

Navigating political roadblocks to researching trans student policy

CAROL A. MULLEN and JESSICA C. WEYMOUTH-GERMAN

KEYWORDS

Roadblock, school board, transgender student policy

doi: [10.22488/okstate.25.100613](https://doi.org/10.22488/okstate.25.100613)

We were getting ready to launch a research project on school board decisions about transgender student policy in 2023 when something happened that forced us to change direction. Political angst can be anticipated for study topics that are sensitive or controversial, potentially evoking discomfort in others. The equitable treatment of trans youth in education policy served as a “litmus test,” essentially gauging the responses of boards in their decision-making processes. This is why we, a collaborating novice and experienced researcher—Jessica (school leader) and Carol (educational leadership professor), respectively—worked diligently to ensure protections for participants in what we hoped would be an important study. Both White, cisgender, and female, in earnest, we were eager to talk to boards about trans student policy, mandated by state code, surrounding a volatile matter for local communities: the treatment of trans youth in schools whose gender identity or expression is misaligned with their biological sex.

Our research plan involved interviewing school boards that were debating trans student policy. Signed into law in 2020, the Democrat-originated *2021 Model Policies* required the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to develop policies across school divisions in the state for the treatment of trans students. However, affording protections to trans students was met with political divisiveness in local communities (Equality Virginia, 2022). Key policy actors were former Virginia Democratic Governor Northam (2018–2022), whose administration originated the model policy, and Republican Governor Youngkin (2022–2026), whose 2022 and 2023 versions rescinded the original document (VDOE, 2023).

To learn about school board decisions impacting trans policies in Virginia’s public schools, we asked:

1. What is involved in policy decisions concerning the equitable treatment of trans students and their access to education?
2. What influences school boards’ adoption of educational equity policies?

To assure anonymity, our initial plan (relayed to divisions) involved (a) storing data under a pseudonym on a password-protected hard drive; (b) not uploading the audio recordings; (c) sharing transcribed interviews with participants for verification; and (d) destroying all data after 3 years.

Conflict: Outtake Incident

Roadblock 1—A Weak Response From School Divisions in Virginia

After our home university's Institutional Review Board approved the plan in May 2023, we sought permission from 11 Virginia school divisions to individually interview school board members. Only three divisions gave permission; one provided partial permission (excluding the superintendent from participation); and two denied permission. Other divisions did not respond. Divisions' weak response was the first major setback.

Roadblock 2—School Board Members Rescinded Initial Agreements

The consenting school divisions had 16 school board members whom we emailed. Only one individual agreed to the interview. Another declined, explaining that because the board they represented was currently debating transgender policy, they could not comment. Seeking fuller engagement, we followed up with the other 14 members and made phone calls while using indirect networking.

Not only that, we consulted with Carol's research groups of school leaders and university faculty. We asked what they thought was contributing to the roadblocks to board participation, seeking advice. A colleague, with contacts in a local school division, reached out to board members on our behalf. Seven agreed to be interviewed. However, all withdrew upon learning that our interest in school board education policymaking specifically concerned trans student policy and decisions that affect communities. This unexpected turn of events, along with the reason from a declining board member, led us to conclude that our topic was too controversial for publicly elected boards to take a "gamble" on being interviewed, despite the research safeguards in place. We did expect some pushback, just not to this extent. School divisions and individual board members ignored our requests for a research interview. The resistance centered around the nature of our topic and interest in hearing from elected officials who did not wish to comment on a debate that was occurring on their watch, perhaps feeling responsible for policy outcomes, despite the assurance of anonymity.

Impact

Only one board member would be interviewed. For Jessica, the frustration and uncertainty associated with such widespread rejection was immense. She thought that school boards should be as apolitical as possible, serving in the best interests of children. This experience confirmed what she had been suspecting as a school

administrator—politics in education had intensified for public schools, making it harder to protect student rights.

With the blow to our data collection plan, we had to quit or pivot. In Carol’s mind, an alternate rigorous data plan was called for if we were to contribute knowledge at a time that trans policy was being hotly debated. Trying to identify why board members were unresponsive or withdrawing after initially agreeing to participate seemed fruitless. We may never know the reasons for the non-responses and negative responses to our request for an interview. We did speculate. Were these board members committed to the equitable treatment and well-being of trans students to the point of being silent on the subject? Alternatively, did any feel squeamish about codifying the rights of trans students? Did the rights of girls supersede trans rights in their worldview?

