How important is cultural diversity at your school?

Attending a school with a diverse student body can help prepare your child for citizenship in a multicultural democracy.

By GreatSchools Staff

As the United States becomes a more culturally and ethnically diverse nation, public schools are becoming more diverse, too.

A growing trend

The Census Bureau projects that by the year 2100, the U.S. minority population will become the majority with non-Hispanic whites making up only 40% of the U.S. population. No doubt students will need to learn how to interact in a diverse environment. Jean Snell, clinical professor of teacher education at the University of Maryland, believes cultural diversity enhances the school experience, too. "There is a richness that comes from students working side by side with others who are not of the same cookie-cutter mold," she notes.

Students who attend schools with a diverse population can develop an understanding of the perspectives of children from different backgrounds and learn to function in a multicultural, multiethnic environment. Yet, as public schools become more diverse, demands increase to find the most effective ways to help all students succeed academically as well as learn to get along with each other. Teachers are faced with the challenge of making instruction "culturally responsive" for all students while not favoring one group over another. A 2007 study by Public Agenda and the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality found that 76% of new teachers say they were trained to teach an ethnically diverse student body but fewer than 4 in 10 say their training helps them deal with the challenges they face.

Schools must take a proactive approach to acknowledging diversity

A parent needs to look beyond the numbers to evaluate a school's approach to diversity. To create a positive environment where students and teachers are respectful of different backgrounds, schools have to be proactive. "Above all, schools shouldn't just do nothing," says Rosemary Henze, associate professor of linguistics and language development at San Jose State University in California and author of Leading for Diversity: How School Leaders Promote Positive Inethnical Relations.

Structured classroom activities can highlight diversity. She suggests that teachers structure their teaching to acknowledge different perspectives. For example, in a history lesson about the Vietnam War, they should draw attention to the perspectives of North as well as South Vietnamese citizens, the feelings of the soldiers and diverse views of Americans. In a classroom the teacher can structure learning groups that are diverse and devise activities that require each student to contribute to the group. In this way students learn that each person in a group can contribute and has something of value to say.

Mutual respect is part of the equation. Henze believes teachers should never tolerate disrespect. They should establish ground rules for the class, and even let the kids help to establish these rules.

She also believes the principal has a huge role in creating an environment where people respect the opinions of others and are open to multiple perspectives on any issue. This should be modeled for students, and in relations with faculty and staff, as well.

No Child Left Behind shines the light on achievement gaps among diverse groups of students. The federal No Child Left Behind law has put pressure on schools to see that all students succeed, regardless of their ethnic or language background. Schools are required to meet state "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) goals for their total student populations and for specified demographic subgroups, including major ethnic/racial groups, economically disadvantaged students, limited English proficient (LEP) students, and students with disabilities. If these schools fail to meet AYP goals for two or more years, they are classified as schools "in need of improvement" and face consequences. A broad approach works best to address achievement gaps.

Belinda Williams, an education researcher and co-author of Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision for Changing Beliefs and Practices, advises school leaders to implement a broad range of strategies to improve teaching and learning, rather than instituting quick fixes to address the achievement gap. The book argues that educators must become more sensitive to the world views of disadvantaged students — and incorporate this awareness into their day-to-day work.

Henze sees value in organizing special events at the school that raise awareness about diversity but warns that "these events should be built into the fabric of the school, rather than being a one-shot deal."

Schools should strive to create an environment where all children feel valued and all children can learn. Snell says the principal should set the tone by having a policy of "no excuses." If there is a problem with a particular student, she says principals and teachers should ask themselves, "What do we need to do to ensure that this child is engaged in learning?" and "What more can we do?" This may mean following up to see that the student has the proper place to study, healthy meals and all the support he needs.

What parents can do to promote a positive environment that fosters achievement for all students at the school:
• Find your school and check the test scores on the school profile, and where available, pay particular attention to the results by subgroup.

• If your school has disparities in outcomes for different groups of students (often called “the achievement gap”), you should ask why and find out what measures the school is taking to close the gap.

• Ask how the school addresses the needs of diverse students and if there are support programs available for students who are not meeting the standards. Ask if there is specialized instruction for students who are English language learners.

• Does the school have a cultural fair or assembly to highlight diversity? If not, work with your PTA or parent group to organize one.

• Express your concern if you see different discipline consequences for different groups of students, or if the best teachers are only teaching the strongest students.

• Observe who is involved in student leadership. Is it an ethnically diverse group? If not, ask why.

• Does the school have tracked classes for high and low ability grouping? If so, if you see racial or ethnic patterns in these classes, i.e. more racial minorities in lower ability groups, ask why.

• What’s the makeup of the school staff? Are all the teachers white and all the aides people of color? Is there a racial hierarchy at the school? Ask what the school can do to change these patterns.

• Does your parent group reach out to parents of ethnically diverse students?

• Don’t be alarmed if you see groups of students separating by ethnic group at lunch or recess. “It’s not necessarily a bad thing to be in their own group at recess,” says Henze. “They can gain a lot from a feeling of belonging.” But do pay attention to what goes on in the classroom. “Classroom activities that give kids the opportunity to interact with different groups can help to break down barriers,” notes Henze.

• Does the principal use a variety of avenues to get parental input? Henze says, “Parental involvement may not be a cultural expectation in some cultures. Schools should not ignore the silent parents. Principals need to listen to all parents and experiment with other ways of getting parental input-written forms, translators and phone calls. Schools should find multiple ways and times to communicate, not just when there are problems with a student.”

Helpful books


Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race by Beverly Daniel Tatum, Basic Books, 1999