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As K–12 schools in the United States (U.S.) continue to become more racially and ethnically diverse, it is increasingly important that we provide our educators with professional learning opportunities that increase their cultural competence to ensure all students succeed. Professional learning focused on increasing educators’ cultural competence helps educators to gain awareness of their own cultural identity and views about difference, while simultaneously learning the varying cultural and community norms of their students and the students’ respective families. Cultural competency enables educators to create inclusive learning environments that support and engage all students.

Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) has successfully piloted a series of professional learning opportunities as part of a Cultural Competency Initiative. The goal of the cultural competency professional learning opportunities is to support teachers, coaches, and administrators in providing equitable learning opportunities for all students, particularly those who live in poverty. In the pages that follow we describe the context in BCPS and why cultural competency is fundamental to the mission of the district, the pilot program and how this professional learning series was created, the role of the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED’s) Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant program in taking this initiative to scale throughout the District, and the lessons learned that others interested in implementing this type of initiative can apply to their efforts.

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BCPS is among the largest and most diverse school districts in the United States. Notably, it is the second largest school system in the state of Florida and the sixth largest school system in the United States, serving 271,105 students who represent 208 countries and 181 languages. Additionally, over the past five years, the student population in BCPS has grown increasingly diverse and economically disadvantaged. Between 2012 and 2016, BCPS experienced a 10 percent increase in the percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch and a 30 percent increase in the percentage of students identified as English Language Learners (ELL).

As noted in the district’s strategic plan, given the increasing diversity and poverty in the student population, helping students from low socioeconomic situations is fundamental to the district’s mission. However, as in many other districts across the country, the level of need is not evenly distributed across the schools in BCPS, and there are identifiable areas of high need. The Dillard Innovation Zone is one such high-need area in BCPS.

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The percentages of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch in the Dillard Innovation Zone is 92 percent, which is well above the 62 percent BCPS average.

The following indicators among students in the Dillard Innovation Zone reflect the implications of this significantly higher concentration of high-need students:

- 15 percent demonstrate kindergarten readiness.
- 63 percent are college ready in reading.
- 43 percent are college ready in math.

Even more striking is the observed gap between Black males and all other students in the Dillard Zone:

Although they only represent approximately 50 percent of the student population, black males were suspended disproportionately more often than other students (244 vs. 167).
BCPS’ Cultural Competency Initiative grew out of an effort to support high-needs students in the Dillard Innovation Zone. In order to address the patterns of inequity cited above and improve outcomes for disadvantaged students, a small group of district leaders, acting as ambassadors for the Dillard Innovation Zone, created a strategy aligned to the district’s strategic plan. The strategy addressed all students in the zone, including early learners, middle years, young adults, and responsible citizens, and included the same three focus areas as the District’s strategic plan: high-quality instruction, continuous improvement, and effective communication. The table below highlights key components of the strategy.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High-Quality Instruction</th>
<th>Continuous Improvement</th>
<th>Effective Communication</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Early Learners</strong></td>
<td>Teacher-in-residency coaching and mentoring program to improve quality of pre-K teaching.</td>
<td>Increasing the percentage of Black &amp; disadvantaged children who enter kindergarten ready for success.</td>
<td>Hands-on Classes for Parents on Healthy Foods</td>
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<td>Pre-K/Elementary Preparatory Project</td>
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<td><strong>Middle Years</strong></td>
<td>Vertical alignment of curricula through increased collaboration between middle schools and high schools &amp; collaboration with community agencies, including juvenile courts, to reduce suspensions.</td>
<td>Improving engagement of black &amp; disadvantaged youths in their learning, helping them academically and socially</td>
<td>Experiential College Field Trip (5th Grade)</td>
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<td>Career City in Collaboration With Ranger Good Works</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Young Adults</strong></td>
<td>Direct instructional program for educators in collaboration with Florida Atlantic University, Department of Curriculum, Culture, and Educational Inquiry</td>
<td>Reducing the dropout rate of black &amp; disadvantaged students and helping them graduate high school college and career ready</td>
<td>Youth Mentoring Extravaganza</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>College Tour</td>
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<td>Vocational Tour</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Responsible Citizens</strong></td>
<td>Enhancing the educational and life opportunities for black &amp; disadvantaged students by fostering positive family and community engagement in education.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Community-Based Coaches</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Three elements of the Dillard Innovation Zone strategy particularly influenced the BCPS Cultural Competency Initiative, including the coaching and mentoring program for childcare providers and preschool teachers, career day and experiential college field trips for elementary students, and the direct instructional program in multi-cultural education. The coaching and mentoring program fundamentally informed BCPS conception of effective professional learning opportunities for educators and initiated the collaboration between BCPS and Florida Atlantic University, with whom BCPS has continued to partner in its current Cultural Competency Initiative. The career day and experiential college field trips engaged the local business community and furthered the collaboration between BCPS and Florida Atlantic University, and the development of the direct instructional program in multi-cultural education laid the groundwork for the coach and mentoring program, which is a key component of the current Cultural Competency Initiative.

