

## SITUATING LEADERSHIP AT THE CENTER OF EDUCATION FINANCE AND POLICY

**Jason A. Grissom**

Patricia and Rodes Hart  
Professor of Public Policy  
and Education  
Faculty Director, Tennessee  
Education Research Alliance  
(TERA)  
Vanderbilt University  
jason.grissom@vanderbilt.edu

**FOREWORD**

This presidential essay is adapted from my address at the 48th annual conference of the Association for Education Finance and Policy (AEFP) in March 2023. The conclusion of the conference marked the end of my year as president of AEFP. Tradition dictates that the outgoing president share an insight or two at the end of their presidential year. As I noted before I began, I could make no promises that my comments would be all that insightful, so I at least aimed to make them brief.

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This year has made me think a good deal about leadership. Much of my research career has involved thinking about leadership—of the *school leadership* variety—so this topic is not new to me, though usually I am thinking about it through the lens of administrative and survey data. But this year I have straddled thinking about leadership as a researcher and as someone helping to lead AEFP as it faces some tough challenges that reflect the moment we all live in.

This straddling has sharpened my thinking about leadership a bit—particularly leadership for *right now*—and its intersection with research and with AEFP. I want to share three observations.

**OBSERVATION 1: THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT FOR  
LEADERSHIP IS DEMANDING**

The context in which leaders work is demanding in ways it has not been in the past. Let me give three examples of some recent, fundamental shifts in the leadership environment.

First, COVID has been incredibly disruptive to organizations—from tangible ways, like how it has affected financial resources, to less tangible ones, like how it has affected how we network and collaborate. Many organizations, like schools, are emerging from COVID facing strong headwinds as they try to make up for what students have lost. The leadership challenges are immense.

[https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp\\_a\\_00425](https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00425)

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Second is the ongoing struggles for racial justice (and other forms of justice connected to identity, like gender and LGBTQ+ status), and the similarly ongoing backlash against those struggles. Marginalized populations have been engaged in this work for many decades. Many organizations only now are waking up to it, and the folks leading those organizations are being called on to meet justice-related demands they have not prepared for (or have not been prepared for).

Third is the insidious nature of polarization. Political scientists have been documenting for some time that conservatives and progressives have been moving further apart in their policy positions at the elite level of politics and among ordinary citizens. AAFP member David Houston has a nice study that demonstrates that this phenomenon is happening in our education policy positions as well (Houston, in press). But worse than ideological polarization is what we term *affective polarization*: We do not just disagree about policy ideas, but we impute bad motives and express dislike of the other side. If you support school vouchers, you are evil and trying to hurt children. Or if you oppose school vouchers, you are an apologist for mediocrity trying to prop up inadequate public schools and deny people good choices. It is not just our ideas that are far apart; we become further apart *as people*.

Combine increasing affective polarization with social media, which gives us greater access to one another and to complain about one another, including anonymously—maybe just to vent but maybe to get likes and clicks—and we have created tough conditions for leaders to make hard or controversial decisions.

It is a bit of a sidebar, but I have been interviewing superintendents across Tennessee about the challenges of recruiting and hiring good principals, and fear of public attacks on social media have come up in several interviews as a reason fewer people are interested in going into school leadership. I worry about this same phenomenon in organizations like ours. The increasing demands of the environment for leadership has consequences for who wants to engage in leadership and what they can accomplish.

## **OBSERVATION 2: THE CURRENT, CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT FOR LEADERSHIP MEANS LEADERS NEED DIFFERENT WAYS OF THINKING AND DOING**

What skills and behaviors define effective leaders? I don't have definitive answers, but a couple of years ago, Anna Egalite, Constance Lindsay, and I took a shot at answering this question for school principals in a report we wrote for the Wallace Foundation, based on a review of the last twenty years of empirical research connecting principals to school outcomes (Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay 2021). Our conclusions essentially boil down to leaders needing to be able: (1) to engage with the core business of the organization (in a school's case, instruction and learning), (2) to facilitate a positive climate and collaboration within the organization, and (3) to manage resources, including human resources, strategically. I do not know the degree to which this framework generalizes outside of K–12 schools, although I do observe that success in these three domains pretty well sums up what AAFP's leadership strives for also.

