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Culture War Skirmishes in Public Schools: The Experiences of Evangelical Christian Administrators

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ABSTRACT

The intent of this exploratory, descriptive narrative inquiry was to understand the experiences of evangelicals serving as public school administrators leading in the midst of culture war skirmishes involving conservative Christians and public schools. The stories of leaders from Texas, Southern California, and the South, the Midwest, and the Pacific Northwest were gathered. Each participant shared a skirmish narrative that included rich descriptions of the cultural and geographic context. In the process, work–faith relationships and the inner worlds of each administrator were also illuminated. Themes were identified within each narrative and across all narratives.

KEYWORDS

Culture; war; conflict; school administrators; evangelicals

Public schools are a place of conflict in American culture, and that conflict has been present throughout the history of American public education.[1] Viewed through the lens of the "culture war" thesis, schools provide a forum for culture warriors motivated by religious belief.[2] In recent decades, conservative Christians have been prominent combatants.[3] This narrative inquiry sought to capture the stories of evangelicals serving as public school administrators, especially when leading in the midst of culture war skirmishes, to better understand how personal faith and larger social forces are experienced by leaders in such conflicts.

James Davidson Hunter's culture war theory frames the dynamic of cultural conflict in American society between socially conservative and socially progressive cultural warriors.[4] Hunter depicted this culture war as "a deeper struggle over the first principles of how we will order our lives together; a struggle to define the purpose of our major institutions, and in all of this, a struggle to shape the identity of the nation as a whole."[5] Hunter's theory has been extensively critiqued and even dismissed by some.[6] Many of the criticisms relate to the different role high profile cultural elites and advocacy organizations play in the conflict as compared to the lives of average Americans. The clash of national voices often involves militaristic, hyperbolic exchanges that are designed at least in part to generate and maintain

financial and political support for the advocacy organization as an entity. The vast majority of citizens do not engage in such conflict nor do they identify with such extremes. Nevertheless, Hunter's culture war thesis endures as a useful tool for analyzing the dynamics of public life.[7]

Public education is one of the major social institutions where cultural conflict is played out. Hunter observed, "Actors on both sides of the cultural divide have placed the battle over public education at the center of the larger conflict."[8] With the ascendency of the Religious Right, the local school was a favored battleground for many national advocacy groups beginning in the 1980s.[9] Organizations such as Focus on the Family, the Eagle Forum, and Concerned Citizens for America worked to keep conservative Christians informed about educational initiatives and reforms viewed as threats to core Christian values, thereby both fueling and guiding local efforts.[10] Polarizing issues, such as religious expression, sex education, Bible curriculum, evolution and intelligent design, and gay rights, continue to be points of focus for national advocacy organizations that have strong support among evangelical and fundamentalist Christians.[11]

Polarized social politics often play out at the local level as culture war skirmishes. Such conflicts offer little middle ground for school leaders seeking compromise. When the school leader is an evangelical Christian and the conflict activates local churches, there is often fierce opposition from fellow believers who view compromise as capitulation; for Christians who consider the public school to be a place of indoctrination in an anti-Christian worldview, compromise is tantamount to dealing with the devil.[12]

The Study

Accounts of school-based cultural war clashes are common, however insight into school leaders' experiences of those conflicts is rare. As a result, a number of questions remain unexamined, especially concerning public school leaders who are evangelicals caught in culture war "cross-fire." To explore these experiences, the narratives of leaders from Texas, Southern California, and the South, the Midwest, and the Pacific Northwest were captured. Each participant shared a skirmish story and its cultural and geographic context. In the process, work–faith relationships and the inner worlds of the administrators were also illuminated, and themes emerged both within and across the stories.

Methods

Narrative inquiry methodology guided selection of a small sample of evangelical Christians who experienced skirmishes. For the purposes of this project, a *skirmish* was defined as a conflict sparked by a culture war hot topic,

reported in the mass media, and involving a national advocacy organization. Potential participants were identified using media reports and snowball methods. An online screening survey provided demographic data and information concerning personal beliefs, church affiliation, level of church participation, and personal political views to inform purposeful sampling.

Extended, semistructured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with each participant. The interview format followed a modified version of the three-interview model proposed by Seidman.[13] The focus of the initial interview was on building trust and creating a complete profile of the participant and the context of the skirmish experienced. The second interview provided as little structure as possible as the participant told their story. A third interview was scheduled if needed to explore aspects needing more information and to allow participants to respond as part of the collaborative work of crafting the narrative. Semi-structured interviews allowed respondents to narrate their stories without undue constraint.

