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# Research Brief

## How to Support the Social-Emotional Well-Being of Students of Color

*Research & Best Practices from Interdistrict Integration Programs*

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### SUMMARY

Across the nation, school districts are intentionally integrating students of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds in order to increase access to educational opportunity, boost achievement, and prepare students to be thoughtful and collaborative citizens in our multiracial society. Some districts have developed interdistrict integration programs in order to bring students together from neighboring towns or even an entire region. While the benefits of interdistrict programs are many, district leaders must ensure the social emotional well-being of students who are attending schools outside of their home communities. This brief highlights successful interdistrict integration programs and the practices their leaders and practitioners have employed to create welcoming and inclusive learning environments for their students.

Decades of research demonstrates that children benefit both socially and academically from learning with classmates who have different backgrounds. Children who attend racially and socioeconomically integrated schools, in fact, derive both cognitive and social-emotional benefits from a diverse education.<sup>1</sup> Benefits include increased academic achievement as well as an enhanced ability to solve problems.<sup>2</sup> In integrated settings, children have opportunities to develop friendships across race and class lines. Authentic cross-class, cross-racial friendships can help diminish students' prejudice and stereotypes over time.<sup>3</sup>

Particularly given a renewed interest in, and incentives for, school integration at federal,<sup>4</sup> state, and local levels, more districts are developing intentional policies to diversify their schools. A recent Century Foundation report found nearly 100 school districts and charter organizations are now intentional about socio-economic integration.<sup>5</sup> At the federal level the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP), which is part of the Every Student Succeeds Act, now enables funds to be used "to establish, expand, or strengthen interdistrict and regional magnet programs."<sup>6</sup>

- 1 Stuart Wells, A., Fox, L. and Cordova-Cobo, D. (2016) Racially diverse schools and classrooms can benefit all students. The Century Foundation. Retrieved at [https://tcf.org/assets/downloads/HowRaciallyDiverse\\_AmyStuartWells.pdf](https://tcf.org/assets/downloads/HowRaciallyDiverse_AmyStuartWells.pdf).
- 2 Siegel-Hawley, G. (2012) How non-minority students also benefit from racially diverse schools. National Coalition on School Diversity Research Brief. October 2012. Brief 8. Retrieved at <http://www.school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo8.pdf>.
- 3 Pettigrew, T.F. & Tropp, L.R. (2006). A meta-analysis test of intergroup contact theory. *Personality & Social Psychology*, 90(1), 751-765.
- 4 For an overview of some of these changes, see <http://school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityIssueBriefNo8.pdf>.
- 5 Potter, H., Quick, K. & Davies, E. (2016) A new wave of school integration: Districts and charters pursuing socioeconomic diversity. The Century Foundation. February, 9, 2016. Retrieved at <https://tcf.org/content/report/a-new-wave-of-school-integration/>. Many of these districts were also pursuing racial integration as part of their plans.
- 6 See, e.g. <https://innovation.ed.gov/part-d-magnet-schools-assistance>. The Notice of Funding for the 2017 Magnet Schools Assistance Program "encourage[s] applicants to propose a range of activities that incorporate a focus on socioeconomic diversity, in including establishing and participating in a voluntary, interdistrict transfer program for students from varied neighborhoods; making strategic decisions regarding magnet school sites to maximize the potential diversity (socioeconomically and otherwise) of the school

As educators—and the communities they serve—begin to contemplate such policies, they can draw from the expertise of established interdistrict desegregation programs to ensure the social-emotional well-being of their students, which is the focus of this brief. These interdistrict programs can also offer useful lessons because of their years of experience supporting children of color who are attending schools outside of their home communities.

Audiences who may find this brief useful are educators operating (or considering) interdistrict choice programs, schools with a majority of white children who seek to serve children of color better, schools experiencing demographic changes, as well as districts who are engaged in a variety of intentional school integration efforts.<sup>7</sup>

### **Research-based Best Practices for Supporting Children of Color**

Parents, particularly parents of color, often worry about the conditions in racially and economically diverse schools. In spite of the powerful research on the benefits of integration, they understand that outcomes can vary by school and by child, and that merely putting a diverse set of children into schools together is not enough to ensure that they will thrive, both academically and socially. Several key components are necessary to ensure the social emotional well-being and academic success of students of color in integrated settings: 1) culturally competent educators; 2) employing culturally responsive teaching methods and curriculum; 3) recruiting, retaining, and supporting teachers of color; and 4) ensuring all students are given a rigorous curriculum as well as the high

“...merely putting a diverse set of children into schools together is not enough to ensure that they will thrive, both academically and socially.”

expectations, specific feedback, and nurturing support necessary to be successful with that curriculum.

