outside arbitrator may be appointed to hear the case. In the fifth stage, litigation in the courts may occur.

The Media, the Internet, and Schools

One reality of rural, suburban, and urban areas is the attention local media give to the educational institution in their areas. For rural-based papers, the local sports section is often populated by stories about each of the local district's teams, offering player highlights, and tracking awards and accolades given to the teams and their members. In the local section, which is often the majority of the first half of the paper, the local school board meeting, activities by the students, teachers' classrooms, and interviews of the principal/ superintendent comprise significant coverage (Jakubowski, 2019). Anytime a perceived or real controversy is visited on the local school, the media will increase coverage of the issue, and provide forums, online, and on the pages, or the airwaves, for residents to comment on. Media, such as newspapers, may interview Board of Education members, administrators, and parents from the community. Sometimes, the local union president for the teachers or support staff is interviewed. If community members are advocating for or resisting a policy, they may form official or unofficial advocacy groups, and the media will seek those groups out for comment (Jakubowski, 2019).

With the advent of the internet, and the creation of vlogs, blogs, and other social media, teachers, and administrators should be aware of the professional implications of their actions in exercising their first amendment rights (Lagan, 2018). Employers are allowed to discipline employees based on their social media posts, and actions, if there is cause. Cause means the employee did something to violate a contract or a local social norm. In many states that offer tenure for teachers, a probationary period of three to four years allows schools to terminate a teacher without citing a specific reason. Once a teacher is tenured, the local school districts and the state often have specific reasons and processes for a school district to fire a teacher with cause. School leaders have and are experiencing significant public protests directed at school boards and their delegated authorities as state-created authorities. Right-wing reactionary groups are now running candidates for local school boards to slow down or overturn progressive, inclusive decisions (Kamenetz, 2021). Some examples include diversifying the instructional materials in classrooms to include previously underrepresented voices. Gender-neutral bathrooms, locker rooms, or participation on sports teams are three other areas of contention. These protests, actions, and agendas are not new, however. As Scribner (2016) found in research into the history of school reforms, local school districts have always been a battleground between the politically progressive-leaning professionals and the local community members. Rhetoric from conservatives and, in many cases, racists, highlighted local control, and local rights as so-called "dog whistles" to reactionary forces who wanted to stop progressive changes by insinuating nefarious reasons behind progressive agendas. Scribner (2016) highlights the expansion of African American, Latinx, and Native cultures in the curriculum as three examples of contention between conservative school boards and politically progressive teachers. A second area described by Scribner (2016) suggested access to programs such as gifted and talented, and a reconsideration of the over-representation of underrepresented populations in the remedial, or special education tracks. Scribner (2016) further found that local conflict between often conservative Boards of Education and more progressive teaching staff created a narrative designed to enact legislation stripping teachers of union organizing and membership rights, as

well as removing tenure. In the post-2021 political reality, conservatives are actively running and funding candidates for local school boards to impact curriculum, pedagogy, instruction, and philosophy in many areas (Kurtzleben, 2022).

McHenry-Sorber and Shafftt (2015) describe how a teacher's union picket during a contract dispute created significant disruption and division within the classroom. The intra-community dialogue between the teachers, their supporters, and the board of education and their supporters revealed deep-seated anger, deep divisiveness, and disregard for teacher professionalism. The research into this one case revealed that the relationship between the teachers, the community, and the elected board was fraught for decades after the event.

