

COMMENTS ON THE REAUTHORIZATION OF THE ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION ACT AND THE HIGHER EDUCATION ACT*

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The purpose of this memorandum is to make recommendations for including cultural proficiency as part of teacher preparation programs, as well as to highlight the importance of recruiting and retaining teachers of color. This memo will provide some examples of schools utilizing culturally responsive practices with success, showing positive impacts in student academic gains and closing the cultural gap that currently exists between educators and increasingly diverse student bodies.

Overview

Latinos are the fastest-growing minority group in the country, with projections estimating that by 2050, 25% of the U.S. population will be Latino. With the highest percentage of people under the age of 21, Latinos are also the most youthful minority population, which means these young people will be critical to the health of the workforce and economic recovery.

- At 41% of the student population, Latino students are the largest ethnic group in Boston public schools and they trail behind all other student groups when it comes to graduation rates, school attendance, and MCAS scores. While overall student enrollment is dropping in Boston public schools, Latinos are the only group that is growing in numbers. In Boston:



- o 23% of Latino students drop out before finishing high school
- o 15% of Latino students who drop out do so in middle school
- o 60% of Latino students in Boston public schools graduate in four years ¹
- 56% of Latinos who graduate from Boston public schools attend a four-year college. The cohort graduation rate for Latino males was 21.1% lower than the graduation rate for White males and 30.1% lower than the graduation rate for Asian males. The cohort graduation rate for White males was 1.2 times higher than the rate for Black males, and 1.4 times higher than the rate for Latino males. ²

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Since 1968, Sociedad Latina has worked in partnership with Latino youth and families to end destructive cycles of poverty, health inequities, and lack of educational and professional opportunities in our community. Through our Pathways to Success model, we pioneer new and innovative solutions to the most pressing issues facing Latino youth today, supporting positive youth development from age 11–21, creating a community that supports young people, and training all youth to advocate for themselves and their communities. At the core of Pathways to Success, Sociedad Latina’s education programs are designed to address the needs of Latino students in Boston public schools, who bear the burden of a school system that has historically failed to adequately serve its diverse student population. Low educational achievement among Latino students in Boston has dire, long-term consequences on economic, social, and emotional well-being. Our solution is a blend of four closely aligned educational programs designed to boost student achievement, build 21st-century skills, engage parents, and prepare every student for success in college or career.

- For more than 20 years, I have worked to create a community that supports young people, values their input, and believes in their ability to create positive social change. Serving as executive director since 1999, I have worked to transform Sociedad Latina into a cutting-edge, data-driven youth development organization. Using culturally responsive practices, including a cultural exploration curriculum, dual-language programming, positive youth and family engagement and academic support beginning in grade six through the second year of college or employment, we have seen 100% of our seniors graduate from high school. Eighty-six percent of these youth continue with positive engagement in college or employment.
- Sociedad Latina piloted a two-year teacher professional development

program for a neighborhood K–8 school. In collaboration with Brown University, we provided training in culture, language, and economic differences, creating culturally inclusive classrooms, school-wide cultural competence, and family engagement. At the end of two years, we assisted in increasing family engagement and trained 30 teachers.

- Sociedad Latina’s youth community organizers have been working on a campaign to push for professional development in culturally responsive practices, for Boston public schools to adopt cultural proficiency standards as a district and for the adoption of a multicultural approach to engage more students. Their campaign is called Learn Us to Teach Us and a video they created is available on **YouTube**.^{*} As a result of this campaign, district leaders including the school committee and superintendent have adopted the term “cultural proficiency” and have a better understanding of what it means to be culturally proficient.
- Sociedad Latina is a member of an advisory for the Boston public schools High School to Teacher pilot program, which recruits high school students of color beginning in ninth grade and supports them through college to return to Boston public schools as teachers.

Too often, schools expect students and families to assimilate to the schools’ environment. Sociedad Latina believes that schools should instead welcome the increasing diversity and integrate the cultural knowledge of students into academic activities.

