



Overcoming Barriers to Change

School leaders listened to parents who had been marginalized, and brought down the institutional barriers to change at their school by using cultural proficiency tools.

Acknowledging achievement gaps has not been an easy process for schools across California or the United States. Our story is not one of educators and parents coming together to agree that a problem needs to be addressed. No, our story has been one of struggle, mistrust, anger, and – most recently – courage.

This story of courage did not begin in the typical manner, with a collective effort from administrators, teachers and classified employees. It began when educators were faced with the moral and ethical dilemma of needing to do what they knew was right for students and deciding to act. The need to act began with site administrators knowing that if their school was going to move forward, they needed to listen to a parent population that historically had remained silent.

This parent group, which incidentally represented the majority of the student demographics of the school, had long felt disconnected from the school. Once administrators acknowledged this perception and reality, all it took was involving parents and community members in ways that shook the system and overcame institutional barriers to change.

The purpose of this narrative is to chronicle the journey of a group of concerned parents and community members and educators as they worked collaboratively using culturally proficient practices as catalysts for shifting school culture. This journey has four key components: seeing the need; cre-

By Joseph Domingues, Peter Flores, Delores B. Lindsey and Randall B. Lindsey

ating a platform for authentic parent voice/ meaningful partnership; organizing the community; and shifting the conversation from school-centric to community-centric through a school-community approach.

Seeing the need

School administrators Joseph Domingues and Peter Flores, co-authors of this article, acknowledged a movement that grew to include many parents and community members who organized to confront what they deemed as resistance from the school. The parents and community members wanted to address the social justice and educational equity issues related to lack of access for Latino students and parents.

Organizers yearned for more meaningful parent participation relative to educational disparities among district schools related to demographics and economics. Specifically, their concerns included lack of enrollment of many Latino students in year-round math and English, lack of enrollment in a-g college-ready academic courses, and lack of academic opportunities for active English language learners and redesignated students, who comprised 80 percent of the student population.

Parents and community members brought public awareness that students were not receiving adequate services as evidenced by low redesignation of English learning students, and low graduation and college-going rates. These factors, combined with a highly school-centric climate, gave parents a sense of urgency about having more meaningful voice in their children's education.

Unfortunately, most of the changes parents wanted to discuss are typically considered to be "legal" issues determined through collective bargaining processes. The more the parents and community members expressed their concerns and pushed for changes, the more resistance they experienced, leaving them feeling isolated and ignored by the school and vital stakeholders.

Creating a platform for voice

This small group of organizing concerned parents and community members began as the core leadership group known as *Que Padre!* (What a parent!), and also *Totally*

Awesome! – names that had arisen out of the school's Cafecito meetings. The school's newest administrators created Cafecito, (or Coffee with the Principal) meetings as a venue for encouraging parent voice and school involvement. Cafecito meetings, held quarterly, had swelled to include over 700 English- and Spanish-speaking parents. Parents and community members also began to attend school board meetings to express their concerns and demands for change, which were met with resistance.

The parents and community members of Santa Maria High School, not unlike their counterparts across the district, felt compelled to act and were well schooled on how to organize and press for change. And, organize they did! They read and digested former California Superintendent of Education Jack O'Connell's "A Framework for Closing California's Academic Achievement Gap," taking particular note of this passage: "Access to high-quality educational experiences is the right of every student and the responsibility of the state. Today, the State of California has not lived up to this commitment for all students, particularly poor, racial/ethnic minority students; English learners and students with disabilities. This need not be" (California P-16 Council, 2008).

Organizing the community

The group realized it needed to move forward with or without the support of the school and district stakeholders. The first step they took was to formally organize into a coherent parent and community union group with a single purpose: Wanting what is best for students. The parents named themselves PCIC, Parents Community Involvement

Committee. PCIC published a "platform" on which they detailed the goals and change initiatives they wanted administrators and teachers to work with them to achieve so that all students could be successful.

The formal PCIC Platform was published in the local news media. They also referenced their awareness of the California parent trigger law, which puts significant power in the hands of parents. This action



certainly got the attention of the educators and school staff. Upon the invitation of the PCIC leadership, members grew to include site administrators, teachers, and staff members from the feeder elementary district, the high school district, and the leadership from the teachers union.

Conversations about meeting the needs of the students took place outside PCIC meetings as well. Discussions began to shift from talking about what was wrong with the school to what they could do together to make things better.

This shift in conversations led to a more inclusive model for the community organization leaders. The platform shaped by PCIC included the motto, "No to Excuses – Yes to Solutions," with an undeniable student-centered focus. Goals included ensuring:

1. Best education possible:

- All classes meet A-G requirements or technical pathway.
- Students are prepared for college/technical trade school/military acceptance.
- High CAHSEE pass rates .
- High English Language Learner success: Re-designation and CAHSEE pass rates.

2. Best school community

- Shared input and balance of power among all stakeholders.
- Cultural proficiency partnership focused on what is best for ALL students.
- Cohesive, positive working relationship to obtain the best results and resources.

3. Best results

- Demonstrated positive improvement each year in school climate, instruction, and academic and athletic success.
- Educators accept primary responsibility and accountability for student learning.
- School and district comparisons that are

favorable to others in the city, county and state.

Eventually, the PCIC platform evolved to become the Alliance for School Professionalism and Inspiration to Reach Educational Excellence (ASPIRE). The new organization included additional partners to form a P-14 school community model, including Hancock Community College administrators and counselors; Santa Maria Joint Union High School District Board Members, administrators and staff; and Santa Maria Bonita Elementary School District Board Members, administrators, and staff.

