

Aftershock

Fallout from divisive election leaves schools confronting a host of issues

Glenn Cook

Julie Esparza Brown has seen the fear. In the schools where she works as a psychologist. At the university where she teaches bilingual and special education courses. In the community where she serves as the first Latina on the board of Oregon's Portland Public Schools.

"It's pretty incredible," she says of the unrest she's seen in Portland since the November presidential election. "There once was a strong sense of national pride among Americans. Now the public dialogue pits groups against one another. Things you wouldn't say in public, now people are saying them in the streets because they feel like it's sanctioned. It's a really frightening world right now."

The aftershocks from this historically divisive presidential election have and will continue to ripple through schools — the mirrors of all communities — for some time. Any major shift in political power means districts likely will face major changes in education policy and philosophy. But just as troubling is how

students have been harassed and threatened at school because of their immigration status, sexual orientation, race, gender, religious affiliation, or political beliefs.

"No matter where you stand politically, there is one thing that every school board is dealing with, and that is the effect this election has had on schools," says Maureen Costello, director of Teaching Tolerance, a program of the Alabama-based Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). "The kind of division and emotion you are seeing in our communities is reflected in our classrooms and hallways, and it is affecting students' behavior and their overall social/emotional well-being. The question is what can you do to bring things under control so all students feel safe."

Over the years, districts have become well-versed in how to handle crises. Procedures are in place to respond to a shooting on campus, a bus accident or other forms of natural or man-made disasters. But many were caught flat-footed when the election results came back and tossed "a grenade into our sense of community," as

one official described the immediate aftermath.

“This is a different type of response that many schools were not really ready to deal with,” says Katherine Pastor, a counselor at Arizona’s Flagstaff High School. “It was uncharted territory, and we’re still trying to figure out what to say, what not to say, and how we say it. I don’t believe a lot of people thought about how to deal with something like this beforehand, and so we’re now scrambling a bit to get our heads around this unusual, mind-boggling thing.”

CALMING TENSIONS

In the days after the election, educational institutions saw incidents of harassment — particularly against immigrant, African-American, and LGBT students — increase dramatically, according to tracking by SPLC. The center says nearly 40 percent of all hate-related incidents reported in the first 10 days after the election occurred in K-12 schools and universities.

As in other large cities, Portland dealt with waves of post-election community protests, several of which turned violent. On Nov. 14, students from at least 10 middle and high schools staged a walkout, one that thankfully ended with no injuries and no arrests. Nonetheless, the following day, interim Superintendent Bob McKean reported large increases in hate speech throughout the district.

Esparza Brown says something had to be done to help calm tensions among the district’s large immigrant population, which has had flashbacks to a 2007 federal raid of a large food processing plant in which 165 undocumented workers were detained. Fears that similar incidents could occur under the Trump administration led the board to support a resolution limiting access of federal immigration agents to the city’s schools.

“We didn’t have a process in place in case there should be a large raid in the area, or if something happens to the students’ families,” Esparza Brown says. “We wanted to make absolutely clear what the law says and to ease families’ fears. Schools need to be safe places where students can learn and feel supported, and they need to know we are there to protect them.”

Meanwhile, a group of 10 national education groups (including NSBA) released “Make Our Schools’ Values Known.” Described as “a national call to action” to show support for all

students, the document was developed by GLSEN, an organization that focuses on the rights of gay, lesbian, and transgender youth.

Eliza Byard, GLSEN’s executive director, says the document urges school boards and districts to “let their communities know what the school system stands for and what they intend to provide for every child.”

“Districts and school boards should be looking at how they can best bring a sense of community to reassure students who are scared by what has happened during this election,” Byard says. “School boards are the leaders who are in positions in the community to say, ‘Not here. Not on our watch. We will help our students, affirm them, and protect them from harm.’”

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), one organization that signed on to the GLSEN statement, also has released guidance to help educators show their support for students. The guidance also calls on boards and administrators to “make positive, proactive statements about what you believe the school environment should be,” says NASP’s Kathy Cowan.

“When you pass a resolution or proactively reaffirm the value of safe and supportive school climates for all students, you’re sending a clear message that that’s your expectation,” Cowan says. “It reinforces for educators what will be a natural instinct anyway, and reinforces that what they’re doing to make sure students are safe and feel supported is the right thing to do.”



WORK TO BE DONE

The red alert nature surrounding everything about the election, heightened by the constant presence — and questionable veracity — of social media, has led many teachers to shy away from conversations with students rather than face allegations of bias on one side or the other. It becomes hard to talk about the principles of “We the People” when conversations are quick to dissolve into statements that start with “You people” because of political or social disagreements.