What is Cultural Proficiency?

In their groundbreaking work *Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders*, Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell define cultural proficiency as:

^{*} The URL for the video is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJHoprwyt30>.

- A way of being that enables both individuals and organizations to respond effectively to people who differ from them.
- A way of being that enables people to successfully engage in new environments.
- An approach to addressing diversity issues that goes beyond political correctness.

They conclude that “educational leaders who are successful in creating culturally proficient learning communities will enable students to play vital roles wherever they go in the global community.”³

Teacher Preparation

We know that White teachers do not knowingly treat students of color differently than their White peers. However, researchers are finding evidence that students of color are, in fact, being treated differently. Although unconscious on the part of teachers, this may help explain why Black and Latino students on average perform worse on achievement tests than Whites.⁴

Little work has been done to help teachers understand how to work with youth of color and their families, populations that they may have had little to no interaction with in their social or private lives. Only one-third of states require teacher candidates to study some aspect of cultural diversity in their core courses or to have a teaching practicum in a culturally diverse setting. The majority of K–8 schools do not address the influence of culture in the learning environment. This lack of training and support for teachers leads them to sidestep discussions of race, privilege, and equity as part of their continued learning as professionals. This results in a school setting where children’s race and ethnicity are ignored and undermines the importance of culture and language. Students whose learning styles and pace are different and who practice culturally appropriate behaviors are often challenged in the current educational system. Within this context, these students are struggling. As a nation, we expect all students to assimilate to the dominant culture, but not all children assimilate in the way the current educational

system is designed. Low-income students who come from socioeconomically challenged environments or who demonstrate learning outside the bounds of what is the focus of standardized testing are considered at-risk and are caught within what we have come to know as the achievement gap.

Most of the research connecting culturally responsive practices to student academic gains is not conclusive. According to research by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Oregon, there are only a handful of studies that use scientific methods to connect practice with outcomes. In their report *Culturally Responsive Practices for Student Success: A Regional Sampler*, they state there are many correlational and case studies that demonstrate how culturally responsive practices affect achievement and other indicators of school success for ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse students. They believe the lack of experimental research points to the difficulty of conducting random assignment trials in public schools, rather than the validity of culturally responsive practices.⁵

Districts working to close the achievement gap encounter a multitude of challenges. Poverty, violence, trauma, poor nutrition, substandard housing, and a lack of preventative health care negatively affects student learning. Additionally, many districts face high staff turnover, a shortage of teachers, a pervasive paradigm of low expectations of students, and limited curricular offerings. Despite these challenges, there are some research-based interventions that support and enhance educational experiences of minority children with some measurable success. Some strategies that have been identified for closing achievement gaps include curriculum enrichment, extended learning time, standards-based instruction, leadership opportunities, and professional development.⁶

As a nation, why should we be concerned with this divide and advocate that our educators be culturally proficient? According to the National Education Association, “students are more diverse than ever. Culture

plays a critical role in learning. Cultural competence leads to more effective teaching. Culturally competent educators are better equipped to reach out to students' families. Cultural competence helps address student achievement gaps. Cultural competence reinforces American and democratic ideals. Cultural competence helps educators meet accountability requirements.⁷ Culturally responsive teaching recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning.⁸ Some of the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching that should be part of teacher preparation include:

- Positive perspectives about families
- Communication of high expectations
- Learning within the context of culture
- Student-centered instruction
- Culturally mediated instruction
- Reshaping the curriculum
- The teacher as facilitator

The research on resilience shows that a nurturing environment provides a secure base for children to develop confidence, competence, feelings of autonomy, and safety. In schools where there is trust, caring, and support, students have higher attendance, better performance, and lower rate of suspensions. Recent efforts to provide culturally congruent science instruction have shown that when cultural and linguistic background knowledge is used, students increase their science achievement test scores. Schools can work with community organizations to provide professional development opportunities for teachers and leaders to learn about their students' cultures. Many states are looking at ways to ensure that their teachers are culturally competent and are working to develop curriculum and professional development opportunities, as well as providing education to preservice teachers.⁹