Data Analysis

Through the use of a limited number of open-ended questions, focused follow-up questioning and probing, and avoiding leading questions, interviews elicited thick descriptions of the context and events, enhancing transferability.[14] Interviews were recorded and transcribed. When possible, data from documents and online resources were used to independently verify details emerging from the interviews and internal consistency was monitored during the interview process, providing a limited degree of triangulation.

The names of participants, schools and districts, city, county, state, and specific events, were changed. Details in narratives concerning the actual conflict were also altered under the guidance of the participants to assure the retention of essential meaning without the loss of anonymity.

There were three phases to coding. First, pre-set narrative codes were used to facilitate the process of crafting each narrative. Coding labels suggested by Creswell were used to sort the data into narrative categories related to chronology (epiphanies, events) and plot (characters, setting, problem, action, and resolution).[15] The second phase of coding was conducted simultaneously with the first phase. This involved "pre-coding" within transcript texts and inductive thematic coding, both as each interview transcript was broken into meaning-based "chunks" and during analysis. After independent coding was completed, intersubjective agreement was sought through review and critique of the coding notes by a research collaborator. After the narrative was constructed, a process of recoding was conducted. Emerging themes were identified and cross-case comparison ensued. Each participant's narrative was analyzed for emerging threads and

insights. When analysis of all narratives was completed, a matrix was prepared capturing the emerging themes from each story, which facilitated analysis of similarities and differences across the narratives.

Limitations

Limitations of this study are found primarily in sampling. Selection bias was an early concern using the snowball method. When that failed to generate sufficient responses, Internet searches for candidates became the primary location strategy, which helped to moderate this issue. Consideration during selection was also given to the variety within the sample in terms of gender, ethnicity, geographic region, size of school, size of district, size of community, and years of administrative leadership.

Participants

The five participants (Table 1) will now be introduced along with a synopsis of the skirmish that qualified each for the study. All names used for participants are pseudonyms.

Kevin

Kevin was raised in a Christian home and attended an evangelical university. Unsure what to do right out of college, he eventually determined teaching was his calling. After several years in the classroom, he moved into administration. Kevin had been a long-time, successful elementary principal in a small-town setting when he took a similar position in a more liberal, upscale, suburban community. Soon after arriving, he began to sense that the superintendent was critical of his leadership, especially regarding matters of religion in his school. When a school board member complained about Kevin's participation in an online appeal for support of a community prayer breakfast to honor teachers, he was reprimanded and eventually fired.

TABLE 1 Participant information

Name	Gender	Ethnic/ racial ID	Admin. position	Years as administrator	Enrollment	Location	Region
Kevin	M	White	Elementary principal	26	School: 500	Suburb	West (California)
Terry	M	White	Superintendent	23	District: 11,000	Suburb	North-west
Eugene	M	African-American	Superintendent	39	District: 16,400	Small City	South
Sharon	F	White	Elementary principal	14	School: 380	Rural	Mid-west
Laura	F	White	High school principal	12	School: 2,300	Suburb	South (Texas)

Note. M = male; F = female.

Sharon

Sharon, born into a Lutheran family, described her experience of being "saved" as a series of moments throughout her life, and she strongly identified with evangelicalism. She began her career as a high school teacher, moved to a middle school, then worked as a high school administrator for several years before becoming an elementary principal. She has lived her entire life in the same Midwestern state. In her first year as an elementary principal, a lawsuit was filed challenging a daytime weekly Bible class program at Sharon's school. In the end, the program was stopped, but a religious released time program held at nearby churches replaced the original format and the Bible curriculum was retained.

Terry

Terry moved from the classroom to the superintendent's office early in his career and served as a superintendent in a number of districts, small and large. Because of the many moves in his career, he and his family attended a number of churches representing several denominations, but all of them were evangelical. His culture war skirmish involved a parent complaint about a church youth worker who volunteered at a middle school in Terry's district. She used social media to invite a student to a youth event at her church without the parent's knowledge. District guidelines for volunteers were revamped and volunteers from churches were soon back in schools.

