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The Principal's Problem: Anchoring Equity in an Exclusionary System

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Abstract

This paper, titled "The Principal's Problem: Anchoring Equity in an Exclusionary System," offers a critical examination of the multifaceted challenges faced by school administrators in navigating an educational landscape marked by growing equity issues, safety concerns, and the mental health crisis among students. Drawing from the author's 35-year experience in various educational roles in Massachusetts, the critical situational analysis delves into the complexities of fostering a safe, inclusive, and equitable school environment amid a youth mental health crisis, reactionary legislative demands, and a hostile, binary, social landscape. The first section of the paper emphasizes the evolving role of educators in addressing the emotional well-being and safety of students. It illustrates how external tragedies, such as student suicides and drug overdoses, directly impact school policies and practices. The author highlights systemic inequities, such as disparities in recognition and funding between male and female sports teams and the controversy over gender-specific graduation gown colors, illustrating the difficulties in upholding Title IX and fostering gender equality. The paper further explores the escalation of gun violence and its profound impact on school safety protocols and legislation. It addresses the administrative burden of complying with a myriad of regulations aimed at ensuring student safety and emotional well-being, from bullying and gender identity to mental health and substance abuse. The first-person narrative critiques the overwhelming expectations placed on school administrators to act as both educational leaders and first responders in a socio-economically diverse and politically charged environment. It argues for a more holistic approach to educational leadership, one that balances legal and moral obligations to protect free expression with the imperative to create a nurturing and inclusive school culture. The author posits that the real challenge lies in the practical implementation of these ideals.

Keywords: inclusive school leadership, systemic inequities, youth mental health crisis

1. Introduction

After a rewarding 35-year career as a Massachusetts public high school history teacher, director, assistant principal, and principal, I can now look at the state of education from a place of experienced wisdom and through a reflective lens. In my semi-retired frame of mind, I feel empowered to articulate what I believe my overworked and underappreciated colleagues are experiencing in this oppressive, bureaucratic, and toxic culture of blame, shame and sue! A culture that puts school leaders between a lawsuit stemming from the failure to protect students' rights to free expression and the potentially deadly consequences of failing to protect and nurture their emotional health and safety in an era characterized by a substantial increase in student anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicide.

Like most careers, mine was shaped by the highs and lows – the events that marked celebration, growth, success, trauma, disappointment, and death. The graduation ceremonies, the staff outings, the opening of a new building, the awarding of a national blue ribbon for excellence, the culture of success and achievement – of belonging to each other and something of great importance. The student car accidents, overdose deaths, abusive parents, disabling poverty, bullied victims, and suicide – the culture of belonging to each other and the importance of our role as educators in life itself. It's always been that student health and wellness enveloped the context of our work. Teachers, and schools themselves, are an extension of home, of nurturing and caring, of learning and development, of growing and attaining.

I can't tell you the best history lesson I taught or when and what the worst test results our school received. I can, however, tell you about the sophomore girl who hanged herself and precisely how that week played out at school or exactly where I was standing when my colleague shared with me that my sophomore student was in a car accident on his way home from school that killed his younger brother. I can tell you about the very bright recent graduate who died of a heroin overdose and the many meetings aimed at developing and implementing strategies and policies to keep students safe from harm. The addition of a transition program to support students returning from hospitalization after anxiety or depression crippled their ability to function, the development of a teacher reporting protocol for students who appear 'off', disengaged, sad, lonely, or angry, the implementation of a weekly student support team (SST) of administrators, counselors, school psychologists, nurses and school resource officers to identity and follow up on the students most at risk either to fail or to do harm. The roll out of a new anonymous portal for reporting bullying. I remember the debates and lengthy discussions during our new building construction over the costs of bullet proof glass, the height of the hedges that would provide optimal viewing of external threats lurking in the shrubs, the alert system in the event of a dangerous person, and the double vestibule visitor entrance speaker and camera system design – all in the hopes of keeping students and staff safe.

This paper is innovative in its research method as a situational analysis written in a first-person narrative. The work provides significant real-world context to support a qualitative study that problematizes the educationalization of social problems (Labaree, D.F. 2008) and the positioning of schools as a force for social progress (Sullivan, T. 2018).

