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Leading for Diversity: How School Leaders Achieve Racial and Ethnic Harmony

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“People would like to see our race problem disappear. And the way they think it’s going to disappear is by not talking about it. But the real way you make it disappear is by talking about it, learning about it, and understanding it, and then you’ll see a change, not just by ignoring it.” – a 12th grade student

The Leading for Diversity research project emerged from a Principals’ Forum developed by ARC Associates in 1995. Participating principals expressed a need for successful strategies to implement in their schools: strategies to dispel racial tensions, class conflict, and violence (particularly violence related to race or ethnicity); to create a vision that includes students of diverse backgrounds; and to increase staff members’ understanding of cultural differences. These principals were among a growing number of educators aware of a lack of attention to diversity issues in the preparation of school leaders. Administrative preparation programs have traditionally emphasized management skills (Fullan 1999) and have not given adequate attention to the need to mediate the new diversity that characterizes many urban and suburban schools (Contreras, 1992). The Leading for Diversity work builds on Allport’s theory of equal status contact (1954), Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1968), theories of racial identity development (Tatum, 1997), and multicultural inclusion theory (Banks, 1993) in an effort to integrate diversity issues in the theory and practice of leadership.

To inform the future preparation of school leaders, CREDE researchers at ARC designed a 3-year study to document the approaches of school leaders who are proactive in addressing racial/ethnic tensions in schools and in encouraging positive interethnic relations. Although the study focused on race/ethnic relations, we assume there is an underlying commonality among all forms of intolerance and oppression, whether people are the subject of harassment because of race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical disabilities, or any other kind of “difference.”

This research brief presents six of the key findings from the study. The researchers used a nomination process to select 21 schools representing different levels (e.g., elementary, high) and geographic regions of the U.S. To be considered for the study, schools had to have (1) at least three ethnic groups; (2) a tangible history of interethnic conflict, either in the school or community; and (3) leadership that was implementing innovative approaches to prevent racial/ethnic conflict and improve interethnic relations. The researchers conducted qualitative case studies of these schools

to describe approaches used by school leaders in different contexts, collecting data that included interviews with 1009 individuals, observations of 441 classes and other school and community events, and relevant school documents and records.

1. School leaders have the power to influence race relations in a positive direction. The study indicates that schools and districts play a complex and uneasy role in changing race relations, both hindering more positive relations and fostering them as well, often at the same time. The proactive leaders involved in the study helped us understand that, despite powerful constraints and barriers, school leaders can make a positive difference in the area of race relations, at least within their local context. For example, one high school principal instituted three new programs: a human relations program, a conflict resolution program, and a mentoring program for new students. These programs, along with other efforts, functioned as a mutually supportive set of structures that cumulatively built student and teacher leadership in interethnic relations and improved the overall climate of the school. Across the 21 schools, proactive leadership in interethnic relations resulted in numerous positive outcomes, such as improved interethnic relations among students; increased academic achievement; improved student behavior indicators; increased staff collaboration; increased staff awareness about interethnic relations and diversity; and increased involvement of diverse parents.

2. Each incoming school leader steps into a different context that may hinder or support the development of positive race relations. Some schools and their leaders, because of pre-existing contexts, face more barriers and rely on fewer contextual supports to promote positive interethnic relations. For example, in schools where segregated groupings of students (e.g., tracking) cannot be quickly changed because of district policies, leaders who wanted to promote positive interethnic relations had to develop structures to bring students together outside of class time. Yet, all schools in the study benefited from some contextual supports that made the development of positive intergroup relations more likely. For example, several schools benefited from strong parental and community support; others from their small size, which made relationship building easier; and others from substantially larger per pupil funding that allowed for program development in interethnic relations.

Districts can play a critical role in creating support structures that enhance school-level efforts to build positive interethnic relations. Nine of the 21 schools benefited from

substantial district supports. Some directly affected inter-ethnic relations, such as a district-wide diversity initiative. Other supports were less direct but no less influential, such as drawing school attendance boundaries to maintain diversity in the schools, and providing weekly, paid time for teachers to collaborate with each other.

3. Proactive school leaders attend to underlying as well as overt conflicts. We found that conflicts in these schools and communities could be viewed along a continuum. The most overt conflicts, such as physical fights and racial slurs, are at one end; underlying conflicts and tensions, such as avoidance of certain groups and perceptions of unequal treatment, are in the middle. At the other end are the root causes of racial/ethnic conflicts, including segregation, racism, and inequality—conditions endemic to the larger society but also, to some extent, amenable to local change efforts. When school leaders operate from the assumption that overt kinds of conflict are the only ones to be concerned about, they place themselves in a reactive role. The leaders in our study tended to reframe the problem, recognizing overt conflict as a “symptom,” and underlying tensions and root causes as the “illness.” By staying tuned to the more subtle tensions that may be related to race or ethnicity, these leaders were able to identify problems more accurately and develop activities and structures to build a stronger interethnic community.

4. Many other role groups besides the principal can lead efforts to improve interethnic relations. In addition to leadership by the principal, we documented cases of leadership by teachers, counselors, parents, students, community members, superintendents, and others. In schools where the administration was largely Euro-American, we noted principals encouraging leadership among people of color and others who care deeply about achieving a more equitable, socially just, and respectful environment. This paved the way for more diverse leaders to take on formal leadership roles in the future, and ensured that efforts to improve human relations were not “owned” by any one individual or group. Thus they had a greater likelihood of being sustained.

5. Organizing themes such as personalization, non-violence, democracy, and community building serve as the “glue” that connects vision to concrete approaches. Proactive leaders avoided the common pitfall of having a “hodgepodge” of unrelated approaches. Each study school exhibited a unique blend of multiple approaches. For example, in one middle school, the theme of personalization was expressed in several ways: the incoming principal met with all teachers and students to identify priority needs, such as the need for safety and security, and students’ need for more after-school activities; a team structure was developed to cultivate more personal relationships among students, teachers, and parents; and several staff with similar cultural backgrounds to students and parents were hired to enhance communication across language barriers and to help mediate

cultural differences. The thematic cluster was much more than the sum of its parts; it reflected the vision of that school’s leadership and was laced with particular values.

6. Schools do not have systems in place to track improvements in race/ethnic relations. Most school leaders and teachers could tell whether race/ethnic relations had improved or worsened during the past years, but no school had a system of tracking progress in intergroup relations. Many disciplinary referral categories (e.g., the term “defiant” in one school) are subjective and do not lend themselves to valid monitoring of patterns. In addition, students told us that many racial conflicts are never reported to any school authority. Moreover, the phenomenon to be measured needs to be defined. Most efforts we documented went far beyond reducing racial conflict. Because leaders used a multitude of approaches designed to build more harmonious relations and address the root causes of racial/ethnic conflict, the impact of such approaches would not be captured by the single measure of “decreased racial conflict.” Rather, they would be reflected in other indicators of a more positive school environment, such as higher academic achievement, more collaboration among faculty, and a better reputation of the school in the community.

Conclusion

If schools are to become more like the ones in the study – safe and respectful environments where positive interethnic relations can flourish – policy makers, principals, and others need to make intergroup relations a priority area in education and take appropriate action. While some school leaders make human relations a priority, they do so largely because of personal characteristics or dire need, not because any professional development program cultivated these skills. If one of the functions of school is to prepare young people to live cooperatively and respectfully in a diverse world, then school leaders need to be better prepared to lead this effort.

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