



# Navigating Divisive Conversations and Preventing District Flashpoints

A Framework for Creating Order in Today's Complex  
Environment

District Leadership Forum

# Joining You Today...

## Meet Your EAB Presenters



**Tanya Hutsona**  
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*K-12 Partner Development*  
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*Associate Director,*  
*K-12 Research*  
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# EAB Helps Schools to Support Students From Kindergarten to Careers

Research-Based Solutions to Systemic Challenges Across K-12, Higher Education, and Adult Learning

*Founded in 2007, EAB is a mission-driven organization based in Washington DC.*

**Everything we do stems from research**, with the purpose of helping institutions to support students at every stage of their journey



## Research and Insights

*8,000+ peer reviewed best practices identified and 500+ innovations tested annually*



## Year-Round Strategic Advising

*2,100+ institutions served throughout the US and across the globe*



## Research-Based Technologies

*9.5 million students supported by our student success management system*

K-12 | Community Colleges | Four-Year Colleges and Universities | Graduate and Adult Learning

# The District Leadership Forum

Expanding Your Team's Capacity to Solve Mission Critical Challenges and Build World Class Schools



**Syndicated research** provides industry-leading understanding of complex problems



**Supplementary custom research** to save leadership team time and bandwidth



**Expert advising, presentation, and facilitation**, to guide decision-making and secure buy-in



**Ready-made resources** to enable sustained, aligned implementation of new practices

**A Nationwide  
Community of  
Committed Peers**

**180+**  
Partner  
districts

**37**  
States  
represented

**600 – 200k**  
Students per  
district we serve

# 3 Questions We'll Answer Today



What is different about today's flashpoints?  
Why does this matter for district leaders?



How can district leaders learn from comparable  
professions to reduce flashpoints response time?



What strategies can district leadership teams apply to  
expedite flashpoint response or prevent escalation?

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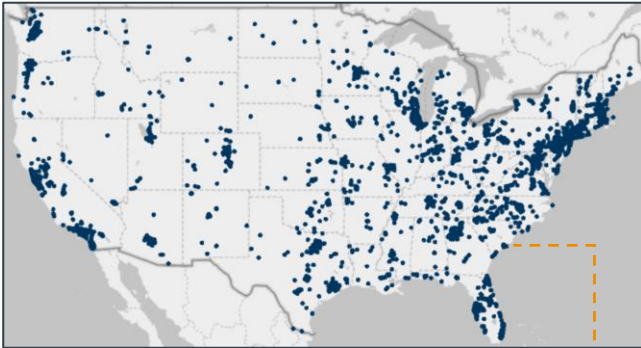
# Top Reason for Superintendent Stress: "Flashpoints"

**flash-point** | *noun*

1 : a controversy causing disturbance in the district due to public activism, criticism, or reputational damage

## Superintendents Across the Nation Plagued with Flashpoint Stress

*Cato Institute Public School Battle Map<sup>1</sup> (2012-2022)*



80%

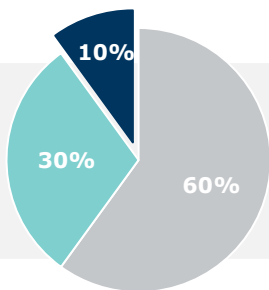
of superintendents agree **managing politically divisive conversations** is the most challenging aspect of their role today

**3,041** distinct flashpoints reported in online news sources

1) Recreated and condensed for presentation

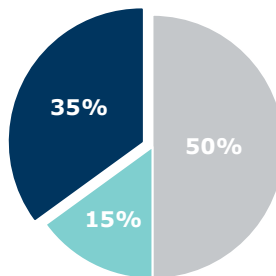
# Focus on Flashpoints Distracts from Strategic Initiatives