The research question that frames the paper is: How do school leaders foster a safe, inclusive, and equitable school environment amid:

- increasing gun violence and drug addiction,
- harsh polarity,
- public distrust in our institutions, and
- an emerging crisis of student emotional health?

2. Upending Traditions and Exclusionary Gaffes

As Title IX reached fifty years old in 2022 it might surprise you to learn that achieving gender equity in high schools even when gender referred to the binary male/female construct has always been a challenging crusade. On the surface, it seems straightforward - a no brainer - all genders shall receive the same benefits. Until the football team wins the state championship - the *superbowl!* Tradition dictates that these athletes be provided with championship rings, championship swag, a legendary banquet with awards and speakers, school dismissals for captains to attend pregame recognition by the state athletic association, a St. Patrick's Day parade float, police and fire escorts with lights and sirens through the town after the win, and a great deal of pre and post-game media attention for individual athletes and the team itself (cable TV, radio broadcasts, Instagram posts, Twitter posts, restaurant menu ads, and a roadside billboard). These are all wonderful recognition and celebrations for our student-athletes and their coaches. It isn't until another team, a female team, with significantly less community and public stature, wins a state championship, that the rubber hits the road.

Title IX is federal legislation, enforced by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR). Specifically, if an institution operates or sponsors an athletic program, it must provide equal athletic opportunities for members of both sexes. In determining whether equal athletic opportunities are available, OCR considers whether an institution is effectively accommodating the athletic interests and abilities of students of both sexes. OCR also considers the following factors in determining whether male and female athletes are provided with equivalent benefits, opportunities, and treatment: equipment and supplies; game and practice times; travel and per diem allowances; coaching and academic tutoring; assignment and compensation of coaches and tutors; locker rooms, practice and competitive facilities; medical and training facilities; housing and dining facilities and services; and publicity. (Sex-based Harassment, n.d.)

The equity issues emerged for us when the student-athletes and coaches themselves brought it to the attention of administration. Both the girl's varsity basketball team and the cheerleaders had earned state championship titles or the equivalent and began to question where the swag and celebrations were for them. The problem here was the football team has the financial and emotional support of prominent community members and alumni who organize and fund many of the accolades. All other teams did not! This leaves the school district responsible for achieving equity - equity of attention, of marketing, of swag, and everything else. The fact that private donations funded much of the football team's awards and recognition does not relieve the district from ensuring equity. This created quite a fiscal conundrum for the district that was unprepared to fund elaborate banquets, billboards, rings, etc. on equal par with that of the private funding of the football team.

The most visible gender inequity practice on display for all to see, was the gender-based color of graduation gowns: white for females, green for males. This long-standing tradition was not unique to our small school. This was the common practice for much of the country. Tossing this tradition out became fodder for a political battle, although not completely unexpected, completely consuming. Another incredibly frustrating time and energy sucker that put me on my heels for months!

Despite that the senior class officers strongly supported the end of the gender-based gowns, loud community voices in the social media realm and in the Superintendent's ear, sought to prohibit the change, arguing that upending "long standing traditions" is unnecessary, not the role of school administration, and perhaps even detrimental to the unique, historical culture of the community. I can't say I was surprised by the backlash, but I certainly was annoyed with

the amount of time and energy I needed to spend on defending a position of progress toward a more inclusive school. Engaging in combat against efforts to thwart inclusive practices should not consume a school administrator. But that is the reality. Several years earlier Massachusetts provided guidance to help school and district administrators take steps to create a culture in which transgender and gender nonconforming students feel safe, supported, and fully included, and to meet each school's obligation to provide equal educational opportunities for all students, in compliance with G.L. c. 76, §5 state regulations.

An Act Relative to Gender Identity (Chapter 199 of the Acts of 2011), which became effective on July 1, 2012, amended several Massachusetts statutes prohibiting discrimination to include discrimination on the basis of gender identity. The Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) adopted revised Access to Equal Education Opportunity Regulations, 603 CMR 26.00, 603 CMR 1.00, to reflect the broadened student anti-discrimination provision in G.L. c. 76, §5. The Board also directed the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to provide guidance to school districts to assist in implementing the gender identity provision.

