



# Promoting Culturally Competent Teaching

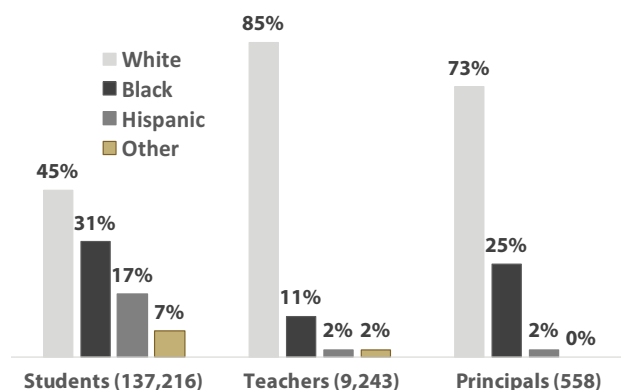
August 2017

This policy brief discusses the benefits of cultural competence and examples of implementation. The analysis concludes with recommendations for promoting culturally competent schools in Delaware.

## What is Cultural Competence?

Research shows that an education workforce that reflects the demographics of the students they teach leads to improved student outcomes, especially for populations of students at-risk.<sup>1</sup> However, in many schools throughout Delaware the percentage of minority teachers and administrators is much lower than the share of minority students (see figure). Because these gaps exist, teachers should understand students' backgrounds to ensure that their biases and values do not negatively impact the student's education.

### Delaware Shares of Minority Groups for Students, Teachers, and Principals 2016–2017



Source: Delaware Department of Education's Teacher and Leader Effectiveness Unit, 2017

Culture plays a central role in learning; therefore, an awareness of students' cultural and ethnic backgrounds is a tool in developing a positive academic environment. Cultural competence is multifaceted, encompassing culture, language, race, and ethnicity. The definition of cultural competence in education varies among different stakeholders and organizations. The National Education Association (NEA) defines cultural competence as "the ability to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than our own."<sup>2</sup> Cultural competence involves interpersonal awareness, cultural knowledge, and a skill set that together promotes impactful cross-cultural teaching.

## The Case for Cultural Competence

The K–12 population in the United States is transforming racially and ethnically. In fact, Delaware is diversifying more rapidly than the nation at-large.<sup>3</sup> As of the 2016–17 school year, 55% of the Delaware's students are nonwhite (see figure). However, while the K–12 student population is becoming increasingly more diverse, the diversity of teachers and school leaders is not.

These racial disparities underscore the cultural and ethnic gaps that exist between students and educators in Delaware. When educators are unaware of the cultural differences that exist between them and their students, "unintentional clashes" may result.<sup>3</sup> These clashes occur when an individual from one cultural or ethnic group does not understand the symbolic meanings, behavioral conventions, or language of another group.<sup>4</sup> A lack of awareness of students' cultural backgrounds may mean teachers and administrators lack the necessary skills to in-

teract with students of all cultures and ethnicities and may misinterpret classroom behaviors. One result of this lack of awareness may be disproportionate school discipline. For example, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights found that black students are three times more likely to be suspended and expelled as white students.<sup>5</sup> Biases may result in higher rates of suspension and expulsion for minority students.

## Benefits of Cultural Competence

Understanding cultural competence can bridge the cultural differences among teachers, administrators, and school communities. Cultural competence recognizes that multicultural education and educational equity and excellence are deeply intertwined for students.<sup>6</sup> Diverse students may benefit from different teaching strategies.<sup>2</sup> Educators who are culturally competent have the opportunity to tailor their teaching styles and classroom practices to the specific needs of students with diverse cultural identities, and in turn, help promote their academic success. In addition, educators who acknowledge and understand cultural differences are better suited to promote parent and family engagement.<sup>2</sup> For example, knowing the native language spoken by English language learners in the community strengthens communication with families. This is important because increased parent engagement has a positive impact on school attendance, test scores, and rates of school discipline.<sup>7</sup> Finally, cultural competence can help foster a school environment that challenges discrimination and tolerance and reinforces the values important in a democratic society.<sup>2</sup>

## Cultural Competence in Education

Cultural competence can be incorporated into the classroom setting through multiple strategies. Educators can develop an understanding of both their students' cultures and how their own culture influences their teaching. This understanding can then be applied to their practices in the classroom, including classroom management, curriculum, and parent engagement efforts.

