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Education Activism: A Moment to Stand Up

by Keron Blair



“I think people see this as a call to really stand up, and say, ‘Our schools will be safe places. Our schools will be sanctuaries. We will have good public schools in our communities, and we will fight for them.’”

The political landscape that we hoped for – and in many places worked to create – did not happen after the election, and so people are still trying to figure out the significance. What are the real implications of living in a Trump America? And for a lot of people, those are scary realities, not just because of the man himself, but because of the people that he awakened, the ideas that he appealed to, and people are concerned that those ideas seem to have won.



So that’s the context. The priorities, then, are still being shaped, but what is emerging is that there is a real need for us to push back and invalidate claims around the role of the private sector as it relates to education. In a speech that Donald Trump gave a month before the election, he said, “We’ve got to break up the monopoly that is public education,” and he plans to push a choice agenda. And so we’ve got to really invalidate the claim that what we need is more choice. And to

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really launch an effort that says, “What we actually need is real and deep investment in Black and Brown communities, with real dollars being invested in our public schools and our public infrastructure.” We need to lift up the value and power of neighborhood-based community schools that have the curriculum, the teachers, the resources that we know make education successful.

The second priority is to really build in infrastructure that can run strong campaigns, at the local and state level. Because, as it relates to the progressive agenda, the federal landscape is a lot more complicated and perhaps unyielding. So we need to really be thinking about, “What can we do at the city and state levels to build a strong coalition?” That can then enliven an agenda that produces wins at the city level and at the state level.

And then a third priority is being very clear that to the extent that the current administration is anti-Black, anti-immigrant, anti-public education, that we need to build a really powerful force that can counter and push back in real ways against that agenda.

QUESTIONS AND ADVICE FOR THE FIELD

You know, we have a new education law in the form of the [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#). How is that an opportunity for us to fight, or to run campaigns, at the state level?

How do we, at the city and state levels, scale up community schools as the alternative, as the solution, to the challenges that many schools face?

And then how do we fight for money – again, at the city and state levels? Because we understand that our schools don’t just fail like the weather changes from hot to cold. Our schools are made to fail because we do not invest the kind of resources that we know it takes for them to succeed.

I know that a lot of people are concerned, and they are concerned for good reason. I think we have to be clear about the new political reality which we find ourselves in. And so I think we have to be prepared to build and to take action that is bold and creative, that forms a real resistance to any threat against our communities. That’s one thing. I think really build on strong and powerful organizations. There’s so much energy that people have right now, and how do organizations capture some of that energy? And say, “Hey, we’ve been fighting, come join us. Come join our ranks.” I think it’s an opportunity to do real recruitment, and really strengthen the infrastructure that folks have at the local level.

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I also think for people who have resources – foundations or philanthropies – I think this is a moment to really invest. We cannot have a resistance that is not resourced to fight the kinds of fights that we will have over the next four years. I think we may have to throw out some of the old ways of doing things, when it comes to resourcing campaigns and organizations, and really invest and invest big, because folks will need it in order to rise to this moment.

LOCAL VICTORIES

I think some of the local election results provide some hope. Like in California, where you have [Kamala Harris](#) going to the Senate, and you have [Tammy Duckworth](#) in Illinois. There were some real wins that suggested that progressives won. For our particular work in [Georgia](#), we beat back a referendum that was really anti-public schools. In [Massachusetts](#), we beat back a charter agenda. So, the electorate at the local level really showed up in a number of places and delivered what we think are real victories, and so that's really hopeful.

I think this is a moment for us to interrogate those stories and lift them up, to point the way that all of America is not Trump America. I think another thing to really lift up in the moment is that, for what it's worth—the candidate that the progressive community was most behind won the popular vote. And there is some comfort in the notion that almost two million more voters voted in favor of us than the current president. And I think that's a hopeful moment, because it says to us that we are still in the majority. I think we really ought to capture that as a win, that more votes were cast in our direction and our favor than for the presidency.

So when we see the [alt-right in a meeting with 200 people](#), saying really awful things, that can be a blow to us, it can be devastating, but we should not forget that there are more people in America who stand for the right of young people to have good public education than those who are opposed to it. There are more people in America who stand for progressive immigration reform than those who are against it. There are more people in America who are for racial justice than those who are opposed to it. And the numbers actually bear that out. The ultimate victory is a bit daunting and a lot more complicated, but the numbers and the way people voted actually bears out differently. And for me, that's a hopeful light, out of the November elections. I admit it may be naïve. And I think we sometimes meet absurdity with absurdity, so I accept that I might sound absurd right now, but the moment is absurd, and so a little bit of absurdity might be the thing we need.

SOURCES OF HOPE

I just spent seven days in West Africa and got a chance to visit the slave capitol on the coast of Ghana. And that slavery occurred in the US—still blows my mind, I cannot fathom it. But as a black man, the descendent of slaves, I was able to stand as a free man in the doorway of the dungeons where slaves were held. To me, as it relates to the community that I come from – we are not unaccustomed to fighting, resisting, and winning. And so for me, when I tell people, “I am a descendent of slaves,” that means a lot for me. Because we won that fight. And there is power in that.

And I think in a lot of ways, what Donald Trump and his administration might do in four years pales in comparison to the kind of resistance that many of the folks that I work with have forged and won, and that is really hopeful for me – that in moments of crisis, we have been able to organize and resist and build, and ultimately turn the tide in our favor. And I think we have a moment here to do that. And to define what it means to be radical, and define what it means to be revolutionary, and define what it means to build really a democratic America. And I think people are thinking seriously about that, and that is encouraging.

And I think as it relates to public education, people see this as a call to really stand up, and say, “Our schools will be safe places. Our schools will be sanctuaries. We will have good public schools in our communities, and we will fight for them.” And I think people are becoming sensitized to the kind of risks, the kind of momentum that we have to build in order to make sure that at the end of these four years, that we have strong public education and public schools in the communities that are most vulnerable.

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