> The gender identity law reflects the reality that transgender and gender nonconforming students are enrolled in Massachusetts public schools. These students, because of widespread misunderstanding and lack of knowledge about their lives, are at a higher risk for peer ostracism, victimization, and bullying. The 2011 National School Climate Survey by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), found that 75.4% of transgender students had been verbally harassed in the previous year, 32.1% had been physically harassed, and 16.8% had been physically assaulted. Educators play an essential role in advocating for the well-being of these students and creating a school culture that supports them.
>
> Whenever students are separated by gender in school activities or are subject to an otherwise lawful gender-specific rule, policy, or practice, students must be permitted to participate in such activities or conform to such rule, policy, or practice consistent with their gender identity. The new law on gender identity provides a good opportunity for schools to review their gender-distinct policies. For example, some schools require students to wear gender-based garb for graduation or have gender-based dress codes for prom, special events, and daily attire. Schools should eliminate gendered policies and practices such as these. For example, one school that previously had blue graduation gowns for boys and white ones for girls switched to blue gowns for all graduates. The school also changed its gender-based dress code for the National Honor Society ceremony, which had required girls to wear dresses. (Guidance for MA Public Schools Creating a Safe and Supportive School Environment, 2021)

It couldn't be much clearer. There it was in black and white - the exact same practice. However, clarity of regulation and expectation wasn't enough to sway the nay-sayers. This is one of those places where administrators need to walk the talk. You can't say that you are an equity advocate and allow these practices to go unchecked. Some of my colleagues in other districts took the route of what they perceived to be a middle ground - allowing students to choose a color. I completely disagree with that practice. We know that forcing a color- a gender-based color - onto students, is forcing them into a very public and for many, a very disconcerting place.

3. Increasing Gun Violence and an Emerging Student Emotional Health Crisis

As I moved from the classroom into administration in 2004, the level of emerging student safety concerns was growing fast. In 2004, two towns over, a high school junior was arrested on charges that he planned to kill eight individually named students and teachers, in an extensive plan evidenced by a map of the school's escape doors to barricade, and a practice session in which he exploded a handmade bomb. It appeared that he was timing an attack to coincide with the April 20 anniversary of the school shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado. In 2010 a South Hadley, Massachusetts, freshman student hanged herself after being bullied relentlessly by six classmates. Not quite in our backyard, but close enough, in 2012, twenty young children were gunned down in their Newtown, Connecticut elementary school, Sandy Hook, by a mentally unstable man wielding an assault weapon with multiple large capacity ammunition magazines. GAME CHANGER! The danger out there was now right here. Legislative action quickly followed.

As a response to gun violence, rising opioid and heroin addiction, increased suicide, anxiety and depression, and overall decline in student emotional health and safety, Massachusetts lawmakers imposed several regulations that would significantly impact the role of schools in supporting student behavioral health. The recent hallmark legislation is intended to hold schools accountable for student emotional health and well-being. These regulations (An Act Relative to Bullying in Schools, 2010, An Act Relative to Gender Identity, 2011, An Act Relative to Student Access to Educational Services and Exclusion from School, 2012, An Act Relative to the Reduction of Gun Violence, 2014, An Act Relative to Substance Use, Treatment, Education and Prevention, 2016, An Act Addressing Barriers to Care for Mental Health, 2022) and the hundreds of pages of guided practice that comes with them impose colossal procedures for data collection, assorted suspension hearing notices, meeting mandates within limited timelines, recommended consequences by infraction, attendance (school absence) mitigation requirements, drop out exit interviews and follow-up tracking, substance use screening mandates, roles of school resource officers, emergency response plans, suicide prevention training and a bureaucracy of reporting requirements.

