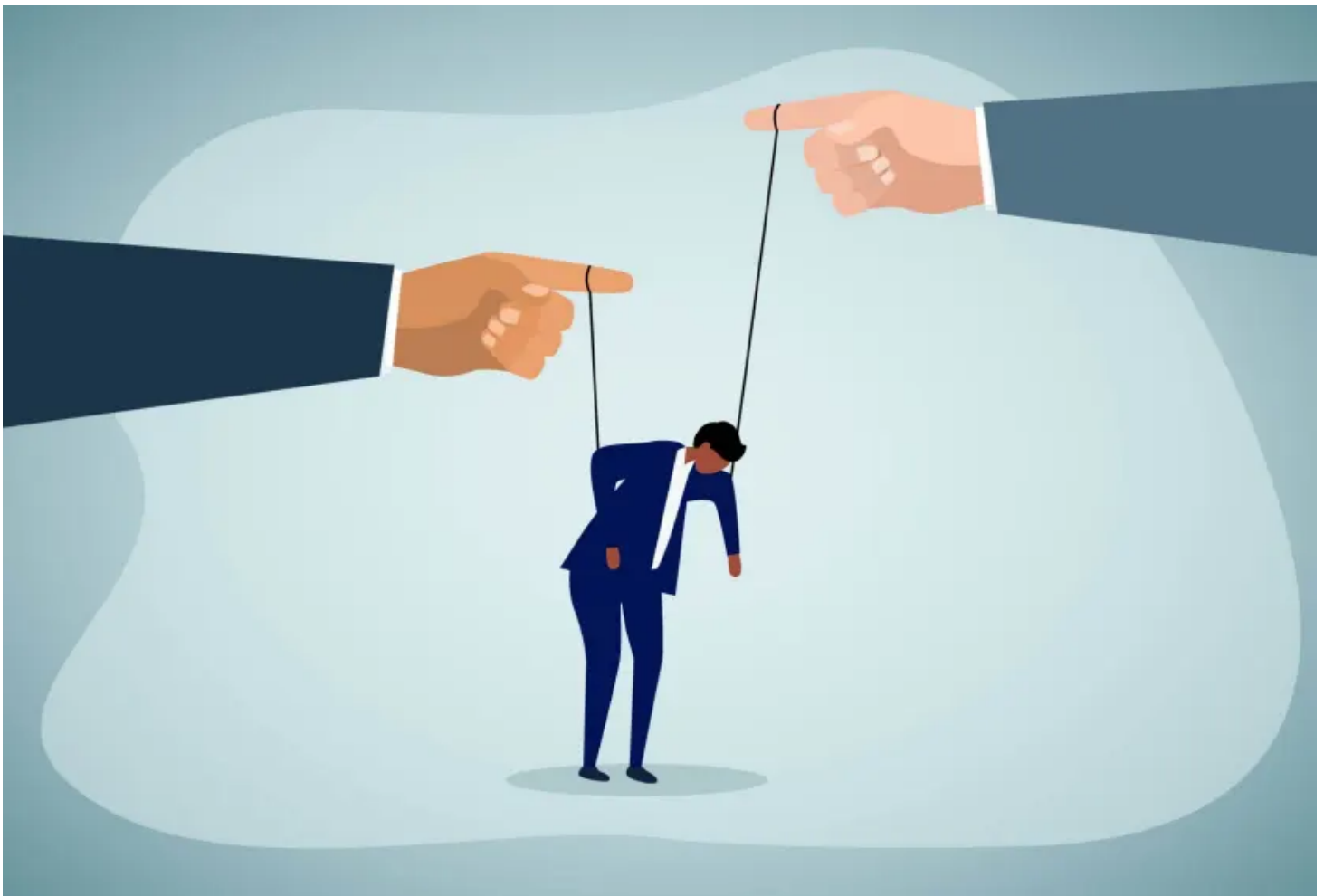


School Superintendents Are Under Pressure. Here's How Vendors Can Help

How One Company Is Supporting Top District Leaders In Navigating Tense Political Environments



By [Robin L. Flanigan](#) — October 10, 2025 ⌚ 8 min read



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Turnover of school superintendents has been a significant problem since the pandemic, and it continues to challenge K-12 systems across the country.