**Coaching and Mentoring Program for Childcare Providers and Pre-Kindergarten Teachers**

In response to the lack of kindergarten readiness observed in students enrolled in Dillard Innovation Zone schools, BCPS focused on improving the quality of pre-kindergarten teachers and childcare providers through partnership with the National Black Child Development Institute, Wolf Trap Institute for Early Learning Through the Arts, Florida Atlantic University, and the Department of Education Program on Early STEM Learning. BCPS implemented a teacher in residency 12-week coaching and mentoring program with childcare providers in the community and preschool teachers in the schools. Through this high-quality, job-embedded professional development, teacher artists were working alongside childcare providers and pre-school teachers, showing them how to implement standards for early learning and kindergarten readiness standards.

**Career Day and Experiential College Field Trips**

In an effort to enhance the educational and life opportunities for students in the Dillard Innovation Zone, BCPS in partnership with Ranger Good Works sponsors more than 30 programs, including two key programs that focus on exposing students to the community around them. Each May, BCPS and Ranger Good works host a career day “Career City” in a elementary school in the Dillard Innovation Zone. Career City brings over 70 community business partners into the school. Through participation in Career City, more than 800 students have the opportunity to participate in hands-on experiences associated with a variety of different careers, from cooking and baking to engineering and computer information systems. Additionally, each year more than 50 fifth-grade students participate in an experiential field trip to Florida Atlantic University (FAU). As part of this field trip, students spend four nights in the college dormitory, chaperoned by their teachers. While

“When we speak of equity what sets us apart is that we know that the solution to poverty is not money. We know that nutrition, education, and teachers’ lack of understanding are all important. We are focused on the child, the parent, the teacher, and the system.”

Angela Brown, BCPS Director, Coaching And Induction, TIF Program Director
they are on campus, students and teachers participate in classes that are part of a customized curriculum, designed by the FAU faculty. The curriculum for students centers around an entrepreneurial experience supported by classes such as graphic design, business research, marketing, budget planning, web design, business planning, and public speaking. Teachers work alongside students while participating in classes on social justice, critical media literacy, and cultural competence.

**Direct Instructional Program**

To more effectively engage all students in learning, BCPS in collaboration with FAU tailored a series of five pre-existing graduate courses to meet the needs of teachers in addressing cultural bias and building cultural competence. These courses were taught onsite at schools in the Dillard Innovation Zone and included two master teachers from each school. The goal was for the master teachers to become experts in cultural bias and use that expertise to work with teachers on their campus. They were able to work with the curriculum that the teachers were using to instruct their students and identify examples of cultural bias that were present in those curricula. Teachers reflected on how those biases influence their instruction and their standards for their students. They then applied the insights gained through these reflections to the task of deconstructing lesson plans and reconstructing them in a way that reflected equitable practices, such as making implicit biases explicit and discussing alternative perspectives with students.

