

# FOCUS ON ASSETS

## overcome barriers

School leaders can shift the culture from responding to learning gaps as compliance issues to responding in ways that transform organizations.

A little more than a decade ago one of the best kept secrets in education, namely the achievement gap, burst onto the national consciousness. For many school leaders issues related to the achievement gap have been with us throughout our careers as educators. The achievement gap has been used as the impetus for legislated school desegregation, special education, bilingual education and gender equity.

However, these landmark issues are too often addressed at the periphery of school leadership. Irrespective of history, we are now publicly responsible to educate all students to high standards. And, though there are school site success stories, as a profession we continue to struggle to educate all learners.

Our intent in this article is to describe our collective experiences from the lens of cultural proficiency. Having served as teachers, principals, district office personnel, desegregation specialists and college of education faculty, we chose cultural proficiency as the approach to frame our work as educators.

We define cultural proficiency as the personal values and behaviors of individuals and the organization's policies and practices that provide opportunities for interactions among students, educators and community members.

Culturally proficient educators value their school community shaped by its diversity. Cultural proficiency enables educators to respond to people effectively in cross-cultural environments by using a powerful set of interrelated tools to guide personal and organizational change (Lindsey, Nuri Robins & Terrell, 2009). The tools for culturally proficient practices allow school leaders to focus on assets to overcome barriers to student success.

### Using our assets

Asset-based strategies are known to focus on how to best serve the needs of students, and yet are too rarely applied to our roles

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as educational leaders. The asset-based resource our schools and school districts must rely on is the moral authority and responsibility of doing what is right for our students.

When we recognize skillful reflection and dialogue as assets and combine those assets with the moral authority behind well thought out approaches to strategic planning and professional development, reflection and dialogue serve as bridges for closing learning gaps among the demographic and cultural groups of our students that have been allowed to exist for too long.

### **Inclusive approach to closing learning gaps**

Are our school districts leaving out the role of district office leaders and boards of education as important links to closing the achievement gap? Since the recent “discovery” of the achievement gap (the theme for this issue of *Leadership* more appropriately has identified it as “learning gap”), we in the education community have placed more attention on assessment and accountability than at any time in our history. Much of the impetus for this attention has been as the result of sanctions built within California’s Public Schools Accountability Act (1999) and No Child Left Behind (2002).

A barrier to closing the learning gaps in many of our schools is one over which we have direct influence, namely resistance to change. Systemic reform, or change, has become an important phrase for school leaders to use in addressing learning needs/gaps vertically throughout our school systems, from the superintendent and board of education to the classroom.

However, the usual attention for change focuses on teachers and site administrators (principals and assistant principals). When the focus is on changing the behavior of only those at the school site, systemic change is ignored.

### **Surfacing values, beliefs and assumptions**

We invite you to read the following nine questions and the brief discussions that follow and employ your skills of reflection and dialogue. First, read each question and the comments and reflect on your personal responses. Ask yourself, “What is my truthful, honest response to each question and how

do I react to the comments that follow each question?”

Educational leaders who are willing to look deep within themselves to examine the *why of how* they developed certain attitudes and values are well prepared to lead schools serving diverse communities.

Second, in your role as school leader – county, district or site level – we invite you to engage with your colleagues in dialogue to surface deeply held assumptions and reach shared understanding of what “closing the learning gap” means to the school community. From these inclusive dialogue sessions carefully crafted statements will emerge to inform everyone in your school community

## **Asset-based strategies focus on how to best serve the needs of students, and yet are too rarely applied to our roles as school leaders. The tools for culturally proficient practices allow us to focus on assets to overcome barriers to student success.**

of your shared beliefs and values about all students learning.

These nine questions are designed as guides for individual educators and school districts to probe and understand their core values in working with communities that have populations with cultural characteristics different from their own.

The purpose of these questions and comments is to actualize the intent of this quote, often attributed to Malcolm X: “Don’t tell me what you value, tell me what you do and I will tell you what you value.”

