

Mutually Beneficial Learning

Tackling the achievement gap by using culturally responsive practices

Heidi Decker-Maurer

Despite best intentions, the news is consistent. Wisconsin continues to trail the nation in achievement between white students and students of color. Since a landmark study in 1994, data has shown that Wisconsin's students of color have

trailed their white peers in nearly every measurement, from test scores to graduation rates. The data shows they also experience higher suspension rates. Various initiatives have been tried, but the question remains: what can we do to close the achievement gap so ALL of Wisconsin's students can succeed?

Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, the Kellner Family Chair in Urban Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has conducted research into the problem of racial disparity in Wisconsin education. Her findings point to a crucial oversight that curriculum and classroom management strategies fail to address: the lived experiences of students of color. According to the

Department of Public Instruction, there are nearly a quarter million students of color in Wisconsin, yet more than 70 percent of teachers are white and female. Their perceptions of the school experience can be vastly different.

Our teachers have always had a reputation for caring and for giving their best efforts to teach, but meaningful change can only take place when educators are willing to try a different approach that takes into account the differences in culture that exist in schools. In its mission to ensure ALL students learn and are successful in life, the Wisconsin RtI Center has identified culturally responsive practices as a key strategy educators and education leaders can



THE QUESTION REMAINS:

What can we do to close the achievement gap so ALL of Wisconsin's students can succeed?



The majority of students in the Bayfield School District are American Indian. The culture of its students are integrated into every aspect of the school.

use to help students become interested, engaged, and feel a sense of belonging in the school environment.

■ What are Culturally Responsive Practices?

In short, culturally responsive practices enable practitioners to manage the dynamics of cultural difference in a way that benefits both themselves and students. Using an approach that values community and family worldviews, educators can build more effective relationships with students and make reliable connections between learning and lived experience.

The Wisconsin RtI Center facilitates this work by emphasizing the crucial importance of culturally responsive practices when helping schools plan and develop multi-level systems of support. In addition, the

center provides a dedicated training series that helps practitioners undertake this work. Since educators want ALL of their students to succeed, this approach gives them the tools to recognize perceptions that may be affecting student achievement.

■ Stage 1: WILL

Will is the desire to engage in the work, even though it is sometimes personal and uncomfortable.

Education professionals want all students to be successful. Achieving this goal means determining how the system serves some students and not others — and committing to addressing discrepancies. The place to start is with self-awareness about how things “are supposed to be” versus how things are. Organizations and individuals must take an honest look at their school’s data, examine

their own belief systems, and actively acknowledge how their own personal and professional worldviews impact how they perceive themselves and others.

■ Stage 2: FILL

Fill involves gaining information about — and an understanding of — the different populations within the schools, districts, and communities.

Self-examination allows adults to recognize the way they perceive students. Becoming educated about the values and beliefs of students’ families, communities, and cultures provides crucial contextual understanding of the students’ cultural worldviews — including beliefs about school. Guiding staff in reframing their cultural understanding is crucial for cementing positive interactions with families and students.

The **Wisconsin Response to Intervention (RtI) Center** is a product of collaboration between the Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) Statewide Network and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). The center, located in the offices of CESA 10, was created to assist Wisconsin’s educational system to build capacity, adopt and implement high-quality practices, make informed decisions, ensure sustainability of efforts, and increase success for all students.

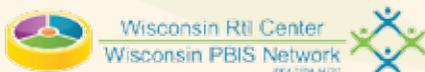


▶ A Visual to Guide the Work

One way the Wisconsin RtI Center illustrates culturally responsive practices is through this graphic that was co-developed with the center, the Department of Public Instruction, and the Disproportionality Technical Assistance Network. The Model to Inform Culturally Responsive Practices provides a pathway to guide individuals, schools, districts, and leadership when undertaking this professional journey.

The Model to Inform Culturally Responsive Practices describes the beliefs, knowledge, and practices Wisconsin educators, schools, and districts need to reach and teach diverse students.

It also helps school and district administrators deliberately and intentionally plan how to approach this work and communicate importance and urgency to their staff members.