Eugene

Eugene grew up during the civil rights movement and came back to his home town in a Southern state to teach. He was quickly promoted to administration, and as principal he guided the integration of the all-Black high school from which he had graduated. He later became superintendent of the district. An anonymous complaint led to the threat of a lawsuit concerning the religious content in Eugene's weekly email messages to staff. Eugene convinced his board to go along as he voluntarily stopped the practice to avoid a lawsuit. His weekly messages continued, but he coded messages in language that was not overtly Christian.

As an African American, Eugene did not identify with the label *evangelical*. This is to be expected, as White evangelicals share common beliefs and values with Black conservative Christians, but the African American church generally does not embrace identification as evangelical.[16] Nevertheless, Black conservative Christians are commonly included in the category for social research purposes because of similarities in faith and practice.

Laura

Laura was raised in West Texas in a large Pentecostal family. She married a high school football coach and teacher and became an educator herself. Administration was not central to her aspirations, but she was ready for a change and others saw potential in her, so she moved into that work and became a high school principal. A character education assembly provided without cost by a Christian organization was scheduled for her high school. The group also planned an evening evangelistic event in conjunction with the school assembly. A teacher objected and a national advocacy organization joined the opposition. District officials stood by Laura and the assembly took place as planned.

Narrative threads

Each leader's story was based primarily on interview transcripts, but screening surveys completed by participants and other data sources as available (typically media reports) were also used. After all narratives had been collaboratively crafted and were accepted as authentic by the participants, the focus of the analysis work shifted to the identification of emerging themes or threads within and across the stories. The following emerging themes were identified—serving a God who listens, speaks, and acts; walking a fine line in the church–state border zone; the uniqueness and complexity of micropolitics in local communities; and viewing Christian religion as a social good and a community asset. Each emerging theme thread will now be detailed.

Serving a god who listens, speaks, and acts

Participants experienced God as an active presence that communicated, listened to prayers, and acted both to accomplish a larger purpose and to respond to individual needs. Each also believed God was at work in his or her ongoing spiritual journey and viewed daily work as an important aspect of that journey. Eugene stated, "I think that when you rely on your faith and God, then He orders your steps." Kevin asserted, "I'd always known that God was involved in my life; I just always knew that He was there. There was never any question about that." Laura held a similar view: "I had the total conversion experience at a very young age and just knew that God's hand was in my life, always. I've never let go of that."

Because they all viewed the events of their lives as transpiring under the authority of God, they sought direction and guidance from God in their personal and professional lives and were confident of providential activity. Laura claimed, "I think I'm where I am because God wants me to be here,"

and Kevin echoed that confidence by recalling a critical moment when he acknowledged divine authority over him, praying, "God, you're in charge and I'm not." Laura asserted, "You can look at my life, all the way through, and you can see God's hand protecting and growing me."

Not surprisingly, each of them looked for indications of God's larger intent and how He was shaping them to be better Christians through their skirmishes. Terry's understanding of his skirmish was dominated by God's involvement. He explained that divine activity prepared key people long before he went to the community where the conflict occurred: "God was working. He was preparing me … and He was preparing these [people] over here, and putting us all together."

Public schools provided these leaders a place to serve and to be tested and formed by the circumstances they encountered. They trusted that ultimately even difficult situations would serve both God's purposes in the world and their own growth and development as Christians. Terry saw his skirmish as part of a consistent pattern of God's active work in his life: "God is not finished with me yet. He's still working on my rough edges. … I mean it's certainly part of my faith journey, part of my transformation, part of my discipling, whatever you want to call that, God shaping me into something else." When confronted with bruising and exhausting challenges, these leaders turned to God for strength and wisdom. There was a confidence that God would come through in moments of testing with the support needed, a belief expressed by Sharon who stated confidently, "He will bring me through this, whatever it is, He will."

Walking a fine line in the church-state border zone

Each participant viewed leadership in the church–state borderlands within a legal framework, but their approaches varied based upon context. Kevin knew working in a liberal community required caution, but he was also aware of the rights of religious people and personally wanted to see more faith expression in his school. He attempted to toe the legal line, but in spite of that his superintendent wrote in his evaluation: "Kevin has difficulty discerning the separation of church and state." He used legal action to defend his rights, score a victory for religious expression by school employees, and overturn his firing. Though the process ultimately brought some resolution through an out of court settlement, the incident ended his career.

