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| **Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Schools and Classrooms Profile Series**  *This series of profiles highlights programs, schools, and districts that are leading efforts in Massachusetts to establish* [*Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Schools and Classrooms*](http://www.doe.mass.edu/odl/e-learning/culturally-resp-sust/content/index.html)*. Other profiles in this series can be accessed* [*here*](http://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/crdw/)*.* | DESE star logo |

It is the first period on a sunny Thursday morning, and there are 10 teachers from different grade levels and content areas sitting around a table in a science classroom at [Cambridge Street Upper School](https://cambridgestreet.cpsd.us/) (CSUS). Stephen Abreu, an eighth grade lead math teacher, sets the context for the conversation that will happen over the next 40 minutes. The group of teachers preview some vocabulary they will encounter in today’s excerpt – going around the circle, one teacher reads a vocabulary word, the full group repeats it in chorus, and the individual reads the definition out loud. As they talk about the strategy they used and whether it would be appropriate for use in their classrooms, an ELA teacher notes, “Is the controversy that this strategy used to be used more frequently in association with repetition and rote? Now there has been a resurgence of the context of orality as a cultural value.” A math teacher responds, “I’ll offer that I just finished *Multiplication is for White People* and it cites call and response as being good in certain populations where it is a familiar tool.” This kicks off the group’s weekly cultural proficiency seminar, required for all teachers at CSUS since the school’s inception in 2012.

Abreu explains, “Over the past few weeks, we’ve talked about historical dates in Black culture, and watched a video about questioning the historical stories that come from whitewashing history. We’ve talked about white talk versus Black talk and looked at curriculum work in small groups to think about some counter-narratives to produce different stories that push against our comfort level and what we usually think of in our lessons. The next step in our journey is another chapter from *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys*.”

CSUS was created as part of a structural transition in the Cambridge Public School District that created four upper schools serving grades 6-8. Founding Principal Manuel Fernandez set cultural proficiency as a priority from the very start. Fernandez explains, “I discussed [the importance of cultural proficiency] with the Superintendent before I signed my contract, and he said to do what I thought was best. My first meeting with the new staff was in March 2012, just a get to know you, cookies and punch type event. I realized it was a very white group, and I told them then that the next time we met we needed to talk about race and culture.” Fernandez said, ““It is pretty bizarre to think that we don’t see color, gender, or race. The fact is we see it, we have been taught to see it. I don’t blame people for that. We’ve been taught to see color but not to acknowledge it, not to work with it, not to change anything we’re doing. [We’re telling our students] you can be just like me if you’ll just act like me.”

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*Manuel Fernandez, Principal*

In addition to his background in school administration, Fernandez made a career consulting with schools and districts to provide cultural proficiency professional development, so he felt comfortable leading his new staff through the process which began in June 2012.  “The first meeting with the new staff of the school was a three day retreat. It wasn’t everyone, we still had people to hire, but the majority of the staff was there. The very first thing I did was show a video about a Korean boy’s first day in an American school – or at least that is what the video appears to show, but you begin to second guess it by the end. We had a conversation with the full group – what would it look like for this boy if he came to our school? What does social justice look like in our school?” Based on their conversations, the staff defined “*What Should Social Justice Look Like at CSUS?”* and created a poster that was displayed throughout the school as a reminder of their work. During that summer, the CSUS staff also participated in a day-long professional development session to introduce cultural proficiency and to highlight the cultural and socio-emotional strengths and needs CSUS students would bring to school every day.

With the start of the first school year at CSUS, the thread of cultural proficiency was maintained through the weekly cultural proficiency seminars. During the first years, team members made grade-level or specialist teams facilitated by Fernandez, and focused on raising their consciousness and exploring culturally proficient engagement practices. The first text selected for the seminars was *Culturally Proficient Instruction: A Guide for People Who Teach*, by Kikanza Nuri-Robins, Delores B. Lindsey, Randall B. Lindsey, and Raymond D. Terrell, which grounded their work in responsive instructional practices. “We started with grade level teams and our support staff pushed into those meetings, but the problem was that those teams meet four times a week on other things. When we brought in additional people, all of the nuances and characteristics of the team were already in play,” Fernandez explains. This dynamic made it harder for support staff to engage in the seminars, so the CSUS team changed the structure of the seminars and prioritized a schedule that allowed for heterogeneous seminar groups.“ We flipped our school’s schedule – we designed it based on the priorities of the school,” says Fernandez.