Board Goals and Community Reaction

In this case study, the school board, which sets the policy and direction for the district, is composed of many “newcomers” to the local community and the district. The members of the board want the newly appointed superintendent, Dr. Bower, who is an employee who “serves at the pleasure of the board”, to work with a newly appointed principal Ms. Jones, who is on a probationary contract, to “bring into line the teaching faculty.” For this case study, the teaching faculty are long-term residents, are supported by the community, and are more moderate/conservative than the newly elected school board, superintendent, and principal. The administrators, of which there are two, which is typical in rural districts, must collaborate in a time of labor strife, the end of the Covid 19 pandemic, and national, state, and local tensions around CRT, and what could be considered questionable speech (“Let’s Go Brandon,” Confederate/ Army of the Northern Tennessee flags and “FJB” flags and tee shirts in addition to speech). In rural districts, the superintendent and principal must balance what the Federal government, the State Government, the Board of Education, and the local community want. Rey (2014) describes this balancing act as diplomacy, and frequently alone, as the administrators are the only professionals who understand the multi-dimensional pressures from different demanding stakeholders.

In this scenario, what did the principal do that created conflict? How will the administrators work to deal with the long-term relationship fallout?

Case Study

Newly appointed principal Ms. Abby Jones is in her first administrative position in a rural, conservative district in what is characterized as a liberal state. Hired by a new superintendent, who is also in their first year, Principal Jones was given the task of “bringing into line” the teaching faculty. An ongoing contract dispute between the district and the teacher’s union has created ill feelings, and every morning and afternoon, the faculty are engaged in an informational picket line outside of school property. The informational picket is one tactic used by teachers’ unions to inform the public that their contract negotiations have stalled. After multiple bargaining sessions, the teachers and the school district are at an impasse. Every morning, the teachers are on the opposing sidewalk from the school carrying signs which read “contract impasse.” The core members of the faculty, who are also union officers, are local and have deep and strong ties within the community. While raises, health care, and other economic issues have

taken center stage, a recent demand from the union is an "Academic Freedom" clause in the contract. This clause would grant teachers the "academic freedom" to use any materials they see fit in their classroom, without needing Board of Education permission.

The Board of Education, composed of recent arrivals to the community, has sought to implement a new, progressive mindset within the community. After 20 years, the previous superintendent and principal retired. The Board of Education believed that only outsiders could help create a school system that was engaged with the social and economic justice movements present in the state and nationally. For most of the school district's existence, the community has consisted of a majority white, steadily shrinking population and economic base. Local members of the community, many of whom are related to the teachers, are becoming increasingly concerned that the State will step in and force their school to merge or take it over if the population continues to drop. In the last election, very few people ran for the Board of Education, and only 5% of all eligible voters turned out for the election and the budget vote.

As the world has created mass migration and refugee issues, several resettlements and immigration activists in the cities to the south and north have assisted families fleeing from Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia in resettling within the rural district. The community is experiencing a sharp demographic change, as the elementary grades saw a 15% increase in students, almost all of whom are refugees and do not speak English. The county, state, and refugee resettlement agencies have rented vacant homes in the area for families.

Situation

One of the teachers, Joan, a veteran teacher and Vice President of the Union, stops by Principal Jones' office on Monday morning after the informational picket. The following dialogue proceeds:

"Ms. Jones, can I talk with you for a minute?"

"Sure Joan, what can I do for you?"

Joan proceeds to sit down, crosses her arms, and leans back in the chair.

"Ms. Jones, I'm starting my senior social studies unit for Participation in Government, and I am here to tell you that I am doing the presidential candidate forum like I did last year. Got it?"

"Ummm, okay Joan, I appreciate you discussing this with me. Are you asking me to do one of my informal classroom observations when you have the students conduct the forum?"

"Well, Ms. Jones, you can do what you will!" With that exclamation point, Joan gets up and yanks open the door, slams it closed, and stomps away to her classroom.

Jones, the newly appointed principal, turns her head and wonders aloud "I wonder what that was all about."

On Tuesday, some of the teachers begin to arrive with political buttons on their clothing. Many of the teachers are sporting the conservative candidate's buttons. Additionally, hats, shirts, and stickers with "Make the US Awesome!" begin to appear on lockers and doors. That afternoon, at five pm, once other duties were done, and before heading home, the principal sent an email to the faculty. Here is the text of the email (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Principal Jones's Email

Dear Faculty and Staff!

