

MOVING FORWARD

News and information about the education of special
needs students for teachers and parents

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THE IMPORTANCE OF EMBRACING CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN OUR SCHOOLS

Embracing the concept of diversity in education is important in terms of creating a culture of unconditional acceptance. When a student feels unwelcome or alienated for any reason, they cease to flourish as a student and as a person.



No matter how subtle, ignoring bullying, negative stereotypes, harsh comments or aggression allow these behaviors to fester. Educators need to immediately pounce on any form of threats to others. Leadership sets the tone for the building.

To negatively judge others based solely on race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disabilities, religious affiliation, or economic status without forethought or reason is hurtful. This practice doesn't actually have to be observable to exist. In fact, some of the most upsetting practices are often nonverbal. There is truth behind the old adage *"Actions speak louder than words."*

Teenagers who are trying to build their confidence and find their place in the world are especially vulnerable to insensitive words or actions.

As educators, we have to keep in mind that we are the role models that students look to for clues on behavior. Sending the right messages to students is critical in creating a classroom culture of unconditional acceptance.

All forms of inclusiveness, cohesive language, supporting weaker students should be reinforced on all levels.

That is why understanding cultural diversity is so important. Hanging posters or famous quotations that promote diversity is clearly not enough. There has to be a total commitment and a well-defined plan in place. All staff, parents and students should understand the expectations and the importance of embracing our differences.

The alienation of any student for whatever reason is unacceptable. The overall climate of all schools should be evident in every hallway, lunchroom, playground and classroom. All visitors should clearly get the message:

"EVERYONE IS WELCOME HERE!"

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**"No culture can live if it attempts
to be exclusive."**

Mahatma Gandhi

(Non-violent leader of Indian independence; 1869-1948)

THE INTERNET: OUR PORTAL TO THE WORLD

As children, we bravely peddled our bicycles into another town and truly believed that our labors brought us into an entirely different world. Even though we were only miles away from our homes, we took in our surroundings as strangers who arrived on foreign soil.

But that world is long gone. The internet has changed our lives forever, and there is no looking back. Our computer screens are now our portal to the whole world. With a single touch of a button, we can literally reach out and bond with anyone anywhere in the world.

What books once tried to describe with colorful words is now an intricate video, a picture, a song or a poem layered with endless meaning. If we want to know about the cultures, traditions or values of a distant country, just click, and the

images tumble onto the screen. It's that easy. We all represent a very small part of a vast world-wide community.

By exposing students to classrooms abundant in culture diversity, we help prepare them for the global economy of the future. By teaching them tolerance and a sincere appreciation for our differences, we provide them with the tools of enrichment they will need both personally and professionally.

The world has seemingly shrunk, and an unprecedented level of global awareness stands before us. We must look to the future, or we risk losing relevance.



“Diversity: The Art of Thinking Independently Together.”

— Malcolm Forbes

FOR OUR STUDENTS TO BE ABLE TO SUCCESSFULLY NAVIGATE A CULTURALLY DIVERSE ENVIRONMENT...



*They need to be **empathetic**, so they can step into others' shoes, to see the world from another's viewpoint.*

*They need to be **humble**, to not see their culture or way of thinking as superior.*

*They need to be **open-minded** and willing to go outside their comfort zones. That will help them understand and appreciate differences in others.*

In the end, our students' lives are becoming more rich and diverse.
Our classrooms and curriculum need to do the same.

Sarah Sansbury, Teacher (Georgia)

WHAT IS THE KEY TO CREATING A SAFE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT? *MUTUAL TRUST*



90% of US public school teachers are white. Most grew up in white communities and attended white schools in middle class, English-speaking, predominately white communities, and received their teaching training in predominately white universities (Gay, Dingu and Jackson, 2003).

What does this statement mean to the typical student in our urban schools? *“You can’t possibly understand who I am or where I am coming from.”* Sadly, they are right in many cases. To combat this disconnect, educators have to take specific steps to create an environment that is safe, fair and open to everyone. This stance may sound easy. But make no mistake, it is a real challenge.