The working environment may be one factor at play, as district chiefs are being forced to not

only cope with challenging, and increasingly unpredictable, financial conditions, but also the fallout from [political-cultural fights over curriculum](#) and other issues.

There are also the more customary pressures that come with district leadership, such as the need to make sure their systems are making smart decisions with taxpayer dollars when it comes to purchasing academic resources.

In the nation's 500 largest school districts, there was a turnover rate of 23% among superintendents during the 2024-25 school year.

Of those school systems, 114 of them experienced at least one leadership change in that time, according to the data compiled by the [Superintendent Research Project](#), an annual data analysis compiled by the [ILO Group](#), a consulting firm.

That's an increase from the previous year's turnover rate of 20% and well above historic pre-pandemic averages of 14-16%.

“The work of schools feels more open and public than ever, and there's a level of greater scrutiny on how products and services are performing,” said Caitlin Sullivan, co-founder and CEO of Leading Now, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that supports K-12 superintendents. “The bottom line is superintendents are operating in a climate right now where all decisions have to be defensible, but also communicated in a way that makes sure their stakeholders feel seen and understood in the process.”

Sullivan recently spoke with *EdWeek Market Brief* Contributing Writer Robin L. Flanigan about managing that delicate balance, how companies can make potential purchases easier, and why staying focused on what's best for children is more perennial than partisan.

The following has been edited for length and clarity.

How much time and energy is this political climate requiring from superintendents?

A report last fall called “The Costs of Conflict: The Fiscal Impact of Culturally” found that

\$3.2 billion was spent in the 2023-24 school year alone on legal fees, security, and more. But aside from a financial cost, there are other costs when culturally divisive conflicts play out.

Superintendents who are actively building trust and coherence are managing through—not totally unscathed, but with more longevity and a sense of momentum on behalf of kids. Those who aren't can get pulled into reactive cycles that distract from serving students.

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These issues are manageable, but only with significant planning and strategic communication. When they're ignored or handled reactively, they can spiral pretty quickly. Denying there is conflict is not a good way to resolve.

Where do most complaints that are directed at school systems these days tend to originate?

In this age of increased social media and advocacy organizations over the past 10 years of our political discourse, it does feel like outside actors and agitators that don't know a community can absolutely insert themselves into the local fabric of a school board meeting or parent organization.

A sense of intimacy can be contrived in this virtual environment we're living in, and that is a different layer of disruption and distraction, then we were in stakeholder management and local trust-building a generation ago.

States have over the past few years imposed restrictions on how schools attempt to discuss race- and gender-focused

topics. What have you heard is being targeted most?

It depends on the community, which is why it's so important for a shared governance team to be in touch with what folks are concerned about—and what they're not. Some of these nationalized culture war issues are not a big deal in lots of communities—and it's not just a red or a blue set of divisions on this.

What needs to be taken into account are the nuanced histories and civic cohesion of every school district in this country. That's why it's important to equip superintendents to have a strong pulse on their community's aspirations, values, fears, pain.

Are the controversies that do exist emerging mostly in certain districts, either because of size or location?

It's not simple. In both smaller rural and suburban districts, for example, superintendents tend to wear multiple hats—instructional leader, chief communications officer, human resources director, and in some cases business administrator or chief financial officer. The toll that takes feels more acute, and that's a challenge.



Use words that will resonate not just in the cabinet meeting of a superintendent's office, but also in the pages of a local newspaper.

And in places with higher demographic changes, whether it's immigrant families or folks moving out of cities because of the high cost of living, that can create strain for a superintendent whose stakeholders are changing. They now need to understand in that new dynamic what really matters to their constituents.

How are restrictions altering the K-12 purchasing landscape?

