# THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD *to* SOCIAL JUSTICE

Missouri district uses culturally responsive instruction to close the achievement gap

By Charlotte Ijei and Julie Harrison

In working toward social justice in schools, we encounter people at different places on the continuum. Educators in our large, primarily white, suburban school district — Parkway School District in St. Louis, Mo. — range from the resistant to the eager reformer. Our challenge over the last year has been to address the data and move our staff to a place where we can say that we will reach and teach all children.

A key component to eliminating the achievement gap is building relationships between educators and students of color. The majority of teachers in the district are white, and they are responsible for teaching all students. If African-American students do not believe that teachers care about them, they are less likely to work for their teachers. Therefore, we help white teachers understand how to build relationships with African-American students in particular. A good relationship includes holding all students to the highest expectations, not lowering standards. Teachers with good relationships also work to understand and accept students' culture.
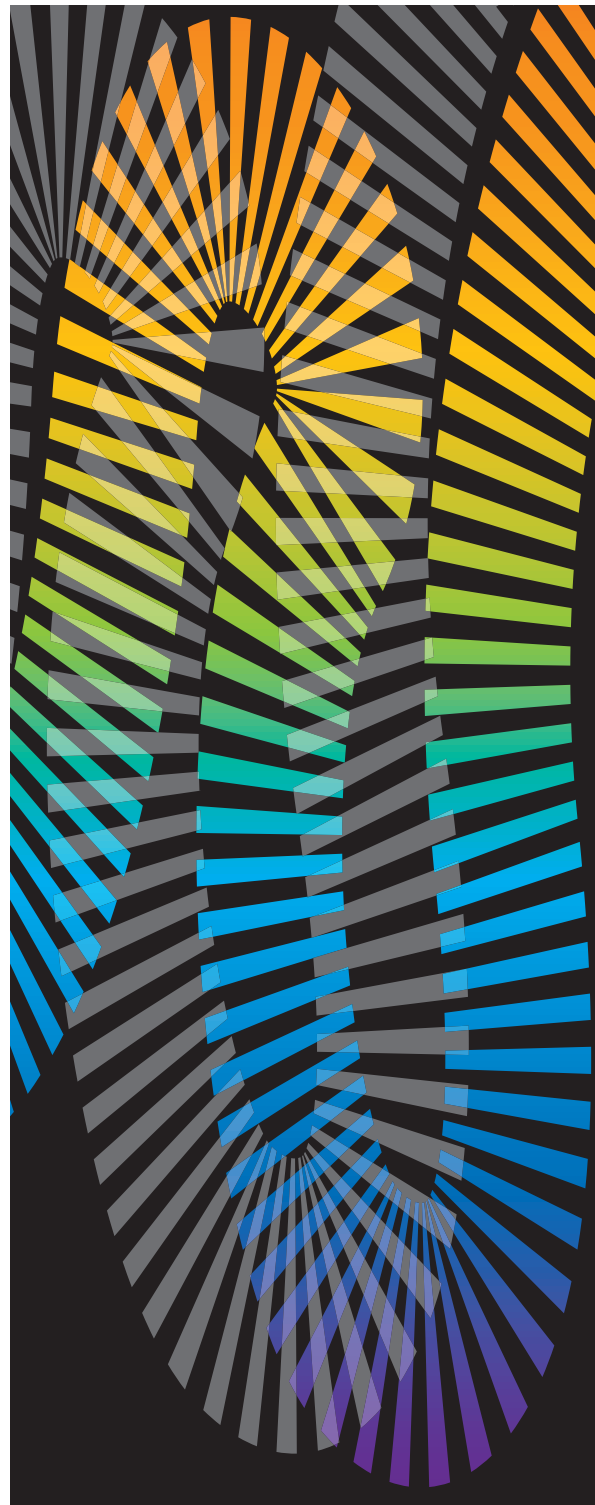
Parkway is not new to diversity work. Years ago, a small group of staff began what Peggy McIntosh calls the second phase of curricular revision with regard to race: "White history with examples of outstanding achievement by persons of color: I tell the stories, but I may include you" (McIntosh, 1990). (See box at right). Our primarily white demographics had made us blind to the staff and students of color. As our Pupil Personnel Department worked to raise awareness, we moved from the "all children are special … I don't see color" stage to a celebration of our limited diversity.

