AMERICAN FEDERATION
for Children

The Warmth of Other Schools

Supporting Underrepresented Students in Private Schools

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A Note on Use and Methodology

The goal of this report is to serve as a tool for school leaders who seek to foster inclusive, equitable, and mission-oriented environments for all students and families. In an attempt to offer an actionable set of recommendations, this report is a collection of research and qualitative findings from roughly two dozen interviews conducted between June and October 2020. The process of identifying participants began with a survey of existing research and contacting sources. Our team received a generous number of referrals to additional scholarship in the field of racial[i] and socioeconomic diversity in the educational context. Finally, the American Federation for Children[ii] (AFC) solicited testimonials from students, alumni, school leaders and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practitioners as they offer invaluable examples of the triumphs and challenges of this work. While notes and transcripts were maintained for these interviews, some quotes and comments in this report are given either anonymously or without attribution to respect the privacy of those interviewed.

[i]This report includes ethnicity within the broader recommendations related to race and non-white students.
[ii]www.federationforchildren.org

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Introduction

In his 1945 memoir *Black Boy*, African-American author Richard Wright describes the process of migrating from the American South to cities like Chicago, Washington, D.C., New York, and Los Angeles. The writer notes:

" I was leaving the South

To fling myself into the unknown...

I was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil,

To see if it could grow differently,

If it could drink of new and cool rains,

Bend in strange winds,

Respond to the warmth of other suns

And, perhaps, to bloom.[1] "

Upon reaching their cities of destination, Blacks did not find perfection, but it wasn't perfection they sought. Most pressing was escaping Jim Crow culture that was literally and figuratively depriving thousands of people of color of their lives and liberty – robbing them of the American dream.

As we publish this report, the fate of millions of children, often Black and brown, remains in the balance. Their predicament is not tied to being in the South, but it is largely dependent upon geography. They are no longer relegated to segregated institutions, but instead navigate a bifurcated system of "haves" and "have-nots."

For at least the past 25 years, within public schools, students of color and students from low-income families are regularly 1.5-2 grade levels behind their white and higher-income counterparts.[2] At the same time, students (regardless of race/ethnicity and income) in private schools regularly outpace their public school peers academically. In fact, minority students in private schools often outperform white students in public schools, creating a "reverse achievement gap." This is not to say that students who enter the private school system are guaranteed a smooth path to future success, but the data are clear: private schools create opportunities for historically underrepresented students to bloom.

The experience of transitioning to a private school can be a jarring one – culturally, academically, and financially – but many students who have benefited from a new school's

climate testify that it was truly life-changing. Even well-intentioned school leaders who are willing to put their hands to the plow, cultivating brighter futures for underserved students face major pitfalls if their work lacks sufficient strategy and intentionality.

When Dr. Trina Moore-Southall accepted the position of Director of Equity and Inclusion at the Brentwood School in Los Angeles, she had over 15 years of experience teaching at private schools – all of them as the only African-American person in the school. She began her new role with the understanding that once again, she would be walking into a school with a history of racial segregation.

Lionel Cable left an 18 year career in public education and a future as an urban school superintendent to become Head of School at New Hope Christian Academy in Memphis. The school's Board had listened to its parents: it was time to hire the first African-American Head of School in New Hope's 23-year history. With a student population consisting of 98% African-American students and a teaching staff that was historically 90-95% white, Cable knew assuming the role would require balancing representation and continued commitment to the schools' guiding mission and principles.

When Stuart Tutler began at New Hope Academy in Franklin, Tennessee, the socioeconomic diversity for which the school strived was modeled all the way down to the classroom level. But while it was clear that families bought into the school's mission, there were still examples of good intentions missing their mark. Mr. Tutler recalls responding to families who considered offering Christmas socks at half price a good way to support the "low-income kids." He then knew that there was still much work to do to grow and support an intentionally inclusive community where all students felt celebrated and included.

These stories are not isolated incidents. Rather, they reflect a general state of affairs in many private[iii] schools throughout the country today. Private school leaders cannot ignore the reality of their institutions' foundations, even as they take steps to reform them. All partners engaged in the crucial work of education must be mindful of the biases entrenched in many of our nation's schools and steadfast in their determination to fight against them.

Diversification is often discussed as a goal unto itself, but the authors of this report believe simple enrollment metrics fall short. As a private school strives to *diversify* its student body, it should carefully consider how a diverse school community will be **supported and sustained**. A school's unique history, mission and goals, and available strategies and resources are all critical to this analysis.
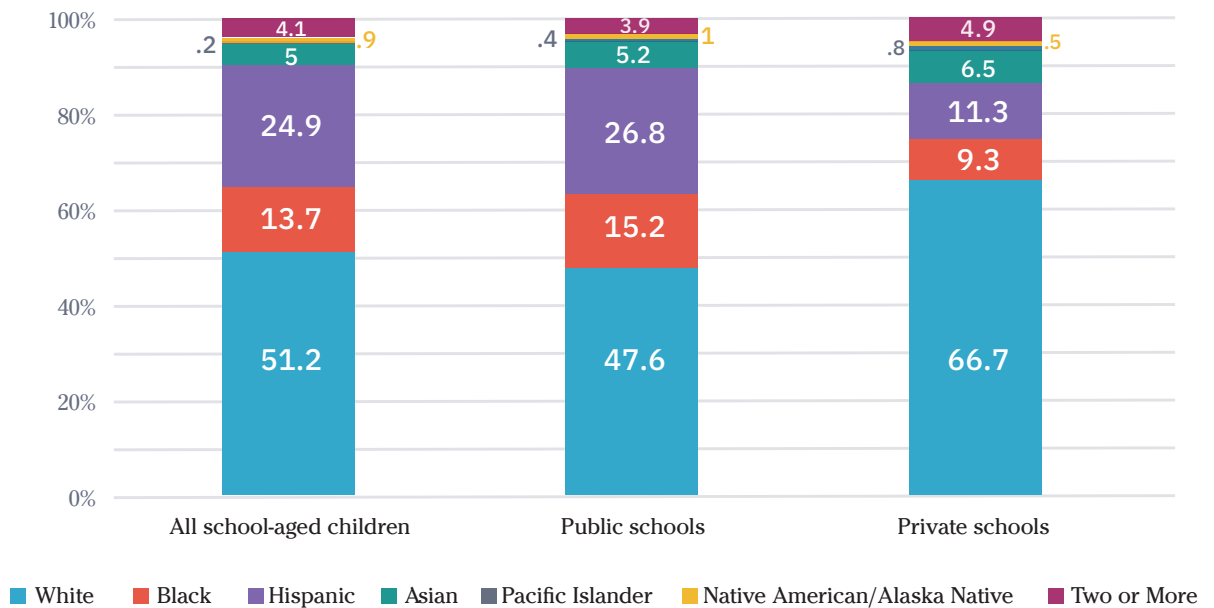
[iii]"Private schools" will be used in this report to capture all K-12 schools that charge tuition, including independent and faith-based schools.

