



## The Emotional Impact of Immigration Policy Debates and Burnout on Educators

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Election seasons spark broad societal engagement in politics. While these times can inspire public confidence, they can also trigger intense policy debate. During recent elections, discussions around immigration policy have been particularly prominent and caused contentious public dialogue. For public-facing figures, such as educational leaders, these heated discussions drive heightened emotions as they navigate the political divide that often infiltrates into their professional and community roles.

While immigration is not the only policy topic of contentious nature, it provides a platform to analyze how school-based educators grapple with pressing political debates. Discussions about the future of immigration have garnered widespread attention, solidifying its place at the forefront of political discourse. Escalating debates on this topic significantly contribute to occupational burnout among educational leaders—a phenomenon characterized by emotional exhaustion, detachment, and cynicism. The consequences of this burnout extend beyond individual well-being, as the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) reports that there is an estimated decrease of 12 billion working days every year due to mental health concerns, costing the US alone \$1 trillion in reduced productivity.

This widespread burnout has ripple effects within schools, particularly on educators' ability to engage with their students. For example, when students seek to understand complex political debates, disengaged educators may lack the capacity to guide them through these discussions, leaving students without the tools to develop informed civic perspectives. This disconnect has long-term consequences: students who are not encouraged to explore political issues may grow into adults less likely to participate in civic matters, such as voting. Addressing educator burnout is therefore not only a matter of workplace well-being but also a crucial step in fostering student achievement and civic engagement.

### Educator Life and the Toll of Immigration Political Debates

Educators' experiences, stories, and emotions capture the realities of politics and policy school-based challenges. Emotions influence thought and action. Educator stories help us understand how educational leadership intersect with broader political and policy developments in society. [Interviews with four education leaders](#) working in urban public schools reveal the emotional toll of political debates on educators. Emotions and stress were particularly evident for educators when it came to discussion around immigration policy.

For example, immigration policy debates, such as the 45th US President's initiative to build a U.S./Mexico border wall sparked emotional responses. Educators were displeased with the idea and expressed feelings of overwhelm with the debate. Specifically, they described the political climate as "awful," "scary," and "really hard." They feel these debates stem from larger injustices and inequity that create a "frightening" climate. In

their capacity as community leaders, educators experienced alarmingly low morale when confronting and speaking on these issues. Some felt so disheartened they expressed intentions of leaving the profession out of protest. Their experiences highlight the urgent need for strategies to mitigate burnout and foster emotional resilience among educators.

## Professional Development Strategies for Supporting Educators during Debates

Rooted in [lessons learned from post-crisis workplace climates](#), professional development strategic design approaches can help support educational leaders in navigating politically charged environments. Professional development in education means providing educators with a set of tools, resources, and training sessions to improve their teaching quality, effectiveness, and morale. These should focus on mitigating education leaders' state of overall emotional wellbeing and empowerment in their schools and communities.

A well-designed professional development (PD) toolkit is essential for creating and implementing effective strategies to mitigate educator burnout. An effective PD toolkit prioritizes empowerment by starting with high-quality, reflective questions that help leaders engage strategically and navigate complex challenges. For example:

- How can I learn more about the powerbrokers in my sphere of influence concerning these political debates?
- How are my own thoughts and emotions shaping my observations, and how can I become more attuned to the thoughts and emotions of others?
- Is my strategic thinking aligned with my advocacy goals? How can I refine it, and who do I need to collaborate with to achieve success?

[The National School Reform Faculty offers resources](#) that facilitate strategic reform and higher-quality strategic thinking. In addition, educators should be encouraged to create or join professional learning communities – groups of educators who frequently meet to share ideas and collaborate on initiatives to better achieve results for the students they serve. Navigating a complex political environment with the support of these organizations can provide educators with a sense of community, reduce feelings of isolation, and foster practical solutions to challenges, ultimately improving their morale and effectiveness.

Professional development that connects emotions with practical strategies helps better support leaders' emotional wellbeing while preventing burnout. The foundation of this process lies in asking high-quality PD questions. To extend their impact, education leaders can document and share their strategies, using inquiry-driven approaches to turn effective practices into policies that benefit schools and communities beyond their own. By equipping educators with tools to navigate emotional and political challenges, these professional development strategies not only improve educator well-being but also strengthen school communities, ensuring they remain resilient and effective during times of political uncertainty.