

Culturally Competent Schools: Guidelines for Secondary School Principals

The first article in a three-part series on culturally competent schools examines how principals can put in place policies and practices that honor the diverse cultures alive in a school.

By Mary Beth Klotz

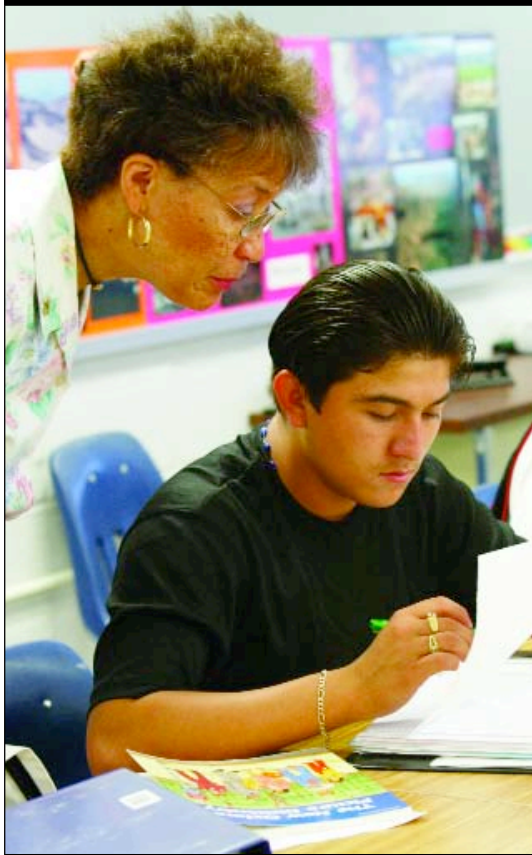


PHOTO BY DAVID HATHCOX

The highest result of education is tolerance.

—Helen Keller

As the number of students from diverse backgrounds continues to grow in U.S. schools, the role of culturally responsive education gains increasing importance. Currently there are 5.5 million English Language Learners (ELLs) in U.S. public schools who speak more than 400 different languages (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The 2000 census estimated that 65% of school-age children are non-Hispanic White and that 35% are from other racial and ethnic backgrounds.

It is estimated that by 2040, no ethnic or racial group will make up the majority of the national school-age population. Adding to the complexity, many students of diverse cultures come from families in poverty, do not

speak English well, have parents who are not well-educated, and move and change schools frequently. In fact, 39% of children in the United States live at or near the poverty level (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2002).

To create culturally sensitive educational environments, schools must set goals for success. These goals for culturally competent schools are to establish settings where all students are made to feel welcome; are engaged in learning; and are included in the full range of activities, curricula, and services. As the leaders of their schools, principals must work collaboratively with school staff members, parents, and the community to accomplish goals that include closing achievement gaps and promoting prosocial behaviors. The benefits of culturally competent schools are numerous and include preventing academic failure, reducing drop-out rates, and

engaging students and their families in the school community.

What Is a Culturally Competent School?

A culturally competent school is generally defined as one that honors, respects, and values diversity in theory and in practice and where teaching and learning are made relevant and meaningful to students of various cultures. In *A More Perfect Union: Building an Education System that Embraces All Children*, the National Association of State Boards of Education (2002) discusses culturally competent schools. The report describes the nation's growing diversity among schoolchildren, the challenges and opportunities this diversity presents, and the need to teach all students to high standards while providing a common set of core values. The report urges state policymakers to counter intolerance and inequity in their education systems through culturally competent practices.

The report also offers the following key recommendations for school leaders:

- Use high academic standards as the basis of instruction for all students

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Roadblocks to Future Opportunities

It is important for principals to consider the unforeseen roadblocks to graduating and transitioning to college that many undocumented students encounter. Doris Páez, the director of the Metropolitan Studies Institute of University of South Carolina Upstate and a culturally competent education expert, advises secondary school principals to investigate the various obstacles that undocumented students face in school. School leaders should be asking themselves, “What opportunities are denied to my undocumented students, and how can our school keep these students motivated to achieve high standards in school and in the community?”

Páez notes that because students who are undocumented are frequently denied access to higher education, there often is little motivation to achieve in high school. In most instances, students interested in attending college who are not U.S. citizens will be asked to submit documentation of citizenship status, such as the permanent resident card (i.e., a green card); hold the U.S. refugee travel document; or apply as an international visa-holding student. Further, to qualify for in-state tuition, students must hold one of the accepted forms of documentation no matter how long they have been living in-state.

Another frequent roadblock to success for students who are English language learners is passing mandatory high school exit exams. Principals, along with ESL and general education teaching staff members, should plan the steps and supports needed to ensure that students who are learning English will be able to pass the exit exams well in advance of graduation dates. The goal for secondary school principals is to provide a setting where all students are given the same access to educational opportunities and experiences.

Programs and Strategies That Contribute to a Culturally Responsive High School

Herndon High School in Fairfax County, Virginia, offers a number of programs and initiatives to help create a culturally responsive school setting. These successful programs include:

- Elective courses designed to help students from diverse backgrounds get along, such as Combating Intolerance
- Peer mediation to allow students from diverse backgrounds an opportunity to talk about potentially divisive issues
- Student clubs that help large groups of students retain cultural identity (e.g., Muslim Student Society)
- Openness to starting new clubs to reflect the interests of the student body
- Parent liaisons who are paid to work with families who would not otherwise have a traditional involvement with the school
- Home visits by parent liaisons
- Telephone tree in multiple languages
- Minority parent committee that organizes evenings for minority parents to come to school in smaller groups and learn about the college admissions process, SAT prep classes, scholarship and grant opportunities, and so forth
- Letters sent home and phone contact with parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to ensure a good turnout at parent meetings
- Open communication with students
- Quarterly meetings between a randomly selected group of students from each grade level and their administrator to obtain feedback on how school is going for them and what specific things can be improved or changed
- Effort awards honor breakfast for students who have had trouble but who have raised their grades; each teacher nominates two students from his or her class
- Establishment of a Hispanic PTSA with business discussion and programs in Spanish
- Initiation of a “challenge” program to invite promising students to enroll in honors and Advanced Placement classes.

