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A View from Academia: Creative Strategies for New Coalitions

by Kenneth Wong



“Charter schools and traditional public schools should not be avoiding one another, but instead I think we need to convene as soon as we can to explore common ground. We are all serving similar students, similar needs, and we are facing similar challenges.”

First of all, the federal government has a unique responsibility to address educational inequality and educational quality for all children. Regardless of how the new US Secretary of Education is going to redefine or reframe the federal education agenda, I think all the stakeholders need to continue to focus on their work so that the federal government under the new leadership will continue to pay attention to schooling inequality, resource disparity, and teacher quality in high-needs communities.



RETHINKING RELATIONSHIPS AND STRATEGIES

The election may have certain implications in terms of coalition building. We may need to think about reassessing who should be included in some of these conversations with the new administration in charge. For example, right now we see a lot of tension between the charter schools and the traditional public schools. So with the new

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administration, there might be a need for us to reassess this tension, particularly in urban areas where the traditional public schools as well as the charter schools are all serving high-needs students – low-income students, students of color, minority, recent immigrants, and so on. Given the election, these two groups of stakeholders should not be avoiding one another, but instead I think we need to convene as soon as we can to really explore the common ground. We are all serving similar students, similar needs, and we are facing similar challenges. There is really a lot of common ground, and I think we need to rethink that relationship.

I also think the relationship between states and local communities should be revisited. Often we try to build up the capacity of the local community, but we need to think about how to connect to stakeholders at the state level. Oftentimes, stakeholders at the state level may not share the same degree of urgency as local urban stakeholders. But I think because of the election, and because of the reallocation of responsibility under [ESSA](#), the states are going to play a leading role in shaping the agenda and the priorities. That’s a reality that I think local stakeholders need to pay extra attention to. Instead of thinking that it is sufficient for us to really work on the local ecosystem, I think we need to think about the dynamic interplay between the local ecosystem and the state policymaking process, and think about ways to make our voices heard in the state policymaking process.

A case in point would be state funding. Oklahoma is one example, where they did not pass the [statewide referendum](#) to provide additional money to the school system. And so you can see that in order to create the conditions that enable us to do a better job in improving urban schools, we need to think about the overall policymaking context at the state level, in terms of funding, teacher quality, and academic standards. Regardless of how powerful local stakeholders are in organizing within urban areas, it is not sufficient; we need to think about ways to connect to the state-level policymaking. Just in terms of those three critical issues, that is going to affect how well we are able to do our work.

Education reform will be substantially defined by who is in charge in the statehouses across the country, and who is in charge in the governors’ offices, across the country. The larger governing landscape is that you’ve got two-thirds of the state legislatures now under the control of the Republican Party, and 34 governors from the Republican side. It is not just the federal government. So we need to think of ways to communicate more effectively. How do you translate your findings, your research, in ways that allow you to make a persuasive argument, to get their attention? Maybe up to now, we are very effective in terms of

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communicating to urban mayors, maybe we are very used to that. But then a question is, how do you communicate across the aisle? I think that may be an interesting challenge for a lot of the stakeholders.

We need to identify who are the key stakeholders at the state level. And so some typical ones would be the statewide taxpayers, and some suburban communities who may not see the need to provide additional money to the school funding formula, and may not see the need to address low-performing schools. So there are some differences of priorities because their needs are very different. So we need to work at the state level and communicate the needs of urban areas, particularly inner-city schooling challenges. I think we need to take their perspective into consideration and see if there may be ways to be mindful of their interests, and yet at the same time push forward with urban interests.

Oftentimes we have looked at resource and policy priorities as a zero-sum game, and may over simplify them as a dichotomy: you are either for equity, or you are against it. So I think we need to think about ways to capture the grey area. I think the grey area is the opportunity for us to make a difference. The grey area is that you can push for equity within the framework of efficiency, for example. A lot of the new governors and the legislature are going to push for more efficiency, meaning that they are going to tighten the belt, there will not be any additional resources, and there might be even stronger accountability to make sure that the teachers are producing the results, and maybe holding more schools accountable, state by state, in terms of their state definition of accountability. So, within that framework, we can find ways to push for more equitable allocation of resources and more equitable definition of efficiency – more equitable, more targeted. So, I'm pushing for more creative thinking, in terms of the current framework of equity and education for all children.

There might be opportunities to target the resources that don't create a lot of political opposition. One example that I'm thinking about is early childhood education – the political opposition against early childhood doesn't seem to be too visible. We all know that there are only limited resources for early childhood – preschools, kindergartens, Head Start programs, and wellness development for infants and toddlers. Within that framework, there may be opportunities to actually target the resources in ways that will serve those who otherwise may not have the resources to do preschool by themselves. So in a way, we can still get to what we want to get to by pushing for support in areas that oftentimes we may not see a direct link, but by creating these kinds of enabling conditions, broadly defined, then we will get to that equity.

STRENGTH OF THE “CHILDREN’S AGENDA”

Looking at the broader picture of the children’s agenda – not just in terms of formal public schooling as an institution, but the broad concern about creating quality of life for children and supporting children as a whole – I’m hopeful that the children’s agenda will remain vibrant. With the US Senate races bringing in new women Senators, and even Trump having talked about daycare – regardless of the particular way of doing it, but even thinking that children’s affairs are part of the federal government’s major responsibility – I think that’s a welcoming sign.

And a lot of governors and legislative leaders are supportive of some kind of children’s agenda – different states have now developed family and children’s cabinets or children’s cabinets, at the state level. This trend is not going to slow down. And so that gives me hope that we will continue to be able to push public commitment and public resources to address the needs of children.

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