Current Private School Climate

Although private schools have become more racially diverse over the last decade, in part thanks to publicly funded school choice programs[3], the current racial demographic makeup of private schools still does not reflect the racial demographics of school-aged children in the United States. In 2017, 51.7% of school-aged children in the U.S. were white, yet 66.7% of private school students were white. Additionally, 74% of private schools are majority white. Figures 1, 2, and 3 illustrate the racial makeup of private schools in the U.S.

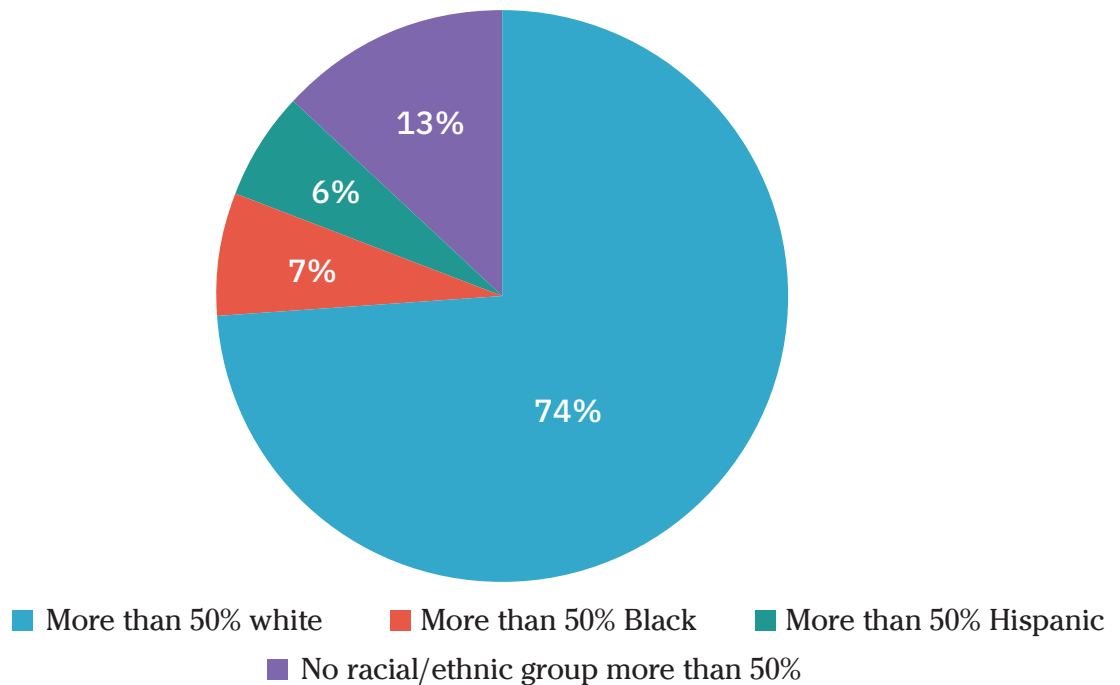Figure 1: Racial Composition of Schools in the U.S.[4]

Racial Composition – Public vs. Private School

	All school-aged children	Public schools	Private schools
White	51.2	47.6	66.7
Black	13.7	15.2	9.3
Hispanic	24.9	26.8	11.3
Asian	5	5.2	6.5
Pacific Islander	.2	.4	.8
Native American/Alaska Native	.9	1	.5
Two or More	4.1	3.9	4.9

Legend: ■ White ■ Black ■ Hispanic ■ Asian ■ Pacific Islander ■ Native American/Alaska Native ■ Two or More

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2019

Racial Composition of Private Schools

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2019

Further, as a sector, private schools exhibit a lack of socioeconomic diversity. Higher-income families are more likely to enroll their students in private schools than middle- or low-income families, and the enrollment gap between families with incomes in the 90th percentile and the 50th percentile is widening.[5] Students from low-income families account for only 9% of the student body in private schools; in public schools, low-income students make up more than 50% of student enrollment.[6]

Low-income students and students of color who attend private schools often face psychological burdens such as social loneliness, racial and social invisibility, class and cultural discomfort, and the burden of being grateful for opportunity.[7] It is, therefore, imperative for private schools to work diligently to support these historically underrepresented students.

> *"There seems to be a certain reluctance in independent schools to acknowledge the basic fact that schools with a white majority – even those schools strongly committed to diversity – often are psychologically complicated and painful places for students of color in ways these schools are not painful for white students."*
>
> *– Michael Thompson & Kathy Schultz, researchers*[8]

Historical Context of Private Schools in the United States

While many private schools were created to provide a quality education to historically underserved students, better serve students with special needs, or create innovative programs to engage all learners, the history of private schools in the United States is complex. In the middle of the 20th century, over 1,000 new private schools emerged to meet the demand of white families exiting public schools in response to desegregation mandates.[9] These "segregation academies" were affordable private schools that enrolled mostly, if not exclusively, white students and maintained (even if only *de facto* and not *de jure*) a segregated school system. Their continued existence helps perpetuate a segregated system today.[10]

Even before court-mandated desegregation, in the late 1800s some private boarding schools engaged in the forced assimilation of indigenous students.[11] Furthermore, as private schools began to integrate, the expectation was often that students of color adapt to the school's white dominant culture.

Many current private school leaders are more likely to embrace diversity and inclusivity than their historical counterparts and despite the historical context, studies have shown that Black and Latino students perform better at private religious schools compared to public schools, and low-income students' academic achievement is also better at private schools compared to public schools.[12,13] Private school graduates, including minority and first-generation college students, are more likely to seek out experiential learning and extracurricular opportunities in college and are more likely to graduate from college on time.[14] Finally, programs that provide low-income students scholarships to attend private primary and secondary schools are known to increase college attendance by significant amounts.[15]

While private schools have come a long way in 200 years in the United States, we nevertheless encourage school leaders to examine and understand their own school's history before blindly pursuing a new strategic vision or expanded mission statement.

Defining Student Diversity

While this report focuses on racial and socioeconomic diversity, it is important to acknowledge that students' identities are layered and complex.

Furthermore, although it is important to understand the intersectionality of students' identities, it is also important not to conflate identities. For example, not all students of color come from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and not all Latino students are English language learners. School leaders and faculty cannot personalize education if they fail to appreciate the nuance that exists within their student body.

Some of the school leaders and DEI practitioners with whom we spoke do exceptional work supporting a variety of student groups. At Valor Collegiate[iv], an intentionally diverse charter school in Nashville, Chief DEI Officer Kasar Abdulla and her team strive to be inclusive of the different religions practiced and languages spoken among students and their families. This requires mindfulness around school communication, event scheduling, and other potential barriers Valor's families might face. This highlights the first common trait witnessed among effective schools: a school must forge strong relationships with its community to truly be responsive to community needs.