Current expectations are that educators intervene and advocate on behalf of their students with trauma sensitive practice and awareness. Awareness, advocacy, and intervention translates as school policy, practice, and expectations which in turn creates school culture – not really rocket science. So, what's the problem? The problem is ostensibly in our practice- in the expectations and the delivery - the management, the resources, the skills, and the overwhelming clinical and first responder responsibilities that eclipse creating and maintaining that school culture. The problem is covertly in the expectations that schools can overcome and mitigate the psycho-socio-economic macrocosm of poverty, intolerance, precarity, violence and hate consuming our youth. Our charge as school leaders is to protect the rights of the student who, for example, wears an anti LGBTQ t-shirt as fiercely as we protect the safe haven climate for the student who feels persecuted and unwelcome. Most often the administrator is burdened with having a student who is feeling overwhelmingly distressed due to what appears to that student as bullying, exclusion, and rejection in their building, under their watch. Will the student hurt themself? Will they be able to access education in this space, emotional and physical? Is it *Tinker* worthy – substantially disruptive, violating the rights of others, is vulgar, or rude? Or is it a protected expression of an idea (*Texas v. Johnson*)? Should the administrator use their position and authority to police free speech and quell student voices in a heated

political issue if that speech causes distress and anguish to other students? The rock and a hard place metaphor here is potentially between a lawsuit and a cemetery.

Here's how it plays out in schools across the country:

3.1. Scenario 1

Shortly after the 2016 Presidential election, during lunch period, two tables of students begin to chant "build that wall" and pound closed fists on their tables – seated next to a table of students who recently arrived in the country and are vulnerable English language learners. Staff on lunch duty shut down the chant and fist pounding by immediately admonishing those engaged. The next day several students at the chanting table wore *USA* and US flags across shirts and caps to school and to lunch. This continued for weeks. Some of the attire was hand drawn with paint or markers on shirts turned inside out, to intimidate the newcomers nearby. They clearly intend to be heard. Three newcomers asked to be placed into a different lunch period which means changing their entire class schedule. In this case the classes they needed prevented a lunch change. They expressed how uncomfortable they were feeling – akin to being bullied and harassed – in complete contrast to the school values and mission espoused of belonging and tolerance – safe and supportive for all.

Do we disallow the wearing of USA or US flag adorned clothing? Of course not. If so, what next? Where do we draw the line? How much free speech do we quell? How do we ensure students feel safe and secure in school? Will the exposure to peers wearing hats intending to send the message of 'you are not welcome here' constitute bullying or harassment? Does the intention factor in at all? Does perception? Does it factor into student well-being, strong enough to create a mental health crisis? Does the 'substantial disruption' standard apply in terms of the number of students disrupted or the level of disruption for one student? Does the immense level of emotional distress for a few or for one constitute substantial?

3.2. Scenario 2

Following the Parkland school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018, several students planned to walk out of school as a means intended to draw attention to escalating gun violence. Surrounding their efforts, some clubs launched supporting campaigns by selling orange bracelets with the "Remember Parkland – 2018" inscription and collecting signatures and letters advocating stronger gun control to send to politicians. The buzz of activity and attention led to some students choosing to wear handmade headbands with pictures of automatic rifles or a large orange number 2 – indicating support for the second amendment right to bear arms. A clear divide began to garner attention and conversation. Not a bad thing!

But what about the climate of fear some of the students and staff perceived as they claimed feeling unsafe by the messages on the headbands? In and of itself a message adorned on clothing does not seem to rise to the level of fear provoking. Coupled with the rash of school shootings and the routine trainings and drills as preparation in the case of a school shooter threat, staff and students report palpable fear and anxiety. Is any of it a substantial disruption? Substantial in number? Or substantial in intensity of distress for some?

3.3. Scenario 3

In a small 94% white high school a few young men decide to drive to school in a truck with a Confederate flag affixed to the rear bumper. The school immediately was abuzz with debate over free expression, white privilege, patriotism, and the history of racism. The divide created

led to a few athletes (both black and white) organizing a 'take a knee' event during the national anthem for an upcoming football game. Fashioned after Colin Kaepernick who took a knee during the national anthem in demonstration or protest over injustices and violence directed toward African Americans hoping to draw attention to systemic racism. Sounds like free speech, student voice, activism, and political expression. However, underneath the layers, in the quiet of the noise, was a very intimidated, very popular, very skilled, black football player. He reached out to his coach, to his parents, to his teachers and administrators for support and guidance. The locker room was becoming unbearable as opinions and comments flew wildly. Many of his teammates were pushing back against the idea of 'taking a knee', challenging the patriotism of those who would consider participating. His anxiety was through the roof; unable to go to school, to practice, or even leave his house with his family. He was one of three black students on the football team. Where does he belong? How is school providing him a safe space to learn and thrive? Should administrators or coaches intervene and try to prevent the 'take a knee' action? How will the community respond? We cannot take action to suppress expression based on *possible* disruption. How fragile is the emotional state of the student-athlete who sought support from school personnel? Is he at risk of hurting himself?

