

Leadership Institute Training: Action Items for Newly Conservative School Boards

By [Heidi Beedle](#) posted on November 13, 2023

This weekend, approximately 30 school board members, activists, and engaged citizens attended the Leadership Institute's School Board and Education Policy Summit at the Colorado Springs Marriott. Founded in 1979 by Morton C. Blackwell, the conservative activist who was the youngest delegate for Barry Goldwater in 1964 and served as special assistant to Ronald Reagan, the Leadership Institute is an "explicitly conservative" 501(c)3 nonprofit that conducts a variety of political trainings across the country.

The event kicked off Friday with a panel discussion featuring Holly Horn, the Douglas County political operative who has served as campaign manager for U.S. Rep. Ken Buck (R-CO), 18th Judicial District Attorney John Kellner's failed attorney general bid, and [most recently for conservative school board candidates in Cherry Creek and Douglas County school districts](#). Horn is also the deputy director for the [Leadership Institute's Grassroots program in Colorado](#).

"I take trainings of all types to places around the country with the Leadership Institute, but I'm also trying to build a program for us here Colorado," said Horn. "Leadership Institute has not been present in Colorado for the last four to five years, and so we're so glad to be back."

Saturday's events included a crash-course in campaigning from the Leadership Institute's Byron Clark, a Florida-based educator with experience running successful school board campaigns in Kansas. Clark's session included suggestions on everything from building effective coalitions and networking with activist groups, such as Moms for Liberty, to developing effective platforms and slogans and managing social media and

messaging. Clark also provided suggestions for how to use campaign volunteers and activists to further policy goals after taking office.



Mische at

the 2023 Truth and Liberty conference.

The afternoon session was presented by Ted Mische, who serves as the [public/private partnership liaison for Woodland Park Superintendent Ken Witt's ERBOCES](#), and is the trainer for the [Truth and Liberty Coalition's "Candidate Academy."](#) Mische provided a list of priorities for the attendees — among whom was [Academy School District 20 board member and Woodland Park School District chief operations officer Aaron Salt](#) — a list of priorities after achieving a conservative majority in a school district.

"The first really important thing that all board members need to consider is their superintendent," said Mische. "Is that superintendent on board? Do they want what you want? If they don't, then you need to replace them. Either you need to retrain them, get them thinking the way you're thinking, or you need to replace them. That is not an easy thing to do to replace a superintendent. If you do, you're going to get a lot of flak from the left."

After a conservative majority was elected to Colorado Springs School District 11's board in 2021, [then-superintendent Michael Thomas was replaced by Michael Gaal](#), after

Thomas stepped down due to “the political divisions, public meltdowns and fighting,” according to reporting from the *Colorado Springs Independent*.

“Finding new superintendents is very difficult — conservative ones anyway,” warned Mische. “Only about one in ten nationally is conservative, and as we take school boards across the country, there are going to be fewer and fewer of those. The universities are very, very leftist, very progressive. They are not turning out new conservatives. They are only turning out leftists. So what do we do? Well, there’s a number of different ways to find solutions. One is there are still a handful of conservative universities. There are Christian universities that are usually conservative.”

Mische also suggested hiring ideologically-aligned superintendents over those with experience in education. “We don’t necessarily have to have people in education,” he said. “It’s good if they have a background, but they don’t have to have that background. So business leaders, CEOs who bring in a business perspective into the school districts, because school districts should be run to some degree as a business for saving money — really looking at that money carefully. We can also use military officers, generals who have a lot of experience managing huge organizations and lots of people. There’ll be a learning curve for them. Both of those don’t know a whole lot about education. They’ll have to learn. The question is — you have to make the choice — is that background in education more important than their mindset?”

Activists in Woodland Park raised concerns over Witt’s appointment as superintendent, [noting in an online petition that](#), “Ken Witt is underqualified to be a superintendent for our district. He graduated from the University of Colorado Denver with a bachelor’s degree in Mathematics. He does not hold any qualifications for being a superintendent and has minimal experience with students, other than making schools less of a place for education and more of a place for business.”

After replacing the superintendent, Mische recommended that new boards also replace the district’s legal counsel. “After you look at the superintendent, then you need to look at the school district’s attorney,” he said. “Most school district attorneys are very progressive. They will not help you. They will stop you from doing the things you need to

do. You can have a majority board, but if you don't have a superintendent and a [school] district attorney who is on your side you will get nothing done."