A Moment of Opportunity

Across the country, programs such as vouchers and education savings accounts (ESAs) are empowering more parents to choose private schools. Demand for these school choice programs has grown, with 77 percent of parents with school-aged children supporting the concept of school choice.[16] Simultaneously, demographics of the school-aged population are changing as students of color are becoming the majority in America's schools.[17] These movements are occurring as the United States undergoes a national reckoning of the impact structural racism has played in the construction of many of the country's major institutions, including its education system.

Private schools can leverage this current moment and build schools that better reflect America's diversity. It should be noted that this is not a work of charity, but recognition of an inalienable right owed to each child. Diverse schools and classrooms lead to educational benefits for *all* students, such as improved critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, and motivation.[18] An intentionally inclusive school environment improves students' sense of belonging, which leads to a stronger sense of identity and higher overall life satisfaction.[19]

The autonomy inherent in any private school allows it to capitalize on this moment. With more freedom in practices such as hiring, community outreach, scheduling, professional development, and curriculum design, a private school can yield high-impact results with appropriate implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

Planning for the Work

There is a temptation for many school leaders and board members to create a new marketing or outreach plan immediately upon acknowledging the desire to "diversify"; however, this process should not be rushed. Attempting to diversify a student body without first changing school culture is merely performative.

By contrast, true DEI work strives to be inclusive and supportive. Enrolling a student without the capacity to support them fails the student and their family. Schools must ensure that their culture is inclusive and they are equipped to provide specific services and supports before reaching out to new populations for recruitment. For schools embarking on this work, the path to equity begins in the planning stages. DEI practitioners unanimously noted that most schools will have to undergo a cultural shift, and it may take years for a school to be ready to welcome students of color and low-income students. DEI work is not merely an initiative, but rather an integration of best practices into all facets of the school: mission, academics, social services, behavioral standards, family engagement, etc.

Be Willing to Unlearn

> *For diversity and inclusion initiatives to transform independent schools and effect cultural change, much unlearning must occur that will be psychologically painful, particularly for the groups that have for so long benefited from a privileged status. Promoting diversity and inclusion within independent schools is hard work, but it is not impossible work.*
>
> *— Jessica Perez del Toro, researcher[20]*

Incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion goals into school culture and building buy-in across a school community takes work, but it is some of the most valuable work a school can do. Common barriers to DEI work include silence, discomfort, and lack of engagement – all of which are rooted in privilege and white fragility.[21] Remington Holt, a DEI consultant, echoes this sentiment: "With white culture being an individualistic culture, it has all of these impacts on its own ability to change." Holt acknowledges that effective racial justice training is often difficult and uncomfortable for white community members. School leaders must help the school community acknowledge how privilege plays a role in maintaining silence around issues of race and class. School leaders can tap into the growing corps of DEI consultants and facilitators, like Holt, who may be better equipped to orchestrate these sessions.

As Sarah Wilson, Executive Director of the Tennessee Association of Independent Schools, points out, "If it is messy, that is an indicator that you're doing it well." Difficult conversations are not a sign of failure; rather, they demonstrate progress and provide opportunities for growth. It is important that the school values openness and maintains a growth mindset throughout its DEI work.

Assess the School's Climate

It is important to know how much school leadership, board, staff, students, and families understand issues of diversity and how willing they are to engage in this work. Climate surveys are a great tool to develop a baseline understanding of a school community, and they should collect feedback from all constituents – faculty and staff, students, families, and alumni.

Dr. Moore-Southall notes that surveys alone may give a louder voice to dominant groups. It's important to use surveys in conjunction with focus groups to ensure that marginalized groups have adequate representation. Additionally, Dr. Moore-Southall recommends sharing how the information will subsequently be used as a way to encourage participation.

For Kasar Abdulla, assessing school culture is an ongoing process. She conducts "listening tours" in order to respond to the needs of the school community. In these small group meetings with members of the school's community, she asks what's going well and what needs improvement. She also examines existing school practices and procedures to determine whether they align with the community's current needs. Abdulla says part of what makes Valor Collegiate special is its willingness to listen, learn, and change. But she is quick to point out that there is always more work to do – a helpful reminder of the growth mindset necessary for lasting change.

Invest in DEI Work

Schools must be willing to invest in the initiative. This investment may look like hiring a consultant to assess school climate, developing a DEI plan, and creating a curriculum. It may also mean establishing a new staff position to oversee the school's DEI initiative, complete with salary and budget resources required to implement the initiative.

While the maxim "Don't tell me what you value, show me your budget" often holds true even in schools, the amount of money spent on DEI is not necessarily directly correlated to a school's commitment or eventual effectiveness. If a school is constrained financially, it may seek out pro bono support, find other ways to compensate DEI experts, or leverage existing members of the school community in the formal aspects of the initiative.

Lead from the Top Down

A recurring theme in AFC's interviews with school leaders was that in order for DEI work to be successful, the school's leadership must exhibit investment in the plan. Remington Holt won't work with a school leader who isn't "all in," because "if the person leading the charge doesn't want to lead the charge, the charge won't be led."

⚠ *Proceed with Caution:*

Avoiding the Blame, Taking the Credit

A school will undermine the DEI work itself if any setbacks are quickly attributed to the chosen DEI leader. Dr. Moore-Southall refers to this problem as expecting a DEI head to "have a magic wand to get rid of bigotry in the entire institution." Accountability should not be solely at the feet of the DEI lead – a school must be intentional in making it clear that accountability is on everyone. Likewise, as adept leaders know, the credit for successful initiatives does not rest solely with the school leader; rather, should be shared liberally.

School leaders must first ensure that the board is in support. Stuart Tutler asserts that the board and leadership team must be unanimous in the decision to pursue a DEI initiative. Tutler also emphasizes the importance of leadership throughout any DEI initiative coming from the head of school, not solely from a DEI coordinator, in order to signal that the work is an essential component of the school's culture. School leaders should work collaboratively with DEI directors to implement change from the top down.

Several school leaders also stated the importance of the DEI director being a member of the senior administration team at the school. If not, the school risks delegitimizing the importance of the position and the stated mission of its DEI initiative.

The importance of top-down leadership was echoed by a private school teacher who says the biggest reassurance she received while addressing DEI in her own classroom was knowing she had her principal's utmost support. "It has to come from the principal," the teacher said. "If the staff knows it is important to him, they will be more receptive."

Dr. Moore-Southall also maintains that DEI work should be the responsibility of the entire leadership team, not just the DEI director. She recommends heads of school ask themselves:

- *How am I supporting the person or people leading the DEI work?*

- *How is DEI part of every department on campus? If it is not a part of a department, why not?*

- *Is the burden falling on people of color to uphold DEI work in certain ways that it does not fall on white people? What am I doing to help lift that burden?*

Dr. Moore-Southall meets with teachers regularly (it's a requirement for the school's teachers) and weaves in anti-racism and bias training throughout the year. Her work is supported by other required professional developments, schoolwide book clubs, and teacher-attended conferences. According to Dr. Moore-Southall, the flexibility private schools have in this regard is an asset and allows her to be responsive to the needs of the staff.