Over time, our demographics changed to include more African-American, Latino, and Indian students. About 30% of our 18,000 students identify as students of color. However, our staff ratio didn't keep up the pace. Only about 6% of our staff are people of color and fewer than 3% of our administrators are people of color. So, even though we were visibly supportive of diversity in our schools — we hung the right posters, we bought culturally relevant literature for our bookshelves, and we studied the outstanding representatives of our minority populations — we were still enmeshed in a culture of white privilege.

Two years ago, our illusions began to unravel. No Child Left Behind illuminated the gaps in our structure. Our Adequate Yearly Progress scores showed achievement gaps between white and other students. We had to face the inadequacies of our strategies to meet the needs of students of color, students with IEPs, and students who receive free and reduced lunch. Our 2009 annual test data show that fewer than 20% of our African-American students and fewer than 33% of our Hispanic students (compared to 61% of our white students) were scoring proficient or advanced. The number of students with IEPs who scored proficient or advanced was less than 35%, whereas about 60% of our non-IEP students scored in the top two levels. Fewer than half as many students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch score proficient or advanced compared to our students who are not eligible. Clearly, there are problems.

CHANGING CULTURE COMES FIRST

Over the next two years, district leadership began to recognize the need for major systemic change in our curriculum and pedagogy. Perhaps the most important factor in mobilizing the district came from the top. Our superintendent attended a week-long residential training academy on social justice and came back ready to support the changes we needed to make our district responsive to all students.

The first step to major change was to examine and revamp our culture and climate. We knew we needed to expand diversity learning opportunities to include all staff, not just the few who volunteered. Our learning opportunities moved from personal awareness workshops for a handful of people to comprehensive social justice retreats for all

PHASES OF CURRICULAR REVISION WITH REGARD TO RACE

1. **White history:** The world is centered on my experience, and I tell the stories.

2. **White history with examples of outstanding achievement by persons of color:** I tell the stories, but I may include you.

3. **People of color as a problem, anomaly, or absence in history:** My narratives center on the ways you have challenged my authority or dominance.

4. **People of color as history:** I listen as you tell your version of the stories.

5. **History redefined or reconstructed to include us all:** The stories are only complete when we all have spoken.

Source: McIntosh, 1990.

district administrators and building principals. All administrators were required to attend a two-day social justice cohort and four follow-up days with our external experts, Education Equity Consultants. Each cohort participates in a small ally group to continue learning. Our superintendent not only supports this initiative financially but participated in one of the cohorts, as did a board member. Because of the top-down support of social justice in the district, we are now teaching teacher leaders from all 28 schools in order to build a cadre of people in each building who have participated in social justice training.

We added to our summer diversity workshops for second-year teachers so that we now follow up with a two-year induction training in diversity as part of our year 2 and 3 teacher cohort groups. Additionally, day-long workshops brought together bus drivers, building facilities employees, and building leaders who chaired diversity programs in each building. This will improve the ability of all staff to meet all students' needs.

CREATING RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTION

At the same time that the district supported increased social justice training for all staff, we also moved into the third of McIntosh's five phases for classroom instruction: "People of color as a problem, anomaly, or absence in history: My narratives center on the ways you have challenged my authority or dominance" (McIntosh, 1990). We could be culturally responsive people, but we needed also to be culturally responsive teachers. McIntosh outlines the switch that happens in this phase, when we began to see the ways

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As an African-American administrator in the district, I am often reminded that I am different from the majority. As an adult, my life experiences have helped me to navigate through difficult times. However, I often think about the students of color who could be experiencing some of the same issues I have faced, but without the life experiences to help them deal with these challenges. That reminder helps me stay focused on our goals as a district: To raise all children up so that they feel a sense of belonging to their school and their education, and so that they are able to reach their full potential as learners and citizens of a multicultural and diverse world.

One story highlights my learning journey. We realized that Parkway's academic data weren't the only alarming indicators that we were failing students. Student discipline data also highlighted stark disparities. Although African-Americans made up only 16% of the student population, their suspension rate was higher than any other student group. We said we were meeting the needs of all students, but the truth was in the data.

Students who are suspended must attend a hearing with the Discipline Review Committee. There was one African-American male on this committee and, when I joined, I noticed that he stayed silent for fear of losing his job. I also noticed the difference between the lengths of time out of school that African-American students received compared to their white counterparts. The language used to describe the incidents was more inflammatory for African-Americans than whites. I began addressing other red flags I saw in the discipline packet prepared by administrators. The packet contained information such as the student's grades, test scores, attendance, and the record of interventions.

