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A Rural Educator Responds to the Assault on the Capitol

Jesse Longhurst

Editors' Note: On January 6, 2021 many of us watched as rioters, some of them armed, climbed over walls, broke windows, and burst through barriers to enter the U.S. Capitol to disrupt the review and counting of electoral votes leading to the certification of the 2020 presidential election. For over three hours, the Capitol building was occupied while Members of Congress and capitol staff took shelter. Social media and news outlets showed images of rioters in congressional offices, armed police defending the door to the Senate floor, and participants, some in clothes celebrating the Holocaust or waiving the Confederate flag, in some of our nation's most sacred spaces. In response to these events, rural educator Jesse Longhurst created a social media post encouraging educators to promote civil discourse and trust in democratic institutions. Her statement is republished here.

Friends, my heart is heavy. I have been worrying about how to advise you in this particular, perilous moment. Ultimately, there are two things that I hope you will think about: The first is our responsibility to help our students process the events of January 6th and to help them feel safe. What happened at the Capitol was frightening. Our students will be feeling its effects.

Depending on how their families are reacting, our students may have different needs. Many of our students have families who model positive civic engagement. These children may wish to debate and argue and practice their budding activism in your classes. They may be fired up and excited and indignant and may not understand how to have productive discourse in ways that do not wound or alienate their classmates.

Many of our students have families who are disengaged from or uninformed about politics. These children may need to ask a lot of questions and worry out loud about the "what-ifs" that scare them. They may be starting from scratch in understanding enormously complex issues.

Some of our students have families who are angry and frightened about what is happening in the world and their children absorb their fear and anger. These children may lash out at their peers or may wish for a space that is a respite. They may withdraw or they may be aggressive. They may appear cynical or inappropriately flip.

As adult role-models in our students' lives, we have a heavy responsibility. Notice that I refer to all our students (even the teens) as children. They are children. Even high school seniors who have reached the age of legal adulthood are, developmentally, still not fully adult. These kids have been through so

much in the past 10 months. Everything that they thought they knew about the world has been upended and this is yet one more blow to their sense of stability and their ability to trust that adults will take care of the big stuff...that we will keep them safe. Who could blame them for feeling afraid?

Secondly, while we absolutely cannot advocate in a partisan way in our role as public school teachers, we can (and I would argue that we must) be champions of our democratic institutions. Teachers are civil servants. We are paid by the public for the public good. In a time when even the existence of a functioning government seems to have become a polarizing issue, I believe that we have a responsibility to teach our students why our democratic institutions exist and how to preserve and improve them. You are part of the most numerous group of public employees in the country. The work you do matters, never more so than now, and you should be proud of it!

Democracy is fragile. I'm enough of a student of history to understand that the American experiment is still very new and that its survival is not guaranteed. If we were to devolve into an oligarchic dictatorship, tomorrow, our era of democratic rule would merely be a blip on the historical radar. What hubris to believe otherwise! Empires sometimes fall dramatically, but far more often they are eroded until nothing recognizable is left.

The erosion of trust in our democratic institutions and the erosion of participation in civic life is worrying. Frankly, one of the only places that we still encounter each other across political, religious, racial, economic, and cultural divides is in public schools. If we miss our opportunity to help children see each other as fully human, to recognize

each other's inherent dignity and to understand that we are responsible for each other's well-being, then we will have committed professional malpractice. The resources, linked below, may be helpful to you

as you work to respond and teach in the coming days and months.

Take care of each other and of yourselves and let me know how I can help you.

Resources:

AFT Share My Lesson Blog: This Moment in Time: Navigating Unprecedented Historical Events:

<https://sharemylesson.com/blog/this-moment>

American Historical Association: https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/everything-has-a-history/the-assault-on-the-capitol-in-historical-perspective-resources-for-educators?fbclid=IwAR28whA8yuL6_c2uoY7uVqdaDRVkuWRBwYJ-d_26G9bYrKIocNmVAXJ3_N8

Collaborative Classroom: Reconnecting and Rebuilding Toolkit:

<https://www.collaborativeclassroom.org/professional-learning/reconnecting-and-rebuilding-toolkit-k-6/>

Dianna Hess talk "Political Education in Polarized Times" from AERA's Ed Talk series:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8zgvTN1WQo>

iCivics resources for teaching about elections and the inauguration: <https://www.icivics.org>

and specific to January 6th: <http://hostinguc.com/iCivics/210107/email.html?emci=c75acc1b-1651-eb11-a607-00155d43c992&emdi=4236a299-2751-eb11-a607-00155d43c992&ceid=9799213>

National School Public Relations Association resource guide for school leaders and communicators:

<https://www.nspra.org/resources-supporting-democracy-and-politics-action>

Oregon Department of Education collected links:

<https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/ORED/bulletins/2b47e77>

National Education Association Talking to Kids about the Attack on the Capitol: <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/talking-kids-about-attack-capitol>

National Council for the Social Studies: <https://www.socialstudies.org/news/ncss-responds-assault-democracy>

Phi Delta Kappan resources for teaching about misinformation: <https://kappanonline.org/against-misinformation-journell/> and about the attack on the U.S. Capitol <https://kappanonline.org/how-educators-can-help-kids-process-the-attack-on-the-u-s-capitol-fagell/>

Teaching Tolerance: https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/when-bad-things-are-happening?fbclid=IwAR2ls0uHdvuJV2EoIZR_RSoZ2ahPHRGjJtBPMWvG_AjxrglqT8kCK5n4E

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