The Principal's Guide to Building Culturally Responsive Schools

naesp™

National Association of
Elementary School
Principals
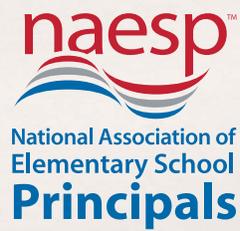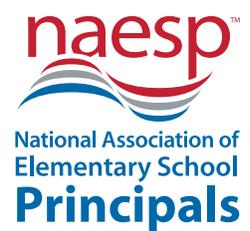
INTRODUCTION

For the first time in U.S. history, a majority of K–12 public school pupils are students of color. Upon graduation, students will face a more diverse workforce than ever before. Ninety-six percent of major employers, say it is "important" that employees be "comfortable working with colleagues, customers, and/or clients from diverse cultural backgrounds."* These statistics make it imperative that our nation's schools not only welcome diversity in the classroom but also teach students how to navigate an increasingly racially, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse society and global economy.

The **NAESP Diversity Task Force** was established with the mission to examine and identify effective practices and exemplars to support principals who are leading strategic initiatives that promote positive student outcomes through policy and practice recommendations that ensure equity for all students and that honor and welcome diverse input. The findings and recommendations of the Diversity Task Force are compiled here to serve as a guide for principals as they work to transform their schools.

*Cordova-Cobo, D., Fox, L., & Stuart Wells, A. (2016). *How racially diverse schools and classrooms can benefit all students.* The Century Foundation. https://tcf.org/content/report/how-racially-diverse-schools-and-classrooms-can-benefit-all-students/

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FOREWORD

L. Earl Franks, EdD, CAE, NAESP Executive Director

The NAESP Board of Directors prioritized equity, diversity, inclusion, belonging, and cultural responsiveness as important areas for the NAESP organization and the members we serve. A Diversity Task Force was approved by the NAESP Board to focus on the critical work of advancing NAESP's efforts to embrace diversity and promote a culture of inclusive leadership across our membership. These actions demonstrate a sincere commitment by the NAESP volunteer leadership to recognize individual and group differences while fostering dignity, developing unique potential and establishing bonds and building bridges that allow NAESP to support all principals and all children.

As the NAESP Executive Director, I am committed to creating a climate of inclusiveness as it relates to diversity. Other factors I strive to encompass include standards of conduct, personal integrity, understanding, respect, and creating a climate of inclusivity. These values are communicated to our Board of Directors as well as through our communications, programs, products, and services.

ASAE, The Center for Association Leadership, defines diversity as follows: "Encompassing a broader array of differences than race, ethnicity, and gender. It also includes: age, physical abilities, skill sets, socioeconomic status, family status, lifestyle preferences, language, religious beliefs and spiritual values. It is more than demographic differences. Optimally, it is about inclusiveness of differences at all levels of the organization." According to the United States Census Bureau, "Diversity is defined as all of the ways in which we differ. Among these dimensions are age, gender, mental/physical abilities and characteristics, race, ethnic heritage, sexual orientation, communications style, organizational role and

level, first language, religion, income, work experience, military experience, geographic location, education, work style, and family status." These definitions greatly expand diversity in a way that many of us have not considered. We must keep diversity at the forefront when designing educational programs and learning opportunities for the students we serve. According to a 2014 report released by the U.S. Census Bureau, "Around the time the 2020 Census is conducted, more than half of the nation's children are expected to be part of a minority race or ethnic group." The report continues, "This proportion is expected to continue to grow so that by 2060, just 36 percent of all children (people under age 18) will be single-race non-Hispanic white, compared with 52 percent today." In referencing future student populations, the report highlights that, "By 2060, the nation's foreign-born population would reach nearly 19 percent of the total population, up from 13 percent in 2014."

As you can see from these projections, diversity will become more of a focus in education than ever before. School administrators must be cognizant of how students will be served in the future that will be served in the future. Not only will the students learn differently, in many schools and systems; they will also look differently. It is my hope that school leaders give more thought and action to diverse and inclusive practices as you work to provide and plan a quality education for *all* students.

NAESP has long supported the educational equity of all students. For example, since the inception of NAESP's Platform Statements, which is a collection of resolutions or belief statements that are updated annually and adopted by the association, educational equity has played a prominent role in many key resolutions such as the following:,

- NAESP supports the right of every child to access fair and equitable educational opportunities.

