

Cultural Competence for New Principals

Ignoring or overlooking your students' culture can cause academic harm

By John F. Eller and Sheila A. Eller



Schools and classrooms across the country are becoming more culturally diverse. Teachers have to learn how to work with a changing population of students who represent many different cultures and backgrounds. It's your job to lead teachers toward an understanding of the major cultures represented by your students and strategies that can be used to help all students learn and be successful.

Cultural Competence, Critical Points

Articulating and defining cultural competence is a foundational skill

for school principals. There are many definitions of cultural competence in the various articles and books available on the topic. Most of these definitions include three elements:

1. Understanding of one's own culture (including common beliefs and potential biases).
2. Knowledge of the cultures represented by the students in the school.
3. Using the knowledge of the cultures to identify and implement strategies to help all students be successful.

It's important for principals to identify their own beliefs and biases. Doing so can help principals work to overcome them, and make it easier to generate ideas and strategies to help students from all cultural backgrounds succeed.

One essential skill needed by principals is the ability to "temporarily turn off" their own biases and opinions in order to truly listen and understand other people's perspectives. This ability is helpful when principals encounter beliefs and practices that may run counter to their own. For example, in one situation

a female principal encountered a family where the culture was male dominated. The principal was able to build a solid working relationship with the family because she did not judge the “correctness” of their cultural belief while also keeping her own beliefs intact.

Get to Know the Cultures of Your Students and Families

Go beyond obvious identifiers such as country of origin, and consider such things as regional and even tribal affiliation. Students may look alike on the surface, but come from families with very different expectations and norms.

A key skill is the ability to temporarily “turn off” your own biases and opinions.

One way to gain invaluable knowledge of the major cultural groups present in a school is to connect with formal and informal leaders within the cultural community. Many times, these leaders have intimate knowledge of what happens within the neighborhoods where the families live. Meetings with these leaders can occur at the school, though you may find it advantageous to meet them in organizations within the community. They can have a wealth of knowledge that may help you understand the unique issues facing your families and how to build relationships with them.

Connecting with families is essential to understanding your students’ culture. Parents want their students to be successful, but may also be

working several jobs and trying to manage the complexities of everyday life, so they may not be able to attend or participate in traditional school activities.

Schools that are successfully developing cultural competency offer family events geared toward their major cultures. Many of these events include food and provide childcare options for families. The focus of these events includes getting to know each other, building relationships, and listening. By keeping the agenda focused on the families rather than lecturing or telling them what teachers need, a base of collaboration is built.

Build Teacher Capability

Principals of culturally competent schools provide ample opportunities for teachers to learn more about the various cultural groups in their schools, as well as strategies to listen and learn about these groups, and to help all students be successful. In addition to professional development opportunities, principals can have teachers interact with formal and informal community leaders, participate in family cultural events, and share successful strategies with each other at faculty meetings, PLC meetings, and other opportunities.

At times, principals will need to confront some teachers’ beliefs and biases. These confrontations may take the form of difficult one-on-one conversations, open discussions and forums at faculty meetings, and using the teacher appraisal system to help teachers see the importance of cultural competency. Confronting teacher biases takes a strong leader who is committed to student success. In our book, *Working With Difficult and Resistant Staff*, we provide strategies and templates to help principals plan and deliver these difficult conversations.


Look for Barriers to Learning

As a natural part of a school’s journey toward cultural competency,

assessments or audits can provide valuable information and feedback. Principals can involve teacher leadership teams in these audits to help increase their awareness and engagement related to understanding the present conditions and seeing the need for change.

For example, in one school, the principal involves the building leadership team in conducting periodic “walk-through” audits. The team is given a checklist and asked to walk around the school looking for signage, posted student work, and other artifacts. Then, the team members are asked to use their assessment checklist to assess the focus of these visible artifacts. The team then holds a discussion of their assessment and how these artifacts might be geared toward one culture and how they might not help students from other cultures feel welcome.

This activity has served as an eye-opener and caused changes within the school. Other elements that can be audited include school policies, rules, regulations, and school celebrations and rituals. The leadership team will need to “step back” and temporarily suspend their own cultural biases in order to analyze the data they are gathering and make helpful suggestions for change.

Helping a school become more culturally competent can seem complex, but if it’s approached in a step-by-step manner, it becomes more attainable. Review the strategies presented in this article as you begin the journey to help your school become more culturally competent. You’ll be helping your students and teachers be successful in building a strong school community. 

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