Laura also honored legal limits, but she led in Texas, a much different cultural context. She stated, "I'm knowledgeable and aware that there is a separation of church and state in Texas public schools. I get it. It doesn't mean I like it, but I do get it." However, Laura was also committed to

assuring that the rights of Christians were not pruned: "So when we talk about rights, we're talking about the rights of the Christian, too."

Terry, serving in a religiously diverse setting, was similarly oriented toward paying close attention to legal requirements without hamstringing Christians in the exercise of those rights. He described his approach as, "kind of dancing on the razor's edge. I wanted to value and respect the work the pastors do, and at the same time I have a responsibility as a representative of the secular school system to do what's legally expected." Terry's balancing act sometimes elicited criticism from fellow evangelicals. In the midst of a skirmish earlier in his career that centered on the needs of poor minority students, he recalled, "People I would be sitting with in the pew on Sunday morning were attacking me as an enemy for trying to help the least and the last."

Both Eugene and Sharon, by contrast, were aware of legal boundaries that were being crossed. Both expressed the view that they and their Christian-dominated communities would continue those practices unless and until there was a legal challenge. Eugene recalled, "I knew that my reference to God [in his staff emails] would be offensive to somebody, but it was overwhelmingly welcome by the community." Sharon admitted that local leaders knew the Bible class program was illegal, but, "because it's in the [community's] DNA, until it's pushed, we're just going to continue to do what we're doing."

When challenges came, Eugene and Sharon worked to maintain as much of the original practice as possible. Eugene's strategy was to comply with the specific legal details in the complaint, but "go and do the same thing but within the [legal] parameters." Sharon's approach was similar. She coached the local pastors as they reconstituted the Bible classes as an off-campus released time program so it complied with the law, yet retained the essence of the curriculum. Sharon's leadership in that transition was popular in the community, many of whom doubted that the former principal would have fought for Bible instruction. She recalled, "I know a lot of people expressed that they were so glad that it was me because I would build the bridge and try to make it still work somehow."

The uniqueness and complexity of micropolitics in local communities

In their work on micropolitics in education, Betty Malen and Melissa Cochran described schools as places "where actors use their power to advance their interests and ideals; where conflict, competition, cooperation, compromise, and co-optation coexist and where both public and private transactions shape organizational priorities, processes, and outcomes."[17] Though the valued outcomes are typically budgets and access to learning

opportunities, faith related outcomes apply as well. Those less tangible valued outcomes were at the heart of these narratives. Each skirmish provided a detailed insider view of informal micropolitical activity that centered on such faith-related outcomes.

Kevin's lawsuit led to an out-of-court resolution in his favor, but Kevin's hope was to redress a grievance that emerged from micropolitical shadows he was never able to penetrate. He recalled, "I don't think I had an opportunity to really decipher who was in charge: the superintendent or the board. I never had a real sense of that." Even depositions taken during his case failed to uncover what he believed was the truth about how and why he was removed from his principalship. Kevin's private meetings with his superintendent about church–state issues and her communications with her board outside of formal meetings were the venues of his professional demise. Up until he realized he had to take legal action, he hoped the situation could be handled quietly if he worked directly with the superintendent. Looking back, he recognized he did not discern the danger he was in until it was too late. He reflected, "Maybe that was naïve on my part."

Unlike Kevin, Terry was intentional in developing a community network of Christian leaders and accessing that network, both for his own spiritual support and for the support of needy students. His network led to a strong Christian presence in local leadership, both in the school district and in the broader community. That network served as a supportive platform for micropolitical engagement when his skirmish began. It allowed him time and political space to process an official district response with minimal expenditure of political capital.

Kevin and Terry were both in diverse communities that required careful handling of religious issues, but Eugene was in a much different setting. "A lot depends upon where you live in this country," Eugene asserted, "and we're in what's called the Bible Belt. So we're able to do some things, until we get challenged on it, because the community is very, very faith based." That pervasive Christian influence in Eugene's district was evidenced by a political group that fostered church engagement in the schools, what Eugene referred to as "faith-based initiative": "We had a core group that consisted of the superintendent, director of public relations, retired educators, and pastors to meet almost monthly for breakfast and talk about these [faith-based initiative] opportunities." The Bible-belt assumptions that undergirded the dynamics of the community's "faith-based initiative" between churches and the schools were skillfully leveraged by Eugene throughout his skirmish.