Five Years Ago



Today

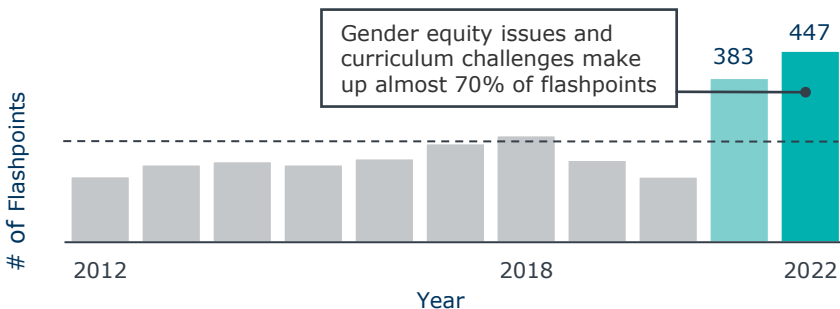
*n* = 24



- Flashpoint Response
- Strategic Initiatives
- District Operations

## Number of Flashpoints Projected to Rise

*Flashpoints per year Across the US 2012 to 2022 (Projected)*





## Quick Poll:



Which of the following topics has your district experienced as a **flashpoint** in the past year?  
*Select all that apply.*

- a) “Parent’s rights” legislation
- b) Curriculum/book challenge
- c) Debate over social-emotional learning
- d) Misinformation about district operations spread on social media
- e) Policies targeting conversations on race, gender, or sexuality in the classroom
- f) Other



# Today's Flashpoints Are Complex and Multi-Layered

10

## Example of What Lies Beneath Today's Flashpoints<sup>1</sup>



### Rhode Island parents enraged at school board for removing honors classes in 'equity obsession'

A local resident, said, 'Equity' has become an unhealthy obsession, and parents are seeing the impact.'

Surface-level incident



Strong moral or religious beliefs



Declining community trust



Virility of social media, GroupThink, bandwagoning



Involvement of the press

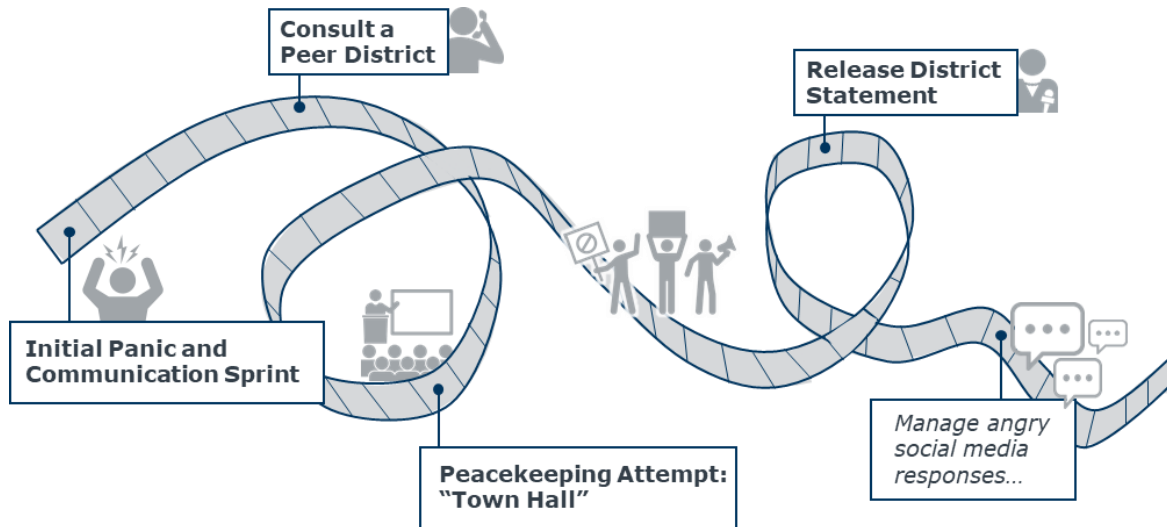


Contentious political environment

1) Not an exhaustive list; examples of the 5 most common drivers of flashpoints across the nation

# Reactive Crisis Management Can Spiral into Chaos

11



“ I’m constantly spinning my wheels. There has to be another district who’s gone through this before – but every time I ask, it seems like we’re all in the same storm.”

