Create a supportive environment for all

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Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago, a recent book by Anthony Bryk, Penny Bender Sebring, Elaine Allensworth, Stuart Luppescu, and John Easton (University of Chicago Press 2009), summarized five ingredients that, when implemented in tandem, produced substantial improvement in math and reading test scores for students in Chicago schools. These ingredients include:

- Strategic school leadership that focuses on instruction and includes others beyond principals;
- Deeper connection with parents and community that make schools open and welcoming;
- Purposeful development of professional capacity including professional development and collaborative work;
- Safe environment that creates support for learning; and
- Strong instructional guidance and materials.

Some of these ingredients are system ingredients, some school-level, and some classroom level. Creating a safe learning environment that supports student academic success is a matter of equity. Some describe the learning environment that respects and acknowledges students as a culturally responsive environment.

The National Center for Culturally Responsive Education Systems (NCCRESt) advocates for culturally responsive pedagogy and learning environments. They describe culturally responsive classrooms as having curricular, environmental, and instructional elements. In extensive web-based resources available for use in professional development, NCCRESt identifies the following five environmental features. Each of those features on pp. 7 and 8 is followed with some discussion prompts that might be useful in engaging teachers whose

NSDC STANDARD

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.

personal background may be different from their students. Through self-reflection and examination of assumptions and beliefs, educators can increase their awareness of how their background and beliefs influence their pedagogy.

Creating culturally responsive classroom learning environments requires thoughtful planning and cross-classroom sharing. When working collaboratively across classrooms, teachers exchange strategies, resources, points of view, and ideas to support building a network of culturally responsive classrooms that contribute to a schoolwide system of supporting the success of all learners.

FOR MORE RESOURCES

• NCCRESt provides resources to download to support professional learning in areas of equity. **http://nccrest.org/professional.html**

• NCCRESt publishes a newsletter called Equity Matters. To subscribe, visit **http://nccrest.org/press.html**

For more information about NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, see www.nsdc.org/standards/index.cfm

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT OF RESPECT AND RAPPORT

Respect and rapport begin with the teacher demonstrating respect for and rapport with students and teaching students how to show respect and build rapport with other students. Teachers can begin to establish this environment by learning to appreciate and understand their students' lives and cultural backgrounds and develop skills for cross-cultural communication. Interactions between students and teachers are warm and based on genuine caring, openness, and honesty.

To consider:
- How do teachers demonstrate respect and build rapport?
- What specific actions do teachers use in their classrooms to communicate their respect of their students?
- What strategies do teachers use to build rapport?
- What indicators help teachers assess the level of respect and rapport between them and their students and among students?

ESTABLISHING A CULTURE OF LEARNING

Teachers shape the culture of learning when they convey its importance and the role of teachers and students as actors in the learning process, with both at times serving in the role of teacher and student. Teachers help students understand the importance of what they are learning, how it will impact their education and lives, and how to apply what they are learning in authentic situations. This requires teachers to reach beyond their own life experiences to connect with students' backgrounds. It also means that teachers hold the same high standards for all students and support students in achieving excellence.

To consider:
- How do teachers engage students in learning?
- What strategies do teachers use to personalize assignments and classroom activities to connect with all students to promote higher interest and engagement?
- How do teachers show enthusiasm for what they are teaching and convey its value to students?

CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Families are a significant factor for the academic success of all students. Culturally responsive classroom environments actively acknowledge and appreciate family and community interests, encourage students to access and engage with community resources, and encourage students to include their families in the learning process. When teachers take time to meet families, visit them, and reach out and tap community resources, they increase their connections to students exponentially and increase their impact on students' learning.

To consider:
- What resources are available in our community that can enhance students' classroom learning?
- What communication systems work best for connecting with and engaging families in students' learning?
- What are some preferred ways families have indicated they want to contribute to their students' learning?
- How might we bring more community resources into our classrooms?

4 ORGANIZING SAFE CLASSROOM SPACE

Culturally responsive classroom environments use space to support learning. To use space effectively, teachers create different types of work environments for students; arrange the space for easy movement throughout the classroom; provide students with personal space; organize resources for easy access; prominently display student work products; ensure that print and non-print resources representing diverse background, values, points of view, lifestyles, and abilities are visible and easily accessible; and celebrate the contribution of all members of the classroom community.

To consider:
- How do we honor diverse backgrounds, points of view, values, lifestyles, and abilities within our school and our classrooms?
- What conveys to students that they are recognized and honored as members of the classroom and school community?
- What types of classroom physical arrangements work best for creating different types of learning spaces for students and still provide personal space for students?
- What are the most essential resources to have available for students in the classroom to support learning?
- What priorities do we have for adding to our classroom resources to ensure that we are honoring all students?

ESTABLISHING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS 5

Culturally responsive classroom management builds on respect, personal and social responsibility, and a strong sense of community. Teachers' own beliefs and values influence their expectations of students and their behaviors toward students. Teachers in culturally responsive classrooms strive to create a strong sense of community in which each student understands and accepts his or her contribution to the success of the community. Teachers focus their efforts more on creating procedures and systems to support learning than on discipline and punishment, while maintaining their role as accountable adults.

To consider:
- What procedures work to keep the focus on building students' sense of responsibility within classrooms?
- What personal beliefs and values do we hold as adults that interfere with expectations of students and their success?
- What does it mean to be personally and socially responsible within a community?
- How do we convey that to students at different ages?
- What is the relationship between classroom management and discipline?

ALSO FROM NSDC

Read the Cultural Proficiency column from *JSD* for more information on this topic. Columnists Sarah Nelson and Patricia Guerra explore a specific aspect of developing cultural proficiency in each issue. They recently completed a three-issue series investigating how to involve parents in the work of schools. See **www.nsdc.org/news/authors/guerra nelson.cfm.**

References:

Bryk, A.S., Sebring, P.B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S. & Easton, J.Q. (2009). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

The National Center for Culturally Responsive Education Systems (NCCRESt). http://nccrest.org/.