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ASSESSING DIVERSITY TO INITIATE CHANGE

Inviting open discussion about a school's diversity initiatives and goals is often considered akin to opening Pandora's box. Do it and you run the risk of bringing all sorts of trouble upon the community. But keeping the lid on these complex issues can have far worse consequences. Among other things, it can suppress frustrations and alienate members of the community, give the impression that school leaders are insensitive to the opinions and needs of others, and, ultimately, threaten the progress the school desires in its efforts to create and sustain a diverse learning community.

● BY ERIC POLITE II ● ILLUSTRATION BY JACQUES COURNOYER

BOX

Better to invite discussion — or so we decided at the Gordon School, a nursery-through-eighth-grade independent school in Rhode Island. A year ago, we developed an assessment process designed to break through the barriers of political correctness (and independent school politeness) to reveal the honest subtext of the culture's feelings and thoughts on our diversity efforts.

This assessment focused on evaluating the progress on the goals outlined in the school's Strategic Plan for Racial Diversity and Multicultural Education, approved by its board in 2000.

and suggestions with regard to all aspects of the school's diversity work.

Advocates for the school's diversity focus spoke clearly, praising the tangible gains and pushing for more progress. Others spoke more cautiously and offered advice. Still others shared strong criticism and, in some cases, resistance to further work. Altogether, the complete set of data — over 300 pages of Likert scales, written anecdotes, and transcribed interviews — is evidence of a decade's worth of focused, sustained work.

Wise to the culture's diverse opinions on work so central to the experience of children, Gordon leadership has crafted its next strategic agenda on

and more than half said diversity is a significant reason why they stay. Eighty-two percent of parents said that they were "proud of Gordon's commitment to diversity" and 91 percent said that they were "satisfied with their child's academic experience."

While the parent feedback was mostly positive, it was obvious that valuing diversity in principle does not always imply support for the practice of creating a racially diverse learning environment. On the surface, diversity is aligned with each individual's allegiance and institutional commitment to the democratic ideals of freedom, justice, and equality. However, underneath the calm surface are torrents of

The lack of clarity leaves institutional diversity subject to individual interpretation.

That plan proclaimed specific goals on the racial composition of its students, faculty, staff, and trustees and concurrently pressed the faculty to grow its practice. As a result, Gordon has increased its faculty of color from none in 1998 to eight in 2004, and students of color from 11 percent in 1998 to 22 percent in 2004.

As the school took on a yearlong review of a decade's worth of diversity work, it was clear that in order to hold onto these gains and accurately project the future, all voices would need to be heard, even if the questions or viewpoints rattled the windows or unsettled long-standing assumptions about the school's purpose and mission.

The Community Diversity Assessment

Titled the Community Diversity Assessment (CDA), the board-approved process provided parents, teachers, students, and trustees with the opportunity to speak their minds and write down their impressions, criticisms,

diversity in ways that connect directly to the lessons learned from the Community Diversity Assessment. What follows is a review of those lessons. We offer it now to affirm the value of opening Pandora's box.

The Parents: Lessons of Affirmation, Communication, and Academics

In previous years, surveys and questionnaires failed to engage more than 10 percent of the Gordon parent community. Therefore, we were initially concerned with parent participation in the Community Diversity Assessment and, subsequently, the range of responses that complete anonymity would produce.

In the end, the success of the parent survey exceeded our expectations with a parent-participation rate of 44 percent and results that were overwhelmingly positive in praise of the school's work. Nearly half of the respondents acknowledged diversity as one of the reasons they chose Gordon

equity, access, and opportunity that surge as a school's commitment to diversity takes hold, simultaneously arousing the voices of resistance in the dominant culture.

One parent, for instance, wrote, "I believe the Gordon needs to balance its intent to create a 'diverse educational experience' with the need to maintain a certain standard of students." Another parent put it more bluntly: "My children are there for an education, not exposure to other ethnicities (that is my job as a parent)." Still another wrote, "Most of [my] misgivings are about the curriculum and the risk that political correctness will lead us into bad scholarship. I worry too that the debate on multiculturalism will divert the faculty's time and energy as they try to design creative and challenging academic assignments."

Another parent's comment echoed what a small percentage of parents felt: "Gordon wastes inordinate time and money on diversity and is pushing it to the point of creating ethnic and racial

prejudice and tension where none previously existed.”

These voices, which might otherwise be silent in the discussion, were very important for us to hear. We learned from them that myths and misperceptions arise in the absence of a clearly articulated (and regularly repeated) purpose and process for pursuing diversity as an institutional imperative. The lack of clarity leaves institutional diversity subject to individual interpretation. Subsequently, diversity initiatives can become the scapegoat for all of the school’s issues and limitations, especially in times of crises.

In a community where everyone works together to advance the school’s

that the faculty assessment data affirmed overall satisfaction with the work environment and a clear commitment to the school’s diversity work. Eighty-six percent expressed clear satisfaction working at Gordon. Eighty-nine percent believe that there is an institutional commitment to diversity at Gordon. Ninety-one percent agreed that a racially diverse and multicultural curriculum better prepare students for the “world beyond Gordon.”

