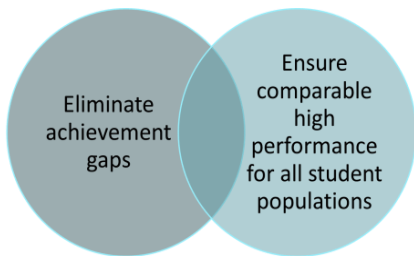# School Board Brief: Cultural Competence

May 13, 2016

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Success in school, in addition to fostering positive self-perception, provides a myriad of opportunities for students, builds families, and supports great communities. For many students; however, lack of

equitable opportunities and expectations leads to gaps in achievement. Student groups experiencing achievement gaps include students who represent racial and ethnic minorities, English Language Learners, students with disabilities, boys/girls, students from low-income families, and students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (NEA, 2010). Gaps in achievement affect students, families and the entire community. Specifically, lack of academic success results in diminished life choices after graduation, lower earnings, poor health, and higher rates of incarceration, consequences for underperformance for the school district, and economic and social consequences for communities. Nationally, "the underutilization of human potential that results from achievement gaps imposes a higher recurring annual economic cost to the US economy than the most current recession (McKinsey, 2009). The goal of equity work in Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) is to eliminate gaps in achievement while ensuring comparable high performance for all student populations.

Alexandria City Public Schools is well positioned to address the challenges that are uncovered by qualitative and quantitative data; the work to address gaps in achievement is firmly rooted in the districts strategic plan goals. Additionally, Alexandria City Public Schools is nested within a community that recognizes these challenges, and as a result, developed the Children Youth Master Plan, which focuses on addressing needs within the community.

Many factors contribute to gaps in achievement, and make them appear to be insurmountable.

However, while some are out of the scope of control of a school system, others are completely within the sphere of control. Equity work in ACPS will focus on the areas within the scope of our control, and where success is possible. There are three areas of focus:

1. Defining our work. In order to move the work forward, a common understanding of the problem and the language of equity is imperative. Equity is defined a providing what each person needs in order to reach an agreed upon standard. The key performance indicators in the 2020 Strategic Plan inform the districts equity

work. Equity is achieved through cultural competency, which is widely defined and the skills, abilities, and mindsets required when working with persons who represent cultures that differ from one's own (NEA, 2008).

2. <u>Professional Development</u> – We are all lifelong learners. To eliminate the achievement gap, we must help staff and stakeholders to develop an equity lens. This will remove the use social identifiers such as race socioeconomics and the acquisition of English as an additional language as predictors of success in schools.

3. <u>Written Guidance</u> -   To guide our work and provide transparency to stakeholders, policies and practices will need to be developed or revised to address the challenges that schools know how to fix. In many cases these problems are technical in nature (Heifetz, 1997).

Equity work develops internal stakeholders so that all learners have access to rich, rigorous, relevant, and engaging curriculum. When meaning is attached to social identifiers, behaviors are influenced either positively or negatively. Variances in expectations for students based on social identifiers are an adaptive challenge. What one thinks about student groups influences what, where, how, and to whom which content is taught (NEA, 2010). Furthermore, thoughts, whether conscious or unconscious, influence access and inclusion, treatment of families, students and staff, resource distribution, opportunities to learn, and shared accountability. (NWREC, 2015).

Addressing adaptive challenge requires long term and detailed attention. Creating organizational cultural competency is an adaptive challenge which requires ongoing expertise, effort, as well as, changes in behavior and attitudes among a host of stakeholders.

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

The Department of Student Services, Alternative Programs and Equity will build organizational capabilities by developing the skills staff need to eliminate the predictability of outcomes based on social identifiers. This journey began with equity walks(brief visits to over four hundred classrooms to identify themes, patterns and best practices); focus groups and interviews conducted with families in four prominent languages, as well as focus groups with administrators and community leaders to gain their perspectives and document their experiences in ACPS. Additional focus groups that solicit the perspectives of students and staff will also be held before the close of the school year. Literature reviews on a variety of topics related to equity work, as well as designing adult learning and organizational change, are ongoing to ensure that best practices in the field inform the design of future work.

An Equity Advisory Committee convened this spring, and meets monthly. A two-pronged approach is being employed to guide the work of the group. The first meetings will build the capabilities of the group, focusing on content related to equity work, as well as, strategies for facilitating conversations with an equity focus. In addition, the committee will design, implement and evaluate content as part of phase one of equity work. Phase one will include establishing shared definitions, examining the commonalities among all forms of privilege and oppression, micro aggressions, and strategies for

addressing the adaptive challenges that influence schools, teaching, and learning. Equity conversations will begin with senior leaders shortly. The goal of this work is to empower each stakeholder to identify, design and implement solutions for the organizational challenges that influence student success. During this initial phase of professional development for advisory committee members and other key stakeholders, additional professional development, in the form of online and face-to-face opportunities, will be made available to interested staff who desire to develop their capacity to work with diverse populations.

At the center of professional development for all internal stakeholder groups will be the following questions. These questions will guide the action plans addressing areas of disparity and build on what is currently in place:

- How does this (system/policy/procedure/practice) affect all learners?
- What are the negative or adverse consequences for any identifiable population as a result of this system, policy, procedure, and practice? How might that adverse impact be avoided?
- As we create new systems, policies, procedures, and practices, what precautions should we take to avoid negative consequences?
- How do we monitor our work and ensure equally positive outcomes for all students?
- How do we change our systems, policies, procedures, and practices to produce fair and equitable outcomes for students and their families?
- How do we engage students, families, and communities in meaningful ways and as partners in decision-making and implementation pursuit of equitable learning opportunities?

As the work moves forward the focus will remain on building the capabilities of staff through sustained professional learning that focuses on the collective vision that every student "every student succeeds".

DATA FINDINGS

The Virginia State Department of Education reports that Alexandria City Public Schools is making significant progress toward closing gaps in achievement for students who are receiving special education services, experiencing poverty, are acquiring English as an additional language, and who are members of identified racial and ethnic groups (VDOE).

Despite these gains, significant gaps persist. For example, in 2014, students of color taking Advanced Placement Tests were not proportional to high school enrollment, and gaps remained in post-secondary enrollment for Black and Hispanic students during the fall immediately after high school.

Post-Secondary Enrollment
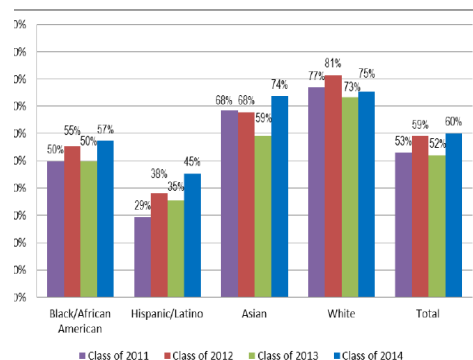
RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations include the following.

- Phase 1 - Design professional development to build institutionalized culturally responsive practices. Modules should create a common language, as well as establish practices that build trust, and improve collaboration, while focusing on cultural awareness, and skill development.
- Phase - 2Design professional development by working with offices, departments, and schools to customize and embed culturally responsive pedagogy in to existing professional learning structures.
- Work with stakeholders to embed the guiding questions noted above within~~t~~ the daily work of the school division.

ATTACHMENT(S):

160513 Cultural Competence ~~Restorative Practices~~ presentation

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