### **Ensuring Teachers Employ Culturally Responsive Teaching Methods & Curriculum**

District leaders must ensure that their teachers are culturally competent. By this we mean that teachers embrace cultural differences and see them as an asset. Numerous resources now exist to support the developing cultural competency of teachers and administrators. Awareness of teachers’ own racial identities—and the implications of those identities on teaching and learning—is a critical foundation. Understanding structural and institutional racism and the impact it has had, and continues to have, on our communities is also important.

Culturally responsive teaching involves five components, including: “developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, demonstrating caring and building learning communities, communicating with ethnically diverse students, and responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction.”<sup>8</sup> In the classroom, teachers who embody these traits are aware of

6 continued

given the schools’ neighboring communities; revising school boundaries, attendance zones, or feeder patterns to take into account residential segregation or other related issues; and the formally merging of or coordinating among multiple educational jurisdictions in order to pool resources, provide transportation, and expand high-quality public school options for lower-income students.” See, e.g. <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2016-12-13/pdf/2016-29907.pdf>.

7 Today, many intentionally integrated schools are located in urban neighborhoods and include a majority of children of color. The practices described in this research brief can also be applied in these settings.

8 Geneva, G. (2002) Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*. March 1, 2002, p. 106.

differences, such as how a culture may expect a child to communicate with adults. Culturally responsive teachers also have an in-depth understanding of the many ways people from different ethnic groups helped to advance mathematics, literature, science and the social sciences. Teachers must also be trained to examine instructional materials, to be sure the history and values of different cultural groups are represented and that challenging topics, such as racism and negative representations of ethnic groups by the media, are not eliminated from discussions. Research suggests that including instructional materials that represent children's cultural backgrounds results in increased achievement.<sup>9</sup> In addition to texts, teachers must remain aware of the "symbolic curriculum," such as bulletin boards, that may ignore or diminish the value of students' cultural backgrounds.<sup>10</sup>

Inspired by the earlier work of Gloria Ladson-Billings, researchers Thomas Dee and Emily Penner of Stanford University recently investigated the benefits of an ethnic studies course in San Francisco. The goal of the high school course was to provide "culturally relevant pedagogy" for students of color. "Ethnic Studies courses are theorized to positively affect student outcomes through the creation of a relevant and meaningful curriculum that affirms students' identities, draws from their funds of knowledge and builds students' critical intellectualism."<sup>11</sup> The students assigned to the course had a significant increase in their attendance, their GPA, and the

number of courses they completed.<sup>12</sup> These findings indicate that districts would benefit from the further creation and implementation of ethnic studies courses that are closely linked to their students' identities.

Cultural responsiveness also includes maintaining extremely high expectations for all students. In fact, "teachers have to care so much about ethnically diverse students and their achievement that they accept nothing less than high-level success from them and work diligently to accomplish it."<sup>13</sup> Teachers must demonstrate these high expectations by developing strong personal relationships with students. Teachers must convey the belief that students' cultural differences are assets that will help them achieve at high levels. While biases can be overcome, research has shown that white teachers may have lower expectations of students of color than their black colleagues do.<sup>14</sup> In a meta-analysis of studies of teacher bias, a report by the Perception Institute found "general negative stereotypes about the academic capacities of students of color may affect teacher expectations, which can in turn create a warped lens through which teachers judge student performance."<sup>15</sup>

Sharing information about bias with teachers can help them become more self-aware. Teachers should also be given accurate information about their students of color as our media often paints a picture of black and Latino students as being unengaged in school. In fact, Amanda Lewis and John Diamond explained in a recent book that