3.4. Scenario 4

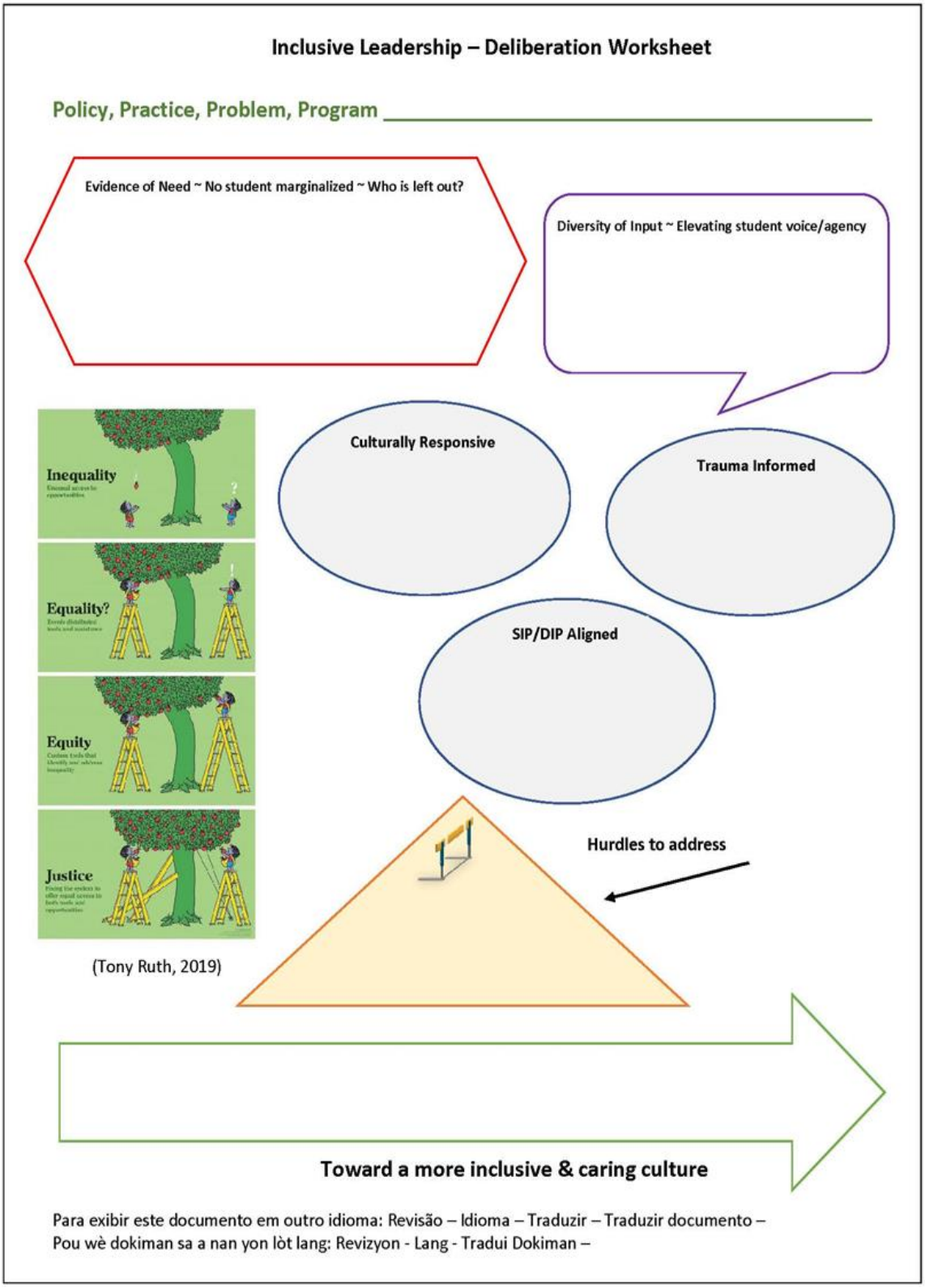
A parent contacts her daughter's guidance counselor to share her grave concern for her daughter's well-being. She has tried to manage the fallout on her own for several weeks. Her grades are slipping. Her attendance has dramatically declined. Her smile and energy all but disappeared. She stays in her room all day and night and barely interacts with anyone. This senior female student reports that she was the subject of a social media post gone viral. The post generated by another student pokes fun at Muslims and the practice of fasting during Ramadan over an image of her face. The original post is immature, intolerant, and mean. And then there are hundreds of comments about the post. There are plenty of comments that call out the original post, as hate speech, and its creator as mean, in support of this young lady. Conversely over 50 comments call for genocide of all Muslims, banning of hijab in schools, and for a shunning of all Muslims. Which comments constitute a threat? Which ones constitute bullying? The commentary was broad, naming a religious group, referred to the student whose image was posted, but did not threaten the student individually. And no, the post and the comments were not generated during the school day on school property. Does that matter to the Muslim students in our care? How threatened do they feel? How are we creating and delivering a safe and supportive climate for all? Should we intervene? Ask to have the post removed? Are we between a lawsuit and a cemetery?