Eugene's school board was divided along racial lines. He was the target of fellow African Americans, although he had the support of White board

members. However, the community's broad support for religious activities in the schools transcended political division, so Eugene was able to work through his skirmish with confidence that the community trusted his commitment to local Christian values.

Sharon's community was also characterized by a pervasive Christian influence. As she described it, "I just feel like it's very saturated here." That Christian influence infused the school, including Sharon's work with her staff. At a particularly difficult meeting to address persistent interpersonal conflicts among staff members, she recalled saying, "The great thing is we all are Christians here. And I know you all have that same desire to do right by God. And you want to be an example of grace and forgiveness."

That community religiosity was a foundation for the work Sharon did during her skirmish. She had a limited public role because the superintendent and school board processed the lawsuit. Instead, she immediately began working informally with local pastors to shape the replacement program for the Bible classes even though the law does not permit school officials to take the lead in proposing and setting up such released time programs. By the time the replacement program plan got to the school board as a proposal, it was essentially complete thanks to Sharon's assistance.

Laura also had strong relationships with local pastors in a community where evangelical Christianity dominated. Church leaders trusted her and came to her aide when needed. However, Laura was sensitive to the delicate diplomacy required to manage that informal evangelical leadership network. "You have to know how to handle [pastors]," she explained. "They have a mission to save the world, which is awesome. But they have to understand we're a public school."

With an overwhelming Christian presence among her staff and central office leadership, Laura also had a professional Christian network of support. She recalled that at the school board meeting where an outside advocacy group presented objections concerning the planned assembly, the superintendent prayed to open the meeting. "She prays before every school board meeting," Laura chuckled. After the challenge to the assembly was formally dismissed by district leaders, Laura was free to address specific challenges that popped up knowing she had considerable support.

In each leader's skirmish narrative, the formal records of school board meetings and public actions capture only a slice of the actual political process. It was primarily the informal micropolitical arena where most deliberations and decision-making occurred. The micropolitics were dominated by the religious culture of the powerful, which ranged from Kevin's experience of hostility towards his faith to Eugene, Sharon, and Laura, who worked in communities where those in power viewed religious practices in a positive light.

Viewing christian religion as a social good and a community asset

For each participant, faith was a central aspect of their identity and their mission in life and at work. However, they also shared a belief that religion—and evangelical Christianity in particular—enhanced the common life of the community, especially for children. They all believed God placed them in school leadership to promote that work. However, there were differences in how each participant approached the connection between religion and schools.

Kevin was quite careful about church–state boundaries in his politically progressive district, but he viewed activities such as a weekend Easter egg hunt held on his school's fields and school holiday assemblies where students sang Christmas carols as positive and appropriate. When challenged by his superintendent about the Easter egg hunt conducted at his school by a local church, Kevin was mystified. "In my mind I said, 'This is not saying, 'Come to Easter Sunday [church service]. This is an Easter egg hunt for kids. I think, 'Cool!'" The prayer breakfast that led to the demise of Kevin's career was another event he viewed as enriching the community. He was baffled by the objection. "Who would be against a prayer breakfast for teachers? What educator would be against that? It's just beyond me."

Terry worked intentionally to support a united effort by churches to help meet the practical needs of schools and students, all the while keeping a steady eye on the limits of the law. He was adamant, "Churches can be good stewards without proselytizing. One group comes to school only to win souls. The other comes to see people as fully human and needing to be loved. And through that love [students may] come to know and love God and God's people."

Terry considered churches meeting needs without direct evangelizing to be faithful Christian service. He described the collaborative work of churches in his community this way: "It became the Christian community truly living out its faith. The best of all possible settings. Not in a proselytizing way, just in a, 'We love you and we want to be part of sharing Christ's love with you.'"

Eugene was a high-profile leader in a Bible Belt community. He was a founding member of a leadership group that established a faith-based initiative linking churches and schools. As an African American who came of age at the height of the civil rights movement, Eugene valued the role of faith in public action, and he was proud of what local community leaders created: "We were able to establish a faith-based initiative in the district where we have mentoring, we have Christian Leadership Centers in the middle schools, we have Good News Clubs at all of our elementary schools, and we have a church–school adoption initiative for each school."

