

# Reexamining Workforce Diversity: Authentic Representations of Difference



**"It is time ... to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength. "**

-Maya Angelou



## Did You Know

Interrogating the Term "Diversity" in Our Districts Matters

Traditional interpretations of workforce diversity tend to conflate "diversity" and "race" (Hanover Research, 2014). Conceiving of diversity in this manner creates problematic assumptions and approaches for school districts in their efforts to recruit, retain, and support school staff representative of their student body. If we seek to cultivate a more representative staff, reflective of all of our school community, we must move toward more holistic representations of difference.

Literature defines diversity as the inclusion of individuals representing different races, national origins, sexual orientations, religions, and individuals with dis/abilities (Hanover Research, 2014). As opposed to using the term "diversity" as a proxy for race, genuine representations of diversity are inclusive of people's multiple identities. It is important to recognize that diversity is a "multidimensional, broadly inclusive concept" that acknowledges and "embraces the richness of human differences" (Coleman, Negrón, Jr., & Lipper, 2011, p. 20). As such, it is crucial that district leaders examine and define what diversity means to them and their learning community with ample clarity (Coleman, Negrón, Jr., & Lipper, 2011).

Further, it is important not to assume that a diverse work force in and of itself is sufficient for promoting an effective learning environment for all students. It is imperative to have [critically conscious leaders](#) who are supportive of increasing, authentic reflections of the student population and its staff (Kyser, Warren, Skelton, Jackson, Whiteman, & King Thorius, 2015). Intentional representations of difference beyond race offers a shift in the culture of the workplace that respects multiple perspectives and lived experiences—and demonstrates the relevance of inclusivity.

In addition, workforce diversity tends to be positioned as a response to the pressures of addressing race-based [outcome gaps](#) between students; rather than viewing diversity among school staff as essential for ensuring effective and inclusive school environments for all students (Hanover Research, 2014). Focusing on racial disparities in student outcomes as the driving impetus for increasing diversity among staff, not only reinforces that students are the problem (LadsonBillings, 2007; Louie, 2008), but it also minimizes students' and educators' multiple identities as assets.

When the purpose of increasing workforce diversity is solely to address racial disparities, educators of color are often hired as the "solution" to achievement inequities, and therefore are burdened with an [invisible tax](#) that often leads to burn out (American RadioWorks, 2016). This "invisible tax" is imposed on educators when they are the only, or one of only educators from non-dominant groups within their school, and are seen as the experts on all issues and questions related to diversity (American RadioWorks, 2016). An over-reliance on educators from non-dominant groups in this way abdicates the responsibility of all educators, including those from dominant groups, of developing and demonstrating [critical consciousness](#) – the ability to recognize and address

institutional systems of oppression that serve as barriers to student success (Radd & Kramer, 2016).

Diverse educators possessing critical consciousness must lead systemic efforts towards educational equity. This starts with understanding the value of a diverse workforce as central to an effective school community for all students. It is important to have educators who are both critically conscious, and embody differences that are reflective of all in the school community, particularly those who have been historically underserved. Possessing these attributes provides rich perspectives, [funds of knowledge](#), and lived experience to district level decision making. When a district's core values include appreciating difference, inauthentic representations and engagement is seen as counterproductive to meaningful change.



## Why It Matters

Having Diverse Critically Conscious Educators at all Levels of the School Community Matters

We must move away from surface-level "workforce diversity" initiatives that often tokenize individuals, toward employing policies that emphasize educator dispositions toward critical consciousness and equity. This shift in consciousness assists in surfacing voices in the school community that have been historically silenced and promotes equitable practices (Weis, 1993).

Intentionally cultivating a diverse district leadership opens the possibility of relevant and effective educational reform in the district. Accordingly, including people with different lived experiences at the district level and on the teaching staff increases awareness of difference, values various perspectives, and facilitates rich, critical learning (Ryan, 2006). This is important because having holistically diverse people in decision-making positions fosters comprehensive, more aligned approaches to supporting the entire school community (Macey, Thorius, & Skelton, 2012).

Additionally, constructing space that encourages discourse about difference and the appreciation of difference lends itself to a more accepting learning environment, reframing historically marginalized students as assets rather than people that need to be fixed (Jackson, Moore, Kyser, Skelton, & King Thorius, 2015; Warren, Kyser, Moore, Skelton, & King Thorius, 2016). Through equity-oriented professional learning opportunities, districts can cultivate a working knowledge and understanding of the communities in which schools are situated,

deepen reform efforts, and embed commitments of diverse ways of thinking in the culture of the school (Coburn, 2003). When diverse educators are able to engage in intergroup dialogue about difference, their consciousness is raised about the origins and effects of social group biases and systemic inequalities. Educators also increase their capacity to collectively redress marginalizing school policies and practices. (Zúñiga et al., 2012).



## For Equity Now

### Beginning Efforts Toward Workforce Diversity by Cultivating Critical Consciousness

Critically conscious dispositions are shaped from the inside out. [Critical reflection](#) about the responsibility towards all students has to start within the individual in order to authentically reflect an appreciation of difference outwardly.

Critical consciousness among administrators, including the superintendent at the district level, is reflected in how policy decisions are made. District policies should demonstrate a valuing of diversity both inclusive of, and beyond race, and support efforts to pursue, support and retain critically conscious and diverse educators. Supporting these endeavors can be realized through concerted efforts through professional development and equitable hiring practices:

- **Critically Conscious Professional Development.** Critical consciousness interrupts historically marginalizing thoughts, ideas, and assumptions about minoritized groups of people—including the tendency to blame them for systemic issues (Radd & Macey, 2014). Professional development at the district level that is geared towards raising critical consciousness can begin to surface inequities in both the immediate surroundings in the central office and within the schools. A first step towards this initiative is to seek local technical assistance from any number of technical assistance centers who provide this type of professional development. For example, the MAP Center provides opportunities for [critically conscious professional development](#).
- **Recruiting, Hiring, and Retaining.** Recruiting, hiring, and retaining high quality, critically conscious educators is paramount to shifting the culture of a district to one that does not view inclusivity as an addendum—but as seamlessly incorporated into all operations. Moreover, given that the teaching profession is comprised of educators from dominate groups (i.e. White, non-disabled, Judeo-Christian, native English speakers, Cisgender etc.), we need to recognize the importance of intentionally recruiting individuals from historically marginalized groups. One way to begin is by being intentional in developing programs that recruit and invest in middle and high school students from

historically marginalized groups into the teaching profession (Fall, 2010; Hanover Research, 2014; Irvine & Fenwick, 2011). Additionally, developing an equity-focused job description sets up expectations, and can begin the vetting process (Jacob, 2007) for **critically conscious high quality educators**. With the knowledge district level individuals receive from their own professional development, they can pass down their philosophies to their schools, ultimately helping to create continuity in the equitable treatment of all students.

## Meet the Authors

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