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Foundations as Change Agents: Developing Leadership and Infrastructure

by Kent McGuire



“We’re going to advance a narrative about what needs to change and see if we can grow a group of new leaders who will be courageous but also smart enough to push in that direction.”

I’ve been in four cities in six days and in several meetings over that period of time, and all of them have started with a conversation about the election and what it means. One of the common conclusions – for those of us who are focused on trying to make the country a better place, more just, more civil, a place that is about expanding opportunities – is that our work is maybe as important as it’s ever been.



POST-ELECTION PRIORITIES

In terms of our priorities, there are probably two or three that, oddly enough, we were already focused on at the Southern Education Foundation (SEF). Maybe that’s because we live in the South – some of the tone and angles on issues that surfaced in the national election are not foreign to us here in the South.

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One of the things that we think is a big priority is leadership. We've done a little bit of that work with college students, but we think we need to greatly expand our efforts there by pushing down towards younger students and thinking more about how to help kids in high school and underclassmen become more organized, better organized, more civically engaged, and to help develop their capacity and vision for doing that. And also working concomitantly with people in the community organizing and activist space so that they are better equipped to represent their own interests politically and institutionally. And we're about to launch a big initiative that's focused on the leadership inside school systems – we're working with a few partners on a big racial equity leadership network that would be made up of school superintendents, deputy assistant superintendents, chief academic officers, and other people in leadership positions in school systems in the South. We're wrestling with how much of what we focus on has to do with helping them grapple more honestly and effectively with issues of bias and race and class and stuff like that, versus how much focus is on content – health and wellness, accountability, assessment, things of that sort.

There is one thing that we are clear about and that we are determined to do that we think will be in contrast with a plethora of leadership initiatives that now exist in our space. The opening assumption about those leadership experiences is that they are trying to do something at the level of the *individual*, where the individual is the intervention. We think the whole logic or premise of an individual riding into town on a white horse is flawed. So, we're going to come to this work with a different notion of leadership that has more to do with collective – as opposed to individual – actions, systemic change, and more focus on the issue of care and empathy. We're not trying to create something where the point is to puff up the CVs of the individuals who participate in them. We also are trying to build community. We're trying to create a network of people who are bound by some common values and principles.

In assessing our impact, we're working on some way of thinking more holistically about what is really important to measure. Measuring what matters, as opposed to measuring what's easy to measure, so that the folks we work with have ways of understanding where they are now and whether they moved the needle. We would like to think that we can do something more robust than orbiting around standardized test scores, as if that is the principal way you know whether you've made school a better place, a healthier place, and a place where learning, not just achievement, is actually going on.

And we're going to try to study some of the Fellows, people who go through this experience with us, so that we can try to understand how this experience has changed how they think, how they act, and what their changes in perspective and behavior gave rise to in terms of their leadership style. Then do those changes in leadership behaviors bring about any changes in the things we care about in schools and school systems? That's going to be a pretty big and important four- or five-year chunk of work for us. But we think it's hugely important, and we're persuaded that we can't actually get the learning outcomes we want for this new, diverse majority of students.

The idea that we'll get those outcomes by patching up or working around the edges of the education system we have is just unlikely. Nor do we think we get them by blowing up the system we have and creating a hundred thousand charter schools. Systems do matter at the end of the day. So, we're going to advance a narrative about what does need to change and see if we can grow a group of people who will be courageous – that's a good word – but also smart enough to push in that direction. So that's one big complicated thing we're going to do on the leadership front.

PROGRESSIVE INFRASTRUCTURE

Leadership is one part of a bigger issue that I think needs attention: the building of infrastructures for progressive ideas and policies. In addition to efforts to identify, attract, recruit, engage, support, and develop leaders, there is data and communication and the development of proposals – so that the people who are pushing for equity and social justice can play offense. We play way too much defense, and there is every reason to believe that the election results have set us up to play even more defense. But what we need to be playing is offense. We need to be taking the ideas to the system, to the legislature, to city hall, to the school boards. But doing that requires that we have the information, that we are not stumbling over ourselves about what we actually want – there is a big difference from knowing what you don't want to knowing what you actually want.

So we need the infrastructure. We need people whose job it is to create opportunities for us to see and understand those things and come to agree about them. When you think about what the far right has done over a couple of decades, that infrastructure exists, and there and there is such correspondence on methods, on ideas, on strategies. In fact, there are a bunch of people who have grown up in a pipeline where the experiences they've had have been informed by those things. So we

can't be surprised, on some level, at some of the political and policy outcomes we see, at the prevalence of certain ideas about education reform that we see, because people got to work on this more than a couple of years ago.

We think that SEF is a natural hub for this work, at least for a defined part of the country, because of the think-tankish nature of the work that we do. We're going to have a communications and messaging operation; we're going to continue to mine, organize, and use data to describe the patterns in relationships—at least in the South—and we'll compare and contrast those to what we see nationally; and we're going to try to backstop a large number of advocacy and civil rights groups who just don't have the bandwidth to do those things. Finally, we're going to make sure that those groups are in relationship with each other, talking to each other, so that they're collaborating, as opposed to competing, and they're communicating with each other. We think we'll get more alignment and concerted effort and greater impact if these broad coalitions that are well-informed come to exist.

