In each issue of *JSD*, Sarah W. Nelson and Patricia L. Guerra write about the importance of and strategies for developing cultural awareness in teachers and schools. Guerra (pg16@txstate.edu) is an assistant professor and Nelson (swnelson@txstate.edu) is an associate professor in the Department of Education and Community Leadership at Texas State University–San Marcos. Guerra and Nelson are co-founders of Transforming Schools for a Multicultural Society (TRANSFORMS). Columns are available at www.learningforward.org/news/authors/guerranelson.cfm.
educators to consider their own position and what they might do in a similar case.

**INDIVIDUAL EFFORTS**

The next step in helping educators develop the courage to act is understanding that taking action does not require having authority or even having a group of like-minded colleagues. An individual teacher has the capacity to take action that will make a difference. Teachers can create change by working within their own classrooms to develop culturally responsive practices that serve as models for other teachers. They can ask questions about practices that seem inequitable. They can engage other teachers in conversation about culturally responsive teaching and learning. They can organize a book study to help teachers understand what it means to create culturally responsive classrooms and schools. They can host parent meetings to better inform parents about educational programs and opportunities. They can volunteer for committees and serve as a set of eyes with an equity lens. There are many ways individual teachers can make a difference. They do not have to start with a schoolwide effort. In fact, we would discourage that. The place to start is with what is most familiar and over which the educator has the most control.

**NETWORKS**

As educators take small action steps, their senses of purpose and needs for change tend to grow. They begin to talk with others about what they are seeing and strategies they have tried. Through these conversations, educators develop networks of people who are also interested in creating culturally responsive classrooms and schools. These networks may be internal or external to the school. In either case, the network becomes a tool that encourages the educator to expand change efforts. One of the strongest inhibitors to action is the fear of being the only one. Networks help educators overcome this fear by assuring them that they are not alone. There are others who are also taking action.

Networks also act as a mechanism for bringing more people into the change effort. As people within the network discuss their efforts, other educators become aware of the need for change. In turn, the network helps these educators understand the responsibility that comes with knowing and provides a forum for helping educators take action. Networks also make it more difficult for educators to choose not to act. It is more difficult to sit on the sidelines when others around you are taking action and there are witnesses to your inaction.

**POLITICAL SAVVY**

The final step in helping educators develop the courage to act is to make educators politically aware. Once educators develop the courage to act, they often want to act with a sense of urgency and initiate large-scale change. However, this approach is likely to backfire because it does not take into account what is at stake when inequitable policies and practices are changed. Changing policy and practice to be more culturally responsive means changing the way things have always been done. In most schools, the way things have always been benefits some students and families at the expense of others. However, those who benefit from inequitable policies and practices often do not see it this way. They may view longstanding policies and practices as fair and impartial. They may not understand why a change is needed at all and may resist change efforts. Situations such as this can become highly political and volatile. Professional developers must help educators understand how to be politically savvy and to be strategic in taking action. Being strategic means starting small, building strong networks and seeking incremental change rather than quick, sweeping change.

**AN INDIVIDUAL DECISION**

Working through this process increases the likelihood an educator will act when faced with an equity dilemma. In the end, the decision to act is an individual one. At some point, every educator will be confronted with a situation in which he or she must choose whether to speak up in support of a student, parent, or co-worker. The educator may not be surrounded by like-minded individuals and may have to act alone. Here’s an example: A student who acts out in other classrooms but does well in one teacher’s classroom is being recommended for suspension due to behavior problems. Does that teacher speak out in defense of this student, who is good when he is actively engaged? Or does she remain silent for fear of offending her peers by suggesting that perhaps the problem is lack of engaging instruction? Without the courage to act, the teacher might quietly sit by and allow inequity to continue, convincing herself that his behavior in her class is an anomaly. But a teacher who has developed the courage to act knows she has an ethical obligation to act, and she knows there are consequences for not acting. She also knows that taking action is within her control. She has the efficacy to make a difference. Knowing you have both the responsibility and the ability to act is at the heart of having courage.

**REFERENCE**