I want to take this opportunity to share with you a gentle reminder of two points. First, I appreciate and acknowledge that freedom of speech is a First Amendment right. As citizens, you have that right. I also want to remind you, as employees of our school district, you are public employees, and need to be aware that while you are at school, during school hours, you need to be aware of a duty to create a safe space for a wide range of opinions and political beliefs. Thank you for all that you do for our students!

Sincerely, Ms. Abby Jones

The superintendent, Dr. Susan Bower also in her first year, was copied on the email as well. Superintendent Bower thanked Principal Jones in an e-mail back. No other member of the staff sent back anything about the email to Principal Jones.

On Wednesday morning, after the informational picket, Principal Jones is walking in the hallway greeting students and teachers. Some of the teachers and students who normally greet her are ignoring her or returning her greetings with curt head nods. She heads to the upper part of the building, where Joan teaches. She wants to see the classroom, and believed her role, as a new principal, was to walk around, get the lay of the land, and see her faculty and staff interacting with students. As she arrives, the bell for first-period rings and Joan calls the students to the front of the classroom. Joan then says, "Ok, folks, day three of the debate. Today's topic is immigration policy!"

The first student starts "Good morning, I am representing our conservative party, and as the incumbent, it is my pleasure to start the show! I believe we don't need immigrants! I believe that we only care for our own! I believe that we gotta respect our founding fathers! Check me out on social media!" The student then proceeds to hand out "Make the US Awesome" stickers to everyone in the class.

Principal Jones moves uncomfortably in her seat, hoping this is just the student channeling the caricature of the presidential incumbent. The second student moves forward and begins saying "Yeah, what they said. I don't care. This is stupid, and I believe that the US is going to hell!"

Principal Jones looks over to Joan, the teacher, who is smiling. Joan clears her throat and says, "Next!" Two more students trudge to the front of the class, and the same parody of the

presidential candidate debate happens. After three more rounds, a young man, with his head down, suddenly says out loud "This is dumb, you're being stupid!" He slams his hand on the desk and stands up. "Why are you like this? My mom and dad fled the death squads in El Salvadore! They work hard over in the new meat plant! You are all being stupid!"

A girl in the far corner, with dark skin, stands up and in a deeply accented voice, says "I want to know what the principal thinks about this nonsense! As she sits back down, Principal Jones stands up and asks, "Will our students take a moment, please, and recall what the handbook says. We treat each other with respect, we acknowledge our differences, and we value each other's experiences for their own sake? I believe we are better as a nation of many, who work together to become one. Can we see if we make space for all of the opinions in our school? Can we talk amongst ourselves as members of the "Wildcat community" as we do at our soccer games? I moved here from a large city, where neighbors were hurt, angered, and confused by the actions of the people next door and down the block. I don't think anyone here really wants to make any Wildcat uncomfortable."

Some of the students nodded, and others smiled. Some of the class, however, frowned and were starting to whisper. Ms. Jones realized that she needed to tread carefully on her next steps as a new principal. She needed to support a variety of voices but was concerned that her modeling counterpoints in the classroom may have caused concerns that will manifest later. Principal Jones gets up and heads towards the door. Joan turns to the students and says, "Well, I guess the principal is leaving, because she doesn't want to hear what the locals think about the upcoming election."

Principal Jones stops, pauses in the doorway, and gently closes the door. She heads down to the superintendent's office, and says "Do you have a minute?" Superintendent Bower looks up, and says, "Come on in and close the door. What happened?" Principal Jones relays the story to the Dr. Bower and they sit in semi-stunned silence.

"Ok Ms. Jones, call Joan (veteran teacher) down. Remind her of the e-mail you sent out, and I cannot stress this enough, tell her gently you are unhappy with the environment in her classroom. Please do NOT write any sort of report, or give her anything other than an opportunity to hear your side of the story."