- NAESP believes that the rights of all students should be protected.

- NAESP believes school culture, climate and social-emotional development should support equity and diversity for all students.

- NAESP believes educational opportunities should recognize and respect all people within our local, state, national, and global communities.

- NAESP values diversity in our culture and believes discrimination must be eliminated.

- NAESP believes that each child must receive a free and appropriate public education.

- NAESP believes federal, state, and local governments must assume accountability and take aggressive action to address social and economic issues arising from such factors as unemployment, immigration, poverty, drugs and alcohol, and other challenges facing the American family.

- NAESP believes sufficient and equitable funding for public education is necessary to support an educated, skilled workforce that can compete in a global economy.

It is my sincere hope that through the diligent work of the NAESP Diversity Task Force, the NAESP organization will improve and expand our efforts related to diversity and inclusiveness. Additionally, I personally pledge that my actions and those of the NAESP staff will reflect these beliefs.

ADVANCING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP

"The culture of any organization is shaped by the worst behavior the leader is willing to tolerate."
— Steve Gruenter and Todd Whitaker (2016)

To move a school toward cultural proficiency stewarded by culturally responsive leadership, school leaders must build the framework through culturally responsive pedagogy, which begins with the process of critical self-reflection (Gay and Kirkland, 2003). Building leaders must understand their own multiple identities (individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, social and political contexts, and other elements) before they can help build cultural responsiveness within their teachers and school staff.

Culturally responsive building leaders ensure that they hire culturally responsive teachers, encourage teachers to use culturally responsive pedagogical and classroom management strategies, ensure they are trained in using these strategies, and hold them accountable to do so (Vogel ,2011).

What makes a culturally responsive teacher? Culturally responsive teachers tend to have qualities such as a sociopolitical consciousness, positive views of students from diverse backgrounds, responsibility for and the capability to bring about educational change, and the ability to build on students' prior knowledge while stretching them beyond the familiar (Villegas and Lucas, 2002).

Aside from building one's own cultural proficiency and responsivity, and encouraging teachers to adopt and use culturally responsive practices, the culturally responsive building leader must also facilitate a positive school climate and nurture positive relationships with the community surrounding the school. Stronger partnerships and collaboration between schools and communities improve family engagement, which is critical to bridging home and school cultures. Additionally, these partnerships increase the sense of trust between students, families and schools, which in turn improves student connectedness to school and feelings of inclusiveness (Wilson, 2004; Khalifa, 2010; Epstein, 2010).

Often, the students who are most difficult to reach also come from families that struggle in various ways (such as financially, culturally, or socially), which makes building a strong support network for students and families even more important. Creating a positive school climate also means that student multiple identities are valued and nurtured, which allows students to feel safer and more connected to their schools (Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013).

According to Howard (2010), schools that have the ability to achieve high academic success for all students contained five attributes:

- Visionary leadership,
- Effective instructional practices,
- Intensive academic interventions,
- Explicit acknowledgment of race, and
- Parental and community engagement.

These qualities help leaders support student performance, work to affirm students' home cultures, empower parents in culturally and economically diverse neighborhoods, and act as advocates for societal change to make their communities better.

Recommendations

1. Conduct individual and building-wide self-assessments. Consider completing an inventory, such as the Intercultural Development Inventory, or engaging in a "Who Am I?" exercise, in which a person writes down as many identity descriptors as possible to help identify his or her cultural, philosophical, and social identities and begin to understand the social contexts that guide individual belief systems.

2. Create a positive climate and culture by intentionally promoting inclusivity and positive relations among students, among teachers and staff, and between students and adults on site.

3. Explore innovative ways to reach the surrounding community, especially families, to utilize their strengths, keep them better informed, and involve them in creating and sustaining a positive climate and culture.

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DIVERSIFYING STUDENT AND ADULT CAPACITY TO TRANSFORM SCHOOLS

"Educators today hear a lot about gaps in education — achievement gaps, funding gaps, school-readiness gaps. Still, there's another gap that often goes unexamined: the cultural gap between students and teachers."
— Teaching Tolerance, Culture in the Classroom

A supportive environment that provides structure to schools' transformation makes it more likely for student and adult capacity to flourish. Districts can help make the difference between student success and failure by assisting schools in building student and adult leadership, trust, ownership, and a shared vision of change among school staff. Additionally, mobilizing district- and state-level resources to support school change is critical in all successful models of equitable turnaround and transformation. Schools that exhibit the following characteristics assure that the process of diversification becomes a cycle of constant improvement: measure progress using data to drive reform; select improvement strategies to meet a school's needs; set high goals and a commensurately high level of accountability; and create strategic plans for improvement.

