

Leadership Actions for Cultural Transformation: Ask Principal Donna™

In order to transform the social and cultural conditions in a school, we must work consciously, through meaningful professional development, to explain what cultural proficiency looks like. The classrooms would be differentiated for learning styles, and openness about discussing differences would permeate the environment. Teachers of all cultural backgrounds must be trained in how to provide a culturally responsive classroom, being sensitive to the needs of students they teach. They must not be afraid to talk to students about what they need and should connect learning to their lives.

To foster a culture that engages its students, teachers should provide a risk-free environment where students learn to advocate for themselves. Students must be encouraged to explain what they need to feel respected and understood in the classroom. They will ask students and adults how they like to be referred to without concern for stepping on toes or creating discomfort. Adults will be able to assess their own level of proficiency on the Cultural Proficiency Continuum and would look more at themselves than at others in order to solve the challenges facing them as educators.

Time should be given throughout the year to discuss and work on developing our cultural proficiency as a staff. They should learn about the history of minorities in order to understand their resistance to white culture. You could study the cultures of the communities you serve and develop a respect for the differences that exist there.

The hallways should be full of multicultural artwork that supports the curriculum and builds background knowledge and vocabulary of our students. There would also be exemplary student work posted in the hallways to celebrate good work. Classrooms would be differentiated with sensitivity to the needs of a diverse community of learners. Focus will not be on passing tests, but on building a community that loves to learn. With this, proficiency will come at last.

Some of the challenges that we face might be the difficult task of getting through the stage where Cultural Blindness changes to Cultural Pre-competence. It is always difficult for whites to admit the prejudices we were brought up with. It can be a painful process, working through and recognizing that we do have these prejudices when we have thought we were caring, non-biased people. Once through this phase, it is a worthy adventure to develop more proficiency. Time is what is needed for pursuing this path to Cultural Proficiency. Another challenge is getting these minority parents to open up. They can be reticent to share what they are thinking and feeling. Years of feeling disenfranchised can leave them resistant to dominant culture. Reaching a relationship of trust may take time and commitment.

In order to effect change and lead the school through a cultural transformation, leaders must develop the capacity to teach the children we have. To do this, staff must work together to achieve greater cultural proficiency. The Cultural Proficiency Continuum found in the book *Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders*, by Lindsey, Robins and Terrel (2003), will be a great support as you go through this process. Personal reflection can open our eyes to the work that needs to be done to meet the needs of our students. Change takes time, and I would

plan for this change to take place over three years as you work with different areas of cultural proficiency, continually assessing and reassessing how you are doing.

I would begin with a plan to develop the five essential elements of cultural proficiency. This would begin with an **assessment of the culture** by working together to name the differences within our community. This would be done with the teachers and staff members. In order to not be driven by the values and beliefs of only the dominant culture, this naming of differences would help us to discover who you are as a community and who you serve. It will be a journey of discovery, not a personal affront. This can be extended to include work with parents and students, as well. Use of films can be helpful to educate about other cultures and help your staff better understand the differences.

- Guiding questions (Lindsey, R., et.al, 2003—pp 131-132)
 - What are the unwritten rules in your school/classroom?
 - How do you describe your own culture?
 - How does your school/classroom provide for a variety of learning styles?

In order to **value diversity**, you can work together to claim your differences. It would be important to work with the community to share their individual values and develop an understanding where there was once perhaps judgments made or misperceptions.

- Guiding questions
 - How would you describe the diversity in your current professional setting?
 - How do you react to the term *valuing diversity*?
 - How do you and your colleagues frame conversations about the learners?

Next comes the work of understanding and **managing the dynamics of difference**. This will be work in reframing the differences that exist between and among our various cultures. It would be important to discuss issues of power and dominance and how it affects non-dominant cultures. You could also analyze historical events that led to distrust of different cultures to create a common ground of empathy for all.

- Guiding questions
 - How do you handle conflict in the classroom?
 - What skills do you possess to handle conflict?
 - Describe situations of cross-cultural conflict that may be based on historic distrust.

Further on in our work on developing cultural proficiency, you would work together on how you will **adapt to diversity**. How and what will you need to change to be culturally proficient? It would be important to teach cultural truths and myths to open people to the possibility of misconceptions about other cultures.

- Guiding questions
 - How have you recently adapted to the needs of a new member?
 - How has the organization adapted to the needs of new members?
 - Describe examples of inclusive language and materials?
 - How do you teach your community about the organization's need to adapt to cultures?

Last, you would work to **institutionalize cultural knowledge** through training about differences. Providing in-service trainings throughout the years will continue to process of developing cultural proficiency. Reviewing policies and practices in the light of cultural proficiency will incorporate your newfound understanding into the daily life of the school.

- Guiding questions
 - What do you currently know about the cultural groups in your organization?
 - What more would you like to know about those cultures?
 - How do you and your colleagues learn about these cultural groups?

I look forward to seeing public schools in the United States moving in this direction. I believe it will do much to heal the hurts of the past and move our brothers and sisters of color into a relationship of greater trust and achievement.

Reference:

Lindsey, R., Nuri-Robins, K., Terrell, R. (2003). *Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders*.