Define Diversity

The word "diversity" is used in a variety of contexts; it can refer to differences in terms of race, culture, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, ability, and more. "Diversity" is also used to mean a diversity of opinions, political ideologies, or thoughts. Jessica Perez del Toro says schools should avoid the latter definition. When an organization employs a broad definition of "diversity," it risks pursuing "easy diversity," which shifts the conversations away from open discussions about race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.[22] And if a school is focused on racial diversity, it is important to disaggregate people of color. For example, a school could have a high percentage of non-white students counted under a "students of color" metric, yet a very low number of Black students, which may not be reflective of the larger community. It's important for schools to explicitly state what areas of diversity they want to improve and measure against predetermined metrics.

Create and Utilize an Equity Lens

An equity lens is a tool to help organizations center the perspective of marginalized groups. It can be a powerful tool to guide discussions and decision-making around equity. An equity lens often takes the form of a list of questions to consider when making any decision. When school leaders, teachers, and staff regularly ask these questions (or, utilize the "lens"), the act of centering non-dominant groups' perspectives becomes a habit, allowing equity work to persist despite shifts in leadership or faculty turnover.

Integrate DEI into the Mission and Culture

DEI practitioners emphasized the importance of framing a DEI initiative as institutional work that is integral to the school's mission – not a new lane added onto the existing institution. School culture is a main focus of Remington Holt's work, and he says any attempt at separation of DEI and the institution is the beginning of "separate schools." DEI cannot be seen as operating independently from the rest of the school, as compartmentalizing the work will only solidify existing inequities.

Private schools should recognize they are not working to bring new, diverse student populations into their existing school culture; they are striving to enrich and expand their culture through the positive contributions diversity brings.

This framing is a critical piece in fostering an inclusive community and requires both reflection by school faculty and an understanding that people will make mistakes.

Chuck Moore, Executive Director of Impact Christian Schools in Madison, Wisconsin, and former principal of Eastbrook Academy in Milwaukee, says his success came from a total

transformation of school culture. Moore centered his school on the belief that all kids can learn and reach high academic standards when the school is committed to supporting them. By shifting the narrative, continually aligning policies and resources with this core belief, Moore's students achieved remarkable results: in lower school 96% met 3rd grade-level proficiency, and in upper school students averaged 29.5 on the ACT, significantly above the national average.

⚠ *Proceed with Caution:*

"Don't Rock the Boat"

Several interviewees expressed that they heard this phrase when pushing a private school to open its doors wider. Chuck Moore told us that if a private school leader decides to merely wait for their school to progress, the desired change will never happen. "It requires a school leader who believes deep down that this is the best, most important thing they can do with their life," Moore says. The time, commitment, and leadership this work takes cannot be understated, but neither can its importance.

Lionel Cable also grounds his work in a core belief, asserting, "We're not a charity, we're an educational institution." For Cable, that means not "taking it easy" on a student who is under-resourced, but instead tapping into the resiliency of his students. It means not watering down instruction because a teacher knows a child missed a meal. Cable's advice: "Get the kid something to eat and teach them math."

Ultimately, some teachers and staff may not support the school's new mission. When one school leader experienced pushback from a group of teachers, including disparaging remarks about students of color, he made the decision to dismiss those teachers, despite their tenure. It is important to support teachers and staff, offer professional development, include their voices in the planning, and give them time to adjust to a new mission. But if staff refuses to adopt the new mission and culture of a school and refuses to see the potential in all students, the work cannot succeed.

One way to codify the incorporation of DEI into a school's mission is to include it as an area of vital growth in materials submitted to accrediting agencies or other certifying entities. Third-party accountability will reinforce the school's commitment to growing in this area.

Building and Supporting a Diverse, Representative Faculty

We asked Lionel Cable how a school can build a racially diverse leadership team and staff. He gave the simple answer: "You just do it. Period." Cable's answer is both earnest and provocative. At its core, the call to "just do it" is another way to say that when tackling the matter of staff diversity, a school can accept no excuses, especially fear of the unknown. In Cable's view, too many schools avoid taking steps to diversify their staff by claiming they don't know where to look.

Similarly, the benefits of a diverse staff were immediately apparent to students and alumni interviewed for this report. One graduate of a prestigious Midwest boys' school where

fewer than 3 percent of students come from racial/ethnic minorities noted the importance of representation on campus: "If I knew that I could come back to the dorm and talk to my dean who is also Black, it would have made a huge difference. You need to see someone like you."

Begin with Leadership

Multiple school leaders brought up the importance of having a racially diverse leadership team and board. Not only does this signal to the community that diversity is taken seriously, it also ensures that diverse voices have a seat at the table and the power to influence change. Racial diversity should not be limited to the teaching staff. Examine all of the school's teams – including the board of directors, admissions, and curriculum teams – to ensure that people of color are included and empowered to make change.

Create Intentional Hiring Practices

Once hiring more teachers of color is tied to the school's mission, it's important to cast a wide net to ensure that candidates of color are being reached. The AISNE Guide to Hiring and Retaining Teachers of Color advises school leaders to advertise the position where large numbers of people of color will see the ad, including the internet and publications serving communities of color.[23] Schools should consider job postings that do not require teachers to have experience in private schools, as that can become a self-perpetuating problem, and necessarily constricts the talent pipeline.

The AISNE guide recommends moving away from exclusively using traditional, independent school job fairs. These may offer many qualified candidates but won't necessarily bring many candidates of color. Some job fair organizations focus on bringing more diverse candidates, but job fairs should only be one of the strategies a school pursues. Beyond independent school job fairs, consider fairs at historically black colleges and universities and other minority-serving institutions. Further, a search shouldn't be limited to highly ranked colleges; often, local college or state schools have more diverse student bodies married with excellent teacher preparation programs. Networking is also key; a school can maintain a diverse network by attending networking events aimed at professionals of color and building a strong alumni network to encourage graduates to work at the school.

Finally, if using a teacher placement firm, a school should be clear it's seeking candidates of color and utilize firms that specifically identify teaching candidates of color.

Add DEI as a Component of School Evaluations

Schools can incorporate DEI practices into school-level evaluations and internal audits. This signals to all staff the importance of DEI to the entire school community. Without metrics in place, any organization can lose focus and momentum, but with transparent measures in place a school can maintain its sense of urgency. Remington Holt notes that measures can, and should, vary from school to school, and schools should take particular care to measure things that may not be overtly appreciated among majority-culture faculty members. For instance, regardless of where one stands on the policies, 20th-century racial hiring quotas measured hiring, but they did not measure the inclusivity of an organization's culture. Without external expertise, a school risks rolling out DEI initiatives that add little value to targeted stakeholders. A school that measures its progress against poorly developed definitions of success could remain in a needless feedback loop.