*Superintendent, Midwest School District*

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# High-Stress Occupations with Problem-Solving Solutions

## Management Professionals that Excel in Chaos and Complexity



First Responders, EMTs, Trauma Doctors

93



Military Commanders, Explosives Engineers

96



Search and Rescue Workers

99



Crisis Management/ PR Consultants

90



Air Traffic Control Operators

91

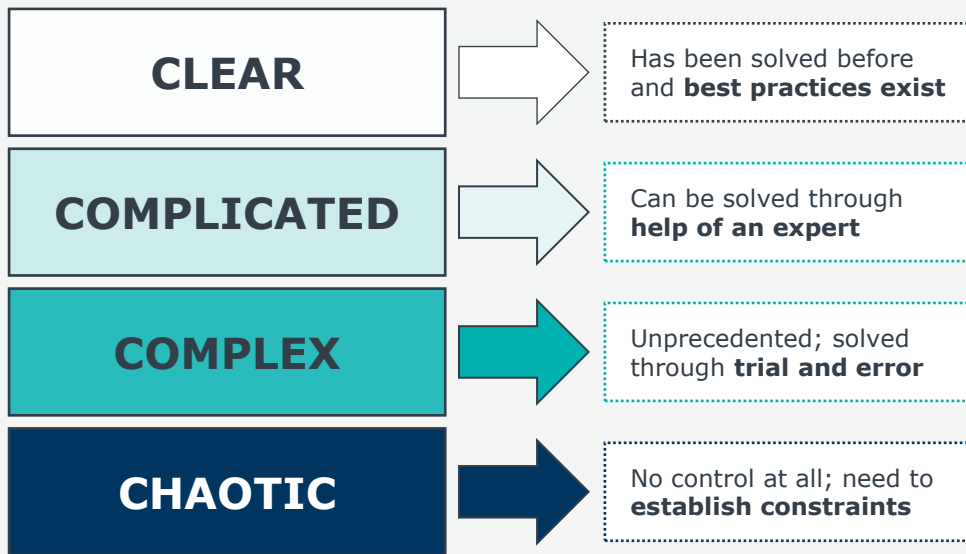
Stress Tolerance Score

# A Framework to Find Solutions and Respond More Quickly 14



**Cynefin** *kuh-NEH-vin* | noun

- 1 : A problem-solving framework that sorts problems into **four domains** and leads executives to solutions that work best



# A Framework to Find Solutions and Respond More Quickly



**Cynefin** *kuh-NEH-vin* | noun

1 : A problem-solving framework that sorts problems into **four domains** and leads executives to solutions that work best

**CLEAR**

Has been solved before and **best practices exist**

**COMPLICATED**

Can be solved through **help of an expert**

**COMPLEX**

Unprecedented; solved through **trial and error**

**CHAOTIC**

No control at all; need to **establish constraints**

**Area of Flashpoint Response**

Issuing a district-wide statement

Identifying future flashpoint risks

Engaging with district stakeholders

Anticipating conflict at board meetings

## Answer Via Chat:



What **other pain points** or **problems** that your district has with flashpoint response/divisive conversations? Where would they fall into the four domains of Cynefin?

<p><b>CLEAR</b></p>	<p>Has been solved before and <b>best practices exist</b></p>	<p><b>Area of Flashpoint Response</b></p>	<p>Issuing a district-wide statement</p>
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**What strategies can district leadership teams apply to expedite flashpoint response or prevent escalation?**

# 6 Strategies to Address Flashpoints Faster

		<u>STRATEGIES</u>
<b>CLEAR</b>	<i>Has been solved before and <b>best practices exist</b></i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "Respond?" Decision Tree</li> <li>2. Flashpoint Response Checklist</li> </ol>
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<b>COMPLEX</b>	<i>Unprecedented; solved through <b>trial and error</b></i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Engaged Parents Toolbox</li> </ol>
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# One Misfire Can Escalate into a Battle

## A Single Social Media Misstep Floods a District in Public Response



**Sunny Valley School District** @Sunny\_Valley\_SD · Mar 1

The district is investigating allegations of a racist incident perpetrated by a teacher at Central HS. More information will be released as the investigation continues.

127

23

13



- Vague message results in community unrest

- Teachers taken by surprise and under pressure to respond

- Local media covers story with incomplete information

Sunny Valley School District @Sunny\_Valley\_SD · Mar 1  
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23

13



Justin F @justfriends · Mar 1

What's being investigated exactly?

5



9



Ravi P. @raviprathar · Mar 1

Wow unsurprising from a district with no equity effort whatsoever

3



22



Harrison W @hw4429 · Mar 1

Which teacher? We need to know if our children are at risk

3



3



Lydia L @lydiarails78 · Mar 1

Clearly overblown. We've gone through this before

22



5



Kia M @kiamana\_em · Mar 1

again???

