



Attaching a Dollar Amount to the Culture Wars at School



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Education-related conflict has a cost. And it's not just metaphorical.

The Trump administration is currently adding to these conflicts by issuing a stream of federal orders that aim to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education and disrupt or end its programs, to prevent teachers from fully and accurately addressing race and gender in the classroom, and to require or facilitate schools' discrimination against LGBTQ+ students.

A [recent report](#) prices out the expenses K-12 school districts have borne as a result of similar efforts at the local level. Entitled *The Costs of Conflict: The Fiscal Impact of Culturally Divisive Conflict on Public Schools in the United States*, the report was written by NEPC Fellow [John Rogers](#) of UCLA, [Rachel White](#) of the University of Texas at Austin, NEPC Fellow [Robert Shand](#) of American University, and [Joseph Kahne](#) of the University of California, Riverside.

Based on a survey of 467 superintendents and interviews with 42, the researchers found that, in 2023-24, nearly every district in the nation experienced culturally divisive conflict related to topics such as gender, race, and book bans. Roughly two out of three were exposed to moderate to high levels of conflict, as defined by tensions that arose and occurred regularly across multiple areas of concern.

Based on these results, Rogers and his colleagues concluded that these conflicts cost American taxpayers more than \$3 billion in 2023-24 by increasing and/or introducing new direct

and indirect expenses such as security for school board meetings, salaries for staff to combat misinformation and fulfill public records requests, legal fees, and recruitment and retention (due to the need to replace staff who left as a result of the tension).

The costs ranged from \$25 per student in low-conflict districts to \$80 per student in high-conflict jurisdictions.

Superintendents who participated in the study noted that these conflicts were rooted not so much in the actual practices and day-to-day realities of schools as in broader societal dynamics. Most were driven by small groups of individuals who used threats and misinformation for political advantages.

One superintendent in a Western state estimated that, in 2023-24, 20 staff each spent 20 hours a week serving the needs of this tiny minority by combating misinformation, fulfilling public records requests, and executing other tasks:

Our staff are spending enormous amounts of time, just doing stupid stuff . . . producing things that serve nobody . . . The fiscal costs to the district are enormous, but [so are] the cultural costs of not standing up to the extremists. If someone doesn't, then the students and employees lose . . . It's the worst it's ever been.

Another superintendent in a southern state bemoaned the time these activities took away from his district's core mission of teaching and learning. "My chief instructional officer was so embroiled in library books, and my chief of schools was so embroiled in [addressing LGBTQ+ issues] . . . that their ability to support campuses, i.e. the students and staff, was so limited."

He added: "I'm still just starting to really realize how deep it goes."

School Finance and Funding

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