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- 9 Zirkel, S. (2008) The influence of multicultural educational practices on student outcomes and intergroup relations. *Teachers College Record*, Volume 110, Number 6, June 2008, pp. 1147–1181.
- 10 Geneva, G. (2002) Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*. March 1, 2002.
- 11 Dee, T. & Penner, E. (2016) The causal effects of cultural relevance: Evidence from an ethnic studies curriculum. NBER Working Paper No. 21865. January 2016. JEL No. 10. P. 5.
- 12 Dee, T. & Penner, E. (2016) The causal effects of cultural relevance: Evidence from an ethnic studies curriculum. NBER Working Paper No. 21865. January 2016. JEL No. 10.
- 13 Geneva, G. (2002) Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*. March 1, 2002, p. 109.
- 14 Gershenson, S., Holt, S. & Papageorge, N. (2016) Who believes in me? The effect of student-teacher demographic match on teacher expectations. *Economics of Education Review*, 52 (2016) 209-224.
- 15 Godsil, R., Tropp, L., Atiba Goff, P. & Powell, J. (2014) The science of equality, volume one: Addressing implicit bias, racial anxiety, and stereotype threat in education and health care. The Perception Institute. Retrieved at <http://perception.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Science-of-Equality.pdf> p. 37.

“students’ engagement, motivation, and effort are roughly the same across racial groups (and on most dimensions black students are more committed to education than whites).”<sup>16</sup>

Culturally competent teachers also implement practices that have been shown to improve both the achievement in and the inclusiveness of their classrooms. Researchers found that the best technique for “improving race relations and average achievement levels in diverse classrooms – the integrated grouping of students for academic tasks” was only employed 29% of the time in majority white schools.<sup>17</sup> The same study found that newer teachers were more familiar with these techniques, suggesting schools of education may be beginning to include these methods in their curricula.<sup>18</sup>

Finally teachers will be able to better support their students if they have examined their own biases, identities and privileges.<sup>19</sup> Their students will also benefit if their teachers have a sound understanding of structural racism and are comfortable discussing issues of inequity. As Julie Landsman writes in *Being White*:

Students who are not white and attend schools that are predominantly white often say that the toughest thing for them is when they are not believed when they speak of racism. It is extremely painful to them when they describe a racial incident, a slur, or an experience by a family member and the teacher or other students dismiss is as

implausible or even impossible. If we are comfortable with dialogue about issues and situations that are racially charged, we can then be there to help students...comprehend the thicket of perception and language that surrounds them all the time.<sup>20</sup>

### Recruiting, Retaining, and Supporting Teachers of Color

In addition to developing the cultural competence of all teachers, regardless of race, successful districts must actively recruit teachers of color. Simultaneously, districts must commit themselves to retaining and supporting teachers of color. Teachers of color are role models and can help create an environment where students of color are consistently held to high standards.<sup>21</sup>

In her 2015 dissertation, Loida Reyes found that teachers of color played a critical role in supporting Hartford’s Open Choice students. Her findings indicate that:

behavioral engagement and overall engagement were found to be positively associated with a higher percentage of racial-ethnic teacher staff...Many students noted that the lack of racial-ethnic staff negatively affected them; they felt they lacked role models and teachers who understood their heritage and could help them along the way in this difficult journey of integration.<sup>22</sup>

16 Lewis, A. & Diamond, J.. (2015) *Despite the best intentions*. NY: Oxford University Press.

17 Frankenburg, E. & Siegel-Hawley, G. (2008) Are teachers prepared for racially changing schools? The Civil Rights Project. P. 5-6 Retrieved at <https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/are-teachers-prepared-for-racially-changing-schools/frankenber-are-teachers-prepared-racially.pdf>.

18 Frankenburg, E. & Siegel-Hawley, G. (2008) Are teachers prepared for racially changing schools? The Civil Rights Project. P. 5-6 Retrieved at <https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/are-teachers-prepared-for-racially-changing-schools/frankenber-are-teachers-prepared-racially.pdf>.

19 Landsman, J. (2012) *Being White*. *White Teachers, Diverse Classrooms*. VA: Stylus Publishing.

20 Landsman, J. (2012) *Being White*. *White Teachers, Diverse Classrooms*. p. 21. VA: Stylus Publishing.

21 Goldhaber, D., Theobald, R. & Tien, C. (2015) The theoretical and empirical arguments for diversifying the teacher workforce: A review of the evidence. Center for Education Data & Research. Policy Brief #2015-9.

