

Promoting Educators' Cultural Competence To Better Serve Culturally Diverse Students

Educators with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to value the diversity among students will contribute to an educational system designed to serve all students well. Our nation can no longer be satisfied with success for some students; instead we must cultivate the strengths of all.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

There is a cultural gap in many of the nation's schools as a growing number of educators struggle to better serve students from cultures other than their own in response to dramatic demographic changes that have created culturally diverse schools in many areas of the U.S.¹

The cultural gap between students and their teachers can be a factor in students' academic performance and contribute to achievement gaps among different student groups. Given NEA's core belief that all students deserve great public schools, we are working to boost achievement for all students. Part of that effort includes advocating for state policies to better equip educators to be culturally competent practitioners who can better serve diverse students.

What is cultural competence?

When applied to education, cultural competence centers on the skills and knowledge to effectively serve students from diverse cultures. In their book, *Cultural Competence: A Primer for Educators*, Diller and Moule offer this definition:

*Cultural competence is the ability to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than our own. It entails developing certain personal and interpersonal awareness and sensitivities, developing certain bodies of cultural knowledge, and mastering a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching.*²

There are four basic cultural competence skill areas. They apply to individual educators, to the schools where they work, and to the educational system as a whole.³ Growth in one area tends to support growth in another.

1. *Valuing diversity:* Accepting and respecting different cultural backgrounds and customs, different ways of communicating, and different traditions and values.

2. *Being culturally self-aware:* Understanding that educators' own cultures—all of their experiences, background, knowledge, skills, beliefs, values, and interests—shape their sense of who they are, where they fit into their family, school, community, and society, and how they interact with students.
3. *Understanding the dynamics of cultural interactions:* Knowing that there are many factors that can affect interactions across cultures, including historical cultural experiences and relationships between cultures in a local community.
4. *Institutionalizing cultural knowledge and adapting to diversity:* Designing educational services based on an understanding of students' cultures and institutionalizing that knowledge so that educators, and the learning environments they work in, can adapt to and better serve diverse populations.

Why should educators be culturally competent?

Below are a few of the many factors that make a strong case for educators to become culturally competent:

Students are more diverse than ever. According to the latest available figures, students of color made up 42 percent of public school students in 2005, an increase of 22 percent from 1972. Minority enrollment grew in all regions of the country, primarily due to growth in Hispanic enrollment. Some 20 percent of public school students are Hispanic, with students of other ethnicities and multiracial students comprising another 22 percent of public school students. In addition, the number of children ages 5-17 who spoke a language other than English at home more than doubled between 1979 and 2005 to more than 10 million students.⁴ And these trends will continue as the nation and the school-age population become increasingly diverse. Overall, "given the dramatic diversification that is currently underway in the United

States, cultural competence may someday reach a status comparable to computer literacy.”⁵

Culture plays a critical role in learning. Culture is central to student learning, and every student brings a unique culture to the classroom.⁶ And while students are not solely the products of their cultures and they vary in the degree to which they identify with them, educators must become knowledgeable about their students’ distinctive cultural backgrounds so they can translate that knowledge into effective instruction and enriched curriculum.⁷

Cultural competence leads to more effective teaching. As students become more diverse, they are likely to benefit from different teaching strategies.⁸ But educators will not cue into these differences and address them appropriately, unless they use the students’ culture to build a bridge to success in school. Culturally competent teachers contextualize or connect to students’ everyday experiences, and integrate classroom learning with out-of-school experiences and knowledge. Helping learners make the link between their culture and the new knowledge and skills they encounter inside school is at the heart of ensuring that all students achieve at high levels.⁹

Culturally competent educators are better equipped to reach out to students’ families. How families process their values, beliefs, everyday experiences, and child rearing conventions is mediated through their culture, especially through the primary or home language. Culturally competent educators understand that students benefit from a learning environment that increases the connection between home and school culture and involves families and the broader community in students’ education.¹⁰

Cultural competence helps address student achievement gaps. Most commonly, the term “achievement gap” refers to “differences in scores on state or national achievement tests between various student demographic groups.”¹¹ NEA broadens the term to also include gaps in attainment (e.g., high school graduation, college degrees, employment), as well as gaps in access to a quality curriculum and expert teachers. As the number of minority students, English Language Learners, and students living in poverty increase, more and more students will be at risk of experiencing achievement gaps.

