



Awareness to Commitment to Action

No school can hope successfully to educate today's children without acknowledging and embracing the cultural pluralism of our diverse society. To this end, independent school educators must work to create learning communities that encourage and support diversity of membership and multicultural curricula. Such communities understand that one's individual perspective depends, in part, upon one's location in society. Common understandings are multifaceted; they grow in communities that encourage individuals to bring their stories to the table.

A monocultural view of the world is a distortion of reality. It lends itself to prejudiced points of view and fosters the climate in which racism can grow. To be educated with only one perspective of the world is to be miseducated. Multicultural curricula broaden our knowledge of the world by including the perspectives, contributions, literature, history, and cultures of all groups of people. In a multicultural school, people ask whose story is not being told. The multicultural curriculum gives both added dimension to each student's identity and enables students to cross ethnic and cultural borders freely.

The path to inclusive and multicultural schools is two-fold. First, schools must address the diversity within the student population as well as within the faculty, staff, and administration. A close look at diversity will include an evaluation of the school's mission and philosophy statements; student recruitment; admissions and financial aid; school and community demographics; faculty hiring, retention, and professional development; school climate; and home-school relationships.

Schools must also assess the program, asking whether it is multicultural, recognizing and including the experiences of the many different peoples who make up the school community, our American society, and our world. Does it both encourage the whole participation of every child, and, at the same time, introduce each student to multiple perspectives?

Each school will find itself in a different location on the path to becoming an inclusive school. The members of the Midwest Diversity Committee (faculty and staff from NAIS, ISACS, the Multicultural Alliance, and Midwest independent schools) offer their commonly agreed upon definitions and a framework for guiding schools along a dynamic continuum from awareness to commitment to action.

Terminology (Adapted from NAIS's Multicultural Update, Fall 1996)

Diversity refers to the quantifiable differences that are observed in a given population.

Multiculturalism refers to the quality of the environment as manifested in the school's climate, curricular goals, and attitudes of the community (individual as well as collective), an environment characterized by acceptance and inclusion.

Diversity: quantifiable differences embodied in, but not limited to...

- Ability/disability;
- Age;
- Ethnicity;
- Gender;

- Geographic orientation;
- Race;
- Religion;
- Sexual orientation;
- Socioeconomic status; and
- Family status.

Multiculturalism, a quality of life characterized by acceptance and inclusion, is manifested in the school's...

- Climate;
- Curriculum;
- Shared community values; and
- Integration of multiple identities.

Wherever a school finds itself along the dynamic continuum for diversity and multiculturalism, the single most important parts of the journey are to make the effort to identify where the school is currently located on the path and to develop a plan to proceed further down the road.

The Dynamic Continuum for Diversity and Multiculturalism

Some Examples...

Admissions

AWARENESS: Evaluating demographic data and recruitment practices in terms of diversity.

COMMITMENT: Revising recruitment and admissions practices.

ACTION: Including multiple voices on the admissions committee and initiating practices for achieving greater diversity.

Publications and Visual Environment

AWARENESS: Evaluating print and visual materials for attention to diversity.

COMMITMENT: Increasing diversity in visual materials, including photos, and reviewing topics and coverage in light of multiculturalism.

ACTION: Reflecting an inclusive and accepting environment in publications, displays, bulletin boards, and public spaces.

Student Life

AWARENESS: Addressing individual concerns and questions of harmful language or behavior.

COMMITMENT: Addressing group concerns for equity and multiculturalism in the environment. Reviewing the code of conduct to include equity issues.

ACTION: Empowering all students by creating a comfortable, inclusive culture for all students.

Faculty/Staff Life

AWARENESS: Evaluating demographic data and recruitment practices. Addressing individual concerns and questions.

COMMITMENT: Revising recruitment practices. Assessing hiring criteria. Addressing group concerns for equity and multiculturalism.

ACTION: Empowering all faculty/staff by creating a comfortable, inclusive culture for all adults.

Community Celebrations

AWARENESS: Including ethnic celebrations along with traditional Western occasions such as birthdays and national and religious holidays.

COMMITMENT: Assessing the effect and participation of diverse community members in celebrations.

ACTION: Promoting and embracing multicultural celebrations as community-building events.

Curriculum (The Banks Model)

AWARENESS: Adding to the curriculum units of study on particular groups of people.

COMMITMENT: Infusing the perspectives of different groups of people into the mainstream curriculum.

ACTION: Encouraging critical inquiry and empowering students to move toward justice and equity through social action.

Leadership

AWARENESS: Raising critical questions and fostering an environment in which others will do so.

COMMITMENT: Including multiple voices in decision-making, planning, and assessment.

ACTION: Establishing a shared vision for a diverse, multicultural community.

Authors: Lucinda Lee Katz (head of school, University of Chicago Lab Schools) and Bonnie Wishne (head of school, Ancona School), with the members of the ISACS Midwest Diversity Committee. Originally published by ISACS, 1997.