Becoming culturally proficient is no longer a job requirement only for teachers in inner-city schools. Rural, urban, and suburban communities once predominantly populated by white middle-class families are becoming increasingly diverse. At the same time, teaching faculty at these schools remains largely white. As a result, many teachers, even those with years of experience, find themselves working in an unfamiliar classroom environment, and many schools with long histories of academic success have come under the watchful eye of their states for failing to adequately educate students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds.

Understandably, school leaders are looking to district staff developers to help create culturally proficient teachers who can successfully educate all children, not just some.

WHAT IS CULTURAL PROFICIENCY?

Cultural proficiency is defined as “the policies and practices of an organization or the values and behaviors of an individual that enable the agency or person to interact effectively in a culturally diverse environment” (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999). The diverse composition of today’s classrooms demands that schools and educators be culturally proficient. Yet few of them are.

When schools are culturally proficient, they have high levels of achievement for all students, minimal failures or dropouts, equitable enrollment in gifted and advanced placement classes, few and more valid referrals to special education, fewer discipline problems, and teachers who feel empowered. Further, because diversity in a culturally proficient school is viewed as a resource and not as a barrier to teaching, learning, and interacting, students and families are validated for what they bring. They feel welcomed and valued, resulting in greater parent and community involvement. Additionally, culturally proficient teachers build on students’ “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and make accommodations in their practice and interactions to better serve the thinking, learning, communication, and relational styles of diverse students and families. Finally, culturally proficient schools continuously assess systems, policies, and procedures to determine if they favor some groups over others. If so, they are transformed and made culturally responsive.

MAKING AN ASSESSMENT

To determine whether your school district is culturally proficient, you can hire a consulting firm with the capabilities and experience to conduct a comprehensive evaluation that includes an analysis of district data; assessment of staff beliefs, knowledge, and skills related to diversity; and a review of district policies and practices. Or you can conduct your own assessment. While conducting your own assessment is more time-consuming, we encourage self-assessments because the insights are more powerful than those gained by an external review.

The assessment: Analyzing district data

The first step in a cultural proficiency assessment is examining each school’s achievement data disaggregated by race/ethnicity, poverty, and language group. Identify which groups of students are passing and which are not. Do culturally and linguistically diverse students have a lower passing rate than white middle-class students? This is one indicator of a lack of cultural proficiency, but not the only or best indicator. To gain a more complete picture, examine other data for each school. Are there high numbers of failures, disproportionate representation in special education, few placements in gifted education or advanced classes, over-referrals to discipline, and little parent involvement for different student groups? All of these indicators point to an organization and staff that are not culturally proficient.

Visit the teachers’ lounge or attend faculty meetings and listen carefully to what is said. Do staff make negative comments about groups of students and parents? Are
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SO WHAT NOW?

Unfortunately, culturally responsive schools and educators are few, so the results of your assessment likely will show that your staff and organization are not culturally proficient. What’s next? Diversity training that addresses the surface aspects of culture, such as customs, traditions, foods, and contributions, is a good start but inadequate to address underlying problems. To become culturally proficient, educators need diversity training that helps them understand how their own and the school’s cultural identity are embedded in all aspects of schooling, including what, how, and who is taught, how classrooms are organized, what instructional materials are selected, how student behavior is managed, and how interactions with parents are structured. This depth of understanding does not occur after one or two packaged professional development sessions. Becoming culturally proficient requires a transformational journey to take educators beyond cultural awareness and knowledge to a safe space where deficit beliefs and practices can be explored, challenged, and changed. Such a journey requires a particular kind of leader. The question is, are you the one to lead it?

REFERENCES
