

# Addressing the Challenge of Postpandemic District Leadership

PACE Annual Conference  
January 25, 2024  
Session 1b | 10:15am-11:45am



# Session objectives

- Gain a better understanding of the challenges facing district leaders in the wake of the pandemic,
- Learn about promising approaches to bring coherence to district approaches to navigating through some of these challenges, and
- Identify practices to support district leaders to succeed.

# Panelists

Moderator: Julie Marsh, Professor of Education Policy University of Southern California

Panelists:

- Carl Cohn, Professor Emeritus, Claremont Graduate University School of Educational Studies
- Jennifer Perry Cheatham, Senior Lecturer and Co-chair of the Public Education Leadership Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education
- Rachel White, Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, University of Tennessee

# Table Introductions

- Name
- Organization
- Why you chose to come to this breakout session

# Carl Cohn

Professor Emeritus, Claremont Graduate University School of  
Educational Studies

# New Political Challenges Facing Superintendents

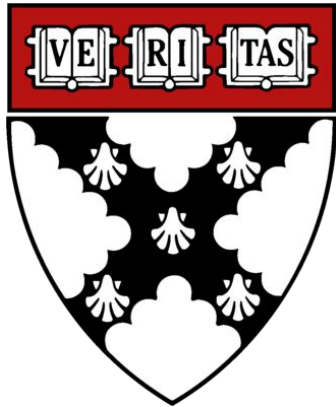
- “All Politics” Is No Longer Local
- Church-State Separation Issues
- Rethinking Allies and Coalitions
- Sticking to Neutrality When Confronted with Immoral and Illegal Policies

# Jennifer Perry Cheatham

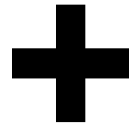
Senior Lecturer and Co-chair of the Public Education Leadership Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education

# Public Education Leadership Project (PELP)

Improve the **management and leadership competencies** of public school leaders in order to drive greater educational outcomes.



Harvard Business  
School (HBS)



Harvard Graduate  
School of Education  
(HGSE)



# Sample District Problems of Practice

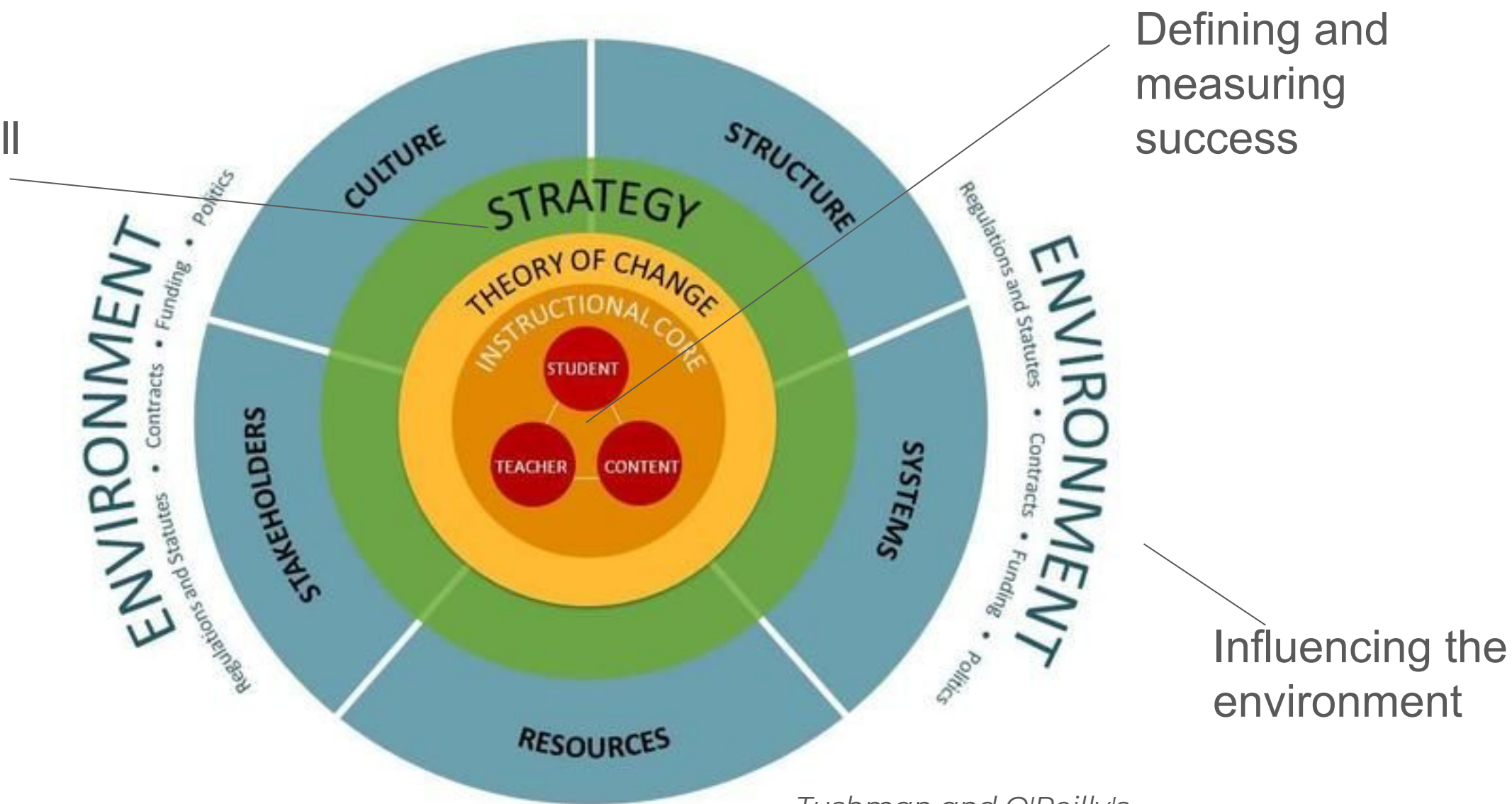
- Lack of access to high quality facilities
- Barriers to enrollment in effective schools/programs
- Inequitable school discipline practices
- Inconsistent access to culturally sustaining instruction
- Lack of instructional coherence
- Ineffective early literacy instruction