Sharon saw the Bible classes at her school as a positive contribution to the lives of her students. Community members supported the program, though at varying levels of intensity. She pointed out that for some evangelicals, the Bible classes were "very important to them," and the program was "their mission field." However, a significant percentage did not have a strong opinion but were "just fine going along with the flow." Sharon's motivation for working to craft a "bridge" from the old Bible class to the new off-campus released time program was driven by her belief that it was important for the community and that it was her Christian duty. She asserted, "I'm the one who's supposed to get that bridge going and get people focused on the positive, and not let it deteriorate anything—the program or just even relationships."

Laura, also working in a community with a pervasive Christian influence, considered schools and churches partners for the common good, and she saw that played out in many situations. One example was when a student died while she was out of town and a local pastor stepped in. She recalled, "That pastor met with kids [and] met with teachers there on that Saturday night. The kids needed a [memorial] service. His church rented the gym and we had a memorial service and had 3000 people there and he led that." Laura also saw partnering with religious ministries as a valuable asset in addressing the character development portion of her high school's educational program. Christian groups offered resources for free or at low cost. She asserted, "You want character programs, and if you look … it's hard to find one that you need and that you can afford that's not faith-based."

Both Sharon and Laura expressed the hope that students would extend their involvement with faith-based programs provided at school beyond the schoolhouse. Both hosted events where students could choose to get on a pathway that greatly increased the chances of having an opportunity to make a decision to follow Jesus. Sharon's comment concerning students from families that were "just fine going along with the flow" and who allowed their children to attend the Bible classes illuminated this approach: "Hopefully that [going to Bible class] will become more of a pattern for that student and go from there," presumably to salvation. She also noted that the classroom door was left open for students who opted out of Bible classes and sat in the hallway, "just in case [the child] wanted hear what was going on." Laura was fully aware that the assembly presenters offered an evening follow up that featured a direct appeal for students to accept Jesus as savior. She worked hard to keep the school event and the evening event separate, but she also said, "Honest to goodness, if these other things happen and there's conversion, of course—that spiritual side—that's great."

Terry also hinted at a "next step" hope when he pointed to a parallel between churches serving schools and participation in a Rotary Club: "If

you go to Rotary and hand out your business cards and promote your business, you're not going to be welcome very long. You can't promote your business, but you do it by working with somebody raking leaves and building a relationship and when they need insurance they call you, or when they need plumbing done they call you."

Discussion

At the heart of culture war theory is a divide between those who hold to orthodox and progressive moral visions.[18] In every skirmish studied, the polarized extremes were evident but there were important differences based upon the locale. In overwhelmingly orthodox communities—as was true for Eugene, Sharon, and Laura—local cultural values were affirmed. In those cases, the participants served as ambassadors during the culture war skirmish by representing local Christian values. Rather than being forced to stand between their own faith community and the public schools, they provided leadership as the community and the schools collaborated to respond to "others" viewed by most in the community as hostile to their values. Sharon took immediate action and provided collaborative leadership with pastors to help the Bible class continue as a religious released time program that would not violate the law. Eugene acquiesced to the letters of complaint threatening legal action, yet continued to send his Monday emails with coded messages to fellow Christians. Laura held firm in the face of a complaint to the district concerning the assembly put on by the Christian ministry, buoyed by a supportive central office and community.

There were different outcomes in the other, more diverse contexts. Kevin was caught by surprise when his job was taken from him in his progressive district. He finally brought in an external organization to assist in his legal efforts to salvage his career. For the most part, his experiences were beyond the view of the public, so his skirmish had little effect on the larger community. Terry's skirmish was muted because of the process he followed and because of the effectiveness of the network of trust he helped nurture among local churches and community leaders. However, earlier in his career in a more orthodox setting, reforms Terry implemented to improve the achievement of Latino students were met with stiff resistance from conservative Christians and national advocacy groups. That conflict deeply divided the community. In the skirmish studied here, Terry guided a process of thoughtful policy review in response to the challenge from a similar tandem of local objection and national advocacy voices. However, unlike his earlier skirmish, in this instance he had support from a strong local network. The outcome was that church volunteers returned to the district schools with clearer guidelines and the media ripples soon smoothed.