22 Reyes, L. (2015) Hartford Open Choice students’ school engagement: The role of individual characteristics and school attributes. Doctoral Dissertations. 784. Storrs, CT: UCONN Library. Retrieved at <http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/dissertations/784>. P. 80.

Importantly, Reyes also found that students of color from both the resident towns as well as Open Choice reported that the program's staff member was a critical support for their academic and social emotional needs.<sup>23</sup>

## Combatting Stereotype Threat

Stereotype threat, originally written about in 1995 by Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson, is students' awareness of stereotypes about their groups and the resulting negative impact those stereotypes have on students' performance. "The mere existence of stereotypes asserting the intellectual inferiority of marginalized groups creates a threatening intellectual environment for stigmatized individuals."<sup>24</sup> Research has found that stereotype threat has negative effects on women, the elderly, Latino and Black individuals.<sup>25</sup> To combat the negative mental tax that stereotype threats take on students, educators must be aware of them and continuously combat them. Teachers can diminish stereotype threat by regularly telling students of color that they hold them to high standards and by giving them specific, critical feedback on their work.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, teachers must convey that their reason for giving students this feedback is because they believe the students can use it to meet their high standards.<sup>27</sup> Additional research has also found that stereotype threat can be decreased when students are exposed to the stories of older students of color who originally felt isolated but gained a sense of belonging over time.<sup>28</sup> Hearing the struggles of the non-stereotyped groups may also be helpful to students experiencing stereotype threat.<sup>29</sup>

"To combat the negative mental tax that stereotype threats take on students, educators must be aware of them and continuously combat them."

Geoff Cohen and Julio Garcia also found that an "affirmation" intervention that forced students to reflect on their values early in a semester can have a significant impact on their achievement. Students were randomly assigned to a group where they wrote about their most significant values and why those values mattered to them. The remaining students, randomly assigned to the control group, wrote essays about their least important values. The researchers found that reflection on one's most important values appears to boost students' confidence, decrease the mental energy they expend on stereotypes and increase their grades. In fact, Cohen and Garcia found a 40% decrease in the achievement gap between white students and the students of color who participated in the experiment.<sup>30</sup>

## Offering Access to High Level Classes

A recent study by Simone Ipsa-Landa and Jordan Conwell uncovered some of the potential stereotype threat-related challenges that may be encountered in interdistrict integration programs. The first finding relates to the ways students are placed in classes and the still common practice of tracking. Interdistrict students of color, as

23 Reyes, L. (2015) Hartford Open Choice students' school engagement: The role of individual characteristics and school attributes. Doctoral Dissertations. 784. Storrs, CT: UCONN Library. Retrieved at <http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/dissertations/784>.

24 Inzlicht, M. & Schmader, T. (2011) Stereotype threat: Theory, process and application. Oxford Scholarship Online, p. 5.

25 Inzlicht, M. & Schmader, T. (2011) Stereotype threat: Theory, process and application. Oxford Scholarship Online.

26 Steele, C. (2010) Whistling Vivaldi: How stereotypes affect us and what we can do. NY: Norton & Co.

27 Cohen, G., Steele, C. & Ross, L. (1999) The mentor's dilemma: Providing critical feedback across the racial divide. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*. October 1, 1999.

28 Steele, C. (2010) Whistling Vivaldi: How stereotypes affect us and what we can do. NY: Norton & Co.

29 Steele, C. (2010) Whistling Vivaldi: How stereotypes affect us and what we can do. NY: Norton & Co.

30 Steele, C. (2010) Whistling Vivaldi: How stereotypes affect us and what we can do. NY: Norton & Co.

compared to a group of students who were waitlisted for the same program, were more likely to equate achievement with a school being “white.” Students who were waitlisted did not racialize their schools by attributing high achievement as being “white” or “black.”<sup>31</sup> While this study could be seen as an argument against integration, we know that integration helps facilitate positive educational outcomes. Hence, educators must be aware of the message being sent to children of color when all of the high level classes are filled with white students. Efforts must be made to avoid tracking; or, if honors and AP classes exist, that students of color are well-represented in these classes.

