
WATERBURY PUBLIC SCHOOLS' PLAN TO IMPROVE TESTING RESULTS: CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING METHODS & STUDENT PERFORMANCE

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In a diverse urban school district, such as Waterbury, it is impossible for curricular development or reform strategies bereft of cultural competency measures to be successful. Further, we believe that students' identities and psychological wellbeing should drive curricular development and teacher-student relationships. The improvement plan, as well as the relationships between students, teachers, and content represented in a presentation made to the Board of Education on September 24, 2015 titled *Waterbury Public Schools Smarter Balanced Baseline, CMT and CAPT Results* are top-down because the improvement plan is contingent on placing content, and curricular alignment above every other educational component important to improving student performance. We believe it should be inverted to align the theoretical construction of curriculum with what is most advantageous for student performance.

Performance Improvement Plan

Placing content above teachers and students is problematic because it subverts the socio-cultural experiences of both groups. This is an assimilationist tactic. We believe this paradigm should be reversed. Placing students above teachers, and content would be the first step in remedying some of the disadvantageous outcomes that already exist for our majority-minority student body. School professionals must develop content, however the content and strategies for delivering it must meet students' socio-cultural needs. The Waterbury Public Schools' (WPS) leadership teams, including department supervisors, and teachers must reorient their practices in order to provide a culturally relevant educational experience. According to the State Education Resource Center of Connecticut (SERC), to have a "culturally relevant" educational experience, these three elements must be present:

1. Students who are empowered to use their own cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives for academic success;
2. Teachers who are highly aware of their own beliefs, attitudes, and biases and those of others; and
3. A curriculum that engages and affirms both students' and teachers' identities, cultural and experiential reference points, and world-views in the process of learning. (SERC, 2011)

When these elements finally exist we can be confident that the WPS is taking an approach that will eventually solve systemic inequalities evident in our achievement gaps and opportunity gaps; and then be able to improve performance on student assessments.

Building Culturally Responsive Curriculum

Seated within the WPS' plan to improve student performance is the reliance on a whitewashed curriculum. Looking at the ELA content focus we see these questions:

- How do we understand what we read?
- How do we write and present effectively?
- How do we speak effectively? How do we listen critically?
- What are effective and accurate methods of research?

Introducing these questions as complex and important to how content is chosen is a routine pedagogical trope. We must not be fooled by this rhetorical ploy by the presenters (Mortensen and Strand). The recommended plans for ELA content are homogenized and bereft of any cross-cultural elements. It is our fear that without an intervention these plans will widen the achievement and opportunity gaps.

Our research shows that curriculum must have elements that are aligned with students' cognizant development of racialized difference and should assist with their cognizant development of race and culture. This is important because focusing on "the importance of agency and choice..." while illuminating the "cognitive processes that influence how individuals adapt, cope, and respond," will initiate an emancipatory process that will lead to performance gains by students (Noguera, 2009). Performance gains may not be possible with the traditional disempowering focus on content because it is not centered in a culturally competent model. Pedro Noguera, Antonia Darder, and Claude Steele make it clear that research has shown "students are highly susceptible to prevailing stereotypes related to intellectual ability" (Noguera, 2009). This is more than an episodic phenomenon, and has detrimental impacts on students of color for their entire learning lives. Thus, our reasoning to move beyond a homogenizing theory of "content first" to a praxis that is reverential to our students' lived experiences, acknowledges school professionals' implicit and explicit biases, and works to eliminate barriers to equitable educational experiences for all of our students.

Professional Capacity

Next, is building professional capacity. What we notice within the WPS plan to build better teachers is not surprising, but predictably insufficient because of the ways in which the Connecticut Common Core of Teaching (CCCT) is structured. Insofar as the CCCT Rubric for Measuring Teacher Effectiveness (CCCTRMTE) is a comprehensive document, it is also a document that lacks a detailed method for judging cultural competency practices of teachers and administrators. The CCCTRMTE, the rubric for measuring teacher efficacy, barely uses the words race, ethnicity, and culture. Upon our review, its mechanisms to gauge the practices of teachers in a socio-culture context is deficient, and certainly doesn't use any accountability standards to reflect the urgent and growing achievement gaps in Waterbury. We should build a custom system that reflects our district.

