

# Diverse Schools: A First-Class Educational Environment

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Changing demographics in American neighborhoods means that faces in today's classrooms often look different than they did a decade or two ago. Unfortunately, a common reaction in many communities is fear - fear that the changes will translate to lower academic achievement and less disciplined, even violent classrooms.

But take it from one voice of experience - a white parent who has been closely involved with one of the most diverse high schools in the country - multi-ethnic schools can provide just the type of academic and social environment we wish for all our children. While the opportunities offered by these schools are great, so are the challenges in seeing they are properly nurtured and supported.

Classrooms in a multi-ethnic school can provide unique opportunities only dreamed of in other schools. Imagine studying about ancient Egypt, or relations with modern Egypt, with recent Egyptian immigrants adding insights to classroom discussions. Just last month at Annandale High in Northern Virginia my son studied the relationship of church and state with a group of eight students - randomly selected by his U.S. Government teacher - who included followers of six religions.

Beyond the enriched academics, diverse schools offer the perfect environment for teaching tolerance and respect. Students learn that their perceptions may not be the only reality. At our high school of 2200 where students hail from 85 nations, kids know that January 1 isn't the only new year. They also know about the lunar new years of Asian cultures and that the Jewish new year in the Fall is a religious, not a secular holiday. When students eyes are opened to new worlds, they open their minds to new approaches, new ways of thinking.

Students from diverse schools are at a distinct advantage as they prepare for

the changing world they will face as adults. My daughter, now at a private university in New England, feels privileged to have attended Annandale High. Her world is broader and she is comfortable in just about any setting. That's not the case with many of her college friends who went to public and private schools where everyone looked like they did.

### **Nurturing the Opportunities**

While diverse schools offer many opportunities, the challenge is to create a school climate that maximizes these. This requires constant and intense observation, analysis, and action. Many schools are being run just as they were 20 years ago, even as the students are less and less similar to earlier classes. This may meet the needs of some students, but it certainly does not meet the needs of the community at large.

A core element of a successful diverse school is the belief that every child, of every background, can and should succeed. That means that school boards need to offer challenging academic programs, encourage students to reach for new heights, and identify ways to support those who are struggling to meet the challenge. Our suburban Washington, DC, high school offers a variety of programs from College Partnership that works with promising minority students and their parents from the day they enter the school, to classroom-based AVID (Advanced Achievement Through Individual Determination) for successful minority students who haven't previously taken advanced classes, to an intensive four-year support program that focuses on at-risk students entering ninth-grade. At the same time, we are instituting a rigorous 9th and 10th grade curriculum from Cambridge University and an International Baccalaureate program in the upper grades, working hard to ensure that as broad a mix of students as possible reap the benefits of these program.

While average standardized test scores in diverse schools are often not as high as they are in homogenous middle-class schools, this doesn't mean students in these schools can't achieve. The issue is often the need to level the playing field. For example, most middle-class students take expensive private SAT prep courses which are out of reach to many others. At Annandale High, we instituted a broad in-school preparatory program plus free workshops on weekends before each SAT test is given. Students are being encouraged to take the test earlier in their high school career and to repeat it as often as possible. For many of our recent immigrants, school is

the only place they hear this message because they are the first in their family to think about college.

### **Living the Lessons of Respect**

Our society knows all too well that equally as important as academics are the lessons of tolerance and respect for differences. There is no better environment for these lessons than a multi-ethnic school. But as in all aspects of school administration, creation of a positive school climate takes commitment and hard work. The value of respect for each individual must be at the foundation of the school's management. Students should be encouraged to share their unique life experiences in the classroom and after school. Social studies classes can make history and geography come alive with the experiences of students and their relatives. English compositions can be fertile ground for exploring family history. Music classes can be enhanced with music from a variety of cultures.

School boards must seek ways to be sensitive to cultural differences without harming others' rights. While our school has a "no hat" rule, Sikh boys may wear their turbans and Muslim girls may cover their heads. During Ramadan, the month-long holiday when Muslims fast during daylight, our school provides a study hall for fasting students where they can go during lunch so they don't have to sit in the cafeteria.

Valuing individual differences doesn't take away from the significance of working together as a whole. At Annandale High our "Unifest," which showcases different heritages within the school, and the "We Stand as One" club, demonstrate that encouraging students to feel pride in their own past only makes for a stronger unity. Our students are remarkably supportive of one another and take great pride in their school.

While offering many opportunities for respecting differences, we also need to teach our students ways to handle disagreements. To have a policy that suspends students for fighting without programs that teach them how to handle conflict in a non-violent way will only end in more and bigger conflicts. Peer mediation programs have proved extremely successful in diverse as well as homogenous schools.

There are a host of other important programs that can help build a positive school climate, including character education and prejudice-reduction

workshops. The key is to be proactive and provide support for implementation and long-term improvement, through budget and staffing, of any program worthy of starting.

We also need to build community support around our diverse schools by keeping the broader community aware of what's really happening inside the school walls. As a public relations consultant, I became increasingly concerned that the negative image that plagued our diverse school over the years was created and fostered by those who had no direct contact with the school. So we instituted a community outreach program that took accurate information about the school to our feeder elementary and middle schools, as well as groups like the local Rotary and Women's Club and real estate offices. The change in attitude has been remarkable.

The bottom line is we as a society need to change the way we look at diverse schools. We need to strengthen and support our multi-ethnic schools and combat the misperception that they provide a second-rate education. In fact, they can offer a first-class education that uniquely prepares students for the global community that awaits them. It's up to school boards to pay close attention to changing student populations and develop policies that take advantage of the opportunities while meeting the challenges of these extraordinary learning environments.