The most successful transformational models at the school level include methods for kindling innovation, changing utilized incentives, and including parental involvement and community support through developing partnerships. Schools providing equitable turnaround and transformation should have effective educational leadership that promotes success, clearly shares a vision for diversification and equity, and provides explicit expectations for student and adult competencies. Principals can play a large role in setting high expectations for teachers and staff to create pathways for diverse learners to overcome obstacles and close the achievement gap. Diverse students are typically affected by a multitude of pernicious forces that limit their opportunity to

learn and tell them they are "less than." Teachers who are willing to confront their own beliefs and hold a growth mindset for students can make stunning progress in narrowing the achievement gap for diverse learners (Saphier, *Principal Magazine, January/February,* 9).

Meaningful use of a lens of equity requires leaders to continuously ask, "Who is being well served, and who is left out or harmed by the policies and practices of the organization?" Leaders of equity should be committed to interrupting policies, practices and procedures that, explicitly or implicitly, perpetuate unequal outcomes for children who are furthest away from opportunity. The work of interrupting entrenched systems often requires redefining "success" and reframing how we understand problems and develop solutions. And although student academic success is important, it is not the only way success should be evaluated. The school organization must also look at the psycho-social development of students, the engagement of employees and families in setting the vision and direction for the system, and the way procedures and inclusion practices are applied to the achievement of the vision. (Jackson, J & McIver, M.)

Recommendations

1. Establish clear methods and practices for collaborating with families and community members on a regular basis and act ethically with integrity and fairness when working with families and community members. Understand how to navigate and influence the larger political and cultural context so that diversification and equity can flourish.

2. Provide strong professional development on cultural competence, equity, and social justice so that teachers and staff can improve classroom instruction and provide equitable school management strategies that will improve achievement for all students.

3. Provide flexibility for decision making to incorporate diversity in instruction, curriculum, staffing, and hiring which are critical in effective turnaround and transformation. Include strategies that engage students, staff, communities, and stakeholders in diversity and social justice efforts in the transformation process.

4. Recruit qualified teachers who are enthusiastic about change. Promote buy-in. School reform cannot work unless the entire staff is on board.

"A bunch of teachers here, they think they know what's wrong with us. But they don't know. If people want to help us, they have to see what we've been through, not from what their own experiences tell them."
— Billie, a Lakota teen speaking of the teachers at her school

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UTILIZING ASSETS TO ENSURE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

"We must teach the way students learn, rather than expecting them to learn the way we teach."
— Pedro Noguera

In today's Pre-K-8 schools, school leaders are under enormous pressure to ensure that all students learn. However, teachers and staff are often ill equipped to know how to reach diverse student populations in ways that will meet their needs. Therefore, it is incumbent for the principal to lead and coach instruction so that effective culturally responsive teaching and learning happens. To do this, principals must utilize all available resources to build teacher capacity so that they become adept at responsive teaching that meets each student's learning needs.

"Teachers must incorporate relatable aspects of students' daily lives into the curriculum. Such familiar aspects may include language (which may include jargon or slang), prior knowledge, and extracurricular interests such as music and sports. Once students feel comfortable with how a teacher talks and discusses academic material, they will feel comfortable enough to focus and try to learn the content.

A common misconception about culturally responsive instruction is that teachers must teach the 'Asian way' or the 'black way.' People often get intimidated by the words 'culturally responsive' because of the incredible number of cultures and mixes of cultures in today's classrooms. Too often, teachers subscribe to the misguided idea that students of different races need to be taught differently, and they waste an enormous amount of effort in the process. Another result is that teachers usually appear fake by simply trying too hard to impress students of different backgrounds."
(Kadhir Rajagopal, 2011)

Recommendations

1. Create a library (physical or virtual) with research and resources for staff and teachers. Use the material to provide research reviews or book studies to help build foundational knowledge and skills for ensuring culturally responsive teaching and learning.

