

## ASSESSMENT IS THE FIRST STEP TO CREATING A SCHOOL THAT EDUCATES EVERYBODY

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

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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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diverse students and families seen for what they don't bring rather than what they do? Deficit thinking is revealed in comments such as: "The kids are hard to teach." "They don't come with experiences." "A lot of these kids are from broken homes." "These kids come to school hungry." "We're working hard, but we can't do this alone. We need these parents to get involved." Deficit thinking can permeate not only conversation but also classroom practice.

Walk into classrooms and observe instruction and student-teacher interactions. Which teachers tend to focus solely on basic skills and remediation and use mainly low-level questions? Do some teachers consistently lecture and have students answer questions at the end of the chapter or primarily use worksheets? Are some impatient with students who request help or clarification? Does the teacher use myriad classroom rules to maintain student control? Does the teacher nurture at the expense of academics? These are the behaviors of teachers who are not culturally proficient.

After examining this data, you likely will have evidence to suggest that at least some schools and some staff lack cultural proficiency. What may not be evident is how widespread the problem is. The following interactive activity will help to uncover the pervasiveness of the problem.

#### The assessment: Interactive activity

Select one school with a significant achievement gap and arrange to conduct this activity at a schoolwide meeting. You will need sticky notes (4-by-6 inches or larger), markers, and about 20 sheets of chart paper posted on the walls of the meeting room. Introduce the exercise as a step in the school's improvement process. Pose the two questions listed below and have staff individually record their responses on sticky notes, one answer per note.

- What are three challenges you face in improving student achievement?
- What are three assets that support student achievement?

Next, have staff work in small groups to categorize and label responses to each question. Once they have completed this task, facilitate a similar grouping and labeling process using the results from each small group. Put one category on each of the posted chart papers, using one color to indicate an assets category and another color to indicate a challenge. The group may combine, delete, or rename some categories. Once the categories are finalized, have one person from each small group place each sticky note on a chart paper under the corresponding category. Allow participants to examine the categories and sticky notes, using a gallery walk if necessary. Ask staff to study both the challenges and assets and draw conclusions about

the two data sets. Carefully note their comments.

We have conducted this activity dozens of times at schools of all types, and the results are remarkably similar. Typically, challenge categories focus on perceived shortcomings in students, families, and communities: "Kids are not interested in learning," "They don't respect authority," "Students are way below grade level," and "Their parents don't value education" are placed under headings like *student motivation*, *student behavior*, *student ability*, and *parent involvement*. Asset categories tend to have labels such as *hardworking administrators*, *dedicated staff*, *instructional resources*, and *innovative programs*. A skilled facilitator can use the juxtaposition of these asset and challenge categories to open a discussion about the view that students, families, and communities are the main obstacles to improving student achievement. Such a discussion will illustrate how widespread deficit thinking is among the staff.

#### 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 transformative 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

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- Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141. ■