

LEADERSHIP

# A look at how ideas are now shifting in education

By Dr. Dana Godek and Michael Moore September 19, 2025



Every August, football fans watch with fascination as preseason games decide which players make the roster. A rookie who seemed on the fringe in June can suddenly become a star in September.

Public education debates work the same way: the lineup of acceptable ideas shifts. The concept that explains this is the “Overton Window,” which describes the range of ideas considered acceptable at the moment.

Joseph Overton, a libertarian policy analyst, coined the term, arguing that what is politically possible is shaped less by facts and more by perception. He found that what people looked for, and policy makers responded to, was sometimes *more freedom* and sometimes *less freedom*.

Later, Josh Treviño added descriptors to describe the range of movement (see Fig. 1).

Issues once seen as immovable or not possible move to acceptability if enough voices shift the conversation. In football terms, after enough “reps,” yesterday’s long-shot rookie becomes today’s starter. That’s exactly what we are seeing in public education right now.

Take book bans. Just a decade ago, most districts viewed removing texts as limiting free speech and extreme. Fast forward to today, conversations about restricting content are not



only common but mandated in several states.

The Overton Window shifted, pulling what was fringe thinking and ideology into the mainstream. School choice has followed a similar path.

Vouchers and education savings accounts, once debated at the margins, are now standard talking points in state legislatures across the country.

In contrast, Minnesota has recently shown how leadership can repopularize ideas that risk slipping out of bounds. In 2024, Gov. Tim Walz signed SF 3567, preserving student access to library materials and reaffirming First Amendment rights.

His words were clear: “Protecting access to books means protecting access to the information and knowledge that our kids deserve.” In a climate of growing censorship, Minnesota helped steer the Overton Window back toward inclusion.

## What once met resistance can become a strength

What is important for superintendents and district leaders to understand is that the Overton Window is not abstract. It directly shapes board agendas, public comment, parent expectations and even how principals manage day-to-day decisions.

When the “acceptable” playbook shifts, leaders must respond, whether they agree with the changes or not. Consider Florida—the sudden normalization of arming school staff would have been unimaginable 10 years ago. Following the tragedy at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, it became a real option debated at state and local levels.

It all comes down to courage and response. Let’s think about libraries. As Carl Sagan once put it, “Librarians are essential to a flourishing democracy.”

Yet, in early August 2025, the Spring Independent School District in Texas rejected a proposal for a parent-led library oversight council tied to state legislation. By unanimously voting it down, the board defended professional standards for libraries and protected student access to books.

This was not just a local skirmish, it was a leader-forward moment that demonstrated the power of governance to hold the line against political winds.

Fortunately, a shifting Overton window can also spark innovation. At Alliance MIT, a 6–12 charter school in Los Angeles, a team of teachers asked Executive Director Jonathan Tiongo to consider a four-day workweek.

At first, he was skeptical. But the school found a smart balance: students still attend five days, while the math department is on campus four days and uses one remote day for planning.

Other departments designed similar approaches to protect instructional time while carving out space for teacher planning. The results: discipline referrals dropped, test scores rose and, most importantly, staff report feeling “more prepared and less overwhelmed.”

What once met resistance can become a strength.



Not long ago, principals in Palm Beach County, Florida, were hesitant to hire teachers from non-traditional routes, fearing they lacked the preparation and would require too much support. But as shortages persisted, the district opened more pathways through career changers, alternative certifications and grow-your-own pipelines.

They celebrated successful candidates and shared their results. Leaders have built new supports to help non-traditional educators transition successfully.

Today, in Palm Beach, bringing in talent from beyond the traditional college of education track is the sustainable strategy for meeting schools' staffing needs, according to Tim Kubrick, the district's chief human resource officer.

## Are you calling the plays yourself?

We are also seeing state leaders come together to be highly responsive to communities right now. We have been meeting with eight states in a community of practice dedicated to navigating these shifts with courage and clarity.

One of our guests to this series is Katherine Grainger, managing partner at Civitas Public Affairs Group, who reminded us that "the time has come for leaders to empower communities to tackle the pressing issues of our time."

Her words capture the very essence of influencing the Overton Window. Leaders cannot stand back and hope someone else will protect what matters most. Courageous leaders apply here.

Given this context, here are a few provocative questions to ask yourself:

- If the Overton Window continues to move as quickly as it has in the last five years, what will be considered "acceptable" in 2030?
- Will artificial intelligence grading replace teachers?
- Will neighborhood schools be a relic as funding follows every student out the door?
- Will public education itself, once an untouchable starter, be benched?

These are not far-fetched scenarios. They are potential lineups if leaders fail to influence the window today.

The challenge is obvious: leaders must manage rapid swings in public opinion, often fueled by national politics, media and social media echo chambers. The opportunity is less obvious: leaders can help define what becomes acceptable by intentionally moving the Overton window to ensure that the best policies and practices for students remain within the window of acceptability.

Just like coaches who decide which rookies get playing time, district leaders can influence whether ideas gain traction or fade.

Doing so requires courage. It also requires clarity. Leaders must know their core values and be willing to repeat them, even when the crowd cheers for something else.

They must articulate which students and families will be helped or hindered by resource, program, or policy changes.



Leaders who chase every new shift risk losing credibility with their communities and may not build the trust they need for harder decisions ahead. Those who anchor decisions in values, research and student outcomes will not always win the preseason popularity contest, but they will build trust for the long season ahead.

Throughout NFL training camp, the coaching staff preaches that “you’ve got to earn that roster spot,” even if you’ve been a starter. Star players get older, suffer from chronic injuries, see the value of their specific skill set diminished with new game plans or are simply out-competed by up-and-comers.

In preseason football, not every decision is about talent. Sometimes it is about who fits the game plan. Education is no different.

The question for today’s superintendents is simple: are you letting others write the story of who plays in public education or are you calling the plays yourself?

Calling the plays means three things:

1. Keep restating your values until they become the drumbeat of your district
2. Use your board agendas and communications to set the narrative instead of reacting to others
3. Model courage by defending professional standards even when they are unpopular.

Leaders who do this may not always win the short-term popularity contest, but they build the trust and resilience their communities will need for the long season ahead.

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