Schools might consider employing an easy measurement often used by Fortune 500 companies: a Net Promoter Score[v]. This simple yet sophisticated tool gives rapid feedback to a school leader or board and, at the very least, may uncover gaps in perception among students, families, faculty, and leadership. By asking, "Based on our school's DEI initiatives, how likely are you to recommend us to a friend or family member?" a school may gain valuable insights.

How likely is it you would recommend us to a friend?
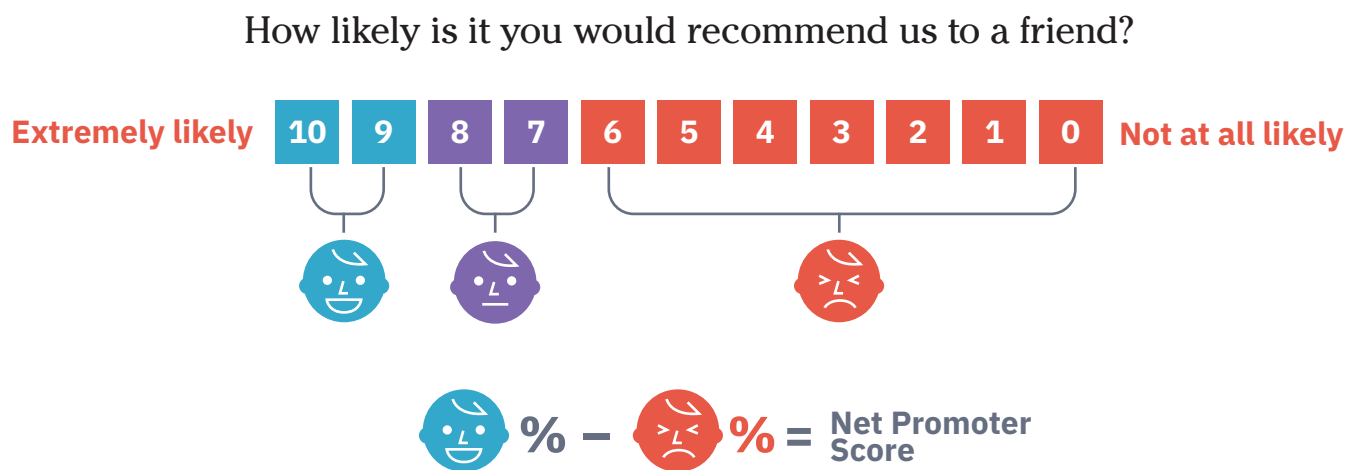
Source: Bain & Company

[v] ™ Reichheld, Bain & Company, Satmetrix.

Organizations typically target a Net Promoter Score of 70 or higher. Such a score would indicate that the group of stakeholders polled are likely to actually promote the institution to those outside the organization itself. The Net Promoter Score can be a particularly powerful tool to gauge student and family assessment of the efficacy of a school's initiatives.

Ongoing Professional Development

As a school incorporates DEI metrics into its own evaluation of success, it is critical that professional development opportunities for faculty align with the mission and vision of the DEI initiative.

As compared to stale PowerPoint-driven professional development sessions, teacher support at New Hope Christian Academy looks a little different for Lionel Cable and his teachers. Cable knew that being the first African-American Head of School brought a new dynamic that the staff would have to address. He also wanted to avoid the trap of teachers feeling sorry for their students, which only perpetuates the cycle the school set out to break. So, New Hope now relies on Courageous Conversation(™) as a bedrock of the staff's community. Courageous Conversation equips staff "to address racial disparities through safe, authentic, and effective cross-racial dialogue."[24] By establishing these conversations as a norm, New Hope grounds its instructional strategies-focused professional developments in race and equity.

Remington Holt reminds school leaders that they cannot expect teachers and staff to pursue professional development on their own. It is a leader's responsibility to ensure that their staff is growing in their understanding and execution of inclusion work. Professional development must move beyond stating the school's DEI values and telling teachers to follow them to creating opportunities for staff to practice the skills and receive feedback. According to Holt, professional development should be challenging, supportive, and evaluative.

Specific professional development actions might include:

- Off-site conferences
- In-house professional development
- Dedicated time for faculty to attend DEI webinars
- Role-playing trainings
- Book clubs and discussion groups
- Guest speaker/outside expertise

To the extent that DEI training is a component of teacher evaluations, it is important for school leaders, not DEI directors, to perform staff and teacher evaluation. Teresa Jenkins,

DEI Director at St. Mary's Episcopal School in Memphis, explains that DEI directors should be seen by staff and faculty as thought partners, not as an enforcement mechanism.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Student Recruiting

"It begins with understanding what is happening in the larger community you are recruiting from. It's about knowing the hopes, dreams and desires of the different populations in your community and figuring out how your school aligns to that particular community's need."

— Creating an Intentionally Diverse School: Lessons Learned NewSchools Venture Fund[25]

As a private school reaches out to a new community, particularly one that has been historically underrepresented and/or marginalized, doing so with humility is paramount. Trust is a prerequisite of all successful school-family partnerships, and it is the responsibility of the school to prove that it deserves the trust of the families it serves.

Leverage Community Liaisons

This process, like much of this work, is not one size fits all. Getting to know a community takes time. It did for each of our school leaders, so AFC asked them where to begin. One school spent a full year connecting with key community leaders to gather input on what an intentionally diverse school would mean for their community before even creating their school. Several school leaders recommended identifying religious community leaders and other organizations that serve youth, such as the Boys and Girls Club and YMCA.

At Brentwood School, Dr. Moore-Southall consistently works with outside organizations like the Independent School Alliance and Young Eisner Scholars (YES) that help students of color and students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds apply to private schools. These and similar organizations across the country offer continued support for students after enrollment.

Mount Michael Benedictine School, a boys' boarding school in Elkhorn, Nebraska, employs alumnus Jacob Idra as a Sophomore Dean. In this role Jacob is part mentor, teacher, and counselor. Importantly, Jacob, who was born in Khartoum, South Sudan, and raised in predominantly Black north Omaha, serves as a liaison between the school and a community to which he authentically relates.

Community liaisons will look different for every school, but the importance of getting to know the area and intentionally building trusting relationships is universal.

Ensure That Applications Are Accessible

For Abby Schumwinger and The Drexel Fund, when examining a school's student population, one of the first things to consider is the accessibility of a school's application process. Since a private school cannot diversify its student population without first diversifying its applicant pool, identifying potential barriers in the application process is key.

An application available only online may be a barrier for a family without reliable access to a computer or the internet. Numerous time-intensive steps, such as multiple essays, may be intimidating to a family applying to a private school for the first time. It's important to find a balance, so that you're identifying families that are a good fit without designing an overly burdensome process. Schumwinger says school leaders should be open to reimagining their application process so it feels accessible to all families.

