Fostering Intergroup Contact in Diverse Schools
Strategies for Educators

KIMBERLY QUICK

Introduction

Decades of research show that students are best served in diverse and equitable schools. Diversity enhances learning environments, inspiring reduced racial bias, increased student creativity, better developed problem-solving skills, and higher average test scores for students in integrated schools.[1] These well documented benefits, however, are often stymied when schools achieve only numerical diversity without truly taking steps to maximize relationship building across racial and economic difference.

Social science research demonstrates the importance of meaningful and sustained face-to-face contact for youth of different racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. This research consensus first became apparent in the oft-overlooked amicus brief submitted by psychologists and other social scientists in the case *Brown v. Board*, which highlighted how the injustice of segregation stunted the development of democratic values in children by teaching white children to "gain personal status in an unrealistic and non-adaptive way." That same research indicated that school segregation exposed children of all backgrounds to "confusion, conflict, [and] moral cynicism" as schools teach about fairness and the American Dream while serving as vehicles that uphold the barriers to it.[2] Meanwhile, emotionally invested bonds of friendship between children and adults of different backgrounds have been shown to inspire more equitable treatment: those who have genuine affection across difference are more likely to treat members of their friends' identity groups as well as they would treat members of their own groups.[3] As segregation remains the default in most neighborhoods and subdivisions, the schoolhouse—where children spend the majority of their time during the weekday—can be one of the best-equipped places for children to encounter and understand difference.

In order to realize the benefits of integration, many demographically diverse schools have taken important steps to ensure that their commitment to integration transcends superficial demographic measures. These schools have purposely implemented structures and programs to foster greater contact between people of different backgrounds and to focus on equity and justice. In their brief for the National Coalition for School Diversity, Dr. Linda Tropp, professor of psychology at University of Massachusetts–Amherst, and Dr. Suchi Saxena, consultant at the Sillerman Center of Brandeis University, outline three ways to classify intergroup contact: supportive norms in schools, cross-racial friendships, and cooperative learning strategies.[4]

This toolkit uses this framework to discuss principles and concrete action steps diverse schools should use to ensure that students reap the benefits of diversity.

This toolkit can be found online at https://tcf.org/content/report/fostering-intergroup-contact-diverse-schools-strategies-educators/

Building Supportive Norms within Schools

When visiting Morris Jeff Community School, a small charter school in mid-city New Orleans, the genuine affection that the students have for each other stands out, perhaps even more than school's rigorous arts program or IB curriculum. Children of different races, economic circumstances, cultures, and ability levels learn and play together effortlessly, romping in the gymnasium during a morning meeting and giggling together in the cafeteria, surrounded by flags from around the world. Yet, according to its faculty, creating this ease was far from easy; the school's commitment to building a foundation of inclusivity and support was baked into its model from the beginning.

For students, school-fostered supportive norms "provide important information regarding the degree to which friendships across group lines are deemed valuable or appropriate."[5] These standards are disseminated both through direct programming with students and, critically, through the culture set by the adults in the building which students closely observe.

The methods addressed in this section are concrete ways to start developing a culture that normalizes and encourages relationships across lines of difference in educational settings. First, successful schools dedicate time and resources to ensure that teachers, staff, administrators, and aides have the tools to model positive intergroup contact—with an emphasis on ensuring that such contact prioritizes equity by making space for and critically listening to the voices of marginalized populations. Secondly, these schools recognize the role of the school within its surrounding community by showing students the challenges, joys, and importance of understanding community dynamics when forming relationships and making choices.

Establish Working Definitions and a Shared Vision

Terms such as diversity, inclusion, integration, anti-bias, and anti-racism carry different meanings to people with different values and experiences; therefore, schools should consider having internal conversations about the significance, bounds, and definitions of each of these terms in order to productively establish norms and procedures.

Several schools featured in this series offer examples of how to do this well:

- Citizens of the World Charter Schools, a charter network with locations in Los Angeles, Kansas City, Missouri, and New York, employed an organizational consultant who specializes in diversity and inclusion to lead the Los Angeles region's efforts to define diversity, inclusion, and equity as they apply to the work of the charter network. As part of that process, the school invited a multi-racial group of teachers, principals, and administrators to participate in compensated, day-long conversation, with the objective of creating definitions, making commitments, and establishing a shared vision for diversity and equity. The committee then sought feedback from employees across the network before writing its final product.

- City Garden Montessori School asks prospective teachers to offer their own working definition of racism during their hiring interview. While there is not one prescribed response, interviewers look for a definition that demonstrates an understanding of the fact that racism is real, based in systemic injustices, and can be as subtle as it is insidious.