### **Nine questions for reflection and dialogue**

**1.** To what extent do you honor culture as a natural and normal part of the community you serve?

The Public Schools Accountability Act and No Child Left Behind have brought us face-to-face with the reality of cultural demographic groups in ways that we have never before experienced in this country. Though always present, we now have the opportunity to discuss student learning in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, ableness and language learning.

Each educator and each school district must recognize the extent to which we re-

gard these and other cultural groupings as asset-rich resources upon which to build our educational programs, not as accountability inconveniences, deficits or sources of problems.

**2.** To what extent do you recognize and understand the differential and historical treatment accorded to those least well served in our schools?

The disparities that we have come to acknowledge as the achievement or learning gap in many cases have been developed over many generations. Though we may not have been party to intentional practices of segregation, racism, sexism, ethnocentrism or any

other form of oppression, it is our collective responsibility to recognize the historical and current bases of discrimination and assume responsibility for rectifying and correcting past injustices through socially just actions now.

Initiating socially just actions begins with recognizing how many of us today have privileges earned by being members of dominant groups. Responsibility for change must begin with those of us in the education community and the manner in which we see the achievement/learning gap as *our* issue.

**3.** When working with a person whose culture is different from yours, to what extent do you see the person as both an individual and as a member of a cultural group?

We estimate that all of us like to be seen and valued for who we are. We may enjoy being part of a team that achieves; however, one’s group identity does not detract from also wanting to be appreciated for who we are as individuals.

Yet, when working in cross-cultural venues, some educators too often revert to use of terms such as *they* and *them* when referencing people from cultural groups different from themselves. At best, this often

gives rise to the “model minority syndrome” that occurs when one member of the dominated group learns the cultural norms of the dominant group. At worst, this leads to pitting one cultural group against another and asks, “Why can’t you be like \_\_\_\_ (the other group),” or other forms of scapegoating.

**4. To what extent do you recognize and value the differences within the cultural communities you serve?**

The cultural groups in our schools are no more monoliths than those of us educators who populate the ranks within our schools. Each of the cultural groups we serve has vast differences in education, incomes, faith practices and lifestyles. The cultural groups in our school communities are as diverse as is the broader community. The socioeconomic differences within cultural groups often give rise to groups having more similar worldviews across socioeconomic lines than they do within cultural groups.

**5. To what extent do you know and respect the unique needs of cultural groups in the community you serve?**

A one-size-fits-all approach to education may serve the needs of school at the expense of our students and their communities. Even within schools that have all students conform to grooming standards and physical accommodations, educators have learned to acknowledge in their curriculum and in their teaching different learning styles, different cognitive styles, and the different ways people process information.

The inclusive educator teaches and encourages colleagues to make the necessary adaptations in how schools provide educational service so that all people have access to the same benefits and privileges as members of the dominant group in society.

**6. To what extent do you know how cultural groups in your community define family and the manner in which family serves as the primary system of support for students?**

Prevalent educational practice has been to assume that parents and other family caregivers who really care about the education of their children will avail themselves of

opportunities to interact with the school. Increasingly, our schools have become adept at finding culturally inclusive ways of engaging parents and caregivers in support of student achievement.

We find too often educators and parents have different perceptions of the term “parent participation.” Lawson used the terms “communitycentric” and “schoolcentric” to describe these contrasting perceptions.

• *Communitycentric.* “Parents involved in activities that meet the basic needs of their



children as going to school well fed, rested and clean.”

• *Schoolcentric.* “Parents involved in activities that are structured and defined for parents by schools” (Lawson as cited in Lindsey, Nuri Robins and Terrell, 2009).

Effective and meaningful partnerships between parents and schools require sensitive, respectful and caring school leaders willing to learn the positive nature and culture of the community and to identify barriers that have impeded progress in school-community relations. Tahoe Elementary School in Sacramento and San Marcos Elementary School have identified their core values about parent/guardian involvement and have been successful in engaging parents in productive ways through school-site, home, and other off-site meetings.