Cultural competence reinforces American and democratic ideals. NEA believes that the appreciation of diverse cultures is a core value built on the American ideals of freedom, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity. Schools

play a critical role in affirming the pluralism that students and their communities reflect; in challenging discrimination and intolerance; and in developing the attitudes and values necessary for a democratic society. “Teachers who are...culturally competent...know that students who have the academic and cultural wherewithal to succeed in school without losing their identities are better prepared to be of service to others; in a democracy, this commitment to the public good is paramount.”¹²

Cultural competence helps educators meet accountability requirements. Today, educators are required not only to increase all students’ performance, but also to reduce achievement gaps among racial/ethnic groups of students. Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), all students must make adequate yearly academic progress, and “all” means students in various racial/ethnic subgroups as well as English Language Learners and economically disadvantaged students. Failure to meet state-based achievement targets results in consequences for schools, which can range from creating improvement plans to involuntary transfers of administrators and staff. A culturally competent school staff can be a powerful tool in meeting NCLB’s accountability requirements.

How is cultural competence a policy issue?

NEA has identified three policy levers through which states can increase educators’ cultural competence: 1) preservice education, 2) ongoing professional development, and 3) licensure.

Only one-third of states require teacher candidates to study some aspect of cultural diversity in their core preparation courses, and/or to have a teaching practicum in a culturally diverse setting.¹³ With respect to professional development and licensure, the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) has been developing model policy that states can use as they work to align their teacher licensing systems. One of these model standards focuses on diverse students. (“The teacher understands how students differ in their approaches to learning and creates instructional opportunities that are adapted to diverse learners.”) With this kind of standard in hand, states can begin to align teachers’ initial licensure with their approval of teacher education programs and the ongoing professional development they require for relicensing.¹⁴ The standards establish the skills and knowledge that educators need to acquire through preservice education and ongoing professional development and to demonstrate in the classroom.

Only nine states (Alaska, Arkansas, California, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, New Mexico, and South Dakota) currently have stand-alone state cultural knowledge or competence standards. The remaining states incorporate standards related to cultural awareness in their history or foreign (or world) language standards. In all cases, these are not as rigorous as stand-alone knowledge or competence standards, since they tend to only focus on developing an understanding of various ethnic groups, and they usually involve changes in personal attitudes and values. Cultural knowledge standards, by comparison, go a step further by requiring educators to become familiar with cultural characteristics, history, values, beliefs, and behaviors. But both cultural awareness and cultural knowledge fall short by failing to include a key concept found in cultural competence: *operating effectively in different cultural contexts by transforming and integrating knowledge of individual students and groups of students into specific standards, policies, and practices.*¹⁵

Alaska provides an example of a comprehensive approach to building educators' cultural competence. In addition to its standards, Alaska has developed accompanying guidelines to implement the standards. The guidelines 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.

The NEA position

The NEA believes that racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity creates a rich American tapestry that enriches us all. The Association understands that the need for culturally competent educators will continue to grow as the nation's students become more diverse. And it considers cultural competence a key policy issue in the 21st century.

More specifically, NEA's resolutions address several of the issues raised in this brief. They include the NEA's support for early childhood education, students' reading proficiency, rich middle school/junior high programs, multicultural education, educational programs for English Language Learners, and the education of specific student groups (American Indian/Alaska Native, Hispanic, Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, migrant, refugee and undocumented children, and children of undocumented immigrants).¹⁶

The NEA also understands that three powerful state policy levers—preservice education, licensure, and ongoing professional development—can help close the current cultural

gap between many educators and the students they serve. Therefore, the NEA is supporting the efforts of its state affiliates to increase the number of states that have cultural competence standards, since these standards will require those who train and license prospective and experienced educators to focus on cultural competence.

