

## Connect the “P’s”: A Systemic Approach for Achieving High Academic Success

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### Abstract

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President Barack Obama’s Race to the Top initiative marks a historical moment in American education. Race to the Top offers bold incentives to states willing to spur systemic reform to improve teaching and learning in America’s school. This initiative has brought to the forefront reform effort needed to address the inequities which exist in our nation’s schools. Oftentimes, educational systems struggle to support the needs of culturally different students. Using salient characteristic of organizational culture as a framework, this paper offers a strategy for creating high performing schools. Particular attention is given to policy, practice, personnel, programs, and process in schools and their role in culturally competent approaches for improving schools.

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**Keywords:** school culture, cultural competency, student achievement, multicultural education, educational psychology

### 1. Introduction

In the United States, President Obama’s Race to the Top initiative offers incentives for systemic reform to improve teaching and learning (The White House, 2013). This initiative has brought to the forefront reform efforts needed to address the inequities that exist in U.S. schools.

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While teachers, administrators, school board members, community members, and policymakers may be aware of these inequities, they rarely examine them systematically or devise ways to eliminate the inequities (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004).

Historically, equity audits have been used to examine inequitable practices relevant to civil rights, curriculum, and state accountability policy systems (Skrla et al., 2004). Diaz, Pelletier, and Provenzo (2006) define equitable treatment as providing instruction and support that meet the needs of the student(s) and refute the notion of a "one-size-fits-all" education. As such, equitable treatment is decidedly more difficult to achieve than equal treatment and, therefore, is often a road less traveled compared to "equal treatment" in the realm of education (Diaz et al., 2006).

The benefits of an equity audit are numerous and noteworthy. However, a cultural audit can reveal beliefs and ideas that are tightly woven within the fabric of a school's culture that are not visible through the lens of an equity audit. A culture audit is an examination of an organization's operational elements to determine its level of cultural proficiency. By uncovering a school culture, it can be openly and purposefully discussed, developed, and assessed. Ultimately, this new knowledge will contribute to an educational experience that is personalized by capitalizing on students' strengths and addressing their challenges. Most important, students will benefit from a curriculum that is characterized by rigor, relevance, and relationships that are amplified by the energy and motivation of staff members and students (Cleveland, 2007; Deal & Peterson, 2009).

Researchers agree that school culture and cultural audits are important, yet often overlooked, components of school improvement (Freiberg, 1998; Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003; Peterson & Deal, 1998). Culture audits examine how diverse cultural perspectives are reflected in the values and behaviors manifested in the overall school culture (National Center for Cultural Competence, 2005). The assessment of school culture would ideally include mixed methods that combine traditional quantitative and qualitative methodology to triangulate data. Researchers Bustamante (2005), Wagner (2004), and Wagner & Madsen-Copas (2002) suggest these methods may include, but are not limited to:

- Examining school documents (e.g., school improvement plan, documents that outline policies and procedures, meeting minutes, written curriculum, etc.)
- Administering surveys (e.g., surveys that measure perceptions about the school)
- Conducting observations (e.g., classrooms, meetings, social events)
- Facilitating focus groups/interviews of stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, teachers, staff, and community members).

Findings from a school culture audit conducted by the authors at a public elementary school in the mid-western United States can serve as an example of how an audit can benefit a school.

At the time of the audit, 83% of the students were eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch. In spite of the limited resources available to families, the school stood out among its peers in academic achievement. Math and English/language arts mean test scores outpaced district wide averages (Department of Education, 2008). Additionally, with the exception of 3rd-grade English/language arts and 6th-grade math, the school exceeded state averages in each category (Department of Education, 2008). A key finding from the audit revealed that teachers and parents/guardians contributed significantly to the schools 'positive culture, which in turn promoted high academic success among students enrolled in the school. For example, it was documented that one particular "Family Night" garnered 100% participation. This information and other data resulted in the school formalizing specific family activities into their school improvement plans to ensure their ongoing presence.

This article explains how information rendered from the audit of the salient organizational and cultural characteristics of policy, practices, personnel, programs, and process can be incorporated into school improvement plans for creating high-performing schools. Hereafter, the variables of policy, practices, personnel, programs, and process will be referred to as the "Five Ps." Table 1 provides an example of a school culture audit data collection form in an abbreviated format. Evaluation of each component can range from the lowest level of implementation, "novice," to the highest level of implementation, "distinguished."