A vast majority of conservative school districts and charter schools in Colorado are represented by [attorney Brad Miller](#). Both Mische and Miller are [graduates of the Leadership Program of the Rockies](#).

Mische also suggested that new majority conservative boards wait to be sworn into their new positions, in order to collaborate privately without violating Colorado Open Meeting Laws. "Try to make those decisions long before you're elected, but certainly before you're sworn in and swear-in date is really, really important," he said. "By law, you have to be sworn in within 10 days after the election is certified. You can push that back. That's in Colorado. Different states are different, but in Colorado, within 10 days after the election is certified. Oftentimes, especially if you're working with a very liberal district, they're going to tell you you have to be sworn in right away, sometimes within a week of being elected. You don't in Colorado, you can push that date back, and you should if you have a majority. If you're a minority, it doesn't matter so much because you can't make any significant changes anyway, but if you have a majority, you want to push that date back so you have more time to speak to each other."

After replacing the district superintendent and attorney, Mische suggested boards work to weaken unions in their districts. "Teachers unions are our opposition, unfortunately, with regards to the campaigns," he said. "So what can we do? We can defund them. Right. There's a couple different ways to defund the teachers union. And we're doing this and I've seen multiple districts that are doing this. One is you give them an alternative."

The alternatives Mische proposed are groups like the Professional Association of Colorado Educators, which has been pushed by [education conspiracist Deborah Flora](#), and Christian Educators.

“They also provide \$2 million worth of liability insurance for \$20 a month from a Christian perspective, and they get Christians legal protections,” said Mische. “If there’s religious issues happening in the schools, they’ll protect them from that perspective.”

Conservative districts in Colorado Springs, District 11, District 49 and District 20, [all received letters from the Freedom From Religion Foundation in 2022](#) for allegedly violating the separation of church and state.

Mische also suggested conservative boards end payroll deductions for union dues. “The second way is, in almost every school district, the school district does a direct deposit of the teachers union dues, so that teachers never see the money in their paycheck,” he said. “For the most part, it goes directly from the district to the unions, and the teachers never write a check. They have no idea how much money is being taken from them every month or every year. So what we can do if we’re elected and we have a majority is we stop doing that. The teachers actually write the check and every single month they will leave. They will leave the teachers union when they see how much money they have to pay in.”

Should changing the superintendent, attorney, and interfering with union activity prove unpopular, Mische suggests making changes to the district’s communications team. “Once you flip that board, the left is coming at you like you would not believe,” he said. “You have to have somebody who is exceptional with communications, somebody who has experience in it and hiring full time because you’re going to need it and person is going to push back on all the negativity that comes towards the district and they’re going to present positive things and things that you as a board are accomplishing on a regular basis, at least twice a week, sending out information either through social media or through the regular media as well. But make sure that information is getting out there. Oftentimes what I see in school boards, conservatives get elected, they do fantastic work, and the public has no idea what they’re doing.”

Prior this year’s elections, Colorado Springs School District 11 gave [a sole-sourced, \\$40,000 contract to Tsogt Research and Consulting](#), a company that has only existed in Colorado since April 7, 2023. The registered agent for the company, Michael Tsogt,

graduated from the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs in 2022 with a political science degree and was a Koch fellow in 2019.

In Academy School District 20, [activists in a leaked Discord chat](#) urged then-candidates Derrick Willburn and Amy Shandy to “fire Allison Cortez [D20’s Chief Communications Officer] and Tanya Thompson [D20’s general counsel].”

Mische also urged new board members to cultivate a network of conservative informants amongst the district faculty. “Conservative teachers are in the closet and they don’t want to come out,” he said. “They’re scared, but those are the ones we need to work with. We need to find out who they are. We need to get them to report what’s happening in the classrooms and in the hallways and what other teachers are doing. If it’s bad. If it’s not bad, then good, things are going well, but we have to have those things reported to the board members so the board members can make those changes.”

Should these tactics lead to contentious public comment sessions during board meetings, Mische assured the audience not to worry. “It is not really the public,” he said. “These are paid activists.”