### Creating Gender-Specific Supports

Ipsa-Landa also found that girls of colors attending interdistrict programs may need additional support to feel included. While boys of color often appear to develop deeper bonds through sports or through their sheer masculinity, black girls in largely white affluent schools are at risk of being judged as “aggressive” and may be excluded from dating and other social opportunities that their male counterparts are offered.<sup>32</sup> As explained in the recent report, *The Science of Equality*, “most traditional stereotypes of femininity are drawn from idealized images of white women. These narrow categorizations are harmful to all women but are particularly pernicious for women of color.”<sup>33</sup> Girls’ awareness of these biases can result

in their “self-silencing, isolation and disengagement.”<sup>34</sup> For these reasons, the researchers explain, girls – especially in settings where they are particularly subject to stereotype threat – need successful female mentors who can guide, support and inspire them. Girls in challenging social situations can be empowered by participating in small groups with a focus on growth mind-set and which engage girls in reflective activities focusing on their strengths and values. They will also benefit from high standards and critical feedback being communicated to them regularly.<sup>35</sup>

In interviews, administrators from interdistrict programs regularly cite the importance of inclusion in enrichment activities as critical for the social-emotional well-being of all students. While this requires additional transportation costs, districts around the country have been creative in locating this funding. Some ideas include:

- Sharing late buses with a neighboring town.
- Arranging for host families to care for children overnight.
- Fundraising for the costs of extra buses.
- Engaging taxi companies.
- Speaking with the coaches and teachers running the after school enrichment programs to ensure they will allow the interdistrict students some flexibility.

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- 31 Ipsa-Landa, S. & Conwell, J. (2015) Once you go to a white school, you kind of adapt: Black adolescents and the racial classification of schools. *Sociology of Education*. 88(1) 1–19. Retrieved at <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0038040714555434>.
- 32 Ipsa-Landa, S. (2013) Gender, race and justifications for group exclusion: Urban black students bussed to affluent suburban schools. *Sociology of Education*. American Sociological Association. 86(3) 218–233.
- 33 Godsil, R., Tropp, L, Goff, P.A., Powell, J. & MacFarlane, J. (2016) The science of equality, volume two: The effects of gender roles, implicit bias, and stereotype threat on the lives of women and girls. The Perception Institute. P. 12. Retrieved at <https://perception.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Science-of-Equality-Vol-2.pdf>.
- 34 Godsil, R., Tropp, L, Goff, P.A., Powell, J. & MacFarlane, J. (2016) The science of equality, volume two: The effects of gender roles, implicit bias, and stereotype threat on the lives of women and girls. The Perception Institute. P. 15. Retrieved at <https://perception.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Science-of-Equality-Vol-2.pdf>.
- 35 Godsil, R., Tropp, L, Goff, P.A., Powell, J. & MacFarlane, J. (2016) The science of equality, volume two: The effects of gender roles, implicit bias, and stereotype threat on the lives of women and girls. The Perception Institute. Retrieved at <https://perception.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Science-of-Equality-Vol-2.pdf>.

## Dismantling Institutional Racism Inside of Schools

In Amanda Lewis and John Diamond’s latest book, they argue that schools looking to improve the achievement and engagement of their students of color should carefully analyze their data. In order to eliminate disparate results between groups, teachers and administrators should carefully examine the routines and every day practices associated with those results. “When disparities in discipline emerge...school officials need to unpack the discipline routine piece by piece,” to include, Lewis and Diamond assert, “potential differential identification through teacher referrals to differential processing that may be influenced by parents’ unequal resources. By doing this, interventions can focus on the actual sources of the discrepancies and modify the routine accordingly.”<sup>36</sup> Gathering and analyzing such data can be a productive conversation for principals to lead, which can potentially have immediate impact on the lives of students of color in the school. Such data can also help teachers directly confront important and challenging questions, such as whether they have high expectations only for white students or if they are more likely to suggest students of color for special education. “Such an approach helps us move beyond accusation and blame and toward equity-based practices that can transform educational outcomes.”<sup>37</sup>

## Lessons from Interdistrict City-to-Suburban Programs

Across the country, there are a handful of programs that intentionally provide urban students access to suburban schools, with the dual goals of increasing access to educational opportunity and promoting integration. This brief is designed to share those programs’ best practices to support the academic

and social-emotional growth of their students. Some of the largest and longest-running programs that enroll city students in surrounding suburban schools are the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO), the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation (VICC), the Open Choice (formerly known as “Project Concern” and “Project Choice”) and the Urban-Suburban program.

