

Reflection from a resigning educator



Educator resignations are becoming as contagious as any coronavirus variant. On February 6, 2022, I joined the education exodus by submitting my resignation as the director of communications for a school district in suburban St. Louis.

Retaining teachers has been a challenge for decades. Typically, teachers leaving the profession is attributed to low salaries. During the pandemic, superintendents, and administrators, who command six-figure salaries, have also joined the growing list of those departing education. To prevent irreparable damage to the public education system, we must identify and address why educators at all levels are walking away.

I believe unrealistic expectations and a lack of empathy are to blame.

As a school communicator, my role is all about storytelling. I love finding new ways to tell positive stories about students. Unfortunately, since March of 2020, I have spent most of my time entangled in nonsensical interactions about COVID-19 with competing factions. On one side, there are people who believe COVID-19 safety measures are intrusive. They have deep-seated anger toward school districts that stems from the closures at the onset of the pandemic. On the other side, there are people who believe COVID-19 safety measures are lacking. They have an entrenched belief that schools should provide the same level of protection and services as top-tier hospitals.

People in both factions expect their individual opinions to become policy. Another thread that connects the fabric of these factions is that neither has accepted reality – our society, including our public education system, is not capable of functioning as it did before the pandemic.

Educators frequently use the word “stakeholders” as an umbrella term to cover students, parents, employees, and taxpayers. For this reflection, I am not referring to students. They are playing a very minor role, if any, in the culture that permeates education. Adults are the protagonists in this problematic production. Most stakeholders are supportive and do not belong to either of the factions. However, those who do, often express their positions through accusatory and abusive language.

DAILY NEWS

Torching Media Mistrust

The first time I told anybody in my extended family that I was considering studying journalism in college was at a Cheddar's Scratch Kitchen in Terre Haute, Indiana.

I was there with my dad, my step-mom, my two younger sisters and my grandmother and step-grandfather, who were visiting before I would visit my dad's for the last time before I left for school, a month or so before I started at Ball State.

My grandparents had asked me what I intended to major in, and I told them I was interested in studying journalism and political science. This information was met not with encouragement but with an extended rant from my step-grandfather on the dishonesty of the media and its perceived unwillingness to cover anything besides the pandemic or the previous president.

This only continued a pattern of media mistrust that the previous president stoked. Former President Donald Trump infamously called journalists "the enemy of the American people" on Twitter Feb. 17, 2017. In 2020, he called the image of police brutality against a reporter "a beautiful sight," and the branch of my family who derided my career choice very much supported him.

This event didn't bother me, per se — I didn't need anybody to validate my chosen profession or tell me I was doing a good job. But it stuck with me, nonetheless.

It turns out this isn't such an uncommon occurrence. According to a 2020 [Pew Research Center poll](#), 52 percent of Americans have "not too much" or "no confidence at all" in journalists while 56 percent believe journalists have "low" or "very low" ethical standards.

The prospects become even more grim for student journalists. In 1969, the Supreme Court decided in the case [Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District](#) that students don't lose their First Amendment rights "at the schoolhouse gate."

But, nearly 20 years later, in 1988, the Supreme Court in [Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier](#) argued nearly the exact opposite. In a case involving a principal at Hazelwood East High School in St. Louis blocking certain pages of *The Spectrum*, the school's student newspaper, from being published, the court ruled in favor of the school district. The court argued schools could exercise such prior restraint as long as the action was "reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns."

The court never specifically outlined what those "pedagogical concerns" could be, leaving the discretion for such a decision entirely to the administrators who practice the restraint.

Challenges to anti-CRT, LGBTQ laws grow

Dive Brief:

- The American Civil Liberties Union last week sued the Wentzville school district in Missouri to stop the district's bans on certain books, following on the heels of two suits ACLU filed against Oklahoma and New Hampshire school districts in late 2021.
- Other challenges to book bans and laws that advocates say target people of color and the LGBTQ community are also growing on a local level. The ACLU filed two public records requests in Tennessee and Montana, and the Mississippi ACLU issued a letter to a Ridgeland, Mississippi, mayor who withheld funds from a local library until it got rid of LGBTQ+ related materials.
- ACLU “will continue to actively pursue this issue through litigation and other advocacy methods,” spokesperson Eva Lopez said in an email. According to experts, lawsuits could eventually reach a higher court.

Dive Insight:

At least nine states have passed legislation preventing teachers from teaching what some parents and legislators say are divisive concepts in the classroom, but which advocates say intend to prevent discussions of racism and historically marginalized groups. Some 36 states have efforts to restrict education on bias, racism or contributions of specific racial or ethnic groups to U.S. history, according to a tracker by Chalkbeat.

Challenges are spreading on the local level, tailored to the circumstances — such as how, why and at what level of government the prohibition was passed — surrounding the bans and their content.

Many bills include language prohibiting discussion of “divisive concepts.” These concepts, according to various bill texts and an analysis by the Education Commission of the States, an organization that tracks the education bills, include teaching “the United States is inherently racist or sexist” and ascribing privileges to a race.

Other civil rights challenges could invoke the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection clause, the First Amendment right to freedom of speech, and, in some cases like the so-called “Don’t Say Gay” bill in Florida, Title IX.

In the meantime, the laws will impact districts in states with classroom censorship laws, including Idaho, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Arizona and North Dakota.

In many cases, districts may overcomply, said Salomone. Salomone conducted a study in the 1980s of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier, which held that student school newspapers not established for student expression had fewer First Amendment protections than do independent newspapers.