(Photo credit: HGSE)

# PELP Coherence Framework

Leveraging all dimensions with a focus on equity



*Tushman and O'Reilly's  
Congruence Model, 2002*

# Knowledge, Skills, Dispositions

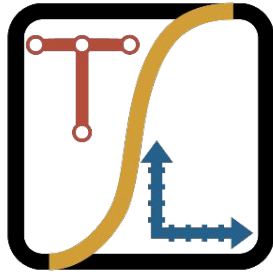
| Typical Skills (PELP)   | New Skills (CPLS*)   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Problem identification</li><li>- Theory and related strategy development</li><li>- Implementation planning</li><li>- Continuous improvement</li><li>- Team development</li><li>- Coherence making</li><li>- Union and board relations</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Personal reflection</li><li>- Visioning</li><li>- Political mapping</li><li>- Movement building</li><li>- Partnership building</li><li>- Communication</li><li>- Advocacy</li><li>- Policy interpretation and implementation</li></ul> |

# What can policy-makers do?

- **Keep stability in mind** as a driving principle - district leaders need stability to make positive change
- **Incent local collaboration** among city/district/union and local non-profits—improving schools requires a community effort
- **Promote productive and authentic parent partnership-** community schools, children's cabinets, etc.

# Rachel White

Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies,  
University of Tennessee



# THE SUPERINTENDENT LAB

Superintendents are positioned to create a vision for equity and social justice,  
and guide policy and practice to see vision through.



## Stability

Takes time to build relationships, trust,  
understand needs of community.

**Stability of high quality district  
leaders is essential to healthy and  
equitable education systems.**



## Diversity

Policy decisions for a increasingly  
diverse student population.

Among the most visible public figures  
in a community→lack of diversity in  
these leadership positions can convey  
values not favorable to inclusivity and  
diversity.



## Working Conditions

What are effective leadership  
strategies and workplace  
environments that support the  
retention of high-quality, diverse  
superintendents?

# Superintendent Attrition: National vs. California

2019-20 to 2023-24

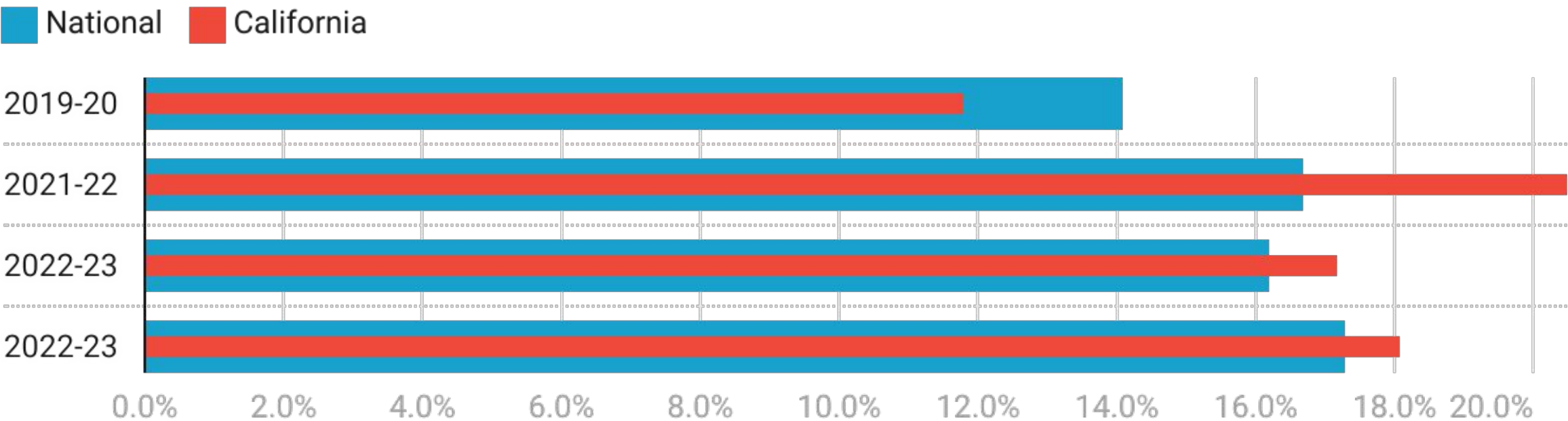


Chart: R.S.White (2024) • Source: NLSA (2024) • Created with Datawrapper

# Context of district leadership

Type of attrition (resign, retire, fired, etc.)

<https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/16534562/>

Nature of attrition (ostensibly amicable vs. contentious)

<https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/16534553/>

Nature of attrition by gender

<https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/16535383/>



# Context of district leadership

National supt mobility by nature of attrition (amicable v contentious):

- Regular: <https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/16529455/>
- Heatmap: <https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/16533958/>

# Why This Matters for Addressing Challenges of Post-pandemic District Leadership

- Increasing churn
  - getting to know the needs of & developing trust with community
  - new relationships with state and local policy makers
- Increasingly contentious churn
  - leading for equity & taking risks
  - speaking up and out
- Gender inequities: how to recognize privilege & provide support?

# Table talk prompts

- What questions or observations came up for you?
- What are ideas or action items you can take back to your organization?
- What statewide policies, structures, or supports are needed at this time?

# Panelist Q&A