Two noticeable themes in the faculty assessment were a clear call for support in advancing multicultural practice and a demand for sustained progress in multicultural curriculum growth. We were pleasantly surprised

students of color).

Clearly there is a need for hands-on support and practical resources to fill the gaps in education and professional experience that often fails to prepare teachers to confidently navigate diverse learning environments. Teachers requested specific support via reading lists, study groups, peer coaching, in-house workshops, and classroom observations. However, the consensus request from the faculty was collaboration with the director of diversity that would facilitate multicultural curriculum development and the professional growth associated with teaching from multiple perspectives.

The Students: Lessons on Identity and Race

On the whole, students expressed comfort and satisfaction with their academic and social experience at Gordon. Of the 143 middle school students who took the survey, 92 percent agreed that they are “happy at Gordon.” They also showed an understanding of the multicultural education they were receiving, with 90 percent of the students affirming the value of a diversity of people and perspectives in school.

While the student survey confirmed general satisfaction, we used a focus group to draw out the voices of students of color, believing that they are the best barometers of our progress in creating a student culture that supports diversity. The students of color focus group produced a narrative of their experience at Gordon, revealing that they desire a stronger sense of inclusion and connection to their school. When asked what they would change about Gordon, the students of color focus group responded with “more students of color” and “a better understanding of how students of color feel.”

The students of color also talked openly about their struggles to navigate the racially and culturally differing spheres of home and school, providing irrefutable evidence of the need for increased attention to the healthy racial identity development of students of color.



efforts, a well-informed parent and professional community is essential. The Community Diversity Assessment revealed places where communication and information would be helpful. For instance, in the parent assessment there was a clear need for regular communication about the content of the school’s multicultural curriculum.

We also found that *multicultural curriculum* and *multicultural education* carry little or no meaning for our parent body unless articulated as an educational imperative with tangible academic outcomes compatible with a shared interest in academic “excellence.” Otherwise, many of these parents will continue to narrowly define anything multicultural as soft, secondary, and perceive it as an imperative solely for students of color.

The Teachers: Lessons of Evaluation and Support

Sometimes the most conservative elements in school change can be found in the faculty. We were pleased to find

to learn that teachers want evaluative feedback and consistent communication so that they can confidently pursue the curricular and pedagogic expectations of the school. As one teacher wrote, “Gordon needs to provide tangible resources that support the integration of multicultural practice in the classroom.” Another said, “Hold us all accountable for pushing the envelope in multicultural practice which, in turn, would embolden each individual to seek more opportunities for personal and professional growth.”

Another lesson learned from the faculty assessment is that teachers, as the old axiom puts it, can’t teach what they don’t know. In a section of the faculty survey on educational experience, the results revealed that the majority of the faculty’s pre-service teacher education rarely included issues of multicultural education and or preparation for teaching in diverse classrooms. In addition, many of them had no experience teaching in racially diverse classrooms (with more than 25 percent

The student survey data also found that, for white students, Gordon is not only the primary site of their racially diverse friendships; it is the most racially diverse setting in their lives. Moreover, we learned that many white students feel some level of discomfort when addressing issues of race in the classroom. The student assessment confirmed the need to create more opportunities for interracial dialogue, and provide all students with the skills and experiences to confidently enter racially diverse settings at Gordon and beyond.

The Trustees: Lessons on Leadership

Given that the board of trustees is the body that decides which initiatives warrant allocation of time, energy, and resources, the board's advocacy for diversity is crucial to its success and survival.

Similar to the faculty, the lesson learned was that the board can't lead what they haven't lived. The reality is that we have called on our largely white board members to lead in diversity work that, by and large, they have neither the training nor background to do with confidence. Leadership in diversity work does not require the same skills and experiences that trustees lend to work on other board initiatives like finance and marketing. While their engagement in board work is an extension of their professional lives, the skills and knowledge required for diversity work usually grow out of personal experience.

In the trustee assessment data, board members communicated a strong willingness and/or desire to assume a lead role in articulating the academic benefits of a racially diverse school and a multicultural education.

But Gordon's commitment to diversity would quickly slide from important to illogical if it was only supported by platitudes and promises and not grounded in the commitment of a visionary and well-informed board. The Community Diversity Assessment highlighted the board's strengths to

HOW TO ASSESS DIVERSITY

All assessment starts with a problem. Organize a team of committed community members to identify the problem or problems to be addressed by the diversity assessment.

Once you've identified the problems, defined the purpose and the population(s) to be studied, calculate the human, physical, and financial resources the assessment will require. Things to consider are the time and scope of the study, institutional resources, equipment, internal and external resources, marketing, materials, compensation, etc.

The integrity of the assessment process depends on creating a space for honest reflection. Open discussions depend on both the appearance and preservation of anonymity and confidentiality, particularly with issues of diversity. Create a statement of confidentiality and anonymity for all surveys and vigilantly adhere to it when reviewing the data.