There are several characteristics that describe culturally competent educators, including:<sup>8</sup>

- Develop an awareness of differences that exist between cultures
- Critically and creatively apply understanding of diverse cultures
- Facilitate open cultural exchanges in the classroom
- Adapt curriculum and classroom activities to better connect with students

At the classroom level, teachers can look to apply an awareness of cultural competence to multiple aspects of practice such as classroom management, curriculum, and parent and family interaction.

### *Classroom Management*

The goal of culturally competent classroom management is not control and compliance but rather to provide equal learning opportunities to all students. In order to provide equal learning opportunities, educators must realize that conventional classroom management strategies are not culturally neutral and in fact are often geared toward predominately white, middle class students.<sup>9</sup>

Strategies for implementing culturally competent classroom management include:<sup>7</sup>

1. **Recognize personal biases and how they may impact their expectations of students and classroom behavior.** Teachers can engage in readings and discussions about privilege or teachers can write personal identity stories that reflect on how their own identities are socially constructed.
2. **Expand on their knowledge of their students' cultural backgrounds.** General knowledge can give teachers and administrators a better idea about cultural differences associated with rules of behavior, communication, and learning styles.
3. **Apply an understanding to their classroom management styles.** Examine how classroom policies and instruction techniques might be tailored toward one cultural or ethnic group. For example, teachers can evaluate which classroom behaviors are considered "disrespectful" due to cultural biases.

Additionally, teachers should communicate clear expectations of behavior to avoid confusion and to be aware of inconsistencies in how consequences are applied for disciplinary incidents.

## Curriculum

According to Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, culturally responsive curriculum is an integral element in reversing poor academic outcomes for students of color.<sup>10</sup> Culturally responsive curriculum does not mean replacing existing standards and curriculum but rather integrating cultural information into curriculum. Teachers and administrators can integrate multiple cultural perspectives into the study of literature, mathematics, science, and the social sciences. Culturally responsive curriculum helps students develop their higher-order critical thinking skills, providing opportunities to apply interdisciplinary, cross-cultural approaches to learning.

Strategies for integrating culturally competent curriculum include:

1. **Include multiple cultural perspectives:** For example, U.S. history is often taught through one perspective; westward expansion is often taught through the lens of white settlers. Teachers should also include the perspectives of the indigenous groups that were impacted by the expansion.<sup>11</sup>
2. **Weave students' own cultural backgrounds into curriculum through student-powered activities:** Students can be asked to research topics that relate to their community or present artifacts from home that connect to their cultural identity.<sup>12</sup>
3. **Confront and engage in controversial topics:** Culturally competent teachers incorporate discussions of racism, historical atrocities, and powerlessness into lessons.<sup>13</sup>

## Promoting Parent and Family Engagement

Because parents and families possess the most intricate knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds, teachers should get to know students' families and engage them in the learning process. By getting to

know students' families, teachers and administrators can gain insight into the influence home environments may have on attitudes and behaviors as well as how students learn best.<sup>14</sup>

Strategies for promoting parent and family engagement include:<sup>12</sup>

1. **Engage parents and families by sending out regular communications or hosting family nights either at school or at local community centers.**
2. **Visit local community centers and organizations to find out more about students' cultural activities and practices.**

## Recommendations for Promoting Culturally Competent Schools in Delaware

Delaware administrators and policymakers can meet the needs of a changing student population by enacting policies and standards that promote cultural competence. Delaware can strengthen quality standards and consider requiring teachers to take courses related to cultural competence. Similarly, Delaware can integrate cultural competence into teacher preparation programs and professional development to ensure that teachers have the content knowledge and strategies needed to serve diverse learners.