The traditional, often stereotypic, image of Euro-American homes of family identified as one mother, one father and the children is now recognized as a limited view of “family.” Today, culturally proficient school

leaders acknowledge single-parent families, multiple-generation extended families, same-gender parents, foster care homes and residential care homes as “family.” Whatever the configuration for the children in our schools, their family is their family.

**7. To what extent do you recognize and understand the bicultural reality for cultural groups historically not well served in our schools?**

Parents/guardians and their children have to be fluent in the communication patterns of the school as well as the communication patterns that exist in their communities. They also have to know the cultural norms and expectations of schools, which may conflict or be different from those in their communities, their countries of origin or their cultural groups.

In ideal conditions, their children are developing bicultural skills, learning to “code switch” to meet the cultural expectations of their environments. However, parents may not have these skills for adapting to new and different environments. Parents or guardians and their children are then penalized because they do not respond to the norms set by educators because they do not navigate well the educational systems of the public schools.

**8. To what extent do you recognize your role in acknowledging, adjusting to and accepting cross-cultural interactions as necessary social and communications dynamics?**

We have encountered few educators who fail to recognize the historical and current impact of racism and other forms of oppression on current school environments. It is also our experience that our educator colleagues who do recognize and understand the huge toll that oppression takes also understand how people not affected by those same systems benefit in unwitting ways. It is precisely the awareness of the dynamic nature of oppression vs. entitlement that enables such educators to be effective in responding to the educational needs of cultural groups within their schools and districts.

Unless one has experienced intentional

or unintentional acts of discrimination or oppression, a person cannot fathom the everyday toll it takes on one's day-to-day life experiences. The over-representation of students of color in special education programs and their under-representation in advanced placement and gifted and talented programs is not new information. Educators who are aware of such dynamics employ strategies and tactics that engage parents as partners in beneficial placements for their children.

## 9. To what extent do you incorporate cultural knowledge into educational practices and policy-making?

Experienced educational leaders recognize the need to learn the culture of a new organization. Their very survival depends on appropriate responses to cultural norms of the school community. Effective educational leaders are aware of their own cultures and its impact on their school or district.

Knowledge about school culture, our individual cultures, and the cultures of our community rarely arrives to our desktops in a three-ring notebook or a PDF file. Cultural knowledge is possessed by those who are keenly aware of themselves, their community surroundings, and the legacies and challenges experienced by cultural groups in our country and local communities.

Educational leaders who possess this self awareness are effective in cross-cultural settings and avoid phrases such as, "Doesn't everyone know that;" "I would hope parents see that as their responsibility;" or "It's the way we do things here and they will have to adjust." Phrases such as these marginalize outsiders and serve to perpetuate an "us against them" mentality.

Culturally proficient leaders share their own cultural knowledge, engage with the community, and invite community experts, knowing that such actions over time will lead to appropriately institutionalizing cultural knowledge. Such leaders recognize that re-culturing schools to be responsive to diverse constituencies is an internal and intentional process.

Responses to these nine questions can be the basis for guiding principles, or core values, that inform and support for culturally proficient leadership. The principles

help frame and focus the behaviors of teachers and school leaders intentionally on all students learning at levels higher than ever reached before.

### Use internal assets and be intentional

The learning gaps are ours to rectify. Shifting the culture of a school district from responding to learning gaps as compliance issues to responding in ways that transform organizational culture relies on use of school leaders' internal assets of reflection and dialogue. This intentionality is a two-step process of personal reflection and purposeful dialogue with colleagues.

Response to these nine questions provides the basis for developing mission statements and core values intended to serve a diverse community. To be effective in schools today leaders need strong core personal and organizational values (Collins and Porras, 1997; Senge, 2000; Lindsey, 2009).

In addition to the values you currently hold, the values of cultural proficiency explicit in the nine guiding principles can serve

as the foundation on which to re-culture and transform schools and districts. ■

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