4. Anchoring Equity Advocacy

Looking for inequity vs. responding to inequity brought to our attention, became an integral part of anchoring programming, policy, and practice discussions and ultimately, decisions. Once we started looking for inequity, we saw it everywhere. It was right in front of our faces the entire time. To be fair, it wasn't just that we were caught up in long-standing traditions and well-oiled practices; it was also that the demands of time and energy on administrators doesn't leave a lot of time or energy for the very important routine evaluation of practice and programming. It took a concerted effort to deliberately add the assessment of how well, if at all, each decision moves us in the direction of closing equity gaps. As powerful as that anchor was, it really gained weight when we took a broader view by adding significantly more student voice to that work. To manage the examination of practices, policies, and programming I recommend using a tool like the one I developed for local administrators and their teams,

provided here, to support efforts towards a more inclusive school and provide transparency of the process.

Figure 1



5. Conclusion

William Reese (2011, p. 329) explained how the public expectation for the increased roles of schools into the realm of social-emotional wellness grew in the 1990s. Two Gallup polls, 1990 and 1993, concluded that between fifty and ninety percent of Americans wanted schools to: teach parenting skills, drug and alcohol education, AIDS and sex education, character education, democracy, tolerance, patriotism, 'caring for friends and family', moral courage, and 'the golden rule'. These same polls supported a strong majority of parents who believed strongly in the importance of extra-curricular activities and that schools should increase social services such as vision and hearing screenings, free and reduced breakfast and lunches, medical inoculations, dental care and after school care.

William Davies (2016) claims that unhappiness and depression are concentrated in highly unequal societies, with strongly materialist, competitive values. As we become more and more obsessed with money and material acquisitions, we put our social relationships in jeopardy and thus our own human fulfillment. Davies believes that in this way capitalism spreads a plague of materialism which undermines our connectedness, leaving many of us isolated and lonely (p. 211). It is incumbent on schools to recognize the emerging issues of *belonging* that plague adolescents and contribute to the rising numbers of students struggling with anxiety, isolation, and depression.

The mental health crisis is real and, in our schools, and in our hearts. Our adolescents are immersed in a world fraught with hate speech, intolerance, and violence. Creating and maintaining a supportive, tolerant, kind, engaging, civil safe haven where ALL students feel that they belong is the greatest challenge for our school leaders. I never quite managed to feel like I did enough. Somehow free speech, freedom of expression, boys will be boys, and girls are just mean doesn't cut it when you are sitting across from a shaken, crying child who just wants to run and hide and never come to school again. The school leaders' most difficult charge is to find ways to navigate and balance the free speech rights of our students with the fragility, angst, and painful burden it often imposes on our most vulnerable young people.

On a macro level school leaders must resist the role of silent bureaucrat and engage in the legislative advocacy required to support student emotional health and inclusive schools. In our own schools and districts, we must consistently frame our leadership (policy development, programming, scheduling, and practices) through a culturally responsive, trauma informed, and equity advancing lens. Given the current complex state of socio-political polarity, this will require great courage and perseverance.

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