Last July, I said goodbye to writing the Finding Common Ground blog but today I say hello again. Truth be told I missed the connection with readers, and decided that I wanted to start writing it again. And I wanted to focus on the critical issues we are facing as a profession.

These days education seems to take a backseat to pop culture news and tweets from the President that he may or may not have Tweeted out. After all, "I didn't do that," is a common response these days. I long for the day when education is seen as one of the most critical issues, and we can all talk about what needs to be fixed as well as what is going well.

For the last few years I have put together a list of critical issues facing education, and they seem to resonate with those who read the blog. As we know with lists, they are based on opinion. Additionally, you may have other issues you believe are far more important. Please feel free to write your issues (education related) in the comment section below. There are most likely hundreds of things we should be concerned about when it comes to education but these are the 8 issues that I find to be of particular importance.

They critical issues are:

Social-emotional learning (SEL) - If you read this blog regularly before my hiatus, then you know this is not a surprise it would make the list. When you read the rest of this list, you will see how SEL has an impact on other critical issues.

Let's consider some of the staggering statistics that should make SEL a priority. The National Resilience Institute reports that, "72 percent of children and youth will experience at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) before the age of 18." Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) are divided into three types, which are Abuse (physical, emotional, sexual), Neglect (physical, emotional), and Household Dysfunction (incarcerated relative, mental illness, domestic violence, substance abuse, divorce, deployed family member and loss of a parent).

These students come to school every day expected to learn, but their issues prevent them from meeting their potential. SEL is not just something that would be nice to have in schools every once in a while; it is equally as important as academic learning. Fortunately, school leaders have gained new flexibility due to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that former President Obama signed into legislation on December 10th (2016), which allows states and local districts to create school improvement plans that will fund social-emotional programs (for more information read the Rand Corporation’s guidance here). Unfortunately, the U.S. Department of Education proposed eliminating a $400 million grant program which focuses on mental-health awareness for students and teachers, school counseling and many other important aspects of SEL.

Equitable Funding - An inequity in the way schools are funded is not new (read this Atlantic article for more information). Over the last decade, we have clearly learned which schools can spend more per pupil, which means the ability to provide students with a plethora of resources, and important positions such as full-time school nurses and school counselors. On the other side of this issue there is a lack of equity, where there are schools that can hardly afford even the most basic materials for classes. Equitable funding will continue to be an issue in 2018.

Leadership - There are many great leaders out there who are using innovative methods with staff. However, there are way too many leaders
who believe they did their time as a teacher or coach so they should be given a principal position. When we look at school morale, school climate, collaboration among staff, building collective efficacy, and engaging the school community...it all begins with leadership.

We need fewer school leaders who think they have to know everything or do it all on their own, and more who want to work in collaboration with the different stakeholders in their school community. Those leaders understand how to foster inclusive school communities, and inspire staff and students to meet their full potential.

**U.S. Secretary of Education** - We know that the Secretary of Education Betsy Devos is all about choice and privatizing public education. One word that comes up in most articles about her is the word "billionaire" and she seems to spend more time bringing in her billionaire friends, which is a strange juxtaposition for someone who is in charge of the public school system. Shouldn't the education secretary be in the forefront showing support for public schools, and not trying to dismantle them?

Having an education secretary who understands the nuances of all things education, including the civil rights of all students, is important. Equally as important is having an agenda that will have a positive impact on education in our nation, and her policies seem to promote the opposite. 2018 could be a pivotal year for her and the US Department of Education she "leads."

**Opioid Crisis** - According to preliminary figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there were nearly 67,000 drug overdose deaths in the 12-month period through June 2017. Sadly, this is up from more than 57,000 in the 12-month period through June 2016. More and more school leaders and counselors are stocking up on Narcan in their schools to prepared for when students overdose. For more information about how schools are preparing themselves for this devastating epidemic, click here.

**Minoritized populations** - If you read this blog on a regular basis you also know that this one is not a surprise. However, let's start with the definition. Shaun Harper from the University of Pennsylvania says that,

> "Persons are not born into a minority status nor are they minoritized in every social context (e.g., their families, racially homogeneous friendship groups, or places of worship). Instead, they are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of Whiteness."

Adding to that definition, there are indigenous groups, special education students, and LGBTQ students who are minoritized in schools as well. Many of those schools have mottos that say, "All Means All" but in-reality the motto should be "All Students Who Already Fit In Means All."

This is a school climate issue. School communities need to make sure that they have images in the hallways that represent their diverse school population, as well as curriculum that depicts those populations in a positive way, and if teachers and leaders do not have the self-efficacy in their own abilities to carry it out in classrooms, they need to work with outside organizations that understand their context and can help them. Unfortunately, Secretary Devos is responsible for eliminating protections for these students, which makes this an even bigger issue for 2018.

**School shootings** - It makes me profoundly sad that this is on the list, but school shootings continue to be a critical issue in the U.S. There have been nearly 300 school shootings since 2013. Kathleen Manzo from Education Week has created a tracker about these occurrences so we can all stay informed as we debate things like gun control and mental health. Schools around the country have to practice "Active Shooter Drills" several times a year, which means that this critical issue has changed the way school leaders approach each day, and how they lead their schools. Parents send their children to school to learn, and expect them to be safe, and this is why social-emotional learning is such an important topic for schools.

**Teacher retention** - Retaining teachers is an issue we should worry about, and this article from the NEA explores that. Teachers are leaving the profession, which has long been an issue. Sometimes they leave because they are not prepared for some of the realities they face (i.e. student mental health issues, families, mandates and accountability, high stakes testing, low salaries, etc). Will new residency programs help change their level of preparedness so they don't feel so burdened?

Other times they leave because of the leadership in their school. The old adage is that teachers don't quit schools, they quit principals. Unsupportive leaders, those who pressure new teachers to make sure their students excel on high stakes tests, and those leaders who give new teachers "tough" classes without the resources to help, are just some of the ways leaders make or break new teachers.

Whatever the reason, teacher retention is an issue.

**In the End**

Let's hope that this year is the year where we, not only discuss the 8 issues from above, but actually do something about them.