



Going Public: Leading for Equity in Polarized Times

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"We may end up tabling the vote tonight, Pete."

Superintendent Peter Scott leaned back in his office chair, phone in hand, trying to absorb what he'd just heard. In his ten years leading Eastport Public Schools, he'd come to know the district quite well. Situated in the quintessential coastal New England town of Eastport, the district's schools were well-resourced to meet the needs of their 3,000 students. The Board of Education was representative of the community and generally very supportive of the school system. But the words from the chair of Eastport's Board of Education, Sharon Manzinni, surprised him. Perhaps he'd been naive to think that tonight's proposal would pass so smoothly.

Ten minutes earlier, Peter had been preparing his comments for that evening's Board of Education meeting, set to begin in a few hours. In the comments, he planned to celebrate a unanimous board vote approving Eastport's participation in Local Districts Offering Choice (LDOC), a state-wide program through which students from urban centers could attend school in neighboring, more suburban communities like Eastport. Towns participated voluntarily, with the state providing transportation and a small cost off-set. After two previous Board presentations and an informational email to the community about the LDOC program, there had been little public comment. Board members had informally voiced their support to Peter for months, and he had taken a general lack of public comment as a positive sign.

"I know we expected approval of the LDOC proposal at tonight's meeting," Sharon continued, "but after emails we've received these last few days, including the one published as a letter to the editor in the *Eastport Times* yesterday, I think a few board members are inclined to table the vote for tonight. I know you feel we're ready, but I do think the emails have raised some valid concerns. And we both know there is no rush. We are well ahead of implementation at this point."

"I agree there are some valid concerns in those emails, but I hesitate to change a plan based on so few comments," Peter protested. "Remember, we are talking about four emails—from supporters who are only asking that we ensure a positive experience for students who come to Eastport through LDOC. And the concerns they raise are perception more than reality."

"I know," Sharon sighed. "But a lot is going to depend on how you present this tonight. You can come on strong, insist we are ready, and push for a vote, but forcing board members' hands might lead to some "no" votes. And we both agree that a unanimous vote is important on this one. Instead of pushing, you could entertain the questions being raised, slow this down a bit, and respond to those perceptions."

"Thanks for the heads up on this, Sharon," Peter replied, biting back his frustration. "Let me take some time to think about it."

Hanging up the phone, Peter stared at the half-finished comments on his laptop, celebrating LDOC participation as another key step in the district's commitment to equity. Discussions about race, equity and social justice in Eastport had been ongoing for some time. Just three years ago, Peter had worked with the Board to discontinue use of a Native American mascot at Eastport High School. At the same

time, the Board publicly committed to conducting a curricular audit, to diversifying material selections, to more transparently addressing individual incidents of racism, and to recruiting more diverse teacher candidates. In communications about the work being done, Peter and the Board used terms like “White fragility” and “anti-racist” openly and proudly while discussing their intention to make this high-performing school district a more equitable place in which all students—including students from historically marginalized populations, who made up only 16% of Eastport’s student body—knew that they belonged.

However, a lot had changed in those three years. On the heels of the mascot decision, Peter shared a newsletter with the community that included a TED Talk by Dr. Hasan Jeffries about confronting hard history. In response to that newsletter, some community members sent letters to the editor of the *Eastport Times*, labeling Peter a Marxist and demanding an end to “Critical Race Theory” (CRT) indoctrination in the schools. An online petition circulated, calling for Peter’s immediate termination because of his racist, anti-White agenda. Freedom of Information (FOI) demands to the district increased exponentially, seeking information about text purchases, classroom materials, teacher learning and training, and communications between and among Peter, his teachers, and Board members regarding race and equity initiatives. A local group brought in an out-of-state speaker to educate the community about the evils of CRT; pamphlets and fliers were distributed; editorials and talk radio shows around the state began talking about Eastport Public Schools and Superintendent Peter Scott.