Nathan Hand, Chief Advancement Officer at The Oaks Academy in Indianapolis, notes the importance of schools working to change the perception of exclusivity in private schools. The Oaks Academy leads with its diverse-by-design model and highlights opportunities for financial support to instantly lower perception barriers. The school also offers weekly, virtual Q&A sessions with the Admissions Team. The aforementioned concerns about access to technology notwithstanding, there are two major benefits to The Oaks Academy's approach. First, the online nature of these sessions is more accessible than midday, on campus sessions which may be difficult for working parents or those who lack transportation. Second, the consistency and frequency of these sessions can increase the chances for all parents to get the information they need prior to the closing of the application window.

Many private schools require prospective students to demonstrate academic readiness, but this can be a measure of a prior *school's* effectiveness rather than a *student's* academic potential. One of Chuck Moore's first actions (albeit controversial) was to eliminate this policy and instead focus on training teachers to scaffold instruction. Some of the school's staff were wary of his decision, but without the admissions policy, a new group of students were able to enroll and were among those who yielded high academic results.

Finally, private schools might consider admitting multiple students from similar backgrounds in a given grade level as a way to mitigate the isolation often felt by students. Most students interviewed for this report mentioned the discomfort of being the "token" student of a particular race, ethnicity, or income level. Some private schools have implemented the policy of providing scholarships to students in pairs so that children who are new to the school community have a peer with whom they can immediately relate.

Supporting and Sustaining Diversity in Student Populations

❝ *"[The school] prepared me better for college, so I'm actually happy that I went to that school, but I wish that I saw more people – students and faculty – that looked like me. I couldn't relate to a lot of the students coming in (entering 9th grade). Their parents had money. If they had trouble, their parents got them tutors. Their problems in life were not similar to my problems in life.* ❞

– Randall L., student

Diversity, equity, and inclusion work does not end when a more diverse student body walks through the doors of the school – ongoing support is likely necessary for students, their families, and the school's faculty and staff. While not an exhaustive list of actions, the following section outlines significant supports a school can implement as part of its DEI work, particularly for students of color and students from economically disadvantaged households.

Fostering Racial Diversity

Utilize a Multicultural Curriculum and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Students need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and to have their culture celebrated in the classroom and leveraged to facilitate their learning experiences through "culturally responsive teaching." Geneva Gay defines this as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them."[26] A culturally responsive teacher examines their own biases, centers the perspectives of non-dominant groups, holds an asset-based view of students' cultures, and provides opportunities for students to think critically about inequity.

A multicultural curriculum is designed to be inclusive and to present students with a diverse range of perspectives from which to understand an area of study. This begins with an understanding that "the curriculum of the mainstream is Eurocentric and male-centric. It ignores fully the experiences, voices, contributions, and perspectives of non-dominant individuals and groups in all subject areas."[27] By incorporating the principles of multiculturalism into a curriculum, a school provides all of its students valuable opportunities to build knowledge through critical thinking and perspective-taking.

Electronic and online resources to support multicultural instruction are plentiful and can be incorporated into existing curricula with far less cost than the exclusive use of physical materials in years past. In addition, schools can strengthen their multicultural curriculum by ensuring that books being taught, as well as books made available to students, include diversity in author and characters. Books should serve as both "mirrors," reflecting and affirming a student's own identity and experience, and "windows," affording a student the opportunity to gain a perspective different from their own.

Though the cost of changing materials and textbooks can be cumbersome, curriculum is an area where private schools' autonomy is a major advantage. Because many private schools create their own curriculum, a school whose curriculum team has well-defined DEI goals is well positioned to support traditionally underrepresented students via curriculum decisions.

Finally, because some private schools are members of larger networks, collaboration between school leaders already serving a diverse population and members of curriculum committees should be considered. This will help underrepresented voices become incorporated in the network's academic programming and maintain consistency across schools.

Create Affinity Spaces

In her article, "How Racial Affinity Groups Saved My Life," Dr. Moore-Southall writes, "For the first time, I felt invited, welcomed, and included in an institution that pretended to represent the same moral and philosophical educational initiatives that supported all people."[28] Affinity groups are spaces for those in the cultural minority to gather and have their experiences validated. Affinity groups can help students to feel empowered, signal that their voices and perspectives are valued, and strengthen school culture. Many post-secondary institutions now utilize affinity groups to great effect.[29]

Teresa Jenkins cautions that affinity groups are sustainable only if they are aligned with a school's culture. She recommends that a school first conduct an honest assessment of its culture to confirm preparedness of the school community. Simply put: affinity groups should not be forced. She also notes that once a school begins to offer affinity groups, it should be prepared to explain the purpose of the groups and offer affinity spaces to any marginalized group that advocates for one. A school that is ready to offer affinity groups can begin by identifying where students who are marginalized go for comfort and support. Jenkins says students will gravitate toward organic, informal affinity groups, which is a good place to start. St. Mary's Episcopal School (Memphis) utilizes a tiered approach to affinity groups by school level: from mentorship to coaching to advocacy. By exposing students to various forms of affinity over time and offering proper support, a school can sustain its affinity groups and help them thrive.

If met with skepticism as to why a school should employ affinity groups, it may be helpful to think about Dr. Moore-Southall's advice: "If you are uncomfortable or unable to understand the necessity of affinity groups, you probably have never needed one. However, if you are committed to providing an education that is truly excellent for *all* students in your institution, encourage and support the vital role affinity groups play toward this noble goal."

Build Mentorship Opportunities

Mentoring relationships with older classmates, faculty, staff members, or alumni of color help students of color to feel known and validated. In a 2015 study, Dr. Erica Stovall White examined the experience of African-American girls in independent schools and found that students felt having a mentor of the same race was key to feeling understood by and connected with their mentor.[30] White suggests that mentors can be selected to support students in specific areas of need, such as academic support. Older students, teachers, counselors, administrators, coaches, and club moderators of color can all serve as mentors to students of color.

Example in Practice:

At The Oaks Academy, middle school teachers took the research about the importance of mentorship to heart. They knew that kids thrive with at least five caring adults in their lives, so the staff stayed after school one day to map out who those five adults would be for each student.

Incorporate Social Emotional Learning

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as "the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions."[31] SEL can encompass a range of tactics, but the key principle is a focus on educating the "whole child." Valor Collegiate utilizes "circles" while New Hope Christian Academy makes meaningful connections by knocking on students' doors. SEL programming can be a powerful tool to strengthen school culture.

Benefits of an SEL program are not merely qualitative. Research has documented improved academic performance, decreased behavioral issues,[32] and higher lifetime earnings.[33] An AEI/Brookings report titled "Opportunity, Responsibility, and Security: A Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream" cites SEL as a recommendation to improve education writ large.[34]

Kasar Abdulla has seen firsthand the power of relationships. DEI work and support in the classroom are student-focused at Valor, and begin with trusting relationships built between students, teachers, and administration. Circles are a regular part of Valor's schedule and strengthen bonds of those involved. Circles also make difficult conversations feel safer for everyone because trust has already been built.

