

Fostering Cultural Diversity in Your Private School: Cultural Diversity Starts at the Top

By Robert Kennedy

Cultural diversity as an issue wasn't even on the radar of most private school communities until the 1990s. To be sure, there were exceptions, but for the most part diversity was not at the top of the list of priorities back then. Now you can see genuine progress in this area.

The best evidence that progress has been made is that diversity in all its forms is now on the list of other issues and challenges facing most private schools. In other words it is no longer a detached issue requiring resolution by itself. Schools seem to be making well-thought out efforts to attract and retain faculty and students from a wide variety of societal backgrounds and economic sectors. The resources under [The Diversity Practitioner](#) on the National Association of Independent Schools' site show the kind of proactive approach which NAIS members are taking. If you read the mission statements and welcome messages on most schools' websites, the words 'diversity' and 'diverse' appear frequently.

Set an Example and They Will Follow

The thoughtful head and board members know that they must encourage diversity. Perhaps that has already been done at your school. If so, then a review of where you have been and where you are going should be part of your annual review activities. If you have not addressed the diversity issue, then you need to get started. Why? Your school cannot afford to turn out students who have not learned the lessons of tolerance. We live in a multicultural, pluralistic, global community. Understanding diversity begins the process of living in harmony with others.

Communication enables diversity. Example fosters diversity. Every sector of the school community from head and trustees on down through the ranks must be proactive in listening, accepting and welcoming people and ideas which are different from their own. This breeds tolerance and transforms a school into a warm, welcoming, sharing academic community.

3 Ways to Communicate Diversity

1. Hold Workshops for Faculty and Staff

Bring in a skilled professional to run workshops for your faculty and staff. The experienced clinician will open up sensitive issues for discussion. She will be a confidential resource which your community will feel comfortable turning to for advice and help. Make attendance mandatory.

2. Teach Diversity

Embracing the principles of diversity taught in a workshop requires everybody to put diversity into practice. That means reworking lesson plans, encouraging new, more diverse student activities, hiring 'different' teachers and much more.

Communication imparts knowledge which can breed understanding. As administrators and faculty, we send dozens of subtle messages to students not only by what we discuss and teach, but, more importantly, by what we do NOT discuss or teach. We cannot embrace diversity by remaining set in our ways, beliefs and thoughts. Teaching tolerance is something all of us have to do. In many cases it means shedding old practices and altering traditions and modifying points of view. Simply increasing a school's intake of non-Caucasian students will not make a

school diverse. Statistically it will. Spiritually it will not. Creating a climate of diversity means radically altering the way your school does things.

3. Encourage diversity

One of the ways you as an administrator can encourage diversity is to require compliance with school policies and procedures. The same kind of strict adherence to policy and procedure which makes cheating, hazing and sexual misconduct taboo should apply to diversity. Your staff must become proactive when it comes to encouraging diversity. Your staff must know that you will hold them just as accountable for your diversity goals as you will for teaching outcomes.

Respond to Problems

Are you going to have problems with diversity and tolerance issues? Of course. How you handle and resolve problems as they arise is the acid test of your commitment to diversity and tolerance. Everybody from your assistant to the grounds keeper will be watching too.

That's why you and your board must do three things to promote diversity in your school:

- decide on policy
- implement policy
- enforce compliance with policy

Is It Worth It?

That nagging question does cross your mind, doesn't it? The answer is a simple and resounding "Yes!" Why? Simply because you and I are stewards of all that we have been given. The responsibility for shaping young minds and inculcating eternal values has to be a major part of that stewardship. Our abrogation of selfish motives and embracing of ideals and goals which will make a difference is really what teaching is all about.

An inclusive school community is a rich one. It is rich in warmth and respect for all its members.