While this notoriety had been hard enough for Peter and Eastport teachers, the situation soon got worse. Four Eastport parents filed a federal lawsuit against the school district and Peter himself, claiming a violation of their and their children’s first amendment rights because of the school district’s “Marxist and racialised” political agenda. The suit, funded by an out-of-state group, referenced many of Peter’s letters to the community, in which he had proudly written about equity steps taken in the district. While the Board had issued a statement declaring their support for Peter and Eastport’s staff, the district’s lawyer Tom Reardon had advised Peter to avoid “poking the bear” by addressing the case publicly or even issuing public statements about the district’s commitment to equity work and culturally responsive teaching. Meanwhile, the lawsuit had caused significant fear among teachers, who worried that they could be named in suits themselves.

Sighing, Peter woke up his laptop and called up his old newsletters to the community, rereading his own words about the importance of confronting hard history fairly and honestly, about the desire for all children to know that they belonged and would be celebrated in their schools, about the importance for all children to see themselves reflected in a positive way in texts and materials in their classrooms. Looking at the dates on the communications, he was surprised to see that he hadn’t sent a district-wide communication about equity work in almost two years. The work had continued, of course, but more quietly. A Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) position had been added to the budget. Partners from the local university were working with instructional coaches to make classrooms more culturally responsive and sustaining. Soon, teachers would begin discussing implicit bias and microaggressions, in part to help them prepare for LDOC implementation. But Peter hadn’t shared this progress publicly with the community, knowing that any communications provided more fuel for his angry detractors to whip up dissent. Not for the first time, he wondered whether his silence was a smart, strategic move or a more personal, emotional response to being attacked. Did his silence serve to protect the work and the voices and experiences of those marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual identity? Or did it send the opposite message, implying discussion of difference was taboo?

“Peter, can I get a ride to the board meeting tonight? My partner needs our car.” Assistant Superintendent Celeste Waters poked her head in the door. Seeing Peter’s face, she asked, “What’s wrong?”

"It looks like the LDOC vote might not happen tonight after all," Peter said ruefully. "Some board members are concerned about parent emails we've gotten."

"I see," Celeste replied, taking a seat opposite Peter. "What do the parents say?"

Unlike Peter, Celeste was new to Eastport, having taken her position less than a year earlier. In fact, Celeste had been drawn to Eastport by the district's commitment to building equitable and inclusive schools despite the pushback. A Black woman with two decades of experience in public education, Celeste was a strong supporter of the district's equity work, and Peter appreciated her partnership.

"Actually, the four emails are from parents who have long supported our equity work," Peter explained. "But they have some serious concerns about LDOC. Here's one email, from Barbara Park. Do you know her?"

"I do," Celeste smiled, leaning in to see the laptop screen. "She emailed a few weeks ago, urging us to put a display in the library celebrating Asian Pacific History Month. I'm curious to hear her thoughts now."

Peter waited as Celeste read Barbara's email: *"While I am a supporter of District Choice conceptually, I just don't think we are ready, as a community, to know that we can keep the incoming children, likely children of color, safe in our schools. What have we done since changing the mascot? I haven't heard about any teacher training, K-5 curriculum audit, or teachers of color hired. All while the negative rhetoric in the community has only gotten more strident. I have been a vocal supporter of this Board and of the statements made in support of equity, but in the last year I have seen little evidence of continuing work on this important issue. I ask the Board to table this request until the superintendent responds to these questions and until we are truly ready."*

"Ouch," Celeste grimaced. "While I certainly agree with her that we need a big push to hire teachers of color, it hardly seems fair to say that we've fallen down on teacher training or curriculum."

"But we certainly haven't made those initiatives public the way we might have in the past," Peter admitted. "And Barbara's right that the negative rhetoric in the community has gotten more strident. We've had curriculum materials make their way onto blogs and YouTube channels criticizing what we do, and I'm sure our participation in LDOC will attract negative attention. I can't blame her for being concerned about bringing marginalized students into this environment."

"What's the alternative?" Celeste asked. "Wait until our critics have all come on board? That won't happen during our tenure in Eastport."

"Sharon suggested that we slow things down and respond to the concerns," Peter shared.

"You already know that I think we should make our equity work more public," Celeste reminded him. "If community members like Barbara knew all the work that we've been doing, I think it would do a lot to alleviate their concerns. Maybe your comments tonight should detail all the work that we haven't been sharing, with our participation in LDOC coming as the culmination of what we've been doing."