Through implementation of the Dillard Innovation Zone strategy, BCPS established partnerships with a wide assortment of organizations in the region that represent multiple sectors, including community-based organizations, businesses, non-profits, institutions of higher education, local law enforcement, and foundations. In the progress of implementing this strategy, BCPS and its partners were not only delivering culturally responsive and inclusive educational programs to children and families in the Dillard Innovation Zone, they were also building the cultural competency of the educational staff working with those children and their families. The success of the programs that BCPS implemented as part of the Dillard Innovation Zone strategy established a strong foundation on which to build the expansion of the BCPS Cultural Competency Initiative.
ED’s TIF grant has helped the district to further develop and expand its Cultural Competency Initiative. The purpose of the TIF grant program is to support the implementation of sustainable performance-based compensation systems (PBCS) for teachers, principals, and other personnel in high-need schools in order to increase educator effectiveness and student achievement in those schools. In 2012, BCPS received a TIF 4 grant to support the development and implementation of a PBCS in 28 schools in the Dillard Innovation Zone. In addition to linking educators’ compensation to their performance, BCPS sought to create coaching positions and a comprehensive professional development system that linked evaluation results to training and coaching support. While the TIF 4 schools had coach credentialing and mentoring program for teachers, cultural competence and culturally responsive instruction were not initially a part of the training. When the superintendent assigned a new TIF project director, who was also one of the Dillard Innovation Zone ambassadors and had been the principal at Dillard Elementary, she saw an opportunity to establish a cadre of expert educators with deep knowledge in cultural biases, equity practices, and culturally relevant learning environments by formalizing the credentialing program with a focus on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as a requirement for coaches.

In 2016, BCPS applied for and received a TIF 5 grant to expand the work that it began in the 28 schools in the Dillard Innovation Zone as part of its TIF 4 project. One of the Year 1 goals of the TIF 5 project in BCPS is to have 100 percent of coaches complete the coach credentialing program, in order to provide enhanced support, including job-embedded professional learning and coaching. TIF 5, with its focus on retaining staff, incorporates cultural competency professional learning. The more culturally competent teachers are, the more compassionate they become and the better equipped they are to work with high-needs students. This not only affects the culture of the school but increases teacher efficacy and satisfaction, which should help to retain them.
All teachers, principals, and coaches in TIF schools are required to participate in **culturally responsive teaching training**. Faculty and graduate students affiliated with the graduate program in multi-cultural education at Florida Atlantic University facilitate this full-day training session. Through participation in this training, educators have the opportunity to examine their own biases and deficit perspectives then work on making connections to their practice in the classroom. The training addresses the following objectives:

- Engage in self-reflective practices around issues of biases, equity, and expectations
- Explore the differences between “achievement gap” and “opportunity gap”
- Shift mindsets from deficit thinking to equity pedagogy
- Engage in reflective practices and strategic activities for gaining cultural proficiency around issues of poverty and equity
- Create inclusive, culturally relevant environments for all students that mitigate the educational debt for groups of students

These objectives are achieved through participation in a sequence of individual, small-group, and large-group activities strategically planned and implemented to maximize engagement and learning among the participants. We describe the activities used to facilitate learning in the course of the culturally responsive teaching training below.

The day begins with a reflective activity in which educators complete a self-inventory, responding on the extent to which they agree or disagree with a series of statements about class, privilege, the role of bias in perceiving students, and the root cause of educational disparities. Beginning the day with this type of reflective activity creates a safe space for educators to privately and honestly reflect on their own beliefs before beginning to engage with others, share and discuss, and expand their knowledge of culturally responsive teaching practices. The table below provides illustrative examples of the types of reflective statements included in the inventory. These statements also serve as an anticipation guide that cues participants into key issues and assumptions that they will be engaged in reconsidering throughout the day.
Table 1: Illustrative Examples of Statements Included in the “Anticipation Guide” Self-Inventory

As in the case of their more affluent counterparts, students of poverty are provided equitable opportunities to progress academically

Viewing students of poverty from a deficit perspective or a perspective that focuses on their deficiencies has become a common practice within schools

Our biases/assumptions or lived experiences/backgrounds often impact how we view the achievement of our students and the expectations we have for them.

The group then comes together to read and discuss a one-page summary of seminal research on deficit thinking and contrasts it with a strengths-based approach. For the purposes of the discussion, deficit thinking is “a way of defining students by their perceived weaknesses rather than their community and culture's strengths,” whereas a strengths-based approach is built on the belief that “students who live in poverty are as capable of success as those that are from more affluent communities.” This level setting is important in order to ensure that the group has a shared understanding of the foundational concepts, which are the focus of the day's activities.