"You are new, I am new, and she is very respected in the community. Sometimes, you must tread carefully until tenure. We have three Board of Education seats open for election this year, and the community is rallying behind three very reactionary folks. Let's not make your first year the last year."

"I am concerned that what Joan did is very wrong! Dr. Bower, what do we do? It's not right!"

"Okay, Principal Jones, verbally warn her and put a note in your purse, Write "draft" on it. Put down what happened. Later, if you need it due to Joan's behavior, we start a document trail. Let me know how it goes?"

Principal Jones writes an email that afternoon to Joan (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Principal Jones's follow-up email

Hi Joan,

Can we talk about the lesson today? I have some questions about the dynamic in the room.

Thanks, Ms. Abby Jones.

Joan drifts in the next day, right as school starts, after the informational picket, sits on Principal Jones's office couch, away from her desk, and opens with "I am here." Principal Jones swallows a few times and takes a deep breath and says "Yesterday didn't feel right to me. Is your classroom a space for a wide range of opinions?"

Joan turned red and through gritted teeth said "HOW DARE YOU! HOW DARE YOU QUESTION ME!" Joan got up and slammed the door as she exited. Principal Jones's administrative assistant came in and said, "You, ok?" Ms. Jones nodded and got up from her desk and walked down to the Superintendent's office.

"Dr. Bower, I asked Joan if her classroom was a space for a wide range of opinions, and she screamed at me and slammed the door."

Principal Jones was shocked, in her seven years of education, she had never been screamed at.

"Abby, these things happen. We need to talk to Joan and ask her why she screamed at you. That is not okay and is very unprofessional. You were right, okay? Joan was wrong. Let's make this better, okay?"

The bell for class changes rings, and the superintendent's administrative assistant knocks on the door. When opening the door, the assistant says, "The union officer team just called to inform you they are on their way to demand the principal be fired for violating the district teacher's academic freedom."

Epilogue

As the teachers' union negotiates with the district a contract, Principal Jones and veteran teacher Joan's interaction both inside the classroom during the debate, and later in her office have become open hostile gossip in the community and the school. Principal Jones and Superintendent Bower have met behind closed doors with the Board of Education, which supported Principal Jones's actions. Parents, however, are beginning to attend the Board of Education meetings, and publicly calling out Principal Jones for being too "woke" for their community. The parents, teachers, and others are defending Joan, the veteran teacher, and petitioning the board for the removal of all the "woke" books in the library. They are also demanding that Principal Jones be fired or at least suspended for her actions. Superintendent Bower has repeatedly asked for the

school attorney's help, and the Board has closed off community comments and, in some instances, asked for the local sheriff's office to send a deputy to the meetings. The three candidates for the Board of Education who are representing community members opposed to Principal Jones's actions have announced a committee to raise money to run for the Board of Education and are seeking endorsements from conservative politicians. The local media outlets, both in the area and from the three nearby metros are sending reporters, and the occasional camera crew to cover board meetings. The State professional association for both Principal Jones and Superintendent Bower announced that they are providing attorneys for the two administrators under siege. The state-level teachers union has not publicly commented.

Unfortunately, the contract negotiations reached a standstill after a year. Superintendent Bower and Principal Jones met in a coffee shop an hour away from their school.

Dr. Bower said "I am not sure if we are going to make it past this year. The Board of Education is still in favor of our leadership, but the three elections were close. Less than 100 votes different, and the Board of Education changes!"

Principal Jones was silent for a minute, and said "Dr. Bower, how do you do it? I'm not sure if I can do this! I want to make a change, I want to lead, I want to help, but the teachers are still mad at me!"

Now Dr. Bower was quiet for a minute. "Okay, we better get a mediator. Let's look for someone skilled and see if we can't end this standoff. Even if we both go, let's try and get the community to know we tried."