While the structure of the seminar cohorts varies year to year, all groups are now comprised of teachers and staff across different grade levels, content areas, and roles. Smith explains, “Diversity of views is the most important. We’ve gotten pushback from folks who aren’t classroom teachers, that we’re spending a lot of time talking about classroom practice. How does that affect folks like Kini [a School Adjustment Counselor] – are we wasting her time? Are we just using her insights to think about how to engage students? We need to make sure we’re not just having them there to be there, but that they are getting new skills, insights, and understandings.” Christen Sohn, the Assistant Principal, gives another example of this pushback: “I had a white male staff member say, ‘This isn’t for me, I’m not a classroom teacher.’ How do you, as a white man with the idea that this doesn’t affect you, impact the students and families you’re working with? For him, that was a whole new layer of thinking about things.” She adds that, regardless of an individual’s role, “We are always trying to ask questions about the application to practice – what are you learning? How are you thinking? How can you change your practice to do it differently?”

Initially, Fernandez served as the facilitator for every cultural proficiency seminar. However, he eventually realized he needed to take a step back, explaining, “It was clear to me that I couldn’t keep up this pace – I couldn’t build a new middle school and also deal with cultural proficiency because it is too awesome a task.” Fernandez also hoped to create additional teacher leadership capacity, so he identified six members of the faculty to serve on the first Cultural Proficiency Facilitation Team and provided them with extensive training to lead the seminars. As Laura Smith, the school’s literacy coach and a facilitator, explains, “When you’re helping adults build content knowledge in racial awareness and cultural proficiency, how to handle the development of that and facilitate conversations can be tricky.”

Today, the Cultural Proficiency Facilitation Team also meets bi-weekly throughout the year to plan the scope and sequence of cultural proficiency seminars and support other work across the school to promote cultural proficiency. As Abreu explains, “We always unit plan over the summer. We all read books and plan out the whole curriculum – what we’ll do through June” and then make adjustments to the curriculum based on the needs of each of the groups as the year progresses. Kendal Schwarz, a math teacher and facilitator, adds, “We feel out where [the team] needs to go. When we meet about math, it is much more student-focused, curriculum-focused, whereas in CP [cultural proficiency] we have to help adults reflect on themselves and their practice so they can figure things out on their own.”

Having a more diverse group of facilitators has also allowed some faculty and staff to engage more deeply with the topics in their seminars. Fernandez explains, “On the surface, I got no pushback whatsoever from staff. In front of me, everyone embraced it 100 percent, but over time I learned that me being the facilitator was never really going to lead to authentic engagement because I was also their principal.” Another facilitator and social studies teacher, Angela DePalma, adds that it is valuable to have white facilitators to push some of their peers in these conversations. “When kids reach us they’ve had so many negative interactions with white teachers, they are coming to us in middle school with the attitude that, ‘You don’t get me, you’re racist.’ So to really push our white teachers to think about the messages they are sending and whether they are being fair and equitable. We really, really push our staff to self-reflect on that.”

“This is my first year here. I came in November and I’m still learning, but everything was a complete shock to me. As a person from India, not born here, what I’ve learned [before CSUS] was that nobody was there to listen and you had to be in your own space. It is so totally different how they welcomed me here. Whatever I feel a challenge is, I can share it.”  
*Anita Jain, Special Education Aide*

Adults at CSUS have also developed a shared language that allows them to have difficult conversations and be welcoming. Abreu adds, “As a Latino speaking to other Latino teachers, other schools are not doing this work fully. They have frustration about how their peers speak to them. A part of the work here is that it allows us to have the same language and speak to each other.” Anita Jain, a special education aide, is new to CSUS.  “This is my first year here. I came in November and I’m still learning, but everything was a complete shock to me. As a person from India, not born here, what I’ve learned [before CSUS] was that nobody was there to listen and you had to be in your own space. It is so totally different how they welcomed me here. Whatever I feel a challenge is, I can share it.”

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| **HIGH EXPECTATIONS** |

Tracey Gordon, a social studies teacher, explains the purpose of this work, saying, “To simplify the jargon, this work is about making sure that everyone feels seen, heard, and a sense of belonging here at CSUS. That is what we want as an institution. The cultural proficiency lens is that we do the work of making students seen, heard, and belong by tapping into their cultural backgrounds and assets. Knowing them, seeing them, hearing them, and not having our own backgrounds get in the way of that.” This shared mindset has led to higher expectations for students, supported by stronger relationships between students and staff.