"I doubt a speech like that would allay Barbara's concerns that the negative rhetoric makes Eastport an unwelcoming place for LDOC students," Peter countered. "And sharing two years of equity work in one night would give our critics a field day. And I can only imagine what Counselor Reardon would say. Besides, we're already seeing teachers called out by name on social media, or having their assignments posted and attacked. Highlighting all the equity work we've been doing would only put our teachers at even more risk."

“We can’t fully protect our teachers or our students in this environment,” Celeste argued, “but we can state publicly that we believe in the work our teachers are doing to help all students know that they belong. We shouldn’t let our concerns about pushback—even lawsuits — stop us from letting concerned parents like Barbara know what we’re doing to build equitable schools.”

“We’re lucky that the vast majority of parents in this community support our equity work and want to see more of it,” Peter said. “But if we start speaking up again to address their concerns, will we actually just fire up the critics all the more and make the environment here less safe for kids and for teachers?”

“We have more than a year before we’d welcome any LDOC students into the district,” Celeste reminded him. “We have time to address those concerns while continuing to move forward with LDOC. Bringing in the new students will allow us to share our resources with students who haven’t had access to schools with those resources. And it will bring greater diversity to our community. It’s the right thing to do.”

“It is the right thing to do,” Peter agreed, “but is stating that so publicly the right thing to do?”

“You should finish preparing your remarks,” Celeste said, glancing at her watch, “and I have a few emails to send before the meeting. Just remember: you bring a lot of privilege to this conversation, and not just because of your professional position. I know Tom doesn’t want you to add any fuel to this lawsuit, but even being careful about the suit, you can say a lot of things that it’s not so safe for other people to say publicly. I hope you’ll remember that and take a strong stance today.”

Peter watched her go. He had just over an hour until they needed to leave for the meeting, but he still wasn’t sure what remarks he should make before the Board. Picking up his cell phone, he dialed Kevin Jones, the superintendent in a neighboring district. Kevin and Peter both participated in an ad-hoc group of superintendents who came together around the topic of equity and, more specifically, around their own racial identities as White people and the challenges they were facing in continuing equity work in their districts. Peter appreciated Kevin’s willingness to be blunt, and the two had become good friends.

“Peter!” Kevin greeted him. “Tonight’s the big vote, right? I’m looking forward to hearing what you learn about starting up the LDOC program—I hope that we’ll start participating in the next few years.”

“Actually,” Peter began, “the vote may not happen. Sharon is worried that several board members will move to table it after we got some emails from parents concerned that the district just isn’t ready to take this step. I’m trying to figure out what to say in my remarks to the board. I worry that I’ve been too quiet about our equity work in the past few years, and so people think we’re not ready for LDOC because they don’t know all we’ve been doing.”

“Doing equity work well doesn’t mean you need to draw attention to it,” Kevin said. “You know I’m really proud of the work we’ve done in our district, but we are very intentionally doing it thoughtfully, slowly, and under the radar. I just want to do the work, and I want to survive to keep doing it into the future.”

“But isn’t the slow and quiet approach just the privileged approach?” Peter wondered. “As White men, we could use our privilege to speak publicly about the importance of this work and still feel secure that we’re going to keep our jobs. My name has been dragged through the mud, but I’m still here.”

“Pete, you can lead equity work without having your name in the press,” Kevin rejoined. “This needs to be about the work and not about the superintendent. Public statements may make us feel good, but they really just pull us away from making the changes that need to happen.”

“But public statements let the community know *why* those changes need to happen,” Peter insisted. “And they let other people know that your district believes in diversity and equity. Is it really strategy, or is it fear of criticism that keeps you from speaking up more boldly?”

“Better to *show* your students that you believe in diversity and equity, with small changes that don’t rock the boat. Small changes add up,” Kevin pushed back. “But let’s agree to disagree. Good luck tonight. I’m looking forward to starting the LDOC program here in a few years when we’re ready.”

Peter hung up the phone with a sigh. It was time to finish his remarks so he’d be ready to stand before the Board. But what should those remarks say?