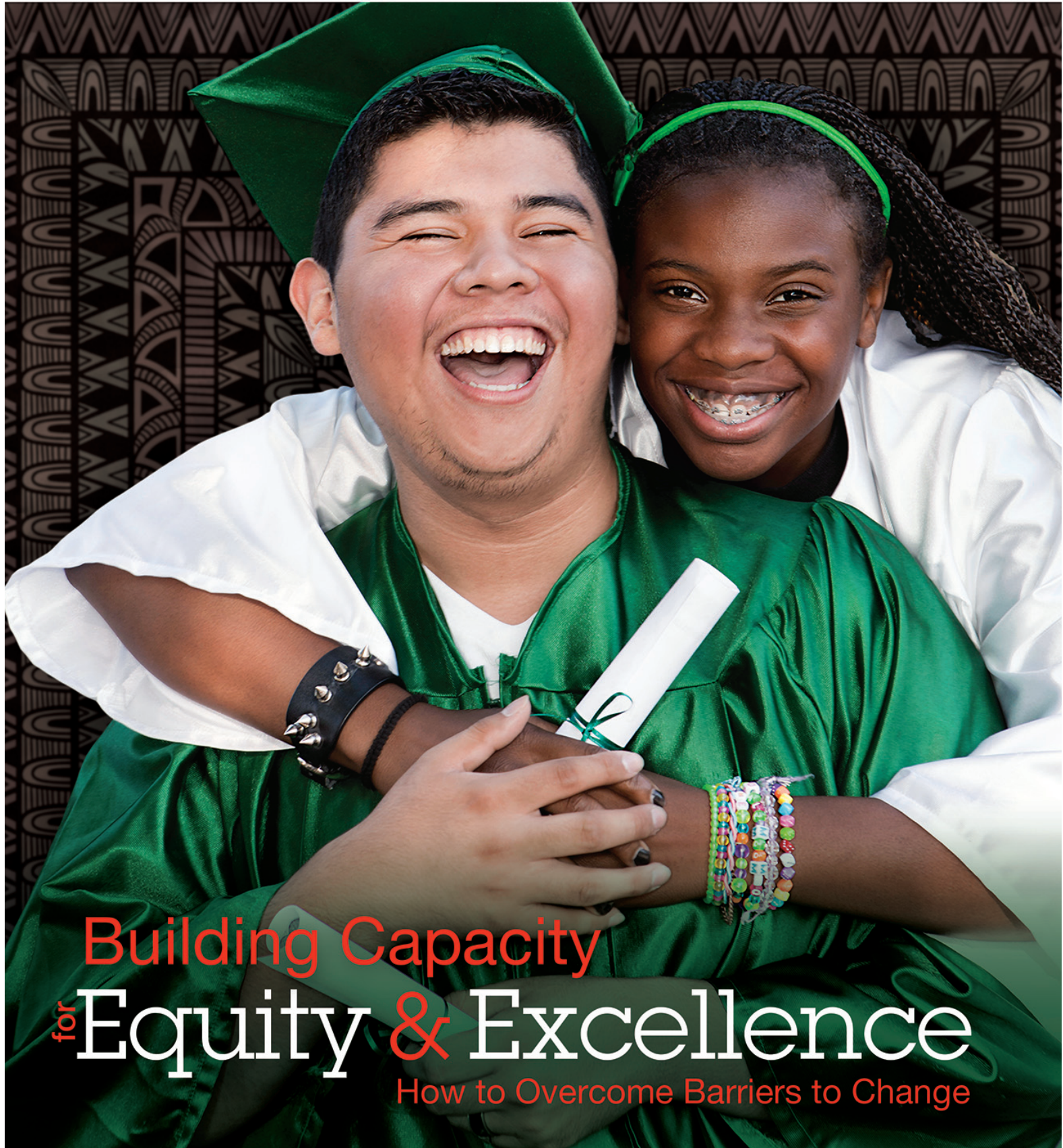


Leadership

Association of California School Administrators
September/October 2015



Building Capacity
for Equity & Excellence
How to Overcome Barriers to Change



Common Core: A TOOL FOR EQUITY

If California educators pair new instructional approaches with the new standards, the Common Core could become a tool for bringing about greater educational equity.

Although California has made progress on the percentage of students demonstrating proficiency on state standards in recent years, much work remains. Only 56 percent of all students were proficient on the California Standards Test in English language arts in 2013, the last time the assessment was administered.

The percentages among Hispanic and African American students were substantially lower – 45 percent and 43 percent respectively. In math, the pattern was roughly similar. Although California made gains of more than 20 percentage points in ten years, clearly the progress has not been fast enough.