Prepare the Adults to Lead

All adults who interact with children and/or make administrative decisions should be prepared to model healthy and meaningful intergroup relationships. In order to ensure that this happens, schools must first take inventories of their racial climates, strongly incentivize or mandate appropriate training and conversation, and implement structures that solidify equitable and meaningful communication practices. Leaders might wish to begin by exploring the following questions:

- Who, if anyone, is responsible for intergroup relationship-building? How are people held accountable if their actions fail to respect or advance the goal of fostering healthy intergroup interactions?

- Does your school have anti-racist training for adults? If so, who administers it, and who

participates? Is this training mandatory or required? Is it one-off or ongoing? How do school officials evaluate its effectiveness?

- How do the school's hiring and evaluation processes measure the competencies critical to fostering sustained intergroup contact?

- How (and how often) does the school "check in" with its teachers from underrepresented groups—namely teachers of color and LGBTQ+ teachers—to ensure that its own staff feels valued by and connected to the institution? Do staff of color and LGBTQ staff feel comfortable approaching school leadership with concerns or ideas? Is there an established and trusted bias reporting system in place within the school?

- What does the school do to develop cross-racial understanding among the parents and guardians of its students? Is the school able to hear, understand, and speak to guardians whose primary language is not English?

The following are some examples of how some schools asked (and began to answer) these questions in order to prepare adults to set a positive example for students:

- *Hire experts to train teachers and parents.* Morris Jeff Community School contacted Matthew Kincaid of Overcoming Racism, an organization that seeks to build more equitable institutions through race and equity training, to conduct four mandatory full-day training sessions for all staff. His program seeks to attack educational equity concerns at their source by improving staff's ability to identify personal and systematic bias and giving them tools to alter their behavior. The school also supports a parent group with the same mission and curriculum.

- *Hold school administrators accountable for anti-racist leadership.* When African-American parents at City Garden Montessori School expressed concerns about inequitable treatment, school leaders launched anti-bias and anti-racist training for themselves. The leadership and administrative teams spent a year seeking to better understand racial bias within their school

community and reflected on the impact of their own actions. They met with an expert in anti-racist training every other week throughout the school year, who helped them create a strategic plan to dismantle racism in the school environment. After evaluating their own biases and shortcomings, City Garden's leadership organized extensive, mandatory training for the entire staff. Today, teacher orientation includes a three-day Analyzing Systemic Racism workshop, and an anti-bias professional development group called Embracing Equity runs full-day workshops throughout the academic year.

- *Build empathy through parent programming.* To promote empathy among parents, and to relieve the burden on Spanish-speaking parents in their schools, Citizens of the World Charter School in Los Angeles regularly flips the dynamics of translation in parent meetings, with the meeting run in Spanish while English-speaking parents use translation devices. The school also developed a parent think tank, which is staffed by an intentionally diverse group of parents who interview and collect data about the experiences of adults in the CWC community. The group continues to meet and brainstorm ways to make their school community more inclusive.

Involve the Community in the Life of the School

The challenges of cross-cultural and cross-racial engagement do not end at the schoolhouse door. Public schools are community actors whether or not they intentionally engage with these issues; that is to say, schools can both reflect (and alter) neighborhood demographics; school buildings occupy critical spaces within a neighborhood; and, depending on admissions procedures, schools typically educate and offer services to children and families in their surrounding areas. As such, a school that engages in constant outreach with its surrounding community fosters an environment in which students from diverse backgrounds are better understood and can see positive examples of cross-racial adult communication and relationships.

Additionally, this models democratic principles and emphasizes that the school itself is part of a diverse society, and that it is obligated to respect a variety of perspectives,

elevate the voices of marginalized groups, and evaluate its position in a multiethnic community.

Effective diverse schools seek to embody and model the principles they teach children, including engagement across difference:

- *Engage with diverse community members and organizations.* City Garden maintains a presence in each of the neighborhoods in its catchment zone by participating in neighborhood associations, advocating for sustainable housing policies, and inviting parents and organizations into the school to engage in conversation and build camaraderie. For example, its popular Colorbrave series provides dinner and child care to adults who engage in community discussions about race and social justice, and the school's Coalition for Neighborhood Diversity and Housing Justice works with local activists and residents to try to slow some of the detrimental effects of gentrification. Through this work, City Garden not only offers its assets to the areas that surround it, but also shows its students how individuals and organizations can coordinate with diverse groups to accomplish goals and advance justice.