Sources: Liang, X., & Zhang, G. (2009). Indicators to evaluate pre-service teachers' cultural competence. *Evaluation & Research In Education*, 22(1), 17-31.
 Muhammad, A., & Hollie, S. (2012). *The will to lead, the skill to teach*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
 State of Washington Professional Educators Standard Board. (2009). *Preparing teachers for schools as they are: Recommendations for cultural competence for all teachers in Washington State*. Olympia, WA: State of Washington Department of Public Instruction.

Stage 3: SKILL

Skill means developing the ability to be respectful of others' worldviews, and use methods that make learning relevant to student experience, ability, and aspirations.

After cultivating will and fill, educators need to transform knowledge into practice by leveraging lessons learned from self-awareness work and from learning about the worldviews of other cultures. Application involves adults using this new knowledge to build bridges between student home culture and "academic" culture. Incorporating culturally familiar experiences, roles, and situations helps make learning more relatable. Guiding staff in ways to connect school learning to students' lived experiences creates relevance that encourages engagement.

Respecting student heritage, beliefs, and prior learning transforms the learning environment into a place that is safe for students to be who they are while learning academic and social tools for becoming their best possible selves.

Evidence-Based Practices

The work and recommendations of top researchers have informed all of the Wisconsin RtI Center's efforts to remedy the state's achievement gap.

Incorporating culturally familiar experiences, roles, and situations helps make learning more relatable.

The center's approach draws from Glenn E. Singleton's work on confronting racism; Dr. Anthony Muhammad's work on changing school culture; Dr. Sharroky Hollie's work on culturally and linguistically appropriate approaches to teaching; Dr. Xin Liang and Gang Zhang's work on pre-service teacher cultural competence; and the State of Washington's recommendations for cultural competence.

In addition, the research and work of Wisconsin education equity leaders, Dr. Shelly Zion and Dr. Ladson-Billings, has shaped the center's philosophy on tackling the problem on the state level. Their professional wisdom and research-proven results provided evidence-based foundations for the center's work.

From Theory to Practice

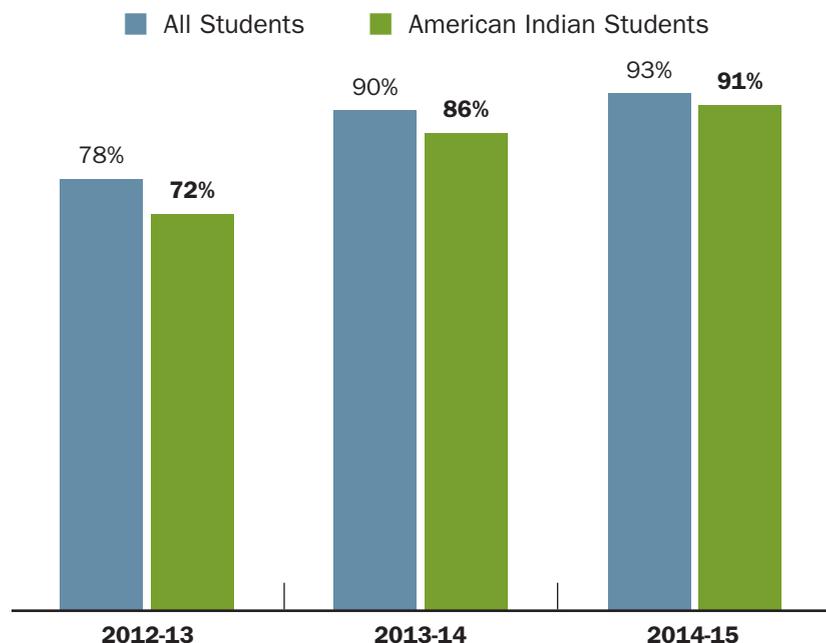
Wisconsin educators have been working on the problem for decades, and many different initiatives across the state were experiencing pockets

of success. The center drew on this collective wisdom to inform the creation of a multi-level system of support that addressed the needs of all students, with an emphasis on bridging differences in culture.