Most educators agree that the Common Core standards adopted by California are even more rigorous than the previous standards. The Common Core asks students to collaborate, persevere, evaluate, reflect, ana-

lyze and communicate orally and in writing through a variety of media. If the instructional approaches of the past are continued, we will likely see performance differentials among ethnic groups widen, as has already happened in Illinois, Kentucky and New York.

Disengagement among low-income students of color – already a problem because of a lack of perceived relevance between classroom learning and life, frequently having teachers of a different ethnicity and culture, and being marginalized generally – could worsen. However, if educators in California pair new instructional approaches with the new standards, the Common Core could become a tool for bringing about greater educational equity.

Providing more engaging instruction that

By Brian Edwards and Jesse Hinueber

builds on the assets that students bring to school may be our best hope for increasing the percentage of students who are proficient on the new standards and reducing performance disparities among ethnic groups. Such instruction is known as “culturally responsive teaching.”

Geneva Gay (2000) defines this as using the cultural characteristics, experiences and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching more effectively. The concept is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful and are learned more easily and thoroughly. Research shows that culturally responsive instruction prompts student involvement, while instruction that ignores student norms of behavior and communication provokes student resistance in the classroom (Olneck, 1995).

In California, where two-thirds of teachers are white and 60 percent of students are Hispanic or black, culturally responsive teaching takes on special importance. Providing such instruction requires cultural proficiency on the part of teachers and principals. Through modeling cultural competence and helping shape teachers’ professional development, school leaders play a critical role in ensuring that their schools are culturally proficient. This article suggests some specific ways for principals to fulfill that role in the Common Core era.

How principals can make their schools more culturally responsive

Culturally proficient leaders guide their colleagues to examine personal values and behaviors in such a way that the staff members see that it is *they* who must adapt their practices to meet the needs of the students and the community they serve (Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbell Jones, 2005). Below are descriptions of three steps that principals can take to be that kind of leader.

1. Develop their own cultural proficiency and create conditions for teachers to do the same.

The first step is to build one’s own cultural proficiency. This requires understanding

one’s history and culture and how they affect interactions with colleagues and students. Such self-knowledge helps a leader come to value the stories that teachers and students bring to school, and not just their own. Knowing that these narratives can have an unconscious hold on how students come to school and how teachers interact with students may engender a helpful sensitivity to different perspectives and approaches to teaching and learning.

In addition, self-understanding is a prerequisite to communicating one’s story, which is important for school leaders to do. When a leader shares her perspectives, values and experiences with the school community, the motivations behind her decisions and actions become more readily understood. It also sends the important signal that individual stories are valued.

In fact, school leaders should encourage all staff members to reflect on and share their own stories, and principals need to create conditions that foster that sharing. Modeling openness is a good start, but principals should couple that with broader explanations of why cultural proficiency is important.

When offering this explanation, a principal needs to be mindful of how teachers will receive the message. Discussions of topics such as white privilege and subconscious bias can be powerful, and leaders should be aware that staff members may become defensive, particularly if the teachers are white and the principal is a person of color. These discussions need to be handled carefully or the likely outcome could be the exact opposite of what is intended. Principals should be comfortable seeking help from groups such as the National Equity Project, which can offer guidance in how to skillfully facilitate such conversations.

Leaders can foster discussions of culture and identity by creating a trustful school environment. Teachers will only be willing to talk candidly about themselves with their colleagues if they trust that administrators and fellow teachers will be accepting of dif-

ferences. Principals might consider having teachers facilitate such discussions to lessen inhibitions that staff members may feel.

School leaders can also foster teachers’ understanding of one another and their students by bringing about a shared concept of culture that goes beyond surface indicators.

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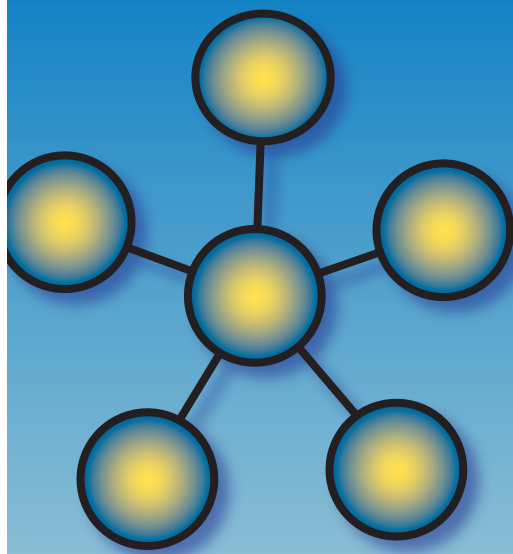


For example, principals may want to borrow the “Iceberg Concept of Culture” that Edward Hall developed in “Beyond Culture” (1976).

In Hall’s vision, language, music, food and dress are just the tip of the iceberg. In contrast, elements such as preferences for competition or cooperation, the nature of friendships, ideals of child rearing, and concepts of past and future lie beneath the surface and require exploration and dialogue to understand fully.

