

Cultural Competence: The Knowledge, Skills, and Support Needed To Effectively Teach Students in High-Needs Schools Effectively

What We Know

In a recently released report, the National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force concluded that more resources need to be invested in and more emphasis needs to be placed on recruiting, preparing, and retaining ethnically diverse and culturally competent teachers for the nation's public schools. The report acknowledges a lack of diversity in public schools, with minority teachers being grossly underrepresented in the teacher population. Fully 40 percent of the nation's public schools have no minority teachers on staff.

There are a number of different definitions and areas of focus related to the concept of cultural competence. A working definition that captures the nuances of the concept is:

...the ability to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than your own. It entails mastering certain personal and interpersonal awarenesses and sensitivities, learning specific bodies of cultural knowledge, and mastering a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching (Diller and Moule, 2005).

Research demonstrates that similarity between home and school culture is a good predictor of student achievement. Many minority and low-income students face an unfamiliar environment in schools that often leaves them disengaged. One way to increase involvement from these students is for schools and teachers to work with students and their families in adapting to the school culture (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Trueba, 1988; Wells, 1990).

As a result, increasing diversity and cultural competence among teachers is critical to improving teaching. Increased emphasis needs to be placed on improving teachers' skills for working with diverse learners, especially English Language Learners (ELL) with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

Washington Context

Washington's student population is becoming increasingly diverse, while the rate of growth for teachers of color is slight (currently 93% of teachers are White). Based on data from the 2004 Washington State Report Card, White children account for about 70.7 percent of the total enrollment in the state. More specifically, there are approximately 5.7 percent African-Americans, 2.8 percent American Indians, 2.8 percent Asians, and 12.9 percent Hispanics. The majority of children from American Indian, Asian, and Hispanic families do not speak English as their first language at home.

A 2003-2004 survey conducted by the University of Washington (UW) found that 56 percent of teachers work in classrooms that include students with identified disabilities, students from non-English speaking homes and students from minority groups that have been typically underserved. Only one-third of teachers feel very prepared to manage the diverse needs of students. Moreover, one-third believed that the professional development offered to help students from

diverse cultural backgrounds did not improve their skills. A majority of teachers believe that in the last two years state reform had not prompted them to learn about how to work with non-English speakers (72%) or help students of color succeed (72%). Only 47% reported that their school places little or no emphasis on including multicultural content in the curriculum.

English language learners (ELLs) are among the fastest growing populations of students in U.S. public schools and they are increasing most rapidly in states that have had limited experience serving them, including Washington. The UW study found that two-thirds of teachers (67%) are teaching one or more students for whom English is a second language. About half of those teachers indicated “moderate” to “great” challenges in working with these students. Teachers of ELLs identified their greatest needs as communicating with students’ parents, lack of one-on-one assistance, difficulty in assessing students’ learning, and lack of appropriate curriculum or texts.

Ideas To Build On

- Offer incentives for teachers, especially those serving in high-needs schools, to enroll in continuing education classes or intensive professional development offerings focused on cultural competence.
- Revise teacher preparation and lateral entry requirements to better prepare beginning teachers to work with diverse learners.
- Incorporate cultural competency training as a licensing standard.
- Develop a statewide clearinghouse of effective strategies for increasing the cultural competence for teachers who work with diverse learners.
- Make issues of equity and diversity a priority and establish mechanisms for continuing dialogue among all teachers about diversity issues.
- Provide an array of financial and non-financial incentives to recruit teachers of color to Washington’s public schools.
- Provide incentives and support for individual NBCTs (and NBCTs working in teams) to conduct and publish results of action research projects related to educating diverse learners.