If you are considering interviews and/or focus groups, remember that outsiders can often ask questions that might be off-limits to insiders. External interviewers reduce concerns about confidentiality and anonymity, and increase the veracity of responses. Basic requirements for facilitators should be a background in education or counseling, experience facilitating dialogue, and impartiality. In addition, assemble a team that best reflects your community with attention to racial diversity and gender balance.

How will the assessment data be used? The credibility of the assessment and its potential to initiate change depend on follow-up. A comprehensive diversity assessment must be followed by strategic action that builds on the collected data. It is imperative that your school community understands the assessment purpose and process and view any plans of action that emerge from the analyses.

The assessment process will probably produce a considerable amount of data. Data is much easier to collect than to analyze, so think well in advance about who will review, code, and examine that data. Consider the resources in your community with knowledge in statistical analysis and or educational research.

Ultimately, the assessment process will yield more questions than answers. Use the quantitative (*i.e.*, surveys, questionnaires) data as background information that is imperfect but pertinent. If the assessment combines quantitative and qualitative (*i.e.*, interviews and focus groups), then you are in a better position to make generalizations about the population under study.

— Eric Polite II

find a clear and consistent voice of articulate explanation of the school's strategic initiatives in racial diversity and multicultural education. As one board member put it, "I feel that I could be better equipped to play a leadership role and advance the diversity work. I am not sure how to respond to

the question, 'How is diversity providing my child with a better education?' To this end, I would need more information in order to address the question because I do feel diversity has a place in education."

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board of trustees voted unanimously in favor of two distinct plans designed to further the work initiated in June of 2000 when they approved the Strategic Plan for Racial Diversity. These two new plans, the *Strategic Plan for Building a Racially Diverse Community* and the *Strategic Plan for Evaluating and*

Enhancing Multicultural Practice, represent strategic action that builds on the data collected from an involved and informed community of parents, students, and educators.

From Awareness to Action

The board embraced the notion of a complete and thorough assessment and, in doing so, set in motion a process

that uncovered both the challenges and opportunities for the next stage of the school's growth. However, sustained growth and momentum required that the assessment be followed by strategic action that builds on the collected data. Thus, the goals outlined in Gordon's revised strategic commitments directly correlate to the issues presented in the Community Diversity Assessment.

If knowledge is power, then providing the community — especially the parents — with clear and accurate information about the academic nature of multicultural education can produce articulate advocates for academic excellence through multicultural education. Accordingly, the plan details a schedule of written and verbal communication with parents with regard to the content of the multicultural curriculum and the teaching practices that support it.

Given the aforementioned limitations of a largely white board in leading the school's diversity initiatives, the plan also states that they will "actively cultivate leadership and membership that understands and articulates the benefits of a racially diverse learning environment." To aid in this effort, trustees will receive a handbook to assist in orienting new and continuing trustees to the school's diversity work. In addition, the board will receive a yearly update on the tangible evidence of the educational benefits of this work so that each member can lead with confidence.

The new plan also seeks to engender an inclusive climate inside each classroom and throughout the school so that all students can reach their highest level of academic success. In response to the issues and themes presented in the student assessment, the new plan includes implementing the Open Circle social curriculum,¹ expanding the middle school advisory curriculum, and establishing racial affinity groups for students.

In response to the faculty request for support, evaluation, and accountability, the *Plan for Evaluating and Enhancing Multicultural Practice* calls for a "comprehensive professional devel-

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opment plan to improve and refine teachers' knowledge skills, and approach to multicultural education." Professional development will be linked to specific goals for each teacher and facilitated by a revised evaluation system that explicitly articulates expectations around each teacher's growth as a multicultural educator. In addition, the director of diversity job description will be revised to provide direct support and guidance to teachers in growing their multicultural perspective, pedagogy, and practice.

Institutions, almost invariably, do not change without the open discussion of real issues. The Community Diversity Assessment provided opportunities for this level of discourse. In opening Pandora's box, Gordon unearthed the hidden realities that move institutional change, and strengthened our commitment to diversity.

As we build on this solid foundation of planning and persistence, only time will tell whether or not the Community Diversity Assessment moved

the Gordon School to the next stage in this process. However, the direction has been established and the willingness to lead and teach to our goals has been reinvigorated. We believe that the Community Diversity Assessment can serve as a model, even as it is critiqued and improved, that other educational communities may use to initiate and sustain commitments to diversity that reflect the very best that independent education has to offer.

Eric Polite II is the director of diversity at The Gordon School (Rhode Island). For more information, contact him at epolite@gordonschool.org.

1 The Open Circle Curriculum (grades kindergarten–5), developed at Wellesley College, integrates research findings in child development with the best teaching practices. The curriculum's holistic approach involves training the adult role models in a child's life to teach and embody principles of communication, responsibility, cooperation, respect, and assertiveness, to facilitate healthy social, emotional, and intellectual growth in children. For more information, visit www.open-circle.org.



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