Utilize Restorative Justice

The trend of "zero tolerance" in school discipline has eroded and is widely being replaced with restorative justice models. A 2008 study by the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force found that zero tolerance policies did not lead to improved school order and tended to disproportionately affect African-American students despite there being no evidence that African-American students exhibit higher rates of disruption or violence that would warrant the discipline.[35]

Instead restorative justice seeks to "proactively address relational, emotional, academic, cognitive, and physical needs before challenging behaviors occur."[36] When harmful behaviors do occur, a restorative justice approach focuses on healing, teaching, and repairing harm and, when executed with fidelity, attends to the needs of both those harmed and those who caused the harm.

Bruce Hermie, former Catholic school principal and current Director of School Partnerships for AFC, says schools should focus on student recovery, not solely on disciplining student-to-student issues. For instance, a school might include support for students' out-of-school challenges within existing discipline frameworks. School administrators might ask themselves: *Why do student discipline issues exist at our school?* The answer can help shape a school's discipline framework, shifting away from strictly punitive punishments.

Fostering Socioeconomic Diversity

Paul Tough's book, *The Years That Matter Most: How College Makes or Breaks Us*[37], recounts an illustrative moment experienced by first-generation college student KiKi. Upon entering a first-year seminar at Princeton she notices "another important difference between" herself and her fellow students. "She was poor, and most of them were rich. They had spent their young lives in an expansive world of boarding schools and tennis camps and vacation homes, while KiKi's childhood had been circumscribed by food stamps and subsidized housing and late car payments."

While this example may seem dramatic, tens of thousands of K-12 students from low-income families experience similar culture shock each school year.

Low- and middle-income students often feel like outsiders when they enter schools outside their immediate neighborhood. Following are strategies that may (1) increase the socio-economic diversity of a school community and (2) provide continuing support to ensure that all students feel welcomed, valued, and included, regardless of socioeconomic status.

Create a Sustainable Financial Model

Private schools, especially in the years following the 2008 financial crisis and most recently the COVID-19 pandemic, have shown tremendous creativity when developing sustainable financial models. This creativity shows that there are numerous ways to ensure access to a private school education for students with limited means. For example, the Cristo Rey Network utilizes a work-study program where every student goes to an internship five days a month and their earnings subsidize tuition.[38] Build Urban Prosperity in Birmingham, Alabama, teaches high school students trades through a hands-on curriculum where students renovate homes that then provide rental income that goes back into the school.[39] Microschools, such as the Wildflower Montessori schools, are intentionally small communities that have significantly reduced operational and overhead costs, allowing for significantly lower tuition.[40]

Fifty-five private choice programs in 26 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico provide an average of $5,823 to students to greatly subsidize the cost of private education. These publicly funded programs often represent a significant savings to state budgets, as the average per-pupil expenditure in public schools is higher than the amount of student scholarships. Meanwhile, eligible families can use the funds to select the school that best matches the unique needs of their children. Without question, tax credit scholarships and voucher programs make a school's tuition more affordable, but there are costs beyond tuition for which schools and parents will have to account. Five states now have Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) that can be used for educational expenses beyond tuition. While details differ from state to state, ESAs can sometimes be used for education-related expenses like transportation to and from school, books, technological resources, test prep, field trips, and even future higher education expenses.[vi]

Embracing socioeconomic diversity will require careful planning and a financial commitment. Abby Schumwinger says, "If a public program is not going to fully fund a private school experience, then a school needs to figure out how they are going to fully fund it."

New Hope Christian Academy in Memphis not only funds students while they attend New Hope in grades PK3-6 but continues to fund students' education until they graduate from high school. Lionel Cable asserts that working to extend the school's donor base is constant and difficult work, but supporting students beyond their time at New Hope is a critical part of its mission.

Subsidize Tuition

While private choice programs put tuition in reach for many families, these programs may still leave gaps that some families will be unable to pay. To create true affordability for low-income families, schools must first assess a family's financial need and determine how much additional financial assistance may be necessary.

After assessing need, many schools offer some form of direct tuition assistance. Stuart Tutler notes that some schools have restrictive internal scholarship rules that result in a student losing the scholarship if they are behind on tuition payments. It is helpful to operate from the initial assumption that all families *want* to be able to pay their child's tuition and, to an even greater extent, they want to maintain a stable educational environment for their child. Instead of immediately relinquishing a scholarship, schools should work with the family to determine a plan to pay outstanding bills while allowing the student to maintain their scholarship. A payment plan often suffices when a family cannot pay full tuition/fees immediately.

Abby Schumwinger notes that many schools committed to socioeconomic diversity use a model in which students' families who are able to pay full tuition essentially subsidize those who are not.

Account for Additional Expenses

School administrators should consider the entire cost of attendance at their school, including books, supplies, uniforms, and transportation. A key first step is helping parents understand the full cost of attendance rather than merely the cost of tuition. It may not be the case that every feature of a school's programming becomes an itemized expense. For instance, in lieu of a family purchasing a laptop for the year where assignments require access to technology, a school might establish a technology rental program. Alternatively, a school can keep its library or computer lab open after school so students can access both technology and a quiet place to study.

Despite gaining admission to a private school through a process which may have included an academic readiness component, many students will benefit from additional academic support – supplemental help that their families cannot provide. One student we interviewed said that "the [academic] material was very difficult and [I] had to go early and stay late. Students have to go out of their way to make it work for them. Schools have to have tutors ready."

Schools should make teachers and tutors available, especially to these students. Likewise, many students cannot afford summer enrichment opportunities or college admission test prep programs that are more easily accessible to their upper-income classmates. These

types of opportunities can significantly improve a student's college application. To help students access these programs, schools can work with college counselors to identify free programs and scholarship opportunities. Additionally, a number of free college access and tutoring resources now exist online and may be used to great effect in the absence of other, in-house resources.

Fund Extracurricular Activities

A student's school experience extends beyond the classroom. Clubs, sports, field trips, dances, and other extracurriculars often incur costs and may be exclusionary if not planned for in advance. The school leaders with whom AFC spoke share the sentiment that all students should be able to access all school activities, so schools must address affordability issues.

At the school level, institutions should include extracurricular activities within financial aid awards. For example, Pine Crest School in Florida created the Inclusion Aid Program, a donor-backed aid fund specifically designed to help students access experiences essential to school life.[41] Memphis University School expanded its aid program to also cover extracurricular costs, so if a student was receiving a 70% tuition scholarship, 70% of extracurricular and field trip costs would be covered as well.

At the state policy level, states should consider private choice programs, like education savings accounts, that can be used by caregivers for school-related expenses beyond tuition.

