Leading in a Pandemic:
Why School Leaders Should Learn From Similarities Between Campus Uprisings and Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 is exposing the inequities and inefficiencies in leadership, in healthcare, and in access to resources—educational, economic, and otherwise—that often necessitate and precipitate unrest and uprisings. These realities are inextricably linked to racism, disproportionalities, and the history of discrimination in this country and across the globe— disproportionalities that intersect with university campus uprisings and the urgent need for anti-oppressive school leaders who center the voices and needs of their students.

Keywords: campus uprisings, Covid-19, educational leadership

While not a campus uprising in the way that most of us traditionally think of uprisings, the Covid-19 outbreak has created unprecedented uncertainty and disequilibrium across the entire university context, not entirely dissimilar from the paralysis experienced on some campuses during campus uprisings. When folks typically think of campus uprisings, our initial thoughts go to disgruntled and disenfranchised people mobilizing to challenge policies and institutional concerns, rather than a global pandemic that is literally compromising the very

ethos and execution of how we do life, let alone education. And we typically do not think about implications for school leadership in K-12 schools.

Yet, I would like to suggest that this global pandemic *is* a campus uprising of a slightly different sort and now is the time for consideration of K-12 leadership implications.

MAIN ARGUMENT

While the Covid-19 virus may not be challenging institutional inequity in the exact same way most typical campus uprisings do, it is certainly exposing the inequities and inefficiencies in leadership, in healthcare, and in access to resources—educational, economic and otherwise—that often necessitate or precipitate unrest and uprisings; and these realities are always inextricably linked to racism, disproportionalities, and the history of discrimination in this country (and across the globe), which never seems to provide Black folks with immunity. Look no further than statistics on the deleterious effects of this pandemic on the African American community (Johnson & Buford, 2020; Muse, 2020), realities that mirror the overrepresentation of Black people in other markers of oppression (e.g., the penal system, and school suspensions) and the otherization of Black communities, whether based on accurate data or on "bad stats" (BS), as my colleague, Ivory Toldson, notes in his book *No BS (Bad Stats): Black People Need People Who Believe in Black People Enough Not to Believe Every Bad Thing They Hear about Black People*. Moreover, perceptions can be just as deadly as the realities, even though perceptions are often *not* reality.

Toldson (2019) appropriately reminds us that some pervasive beliefs held about Black people are not true and based on BS—for example, the claims that "there are more Black men in prison than college," and "Black children fail because single mothers raise them" (p. 3). This is important context and consideration for anyone who desires to respond to this particular campus uprising called Covid-19, a virus that has compromised the immune systems of the entire global, national, and educational enterprise. What hasn't been compromised is the proclivity of adversity to disproportionately and negatively affect the most vulnerable.

During times like these, leaders across the spectrum of influence—from educational, community-based, and curriculum contexts to political and governmental chambers—must draw on the best of what we know to face and overcome that which we have never experienced in our lifetime. And let's be clear. Leaders—at the governmental, school district, and campus levels—are struggling much like many faculty and staff members who are now managing transitions to 100% online classes while serving as homeschool teachers to our

own children. Few, if any of us, took a class in our leadership or teacher preparation journeys called "What to do During a Global Pandemic."

My new co-edited book (2020), *Campus Uprisings: How Student Activists and Collegiate Leaders Resist Racism and Create Hope,* offers timely and vital perspectives from various levels of university governance and engagement that would be useful to colleagues at disparate levels of educational leadership currently in the throes of a new normal of social distancing, an elevated level of systematic instability, and ubiquitous headlines of systemic bad news. Admittedly constructed to address a particular brand of campus uprising, now is the time for leaders and students—K-12 and collegiate—to consider what resistance to pandemics in all their forms (e.g., racism and Covid-19) looks like. We must remember that the students who march and lead on college campuses are typically no more than four years removed from high schools that often have failed to expose them to historical truths and critical perspectives related to race and racism in this country; high school is not a place where most students learn about their capacity to be part of anti-racist solutions and systemic change. The awakening that recent high school graduates experience when they gain access to greater diversity of thought, engagement with difference, and critical historical perspectives on college campuses sheds light on the shortcomings of some high school curriculum and the need for greater opportunities for high school students and leaders to grapple with historical and contemporary truths that undergird disproportionalities in this country.

Uncertainty on college campuses is rife. *Campus Uprisings* includes hopeful insights from those who have known unrest, albeit by a slightly different name: substitute corona virus for campus uprising. Still, the lessons from their leadership experiences certainly translate and raise questions that K-12 leaders need to consider. Stephanie Rome's chapter reveals the experience of a department chair when she stood strong for her students, faculty, and staff during the heat of the University of Missouri uprising: In short, students value leaders who are authentic, accessible, and advocates—particularly during times of challenge. Particular staff members at Andrews University did similarly during the #ItIsTimeAU uprising, when some of them stood with students to demand change through a strategic resistance campaign that included a social media campaign and on-campus engagement. Student-activists value leaders who are willing to get in the trenches with them. And getting in the trenches includes advocating for the removal of deficit-based curriculum like Confederate monuments and statues. School leaders who value and empower school staff to use their influence to prioritize student needs amidst the pressure from diverse stakeholder interests are the leaders schools need most now. Sensitivity and a commitment to understanding and challenging oppression in all its forms and intersections is also vital—as is grounding resistance efforts within a

consideration of local, regional, national, global, and institutional histories. Contexts matters as a conduit for relevancy and the continuum and timelines that often frame how meaningful change is measured.

Moreover, in the midst of a global pandemic, the need for student voice to be invited, heard, and valued is paramount to not just meet student needs before they become demands, but to be visionary leaders who can anticipate what our students and schools need—partnered with the humility to learn from and lean on the wisdom of our staff members, community members, and the students and parents whom we serve.

CONCLUSIONS

In chapter 7 of *Campus Uprisings*, "Preparing for the Storm in the Times of Peace: Strategies for Preparing Higher Education Presidents for Campus Racial Crises," Mahauganee Shaw and Sydney Freeman Jr. rightly posit that leaders should seek out crisis management training prior to a crisis taking place.

While it is now futile for school leaders to waste time wishing they had completed a course on leading in a pandemic, it is not too late for them to consider and learn from the similarities between campus uprisings and the coronavirus outbreak and to draw strength in the midst of this crisis from hearing and harnessing the voices of the students and parents we serve. Leading in the midst of a global pandemic is unprecedented in our generation; yet, leading with courage and humility—with a commitment to justice and equity—are not. These are qualities of school leaders we need most now.

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