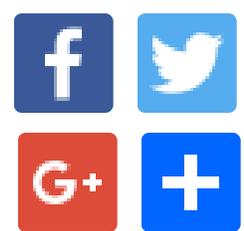


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District Leadership: A Time for Activism and Coalitions

by Deborah Jewell-Sherman



“After the election I wrote to all of my students – past and present – and said, ‘We were born for a moment such as this. And we will do what is necessary to secure the future for all children.’”

I don’t know the degree to which I can be insightful, because this election was my worst nightmare, for reasons far and above political party ideology. I’ve lived through many elections and have voted since I was able, and I often had to withstand the opposition winning, whether it was a local, state, or national election. But I have never been frightened by the possibility of a candidate winning, as I was at the possibility of Trump becoming president. And now that he is president-elect, I have grave concerns about this nation’s children and our future.



As a practitioner for more than three decades, I’ve lived through forward momentum with significant setbacks, but not complete derailment. I was still in high school or college during the Nixon years, and was a teacher during the Reagan years – those were periods of retrenchment, but they acted within the law. Reagan made significant changes to integration policy by seeking to dismantle busing and other efforts to provide a

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So I'm concerned about what Supreme Court justices may enact in every regard, specifically in educational issues. Progressive states and locales will continue in their own efforts, but I am very, very concerned about southern states. Their rural populations, their students of color. I can't even imagine what the educational opportunity will be for those young people. You know, those hard-won gains can be wiped out for a generation.

BECOMING ACTIVISTS

So for me, it is time to mobilize in significant ways at all levels – local, state, and federal, forming new alliances. I have one former student, who is now a school principal. And the day after the election, she sent out into her social media a request for women who felt as she did to come together to address education and political issues at the local and state level. When last I heard from her, she had 150 women who had signed on, and they are delineating tasks according to strengths and capacity and networks. So some are going to be blogging, some are going to be monitoring legislation at the local and the state level. She's in North Carolina, and they're already letting their locally elected officials as well as their congressmen and state senators know that they are monitoring every one of their efforts as they relate to children and education and families and women.

So I think it's time for those kinds of grassroots actions, hopefully with new strategies. Because marching alone and other strategies that were used in the past to earn hard-won civil rights, gay rights, women's rights – those strategies in and of themselves will not be sufficient. I think that we have to learn that we have to analyze just how Trump was able to galvanize majorities in these key states, sometimes just by thousands of votes, so that he was able to carry the election. But he used some strategies that are very new, or certainly hadn't been used before in political campaigns. We can learn from those. And we have to learn from them, so that he is a one-term president.

I think that we have to be active on the local level. I think that it'll become increasingly important that we field school board candidates in local elections that support a progressive educational agenda. Because they really can make a difference, in spite of what is happening at the national level and the state level.

I have been saying to my students that even though there are one or

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sometimes even two generations between us, we both share that we haven't paid for the privileges that we enjoy. I was a young child during the civil rights struggle. Dr. King was assassinated when I was a high school student. So I saw my mother and other adults protesting and working to secure these rights for me. That opened up scholarships and other opportunities at universities that I got to walk into, without earning it. And although I've been a practitioner and certainly have worked hard for four decades, I haven't had to be on the battlefield as an equity warrior, a social justice warrior, who did what others have done before me. And neither have my students.

And so the class that we had the day after the election, I challenged them, as I am challenging myself, to be more active. Because we have enjoyed a privilege; others planted the trees under whose shade we sit, and we now have to do that for generations going forward. And with this man in power, and a Republican Congress, there's legislation and Supreme Court decisions that can be enacted and passed down that will affect generations. I think that we need to learn from our adversaries, mobilizing our voice like the NRA has; in spite of all of the tragic shootings, the NRA was able to hold Congress in check.

I think that if we mobilize in our communities and then develop structures so that we're knitting together these grassroots efforts, in sync with established national efforts, that we will be able to put pressure on congressional leaders. And I think that it's time for all of us, especially those of us who sit in positions of comfort, to use that privilege to be real activists. And to support those who are on the battlefield to create our discomfort among people who would rather just maintain the status quo.

So I'll continue to do the work of preparing future leaders – that's the role that I have as a professor of practice – but I think I and others like me have to get out of what is comfortable, even though it's difficult. The work that I do is difficult and worthy, but it's not uncomfortable. I think that it's important for us to enter into a space that is impactful and will be uncomfortable. It may cost us in significant ways, but the stakes are just that high.

But one of the lessons learned through this is that we have to fight. That it's never over. You know, the fight for social justice and a progressive education for every student—it's never a right that is won, and therefore over and done, and we can move on to something else. And I think that there's always the desire to be done with that part of the work. Each generation has to fight those battles anew. And that's the work that's before us. I'm hoping that millennials, current leaders, and people like

me who are baby boomers can find common ground and get over the politics of celebrity or personality and focus on broader issues. So that we can thrive even in what I envision will be a very toxic educational environment.

KNOWING WHEN TO FALL ON THE SWORD

I graduated from the Urban Superintendents Program that was in existence for 20 years, led by Robert Peterkin as our director. And now we have a new [doctoral program in education leadership](#) that again is preparing students to go out and make a difference – this time not only as superintendents, but in other parts of the sector. So I’m telling all of them that it is time for us to be politically astute. I’m reading *The Art of War* again, which I’ve read so many times in my life. Because I do see this as warfare – I see it as equity warfare. People are not going to give up power and privilege because of the righteousness of our argument; that only persuades some. I think that we’re going to have to be tacticians and continuously develop political and social capital to effect an agenda that’s progressive and not regressive: forming networks, helping them understand that in many ways the urgent is going to take precedence; that they need to be thoughtful, they need to be able to play a long game. They also need to do what is necessary to stay in their positions, and be very, very clear about what they’re willing to fall on the sword for.