2. Provide opportunities for faculty and staff to engage in professional conversations in developing skills related to cultural sensitivity to individual students and flexibly in adapting their content, curriculum, and teaching strategies.

3. Equip educators with the skills to increase their instructional differentiation repertoire to meet the educational needs of students. Principals should consider specialized training in the following areas: English language learners; exceptional children services; students of economically depressed families; and students who have experienced social hostility such as racism, sexism, and other negative encounters with others.

4. Develop student interest surveys and lead teachers to learn about their students' interests. Incorporate staff meeting time for teachers to report on: what motivates students to learn; how a relationship has been built with each student; and what they learned about students' interests. Ensure that teachers identify and have a specialized focus on students who are marginalized or are at risk.

5. Initiate discussions with local, state, and national evaluation process designers to include indicators or cultural responsiveness as essential components in teacher and staff observations.

6. Incorporate recommendations from culturally educational texts and other materials into the teacher evaluation process and performance improvement plans for teachers and staff who have demonstrated deficits in cultural responsiveness.

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DEVELOPING AWARENESS AND LEADING THE CHARGE TO PROVIDE DIVERSE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL STUDENTS

"A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way."

— John C. Maxwell

In order to transform our Pre-K-8 schools, school leaders must lead the charge in developing awareness that will educate, promote tolerance, and foster an appreciation of diversity in the school culture. Each school has a unique set of diverse values. The principal, as leader, should promote and support these values to ensure an inclusive environment. If this is done well, our schools will see a reduction in bullying due to differences, create safe spaces for students to learn, and improve the overall school climate by creating tolerant attitudes. Diversity awareness (gender, age, sex, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and/or social status) is a form of appreciating the differences in individuals. It is imperative that school leaders create and develop an awareness and support for diversity and inclusiveness among all stakeholders.

"There are many benefits that come with a conscious implementation of diversity awareness in the educational environment. Culturally-responsive pedagogy improves academic outcomes for students and makes learning more interesting and connected to the real world. More importantly, however, a successful diversity awareness program turns schools into a place where no child is afraid to come or afraid to be different." (Wagner, 2013)

School leaders play an important role in creating a culture that values diversity by encouraging staff, students, and teachers to increase their awareness of the various dimensions of diversity. As all groups examine their own cultural identity

and how it affects relationships with others; become more aware of their own attitudes, perceptions, and feelings about various aspects of diversity; and, most importantly, promote an inclusive environment where everyone feels valued and respected, the school culture can become a safe and inclusive community.

Recommendations

1. Create student diversity leadership training and diversity workshops for administrative teams and student leaders which include teaching tolerance. Student leaders can train peers on subjects related to diversity and tolerance which will be guided by administrators and counselors.

2. Provide chats, newsletters, and/or blogs written and led by the principal and school leadership team that promote the diverse school culture, showcase how the school values diversity, and strive to meet the needs of each and all students.

3. Endorse student-teacher collaboration by celebrating the school's diversity through developmentally appropriate activities and celebrations.

4. Promote regular school-to-parent communications in the native languages of parents and guardians.

5. Include representatives from all demographic groups in the school 's diversity planning.

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CONCLUSION

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Several years ago, I was walking down a hallway in an urban elementary school in the Midwest when a teacher proclaimed to a group of students: "We are not moving until I see a straight line." I was stunned as I noticed the third graders desperately trying to figure out how to construct the line straight enough so that they could move. For six minutes, the teacher stood there with a look of disgust on her face, because the students apparently could not make the line straight enough. I wondered what kinds of other learning opportunities the students were missing during her six minutes of "teaching" the students that they would not move unless she saw a straight line.

To be clear, the line was not all over the place at all. And perhaps I was observing a situation that had frustrated this teacher for many days — weeks even. But this story is not unique.

In some schools, teachers focus so much on rules that they sometimes forget they are working with developing human beings who are grappling with a range of matters that are ordinary to adults but often bewildering to children. What happens is that students are placed on the "margins of learning," and some far more often than others. Students who are disproportionately on the margins of learning include:

- Those whose first language is not English;
- Those who live below the poverty line;
- Those who are Black and Brown;
- Those who have learning differences; and
- Those who are marginalized and underserved due to their immigration status, sexual orientation, religious preferences, and geographic location.