## 2. The Five Ps

The "Five Ps" are common critical factors in most school organizations. Often, the decisions made by leadership are anchored in organizational policies. Those policy decisions drive the process, practices, and programs whereby the school personnel operationalize the other Ps. Integral in understanding the significance of school culture and the role of the Five Ps in transforming school culture is a rudimentary understanding of the multiple cultures at play in everyday school interactions. As part of a "null curriculum," culture has powerful influences on the way administrators, teachers, staff, students, and families interact (Diaz et al., 2006). This system of meaning shapes the way people think and define "normal" and how to sanction those who are not "normal." Therein lies the problem for many who operate within this culture.

Students associated with the school arrive with varying degrees of understanding of what is acceptable and what is not. Students whose cultural characteristics are more consistent with the culture, norms, and expectations of the school have greater opportunities for academic success (Milner, 2010). Students experiencing a "cultural mismatch" between their community and school are often less successful (Klotz, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2001).

Schools can address this disparity by aligning to the child's community, rather than forcing the issue the other way around (Ayers, 2010). In short, it is critical that school improvement plans identify intersections between the school and community values, beliefs, and norms if they are to achieve a high level of academic success for all students.

Creating an environment that is responsive to the needs of a diverse constituency has major implications for educational outcomes. Research indicates that culturally responsive schools benefit students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, who are often impacted negatively by the achievement gap, overrepresentation in special education, and higher suspension, expulsion, and drop-out rates (Noguera, 2003; Skiba et al., 2006). **The following section will describe how the operational elements of the Five Ps can solidify a school improvement plan toward cultural proficiency.**

### **3. Connecting the Five Ps to School Culture**

#### **3.1 Policy**

The culture of an organization is the embodiment of several elements. One of these elements is policy. Policy is a high-level, overall plan that outlines the general goals and acceptable procedures of an organization.

This characterization of policy highlights several important implications. First, policy is a method of action that establishes expectations for organizational norms, beliefs, and behaviors (Szilagyi & Wallace, 1990). Second, policy guides and determines decisions. Lastly, policy occurs “in light of” conditions. For example, federal and state policies dictates that schools must implement and monitor the progress of their efforts to close achievement gaps between all students regardless of their race, ethnicity, social class, income, language, or geographic location (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). Examples of other hallmark policies currently being implemented at the school and district levels include:

- Zero tolerance policies are illegal. Each individual case must be considered.
- Students must be allowed due process (14th Amendment) in all discipline cases.
- Students who fail a classroom test are to be re-taught and re-tested.
- Students who are suspended from school are given the opportunity to make up missed work.
- Students who lose a book must have it replaced by the school.
- Tests cannot constitute more than 40% of a final grade; other forms of assessment must be incorporated to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge.

School improvement plans can exemplify how policy is implemented and guide equitable and fair decision-making. Defining policy as an overall plan suggests that policy is systemic, specific, and concrete. Policy is the conduit for educational accountability and can be instrumental in developing mandates respective to cultural competency, equity, and diversity.

### **3.2 Practices**

Many pedagogical practices enable schools to function as caring, inclusive, and cohesive learning communities (Tomlinson, 2003). School practices are established habits or customs exercised on a daily basis. Adopting culturally responsive practices in a school improvement plan creates a stronger core culture that is part of the formal curriculum and is known, supported, and sustained by all members of the community. One hallmark of culturally competent practices in a school is the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). Further, Banks (2006) proposes that classroom practices should equip students with social action and decision-making skills necessary to encourage social action in the communities where students live. Other hallmark pedagogical practices that support inclusive and culturally responsive learning communities include:

- Differentiated instruction—Teachers present several learning options at different degrees of difficulty to ensure appropriate challenge for students at varied readiness levels. Teachers use varied assessment options (e.g., portfolios, presentations, authentic problems to solve, etc.) that allow students to fully demonstrate their knowledge.
- Professional learning communities—Teachers collaborate on developing culturally relevant lessons; they utilize action research book studies and data studies to improve academics as a team.
- Parental involvement—School administrators and teachers reach out to parents to gain knowledge about family traditions and practices, explain what is happening in the classroom, provide frequent feedback on assessments, and enlist support at home.
- Peer collaboration—Teachers create interactive instructional strategies emphasizing culture, open-ended problem solving, student interests, and peer support.

Professional development for teachers, staff, and administrators is critical to the development of culturally responsive practices. School improvement plans should clearly articulate opportunities and varied types of professional development that specifically speaks to validating cultural experiences in instructional practices.