Higher education institutions must provide a learning environment that supports future teachers to understand that their life experience, educational focus, and

method of learning and teaching does not necessarily represent those of their students. By embedding cultural proficiency in all coursework, we can prepare teachers-in-training to understand the roles that culture, race, and language play in the lives of their students and help them to better understand the mindset of their students. Teachers can be taught how to create an optimal learning environment for all students that is inclusive and celebrates the experiences and knowledge that students bring into the classroom. Culturally responsive teaching also empowers student to learn in ways that best meet their individual learning style.

Using Culturally Proficient Practices to Create Optimal Learning for All Students and Bridge the Culture Gap

There are some examples of school districts across the United States that are embracing cultural proficiency as a way to close the cultural gap between educators and students. One such program is WestEd's Bridging Cultures Project, which trains teachers to use cultural knowledge to increase educational success. It has produced monumental gains in student achievement in schools nationwide. Using WestEd's approach, Tahoe Elementary School in Sacramento, California, provided teachers with support and training over five years to take an inside-out approach to learning about themselves, their own culture, perspectives, and biases in order to learn about others. Three years into the Initiative, Academic Performance Index scores rose from 556 to 765.¹⁰

Alaska provides another example of a district's approach to building cultural proficiency. The state has developed guidelines to implement its educational standard, "which address the preparation of culturally responsive teachers, the work of culturally responsive school boards, nurturing culturally healthy children, respecting cultural knowledge, strengthening indigenous languages, and creating and implementing cross-cultural programs."¹¹

Curricula should reinforce and value cultural knowledge of students rather than ignore

or negate it. A culturally responsive curriculum should fully integrate cultural knowledge, not adding it on in unconnected units or with standalone culture days. According to Demmert, “a series of studies conducted in the past 30 years collectively provides strong evidence that Native language and cultural programs—and student identification with such programs—are associated with improved academic performance, decreased dropout rates, improved school attendance rates, decreased clinical symptoms, and improved personal behavior.”¹²

Diversifying Our Teacher Workforce

The majority of Black and Latino students across the United States rarely have a teacher who looks like them. According to a report released by the Center for American Progress on teacher diversity in 2011, the teacher workforce has not kept up

with student demographics. The report found that students of color make up more than 40% of the school-age population, while teachers of color were only 17% of the teaching force.

The Teacher Diversity Index ranks states on the percentage-point difference between the percentages of non-White teachers and non-White students. The student data came from the Common Core of Data and dates back to the 2010–2011 school year. The teacher data is from the Schools and Staffing Survey and is from the 2011–2012 school year. Both datasets are the most recent available. These numbers clearly demonstrate the lack of diversity in our teaching workforce and the tremendous work that lies ahead to ensure that the teachers standing in the front of the classroom reflect the changing student demographics. On a state and federal level, we can work to improve the demographics of the teaching profession.¹³

Recommendations

Why is cultural proficiency a policy issue? The student population in the United States continues to become increasingly diverse. Our students of color continue to lag behind academically. We need to build the cultural competency skills and awareness related to issues such as culture, language, race, and ethnicity of our incoming teachers. We must have an aggressive plan to recruit and retain teachers of color. If we want to reverse the current achievement gap that

TABLE 1
Teacher Diversity Index

State	Diversity index	State	Diversity index
Vermont	4	Louisiana	26
Maine	5	Nebraska	26
West Virginia	6	New York	27
New Hampshire	8	Kansas	27
Wyoming	10	Mississippi	27
North Dakota	12	Oklahoma	27
Kentucky	13	South Carolina	28
Montana	14	District of Columbia	28
Idaho	14	Massachusetts	29
Missouri	16	Rhode Island	30
Iowa	17	New Mexico	31
Hawaii	17	New Jersey	31
Arkansas	18	Connecticut	31
Ohio	18	North Carolina	31
South Dakota	18	Virginia	31
Utah	19	Colorado	31
Indiana	20	Georgia	32
Alabama	21	Illinois	32
Minnesota	21	Alaska	34
Wisconsin	22	Texas	34
Oregon	22	Delaware	35
Michigan	22	Arizona	37
Tennessee	24	Maryland	40
Washington	24	Nevada	42
Pennsylvania	25	California	44
Florida	26	National	30

