

P.S. 63 STAR Academy:

Curriculum: A Culturally Responsive Unit

All curriculum is responsive to culture, but to whose culture? That was the premise and question organizers at P.S. 63 wanted to examine and respond to critically with a closer look at their student curriculum in place. They developed the “Curriculum: A Culturally Responsive Unit” program as a way to take an existing curriculum and make it work better to reflect the backgrounds, interests, and needs of their students, comprised mainly of children of color. Much like most schools teaching units, their curriculum reflected Eurocentric view of the world and the staff at P.S. 63 wanted to disrupt that status quo. Organizers hoped this adjustment of the curriculum to one that was critically conscious would lift engagement and increase ownership of learning. Teachers had been having conversations

about race and equity and wanted to bring that work into their teaching practice as well to take it to the next level.

To begin the examination, the organizing staff read pieces focused on race and equity. Some examples included Ta-Nehisi Coates’ article “Between the World and Me” in *The Atlantic* and excerpts from Patricia Ramsey’s *Teaching and Learning in a Diverse World*. They also looked at a multicultural framework to reflect on their units and plan to make revisions that reflected the students’ demographics. Pre-K through 5th grade and enrichment (art, music, physical education) teachers were tasked to revise their curriculum to target students of color so that they would see themselves in the curriculum. An added benefit to this practice was to expose white students to a counter-narrative. This effort impacted a total of 204 students, 25 school teachers and



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staff, one district leader and 20 community members in the district who later received the cycle to replicate.

The "Curriculum: A Culturally Responsive Unit" program was launched during the beginning of P.S. 63's professional development (PD) cycles in the 2016–2017 school year. The work in 2017 introduced the multicultural organization framework which they used to begin the PD cycle for 2018. At the end of the 2016–2017 school year, teachers completed unit reflections describing the effectiveness of the unit, what they would want to change in the following year, and assessing their curriculum multicultural focus. These reflections were used as a launch to this PD cycle. The P.S. 63 PD Committee and the Assistant Principal facilitated a six-session cycle of Professional Development for classroom teachers. The Committee (three teachers, AP, and Principal) created an overview for each day of the cycle based on principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), social action project goals, and Understanding by Design (UBD) stages of unit planning with a session devoted to standards analysis, a focus on assessment, updating teacher "hooks" and creating 4-5 UBD key learning experiences, an overhaul of objectives, delivering content and resources to teachers and culminating in a cross-grade peer-to-peer feedback protocol and reflection session.

One third-grade teacher remarked at the practice, saying "The work in revisiting the unit with the multicultural lens was an enlightening experience because I thought about my students as more than just learners. I really thought about what my students can offer from their lives, families, and homes."

She explained that "Many times, educators are always thinking about what they can offer to students. This process helped me to think about what my students can offer to their classroom community to teach all of us more about themselves."

Organizers anticipate further development in the students' critical thinking and questioning skills. They have already noted that peer relations in the school have improved, students have moved from tolerant to acceptant

of others and have become more active participants in their learning. Most notably, there is a decrease in negative behaviors and less classroom removals since the new curriculum has been implemented.

Following the PD cycle, a feedback protocol was implemented in order for teachers from different grade levels and specialties to review and provide feedback. After reading and providing feedback on two different units, each teacher received feedback from two different colleagues on the changes they had implemented as well as the unit as a whole. Staff members evaluated the units based on specific criteria (e.g., hook and hold, performance task) as well as individual lesson plans and/or teaching points. Many staff members reported that the feedback received was genuine and helped spark deeper conversation and add a new perspective to potential areas of revision.

While many teachers indicated that their units are still works in progress, they have been eager to implement these revised units. They are more responsive to the students and their backgrounds. Essential questions and enduring understandings were made more accessible to students and resulted in increased engagement around topics of multiculturalism. Teachers found that students are more receptive to the activities built into the unit and there are organic opportunities for family engagement stemming from the new curriculum.

Organizers said they could have strengthened the practice by including benchmark and post student survey data about their attitudes towards the curriculum. Some of the challenges of implementing the practice included time, selections of which units to begin revising first, incorporating UBD and UDL practices, and staff buy-in to the program. They would urge that schools interested in implementing a similar program should start small with one unit at a time as capacity allows, create staff buy-in by allowing choice and responding to the team's wants and needs. Future organizers should encourage cross-collaboration among grade teams and content areas to help build skills and grow together as a community of educators.