Principals can turn to established protocols to facilitate discussions of identity and culture. For example, schools can use the “The Paseo or Circles of Identity” exercise developed by National School Reform Faculty. The protocol begins with individual reflection and then moves into personal storytelling (see next page for more information).

Activities such as these help colleagues get to know each other more deeply, which helps create trust and cohesion among the



Carrying out the Paseo or Circles of Identity

Each participant draws a web of circles that looks like a diagram of a molecule. The participant writes her name in the center circle and words or phrases that capture an element of her identity in the other circles.

Then participants split into two concentric circles, with each member of the inner circle facing a member of the outer circle. A question on identity or equity is then asked. Every pair answers the question, with the person on the inner ring taking two minutes to answer, followed by the person on the outer ring taking two minutes to answer. After each question, one of the rings is asked to rotate to create new pairs. Once the participants have answered all the questions, they debrief as a group on what emotions surfaced and what they will do differently as a result of the activity.

Examples of questions are:

- Describe a time when one of the elements of your identity worked to your advantage.
- Talk about a time when your perceptions of a student's identity caused you to do something that moved him or her forward.
- Talk about a time when you noticed an inequity and said or did something to address it.

staff. However, these activities are most effective if they are iterative, because people generally need time to become comfortable discussing issues of identity and culture. A benefit of having teachers do this work with each other is that it can serve as practice for getting to know their students.

2. Develop a schoolwide, assets-based view of students.

Research shows that students learn better when they feel understood and cared for. Principals can encourage teachers to get to know their students by promoting the concept of asset-based instruction in their schools. Such instruction recognizes students' strengths and helps students feel they can contribute to their own educational growth. The strengths that students bring to school – the knowledge, resources and competencies that families use to maintain households and communities – are what Moll, Amanti, Neff and González (1992) called “funds of knowledge.”

One way to take inventory of these funds of knowledge is to use what Pat Thompson (2001) called the “virtual school bag.” Teachers can only describe the contents of students' virtual school bags if the teachers know their students well. This happens over time and in a variety of ways – for example, by creating classrooms where students feel their voices are heard, having lunch with small groups of students, or corresponding with students in their journals.

Taking such steps to build rapport with students is the first part of developing what Zaretta Hammond (2015) calls learning partnerships.

In Hammond's formulation, once rapport is established, teachers and students form an alliance to tackle a specific learning challenge. Because the student trusts the teacher, the student is less likely to withdraw and more likely to try to rise to the challenge. In that phase, teachers help students become independent learners and expand

their intellectual capacity. The alliance thus promotes students' cognitive insights.

When school leaders encourage their staff to get to know their students, including the strengths they bring from their homes and communities, they set in motion a chain of events that lead to greater student agency, which creates deeper, more self-directed learning. In the Common Core era, when so much more is being asked of learners, this student agency is critical.

3. Foster academic mindsets in students.

The learning partnerships described above are one method of helping students develop positive academic mindsets, which research suggests are an important factor in academic performance. Farrington, *et al.* (2012) give specific examples of mindsets associated with high academic performance:

- I belong in this academic community.
- My ability and competence grow with my effort.
- I can succeed at this.
- This work has value for me.

According to Farrington and her colleagues, these mindsets can be cultivated in students. However, educators should be particularly vigilant with regard to students of color because these students are more likely than their white counterparts to face contexts with pointed challenges to the development of positive mindsets.

Although the research is not entirely clear on the specific classroom strategies that teachers should use, Farrington, *et al.* offer findings from the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2004) on general school conditions that promote strong student engagement and positive academic mindsets.

The conditions include, among others, presenting students with challenging but achievable tasks; communicating high expectations for student learning and providing supports that allow students to meet those expectations; making evaluation



practices clear and fair and providing ample feedback; and providing students with opportunities to exercise autonomy and choice in their academic work. A culturally proficient principal supports teachers as they implement such practices.

Common Core as a tool to narrow the achievement gap

The increased rigor of the Common Core can be daunting, and for a time, California may see the achievement gap widen in some districts. But if the state's educators can embrace the new standards as well as a new way of implementing them, the Common Core can actually become a tool to narrow the achievement gap in the long run.

The new standards give teachers flexibility to craft culturally responsive lessons that will deeply engage students. Principals can encourage teachers to take advantage of that flexibility by using instructional materials that are "windows and mirrors" for students – i.e., texts that students see themselves in as well as material that will give students insight into other cultures (Bishop, 1990).

In addition, the Common Core's emphasis on critical reading of non-fiction could give rise to lessons that incorporate local news stories, with students analyzing, communicating about, and collaborating around events in their communities. Such lessons will help create reflective, engaged citizens with strong skills and a better understanding of their own culture and the cultures of others. ■

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