

Urban Districts' Group Decries President Trump's Response to Charlottesville

By Denisa R. Superville on August 17, 2017 3:26 PM

UPDATED

The Council of the Great City Schools, the Washington-based organization that represents largely urban school districts, criticized the president's response to the Charlottesville violence, joining critics who say that the response has been inadequate.

"As the most diverse group of children in American history returns to their classrooms over the next several days, they are getting a hard lesson on intolerance, hatred, and political cowardice," the group's executive director, Michael Casserly, said in a statement on Thursday, nearly five days after white nationalists and Neo-Nazis clashed with counter-protestors in the Virginia college town. "In the face of a national tragedy, our president—and others—have attempted to stoke the fires of division and equate the moral standing of various white supremacy organizations with the justifiable outrage of counter-protesters in Charlottesville."

"At a time when we need strong, unifying leadership the president has chosen to equivocate, sending the signal that displays of racial hatred have the same valence as the voices of indignation and hope," Casserly wrote. "This kind of thinking warps our common understanding of what freedom and opportunity mean, and it loosens our grip as a nation on our founding principles. These are vile and dangerous sentiments that should be roundly rejected by the citizenry."

An Ohio man faces charges after allegedly plowing his car into counter-demonstrators on Saturday, killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer. Two members of the Virginia state police who were monitoring the events—H. Jay Cullen and Berke Bates—also died when their helicopter crashed.

The Council of the Great City Schools represents 70 of the nation's largest school districts—about 7.3 million students, the majority of whom are Hispanic and African-American.

Casserly released a similarly blunt statement last year after the police killings of Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, Mo.; Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, La.; the fatal shootings of five police officers in Dallas and three officers in Baton Rouge; and the terrorist attack on the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Fla., in which 49 people were killed.

President Trump's initial response condemned hatred, bigotry and violence on "many sides." On Monday, he struck a more conciliatory note, condemning Neo-Nazis and white supremacists. In a press conference on Tuesday, he blamed both sides for the violence.

Trump's comments have been criticized for equating counter-protestors with Neo-Nazis and white nationalists. Former [Ku Klux Klan grand wizard David Duke has praised Trump for his response.](#)

The Charlottesville violence has led to renewed push to remove confederate monuments from parks and other public spaces—a debate that bubbled to the fore two years ago after Dylann Roof killed nine black parishioners in a church in Charleston in 2015.

"Our schools, particularly our diverse urban public schools, will once again need to serve as a source of inspiration and courage during these rough political times. As educators, we have the power to build a future that is more thoughtful, charitable, respectful, and broad-minded—a future that counters the forces of intolerance to which our leadership has turned a blind eye," Casserly said. "In fact, it is our patriotic responsibility to ensure that our students learn to think critically, differentiate fact from fiction, understand the key principles of our founding ideals, and live their lives with forbearance and respect for each other. It is a challenge that the nation cannot afford for us to neglect, for these are the assets that will keep us glued together as one people and will ensure that the moral arc of history bends ever faster towards justice."

The council was among education groups and school leaders have addressed the events in Charlottesville.

[UPDATE (5:40 p.m.): "The basic rights and wrongs that we, as educators and parents, have been trying to teach our children have been challenged by what we've been reading about or have seen on our television screens," AASA's executive director Daniel A. Domenech said on Thursday.

"The question now becomes, how do we as school system leaders pull through? How do we move forward at a time when more than 50 percent of our nation's students are children of color? What directions do we take when scores of young people are the children of immigrants and English language learners? How can we focus on test scores and academic outcomes when the most basic fabric of our society is being torn apart?"

He continued: "There is no better time than now to view every public school as the most fundamental foundation of our communities. There is no better time than now to speak loud and clear about the value of public education and the positive impact educators make on the children they serve."]

Education secretary Betsy DeVos condemned the violence on Saturday on Twitter, but has not addressed it since on the platform.

UPDATE:

RiShawn Biddle, who runs the web site Dropout Nation, **has been urging education reformers to walk away from the administration.**

Michael Petrilli, the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, **also wrote on Monday (before the president's press conference condemning Neo-Nazis and white supremacists and before his Tuesday pivot saying both sides bear culpability) that the president should make it clear that "he wants nothing to do"** with Neo-Nazis, the KKK, and white supremacists. Teachers and other educators **have also put together resources to teach about white supremacy and white nationalism in schools.**

Chiefs for Change, the bi-partisan group of state and district chiefs, also responded after the president's press conference on Tuesday.

"As the nation's top leader, the President of the United States offers a model and example to children throughout this country," the group's statement said. "Equivocation about racism, white supremacy, anti-Semitism, and domestic terrorism is intolerable anywhere, but especially from our top elected officials. As a bi-partisan coalition of state and school district leaders, we commit to advance civil discourse that stands against evil. We will redouble our efforts to ensure students learn to be responsible adults and patriotic citizens who work toward a far different and more positive vision for this nation, and we urge our fellow leaders to join us in standing strong against hatred and bigotry."

Chiefs for Change board of directors include John White, Louisiana's education chief; Tom Boasberg, the schools chief in Denver, Colo.; Hanseul Kang, the director of the Washington, D.C., Office of the State Superintendent of Education; Robert Runcie, the superintendent of Broward County schools in Florida; Hanna Skandera, the former New Mexico schools chief; and Antwan Wilson, the chancellor of the Washington D.C., public schools system.