Sohn adds, “This happens because you create a conscious culture around it.” She explains that Fernandez leads the way in modeling this work for staff and students. “Dedicated leadership is the most important piece to this work – the leaders need to be onboard in modeling how to do the work.” Fernandez sets tone for having high expectations and acknowledging mistakes. Suhilah, an eighth grade student, says, “If you tell someone what they are good at it gives them more confidence, but it doesn’t help them because there is always something to do better. Mr. F. helps us to self-reflect and see what we can do to improve our school.” Her classmate Jason adds, “At our community meetings, Mr. F. always has something to say about what we can be – he wants us to get better and better. He knows we have no limit.” Teachers communicate similar expectations for self-reflection and improvement. Jason explains, “They don’t just say, ‘Hey, that was a bad assignment, do better on the next one.’ They help you get better at the first assignment and then use it to learn how to do better next time. If you make a mistake, it means you know what you need to work on.”

Tsekai English, a math teacher, explains that the cultural proficiency work “is challenging teachers to hold students to high expectations and see everyone as a capable scholar. That reflects in the work produced by students. We see it in math – we raised the bar to do the accelerated math program for all students. Students who have struggled with math all their lives are doing the accelerated materials because we send the message that this is hard *and* you can do it and then push through it together.”

Following a two-year study of the district’s ability-grouped middle school math program, CSUS began de-tracking their math classes and providing a heterogeneously grouped program with the accelerated curriculum for all students. Mary Elizabeth Cranton, a math interventionist, explained, “When we looked at what tracking was doing, we saw scholars segregated by race. We know that everyone can learn at high levels, so something was very wrong. We talked to students and those in the grade-level courses were not identifying themselves as mathematicians. They felt separated out from the ‘smart’ kids. We decided to get rid of tracking – we went out on a limb and put everyone on the accelerated pathway. It was and has been important for all scholars to see themselves as mathematicians.”

To ensure their efforts were successful, Fernandez ensured math classes had additional teaching support and the math team focused on collaboration. Abreu explains, “We are fortunate to have multiple adults in the room to allow us to do this. Two, three, or even four adults in the room from general education, special education, paraprofessionals. This has allowed us to focus on developing routines.” Having additional adults on the team has “been huge for collaboration - opening up your practice to feedback in a way that can only improve what you’re doing and justify what you’re teaching,” Schwarz adds.

Having multiple adults in the room also allows for student voice to be promoted. Schwarz explains, “We have specific things in place to make sure all students are heard in a positive way. We do number talks, we have very specific routines.” Abreu adds, “We can also amplify the voices you wouldn’t hear. The adults that aren’t standing at the front of the room can turn to a student and ask, ‘What did you say?’ or ‘What can I say for you?,’ and students realize that other students have the same questions.” Chris, an eighth grader, says, “What I noticed is kids in my old school don’t want to raise their hand. Here they raise their hand and it helps other kids to know they are thinking what I’m thinking. So then you feel like you can say it, too.”

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| **CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE AND ANTI-RACIST CURRICULA** |

At CSUS, it is also the expectation that students are engaged with curricular materials that reflect their cultures. Gordon explains, “Students learn about and honor their own culture. As a history teacher, I share what history has said about their culture, how they’ve been misrepresented, made invisible, overrepresented, everything.” Maura Mullowney, a special educator, adds, “It comes out in small things sometimes. I watched a video about an editorial board discussing how they decide what editorials to write. My first thought was, ‘Is that a diverse group of people?’ I wouldn’t have thought that before – asking, ‘Are there different perspectives here or is it all white men? And is there something else I could pick to get the same point across but through a more inclusive or accessible lens?’”

“Your administrator needs to be on board and live, breathe, believe in this work. It doesn’t do much good for one person to go do a workshop. You need to have ongoing commitment and buy in.”

*Angela DePalma, Social Studies Teacher/Cultural Proficiency Facilitator*

Fernandez has supported his teachers as they design culturally responsive curricula. DePalma says, “I change my curriculum every year to accommodate the needs of my scholars. We start by looking at identity in the United States as compared to discrimination in Japanese culture. We move into the Middle Ages to talk about social mobility then versus today. Then we learn about Mesoamerican and the Central American migrant crisis – what role has the US played in what’s going on today? What are the long term impacts of colonization on indigenous peoples? We specifically look at the long term impact on African Americans, like mass incarceration, and students do a civic actions research paper.” Students describe DePalma’s class and others as meaningful and empowering. Eighth grader Suhilah explains, “I think every kid should have classes like [DePalma’s]. What we do is so important to expand our worldviews and make sure we’re not ignorant. You may not have known that LGBT people are still being discriminated against. Just knowing that expands your view and makes you realize there’s so much more beyond this school for you to go and fix.”