Analysis

In this scenario, several potential concerns are raised. First, when community members vote at the local school level, board of education candidates run on a single issue, and have, in recent years, begun to align themselves with national political parties (Reckhow, et al., 2017). In a recent book for future and in-practice leaders', Marshall et al., (2020) wrote suggestions for understanding the politics of leadership at the local level, or micropolitical level and the implications school leadership. Within the introductory chapter, the authors indicated very clearly that administrators, board members, teachers, and others are often caught between conflicting stressors from different interest groups and the potential mobilization over any issue. In my research (Jakubowski, 2019; 2020; 2021), I found the often-competing narratives of school reforms and dissonance between policy makers' desires and local implementation led to local administrators being placed in a difficult situation. These findings echo the realities discovered in Rey's (2014) research on how administrators, specifically superintendents, needed to mediate between state and local demands which were unaligned. School boards are often conflicted with implementing local, state, and federal expectations. The local population does not understand the implications of ignoring a state or federal mandate, and school governance has become increasingly complex in the last 20 years with different overlapping regulations, accountability demands, and specific expertise required (Sutherland, 2020).

The dissonance between the superintendent and school board can lead to involuntary or voluntary turnover, with many superintendents citing disagreements over philosophy as a key reason for their departure (Tekniepe, 2015). A potential second cause of superintendents leaving rural positions includes the scope of job duties. Superintendents and principals are often asked to accomplish tasks that, in larger districts, are handled by other administrative colleagues. Other states may have multi-district assignments, which leads to conflicting time prioritizations (De Jong et al., 2017; Lamkin, 2006; McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2020). With a frequent turnover in district leadership, the superintendent and principal are often "outsiders" who do not stay for an extended length of time in rural districts. The frequent change often creates jarring policy and curricular changes and causes local faculty to ignore or discount changes requested by the administration, as a wait-and-see mentality sets in (Williams et al., 2019).

A second area, administrator turnover at the superintendent level, may lead to principal turnover as well. In situations such as the example presented above, Morford (2002) found many new principals feel under-supported and under-prepared when challenged by established cultures. A second study (Hansen, 2018) found several personal as well as professional tensions which led to increasing numbers of professional departures. Community and personal expectations misalignment figured as a significant reason why principals chose to leave their districts. Principals choosing to leave the rural districts cited a lack of professional support as a second significant reason for departure. Finally, the last cited non-personal example involved the principal's working relationship with the superintendent and board of education. In small districts, the principal is often the face of policy explanation and enforcement with parents and community groups. These interactions are often terse and may prompt an exit by the principal (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). Especially with the mounting pressures from shortages in staffing, from substitutes to cafeteria, aids, and bus drivers to the classroom teachers themselves, school and district administrators are reporting higher rates of burnout and are actively seeking different careers or jobs (DeMatthews, et al. 2021).

Teacher recruitment, retention, and bargaining rights are potentially the third area to consider within this case study. Although the case presented does not explicitly deal with recruiting and retention of teachers, these challenges remain at the front of many administrators minds when addressing concerns in their schools. Multiple well-constructed research studies (McHenry-Sorber et al., 2021; McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2015; Tran et al., 2020) indicated that rural teacher recruitment and retention are top of mind for many district administrators. Researchers have found that difficulties in recruiting and retaining rural educators usually emerge in categories that reflect the fiduciary realities of low pay, difficult working conditions, professional and personal loneliness, and improper preparation. Rural teachers are also less able to "hide" like in the more populated areas and are integrated within their school communities as residency, shopping patterns, and recreation usually mean they interact with students and family after hours (Eppley, 2015). With the added pressures of becoming part of a community, and often a desire to maintain a separate work-life balance, rural educators often leave for larger, suburban, and urban opportunities (Jakubowski, 2020; 2021).