Note: By “nonwhite,” we mean all populations that are nonwhite, including the African American, Hispanic, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and Native American populations.
Source: National Center for Education Statistics, School and Staffing Survey: Teacher Questionnaire, 2011–12 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011–2012).

exists between our White students and our students of color, it is imperative that we focus on these priorities. The National Education Association has identified three policy levers through which states can increase educators' cultural competence: preservice education, ongoing professional development, and licensure.¹⁴ If we really want to see dramatic changes in our educational system, such as lowering dropout rates and closing the persistent achievement gap, then we must make these policy levers a national priority.

1) Under Title II of the Higher Education Act, incentivize institutions of higher education to:

- Include cultural proficiency as part of teacher education programs with a hands-on practicum.
- Provide more scholarships to recruit people of color to become teachers.
- Provide ongoing support to newly graduated teachers of color for the first year of teaching through blend of online learning and support with lesson planning, as well as providing observation and feedback.

2) Government can play a role in assisting in the recruitment of teachers of color:

- States can provide greater funding for teacher-preparation programs that specifically target teachers of color.
- The federal government can create financial aid programs for low-income and students of color to attract them to the teaching field, as well as to support them to offset the costs of higher education.
- In Boston public schools, a pilot program has launched this past year recruiting ninth grade students interested in teaching, predominantly of students of color, to be part of an eight-year cohort. They will be provided with leadership development, internships, and academic support through high school. They will

also receive a substantial scholarship to a higher education institution with the understanding that they must return to teach at Boston public schools. This type of program could be replicated in other districts.

Conclusion

In the new economy students will need skills that go beyond meeting academic proficiency standards. Students will need to cultivate their intercultural communication skills and demonstrate that they can work with and respect a variety of cultures: "the changing nature of work, technology, and competition in the global job market has far outpaced what the U.S. education system provides for students, despite the ongoing efforts of educators and communities to improve their schools."¹⁵

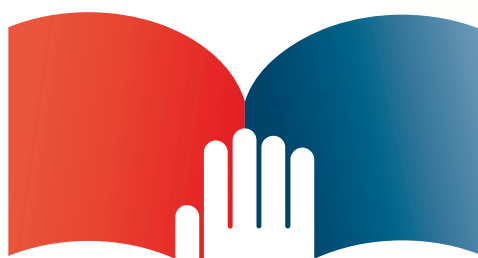
Given the demographic shifts occurring and the country's immigration history, the classroom itself presents a perfect place for students to practice such skills. If the intent of our educational system is to create global citizens of its students, we must first provide educators with a supportive learning environment to explore their own cultural biases and stereotypes and to support them in the journey toward creating culturally proficient classrooms and schools.

Becoming culturally proficient deals with how we think about issues of culture and expanding how we understand, appreciate, and work within its various manifestations. We need to inculcate cultural proficiency within every aspect of schooling and professional practice, starting with how we train teachers and in their continued professional development.

I welcome the opportunity to work with Congress on this very important issue. Please contact me at alex@sociedadlatina.org or call (617) 442-4299 if you would like further information or to set up a meeting to continue this critical conversation.

Endnotes

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- 14 National Education Association, *Promoting Educators' Cultural Competence*.
- 15 Willard R. Daggett, *Achieving Academic Excellence through Rigor and Relevance* (Rexford, NY: International Center for Educational Leadership, 2014), http://www.leadered.com/pdf/Achieving_Academic_Excellence_2014.pdf (accessed June 24, 2015).



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