In addition, the center's culturally responsive training series was developed to lead practitioners through this work. Andrea Davis — co-founder of a cultural and academic enrichment program for African-American students — joined the Wisconsin RtI Center to serve as the culturally responsive practices coordinator. Successful practices were identified, aligned to culturally responsive best practices, and were adapted and scaled up to reach the largest possible audience. In addition, these practices are at the core of all the center's work, and are woven into all aspects of the training, guidance, and support offered to all schools that are implementing a multi-level system of support.

Rising Graduation Rates in Bayfield

from 2012-13 to 2014-15



Onalaska's Culturally Responsive Journey

What Successful Implementation Looks Like

As mentioned before, many schools engaged in this work have realized positive outcomes not only for their students of color, but for all student populations. Bayfield High School in northern Wisconsin is one such school. Doing the work of WILL-FILL-SKILL, they examined their beliefs, learned about student culture, and made deliberate choices that would provide an

environment where students could flourish.

At Bayfield High School, 75 percent of the students are American Indian. Recognizing the connection between student engagement and academic achievement, the leadership team purposefully decided to include the culture of students in every aspect of the school. They wanted students

to see themselves in the building and in the curriculum — in a way they had not before. According to Pupil Services Director Sandy Raspotnik, “We needed kids to come here, feel safe and feel like they belonged.”

Positive cultural imaging throughout the school fosters this sense of belonging. A mosaic of a tribal leader, an enormous dream-catcher in the entryway, and a wild-life mosaic in the cafeteria represent student connections to their past, their heritage, and nature. Curriculum includes Ojibwe language and culture, as well as outdoor, project-based learning that validates their traditional way of life.

Bayfield school leaders believe this commitment to culture has increased student engagement, leading to a decrease in suspension rates and an increase in graduation rates. Since incorporating culturally responsive practices within the school, they have seen an 80 percent drop in suspensions for American Indian students — as well as a 65 percent drop in suspensions for all students. In addition, graduation rates among American Indian students rose by 19 percent, and by 15 percent for all students.



Onalaska's Culturally Responsive Journey

Wisconsin Fill Center/PBIS Network

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If you'd like to learn more

about the Onalaska School District's work in embracing culturally responsive practices, watch the brief video at:

goo.gl/fKB52d



The Onalaska School District holds “Equity Day,” an in-service training for educators where they learn about student cultural worldviews and perspectives.

■ Scaling Up to the District Level

After a self-assessment revealed the potential for improving their cultural competence, the Onalaska School District chose to adopt a culturally responsive approach to teaching and learning. Lasting change takes time, so they spent a year building their knowledge. They started with a small team and then scaled up professional development to everyone in the district.

They learned that — whether intentionally or not — adult behaviors communicate teacher attitudes and beliefs about students. Self-reflection allowed them to uncover unrealized biases so they could shift their approach to teaching. They learned about student cultural worldviews and perspectives in order to build understanding and better reciprocal relationships with students.

To maintain progress, their equity committee hosts annual in-service

training. Deepening their understanding of student culture allows educators to differentiate instruction in the classroom.

According to former Onalaska Northern Hills Principal Curt Rees, “...it just boils down to really knowing your students, knowing yourself as an educator, and then making appropriate steps to help each student to achieve the progress that they want — and that they need — to make.”

By adopting culturally responsive practices, the district has seen a ripple effect that goes well beyond improved teacher-student classroom interactions. These practices have transformed entire schools, energized the district, and the effects have spread to families and the broader community as a whole.

■ Mutually Beneficial Learning

Bayfield High and the Onalaska School District have seen positive

results from adopting this approach. Educators and school systems undertaking this work benefit from the richness that diversity brings to teaching and learning, and have been rewarded with the satisfaction that comes from helping students succeed.

Knowledge of self and others gives needed perspective that enables practitioners to make learning relevant, respectful, and relatable. Schools that value student culture build trust, and encourage the self-confidence needed for students to become their best selves. Now is the time for all Wisconsin schools to join on this journey, to ensure success for all of the students we serve.

For more information on the Wisconsin RtI Center’s work, visit wisconsinrticenter.org. ■

Heidi Decker-Maurer is a staff writer for the Wisconsin RtI Center. The Wisconsin RtI Center is a collaborative project between the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and the CESA Statewide Network.

Students at Dodgeville High School sign the final beam to be placed in the construction of the new additions.



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