If the Waterbury Public Schools use CCCT lesson planning and the CCTRMTE as baselines for building, and measuring professional capacity for teachers, then we can expect a worsening of the achievement gap here in Waterbury. In the presentation made to the Board of Education on September 24th these questions were noted as the ones to gauge professional capacity:

- What is the evidence that our professional learning is increasing our adults' effectiveness in ways that translate to enhanced levels of student performance?
- What is the impact of the new learning on students?

These questions hold little or no value if their construction is void of a diametrical positioning to the status quo cultural power dynamics of the Waterbury schools. Antonia Darder suggests the focus should be on democratizing the classroom. Improving teacher capacity here in Waterbury must start with removing the "powerlessness generated by working in an environment that is fundamentally incompatible with engaging the complexities of teaching a culturally diverse student population" (Darder, 2012). Our claim is simple: build institutional supports that portray rather than obscure student centrality. Again, let us assert that the paradigm of placing content over teachers and students will have negative consequences for teacher morale, school climate, and student performance.

Glaring Omissions

Finally, the greatest deficiency in the September 24, 2015 presentation made to the BOE was this: neither the Bilingual/ESOL Education Department, the Special Education Department, nor were any solutions noted for these students represented in this presentation.

These students are historically looked upon as abnormal, as burdens, and not deserving of having an identity safe learning environment. Recent research has revealed that conditions worsen for English Language learners and Special Education students in designated “turnaround” schools or districts. Their omission is disconcerting. The Institute for Educational Sciences cited that ELLs experienced “moderate or limited attention to the unique needs of ELLs” when inside a school district or school designated as a turnaround entity (IES, 2014). The United States Department Education acknowledged this phenomenon, and the strategic reform plan presented on September 24, 2015 would easily be categorized as “less than moderate.” Combining this conspicuous absence from the presentation made by school district leaders with the performance results revealing not more than 4.2% of Special Education students or EL students met the accountability target of level 3 in Math or ELA; one could conclude these students would immediately be granted additional specialized resources. In the same vein, their teachers’ capacities need to be measured in a manner that reflects the heightened responsibility of the work they’re doing. Additionally, special education staff should have more impactful professional development that is closely aligned to the socio-cultural experiences of their students. Imagine the ways a black female special needs student’s educational experience differs from that of a white male. These components were not clearly identified.

Solutions

Therefore, we ask you to reject the reductionist mentality associated with practices that allow dehumanizing conditions to persist for our most deserving class of students. If we don’t reject this mentality, a dualism that forces curricular reform on students and teachers without providing cultural competency training for educators will create gaps for our students to literally disappear in to. In an attempt to reconcile with rigid, outdated, technically focused instructional practices we encourage the new director of teaching and learning, Steven Strand, to explore ways to allow teachers and students to leverage their cultural backgrounds, lived experiences, and unique learning or teaching skills in order to avoid the traps of oppressive learning environments created by top-down paradigms of instruction and learning (Darder, 2012).

If we are to agree on common goals for our educational system we first have to reject assimilationist ideologies just like the one promoted through a paradigm that places content over teachers and students. We recommend the following:

- Immediately commence a multi-phased professional development series for teachers with its sole purpose being to build professional capacity through building cultural competency.

- Reverse the current focus on content and curricular alignment in order to focus on a liberating pedagogy for both teachers and students. This process will build autonomy for teachers and allow student experiences to be the driver of innovation.
- Rebuild teacher assessments to include data driven analysis for achievement and discipline gaps based on race, gender, and disability.
- Empower students by allowing them to inform the decision-making on classroom rules and class assignments.
- Construct a curriculum that has elements aligned with students' cognizant development of racialized difference, and assists with their cognizant development of race and culture.
- Develop and implement measures that will ensure Bilingual/ESOL Education students and Special Education students are provided with instruction aligned with their unique learning capabilities.

Challenging our current institutional practices is necessary to promote the democratization of our educational system. A culturally democratic educational experience requires challenging hierarchies of privilege with “cultural expressions of resistance,” leveraging new accountability measures that tear down barriers to equity, and building institutional supports that promote, rather than obscure, student centrality (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Respectfully,

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Works Cited

- *Equity in Education: A Transformative Approach*. SERC 2011. It should be noted that we reordered these to place students first.
- *The Trouble with Black Boys and Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education*; Pedro Noguera, 2009.
- *Culture and Power in the Classroom: Educational Foundations for the Schooling of Bicultural Students*; Antonia Darder, 2012.
- *A Focused look at Schools Receiving School Improvements Grants that have High Percentages of English Language Learners*, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, April 2014.
- *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*; Freire & Macedo, 1987.