“We are trained in education: Don’t talk about religion and don’t talk about politics,” says Robin Pete, an assistant principal at Flagstaff High School. “But having to deal with the emotional impact that this created without putting your personal ideals in there is very unusual and very difficult.”

Pastor, the American School Counselor Association’s 2016 National School Counselor of the Year, says students are going through “a process of grieving” at her school, which is one-fourth Hispanic and one-fourth Native American.

“It was a very delicate time to sit and chat with students, who in many cases were personifying what their parents were saying,” Pastor says of the days immediately following the election. “Families were having these discussions and kids were taking

what was said and trying to figure out their own opinion about it. We have to find a way to have healthy conversations, have disagreements, and make a conscious effort to think about what we’re saying.”

Pastor’s concerns about her school mirror findings of Teaching Tolerance’s post-election survey of more than 10,000 educators. Released just after Thanksgiving, the survey found schools fall into three distinct groups, each with different challenges. Costello says schools with large majority-minority populations, especially those serving large numbers of immigrants, “are undergoing trauma.”

“It’s not really about the election of Trump, but really about the fear of the policies,” Costello says. “In diverse schools, where there’s no single majority group or if there is it’s barely over 50 percent, we’re seeing a real erosion of trust and increase in tension.”

The third group, Costello notes, provides a stark contrast. In schools that are primarily white and somewhat isolated, students have a very different reaction.

“It’s either a big yawn, an ‘OK, this happened, now let’s get back to basketball season’ or whatever is next. Or, it’s a kind of ‘Get over it,’” Costello says. “There’s simply not an awareness of what a lot of other kids in this country are going through. We’ve heard ‘Suck it up’ or ‘So what?’ There’s a lot of harassment and pejorative language, a lot of stereotypical thinking. I see it really as a lack of exposure to what the fears are that other people have in their lives.”

Schools that have strong anti-bullying/anti-harassment programs already in place have seen tensions ease quickly, Costello says. “They have the infrastructure and expectations that school is a safe place, where you will respect each other and there’s a respectful dialogue,” she says. “In other places, there are schools where students are using language that hasn’t been heard in schools in a long time and the staff is just in shock. They thought their school was one way and are seeing that it’s another. That’s where the work is going to have to be done.”

ADDRESS PROBLEMS NOW

Ian Brodie is a middle grades counselor at Lake Braddock Secondary



School, located in Virginia about 15 miles outside the nation's capital. For the past three years, he and the school's counseling team have refocused their bullying prevention program into an effort they call "Compassion in Action."

"The focus is on teaching kids what to do instead of what not to do," Brodie says. "Typically, a bullying prevention program teaches what not to do, which is to not bully or harass others. What we say is that we all can have compassion. We all have a role in standing up for someone who is being bullied."

Brodie says the program has taken hold at Lake Braddock and its feeder schools, having a positive impact for students in grades K through eight. Reports of bullying in school have declined over the three years, and even though the election "jolted that a bit," shifting the focus to compassion and understanding has made it easier to deal with fears students feel.

"We've made it really clear that there is a difference

between disagreements and bullying. It's OK to disagree with people. But if compassion is the focus, and kindness is the focus, then you can help students learn how to understand differing points of view," he says.

Costello, Byard, and Cowan agree. They say districts need to look at how the election has affected the school climate, and be prepared to address problems that arise sooner rather than later.

"Schools are historically a place of equilibrium, a learning environment that's a place where kids work to find their center with people who are not necessarily their family members and not necessarily their best friends," Cowan says. "We have to make sure, as adults, that we model the behaviors we want our children to exhibit. What we say and how we say it matters, now more than ever."

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Apprentice Approach

The Swiss apprenticeship model could be gaining traction in the U.S.

MATTHEW DIERS HAS SPENT HIS entire education career working on Colorado's Western Slope, the rural, sparsely populated side of the state best known for ranching and mining. As the executive director of high schools and academic alternative schools for Mesa County Valley School District 51, he knows his students need more middle-skills training.

He also knows most of that training, designed for jobs that require

more than a high school education but less than a bachelor's degree, will revolve around the ever-changing world of technology.

"Technology is part of everything we do now, from talking on the phone to working on our tablets and computers," says Diers, whose 22,000-student district is the largest in Colorado west of the Continental Divide. "We need people to support it."