- *Honor community voice in the school's DNA.* Both Morris Jeff Community School and Denver School of Science and Technology (DSST) schools, a network of charter middle and high schools in Denver, Colorado, incorporate community input in their processes for expanding and developing new schools. Established in 2008, Morris Jeff was founded by a diverse group of community members seeking to reestablish a school in the multiethnic Mid City neighborhood post-Hurricane Katrina. The founding group attempted to ensure that the school reflected its neighborhood—not only demographically, but also in terms of the values represented and ideas it embodied. DSST, which is currently expanding its network, includes community and stakeholder feedback in the process of determining its school site placements and programs.

The process of community involvement always begins by listening and understanding community needs and desires—rather than prescribing solutions for perceived community shortcomings.

Building Cross-Racial Friendships among Students

Young children's experiences with intergroup contact have long-term consequences: research shows that plentiful, positive early cross-group interactions results in increased numbers of meaningful cross-racial friendships, reduced bias toward underrepresented or marginalized groups, and increased comfort living and working in diverse environments as adults.

Schools are uniquely positioned to encourage this type of development. Once faculty are equipped to model productive and inclusive relationships and power structures for their students, schools then deploy a variety of methods to encourage more frequent intergroup contact among students. [6]

Design Non-Academic Social Activities

- *Assign supportive, diverse spaces.* DSST Public Schools encourages relationship-building with student groups called "advisories." Carefully curated to be racially and economically diverse, these single-gender small groups meet twice per week during the school day. The content of these meetings is not academic, but rather is designed to help students connect both with one another and with a teacher mentor/advisor. Advisors might facilitate personal or political discussions during the allotted time or plan a fun activity for the group. The advisory remains together all year, and students ideally form close bonds along the way.

- *Establish traditions that showcase diverse classmates.* Several schools use "morning meetings," brief all-grade gatherings prior to the start of classes, to set a tone of teambuilding, cordiality, and democracy. At Morris Jeff Community School, these meetings offer students the chance to demonstrate and admire one another's talents and to listen to and discuss school announcements. At DSST, students can "shout out" (compliment) other students for their accomplishments, helpfulness, or demeanor.

- *Encourage and facilitate play.* Community Roots Charter School, an intentionally diverse school in Brooklyn, New York, organizes "Play and Learning Squads," small groups for students and parents to have outings or do cooking or crafts at families' homes. These groups are encouraged to connect children (and their parents) who would not otherwise spend time together outside of school. Blackstone Valley Prep in Rhode Island is initiating a similar program.

- *Let children lead and express themselves.* Some school allocate time at the end of the school day to "check in" on students' feelings, sometimes letting other children lead this reflective exercise. In City Garden's middle years program, a designated student ends the school day by leading classmates through a brief meditation and offering students the opportunity to share highlights and challenges from their days. This allows the teacher to take the pulse of the students in the classroom while making space for honest conversation among a diverse group of students.

Recognize and Measure Intergroup Interactions

Teachers at Citizens of the World Charter School map student social networks through a tool that shows friendship networks within a single classroom, paying particular attention to how those relationships cross lines of similarity and difference. Teachers and administrators then supplement this information with teacher surveys that qualitatively describe classrooms' intergroup interaction patterns.

At a minimum, school-based teacher preparation and orientations should train instructors to recognize and respond to racially or socioeconomically homogenous social groupings within classrooms. Teachers might mitigate homogeneity by assigning diverse teams for games and activities, designating buddies for assignments or homework, or seating students from a variety of backgrounds together.

Cooperative Learning Strategies

Because students spend the majority of their days in school, intergroup contact within the classroom setting is paramount if students are to maximally benefit from a diverse school. Nationally, second generation segregation, or when students are segregated within an otherwise diverse school setting, often through tracking, is responsible for wide disparities in academic outcomes—even in school buildings that would otherwise be considered racially balanced. As Halley Potter points out in her toolkit "Integrating Classrooms and Reducing Academic Tracking," racially and socioeconomically separate classrooms rob children of the important peer interactions associated with integration—while also harming students placed in the less rigorous program.[7] In many cases, addressing and reducing the prevalence of tracking within diverse schools might be a precondition for establishing the types of cooperative learning strategies that yield meaningful intergroup contact and relationships. It is worth noting that the actions outlined in this section have been adopted by schools that have either greatly reduced or completely eliminated rigid, "ability-based" academic tracking.

- *Intentional pairing of students in de-tracked or multi-level classrooms.* Teachers at DSST are coached to use strategic partner work in academic courses. Teachers account for ability levels, racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, and English language skills when seating students, intentionally seating students from different backgrounds, friend groups, and strengths next to one another. Teachers then design assignments that require students to work in teams or with a partner seated next to them. This not only fosters academically beneficial interactions between higher-achieving and struggling students—it might also bring students from different backgrounds into conversation with one another.