Massachusetts’ METCO program enrolls 3,281 students from Boston and Springfield in close to forty surrounding suburbs. The program started as “Operation Exodus” in the 1960s when a group of African-American parents organized and enrolled their children in nearby well-funded, white school districts. As a result of this movement, as well as the Racial Imbalance Act that sought to desegregate Massachusetts schools, METCO was born. METCO is funded annually by a state grant with supplemental funding from the suburban districts.<sup>38</sup> Boston’s METCO program is overseen by METCO Inc. The Springfield program is administered by the public school district’s enrollment office. Boston METCO uses a waitlist, which parents may sign their children up for at birth. Springfield METCO uses an annual lottery, which parents may sign up for once their children are old enough for kindergarten.

The St. Louis-based VICC interdistrict desegregation program began in 1981 in response to a federal court order. The program allows

### ENROLLMENT OF INTERDISTRICT CITY-TO-SUBURBAN PROGRAMS

VICC	4,440
METCO	3,281
Hartford’s Open Choice	2,300
Urban-Suburban	600

36 Diamond, J. & Lewis, A. (2015) *Despite the best intentions*. NY: Oxford University Press, p. 170.

37 Diamond, J. & Lewis, A. (2015) *Despite the best intentions*. NY: Oxford University Press. p. 176.

38 See METCO homepage at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/metco/>.

students living in the city of St. Louis to enroll in a school in the surrounding suburbs. Additionally, students coming from the suburbs or “county” may enroll in the city’s magnet schools. There are approximately 4,300 city students attending suburban schools and 140 county students attending magnet schools.<sup>39</sup> Families apply to transfer and are granted enrollment as spaces become available.<sup>40</sup>

Connecticut’s Open Choice program operates in three cities: Bridgeport, New Haven, and Hartford.<sup>41</sup> Because of ongoing court orders in *Sheff v. O’Neill*, Hartford’s Open Choice program is the biggest of the three, serving approximately 2,300 students attending schools in nearly thirty districts. It is run by the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), one of the state’s Regional Education Service Centers (or “RESC”s). CREC also operates a number of the interdistrict magnet schools in Greater Hartford, which enroll students from the suburban districts and Hartford resident students. The Open Choice program, first known as “Project Concern,” and later “Project Choice” began operating in 1966.<sup>42</sup> Open Choice is funded by the Connecticut Department of Education, and aims to “improve academic achievement, reduce racial, ethnic and economic isolation and provide all children with a choice of high quality educational programs.”<sup>43</sup> Open Choice uses a lottery.

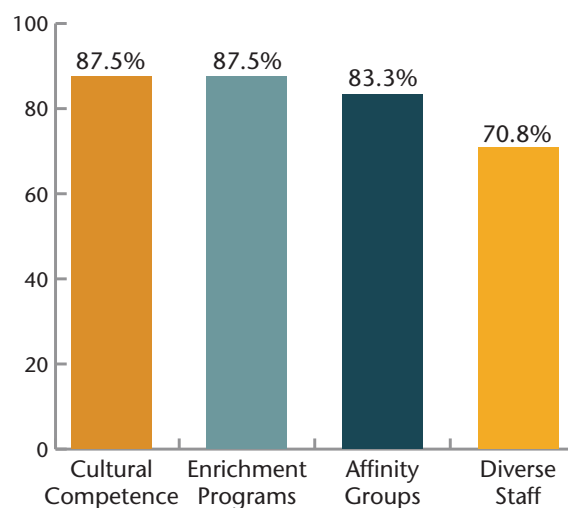
The Urban-Suburban Program began in 1965. It is an interdistrict transfer program for students living in and around Rochester, New York. There are fifteen participating districts in the program. About 600 students participate in the program annually.

State funding, which would have gone to the Rochester Public Schools, follows the child to the suburban district. Unlike many of the other programs, the city of Rochester funds the transportation.<sup>44</sup>

## The National Coalition on School Diversity Survey Results

The National Coalition on School Diversity recently surveyed administrators in METCO, CREC’s Open Choice program, the Urban-Suburban Program, and VICC. We received 24 responses with 41.7% coming from METCO, 16.7% coming from VICC, 12.5% coming from the Urban-Suburban Program and 29.2% coming from the Open Choice Program. Respondents included superintendents, program directors, and academic support specialists.