The ASPIRE motto became “Change is Occurring – Embrace it and Support it with Pride, No to Excuses – Yes to Solutions.” A positive relationship began to develop between the parents and the California Teachers Association representatives at each school. Continued support for shifting the conversation from blaming the kids for their circumstances to focusing on the educational environment came from the use of the Four Tools of Cultural Proficiency.

Overcoming barriers through cultural proficiency

Every narrative has a back-story. The back-story for Santa Maria High School is about the parallel worlds that existed for a few years. While the parents were struggling to find answers to their questions about how their students were being served, two school administrators, co-authors of this article, were finding their way on their leadership journeys using the Four Tools of Cultural Proficiency.

Peter Flores, assistant principal at SMHS, had been introduced to cultural proficiency several years before his arrival at SMHS and had shared the early stages of his journey with Joseph Domingues, SMHS principal. Together, they researched the work of Delores and Randall Lindsey and invited us, also co-authors of this article, to join them on their journey of moving toward culturally proficient leadership practices.

Their first steps were to do their own “personal” work of self-assessing their cultural knowledge and their core values for equity, diversity and inclusion (Lindsey, Jungwirth, Pahl, & Lindsey, 2009). At that point they asked themselves: Are we who we say we are, and what does the data show? After analyzing the school-wide data, they could not deny the evidence. The data did not align with their core values or with the mission of SMHS or the district. They were compelled by a deep sense of professional and moral responsibility that inspired and solidified their courage to change. The message became clear to them: We must engage the entire school community in becoming a culturally proficient school!

As leaders of the school community, they knew they needed to take the initiative to move forward with the parent group to meet the needs of the students. They used the lens of cultural proficiency to examine the school-wide data and engage in professional learning conversations with educators and the community to focus on the needs of SMHS students.

Concomitantly, the parent group was examining similar data and was equally unhappy. They were organizing to move forward and needed a solid framework on

The Value of First Financial Membership Really Adds Up for ACSA Members!

Providing Better Value, Products and Service for Over 80 Years!

- ◆ **Fixed-Rate Platinum Visa Credit Card** with no balance transfer fee
- ◆ **Checking Accounts** with more free ATM access than the big banks
- ◆ **Auto Loans** with competitive rates and terms to fit your budget
- ◆ **First Mortgage with No Points, No Fees¹**
- ◆ **And Much More!**

Call: (800) 537-8491 ◆ Click: www.ffc.u.org

FIRST FINANCIAL
C R E D I T ◆ U N I O N



All loans are subject to credit approval and to all First Financial Credit Union (FFCU) policies and procedures. Loan rates are based on credit history, collateral criteria and term of loan. Other terms and conditions subject to change without notice. ¹There are no Origination, Administration, Document or Funding Fees. Call for complete details. FFCU is an Equal Opportunity Lender. Federally insured by NCUA. NMLS# 78273. All information is accurate as of July 2015.

which to build their “platform.” Flores and Domingues saw the opportunity to present cultural proficiency as that framework for courageous and positive dialogue.

With careful and intentional planning, they formed an initial cohort, now known as Cohort One, of educators, parents and community members to begin their own journey toward Culturally Proficient Education Practices. Cohort One comprised teachers, administrators, counselors, classified staff members, community members and parents.

The first two professional learning sessions were held at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. Delores and Randall Lindsey provided support for the Cohort grounded by the Four Tools of Cultural Proficiency and shaped by their two-day museum experiences.

The cohort members left Los Angeles prepared and motivated to work together for the upcoming years as a collaborative group facing difficult issues with a new commitment toward serving all students in the Santa Maria High School Community. The Cohort engaged in extensive book study during the year to guide their conversations and deeper learning about the Tools of Cultural Proficiency (Lindsey, *et al.*, 2009).

Courage to change

This story continues to evolve as a story of growth, challenges, and adventure. The work of cultural proficiency at SMHS is now in its fifth year. The data are beginning to reveal progress for groups of students who had not been successful before. The “movement” is communitywide, and new partners are engaged in ASPIRE work.

In October 2014, Flores and Domingues requested that Corwin, publisher of the Cultural Proficiency books, allow SMHS to host the International Cultural Proficiency Institute, scheduled for June 2015. The request was granted and the two administrators, along with Corwin staff, planned every detail to host an international conference with the motto, “Courage to Change,” at a local high school. As of this writing, all assessments indicate the institute to be highly successful, in large part because of the SMHS story.

This is an important story to be shared not

This is an important story to be shared not because of the high level of success indicators, but because of the struggles; the willingness and the courage on the part of the parents, educators, Board of Education and community members to work together in a culturally proficient way to do what’s best for their students.



because of the high level of success indicators, but because of the struggles; the willingness and the courage on the part of the parents, educators, local Board of Education and community members to work together in a culturally proficient way to do what’s best for their students. The Santa Maria story is a model for a cultural proficiency implementation plan that school and district leaders can use to guide their own journey toward culturally proficient leadership practices. ■

References

- California P-16 Council. 2008. *Closing the Achievement Gap: Report of Superintendent Jack O’Connell’s California P-16 Council*. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education.
- Lindsey, Delores B., Jungwirth, Linda, Pahl, Jarvis, V.N.C. (2009). *Culturally*

Proficient Learning Communities: Confronting Inequities through Collaborative Curiosity. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Lindsey, Randall B., Nuri-Robins, Kikanza, & Terrell, Raymond D. (2009). *Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders, 3rd Ed.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin

Joseph Domingues serves as principal of Santa Maria High School in Santa Maria Joint Union High School District, where Peter Flores is assistant principal. Delores B. Lindsey is associate professor of Education Leadership (retired) at California State University San Marcos, and served as Cultural Proficiency education consultant to Santa Maria High School. Randall B. Lindsey is professor emeritus, California State University, Los Angeles and served as consultant to Santa Maria High School.