That's one reason Diers is excited

about CareerWise Colorado, an ambitious effort designed to bring 20,000 apprenticeships to the state's high schools over the next decade. High school students, starting in their junior year, will be eligible to participate in the program beginning next fall.

CareerWise is modeling its effort on Switzerland's apprenticeship program, which serves 70 percent of the country's students in more than 200 occupations. Over the past year, delegations from the state, local business, industry, organized labor, and several school districts have traveled twice to Switzerland to study the country's apprenticeship programs.

I met Diers last October, when I was fortunate to accompany the delegation that visited Zurich and Bern to see first-hand how apprenticeships are embedded into the Swiss Vocational Education and Training (VET) program. Like the others, I left knowing why the Swiss model is considered the gold standard in the world, and saw the potential for bringing aspects of the VET to the United States.

FLEXIBILITY AND CHOICE

Revisiting the apprenticeship model for K-12 schools comes at an opportune — and critical time — in the U.S., especially in the technology sector. Middle-skills jobs now comprise almost 40 percent of U.S. employment, and eight out of 10 of those positions require digital skills, according to a 2015 survey by Burning Glass Technologies.

"Technology support is the area where we see the greatest growth and the greatest need for employers in Mesa County," Diers says. "No question. There are so many businesses that need that kind of support — hos-

pitals, banks, manufacturers. Apprenticeships are a great introduction for that kind of work.”

What makes the Swiss model appealing, both for students and employers, is the choice and flexibility it offers. Students have more than 250 pathways they can pick from, and can move back and forth between them as their skills and interests evolve. Once they finish the program, usually a year or two after graduating from high school, they can continue in their chosen career path, pursue advanced professional degrees, or move into a university setting.

Over three days, we toured a number of companies and schools that offer both traditional and nontraditional employment opportunities for students, including Libs, CYP, Zurich Business School, Swisscom, and EWH-Zurich. We saw the work of numerous apprentices, most of whom started at age 15 and are enrolled in two- to four-year programs that feature a combination of hands-on and classroom work.

“What we are trying to do is put the apprentice in the driver’s seat so that they have to decide what they want to learn and to really be responsible for their own apprenticeship,” says Julien Hautle, head of talents and promotion next generation at Swisscom, the country’s largest telecommunications provider. “If you want the next generation of products, you need to invest in the next generation of people.”

At Swisscom, 10 percent of the company’s 8,000 employees are apprentices, many of whom remain with the company after completing the program. And while the benefits to businesses — inexpensive labor, a grow-your-own workforce — are obvious, the model has

another twist that makes it appealing to potential employers.

In Switzerland, industry determines the VET standards used by the schools and pledges to help to carry them out. While some U.S. school districts may be skeptical of the idea of having a stamp of approval from local industry on their career and technical education curriculum, the potential for buy-in and shared responsibility between the two parties is worth considering.

Noel Ginsburg, chairman and CEO of the Denver-based Intertech Plastics, also is serving as the CEO of Career-Wise Colorado. He estimates that the state has 25,000 job vacancies in high-growth industries due to an ongoing skills gap.

“Business can play a critical role in education that goes far beyond simply advising educators,” Ginsburg says. “By extending the classroom into our places of business, we can become producers, not just consumers, of the education system.”

RADICAL INNOVATION

The key, of course, is getting that buy-in, which is one reason CareerWise is starting small. Plans are to have 250 apprenticeships in place across the state next fall.

Ursula Renold, director of the Comparative Education System Research Division at the Swiss Economic Institute in Zurich, is one of the foremost researchers on apprenticeship programs in the world. She calls Colorado’s effort “radical innovation” and cautions education and business leaders to be patient.

“Changing social and educational institutions takes time,” Renold says. “This is not an overnight process but one that will take 10 to 20 years. As ed-

ucators, you are half of the rubber that meets the road. Business is the other half. You will have to identify these folks, survey them, and find out their willingness to train your students. But they have to meet you halfway.”

Diers went to Switzerland with school counselor Andrea Bolton, the director of the Mesa County Workforce Center, a principal in an adjoining district, and leaders from a community college and nearby university. He believes 30 to 50 employers in the area will take on apprentices. Plans are for students to start the program as juniors and complete as community college students a year after graduating from high schools.

“I was afraid I would see apprentices in dead-end jobs with no opportunity for advancement,” Diers says of the Switzerland experience. “That was not the case at all. What we saw is students who have been able to take that apprenticeship, make a contribution, and catapult themselves into college, into careers, and into other opportunities. If we can do that here, it makes sense. Things are changing too fast not to start now.”



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