

PUBLIC SCHOOL

BRIEFING

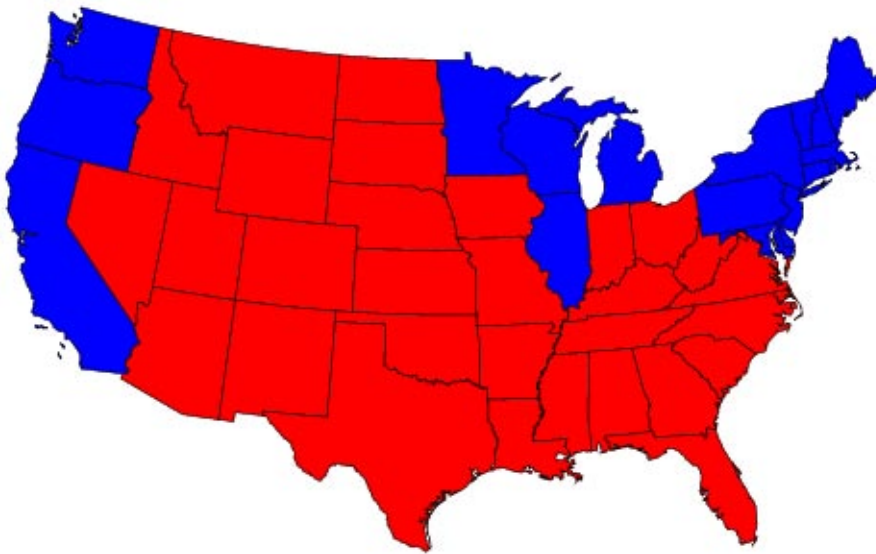
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BY WAYNE JACOBSEN

Healing the Cultural Divide:

What the 2004 Election Results Can Teach You About Your District

The results are in! The 2004 presidential election was one of the most polarizing in my lifetime. The rhetoric, tactics and strategies of both presidential campaigns, and others who supported them, were designed to divide and polarize the electorate through misinformation and false accusations. And it worked. Statesmanship suffered a severe blow in this election which is likely to encourage more animosity and conflict as people on both sides of the cultural divide fight for control of public schools. What can your district learn from this election, and more importantly, what can it do to help heal this divide in your community rather than be victimized by it?



Courtesy of The University of Michigan
<<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~mejn/election/>>

Most have seen the red/state blue state maps that show the Democratic majorities on the northeast, upper Midwest and west coast, while the Republicans held throughout the south and central regions of the country. I regret that Hawaii and Alaska were left off of this map, but they went blue and red respectively.

Most have not seen, however, the county map of these election results which can provide some valuable information for your own school district. (Please see map on page 2.)

Obviously the cultural divide in our national politics is between those who live in rural areas who tend to be more conservative on social issues and those who live in urban areas who tend to lean to the left on those same issues. As you can see there are ample red counties in the blue states and significant blue counties in the red states. Interestingly enough the school districts where we've done the most bridge building are in counties that are opposite in color to the state in which they are located. Here majority populations find themselves alienated from their local schools where social



USA Today <<http://www.usatoday.com/news/politicselections/vote2004/countymap.htm>>

agendas are forced on them through state mandates.

If your school district is in a county with the opposite political views of the state as a whole, your tendency toward conflict is much greater. The potential for conflict is greatest where urban sprawl overtakes nearby rural communities and the resentment between the 'oldtimers' and 'newcomers' spills over into a variety of issues. Those groups with political power at the state or local level will use that power to force their agenda in policies and curriculum. Those groups without political power will resort to litigation as their means to protect their rights or advance their agenda, even as they try to gain power in future elections.

The conflict that results in public schools is paralyzing and unnecessary. It frustrates me to see that everyone involved in this election cycle found it more politically expedient to exploit our cultural divide, rather than to challenge us to a higher common good. Candidates garnered votes and the news media grabbed ratings by playing to people's worst fears about 'the other side', and vilifying anyone who disagrees with their agenda. It is a recipe ripe for greater animosity and conflict over moral and social issues. It matters little whether that agenda pushes people toward the right or whether it pushes them to the left, the dynamics are still the same. One group forces everyone else to their social cause, and those who don't share it resent them for doing so.

Unfortunately, it often falls to the local school district to be the lone voice for sanity in the so-called 'culture-wars'. While others exploit the divide at a national level, social and religious conflicts at the local level cost too much in district resources and community goodwill at a time when all of our efforts need to be focused on academic excellence. Surprisingly enough this cultural divide is not that difficult to heal, especially at the local level. Yes, there are individuals and advocacy groups that want to force their agenda on others, and in the absence of other options they play well to our cultural divide. But the vast majority of people in your community will support solutions, if offered, that treat our cultural differences with respect and fairness.

Here is the one maxim that can guide our debate and heal the cultural divide at the same time: *No one should be asked to participate in a public education that is biased against themselves.* If district decision-makers embrace that passion, and equip their communities to as well, they would find constructive solutions and valuable collaboration that could reach across the cultural divide and strengthen our public schools. It shows respect for the differences of those on the left and the right and will allow a district to write policies and choose curriculum that is in the best interest of all and create a fair environment for its staff, students and parents. When we get it right a public school will be just as safe for an evangelical Christian as it is for someone perceived to be gay. It will be fair to the Jewish family as well as those who claim to be atheist, for Republicans as well as Democrats. Our schools do not have to choose sides in this cultural divide, and I would argue that they become less *public* schools if they do.