Open Private Schools in Underserved Communities

According to Dr. Bartley Danielsen, Associate Professor of Finance at N.C. State University, areas that "suffer from joblessness, low incomes, low economic activity, low housing values, high crime rates, a prevalence of food deserts and other negative neighborhood characteristics" also suffer from poorly performing public schools.[42]

At the same time, private schools that *could* provide alternatives to students in under-resourced neighborhoods are typically located in close proximity to middle- and upper-income families. Planting private schools closer to communities with large numbers of historically underrepresented students would greatly increase access to life-changing educational opportunities. As Danielsen notes, "education policy should strive to give every neighborhood the best schools possible." Danielsen advises policymakers to prioritize eligibility for private school choice programs based on residing in economically depressed ZIP codes, including federally identified Opportunity Zones.

Another model that brings private schools to communities presently lacking a range of educational options is the "microschool." Microschools – schools that enroll fewer than

100 students, often in a one-room schoolhouse setting – can be started with relatively little overhead and administrative cost. These schools, many of which benefit from centralized support networks (e.g. Prenda, Acton, and Swing Education), would quickly provide students with options that are currently lacking in their community.

Many private schools have made the mission-driven decision in recent years to open satellite campuses in underserved areas. Lakeside School, a 101-year-old private school in Seattle, Washington, opened The Downtown School as a more accessible, more affordable (roughly 50 percent of Lakeside's tuition) option for students and families. Additionally, the Downtown School's goal is to support 30 percent of students with scholarships.

Schools that choose to open satellite campuses that matriculate into the main campus must proceed with caution to mitigate the eventual culture shock that students from both campuses will encounter. Nevertheless, with planning and care, existing private schools can export much of their models to as-yet-underserved students. This move will benefit students and enrich the entire school community.

Family Engagement

New and seasoned school leaders alike emphasize the importance of cultivating strong relationships with all families in the school community. Like all DEI work, family engagement must be intentional and ongoing.

Engage Existing Families

Children learn from and model their parents/caregivers, so one of the best ways to ensure that students embrace diversity is to ensure that parents understand and are committed to the school's mission. As mentioned in the "Planning for the Work" section, incorporating DEI goals into a school's mission signals to the greater community the importance of equity and inclusion. Clearly communicate the mission, DEI plan, and goals to all students and families. Not only does this ensure that parents are informed of the school's plans, but it also allows school leaders and families to hold one another accountable to the stated goals.

Opportunities to engage in DEI work ought not be limited to staff and students. Invite parents to attend speaker events, film screenings, and other events where they can learn and engage in conversations about racism, classism, and relative privilege. Jessica Perez del Toro emphasized the importance of school leaders helping the entire school community, including parents, to acknowledge how privilege and white fragility maintain silence around racial diversity, equity, and inclusion.[43] This is why The Oaks Academy launched a 12-week discussion group for incoming families on privilege, white supremacy, and racial inequality. The group allows families to get comfortable having conversations about these sometimes

unfamiliar topics, preparing them to more authentically engage in the school's DEI work.

For Chuck Moore, leveraging established relationships between teachers and families was important. When his teachers were excited and committed to the work, he saw families share in the excitement, too. Moore says even conversations in the hallways went a long way in helping strengthen shared understanding and buy-in.

The more comfortable school leaders are when talking about these issues, the greater the opportunity for families to constructively engage in the DEI efforts.

Create an Inclusive Environment for New Families

Equitable family engagement creates systems of meaningful engagement for all families. Kasar Abdulla identifies the important difference between "engagement" and "involvement": "involvement" is transactional and often happens on the school's terms, whereas "engagement" is a two-way process. Abdulla emphasizes that families and teachers should recognize and trust one another's expertise — families are best positioned to know and advocate for their children while teachers are best positioned to assess academic readiness and progress. Both see aspects of a child's development, and trust is foundational for optimizing this partnership.

In order to help families feel welcomed, a school must ensure that events and communications are accessible. School events must be held during times, and at locations, accessible to all families. For instance, a school should consider parents' work schedules and transportation needs, offer multiple time slots for conferences, record school events so families who cannot attend can still watch, and offer childcare at school events. Several private school leaders also advised against families hosting events at their homes, as it can elicit feelings of exclusion for low-income families.

Translating written communication, including websites, newsletters, and forms, may be necessary. Abdulla notes that even materials in English should avoid using terms that are not easily understood, especially technical jargon (e.g., a grade-level "scope and sequence"). Hiring translators is important at school events, such as parent-teacher conferences. Teachers must be able to easily communicate with parents, but students should not be used as translators; instead hire translators or use over-the-phone interpretation services.

Affinity groups, once again, are a great tool for family engagement. Family affinity groups allow family members with a shared identity to meet, build community, share their experiences in the school, and discuss important issues. Abdulla recommends letting parents lead these groups with support from the school. At Valor, school leaders rotate in attending affinity group meetings to strengthen the relationships between faculty members and families.

New Hope Academy hosts events to welcome families at the start of each year. The school organizes a schoolwide picnic, and each classroom also has its own gathering for students, families, and teachers to start building relationships. When the school fostered these relationships early, other opportunities for building community emerged, such as a group of moms who came together to teach one another how to dance. New Hope Academy also allows any parent who wants to attend a field trip to do so, and requires students to invite all the boys or girls or the entire class to birthday parties to prevent feelings of exclusion and discrimination. These intentional practices and policies help build an inclusive school environment.

Conclusion

The shifting demographics of the country as well as the educational benefits for all students who attend diverse schools should inspire private school leaders to pursue diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Private schools are uniquely positioned to implement these initiatives given their autonomy, which allows for flexibility and creativity.

As all those interviewed reiterated, it is important to understand that this work must be intentional and ongoing. School leaders should consider the strategies outlined in this report and determine which recommendations will work best for their students, staff, and families. This work takes careful planning and thoughtful execution as well as continued reassessment to ensure that the work is not stagnating and that existing strategies are still effective.

With a commitment to the work, private schools can build communities that are reflective of the growing diversity of America and where all students, families, and staff feel valued and are able to thrive.

Road Map for School Leaders

Planning for the Work

- Examine the historical context of your private school
- Be willing to unlearn
- Assess the school's climate
- Invest in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work
- Lead from the top
- Define diversity
- Create and utilize an equity lens
- Integrate DEI into the school's mission and culture

Building and Supporting a Diverse, Representative Faculty

- Ensure diversity among school leaders
- Create intentional hiring practices
- Add DEI as a component of school evaluations
- Ongoing professional development
- Leverage community liaisons
- Ensure application accessibility

Fostering Racial Diversity

- Utilize multicultural curriculum and culturally responsive pedagogy
- Create affinity spaces
- Build mentorship opportunities
- Incorporate social emotional learning
- Utilize restorative justice

Fostering Socioeconomic Diversity

- Create a sustainable financial model
- Subsidize tuition
- Account for additional expenses
- Fund extracurricular activities
- Open private schools in underserved communities

Family Engagement

- Engage existing families
- Create an inclusive environment for new families

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