A permanent banner stretches across the façade of Woodburn (OR) High School. In large blue letters it proclaims “Welcome”—not only in English but also in Spanish and Russian.

Inside the building, there’s a more personal way that teachers and administrators walk their talk about a welcoming, culturally diverse environment. Most of the staff members—men and women alike—wear bright plastic bracelets that are etched with the word Believe in the three languages that predominate there. The rural Woodburn School District serves 4,600 students who are 73% Hispanic, 11% Russian, and 16% White.

Superintendent Walt Blomberg ordered 1,000 bracelets after conducting a districtwide staff survey that asked, “Do you believe our kids can be successful?” In a March 15, 2006, interview, Blomberg admitted, “I was disappointed with the results, and I challenged the staff to explore what came out of the survey and how we could change that. When I gave these [bracelets] out, I said, ‘This is about believing in our students and in each other. If we believe, we can succeed.’”

Pressure to succeed with students from diverse backgrounds has grown stronger, not only because of No Child Left Behind mandates but also because of the increasing numbers of minority students in U.S. classrooms. In 2004–05, 42% of public school students were part of a racial or ethnic minority group and 10.5 million school-age children spoke a language other than English at home (with Spanish being the most frequently spoken). The statistics also show that on most education indicators (including school enrollment, grade retention, high school completion, and postsecondary enrollment), language minority youth lag behind their peers who speak only English at home.

A number of studies suggest that low school performance may be linked, in part, to a lack of congruence between the cultures of the students’ families and communities and the cultural norms embedded in the expectations, policies, procedures, and practices of schools (Bensman, 1999; Bowman & Stott, 1994; Cummins, 1986; Delpit, 1995; Entwistle, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition, an examination of 80 research studies and literature reviews...
Standards-Based Teaching

By Steffen Saifer and Rhonda Barton

(Henderson & Mapp, 2002) found a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement, higher scores on standardized tests, enrollment in more challenging courses, and improved behavior both at school and at home. These benefits held across families of all economic, racial, ethnic, and educational backgrounds and for students at all ages.

One of the most powerful—but least used—ways to strengthen family and community partnerships for successful student learning is to change instructional and curricular practices so that they are more culturally responsive. This sends a strong message to families that the school values who they are. Families respond in turn, although not always by volunteering more at school or by other traditional means of parent involvement. Instead, families are often more inclined to support their children’s engagement with school: helping more with homework, promoting good attendance, and having higher expectations for their children’s school success.

In 2002, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory set out to describe how educators can use the knowledge and culture that students bring to school to complement a standards-based curriculum. The three-year Classroom to Community and Back study involved practitioners in almost two dozen schools. It resulted in a set of practices called culturally responsive, standards-based (CRSB) teaching. Unlike multicultural education—which is an important way to incorporate the world’s cultural and ethnic diversity into lessons—CRSB teaching draws on the experiences, understanding, views, concepts, and ways of knowing of the students who are in a particular class or school.

The Essential Elements

CRSB teaching promotes six essential elements that are embedded and woven throughout classroom practice:

- It is always student centered. Students’ lives, interests, families, communities, and cultures are the basis for what is taught; students are involved in planning what they’ll learn and how they’ll learn it.
- It has the power to transform. The role of the teacher is transformed from instructor to facilitator by allowing students’ experiences and interests to help shape the curriculum; students’ points of view are transformed as they begin to value and respect things and people that they may not have valued or respected before.
- It is connected and integrated. Learning is contextualized and builds on what students already
know, allowing them to comprehend new information more easily; the work encourages students and teachers to connect with others in the school, at home, and in the community.

- It fosters critical thinking. Teachers pose questions that probe student thinking; students monitor their own level of understanding and become self-directed.
- It incorporates assessment and reflection. Teachers use a variety of authentic assessment measures to monitor progress throughout the year and make midcourse adjustments; students and teachers pose rich questions to reflect critically on lessons learned.
- It builds relationships and community. Teachers get to know their students, students’ families, and the communities they serve and use what they learn to inform what they teach; they help students get to know other people in the community and communicate with parents about ways to become involved in the classroom.

As a first step in implementing CRSB teaching, teachers and administrators must understand that everyone views the world through a cultural lens. Each staff member must examine how his or her cultural perspective affects the way he or she sees students and their families. Each must ask, What self-exploration do I need to do?

After probing their personal beliefs, staff members must think about what additional information they need to learn about their students, such as their cultural backgrounds and perspectives and their personal and family values. They must also think about how they can show students, families, and community members that their cultural framing and knowledge are valuable. Staff members must know how they can tap their students’ cultural strengths and ensure that they are not operating on stereotypes.

After exploring their own cultural lenses and those of their students, staff members can begin to build relationships and community in the classroom using activities to help students and staff members get to know one another better and learn from one another. This process takes time. Participants in the CRSB teaching project found that it’s best to start small and then build up to larger activities and projects.

**Putting CRSB Into Practice**

Schools and educators involved in the Classroom to Community study offer a variety of examples—both simple and complex—of ways to connect to students’ culture, their families, and the larger community.