STATE AND LOCAL STRATEGIES

We're already turning our attention to the state level; we've been chipping away at these red states for decades. Our strategy at SEF had been predicated on the assumption that there are reasonable people sitting in legislative offices at the state level who just knew what was going on. If you could give them the facts, they would consider those facts and they would do the right thing. That might have been true twenty years ago, when there was cooperation between parties, when redistricting and gerrymandering had not so greatly impacted who served. Now, all of the competition is at the primary stage, and things have ossified around ideology. So you could show up in Alabama or Mississippi or Georgia with all the facts you want, but when (a) the ideology trumps the facts or (b) everybody gets to use their own facts, then just showing up with nice reports turns out probably not to be enough.

We need to work closer to the ground where the issues are right in your face. If you can get at some distance from the problem, it's easier to ignore it or look the other way—you can't put faces on the problem, you can't put names on the problem, you're not so uncomfortable not addressing the problem. So our sense has been that report and data are necessary, but they're not sufficient in this world. We actually need to do more work closer to the ground where we can organize those who have the most at stake and we need to try to work-- so that's working from the outside in. We also need to try to get inside some of these

systems and work from the inside out. If we can do both of those things, and it's not promised we can get away with it, we've got a better shot at trying to move something.

This new federal law – [ESSA](#) – serves up one of those interesting moments. Huge questions about what a new Trump Administration's posture vis-a-vis ESSA, but the good news is that the law has already been passed. I'm not saying that they won't throw the regulations out. But for the most part, this new administration doesn't actually give two hoots about education. They don't care about it at all. But the silver lining in that is you've got to show up with the states, and especially at the local level and basically say, "Hey, you guys have carte blanche. The real question is: what are you going to do with it?" This is why you need to have a set of ideas ready to go at a moment in which the pen has been handed to you –especially local school boards, school superintendents, and others who can probably do what they want. Will the federal government's enforcement mechanism be neutered? Yes. Might the guardrails come off, some of them? Yes. Might they figure out a way to even further consolidate or block grant funds? Yes. All of those things are possible. Some of those things are likely. And if we're not there playing often with ideas and evidence for how to use that newfound flexibility well, then we have dropped the ball.

That's why I think the stakes are actually very high down-ticket, at the local level. Being organized isn't just about what you want to see happen. It's also about who is lifted up and encouraged to run, encouraged to serve, and that, once again, is what I mean by the leadership component of a larger infrastructure-building strategy. Those people don't just materialize out of thin air. They have to be found and encouraged and supported. They have to know what platform they are running on. And they're going to make the decision to run – because the incentives to serving are not high – but they're much more likely to run when they think they could win. They're much more likely to think they could win when someone cajoles them that there is an organized constituency that believes in and cares about what they believe in and care about.

So, there is a link between a well-crafted, progressive story and policy agenda and leadership strategies designed to find the people who can carry that water into office. But we know that it's not going to just happen overnight. If we want to accelerate it, we better build that infrastructure. We know that the power isn't just handed off or downloaded onto people. It has to be earned. So, I really do think there is a correspondence between having progressive agendas and having people well organized around them and our ability to recruit and

advance leaders, whether it's school boards, city councils, mayors, state legislators. And we think education is one of the issues around which progressive coalitions, maybe even bipartisan ones, can be built. I'm hopeful that if we don't just get angry but we get organized and work smart, that we'll see real progress.

LOCAL VICTORY

In Georgia, we had what we thought was a very dis-equalizing ballot initiative to take over “failing schools,” which was defeated. We could celebrate that victory – it was hugely important. But it was the tip of the iceberg, because what's going on in schools that brought this ill-informed policy idea into view is still a problem. And if we don't jump into this space right now with that progressive vision, if we don't stay organized and use the coalition that helped defeat the ballot initiatives, if we don't bring that same sense of organization to the legislative session, if we don't turn to the communities where those so-called “failing schools” are, if we just go to sleep on that issue, it's almost like saying the governor was right, and it opens the door. They will be back – they already had plans for how to do legislatively what they couldn't get done through the state constitution, because the governor can't put one an amendment on the ballot one year after the next. The point is, this was no time to go to sleep, and we have let children down if we simply assume that we won because we stopped a bad policy from happening, if we don't actually do something that makes a positive difference in those schools. So, that's really the kind of collective action that we need in the wake of both the national and more local election results.

I can't underscore the importance of the *Investing in What Works* report that we did with AISR in setting the information phase right. It wasn't so much the event when we released it that mattered, but our ability to pull from it, reproduce it, create fact sheets on the basis of it, and point to it on the website during the ensuing ten months that was really important. When people first came together, so many of the people around the table were skeptical about whether they should be against it because there was so much anxiety about the status quo. Our ability to say that there are other ways of thinking about these issues made a huge difference. So for AISR to be thinking of itself as a place that tries to assemble these resources broadly and to know enough to be able to inform some of these challenges when they surface is sort of like one of those Whack-A-Mole games. As soon as you hit one, you knock it down, another one pops up and you have to catch him.

There is not enough progressive infrastructure available to us. We're going to try to build ours with the resources we can assemble.

Hopefully, you'll build yours and there still won't be enough. So I think it's important work in terms of helping people to actually think in earnest about what to do, especially when a lot of what you see seems irrational.

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