8



8



Juana Hernan @hernan\_j49 · Mar 1

@Sunny\_Valley\_SD we need more information now

1



1



# The Overlooked Secret to Avoiding Mistakes

## Costly Mistakes Are Rare in Many Highly Skilled Fields...

*Air Travel:*



**1 in 29.4 million**  
likelihood of disaster

*Construction:*



**0.0002%**  
likelihood of disaster

*Surgery:*



**50%** of deaths during surgery are **preventable**



## Dr. Atul Gawande Explores the Promise of Checklists in the Surgery Room



**↓ 36%** reduction in surgery-related complications

**↓ 47%** reduction in surgery-related deaths

## Flashpoint Statement Checklist

- 1 Has **legal** counsel been consulted?
- 2 Does your statement only include **factual** information, not speculation?
- 3 Does your statement speak to the **concerns** of those directly affected?
- 4 Does your statement reference tangible **action(s)** taken by the district?
- 5 Is the chosen **messenger(s)** appropriate for the severity of this flashpoint?
- 6 Are chosen **distribution channels** a good match for the intended audience?
- 7 Do your internal communications on this topic pass the **"front page" test**?
- 8 Has a **holding statement** been released within 30 minutes of the incident?

# Resource Spotlight: Flashpoint Statement Checklist

District Leadership Forum

## EAB's Checklist for Publicly Responding to Controversial Flashpoints

More than ever before, district leaders are feeling the pressure to publicly respond to social and political flashpoints at a moment's notice. In fact, these flashpoints have tripled in frequency in the past five years alone, exhausting leadership and resulting in small-but-costly mistakes that only cause flashpoints to spiral further.

Costly mistakes are rare in other highly skilled fields with the help of a simple technique: consistently referring to a checklist before completing a critical task. Dr. Atul Gawande, surgeon and author of *The Checklist Manifesto*, reduced surgery-related deaths by 47% in only months after requiring a pre-surgery checklist protocol. Learning from Dr. Gawande's research, EAB developed a peer reviewed checklist that K-12 superintendents can use to avoid small-but-costly errors when publicly responding to controversial flashpoints.

Deploy EAB's flashpoint checklist before releasing your next official statement.

### Flashpoint Statement Checklist

1. Has legal counsel been consulted?  
*What liabilities or rights should the district be aware of before taking responsibility?*
2. Does your statement only include factual information, not speculation?  
*What basic information can be shared that won't create mistrust if later proven wrong?*
3. Does your statement speak to the concerns of those directly affected?  
*What are key stakeholder groups feeling, and what questions do they have?*
4. Does your statement reference tangible action(s) taken by the district?  
*How can the district show they're already working toward a solution?*
5. Is the chosen messenger(s) appropriate for the severity of this flashpoint?  
*E.g., Superintendent for district-wide flashpoints, school principal for localized issues*
6. Are chosen distribution channels a good match for the intended audience?  
*E.g., time-sensitive statements are posted as pop-ups on district/school homepages*
7. Do your internal communications on this topic pass the "front page" test?  
*Would you be comfortable with an email being leaked or released via FOIA requests?*
8. Has a holding statement been released within 30 minutes of the incident?  
*A holding statement will reduce risk of subsequent chaos if released promptly*

### 3 Tips for Building Your Own High-Quality Checklist

Incorporate Boeing engineers' tips to craft useful checklists for other pain points in your everyday work.



**Define a Release Point**  
Determine the exact moment when the checklist should be deployed every time



**Prioritize Speed**  
Limit the checklist to 5-9 items and ensure it can be executed in less than 60 seconds



**Test and Revise**  
Revise the checklist each time you use it to ensure it stays useful and relevant

Source: Gawande, A. 2010. *The Checklist Manifesto*. EAB interview and analysis.