**Molecules with a twist of culture.** Chemistry and culture seem like an unlikely match, but high school students at Oregon Episcopal School in Portland were able to blend the two in a molecular modeling project. Teacher Rosa Hemphill asked students to choose a chemical molecule and research its industrial, medicinal, and historical uses as well as its chemical properties. She also told them to consider how their molecules might affect their culture or community.

Two Chinese students decided to study morphine because of the devastation that the drug brought to their home country during the Opium Wars. Several students studied molecules that made up medicines they or a relative had taken. One Black student investigated lactose because of the high levels of lactose intolerance found among members of the Black community. Other students looked into chemicals present in the foods or plants used in traditional folk remedies in their cultures. “One might think that the teaching of science is relatively culture free since certain science materials, tools, and skills are recognized and used universally,” said Hemphill (personal communication, November 16, 2005). “However, the cultural background students bring to their science class affects the words they use, the expectations they have of the process, and how they see results.”

**Building relationships through writing.** At Kenny Lake School in Copper Center, AK, language arts students in Tamara Van Wyhe’s class share some of their deepest feelings and beliefs. “Students know I value their honest voices, so they write very openly.” Her students—who are Alaska Native and White—are encouraged to write about how family, culture, and community influence who they are. After reading *The Education of Little Tree* by Forest Carter, the students create personal time lines and write about learning experiences they have had outside of school. In the process, they often realize how much they’ve learned from family members, elders, or others in the community. At the end of the school year, students submit their favorite pieces of writing and a student committee chooses selections for an anthology that the PTA publishes. The student authors read their works at a well-attended public event that further strengthens the connections between school and community.

**Sharing family stories.** Sixty-five powerful portraits make up the Stories Project, a collection of photographs of
diverse students, teachers, and families who learn and teach in Portland (OR) Public Schools. Each image is accompanied by a narrative that reveals something about the daily life of its subject—whether a Latino family, twin middle school students in wheelchairs, or a student with multiple piercings and a Mohawk haircut. The photo exhibit has circulated to different schools and public venues where it’s served as the focus of staff development meetings, classroom assignments, and community forums. Shauna Adams, a family involvement facilitator, and photographer Kat Nyberg collaborated on the project. According to Adams, the exhibit helps people look at how they define family, diversity and equity, wellness, and success. “The power of the photographs is [that] they make us question and take a closer look at ourselves and those we care for, educate, and support,” she said (personal communication, May 1, 2007).

These examples illustrate the fact that CRSB teaching can be incorporated into the classroom (or professional development opportunities) in a variety of creative ways. But it’s ultimately up to the individual school and teacher

One Principal’s Experience

Six years ago, when Principal Diana Pratt arrived at Kentlake High School near Seattle, WA, she discovered that many minority students were transferring to a more diverse high school where they felt more comfortable. Her mission became to make her school more culturally responsive and welcoming.

Today, more than a fourth of the student body is from minority backgrounds, including Hispanic, African, Eastern European, American Indian, and Asian. Kentlake’s various diversity initiatives have garnered two awards from the Anti-Defamation League. As an added bonus, the school has seen academic achievement soar: reading proficiency scores went from 38% of students meeting standards in 1998–99 to 84% in 2005–06 and math scores increased from 29% to 59% during the same period.

Pratt points to a few practices that have made a difference:

- A series of schoolwide diversity lessons was developed by a committee of teachers, and all staff members were trained to deliver the curriculum. “Everyone teaches a different lesson each period of one day so all students get six classes in topics like solutions to harassment and understanding cultural competency,” said Pratt (personal communication, April 12, 2007). “Kids see that this is a priority that we value as a building.”

- The Diversity Club meets weekly, providing a forum for students to express their concerns to staff members. The club holds schoolwide events to welcome international students; coordinates Mix It Up at Lunch Day, during which students sit at different lunch tables to get to know other kids; and organizes anti-harassment campaigns. (For more information about Mix It Up at Lunch, visit www.teachingtolerance.org.)

- Focused outreach to Somali and Ukrainian families includes translators who were hired by the district, school conferences at the housing projects where many new immigrant families live, and transportation to school events.

- The AVID program identifies underachieving students and encourages them to take more-rigorous courses. Mentors provide extra support to the students, many of whom are members of different ethnic and racial groups.

“The issue is really about school climate,” said Pratt (personal communication). “We [principals] get caught up in building management, but to have educational reform that makes a difference we have to spend time to nurture and provide a climate where those changes can take place. You have to involve students and staff to create ownership and acceptance of the decisions that are made. You can’t do it alone.” Pratt also said that as Kentlake students and staff members got involved in diversity initiatives, their definition of diversity expanded. Now the school focuses not just on ethnicity and race, but on sexual identity as well.
to discover how to draw on the unique knowledge, skills, and perspectives of their own students and communities. Doing so will enrich the curriculum, build family and community support, and broaden learning experiences for all students. PL

REFERENCES


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