Source: Jan Leslie, the director of the Office of High School Instruction and K–12 Curriculum Services and the former principal of Herndon High School, Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools

- Adopt a curriculum that fosters cultural competency
- Demonstrate respect for students' identities and welcome a diverse community to participate in schools
- Acknowledge students' diverse learning styles
- Ensure qualified personnel for all students
- Provide extra help for schools and students who need it.

Building a Culturally Competent School

As with many aspects of establishing a positive school climate and setting high academic standards for all students, the principal plays a key role in ensuring that his or her school is culturally competent. In the practitioner brief *Addressing Diversity in Schools: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2004), the authors outline three specific areas that must be addressed to ensure that a school is culturally responsive: organization of the school, school policies and procedures, and community involvement.

The organization of the school includes the administrative structure and the way it relates to diversity. The principal might consider such details as the assignment of classrooms, the hours the building is open, whether the building and the staff are accessible, and whether the building's physical appearance is respectful of different cultural groups.

School policies and procedures refer to practices that affect the delivery of services to students from diverse backgrounds. Principals must ask questions about their school's special education referral rates and identification procedures and access to honors and AP classes. Principals must also examine which students get instruction from the most experienced teachers and how school resources are allocated.

Community involvement encompasses neighborhood and community outreach efforts and the outcomes of these initiatives. These outreach efforts

A New Twist on Professional Development Opportunities

Deborah Crockett, a program consultant for School Psychological Services of Fayette County (GA) Public Schools, recently initiated a creative solution to the language barrier felt between the school psychology staff and Hispanic parents in her school district. Through the use of grant and professional development funds, the School Psychological Services Department will be offering an intensive yearlong introductory Spanish language class. The class will be taught by one of the district's ESOL teachers and will be open to school psychologists as well as to the administrators and support staff. School Superintendent John DeCotis and ESOL Coordinator Ann Richardson supported the initiative as an exciting new endeavor to help build community relations and improve the cultural sensitivity of school personnel. Goals of the voluntary program are to:

- Increase sensitivity and understanding of the process of second language acquisition that the students experience by going through the process personally
- Help staff members acquire basic language and communication skills in Spanish to work more effectively with Spanish-speaking parents
- Improve the ability of school psychologists to work effectively with translators and interpreters by having some basic knowledge of Spanish
- Increase collaboration and teamwork between the School Psychological Services and the English as a Second Language Departments of Fayette County.

might include hiring parent liaisons or a staff member who speaks the language of a student group and who understands their cultural background. The parent liaison would work with parents to bring them into the school process.

Culturally Competent Checklist for Success

Principals of culturally competent schools encourage understanding and respect for individual differences and strive for high educational standards and levels of achievement for all students. Students' problems are examined within the context of environmental factors, including prior educational experiences, instruction, second language acquisition, and culture. The following tips are reminders of strategies and procedures that are essential to creating a culturally competent school environment.

Staff development

- Ensure that all professional development opportunities are culturally sensitive and inclusive
- Teach all staff members the distinction between the second language

acquisition process and language differences and learning disabilities

- Recruit qualified school personnel who represent the cultural and ethnic makeup of the communities being served.

Early intervention and assessment

- Use a team problem-solving model to address student achievement or behavior problems and provide early intervention support
- Match students with appropriate mentors or life coaches from similar cultural backgrounds
- Include ESL teachers and other staff members who have a background in cultural differences and second language acquisition issues on the general education problem-solving team
- Use assessments that are unbiased, culturally sensitive, and advocacy-oriented
- Use outcome-based data for decision making and planning.

Instruction and curriculum selection

- Give all students the same enriching, evidence-based educational opportunities
- Offer a culturally inclusive curriculum that encourages cultural inquiry

Resources

National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE)

Determining Appropriate Referrals of English Language Learners to Special Education: A Self-Assessment Guide for Principals.

www.cec.sped.org/law_res/doc/resources/files/NABEGuide.pdf

NASSP

Promoting School Completion

Principal Leadership Magazine, 4(5), 9–13.

www.naspcenter.org/principals/nassp_completion.html

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)

Culturally Competent Practice

www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence/index.html

Portraits of the Children: Culturally Competent Assessment video and CD-ROM

The Provision of Culturally Competent Services in the School Setting

www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence/provision_cultcompsvcs.html

National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCREST)

www.nccrest.org

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES)

The Nation's Report Card: 2005 Assessment Results

http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nrc/reading_math_2005

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- Encourage teachers to hold cultural sensitivity discussions with students when literary selections or references present negative stereotypes
- Explicitly teach and model important values and appropriate classroom behavior.

Community and parent involvement

- Ensure that communications from the school are available in languages other than English, as appropriate
- Have childcare available at parent meetings
- Help students develop a sense of civic responsibility toward their immediate community, the nation, and the world
- Collaborate with parents and other community members and invite them to share their home cultures with the school.

Final Thoughts

Daniel Domenech, the former superintendent of Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools, said, “Look at diversity as an opportunity to learn, and not as a problem in your school.” By defining the challenges of educating students from multicultural and multilingual backgrounds as an opportunity to learn, rather than as a problem, principals can begin to shape thinking and collaborative efforts in positive ways. **PL**

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