## Download EAB's Flashpoint Statement Checklist to Help You:



Learn why checklists are a powerful tool for accuracy



Clarify each checklist item with additional questions



Find out how you can build checklists of your own



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# The Danger of Letting Risks Go Unidentified



## District Focus on Traditional Risks...

- Inclement weather
- Public health protocols
- Building security



## ...Fails to Identify Increasingly Common Flashpoint Risks

- Unstructured board meetings
- Increasing book challenges
- Social media and click-bait news
- Pushback on SEL curriculum
- Rise in student misbehavior, discipline
- “Parents’ Rights” legislation

“

**Our weakness is that we think in the more traditional way of risk management – a tornado, a fire, etc., but don’t think about more modern risks, like posting on social media or angry parents at board meetings.”**

*- Superintendent, Southeastern School District*

# Avoid Surprises with a Flashpoint Risk Register

**risk reg-i-ster** | *noun*

1 : a document that lists flashpoint risks and ranks them based on likelihood and impact, helping to elevate otherwise overlooked risks



## Characteristics of an Exemplary Risk Register

### Exhaustive



- Includes all potential risks to district, regardless of likelihood
- Individual risks are described thoroughly with specific, simple language

### Encyclopedic



- Organized by total score highest to lowest
- Accessible to *all* district leadership by using collaborative data collection

### Evolving



- Updated at least once a month during Climate Risk Team meetings
- Tracks response strategies for past risks

### Who Owns the Risk Register?

EAB recommends that a district leader with experience in communications owns this document and shares the document's location with the full district leadership team.

# 2 Tools from EAB to Start Flashpoint Risk Identification

## Flashpoint Risk Register Spreadsheet

Step 1: Identify Risks	Step 2: Determine Current Status of Risks	Step 3: Rate Likelihood, Impact for Total Risk Score
<b>Risk</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Response Strategies, Response</b>
Increased interest in parents' rights	Community	Increased communication and transparency with parents in district decision-making to show support of teachers influencing school improvement to meet or exceed
Curriculum challenge escalating in the district	Curriculum & Instruction	Review curriculum and instructional materials for alignment with state standards and ensure all teachers are trained on the curriculum
Districts confronting an increase in student homelessness	Human Resources	Partner with community organizations to provide support for students and families experiencing homelessness

### Risk register allows districts to:

- ▶ **List District-Wide Risks**  
Use spreadsheet to track all potential risks to district
- ▶ **Prioritize Risk Responses**  
Capture risk scores, response strategies, monitoring in one place

## Guide for Identifying Flashpoint Risks

**Six New & Evolving Issues for K-12 Districts**

- Increased interest in parents' rights
- Curriculum challenge escalating in the district
- Districts confronting an increase in student homelessness
- Unsettling student safety in school
- Extracurricular programming
- Student safety in school
- Teacher safety in school

**Sample K-12 School District Risk List**

Curriculum & Instruction	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	Extra-Curricular Programming
Curriculum/Teaching Pedagogy	Students feel excluded in the classroom based on their background (e.g., accents, race, religion)	Students damage public property or otherwise cause the facility with an infrastructure while participating in an after-school activity, trip, or community project
Student Success	Sensitive material presented in class is offensive to a subset of students	Parents blame the district after serious student injury on a district-sponsored activity
Enrollment	Students sense that their political views are unrepresented in classroom discussions	Parents claim that the district is violating applicable laws regarding student discipline and safety
Climate/Flashpoints	Students refer to athletes as "less smart" than peers	Parents claim that a case of violence preparation and safety training program is not being implemented for the college admissions process
Student Safety	Students are harassed or bullied while demonstrating their participation	Parents criticize district in quality of number of extra-curricular programs

**Three Evergreen Flashpoint Risks**

- Unsettling student safety in school**  
Safety of parents, fear for student safety, the highest in 20 years.

### Guide allows districts to:

- ▶ **Identify Top District Risks**  
Learn today's "evolving" and "evergreen" risks to districts, as well as a sample list from EAB partners

# Introducing the District Flashpoints Resource Center

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## Partner Exclusive Content

**6** Click-to-Download Resources

## One-Stop Webpage to Help Your District:

- ▶ **Identify optimal flashpoint response strategies**
  - Start a flashpoint risk register
  - Learn communication strategies for divisive conversations
- ▶ **Practice new decision frameworks**
  - Learn how other high-stress occupations manage complex flashpoints
- ▶ **Watch recorded workshops and presentations**
  - Share insights and strategies with your district leadership team

# How Else Can We Help?

I'd like to speak with someone further about...

- 1 Understanding types of flashpoints to enable faster response
- 2 How to identify and prioritize flashpoint risks before they occur
- 3 Strategies for communicating during divisive conversations
- 4 Something else? Choose this option and we will follow up with you

## A Quick Ask



We value your feedback.

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Please take a few minutes to **complete the short survey** that pops up at the close of this webinar.

Thank you!



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