Vendors should not just be pitching their products. They really need to do their homework and understand a district's long-term goals. That now extends to understanding their financial position and their budget picture in the uncertainty that has permeated the fiscal climate right now.

When making financial projections for the next year, districts are accounting for 2% to 3% uncertainty and have contingency plans in place. Some, before the start of the summer, were trying to account for changes in operating capital between 5% and 20%. Appreciation from a vendor for that degree of swing can help build empathy and trust.

When EdWeek Market Brief surveyed district and school leaders about how vendors could help them navigate culture wars, they pointed to support companies could provide behind the scenes. Does that finding resonate with what you know of superintendents' needs now?

For superintendents, their most precious resource is time, so if they feel equipped with empathetic guidance from a vendor, it can go a long way—not only in building relational trust, but also in building momentum with end users who want to understand the 'why' of an investment or change.

It's less attention on "What solution does my company provide?" and more "What problem am I helping a district or school leadership team solve?" Companies can even step into the shoes of system leaders as communicators and share basic language or FAQs or even sample conversation guides customized for different audiences—principals, teachers, boards, parents. There's never going to be a one-size-fits-all script, but taking some of the onus off district administrators to come up with that from the get-go is a huge benefit.

How should companies support districts who have made it clear they remain committed to supporting DEI, despite political pressures?

Academic providers, tech vendors, and curriculum companies have to defer to the values and vision of the district. This is a moment where if you don't do that, the stakes are higher and

the fallout might be greater.

In what ways can vendors help with messaging, no matter a district's position?

Avoiding acronyms and edu-speak, and thinking about a wide range of stakeholders who might be paying attention to the contract bid or proposal language. Make sure you use words that will resonate not just in the cabinet meeting of a superintendent's office, but also in the pages of a local newspaper.

Basically, embrace this idea of radical transparency and candor to make sure this doesn't just feel like the superintendent's or district leadership's choice, but a community-oriented choice. That can be a way to build up a risk-mitigation strategy for when there are questions down the road.

Any other strategies you recommend?

With the explosion of AI-infused products, the more tinkering time they can get before needing to commit, the better. So allow and encourage folks, including parents, to test-drive your product in a low-friction, no-risk way. It dispels the mystery and perhaps the skepticism of what these products are doing and how a student is interacting with them.

I also think it's a time to sunset contracts that are not serving kids—and for vendors to be the ones to initiate that with districts. Life is long, and those folks can become some of your best references. They'll say "This is a vendor who's not just looking to keep a contract or make a sale, but for results that my system is yielding for kids." And for companies, for every contract they're looking to get back on track, it's a zero-sum game with time they're not spending with other more deeply engaged, or even prospective, clients.

How are superintendents coping with the mercurial federal funding situation?

On one hand, there's relief that these federal funds have been unfrozen. On the other hand, the bigger picture is that the instability and unpredictability of this fiscal climate makes it

really hard for superintendents to plan, communicate those plans with stakeholders, and lead in a multi-year way.

Because of their role as civic leaders, having to communicate the value of federal funds and the impact when they are threatened or frozen or eliminated, a lot of superintendents are more fired up than ever to be bold when making their case. And not as lobbyists or advocates, but in a way that amplifies the stories of students—and why after-school or summer programs, school breakfasts and lunches, and special education services are so imperative for families and students to rely on. Whether taking away or restoring funds, there's a cost to the change.

Describe how you see the big picture despite current challenges?

It restores my hope in our public education system and in superintendents, who are unsung American heroes in lots of ways, that there's so much more in these conversations that everyone agrees on than any lines of demarcation based on the particular persuasion of their communities.

If we keep the focus on kids, and adults channel their energy to transform opportunities and experiences in a way that's honest about the fact that not every child is getting what they need right now, that's where we going to find our way. And it's not going to be on partisan lines; it's going to be in better understanding each other. There's a lot of advocacy on both sides of the extreme, and we're trying to create a broad tent that's student-centered.



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