Rori, an eighth grader, says, “We just had a three day seminar on Native Americans and an open conversation about race and what’s going on in our country. It feels like normal school work to me now, but my mom was like, ‘Can you do that?’ Our teachers try to make it so that’s not a weird or unusual part of the day [to talk about race and culture].” Kailani, another eighth grader, adds, “In almost every school the kids are learning about slavery, but they don’t know about the trauma people still face today, and about other groups that carry trauma today because they were targeted in the past.” Her classmate Jason adds, “We’re not just learning about different conflicts that happened [in history], but about the different sides of the story.” Caleb says, “Before this school, I was oblivious and naïve, maybe ignorant. I’ve learned things that were unfathomable and that can really transform a person, especially people like me who are the majority and are privileged.”

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| **BUILDING COMMUNITY** |

In September 2018, CSUS redesigned their school logo to reflect the attributes of a CSUS scholar. “We’ve called our students ‘scholars,’ and we changed the school logo to elevate what that means,” Fernandez explains. Scholars collaborated to define each of the attributes of a CSUS SCHOLAR.

Each month of the school year, there is an assembly devoted to one of the attributes. Sohn explains, “I’m in charge of the monthly assemblies. What do I do? Nothing – the scholars create and run them.” Sohn compares these assemblies to those at the school where she taught before CSUS: “When we used to have the standard assembly for band or a school performance, the amount of hushing and crowd control…and then we’d often end early with a lecture about audience behavior. At our recent SCHOLAR assembly, it was completely different. We had a student from our ASD program present about originality and superheroes he had created. All the kids in the room from all walks of life and all backgrounds were so genuinely excited for him. There is a different level of acceptance than I knew was possible with middle schoolers. I wasn’t giving them enough credit. That’s a direct result of this work – a community expectation for the staff and the kids. We are all bringing something to the table.”

Fernandez has also taken steps to ensure families feel like a valued part of the community. CSUS asks families to participate in listening conferences each September. “It is a new year, new teachers for your child. We want to know from you who your child is before we reach out and tell you,” Fernandez explains. “Year in, year out, parents get an email or letter or phone call [from teachers] saying we want you to come in so we can tell you about Johnny’s behavior or math skills. It’s often the first conversation parents are having with their child’s teacher. We wanted to flip that script – parents come in first and talk about their child, how they learn, and their cultural lens.”

“[My message to families is] it is a new year, new teachers for your child. We want to know from you who your child is before we reach out and tell you.”

*Manuel Fernandez, Principal*

For conferences later in the school year, teachers facilitate and take notes while scholars present to their families about their successes and challenges. Suhilah explains, “With regular conferences, they have a conversation and you’re the observer. With the student-led, you can tell why that work you’re sharing is important and how you felt. Your teacher doesn’t know why it is impactful and how it influences you – being able to share that is so much better than watching a teacher explain what they think you felt.” Another eighth grader, Roz, adds, “Teachers can’t tell you what to be proud of. Sometimes you get a good grade, but are you proud of it if you got an A and it wasn’t your best work? Instead, you can share this is something that I felt proud of and worked hard on even if I didn’t get 100 percent. It prepares you for the real world and being able to own your work.” Teachers are also able to learn more about their scholars during the conferences. Jason says, “You can talk about how you felt in class, and the teachers use that to adjust what they do next time.” Suhilah adds, “I said in my conference that sometimes I felt like the questions my teachers asked me in class weren’t the hard ones, so she tries to call on me more in class now.”

Families and community members are also invited to participate in a series of *Diversity Dialogues* each year. Each workshop includes dinner and a participatory activity, often led by an external speaker. Recent topics have included “Understanding the Forces Shaping the Asian American Youth Experience,” “Understanding the Power of Black and Latina Girls,” and “How to Talk to Children about Race.”

