

Diverse By Design

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As a white woman, I at times feel conspicuous advocating for explicit practices that build diversity. These conversations may be hard, but my discomfort is small compared to what my peers of color feel in organizations that aren't willing to look at both race and power structures humbly and critically. I am reminded of what white privilege is all about: I have a choice as to whether or not I take on these conversations; many of my peers of color do not.

Thrive, the school for which I am Chief Executive Officer, has made a conscious decision to be a “diverse by design” school. This means we intentionally recruit students from varying backgrounds and neighborhoods, and offer a staff that is representative of the diversity in our home community and student body. These goals create many opportunities and challenges. As John King, the US Education Secretary, recently pointed out, while students of color make up the majority in our public schools, just 18 percent of teachers identify as people of color.

As an abundance of current research shows, building diverse organizations, and schools in particular, is urgent in our national landscape. The Brookings Institute recently published *High hopes and harsh realities: The real challenges to building a diverse workforce* reaffirming that same-race matches between students and teachers are associated with greater student achievement (Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015; Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010; Dee, 2004) and student behaviors and attitudes are also associated with teacher race (Holt & Gershenson, 2015). Students who share racial/ethnic characteristics with their teachers tend to have a more favorable perception of their teachers as well (Egalite & Kisida, 2016). As educators, we have a powerful opportunity to help students create a better future for themselves and for every person on this planet. To do that, it takes all kinds. We need multiple voices and perspectives. And we especially need to hear those voices and perspectives that

represents the students we serve.

I want to be clear that, as an organization, Thrive has not solved racial inequality, bias or poverty. What we have learned are a few lessons that have pushed our staff to become more representative of our students. Ultimately, we believe this is good for kids. Here are some of those lessons.

Lesson #1: Create a Climate Where Diversity Matters

It is important to get beyond seeing staff diversity as something that looks pretty in pictures. At Thrive, diversity is critical to our core mission in understanding communities and educating diverse students. Once we are able to get beyond what we want our class picture to look like, hopefully we can see that the reason diversity matters is because it helps us understand our kids. It moves us out of an ethnocentric paradigm into one of seeking to understand each other; it helps us become culturally responsive.

Lesson #2: Seek Input, Listen Inclusively and Forge a Team

It doesn't cost to listen, but it takes some effort to get the input we are going to need to create a multi-racial organization. Open the dialogue among our stakeholders. As a school, send out surveys. Or better yet, create an advisory board of parents, community members and students, and ask courageous questions: *How can we make our school more inviting to you? How can we create a space that welcomes all voices? What are we not seeing? Do you feel heard?* Their answers may surprise us, as may their initial silences. Persist. Those general questions can then be crafted into specific, targeted questions around which action steps can be planned: *How can we make our students of color feel empowered to join student leadership? How can we ensure that every student on our class can see her/himself in at least one adult on campus?* To help us answer these questions we survey our parents twice a year, review these surveys during our leadership retreats, and action plan around them. We also hold monthly parent coffees at each of our sites to gather feedback. And we took this to a deeper level when planning our high school. We created a team of parents and students who met monthly to provide feedback and insights on our developing vision. All of the structures I've mentioned here are common practice — the change is in asking different questions and listening carefully to the voices in the room.

Lesson #3: Live the Intention and Set SMART Goals

Once we have a vision for diversity, a diverse advisory council, and a question we are trying to answer, it's time to set a SMART goal: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely. Goals matter. It is impossible to be intentional without them. And they shape my recruiting efforts. For example, about a year ago I decided that I wanted to be succeeded by a leader of color and "that was that." If there were not enough executive level staff of color to eventually take on my job, then Thrive would need to bring folks in at various levels of opportunity and train and support them to have the skills they need to be qualified. Additionally, when my organization is hiring, we reach out to university programs with diverse student bodies and in urban centers across the nation. We make ourselves known in schools and neighborhoods not often recruited from. When reviewing resumes, we always look for the most qualified candidate—great teachers and leaders are central to our work. But in gathering resumes, we reach for diversity. All this to say that goal setting makes a difference. It sets our priorities and directs resources toward them.

Lesson #4: Use Asset Mapping and Network Outreach

It's possible for a mostly homogenous organization to not have a ready volunteer core of diverse stakeholders. Sometimes, we have to seek out the voices we aren't hearing. This outreach can be begun through an asset mapping process that identifies who within our community (or state) can contribute to the conversation. We may have to explore organizations we don't know well, or ones we've never heard of before. This may mean research: reaching out to black fraternities, Latino leadership councils, the Pacific Islander community center, the Imam at the local mosque. It's essential to ask for help, to shift the power dynamic, to show our community members that we need them.

Lesson #5: Become an Ally and Grow into an Advocate

Becoming a diverse organization requires us to actively create a safe space for colleagues of color; it requires us to be assets, not just allies. Let me go back into that uncomfortable space and say, white voices matter when creating a multi-racial organization. Whether I like it or not, my skin gets me access to audiences denied to others. This means that I need to be bold in communicating to those who will hear me. I need to be prepared to take on the ripples and blows from white peers who do not understand the importance of this work, whose life experience may not demand change with urgency—even on my own team. A current conversation we are having in our leadership team is around unintentional bias. Each of our school leaders have self-assessed on Harvard's Project Implicit Survey. We are in the midst of

discussing the outcomes of our personal results and the impact of our biases on our leadership as well as planning a full staff training around racial awareness and power structures. Our ultimate goal is that everyone on our campus—staff, parents and students alike—are known, seen and valued in our community.

Lesson #6: Practice Patience and Hold Compassionate and High Standards

A sentence above bears repeating: *We always look for the most qualified candidate – great teachers and leaders are central to our work.* Building diversity does not mean falling into the trap of tokenism. It may mean seeking out greatness while acknowledging that skill sets will vary among otherwise qualified candidates. There are great people in every community, but their work histories may not be identical. Genius is distributed equally in all humanity, but access is not. We must hold high standards for ourselves to create an organization where people of color want to work, will thrive, and will stay for years, moving up the organization. We do this by providing our people with access to key relationships, training, and coaching. We must ensure that we have done everything in our power to give them opportunities for a robust work history and opportunities for professional excellence.

Lesson #7: Implement Plans and Adapt With Agility and Equity

We must turn toward the conversation about race. We can't run away from the discomfort; we need to embrace it. My challenge to white leaders is the same: engage with other white leaders, staff members, and parents to have conversations about race and power and opportunity. Discuss race in staff meetings (the School to Prison Pipeline, the Invisible Knapsack, and the recent Yale preschool study are all great starting points). Bring it up so everyone knows it is a conversation that matters and that isn't going away. Don't place the burden on colleagues of color. Be courageous, make peace with discomfort and be the advocate our students need.

I'll be the first to acknowledge that diversifying an organization is a process—and one that takes years. When we opened our doors in 2014, our staff was conspicuously all white. Now, nearly two years later, half of our CMO team, and half of our school site leaders are people of color. Soon, we hope, our teaching staff will be equally diverse. Sharing our practices in venues like this is one way that we keep ourselves accountable to these priorities. We must remember that ultimately we are preparing the next generation to learn and lead in a more just and equitable world.

References

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