

Students fearful of a Trump presidency

SARAH FRIEDMAN, MEG O'LEARY AND MARC GREENFIELD

On Nov. 9, as we climbed the steps of our school to meet the rush of our 560 beautiful students of color and their families, we were hit with their immediate and palpable distress at the election of Donald Trump. The daunting task of assuring them they were safe was a punch in the gut. We reassured our students — representing 39 countries, 50 percent young girls, a range of learning differences — but we aren't confident we can protect them from what's to come in Trump's America.

Make no mistake, our children are afraid. They have good reason.

Even our youngest children know our President-elect mocked a disabled reporter, promised deportation of millions of people, called for banning Muslim immigration, and bragged on a 2005 tape about assaulting women. He chose an anti-gay vice president and white supremacists supported him.

Proposals like “stop-and-frisk,” a ban on Muslim immigration, and others that threaten the rights of those seen as different have real consequences for all of us, especially our children. If turned into action, through uncompromising bureaucracy, such policies could become an unthinking, indiscriminate monster. Once unleashed, extreme immigration policies could result in large scale roundups that could sweep up families that are in the process of trying to gain citizenship.

Our children are now experiencing emboldened white supremacist, sexist and xenophobic attitudes and actions, escalating locally and nationally. They are considering ways to hide their true identities to protect themselves.

Educators, if there is no neutral stance on bullying, there is no neutral stance on bigotry.

Silence conveys the worst possible message: “We don't see you. Your fears are not justified. Bigotry is OK. You are on your own.” We urge educators, instead, to acknowledge our most vulnerable children's pain in the aftermath of this election — give them clear messages to lean on.

- You are in a safe, loving community at school every day. We respect all points of view but we won't tolerate bullying or bigotry of any kind. We must respect each other's differences. In schools where most children don't feel imminent fear, it's equally important to discuss why others might be fearful — why empathy for all fellow humans makes our own lives better.

- Our democracy works. We respect the election process. We accept the outcome. Remember, our democracy ensures that elected officials' choices are influenced by many voices, including our voices. We have to speak up.

- Throughout history, great social justice leaders taught us progress is hard-won and comes with setbacks. True leaders help people make progress through division and conflict, to achieve our collective ideals of equality and justice. That will be our work to do, together.

We also told our children that while it's understandable to grieve, we have to remember our responsibility to make the world a better place — it's time to dig deep and throw themselves into their learning. In a way even beyond what we have seen before, they are doing just that. One student said, “Miss, I know that because I'm a Latina girl, I have to work harder than other people. But don't worry — I will.”

She shouldn't have to, but she will. We will too.

— Sarah Friedman and Meg O'Leary are codirectors, and Marc Greenfield is the president, of the Learning Community, a charter school in Central Falls that serves a diverse and high-poverty population.