Resolution

Navigating political roadblocks to research trans policy required pivoting. Existing school board meeting recordings could serve as a data source and potential solution to our problem. Carol thought that this plan could meet the standards for substance and quality if board data and analysis were strongly supported with a conceptual framework and literature review.

To salvage our data collection, we procured recordings of local school board meetings from the internet, coding 18.5 hours of conversation about trans student policy. Each meeting had a transcription accompanying the video. Watching the videos helped with qualitatively coding 15 transcriptions of board meetings from three school divisions (2021–2023). We remained critical about whether there was sufficient content and substance to justify continuing. For our account of select board meetings, we wrote a detailed state-level case unpacking trans policy issues.

Simultaneously, we drew upon frame theory to determine how decisions are made and enacted by policymakers as a strategy for illuminating democratic issues. Such deliberation involves problem and solution frames rooted in “identify[ing] what is wrong and how to solve it” (Huguet et al., 2021, p. 715). We gravitated toward Huguet et al.’s approach to frame theory because of their application to school divisions, although our context (board meetings) and focus (trans policy) differ. Frame theory proved useful.

We arrived at five findings from analyzed school board meetings: (a) values and beliefs impacted policy decision-making; (b) stakeholder trust and board–division

relationships affected policy adoption; (c) a policy's legal status influenced board adoption; (d) scenarios shaped policy direction in real-world contexts; and (e) decision-maker profiles informed policymaking.

Results from the individual interview echoed these. A board member with whom we spoke for 45 minutes responded to questions about the policy adoption process for boards, the model policies, and their own views expressed in meetings and reflections on policy decisions. As highlights, they described student well-being as one of the “biggest things that weigh on me” in the context of values and the increasing suicide rates of trans youth. They also talked about the complexity of creating policies that address the needs of the division they represent and how they personally “try and come at it from different angles.”

Reflection

When we submitted our official account, minus the outtake storyline, to a journal (Weymouth-German & Mullen, 2025), reviewers' responses surprised us. One wrote: “Your research design was robust, innovative, and well-conceived, and your methods are wide-ranging in scope and capture relevant data from a range of angles.” Another stated, “I applaud the authors' attention to the complex interplay among the legal, moral, and ethical constraints and obligations around trans laws/protections/policies.” A third said that they “enjoyed reading this manuscript and believe it highlights some very important and practical issues facing the field.”

These positive reactions evoked an “aha” moment. We wondered how our reviewers might have reacted if our standard journal article included the untold story—outtake incident and forced pivot. The need to drastically change course and produce a different data collection plan did not fit with our official research account, but omitting it felt incomplete.

We hope that our research story encourages novice researchers in particular to push past unexpected challenges encountered when conducting studies. To help acquire knowledge, primary adjacent sources (e.g., meeting recordings, maps, displays, tools, news stories, and personal diaries) can be vital when primary sources (e.g., interviews) are not available or insufficient. Adjacent sources offer supporting evidence as well as contextual information and perspectives. Connecting with colleagues who facilitate access to the desired participant group is yet another strategy. Engaging face-to-face, no

matter how informally, with prospective research participants may be possible. Brainstorming with a research advisory group is worthwhile.

In a politically divisive country rife with conflict and uncertainty, the research world is deeply affected. When our inquiries revolve around sensitive topics involving vulnerable populations, we are forced to confront our assumptions and research procedures. Navigating roadblocks and problem-solving creatively are survival skills in human inquiries.

References

- Equality Virginia. (2022). *School board policy & meeting tracker*. Retrieved from <https://equalityvirginia.org/school-board-tracker>
- Huguet, A., Coburn, C., Farrell, C., Kim, D., & Allen, A. (2021). Constraints, values, and information: How leaders in one district justify their positions during instructional decision making. *American Educational Research Journal*, 58(4), 710–747.
- Weymouth-German, J. C., & Mullen, C. A. (2025). Trans student controversy in education policy: Constraints and possibilities. *Leading & Managing*, 31(2).
- Virginia Department of Education. (2023). *Model policies on ensuring privacy, dignity, and respect for all students and parents in Virginia's public schools*. Retrieved from <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/46509/638252918535370000>