In the second activity of the day, participants get to know one another and continue to develop their shared understanding of deficit thinking. Participants break into small working groups for the second activity of the day, which is entitled “messy connections.” Standing in a circle, participants pass a ball of yarn from person to person. As each one passes the yarn, each participant shares a common policy, practice, or behavior from his/her experience that exemplifies deficit thinking. The result of this activity is a physical representation of a complex web of “messy connections” that is difficult to disentangle. This web of messy connections is an allegory for the work that lies ahead of participants, as they strive to disentangle the web of interwoven and interconnected policies, practices, and behaviors that represent the status quo, which is informed by a deficit perspective, in order to create a fabric of policies and practices that are informed by a strengths-based perspective.

In order to begin to challenge this status-quo, participants complete another reflective exercise that focuses on their classroom practices and the extent to which their current practices are contributing to a culture of care that models caring, encourages dialogue, and supports personal connections between participants who reinforce, affirm, and inspire the best in one another. It is this caring and establishment of a culture of caring within the classroom that is a prerequisite for creating a classroom that is a safe space for students of all backgrounds and cultures. The table below provides illustrative examples of the types of reflective statements included in the “Culture of Care” inventory.
Table 2: Illustrative Examples of Statements Included in the “Culture of Care” Inventory

| I provide students with opportunities to share their personal stories or experiences. |
| I make my classroom a safe space for students to speak, express their viewpoints, and to engage in learning. |
| I work with students to establish classroom norms and expectations. |
| I consistently communicate high expectations for my students that are based on a genuine interest in their success and respect for them. |

The culminating activity for the morning involves the analysis of a case study of an African American boy's experience in his sixth-grade gifted, creative writing class. The context for this case study is that the boy’s teacher assigned a creative writing project around the theme of “Youth Violence.” The student chose to write a poem for his assignment that very eloquently and vividly described the boy’s thoughts and feelings in response to several recent instances of violence against young black boys perpetrated by the police who are supposed to protect and serve the community. The participants read the boy's poem. It is clear that the student put more than a fair amount of thought, effort, and emotion into the assignment; however, the teacher never discusses the poem and the issues that it brought up with the student or the class. The teacher doesn't even acknowledge the boy's completion of the assignment or give him any feedback on it. The participants reflect on the impact that the teacher's attempt to ignore and exclude the student's lived experience from the classroom because of her own discomfort may have had on the student, as well as their own comfort or discomfort in facilitating a discussion with their students around difficult issues such as this. Participants also reflect on the opportunity that the classroom teacher could have seized to create a culture of caring in her classroom that was reflective of her students.

The focus of the afternoon is on bridging the gap from theory into practice. Participants learn about the six rules for engagement and conflict resolution, which include:

1. Know yourself
2. Provide safe space
1. Create non-negotiable expectations
2. Seize unexpected teachable moments
3. De-escalate/interrupt conflict
4. Reflect afterwards

The participants unpack each of these rules and discuss specific classroom practices that adhere to and violate each of these rules (i.e., things to do and things to avoid). Going even deeper into culturally responsive pedagogy, participants then complete a jigsaw activity in which they each analyze differences between traditional pedagogical models and culturally inclusive models of instruction as described in the text *Equity Pedagogy: Teaching Diverse Student Populations.* In dyads, participants analyze differences between these two types of pedagogy in one of each of the following dynamics:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connection</th>
<th>The relationship between the teacher and the student(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>The learning community established in the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>The extent to which the teacher incorporates various racial and ethnic backgrounds into instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>The value placed on isolated character traits/values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>The manner in which content is delivered to students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>The extent to which students are encouraged to inquire, question, &amp; explore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consciousness</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Each dyad reviews the content in the relevant chapter of the text that describes their assigned component and summarizes what practice informed by teach type of pedagogy (traditional and equity), would look like, what learning constructs would inform each, and describes how the practices informed by the equity pedagogy contribute to the creation of culturally responsive and inclusive classroom communities. The dyads take turns sharing out with the whole group what they learned about their assigned component, creating a complete picture of equity pedagogy through their combined efforts.