References

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- ³ Ibid; King, M.A., Sims, A., & Osher, D. (2007). How is cultural competence integrated into education? Washington, D.C.: Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice, American Institutes for Research, http://cecp.air.org/cultural/Q_integrated.htm.
- ⁴ U.S. Department of Education. (2007). *The condition of education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe>.
- ⁵ Diller and Moule, 2005, p. 19.
- ⁶ Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research and practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- ⁷ Banks, J.A., McGee, B., & Cherry, A. (2001). *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (4th Ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., p. 176.
- ⁸ Marzano, B. (2004). *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement: Research on What Works in Schools*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- ⁹ National Education Association. (2005). *C.A.R.E.: Strategies for closing the achievement gaps*. (2nd Ed). Washington, DC: NEA Human and Civil Rights, National Education Association, www.nea.org/teachexperience/images/CAREbook0804.pdf.
- ¹⁰ Henderson, A. T., Mapp, K. L., Johnson, V. R., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school-partnerships*. New York: The New Press.
- ¹¹ Anderson, S., Medrich, E., Fowler, D. (March 2007). Which achievement gap? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 88(7), p. 547.
- ¹² Ladson-Billings, G. (Summer, 2001). Teaching and cultural competence. What does it take to be a successful teacher in a diverse classroom? *Rethinking Schools Online*, 15(4), p. 2, www.rethinking-schools.org/archive/15_04/Glb154.shtml.

¹³ National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification. (2008). NASDTEC Knowledgebase. (Accessible at www.nasdtec.info)

¹⁴ Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC). (2008). Standards are the policy that drives the system, available at www.ccsso.org/projects/Interstate_New_Teacher_Assessment_and_Support_Consortium.

¹⁵ Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice. (2008). How does cultural competency differ from cultural sensitivity, http://cecp.air.org/cultural/Q_howdifferent.htm.

¹⁶ National Education Association, (2008). NEA Resolutions 2007-2008. In National Education Association: 2008 Handbook. Washington, DC: Author.

Resources

The NEA believes that all schools must be welcoming places for culturally diverse students. They must be places where students' differences are understood and valued.

C.A.R.E.: Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gaps

This NEA training guide helps educators reflect on the causes of disparity in student achievement and explore ways to improve students' academic success by using innovative, research-based instructional strategies, including strategies related to students' cultural, economic, and language differences.

www.nea.org/teachexperience/images/CAREbook0804.pdf

Ethnic Minority Group Status Reports

NEA's Status reports on four ethnic minority groups—American Indians/Alaska Natives, Asian and Pacific Islanders, Blacks, and Hispanics—presents historical, demographic, and other statistical data; recommended practice; resources and perspectives from practitioners, researchers, and community members.

www.nea.org/achievement/whois.html

Focus On Series

Each year, NEA's Human and Civil Rights Department prepares briefs on public education issues relevant to six underrepresented student groups: American Indians/Alaska Natives; Asian and Pacific Islanders; Blacks; Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered students; Hispanics; and Women and Girls. Each brief contains concrete strategies to address the issues and additional resources for school personnel.

www.nea.org/teachexperience/achievgapfocus0405.html

Leading With Diversity: Cultural Competencies for Teacher Preparation and Professional Development. This 2005 book, from Brown University, The Education Alliance, and the Pacific Resources for Education and Learning, provides current research-based information on cultural competencies. Authors Trumbull and Pacheco review the 2005 status of state cultural competency teaching standards and explore practice-based competencies related to culture, language, and race and ethnicity.

www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/leading_diversity/index.php

Language, Culture, and Community in Teacher Education. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education published this collection in 2007 on knowledge, practice, and policy in working effectively with linguistically and culturally diverse students. This book examines what is needed to prepare teacher candidates to work with the culturally and linguistically diverse communities from which their students will come.

www.aacte.org/Publications/default.aspx

Cultural Competence: A Primer for Educators. This thorough and practical 2005 publication has become the bible on cultural competence for educators. Authors Diller and Moule focus on the social and psychological factors that shape a teacher's ability to work with students from backgrounds different from their own. The research review is followed by in-depth interviews with five educators from diverse communities who explore what each believes is critical for a culturally different teacher to know to be effective in working with students from these communities.

Search <http://academic.cengage.com> for ordering information.

