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# VARIETY MUST LEAD TO EQUITY

Meeting the needs of *all* learners in classrooms provides teachers both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity is to maximize a teacher's professional expertise to adapt instruction and curriculum to meet the unique needs of their students, much as a doctor treats individual patients. The challenge rests in having a breadth of knowledge, skills, and resources to accommodate the differences in students' learning preferences and needs. However, for teachers to create safe, positive, productive learning environments in their classrooms built on respect for students requires extensive teacher expertise. Those in leadership roles have the responsibility to muster and share the expertise that rests across the school so that no teacher lacks resources or the pedagogical practices necessary to ensure that all students succeed.

NSDC's Equity standard acknowledges that each student brings into school variations and differences in their backgrounds, educational experiences, academic ability, and family situation. When students enter the doors of some schools and classrooms, teachers recognize and tap into these difference as a potential source for connecting the student to the school. When students are connected, feel valued, and are a part of a classroom community, they are more likely to be academically successful, attend school, and stay in school.

Coaches and teacher leaders help their peers appreciate each student, create safe, learning-focused classroom environments, and hold high expectations for every student.

They do this is a variety of ways.

## 1. Disaggregate data.

Coaches can help teachers disaggregate school, grade/department, and classroom data to

look at how various groups of students perform on a variety of measures of student achievement. When teachers use data to understand how different student groups perform, they can adjust their instruction. For example, when teachers look at common assessment data, they can discover if students with similar characteristics are performing better than others. With this information, teachers adjust instruction, curriculum, classroom resources, and interventions to address student learning needs.

## 2. Help teachers understand how their own background, family experiences, culture, race, gender, and learning experiences influence their instructional practices.

Parker Palmer reminds us that teachers teach who they are rather than what they know. Coaches can create opportunities for teachers to engage in dialogue in which they examine their individual and collective beliefs about teaching and learning. Teachers who understand their own beliefs and those of their colleagues develop a deeper understanding of how differences enrich a community.

## 3. Bring students' life experiences into the classroom.

Erin Gruwell and her students provide one example of how bringing students' life experiences into school can improve their academic success. In their book and eventually a movie, "Freedom Writers," Gruwell and her students describe how they used the complexities of their students' lives as the grist for their writing. Eventually, these students whose differences



### **EQUITY**

Staff development that improves the learning of all students prepares educators to understand and appreciate all students, create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments, and hold high expectations for their academic achievement.

For more information about NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, see [www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm)

often led to conflict became passionate writers, an active community of peers who learned to appreciate their similarities and value and understand their differences, and who stayed in school. Today, several of them carry on the tradition Gruwell began in their own classrooms.

#### **4. Provide opportunities for increasing teachers' understanding of practices that increase opportunities for students to learn and to receive feedback on instructional practice.**

Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (<http://streamer3.lacoe.edu/tesa/>) is a professional development program using peer observations that focus on helping teachers learn how to strengthen their instructional practices to increase teachers' expectations in learning. For example, teachers gather data in one another's classrooms about the presence of specific and sometimes subtle instructional behaviors. Data provide the evidence teachers use to know if they are including more of the desired practices.

#### **5. Facilitate professional collaboration about teaching and learning.**

Teachers want a safe, risk-free forum for seeking support from their peers on differentiating instruction and curriculum for students in their classrooms. Coaches can facilitate opportunities for teachers to examine student work; conduct child study or review; design lessons, common assessments, or student work together; engage in problem solving around particular challenges of practice; increasing student engagement; and creating safe classrooms.

#### **6. Support teachers' understanding of instructional practices that decrease disparity in the classroom.**

Generating Expectations and Student Achievement (GESA) provides teachers an opportunity to understand what contributes to disparity in their classrooms. GESA identifies five areas teachers can examine including: instructional contact; grouping and classroom organization; classroom management; enhancing self-esteem; and evaluation of student performance. When teachers learn specific classroom behaviors that reduce disparity, students engage

more actively in their learning experiences.

#### **7. Engaging students in authentic, rigorous learning experiences.**

Increasing the relevance, rigor, and authenticity of students' classroom work has a parallel impact on student learning. Phillip Schlechty at the Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform ([www.schlechtycenter.org](http://www.schlechtycenter.org)) identified 10 design qualities that increase the relevance and rigor of student assignments and foster student engagement in and responsibility for learning: content and substance; organization of knowledge, product focus; clear and compelling product standards; safe environment; affirmation of performance; affiliation; novelty and variety; choice; and authenticity.

#### **8. Spend one-on-one time with each student.**

Disenfranchisement contributes to negative attitudes about school, high drop-out rates, and even poor academic performance. Developing caring relationships with students helps teachers gain a deeper understanding of students' individual learning preferences, their background, their culture, their needs, and their unique attributes. When students feel that they have a strong advocate, a trusting adult who cares about them, they are less vulnerable academically. Teachers can promote increased motivation, self-esteem, competence, and emotional intelligence when they build an interpersonal connection with their students.

In classrooms where equity exists, teachers respect students as individuals and their ideas as important, acknowledge and tap the background experiences students bring with them, develop a deep understanding of students' culture, and build on what students already know. Students share ownership for their learning and take responsibility for their own academic success. Coaches and teacher leaders support colleagues in developing learner-centered classrooms and schools through facilitating courageous conversations about race, poverty, and beliefs (Singleton & Linton, 2006), facilitating learning experiences, modeling, co-planning differentiated instruction, and offering feedback about classroom practices. When teachers create learning-centered classrooms, students benefit academically, socially, and emotionally. ◆

#### **Reference**

**Singleton, G. & Linton, C. (2005).**

*Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.