### 3.3 Personnel

Culturally responsive school personnel are collegial, respectful, and value cultural differences. The process of changing and developing a new school culture that reflects the described values can become fragile by attention slips, new people, retirements, and waning awareness (Fisher, Frey, & Pumpiam, 2012). Nevertheless, leadership should be committed to the development of culturally responsive school personnel. This process includes the entire staff, from the principal to the teachers, support staff, and even volunteers. Fisher et al. (2012) have suggested the following practices for building cultural capacity within a school:

- Discuss the cultural pillars of the school during the hiring process with candidates.
- Allow regular feedback between the leadership team and staff to determine what is going well, what needs support, or what needs to be changed. This process also promotes ownership in the development of the school culture by all.
- Implement brief daily standing meetings to quickly get everyone on the same page each morning. These meetings also offer the time to build culture through symbolic gestures and celebrations.
- Give recognition to and celebrate staffs who are well prepared, dedicated, and committed individuals.
- Design a staff development plan invested in a school culture that reflects commitment to high academic performance among all students.

In short, schools in the United States and many other countries are becoming more ethnically, racially, culturally, socially, and linguistically diverse. *Therefore, it is imperative that administrators hire individuals whose commitment to multicultural education is embedded in their core beliefs about teaching and learning. These actions will ensure school personnel are culturally responsive when adapting cognitive and physical behavior in cross-cultural situations (Bennett, 1993) to meet the needs of all students.*

### 3.4 Programs

A program is a system established to attain a specific goal. For example, an afterschool tutoring program may be created to reduce achievement gaps between student populations.

A school improvement plan can guide administrators in developing programs that are equitable and accessible to all populations within the school.

This is achieved by considering what programs are being offered, where programs are being offered, when programs are offered, what type of accommodations (i.e., interpreters, accessibility ramps, etc.) are needed for students with special needs, and which supplemental services (i.e., transportation, meals, etc.) are needed to maximize participation for all who require academic support. Some hallmark programs that have been implemented within the United States are:

- 21st Century Scholars Program—This federal grant program offers tutoring and afterschool activities; most important, students receive up to four years of undergraduate tuition at any participating public college or university in their state.
- Academies—Students enjoy small learning communities with similar career interests, and a focus on college preparation; students have a vested interest in their school.
- Student academic support—Struggling students must attend a mandatory academic support school program that emphasizes study skill development, organization, and completion of work.
- Intersession programs—These programs provide enrichment activities, day camps, and remediation for students during extended breaks (i.e., spring break, fall break, etc.) from school.

Equally important, programs should be representative of the demographics of the school population (i.e., racial, socio-economics, gender, ability levels, etc.). For instance, if students of color are primarily in athletics and rarely present in accelerated academic programs, school leadership and educators should take corrective steps to address this disparity (Milner, 2010). The democratic goal of educating all students for participation in intellectual and academic complexity means breaking down barriers to full participation of historically oppressed or excluded groups (Ayers, 2010). Therefore, it is critical that school improvement plans be used as a tool for the inclusion of all students.

### **3.5 Process**

A process is a natural phenomenon marked by gradual changes that lead toward a particular outcome as a result of established routines or set of procedures (Szilagi & Wallace, 1990). Processes should not be tangential discussions about fragmented applications of ideology, or the offshoots of political or personally biased diatribe. Rather, processes should be clearly articulated in school improvement plans, whereby process is a specific, intentional, distinct, and tangible construct that is measurable and routinely monitored. For example, the outcome of a special education placement is the ratification of a process.

Unfortunately, as a result of an often biased process, African American students are disproportionately represented among those who are eligible for special education services (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Skiba et al., 2006). School culture has been found to be a likely determinant of special education placement, rather than the characteristics of children themselves (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Noted below are a few measures school improvement plans can detail to establish and maintain fair and equitable process resolutions:

- Describe how and which data will be used in the decision-making process
- Describe which personnel are involved in the process
- Describe how processes are monitored and evaluated periodically for inequities and disparities among school subpopulations
- Describe how new processes are implemented
- Describe how summative evaluations will be used to appraise established processes.

In short, an analysis of the data collected from the evaluation of school processes will give recognition to practices that are strengths and reveal weaknesses and threats to the learning community. By identifying these designated areas, schools can bring about meaningful change by making paradigm shifts in school procedures that influence organizational behaviors.

#### 4. Conclusion

There is no single variable that accounts for closing achievement gaps. It is a multifaceted problem that requires a comprehensive planned approach involving school and families (Mimms, 2007). Essential to this plan is executing *policies* that promote equitable and fair outcomes for subpopulations within the school; implementing culturally responsive *practices* to establish an inclusive and cohesive learning environment; hiring and developing school *personnel* who value culture differences and are responsive at adapting cross-cultural situations; creating *programs* that are equitable and accessible to all populations within the school; and developing clearly articulated *processes* that are not driven by attitudes and beliefs, but rather by specific and distinct data that can be measured and routinely monitored.