According to both teachers and students, the focus on building a community is having an impact. Norah Connolly, the school’s librarian, says, “The relationship building is key. It requires people to slow down and not see the curriculum as the end goal. Relationships are what can get us to the goal of better achievement.” Gordon adds, “One question is how can this help the achievement and opportunity gaps? If kids feel they belong in school, they want to do better. They have a greater sense of belonging, are more honored and more seen, so they are more likely to take risks. That’s the payoff – but it’s really hard to measure.” Roz agrees, saying, “I think based on how they are teaching us and informing us about the world it will increase our odds of succeeding in high school because we can take chances and risks.” Caleb, too, emphasizes his comfort exploring and learning at CSUS:, “I’m not afraid to ask a question, I feel safe. My teachers and my peers will inform me in a kind manner about the answer.” Ruri adds, “The way that teachers, when they teach, aren’t saying there is a right answer – they are saying here is what people are saying, here are the facts, you decide.”

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| **CONTINUING THE WORK** |

CSUS acknowledges that they have made a lot of progress over the past seven years, but DePalma emphasizes, “We have a long way to go, even though we are above and beyond where some other schools are. This work isn’t easy, it’s not overnight. It is slow and it takes time.” Betsy Preval, an ELA teacher adds, “Once you start this work it only gets more complicated as you go. It is a new commitment – once you see it you can’t unsee it. You become a better person for it.”

Fernandez confirms, “We know we do this and most schools don’t, but that doesn’t mean we always make the right decisions or do it right.” Following the Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand, Fernandez was proud that students came to him to ask why the school hadn’t done anything in response. “It was powerful – to know that the scholars recognized that it wasn’t right and came to me to hold me accountable. They were right, we had made a mistake.” Fernandez sent a letter to the whole school community apologizing for failing to acknowledge the tragedy, and holding himself accountable for doing better.

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*Manuel Fernandez, Principal*

Fernandez hopes to continue to build students’ capacity and understanding for social justice. “We need to have deeper, more sustained conversations with our kids about this,” he says. CSUS is also trying to learn more from students about the disparities that still exist in their school experiences. Fernandez explains, “We interviewed kids about this – a group of black boys by accident at first. They were in their “What I Need” [intervention] time and started to talk to their teacher about what it meant to be a black boy at CSUS. She asked to video tape them, and we shared it with our staff.” The boys shared some critical reflections of how they were treated differently from their peers, and some staff members were defensive. “So we asked five white kids to describe what they saw and they had the same interpretations and outcomes of race in school – they described the exact same things and could pinpoint when it happens.” These videos and others CSUS has created with different groups of students are being used as a resource in the cultural proficiency seminars to push staff to continue to improve. Fernandez says, “We need to continue to do better to close the opportunity gap that continues to exist and be authentic about the conversations we’re having and the steps we’re taking.”

The CSUS team is also transparent with prospective staff members about the importance of these conversations. Sohn says, “We’ve been around a while now and have a reputation that we take on cultural proficiency and have it at the forefront of our work. [Candidates for positions] know that coming in and from their first conversation with Mr. Fernandez. It is part of the interview process. We ask ‘How have race and culture impacted your life and your work with kids?’ We talk about the seminar and that it is expected of everyone.”

In part because of this reputation, Fernandez has been able to increase the diversity of his staff. Currently, about half of the staff identify as individuals of color. Now, Fernandez hopes to provide better support for those staff members, explaining, “We have always talked about what our kids need, and have geared the work towards helping white teachers. Now, our staff of color is saying they need more.”  English explains, “Sometimes the adults know how to be culturally proficient with students, but it doesn’t transfer as well to their interactions with adults and they don’t see it.” Fernandez adds, “We have had a number of people of color who have asked for space as persons of color to have conversations outside of the space with white faculty.” As a result, Fernandez has established racial affinity groups that meet during monthly faculty meetings.

“If you’re only doing culturally proficient work from 8 to 3, it isn’t going to work.”

*Manuel Fernandez, Principal*

The CSUS staff praises Fernandez’s relentless commitment to the work. DePalma explains, “Training and consistency and buy in [are what makes this work]. Your administrator needs to be on board and live, breathe, believe in this work. It doesn’t do much good for one person to go do a workshop. You need to have ongoing commitment and buy in.” English adds, “It’s all about the consistency. At another school, I know they talk about cultural proficiency in their staff meetings, which aren’t as regular. Here we do it every week and it is very rare for it to be cancelled. We are expected to be there and nothing supersedes that commitment.” Fernandez’s goal is for all of his staff to continue to go deeper in their work. “You need to be doing it all day, every day, wherever you go – looking at how people engage in stores, in the street, in the community. What language is used at social gatherings or on the ball field? If you’re only doing culturally proficient work from 8 to 3, it isn’t going to work.”