### ADMINISTRATORS’ SURVEY RESULTS SHOW COMMON EFFORTS



39 See VICC homepage at <http://www.choicecorp.org/>.

40 See VICC eligibility page at <http://choicecorp.org/FreqQuest.htm>.

41 See CT State Department of Education web site at <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2681&q=335142>.

42 Gurren, A. (2013) Connecticut takes the wheel on education reform: Project Concern. ConnecticutHistory.org. Connecticut Humanities. Retrieved at <http://connecticuthistory.org/connecticut-takes-the-wheel-on-education-reform-project-concern/>.

43 See Open Choice web site at <http://www.crec.org/choice/>.

44 Murphy, J. (2015) Q&A: The Urban-Suburban program. *Democrat & Chronicle*. Retrieved at <http://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/2015/01/17/urban-suburban-program-rochester/21921257/>.



The survey results showed that program leaders are engaged in many common efforts to ensure the social-emotional well-being of their students, with the great majority working to develop the cultural competency of their teachers (87.5%), making efforts to diversify their teaching staff (70.8%) and working to create affinity groups (83.3%) where students can come together to support one another. Efforts being made to ensure that students in these programs are getting access to enrichment (87.5%) are also common.

## ***Best Practices in the Field***

### **Encouraging Students' Participation in Rigorous Coursework**

Districts around the country are examining their enrollment practices and tracking the number of children of color enrolled in honors and AP courses. The Parkway School district in Chesterfield, MO, a VICC district, is using the Equal Opportunities Schools<sup>45</sup> system to help identify students of color who are qualified for high-level classes. Also in Parkway, Director of Diversity and Pupil Personnel, Charlotte V. Ijei, helps to coordinate the Spirit of Excellence Awards Ceremony that recognizes black students who are earning a GPA of at least 3.5. In the recent 2017 celebration, Dr. Ijei honored 533 students. Dr. Ijei finds, "Having this ceremony for the district allows students of color to see others across the district who are excelling thus eliminating the stereotype that only white students achieve and belong in AP/Honors classes."

In Bedford, MA, a METCO district, Superintendent Jon Sills oversees the LA2 Tenacity Challenge, which engages students of color from across Massachusetts in a scholarly competition. Students work in teams over several months engaging in college-level research and analysis. Informal studies have found that participating students are

incredibly motivated by the opportunity to collaborate with teammates and compete with other African-American and Latino students similarly engaged in rigorous studies and intellectual risk-taking. Additionally, Bedford's students participate in the Boston University based Calculus Project and in its own calculus program, both of which begin in middle school and prepare students of color for high school calculus. Finally, Bedford High School's EXCEL program identifies and provides added academic support to students of color who are prepared to move to the honors or high honors/AP course levels.

### **Developing Students' Leadership Capacities**

In Hartford, CREC organized the Youth Empowerment Summit (YES) during April vacation for Open Choice students under the leadership of David Daye, Director of Hartford Region Open Choice. During the week of the summit, students are taught leadership and networking skills by CREC staff and community partners. Students take field trips to local colleges. Critically, students get to know other Hartford students who are experiencing the benefits and challenges of being students of color bused to school in largely white affluent suburban communities. Students participate in conversations about diversity and inclusion. Students see that the community of highly motivated and academic Hartford students is a large and inspiring one. They also have the opportunity to celebrate their community and culture. Participating students found the summit extremely valuable and, as a result, it has been expanded into the middle school. Daye's team is working to make the summit even more robust by adding programming and students every year. This year they hope to have 100 high school students and 40 middle school students participate. Daye says he, "Anticipates the summit will be Open Choice's signature program." While

45 See <http://eoschools.org/>.

the program was underwritten through community grants the first year, CREC has now made the summit part of its annual general budget.

