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## Eliminate inequities to transform the college prep process in elementary school

**B**usiness as usual should end once a school staff develops a measure of cultural proficiency. Such skills should not be shelved like the many programs adopted by schools each year. Rather, a culturally proficient outlook should function as the lens through which all school operations are conducted. Examine the implementation and impact of all practices, policies, and procedures disaggregated to identify those favoring some student groups, parents, and even staff over others. Once such practices are identified, begin work on transforming these inequities through

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a culturally responsive approach. This means doing the business of schooling differently. Schools can no longer continue to implement traditional approaches year after year, void of any consideration of culture and language differences, and expect the achievement gap to close.

In this and upcoming columns, we present some common inequities found in schools and provide examples of culturally responsive practices as a way to help jump-start transformation efforts in your school. Persistent inequities, which are well-documented in the literature, contribute to the achievement gap due to educators' lack of understanding about the assets culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse families bring to the educational process. This column is the first in a series of three that explores culturally responsive practices for college preparation at each level of schooling — elementary, middle, and high school.

### STATUS OF COLLEGE PREPARATION

Look at the college preparation track of high schools across the nation, and you will discover that, in many cases, enrollment in these courses is not demographically proportionate to the school's student population. Although many schools may have a large percentage of black and Latino students, the majority of students in college prep courses are white, middle- to upper-class students, with a few Asian-Americans, the "model minority." In response to this

data, culturally unaware educators are quick to point out that students in college prep courses come from families who value education and provide the necessary academic resources, guidance, and assistance, while, in their words, "disadvantaged students" have "no experiences" and "no parent support." Culturally unaware educators often suggest these problems are compounded as students go through school because "students are unmotivated to learn," "have too much responsibility at home," or live in conditions that are "too great to overcome," such as having a parent in jail or being homeless. Culturally unaware educators rarely understand that these deficit beliefs can become self-fulfilling prophecies that shape the fate of culturally, linguistically, and/or economically diverse students, or that schools have an obligation to adapt to meet the needs of communities they currently serve and not those of the past.



### BEGINNING AT THE ELEMENTARY LEVEL

For many middle-class families, acquiring an education is an unstated expectation that begins in kindergarten and continues through college. Because one or both parents often have a college degree, they have implicit knowledge of

the operations of the educational system (i.e. parental rights, courses to take, involvement in extracurricular activities) or at least know from whom and where to obtain this information. Parents use this knowledge to guide their children through the K-12 system and on to college. Equally important, they have the necessary resources to purchase educational goods such as computers, software, musical instruments, or uniforms and services such as tutoring, summer camps, or music lessons needed throughout their children's educational career to ready them for college and maintain a competitive edge.

Culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse families greatly value education, are involved in their children's schooling — although perhaps in ways educators do not recognize — and want to provide more academic assistance to children, but often do not know how. However, many educators believe such families have little to offer because of limited formal education, language differences, lack of knowledge of the educational system, and access to few resources. Rather than seeing culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse parents for what they don't have, tap their funds of knowledge to meet specific needs, which is similar to how schools work with middle-class families.

How might this transformation begin in elementary school? First, help educators who have developed cultural proficiency in theory transfer this knowledge to daily practice. It's one thing to demonstrate cultural understanding during professional development. It's quite another to actually apply this lens to daily practice. Examine policies, procedures, and practices for each aspect of schooling, such as instruction, curriculum, and family engagement. Guide staff through these investigations by openly discussing your thought process when analyzing data, examining impact on groups, identifying the causes behind culturally

biased policies or practices, making suggestions for transformation, and forecasting the possible future impact of the changed policies or practices. Repeat this metacognitive process until it becomes second nature for all staff.

As the staff considers suggestions for transformation, resist the urge to do more of the same. Doing what you've always done is not the answer. Identifying new and different approaches based on the needs and funds of knowledge of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse families is essential for transformation. Educators typically do not use the funds of knowledge culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse families bring, such as a second language, the cultural value of interdependence, and large networks of loyal extended family members and friends who are willing to help in response to a personal request. When educators take into account such funds of knowledge, they can use such information to design culturally responsive practices to facilitate parents' involvement in school.

The process of transforming a practice into a culturally responsive one is illustrated in the following example. At the beginning of each school year, an elementary principal in south Texas personally calls parents, many of whom are migrant workers, to invite them to a weekly "coffee klatch" held in Spanish. But before addressing school business, she purposely spends the first few sessions getting to know parents. Once trust is established and parents understand she has their best interests in mind, the work on schooling begins. However, she doesn't tell parents what they can do for the school or teach them how to be "better parents," as so often is done in these meetings. Rather, she asks parents about dreams and aspirations for their children, what the school, in collaboration with the family, can do to help accomplish these goals, and talks about ways in which parents can help. This approach has resulted in a number

of positive outcomes for the families and the school. First, as parents grow comfortable in these sessions and realize they will not be judged for their differences, they ask about all facets of schooling. This increased knowledge has not only resulted in more parent participation at school and in academic matters at home, but also leads to advocacy for children. Moreover, a desire for more knowledge on the part of parents has led to the development of an annual summer academy organized and coordinated by parents. In these sessions, parents, district staff, university personnel, and community members come together to explore parent-requested topics of interest.

Second, by engaging with the principal about how they might help their children, parents discover they do have knowledge, skills, and talents the school can use. When their funds of knowledge are valued, parents feel welcome in school and volunteer to share their gifts as part of classroom instruction and other services needed by the school.

Finally, during these coffee klatch discussions, parents repeatedly said, "I want my child to get an education and get a good job and have a better life than I do," but were unsure how they could best help their children. This sentiment provided the ideal opening for the principal to introduce the topic of college readiness. On the first session of this series of discussions, each parent was presented with a set of calendars, one for each academic year, from pre-K to 12.

Printed on the last calendar was their child's high school graduation date along with their first day in college. With the principal's guidance, these calendars have become concrete tools for visualizing and accomplishing parents' dreams. After children leave elementary school, the secondary principals will continue to meet regularly with parents and empower them with knowledge, guidance, and access to resources, always helping them to keep the end in mind throughout their children's education journeys. ■