One student's visit to the District Review Committee is unforgettable and clearly indicated to me that

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underperforming African-American students flew under the radar unless they had discipline issues. A student entered the room and quietly said how sorry he was for fighting. He was facing suspension or expulsion, but the administrator explained to the committee before the family came in that this student was a great young man and had a clean discipline history.

As I looked through the student's file, I began to see a bigger problem. This 11th grader had only earned nine credits toward graduation. At that point, he should have earned at least 17.5 credits. I also saw that this student had been struggling in reading since elementary school. I asked: "Has this student been helped by our care team? Have you seen this student's standardized test scores? What interventions have been put in place to help this student succeed?" I was more interested in our culpability for the lack of support that led him to a violent expression of his frustration than for the responsibility we were asking him to take for his failure to make adequate academic progress. I realized that if this student had NOT gotten into a fight, he would have become another statistic. This incident turned out to be a good thing because it forced the system to work for him instead of against him. He began receiving the services he needed to recover credits and improve his chances to graduate with his classmates.

After this and other incidents, I took a look at the bigger picture. As I expected, this student's case was more the rule than the exception. We needed to look at our culturally unresponsive climate and find a way to train as many administrators and teachers in social justice in the shortest amount of time as possible. We did not have time to waste — students' futures were at risk.

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African-American academic struggles cause us to question the existing curricular foundations. Board policy now includes social justice expectations, and our district progress monitoring teams, literacy coaches, and data teams are accountable for ensuring that we are intentionally working to narrow the achievement gap. Our Diversity in Action district committee, made up of administrators, teachers and counselors, oversees, coordinates, and develops academic initiatives for the district. A Diversity in Action teacher leader in each school is paid a stipend for taking district work back into each building.

Administrators recognized that the achievement gap was not the result of student deficit as much as ineffective teaching strategies. This switch in perspectives allowed us to ask what we could do differently so that our teaching reached our kids, not what

we needed our students to do differently so that they could catch what we were throwing at them. Instruction included thoughtful attention to the five best practices outlined by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) standards for effective pedagogy (see box at right). We sought to use instructional group activities in which students and teacher work together to create a product or idea. We consciously applied literacy strategies to develop language competence in all subject areas. We engaged in professional development to begin to contextualize teaching and curriculum in students' existing experiences in home, community, and school. District task forces on diversity advocated for the implementation of challenging standards for student performance. Specifically, we recognized the need to be more effective in identifying capable African-American learners and then to hold them to high standards of rigor. And we examined data that indicated the effectiveness of our teaching strategies, which has led us to craft instruction through academic, goal-directed, small-group conversations rather than through lectures.

At the same time, we coupled professional development on the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) standards with district implementation of an Un-

**THE CREDE STANDARDS
FOR EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY AND LEARNING**

1. **Joint productive activity:** Teacher and students producing together.

2. **Language development:** Developing language and literacy across the curriculum.

3. **Contextualization:** Making meaning: Connecting school to students' lives.

4. **Challenging activities:** Teaching complex thinking.

5. **Instructional conversation:** Teaching through conversation.

Source: CREDE, n.d.

derstanding by Design (UbD) model. Looking at everything with backwards design in mind led us to rewrite our mission statement and our curriculum across all disciplines. UbD forced us to put students in the center of everything we were doing.

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN THE MISSION

The third strand of change that we pursued, along with social justice learning for staff and specific academic initiatives for African-American students, targeted students themselves with a variety of social justice trainings. In addition to the general counseling curriculum, a core team of district counselors presented respect and responsibility workshops to the district's 4th, 6th, and 10th graders. High school leadership groups brought together students who would take the learning back to their schools. As primary stakeholders, students need to take ownership for their learning. If we believe that students are at the center of our mission, they need to be aware of our intent and have a voice in evaluating our efforts. We purposefully named our student social justice training "Honoring All Voices" because we want to empower students to speak their truth.

Using social justice programs to hire and train culturally diverse and sensitive staff, demonstrating curriculum best practices that focus all learning on effective student achievement, and including students as the most important stakeholders of our district educational infrastructure all contribute to the achievement of our mission. Equity that is embedded in all layers of our schools becomes a vehicle to achieve our student-focused mission, not as an add-on initiative. Now when we say that we develop "remarkably capable, curious, and confident learners who are well-equipped to understand and respond to the challenges of an ever-changing, complex world," we feel comfortable that we mean *all* of our learners.

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