While I have spent a lot of time visiting urban schools (from elementary to high), I have also visited and observed suburban, affluent, and independent schools. What I have learned is that despite these different social contexts, student behaviors are similar in many ways: students talk sometimes without raising their hands; they have conflicts with their classmates; they forget to complete their homework; they sometimes use profanity; and they even struggle to stand in a straight line

.

However, there is a stark difference between how teachers tend to handle students' mistakes in suburban and independent schools. In many urban schools, students are treated like prisoners, while in suburban and independent schools, students are treated as individuals who are learning and developing. In many urban and highly diverse schools, students are learning how to follow rules but may not be learning how to develop their own academic, social, and political awareness and positions on issues. In this way, urban and highly diverse schools are preparing their students for jobs that require this skill: to take orders. Suburban and independent schools are preparing their students to develop and give orders (Anyon, 1980; Milner, 2010; Noguera, 2003).

It is important to note that I am not suggesting that teachers and other educators in schools should not help students understand rules and laws in society and schools in order to live and function. However, focusing on rules more than on helping students develop knowledge and skills to navigate difficult situations is problematic at best; yet it is pervasive in schools across the United States. But what is even more profound in what I observed in the hallway that day was how

the principal, who also observed the situation, responded (or perhaps did not respond). The principal did not seem bothered or concerned about the situation at all. This type of "teaching" clearly had become the norm: for the head of the school, for the teachers, and for the students. In what ways had this principal cultivated this type of environment?

NAESP is to be commended for working collaboratively to advance equity. This document provides insights, recommendations and implications for practice — real actions that can help improve learning opportunities for all students and create equity. I have spent my career working mostly with teachers and principals in elementary, middle, and high schools to improve their practice with those students most often placed on the margins in schools. This report is important because it explicitly attempts to provide educators with tools to better serve these (and all) students.

The report has many valuable lessons and that educators in the United States can use in their own practices:

- We should embrace, celebrate, more deeply understand, and build on the richness of diversity; however, we must also acknowledge that diversity is but one part of the complexities of leadership in schools today.

- We must focus on equity, not solely equality, in our work to improve the educational experiences of all students.

- Equity means educators are committed to developing environments, systems, and practices in ways that provide students with what they need based on careful attention to the particulars of students' situation. Equality, by contrast, entails providing students with the same, standardized set of conditions and resources, regardless of circumstances.

- Punitive disciplinary policy can actually do more harm than good.

- Professionals, including superintendents, principals, social workers, school counselors, and teachers, need (and deserve!) opportunities to develop and improve their practices.

- Principals need to hire teachers who know their content and subject matter well but who also understand how to teach the students in front of them. Teachers can learn to build instructional practices that help students build knowledge, but they must have time and opportunities to build these skills. Teachers tend to have very little time to spare for professional development that can improve their classroom practice.

- We need to make sure families and communities are actively involved in the education of their children. How can we build on the many strengths and assets of our communities inside of schools?

- Our students succeed when mechanisms are in place to support them.

- We must pay more attention to what is called in the literature "teacher/student ethnic matching" — that is, how do we increase the teacher-of-color pipeline in our schools?:

- Principals need support to get better, too. We should deliberately support principals and other school leaders with the goal of building sustainable models that last. A coaching model from effective leaders could really help principals think through their curriculum and instructional leadership. Many spend their time on punishment structures in the name of "discipline." But management issues decrease when students are actively engaged in the classroom, school, and community.

- If we could increase the number of instructional hours each day and through lag periods such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and summer, student learning would likely increase. However, it's important to note that without high-quality teaching, increased hours of instruction do not equal increased learning. The increase in learning is directly dependent on the quality of the teaching;

- Our focus should be on helping students develop a love of learning – the benefits of education (not schooling!). (See Shujaa, 1994.).

- We should help students build skills that are transferable to other sites (skills that allow them to critique, question, create, construct, deconstruct, disrupt, speak truth, and voice).

- Knowledge is socially constructed. Our students know a great deal; it just may not be what is being tested. Testing tells us one dimension of a much more complicated story.

Indeed, the answers to problems and challenges in schools can be found in the context of the situation (Freire, 1998). This collective effort represents the kinds of problem-solving essential to advance and improve learning environments for students.

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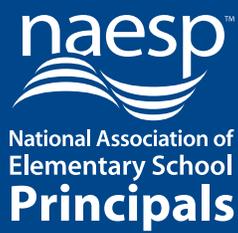
APPENDIX

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