“Relationships are most important to improving education outcomes. Training supports building more effective relationships.”

Robert Runcie
BCPS Superintendent

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The culminating activity for the afternoon is the creation of individual transformational action plans. Participants each identify three goals for their practice, and in collaboration with a small group of peers, they brainstorm strategies or actions to implement in their classroom to support their attainment of each goal. Team members provide feedback to one another on their strategies and actions to increase the level of specificity and maximize the alignment between each goal and the strategies. Before they leave the training, each participant documents the details of the transformational action plans, taking one copy with them and leaving one copy for the instructors. One month following the training, the instructors subsequently reach out to each of the participants to discuss their progress in implementing their plans, reflecting with them on their successes and challenges, and providing guidance and feedback to help address challenges that participants may have encountered in implementing their plans. The individual transformational action plans ultimately take what teachers learned outside of the classroom in theory and translate it into an actionable plan that teachers then put into action in their classrooms.
Conclusion

This description of the pilot and expansion of BCPS’ Cultural Competency Initiative illustrates how an educational organization can build its capacity to engage all students by building on their culture and life experiences as strengths and tools in their learning as opposed to deficits. BCPS recognized inequities in educational opportunities as the root cause of inequitable outcomes in their students; it focused its efforts and solicited resources in the Dillard Innovation Zone in order to design and pilot tools, programs, and supports that would support educators in creating culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments. BCPS is leveraging lessons learned from this experience to take these efforts to scale throughout the district. These lessons include the following:

1. **Collaboration is key to success. The ability to collaborate across units, buildings, offices, and even organizations is essential regardless of the strategies, programs, or initiatives that you are implementing.** The partnerships that BCPS established through the implementation of the Dillard Innovation Zone strategy were fundamental to the success of those programs during the pilot and critical to the development of high-quality professional learning opportunities that are being taken to scale. When the Dillard Innovation Zone ambassadors were seeking resources to support the implementation of their strategy, it was the community-based organizations, businesses, non-profits, institutions of higher education, local law enforcement, and foundations who stepped up. Through these partnerships, BCPS was able to gather evidence of the success of these programs through its initial implementation and pilot that was essential to garnering the supports needed to take these efforts to scale throughout the district.

2. **You’ve got to make sure that you have the best leaders in your school to drive the right kind of culture and environment. From the school leader to teacher leaders, it is important that there is leadership in each school to help establish the culture of the school.** The current TIF project director drove the work that began in the Dillard Innovation Zone; she was an elementary school principal at the time and one of three ambassadors for the Dillard Innovation Zone. Her commitment to meeting the needs of her students led to the organic creation of a variety of programs and initiatives that ultimately informed the creation of the cultural competency through the coaching and mentoring program. Subsequently, the teacher leaders who were engaged as coaches through the TIF program were essential in driving the culture in their schools around cultural competency and self-reflection as part of continuous improvement. Having the right leadership and distributing it throughout the schools in the Dillard Innovation Zone initially, and then throughout the district, has been essential to establishing a culture within BCPS that recognizes the importance of culture in the classroom and moving away from deficit thinking towards a strengths-based approach to meet the needs of all students.
3. **Equity doesn’t mean equal. Providing the right level of resources to schools and differentiating that based on need is the best way to create equitable opportunities for students.** The cultural competency work in BCPS began in the area of greatest need. Federal grant programs that target high-needs schools supported this work in part. These programs are built around the notion that in order to address gaps in achievement between sub-groups of students, additional resources are necessary. The TIF program supports the design and implementation of PBCS and human capital management systems to govern the flow of effective educators as resources throughout an organization, increasing students’ access to high-quality educators in the areas of greatest need. The thoughtful implementation of TIF in BCPS, which used data to identify the need and root causes and engaged educators in designing and implementing programs, policies, and processes that addressed them, contributed to the success of the pilot BCPS conducted under TIF 4. This enabled BCPS to take its efforts to scale through TIF 5 and in-kind support from the district.

To learn more about Broward County Public Schools and its Cultural Competence Initiative, please visit the TIF Community ([www.tifcommunity.org](http://www.tifcommunity.org)).