The participants' actions were informed by careful attention to the law, but that took different forms. Kevin initially wanted to simply support the local breakfast to honor teachers, but as his saga unfolded, he became focused on working quietly to regain his job. When it was obvious that the internal process was not going well, Kevin turned to the courts and sought a legal victory in the hope that a win in court would help others who faced similar opposition. Terry worked to get the church volunteers back into his district's schools in a way that complied with the law and, at the same time, did not squelch the valued contributions churches were making to the schools. Eugene sought to avoid a legal battle and yet continue sending Christian-themed encouragement to his staff. Both Terry and Eugene expressed a commitment to follow the law, but in Eugene's case, he was not prepared to do that until a complaint was received. Sharon's goal was to restart the Bible class as quickly as possible in a way that would meet legal requirements, but she too knew the Bible class at her school violated the law. Her loyalty was to the Bible program, which she viewed as a community "good" that she was called by God to steward. Laura was also committed to honoring legal boundaries, but she was also determined to provide her students with an assembly she believed was important for her students' wellbeing, and she was adamant about protecting the religious rights of Christians in schools.

The involvement of national Christian advocacy organizations in each narrative aligns to the role of these entities in the culture war theory. On either side of the culture war divide, the power wielded by such groups is primarily the power of law, either by way of threat or through actual legal action. Most of the participants faced challenges triggered by minority voices within their community who linked with progressive advocacy groups. However, the experiences of Kevin and Laura illustrate the role of conservative advocacy groups as well. Kevin enlisted a national group that provides free legal assistance to Christians. The pastors in Laura's community were clearly aware of national Christian advocacy groups available. When they learned that the school assembly they supported was being challenged on religious grounds, they asked her, "Do we need to call in our organizations?"

Local culture war conflicts are attractive stories to the media, with extreme voices easily captured and often featuring loud public incidents. All of the narratives in this study included media coverage and each participant commented on the role of the media in exacerbating conflict. In his work comparing mainline and evangelical Christians, James Wellman observed, "evangelicals feel that they are smeared by the media and muzzled by liberal bias and political correctness," and that was reflected to varying degrees in the views of the participants of this study.[19] Laura was particularly wary of

the press based primarily on a previous situation when she felt she and her school were portrayed as "the evil people." Terry viewed the press with more equanimity, commenting, "They sniff blood when there's a hot story," but Laura was of the opinion the media is negative, and especially towards Christians. She said, "it's going to happen when you do good things, somebody's going to look for dirt."

Every conflict has winners and losers, and in each skirmish detailed in this study, participants pointed to success in achieving an intended outcome. Differing conceptions of "victory" add insight into the way each participant viewed their purposes and responsibilities as Christians serving in public schools. Initially, Kevin wanted to reclaim his principalship, but he shifted to viewing "victory" as a legal judgment that clearly found the school district in the wrong. Terry successfully guided the process by which district procedures and guidelines were revised so volunteers from local churches could return to school campuses. Eugene modified his Monday emails to avoid litigation, but managed to continue the practice using coded language that connected to Christian staff members. Sharon coached pastors as they organized and launched a daytime Bible program that did not violate legal requirements, but continued to offer a chance for children to learn about Jesus. Finally, Laura's school held the assembly by the Christian ministry as planned, and the more overtly proselytizing evening event was held in the school auditorium. In every case, the administrators framed their personal success as a positive good for others.

Fellow Christians were supportive during the skirmishes. Encouragement primarily came by way of prayer, offered most often by individuals, but at times by groups as well. Terry was regularly prayed for by the local group of pastors, Sharon's teachers prayed for her at a staff meeting, and Laura's regional denominational group sent out a request for prayer on her behalf. Encouragement also came in the form of personal comments, emails, and phone calls.

For Sharon and Laura, the support of fellow evangelicals was overwhelmingly positive. Other participants had more varied experiences. Though Kevin's wife, his church home group, and several close friends encouraged him and prayed for him, he was dismayed by the lack of support he received from the district human resources director, who was a fellow Christian, and a school board member who was also a Christian. Terry had broad support from Christians during his skirmish regarding the on-campus church volunteers, but at earlier points in his career he was harshly and publically criticized by fellow evangelicals and Christian advocacy groups had attacked him.

Hunter's culture war theory provides an excellent lens for understanding the skirmishes studied here. However, much of the school and district level

leadership activity might be better interpreted applying two theories that focus on a more fine-grained exploration of such experiences: street level bureaucrats as proposed by Michael Lipsky, and micropolitics, especially at the local level, as detailed by Elaine Sharp.[20]

Sheryl Boris-Schacter and Sondra Langer applied Lipsky's theory, detailing how school administrators operate in the role of street level bureaucrats.[21] In the skirmishes studied here, administrators in communities with a collective religious identity negotiated implementation of what was legally required but conflicted with local values and norms. Efficiency and resource allocation linked to service delivery are at the center of most of the literature concerning street level bureaucrats, but the same behaviors are evident when applied to these situations where external mandates are implemented locally.