Our background plays a huge part in who we are, and that cannot be changed. What can be altered is our viewpoints, reactions and our commitment to open dialogue. With or without malice, teachers are often being heard blaming a specific minority or change in demographic for poor school performance. Instead of generating solutions and communicating concerns, they find it easier to point fingers and shift accountability for learning as being “beyond their control.”

All school staff need specific training on understanding the cultural impact on relationships and learning. This is not a training that can be accomplished in a few days. It’s a journey that every adult must be willing to embark on to gain a more holistic understanding of

their students. It can be a hard conversation for school officials to have.

The most fundamental step in the quest for nurturing cultural diversity is honesty. Consciously or unconsciously, we all have biases that may obstruct the ability to connect to students. Admitting, understanding and addressing those biases is critical, because with or without intent, it shapes our behavior.

In addition to introspection, educators also have to be honest about their feelings. Anyone who has worked with children, especially those that are “street smart”, knows that they can smell phony attempts at empathy a mile away. If interactions between adults and students are not genuine, they will be completely ineffective (and even insulting in some cases).

There are often no right or wrong answers to the many obstacles to equality, only frank discussions that generate a greater awareness. But these discussions should be reciprocal. Students should be able to trust adults enough to ask questions, voice concerns, or get support when protecting peers.

Education is about constantly adapting to meet the needs of the students. Without the knowledge of cultural differences, we limit our ability to connect to those who need us the most. **All students can learn and deserve to be respected.** Those are the golden rules of education, but those words are meaningless if there isn’t genuine conviction behind them.



The true art of teaching involves weaving together individual differences to enrich all facets of the classroom.

Children thrive in environments that are safe, secure and accepting.

TEACHING STUDENTS THE RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL AWARENESS

Students need a context for how their lessons relate to their lives. How often do you hear, *“What does this stuff really have to do with the real world”*? There is a way to make the curriculum relevant and at the same time build a sense of social awareness. With social awareness comes the important lesson of how many cultures are all around us. Suddenly, their world expands to a much larger, more inclusive world, and hopefully, they gain a far deeper appreciation of our differences.



Students can passionately about, which increases their motivation. They can convince others to take a stand and channel their boundless energy into creating a positive “movement,” big or small. Their voices can not only be heard in the classroom, they can reach out to their schools, neighborhoods and communities.

Parents and teachers can match learning with life itself. There are endless local, national and global networking options that are fascinating. Most big news stories highlight some type of conflict that needs to be resolved. Thanks to technology, students can voice their opinions in all kinds of ways. They can write, text, blog, draw, or even make music as a means of communicating their thoughts and ideas.

Using social awareness as a tool puts a face on the learning process. Lessons not only become more relevant, they also become more personal. In addition, the ensuing discussions surrounding world events can become effective “teachable moments.” Frank conversations about prejudice, hatred, war, violence and other significant topics can provide valuable exposure to the plight of others. Investigating news stories with other peers also teaches students how to be members of a team.

This creative process would require the use of many skills that are taught in the classroom. Students can find topics or issues that they are pas-

From a developmental perspective, children can be very self-centered, especially when they are middle school age. Teaching social awareness will broaden their perspectives of people and cultures outside of their own comfort zones.

WHAT IS A MOVEMENT?

Minor County’s population was 3000 and dwindling. The South Dakota county had the highest rate of youth leaving the area and the median price of a house was \$26,500.



At Howard High School, the students read a book about the death of rural communities. Seeing the obvious relationship to the fate of their own town, they asked *“What can we do to help?”*

Minor County itself had plenty of problems besides the poor economy, but that did not deter the students. They did some research and addressed the community at a public meeting. There was only one thing that the town could control: spending money locally. Instead of driving to bigger towns with bigger stores, the students proposed that if all residents spent 10% more of their disposable income at home, it would boost the local economy by \$7 million.

The town took the students’ advise to heart, and the change began to snowball. A year later, the town coffers had increased by \$15.6 million! More revenue meant more funds for new programs, an improved infrastructure, and innovative proposals. What started as a mere school project transformed the fate of an entire town.

(Source: “Switch” Heath, 2010)

Moving Forward
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