The fourth major concern within this case study is the idea of what constitutes teaching for social justice and the implications of free speech in the classroom. As cited earlier, many teachers are unaware of what constitutes permissible and impermissible speech according to local school

district policy and state-level laws. What responsibility does the teacher have, however, in intervening when discriminatory language emerges within the classroom? As Kaka et al. (2021) reminded educators, a moral responsibility exists for teachers to intervene in classroom discourse when discriminatory language or hate speech are present. Nganga et al. (2021) indicated that pre-service teachers have difficulty with teaching around and with controversial issues. First-year teachers are also quite often without significant protection and can face job discipline or loss of employment for engaging in controversial issues in the classroom. In rural districts, with often conservative-leaning boards of education and community, progressive ideas in the classroom may be discouraged and, in some instances, repressed (Geller, 2020).

Changing demographics within the rural community is the fifth area of concern in this case study. With the dominant narrative of decline and contraction in most academic and popular media accounts, there is a different reality (Johnson & Lichter, 2020). While many rural areas are experiencing decreases and declines, there are several areas experiencing growth and diversification as fracking, tourism, and immigration to those areas have produced diversity within the formerly white-dominated population and economically declining areas (Kebede et al., 2021). In Kebede et al.'s (2021) study, Hispanic populations in rural areas were found to rise. Districts with increasingly diverse populations were found to experience population increases, while the majority white districts were experiencing decreases.

The sixth area of discussion in this case study is the relationship between what administrators should do when a potentially ideologically hostile classroom situation occurs. While teachers have the right to their opinions, situations across the United States are creating a wide range of issues administrators need to be cognizant of and sometimes address.

The recent state legislative mandates to exclude CRT and regulate what teachers can and cannot say in classrooms have created a quilt-like minefield for administrators. With significant differences between Critical Race Theory and Culturally Responsive Education, teachers and administrators must understand, and articulate those differences.

Finally, with the difficulties inherent in recruiting teachers and school leaders for rural areas, we in educational leadership must remember Gallo's (2020) findings. Working and living in rural areas has positive benefits and can result in an extremely fulfilling career. Connections with families, and communities, as well as professional leadership opportunities, abound in rural areas. My research (Jakubowski, 2020) found that in rural areas, teachers become leaders out of necessity because the luxury of large staffing does not exist. Future education leaders must be aware of the positives, as well as challenges facing communities while resolving to give rural areas a realistic opportunity.

Questions for Discussion

1. In this scenario, what steps should the principal take to decrease the tension with the teacher?
2. Should the principal have addressed the teacher on the day of the classroom event?
3. What are some steps Superintendent Bower should take to address the issues the Principal Jones brought to her attention?

4. How should the administrative team address the demand that the principal is terminated?
5. How does the principal balance the rights to free speech and the requirements to observe permissible speech?

Response

The conflict between administration and faculty can occur at any stage of an administrator's career. When examining the five questions above consider some of the following points provided below.

Question 1. What steps should the administrator take to decrease tension with the teacher?

Question 2. Should the principal have addressed the teacher on the day of the classroom event is a discussion point that should lead the class to understand some of the basic principles of supervision. Do you as an administrator adopt a philosophy of immediate, or reflective reaction? What are the advantages and disadvantages? What scenarios may have emerged from immediate versus delayed addressing the issue?

Question 3. What are some steps the Superintendent Bower should take to address the issues the Principal Jones brought to their attention? This discussion question will allow students an opportunity to discuss with mentors in the classroom different scenarios that have occurred. This question is also an opportunity for students enrolled in superintendent certification courses to begin to develop their philosophy of action as a leader within a district.

Question 4. How should the administrative team address the demand that the principal is terminated? This question allows the class and the instructor to deep dive into issues of supervision, community and staff relationships, and the implications of labor and management relationships. The instructor may wish to examine the impact of personnel decisions considering wrongful termination. The second area of examination is the impact of management rights versus employee bargaining unit power.

Question 5. How does the principal balance the rights to free speech and the requirements to observe permissible speech? This question should be a central discussion point, as free speech rights do not 100% extend into the classroom for teachers. In many ways, educators are often unaware of their rights, and limitations in the areas of free speech. The instructor is broadening the student's horizons.

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