For example, the day after the election, the superintendent in Baltimore County, Maryland – Dallas Dance – retweeted a tweet from Josh Starr (CEO of [PDK International](#)) about protecting and being sensitive to the needs of students on that day, especially those students who are undocumented, are Muslim, are Black and Brown or in any other way Other. And so Superintendent Dance retweeted it, and he [came under immediate and harsh criticism](#) from politicians in his community. At first they were seeking to have him resign immediately. I think that he mustered sufficient political and social capital that they had to back off, but they still felt that he should resign, and I think now they’re not even asking for his resignation, but he has now acquired enemies who will be after him every step of the way. This was an instance in which he was willing to fall on the sword. He decided that he would not retrench, he would not recant, he would not apologize. So that’s the point at which I think he decided, “This is a stand that’s so important, I’m willing to take whatever comes with it.”

I think that there’s a new kind of courage that leaders are going to have to demonstrate, that goes above and beyond instruction, teaching and learning. And we as leaders are going to have to be instrumental in

building cultures that provide schools as safe havens. And that sharing that knowledge of best practices has to become the norm, not an exception.

And I think in this changed political milieu, people are going to find themselves unexpectedly and sometimes as the result of a calculated risk, in a political maelstrom. And they need to have political cachet so that they can weather the storm. They have to be affiliated with networks nationally, at the state level, and locally, so that they can do the right thing.

BUILDING BRIDGES

We are going to have to figure out ways to build coalitions not just of the willing and among those who share a progressive agenda, but really find a way of building bridges with some elements of this new world order that we've inherited. One of my students who is from Wisconsin and who formerly was the principal – founding principal and a teacher – at a charter school, shared her story that I think is worth noting. She is a queer woman, and [she started a school that was against bullying](#) with a specific focus on protecting queer students. The school is open to many. But when they opened their doors, they had members of a conservative Christian group outside of her door with signs, protesting. This was before the children came. So her first reaction was to just go inward, to try to seal the school off from the community, and not deal with it. But she was encouraged by the school board member from her district to do what she always does – talk to people.

So she went out there with cookies and hot coffee, and told them that this is not a school teaching people how to be LGBTQ, but it's a school that's teaching people not to bully, and how not to be bullied. And then she went on to talk about how she had been bullied, how she was sure they had been bullied, which opened a floodgate for them, because they then talked about being bullied because of their religious beliefs. And as a result, that was a bridge that was built between two people who on the surface seemed to be holding completely diametrically opposed ideologies, and they now are supportive of her school. Not supportive of being LGBTQ, which goes against their religious beliefs, but supportive of young people who are at the school – and I mean actively supportive. So I think that there's a need for us to do more of that kind of bridge-building. And I think that we have to do that locally, because that's more likely to be face-to-face. It's hard to demonize one that you're looking at.

STATE AND LOCAL CHANGE

I live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, because that's where I work. But my home is in Richmond, Virginia, and I come home frequently. And I vote in Virginia. We've had school board elections in my city of Richmond that are going to signal a complete change in our local school district – of the nine members on the board, eight new people. So, there's going to be a change. I think that there's an opportunity here. It's a small enough city for educational leaders and community leaders of all levels to have their say. Our new mayor defeated a business leader in the election. So I think that there's a possibility of a more progressive agenda going forward.

I know in Massachusetts the big issue on the ballot in addition to the presidential election was [lifting the cap on charters](#), and that was resoundingly defeated. However, I think that we may be getting a mandate or push from the federal level that pushes against what was just decided at the state level in a place like Massachusetts. So, I think that in many ways it will be a state-by-state fight.

GAINING HOPE

I think it's in the book *Good to Great*, about confronting the brutal facts without losing hope. And there's that tension that exists in the life of any leader. That's where I stand. I really feel that I am too blessed to despair. There's a difference between facing the brutal facts and despairing of them.

I gain hope every day that I teach. Because all of these younger leaders at various steps in their careers give me hope in the possible. And I tell them that – that they are my legacy. That the work that I do with them is to ensure that they are knowledgeable, that they are able to demonstrate compassion in their decisions, that leadership is not only a function of the mind (even though they are brilliant!) but also a function of the heart. And then instill in them a willingness and a predisposition to act boldly, courageously, and urgently to effect change. And the way that they receive these lessons and build upon them and grow – that gives me hope. They bring their passion and their zeal and their belief in the positive, and I try to help them become wiser and more strategic and caring in demonstrating it.

I am not without hope. I know that the arc of justice, though long, always veers towards righteousness. I've seen it in my lifetime. I know that it did in the lifetime of the giants on whose shoulders I stand. And these younger leaders who are coming into their own will not give up.

And they are innovative. They are creative. They are thinking about different ways to make things right. And they are willing to shake up the crucible and do what needs to be done.

And I am not without hope as I talk to my peers, who have been at this work for decades, but who as they look at their children and grandchildren, are willing to go back into the fray in significant ways. So I think that there's a mighty coalition rising. And that somebody as horrible as that man and his people – some of whom voted for him out of blissful ignorance, some who voted for him because they could not believe that somebody would actually do what he said he would do, and some who believe in every ugly, hateful thing he said – I think that in their own way, they have called to action sources of strength that were dormant in us as individuals and in us collectively.

And I am looking forward to seeing the leaders that rise up to meet others. Something that I wrote to all of my students, past and present, after the election was, “We were born for a moment such as this. And we will do what is necessary to secure the future for all children.” And I believe that.

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