## Including Cultural Competence in State Teaching Standards

Delaware can strengthen the teacher standards related to cultural competence to reflect a commitment to diversity and to include the needs of the state's unique cultural landscape. Currently, the standards require that teachers "use an understanding of individual differences and diverse cultures and communities to ensure inclusive learning environments that enable each learner to meet high standards."<sup>15</sup> Delaware can look toward the multiple states that have strengthened state teacher standards and include more requirements

related to cultural competence. Sixteen states explicitly reference cultural competence as a priority in teaching standards, and seventeen states reference issues specific to English language learners.<sup>8</sup> California incorporates culture, race, and ethnicity into teacher preparation program standards and teacher competencies. The state requires teacher preparation programs to “include study and discussion of the historical and cultural traditions of major cultural and ethnic groups in California society.”<sup>8</sup> In addition, competency standards related to English language learners require teachers to have knowledge of linguistic development and first and second language acquisition.<sup>8</sup> Delaware can look to examples like California to add more definition to state standards related to cultural competence.

In response to strengthened standards, teacher preparation programs and on-going professional development can prioritize cultural competence. Teacher preparation programs can place students in practicums and internships where they serve children from diverse cultures and English language learners.<sup>16</sup> In addition to pre-service training, professional development opportunities for educators can prioritize cultural competence by offering related learning opportunities. Professional development should be tailored to the population of students and cannot be one-size fits all. For example, North Dakota has a “Multicultural Education and Native American Studies” requirement that requires teachers to have a basic understanding of Native American cultures and stereotypes. All teachers, including in-state and out-of-state applicants, must take the Native American studies course within two years of earning their initial teachers license.

As Delaware’s student population rapidly diversifies, the teacher workforce should adapt to serve the new cultural landscape of K–12 schools. The above recommendations can help ensure that Delaware educators are equipped to adapt their teaching styles to the needs of diverse learners and are able to create an environment in classrooms that respects both local and global cultures.

## Authors

Taylor Hawk, Public Administration Fellow, Institute for Public Administration, UD

Kelly Sherretz, Assistant Director of the Partnership for Public Education

Ariana Minella, Project Coordinator of the Partnership for Public Education

## Work Cited

1. Goldhaber, D., Theobald, R., & Tien, C. (2015). The theoretical and empirical arguments for diversifying the teacher workforce: A review of the evidence. The Center for Education Data & Research, University of Washington Bothell.
2. Van Roekel, N. P. D. (2008). Promoting educators’ cultural competence to better serve culturally diverse students. Washington, DC: National Education Agency.
3. Population by race/ethnicity (2017). Delaware Focus
4. Bertani, T. A., Carroll, L., Castle, M. H., Davies, K. E., Hurley, A. M., Joos, T. L., ... & Valenti, M. (2010). Culturally Responsive Classrooms.
5. Data snapshot: school discipline. (2014). U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights.
6. Gay, G., & Kirkland, K. (2003). Developing cultural critical consciousness and self-reflection in preservice teacher education. *Theory into practice*, 42(3), 181-187.
7. National Education Association. (2009). Research spotlight on parental involvement in education. *NEA Reviews of the Research on Best Practices in Education*, 1-5.
8. Trumbull, E., & Pacheco, M. (2005). Leading with Diversity: Cultural Competencies for Teacher Preparation and Professional Development. Education Alliance at Brown University.
9. Evertson, C. M., & Weinstein, C. S. (Eds.). (2013). *Handbook of classroom management: Research, practice, and contemporary issues*. Routledge.
10. Culturally responsive curriculum at a glance. (n.d.). Teaching Tolerance at The Southern Poverty Law Center
11. Kozleski, E. B. (2010). Culturally Responsive Teaching Matters!. Online Submission.
12. Reshaping the curriculum (n.d.). The Education Alliance at Brown University
13. Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of teacher education*, 53(2), 106-116.
14. Addressing Diversity in Schools: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Richards, Heraldo V; Brown, Ayanna F; Forde, Timothy B *Teaching Exceptional Children*; Jan/Feb 2007; 39, 3; ProQuest Education Journals pg. 64
15. 14-1500 Del. Admin. Code §1597

### Partnership for Public Education

182 Graham Hall, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716

phone: 302-831-0184 | email: [ppe-info@udel.edu](mailto:ppe-info@udel.edu) | [www.sites.udel.edu/ppe/](http://www.sites.udel.edu/ppe/)