Micropolitical analysis, especially in informal interactions, is essential for understanding how the culture war played out in these skirmishes. Other school-based skirmishes that have been studied illustrate this perspective as well. For example, when the performance of a Christian band at a high school assembly in a small Southern town was cancelled, a skirmish broke out that divided the community.[22] The complexities of power, personality, and law evident in the case illustrate the utility of micropolitical analysis in understanding such conflicts. All of the most important steps in the conflict occurred in informal contexts. As is generally the case, no mention was made of the religious identity of the school principal or the superintendent. If either or both were evangelical Christians, the role of religion was likely an important, yet overlooked, factor. In the end, an out of court settlement was offered when new school board members were elected. The settlement offer was made in spite of the fact that the legality of the decision by the district had been confirmed. "The quandary for school administrators," observed Cynthia Beekley, "is how to determine legally what will avoid litigation."[23] That is true, and yet micropolitical analysis helps explain how power and personality interact with, and sometimes trump, legal factors.

Each of the narratives in this study provided ample detail of how micropolitical practices were central to the action, and how those processes were colored by religious factors. For example, Sharon and Eugene engaged in practices they knew to be out of compliance with law. The local community was supportive, and that fact either drove or encouraged their practices. Both continued their actions knowing a legal challenge would require a change. Laura also mentioned that illegal practices in the area of school prayer were commonplace in more rural areas of Texas. Inconsistent compliance with laws, policies, and curriculum standards that run counter to the religious views of teachers and administrators is common, but the explanation remains poorly understood.[24] Do such situations typically

reflect gaps of knowledge or are they intentional acts of defiance of the law in solidarity with local culture? For Sharon and Eugene, it was the latter. They were not acting in the role of individual rebels; they were acting as leaders aligned with the local religious consensus.

Conclusion

This study sought to better understand the experiences of evangelical Christians serving as public school administrators in the midst of culture war skirmishes. The stories from each of the participants explored both an incident—a culture war skirmish—and a world unique to each participant within which that conflict occurred. Those unique worlds encompassed the cultural and geographic context, but also included each leader's inner world of experiences and worldview. The thematic threads that emerged from across the narratives provide insight into the commonalities of those experiences of cultural conflict among the five participants: serving a God who listens, speaks, and acts; walking a fine line in the church–state border zone; the uniqueness and complexity of micropolitics in local communities; and viewing Christian religion as a social good and a community asset.

At the center of this study is the interplay of the cultural mission of evangelicals, competing visions for public schooling, and the work of school administrators who are evangelicals. The narratives captured suggest that geographic location is the most dominant of a number of factors that make the individual navigation of culture war conflicts especially complex. All of the participants had a faith that presumed a God who communicated with them, listened to their prayers, and acted both to accomplish a larger purpose and to respond to their individual needs. A legal frame dominated each participant's approach to leadership in the church–state borderlands, but their work within that frame varied based on the context. The skirmishes provide a detailed inside view of micropolitical behavior in schools and school districts. Each situation was different, but in every skirmish the bulk of the essential action took place in informal micropolitical interactions. For each of the participants, faith was a central aspect of their lives, their identities, and their mission in life and at work. However, they also shared a belief that religion—and Christianity in particular—offered a positive element to the common life of a community.

It is hoped that this study contributes to making the experiences of evangelical Christian leaders in public schools available to others and thereby promotes greater understanding across contexts and worldviews. Other religious groups among public school administrators, such as Mormons and Muslims, also inhabit professional and inner worlds that are poorly understood. Those experiences are also missing from educational leadership

research. Further study and understanding of the ways that faith provides motive, mission, and resilience for many school leaders will enrich preparation programs, school leadership practices, and ongoing support for administrators.

Notes

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12. Examples of such views are common, but for a unique articulation by a former public school administrator, see Michael J. Metarko's letter of resignation (2010) retrieved from http://www.ncfic.org/weblogmodule/view/id/548/src/@random493e73d2154bd/
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