What I want to highlight is that today's environment changes how leaders approach work in these areas, and how they define success. I have more questions than answers about these "hows," but let me offer some hypotheses to illustrate my point.

1. COVID has heightened the need for crisis planning, for organizational agility, and for creative deployment of resources (Grissom and Condon 2021). Trust that we have gotten a crash course in this area at AEFP over the past three years.
2. Attention to racial and other forms of identity-based justice creates a need for intentional efforts to promote anti-racism, anti-sexism, LGBTQ+ rights, disability rights, and so forth, and, more broadly, to promote inclusion. We have a lot of work to do, but hopefully the AEFP community is seeing the efforts to be more inclusive in the organization's work.
3. Polarization means the need for focused attention on building climates marked by respect for differences, trust, and kindness; on building skills to promote healthy discourse and manage policy disagreement before it becomes divisive; and on building resilience for when it does.

I worry about this last one a lot as a threat to organizations, and ours in particular, since I think the close, tightknit community here has always been a strength of AEFP. We have a collective responsibility to work to maintain that community. Again, I do not have the answers to the “how” of that work, but it is *work*, both in this organization and in the kinds of organizations we study and aim to affect.

### **OBSERVATION 3: THE EDUCATION FINANCE AND POLICY COMMUNITY HAS A LOT TO SAY—AND A LOT IT COULD SAY—ABOUT LEADERSHIP**

I mean this point in two ways.

First, as an organization, AEFP is full of extraordinary members who show leadership to this organization and in this field every day. Jim Spillane's work has taught me that leadership is often best thought of as distributed throughout organizations (Spillane 2006)—and I see that week-to-week at AEFP. The co-chairs of our community groups are great examples. AEFP has a vision statement that says we are aiming to be inclusive, to build an organization that can support and lift up diverse perspectives for solving our most pressing problems in education finance and policy—but these are the leaders who are making it happen. (And when you see these opportunities to lead within AEFP arise, or if you want to create new opportunities, reach out.)

The second way I mean this point is somewhat selfishly: Leadership should be a much more central research topic for AEFP. Leadership is a core ingredient to how schools, institutions of higher education, and adjacent organizations function, and we need a much more robust research base on leaders and leadership to provide guidance to policy makers, those preparing leaders, and those doing the work on the ground about how to approach leading these complex organizations.

I do not discount the important work on leadership done by scholars of educational administration, but I think the kinds of methodological tools and creative thinking the AEFP community typically brings can provide an important complement to that research.

Typically, we have two or three leadership panels at the annual conference, and they often are terrific, but in general, the attention we give the topic as a community is small relative to its importance.

So this is my plea, especially to graduate students and young scholars: There is so much interesting and important work you can do, and trust me, it is a tiny sandbox. Come join me in it.

Let me conclude by saying that opportunities for professional growth are too scarce in academia. Serving AEFP this year has been one of those opportunities for me. I am very thankful for it, and to all of you. After a demanding year, I am also thankful to pass the baton to Colin Chellman. I look forward to all that AEFP will accomplish under his leadership and the leadership shown by this great community.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

AEFP leadership is, fortunately, a group endeavor. Thank you to the members of the AEFP Board of Directors for their thoughtfulness and commitment to the organization's mission as we navigated difficult circumstances this year. To the other members of the executive committee with which I have had the privilege of serving, thanks for your collaboration and creativity. Special thanks to Lydia Ross for two years of being solutions-oriented in the face of every problem and for her commitment to expanding AEFP's programming and footprint. Closer to home, my thanks to my colleagues in Leadership, Policy, and Organizations at Vanderbilt and to Erin O'Hara and Laura Booker at the Tennessee Education Research Alliance—being surrounded by competence, helpfulness, and good humor gave me just the right amount of professional space to devote to AEFP. And lastly, sometimes that professional space encroaches on the rest of what is important. My love and gratitude to Silas, Joy, and especially Dana for supporting me even when it does.

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