For instance, some analysts have identified gay rights as a major factor in this election. While terrorism and the war in Iraq were probably more significant, local districts have little involvement in those issues and will be more affected by the social issues that so easily explode into conflict in local districts. With all the attention paid to gay marriage, sexual orientation discrimination, and the eleven state propositions that were passed on election day to ban gay marriage, this continues to be one of the defining issues at the cultural divide. People on both sides are passionate about their view regarding the morality of homosexuality and how our culture will define the term family.

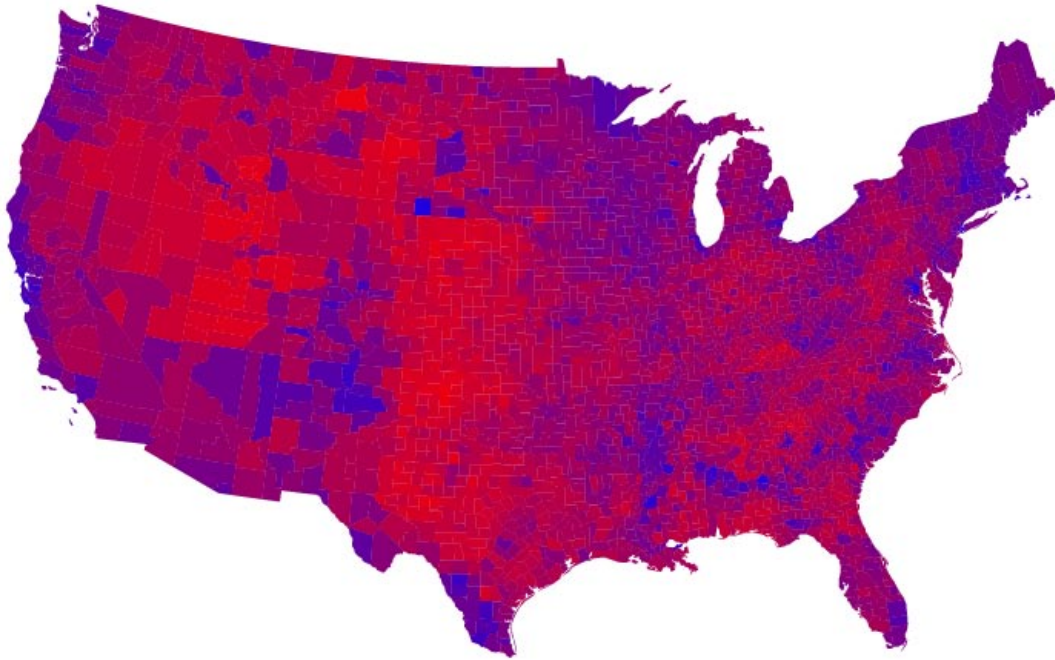
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More than ever public schools need to demonstrate their fairness to these different points of view, rather enlisting on one side or the other. How a district deals with issues like this can either build trust with divergent groups or send their community spiraling into escalating conflict. You can expect resentment and anger from either side when they feel their concerns are being ignored or dismissed. We have seen numerous communities build a school environment that can protect the rights of all students to learn in an harassment-free environment, including actual or perceived sexual orientation, without undermining the religious convictions of those families who are concerned that their schools are endorsing an agenda they don't share. Mutual respect is not built by ignoring our differences, but affirming them.

On the next page I have one other map to show with you. This one blends the red and blue colors in each county proportionate to the votes for Kerry or Bush. As you can see only a few counties are overwhelmingly blue or red indicating that more than 70% of the vote when for Kerry or Bush. Most, however, are various shades of purple indicating a vibrant mix of voters. The closer your county is to purple, the more evenly divided it is and the more you will be forced to take into account the cultural divide and develop strategies to elevate the common good rather than wittingly or unwittingly exacerbate the conflict.

But even those schools that are heavily blue or red, should consider the value of teaching their community how to be fair to their differences, rather co-opting the environment of public education to advance their own agenda. Helping people work together even in the face of their deepest differences will benefit the district and the community.

Don't we all want the freedom of participating in a public school district that is not biased against



Robert J. Vanderbei, Princeton University <<http://www.princeton.edu/%7ervdb/JAVA/election2004/>>

ourselves? Why would we extend anything less to our neighbor or co-worker? In the current rancor of our political debate it is time for courageous statesmen and stateswomen to step to the forefront who will encourage us to a common good greater than our differences and help cultivate mutual respect instead of greater suspicion and fear.

If I can help you develop common ground approaches to divisive cultural issues in your district, please email me or give me a call.

Wayne Jacobsen, President
BridgeBuilders

If you find this article helpful, please feel free to pass it along to your public school officials and colleagues. The web address is: <http://www.bridge-builders.org/RCW11.04.html>

Wayne Jacobsen, as the President of BRIDGEBUILDERS, is a nationally-recognized specialist in disarming cultural and religious conflicts. His workshops and mediation services have been used at state and national education conventions, universities as well as local school districts. He has also testified on these issues before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and worked with Columbia University's American Assembly on Religion in American Public Life. His articles have appeared in Educational Leadership, The School Administrator and Religion in Education and recently authored the Fastback, Disarming Conflict Through Common Ground Thinking for the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.



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