In closing, culture is an important factor that determines a child's level of confidence, level of aspiration, and the level of motivation in how they approach life events (Plata & Robertson, 1998). Therefore, it is time for educational professionals to remove the invisibility cloak from culture and move beyond the notion that all students must be treated equally in order to be treated equitably (Mahon, 2006). Only then can achievement gaps by race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomics, and other cultural variables be erased (Skrla et al., 2004).

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**Table 1**

<b>Cultural Proficiency &amp; Organizational Culture</b>					
<b>Organizational Characteristics</b>	<b>4 - Distinguished</b> <i>Exemplary level of development &amp; implementation</i>	<b>3 - Proficient</b> <i>Fully functioning and operational level of development &amp; implementation</i>	<b>2 - Apprentice</b> <i>Limited development or partial implementation</i>	<b>1 - Novice</b> <i>Little or no development or implementation</i>	<b>Evidence Box</b>
Policies-There are policies in place that support and encourage a culturally proficient organizational culture.	The district/school policies support the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students. Particular attention is given to the needs of subpopulations, i.e. <i>race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, to ensure equitable distribution of resources.</i> The policies are systemic, concrete, communicated, implemented, and monitored.	The district/school policies support the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students. Particular attention is given to the needs of subpopulations, i.e. <i>race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, to ensure equitable distribution of resources.</i> The policies are systemic, concrete, communicated, and implemented.	The district/school policies support the academic, psychosocial, and career development of particular students. However, the policies are neither systemic concrete, communicated, nor implemented.	The district/school policies do not support the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students.	
Practices-The school/district ensures equitable and culturally responsive practices and implemented systemically.	Faculty and staff practices bolster the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students. Particular attention is given to the needs of subpopulations, i.e. <i>race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, to ensure equitable distribution of resources.</i> Their practices are specific, concrete, measurable, and routinely evaluated.	Faculty and staff practices bolster the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students. Particular attention is given to the needs of subpopulations, i.e. <i>race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, to ensure equitable distribution of resources.</i> Their practices are specific, concrete, and measurable.	Faculty and staff practices bolster the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students. Particular attention is given to the needs of subpopulations, i.e. <i>race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, to ensure equitable distribution of resources.</i> However, their practices are not specific, concrete, measurable, or evaluated.	Faculty and staff practices do not bolster the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students.	
Personnel-The faculty and staff supports, respects, and accepts all students in the school.	District/school staff supports the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students. Particular attention is given to the needs of subpopulations, i.e. <i>race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, to ensure equitable distribution of resources.</i> Their efforts are systemic, concrete, well established, and routinely evaluated and monitored.	District/school staff supports the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students. Particular attention is given to the needs of subpopulations, i.e. <i>race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, to ensure equitable distribution of resources.</i> Their efforts are somewhat concrete and well established.	District/School staff support the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students. . Particular attention is given to the needs of subpopulations, i.e. <i>race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, to ensure equitable distribution of resources.</i> However, their efforts are not systemic, concrete, established, or evaluated.	District/school staff does not support the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students.	
Programs-There are programs in place that support and encourage a culturally proficient organizational culture.	The district/school programs support the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students. The programs are systemic, concrete, well established, routinely monitored, and evaluated.	The district/school programs support the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students. The policies are systemic, concrete, established, and monitored.	The district/school programs support the academic, psychosocial, and career development of particular students. Additionally, the programs are not systemic, concrete, established, monitored, or evaluated.	The district/school programs do not support the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students.	
Processes-The school/district has systemic concrete processes to support the development and maintenance of culturally proficient organizational culture	The district/school processes promote the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students. Particular attention is given to the needs of subpopulations, i.e. <i>race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, to ensure equitable distribution of resources.</i> The processes are systemic, concrete, well established, and routinely monitored.	The district/school processes promote the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students. Particular attention is given to the needs of subpopulations, i.e. <i>race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, to ensure equitable distribution of resources.</i> The processes are systemic, concrete, and established.	The district/school processes promote the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students. Particular attention is given to the needs of subpopulations, i.e. <i>race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, to ensure equitable distribution of resources.</i> However, the processes are not systemic, concrete, established, or monitored.	The district/school processes do not promote the academic, psychosocial, and career development of all students.	