### **Successfully Recruiting Teachers of Color**

In Newton, MA, METCO Director Maricel Sheets has found success in supporting the district's Diversity Committee in hiring teachers of color. Newton made it a priority to hire 15 new staff of color and the district beat this goal, hiring 20 new staff members of color for the 2015-2016 school year. While Newton benefits from its close proximity to Boston, Sheets also engaged in several creative strategies to recruit educators. First, she reached out to Newton's faculty ALANA (African, Latino, Asian, Native American) affinity group, in partnership with Human Resources, and asked members to recruit new colleagues from their own personal networks. Sheets also believes that some of the cultural competency and anti-racist professional development the administrators had engaged in - which was co-created by her and invested administrators, teachers, and counselors from within the district - may have helped them be more aware of their hiring team's potential biases. Finally, the district has benefited from METCO as a pipeline for recruiting and developing teachers of color. For example, Sheets recalled a bus monitor who had become a paraprofessional and who is now working on her teaching certification.

### **Ensuring Teachers Are Culturally Competent**

In Hartford, CREC runs an annual Leadership Institute for educators in the participating Open Choice suburban districts. Between forty and sixty teachers and administrators take part each year and the program has been running for four years. Its goal is for teachers to understand implicit bias and the impact it has on student achievement. Educators learn about white privilege and restorative justice practices. They also learn ways to ensure Open Choice students feel valued and

"...some of the cultural competency and anti-racist professional development the administrators had engaged in...may have helped them be more aware of their hiring team's potential biases."

included in their schools. At the end of the conference, teachers and principals have the opportunity to devise an improvement plan for their schools related to cultural competency.

In Newton, MA all teachers have to take part in cultural competency training through an outside provider within the first five years after being hired. In addition to this, METCO Director Maricel Sheets co-facilitates - with the district's Race and Achievement Working Group - cultural competency training within the district. As she explains, "It is critical to have a team to reflect on culturally proficient practices to implement for effective student learning progress." Sheets also participates weekly with the curriculum coordinators and principals to help plan professional development that is aligned to the district's theme of equity and excellence. Additionally, Sheets has embedded METCO counselors into all of the middle school and high school project-based learning teams to continue to reinforce the district's theme.

### **Offering Targeted Support to Girls of Color**

In Bedford, MA, the district is committed to ensuring their female students of color are embraced and involved in the community. To make this happen, the district has begun having high school senior girls of color meet with middle school girls of color. These meetings offer the older girls the opportunity to share challenges and advice with the younger students. The first cohort of middle school girls who received this mentoring were more involved than their mentors had been, once they



Staff from the Hartford-based Discovery Center help facilitate the Youth Empowerment Summit for Open Choice students. The Discovery Center works "in partnership with youth, families, schools, and communities to facilitate nurturing spaces where people can understand and challenge systemic racism and oppression." See [www.discoveringdiversity.com](http://www.discoveringdiversity.com) for more information.

arrived in high school. For example, they participated more frequently in enrichment such as volleyball and the school musicals as well as sleepovers with their white Bedford peers. Lunch groups run by faculty members also surface students' challenges and provide peer support to girls of color.

### ***Collaborating to Ensure Students' Social-Emotional Well-Being***

In Brookline, MA METCO Director Suzie Talukdar works collaboratively with a local mental health clinic to provide students with a place to come together to engage in identity development work. These groups, the Brotherhood Towards Success for boys and Sisters Toward Success for girls, begin in the eighth grade. The groups, which are open to both Boston and Brookline students of color, range in size from fifteen to twenty students. Students are brought together regularly with high

schools seniors, faculty members of color and doctoral-level clinicians of color for mentoring and support. In high school, these groups and the mentoring continues weekly, and encourages students to share any experiences they are having with racism and negative stereotypes. The mentors and teachers also offer academic advice and support to ensure their success.

### ***Conclusion***

The interdistrict integration programs we surveyed have a fifty-year track record of success. As the evidence grows increasingly clear about the benefit of children attending diverse schools, interdistrict integration is an excellent option for districts and groups of districts looking diversify their schools. Of course, these programs are not without their challenges—challenges that are a reflection of our larger social context. Educators must take affirmative steps to address them.

Recent research and anecdotal findings from the field support the need for the recruitment of teachers of color, the use of culturally relevant curriculum, cultural competency training for teachers, intentional efforts to diminish stereotype threats and to increase the expectations and rigor for students of color. The National Coalition on School Diversity is available to provide further support to districts interested in this work. Please contact Gina Chirichigno for more information at [school-diversity@prrac.org](mailto:school-diversity@prrac.org).

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