



Superintendents Experiencing Threats and Contention

SUMMARY: As school board meetings have become contentious and amid an increasing trend of superintendents being fired without cause, a substantial number of superintendents or school board members have been threatened, and nearly two-thirds of superintendents expressed concern for their mental health and well-being. Superintendents in suburban districts are significantly more likely to feel or experience contentiousness at both school board meetings and elections.

critical race theory, book banning, issues related to LGBTQIA+ inclusivity, and more. Popular media has shared stories about tense school board meetings and an increasing trend of superintendents being fired without cause by partisan boards that skew conservative or ones that recently shifted power towards a Republican-majority. Yet, little research has sought to understand superintendents' experiences as these events have proliferated.

Superintendents have recently been at the epicenter of many political battles in the United States facing topics such as

In a recent study, data was collected via a nationwide survey of superintendents that, in part, focused on

Figure 1
Superintendents' experiences with threats

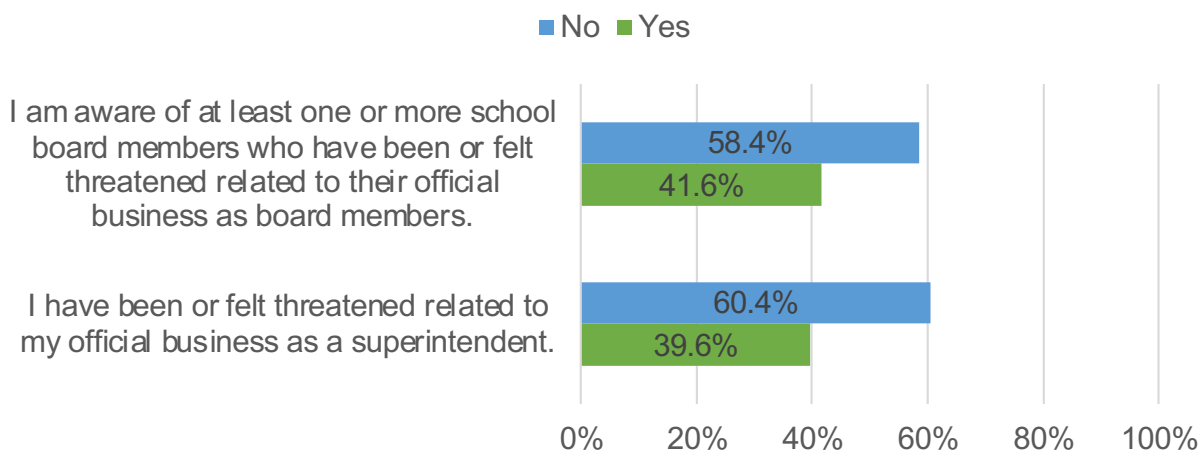
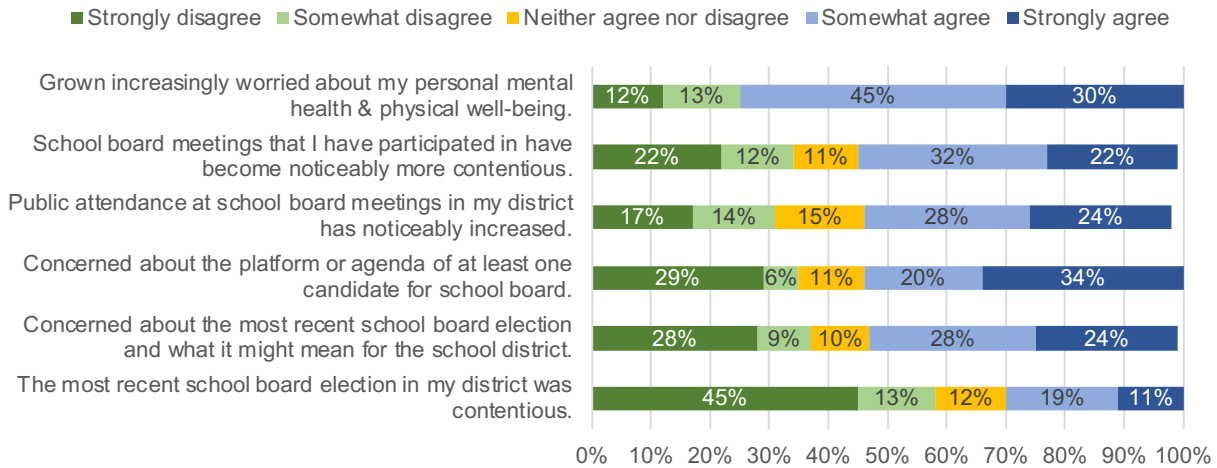


Figure 2
Superintendents' perceptions of local political context



superintendents' personal experiences with local politics, relationships, trust, and threatsⁱ. It was found that more than one-third of superintendents indicated they recently have been or felt threatened, and the same amount are aware of at least one or more school board members who have been or felt threatened (Figure 1). The study also queried superintendents about district-related political contentiousness (Figure 2) and their health and well-being.

School board meeting contention

Just over half of superintendents indicated that attendance at their school board meetings has recently increased (52%) and school board meetings have become more contentious (54%). Compared to rural superintendents, suburban superintendents were significantly more likely to agree that their school board meetings have increased in attendance and become more contentious. Superintendents who

identified as Republican superintendents were significantly more likely to disagree with both of these statements.

School board election contention

While much media attention has been given to contentious school board elections, more than half (58%) of our superintendents indicated that their latest school board election was not contentious. However, compared to rural and urban superintendents, suburban superintendents were significantly more likely to agree that their school board election was contentious and that they were personally concerned with one or more candidates running for school board. Superintendents that self-identified as Republican were significantly less likely to agree with these two statements.



Health and well-being

Has having to navigate contentious contexts been stressful for superintendents? In our survey, 63% of superintendents indicated that they or people close to them have grown increasingly worried about their mental health and well-being. Worry for superintendent wellness was ubiquitous: there were no significant differences in responses to this question by gender, race, experience as a superintendent, district locale, or political party affiliation.

Implications

These findings underscore the toll of contentious issues and divisive politics on many superintendents' health and well-being and provides a sense of the frequency and intensity of adverse experiences. These findings also show patterns regarding where, how, and for whom these issues are appearing.

This brief is based on a study published as: White, R. S., Evans, M. P., & Malin, J. R. (2023). Political battles in suburbia. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 104(5), 6-10.

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ⁱ <https://kappanonline.org/political-battles-in-suburbia-white-evans-malin/>