- *Project-based and experiential learning.* Citizens of the World Charter Schools feature project-based pedagogy, in which students gain knowledge and skills by working to investigate and solve problems. Frequently, children work on assignments in heterogeneous small groups,

which can be selected to reflect a school's diverse demographics. CWC amplifies the benefit of its diversity by regularly assigning projects that require students to explore issues of race and identity with one another. (For example, the school's second graders learn about Cesar Chavez and farmworkers' unions through roleplay scenarios and group decision-making.)

Additional Resources

• Contact TCF researchers with questions by emailing intergroupcontact@tcf.org.

• Request to be connected with one of the schools featured in this toolkit to learn more about their approach to diverse enrollment by emailing intergroupcontact@tcf.org.

• Read TCF's in-depth case studies at TCF.org of charter schools and school districts that have prioritized school integration:

> • Blackstone Valley Prep
> • Cambridge Public Schools (MA)
> • Champaign Schools (IL)
> • Chicago Public Schools
> • Citizens of the World Charter Schools
> • City Garden Montessori School
> • Dallas Independent School District
> • Denver School of Science and Technology
> • Eden Prairie Public Schools (MN)
> • Elsie Whitlow Stokes Community Freedom Public Charter School
> • Hartford Public Schools (CT)
> • Jefferson County Public Schools (KY)
> • Morris Jeff Community School
> • New York City Public Schools
> • Stamford Public Schools (CT)

Conclusion

In a society in which historical, financial, and cultural structures reinforce segregation, schools that take intentional steps to bring together a diverse group of children are already doing critical but difficult work. Yet this alone will not remedy racial and economic divides—nor is it sufficient to combat the harmful stereotypes and assumptions that contribute to the continued marginalization of people of color, the differently abled, LGBTQ+ people, and low-income people. Diverse schools that leverage their diversity to encourage meaningful, sustained, and challenging cross-racial and intergroup contact play a significant role in building a society where the recognition of potential is not racialized and opportunity is not restricted.

To encourage young people to form meaningful relationships across lines of difference, adults should learn to model the behavior that they would like to see, and should design portions of the children's academic and nonacademic time to teach strong intercultural communication skills, teamwork, and trust-building.

Author

Kimberly Quick is a senior policy associate at The Century Foundation working on education policy in the foundation's Washington, D.C. office.

Notes

1 Amy Stuart Wells, Lauren Fox, and Diana Cordova-Cobo, "How Racially Diverse Schools and Classrooms Can Benefit All Students," The Century Foundation, February 9, 2016, https://tcf.org/content/report/how-racially-diverse-schools-and-classrooms-can-benefit-all-students/.
2 Appendix to Brown in 1952, *The Effects of Segregation and the Consequences of Desegregation: A Social Science Statement,* https://www.naacpldf.org/wp-content/uploads/Brown-Appendix-to-Appellants-Briefs-The-Effects-of-Segregation-and-the-Consequences-of-Desegregation-A-Social-Science-Statement.pdf.
3 Stephen C. Wright, Art Aron, and Linda R. Tropp, "Including Others (and Groups) in the Self: Self-Expansion and Intergroup Relations," in *The Social Self: Cognitive, Interpersonal, and Intergroup Perspectives,* ed. Joseph Forgas and Kipling D. Williams (New York: Psychology Press, 2002), 343–64.
4 Linda R. Tropp and Suchi Saxena, "Re-Weaving the Social Fabric through Integrated Schools: How Intergroup Contact Prepares Youth to Thrive in a Multiracial Society," National Coalition on School Diversity, May 2018, https://school-diversity.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/NCSD_Brief13.pdf.
5 Ibid.
6 Frances Aboud, Morton Mendelson, and Kelly Purdy, "Cross-Race Peer Relations and Friendship Quality," *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 27, no. 2 (2010): 165–73; Lincoln Quillian and Mary E. Campbell, "Beyond Black and White: The Present and Future of Multiracial Friendship Segregation," *American Sociological Review* 68, no 4 (2003): 540–66; Heidi McGlothlin and Melanie Killen, "How Social Experience Is Related to Children's Intergroup Attitudes," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 40, no 4 (2010): 625–34. See also Amy Stuart Wells, Lauren Fox, and Diana Cordova-Cobo, "How Racially Diverse Schools and Classrooms Can Benefit All Students," The Century Foundation, February 9, 2016, https://tcf.org/content/report/how-racially-diverse-schools-and-classrooms-can-benefit-all-students/.
7 Linda Darling-Hammond, "Inequality in Teaching and Schooling: How Opportunity is Rationed to Students of Color in America," in *The Right Thing To Do, The Smart Thing To Do: Enhancing Diversity in the Health Professions* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2001).