



Creating An Intentionally Diverse School: Lessons Learned

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ABOUT NEWSCHOOLS VENTURE FUND

NewSchools Venture Fund reimagines public education through powerful ideas and passionate entrepreneurs so that all children—especially those in underserved communities—have the opportunity to succeed. As a national nonprofit, we raise charitable funds from donors and invest them to support education entrepreneurs.

Introduction

Schools are places where we learn classroom lessons, as well as life lessons.

For many students, school integration—which began as early as 1954 with the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, and truly became a reality in the decades that followed the Civil Rights Act of 1964—created an opportunity to meet other students, learn from them, and grow with people they might never have otherwise met. It created greater understanding of people from different backgrounds and cultures, and laid the foundation for integrated workplaces and communities. However, over the past two decades, we've lost ground.

Schools today are more segregated than they were in the 1960s. According to a [2016 study](#) by the U.S. Government Office of Accountability, "From school years 2000-01 to 2013-14 (the most recent data available), the percentage of all K-12 public schools that had high percentages of poor and Black or Hispanic students grew from 9 to 16 percent."

Now, a handful of educators have taken up the charge to re-integrate public schools—with an eye toward racial, income and cultural diversity. These schools, called "intentionally diverse," are designed to create environments that reflect the rich mosaic of American life. There are many components necessary to create these schools and make them successful. This paper will explore several of these components, and while it will not focus on funding, it's also critically important to note that schools like this will not grow without funder support. Historically, education-focused private philanthropy has almost exclusively funded schools in the highest need communities—in effect, creating schools with high concentrations of low-income students. That's not without merit, but there is also room to support economically diverse schools. In the last few years, NewSchools has carved out a small piece of our investments to explore the possibilities of intentionally diverse schools and learn more about their work.

The intentionally diverse schools we fund are working to provide students, teachers and

families the opportunity to connect and relate across lines of difference. This is in the hope of making the future a better place for all children in the communities where they work. "Global awareness means being able to succeed in diverse environments. We are teaching [our students] to be professional with people that have different beliefs and perspectives," said Kasar Abdulla, who is a founding member of Valor, an intentionally diverse school in Nashville, Tennessee.

For others, the hope is that their school will help to create a better, more equitable society. "We are advancing equity, developing empathy and catalyzing creativity," noted Josh Densen, who founded the Bricolage School in New Orleans. Nicole Assisi, the CEO of Thrive Public Schools in San Diego, said her schools' mission was simply stated: "We are learning to live together, to give everyone a sense of belonging in the community and to ensure that everyone has a voice."

These school leaders are pioneers in the field, creating intentionally diverse schools and learning as they go. As they deepen their experience and expand their knowledge of what it means to run an intentionally diverse school, they are creating and refining practices that enable their schools to achieve their goals. We interviewed a group of them to learn more about their journeys and lessons learned. We hope others who are creating intentionally diverse schools in their communities can benefit from their experiences.



When listening to their individual stories, we noticed many of the experiences and perspectives fit into a small set of major takeaways and observations: creating a culture of belonging, recruiting targeted populations, and reducing barriers to enrollment. In this paper, we will explore each in greater detail.

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Creating a Culture of Belonging

In an intentionally diverse school, it's not just about putting diverse students in the building, it's about creating a culture where working together is the goal, and then providing the tools and learning experiences that support that goal. Beyond attracting racially diverse students, an intentionally diverse school must also create an environment where every member of that school community is valued, respected and important, regardless of family income, religious preferences, dress codes or other factors that have to do with diversity and inclusion.

It is important to think about the approaches and practices the school will put in place to make that belonging possible, including what kind of curriculum should be used and how the school will create a culture of belonging and maintain it.

David Richards from Growth Public Schools started thinking about his vision of a school for the future and asked himself, "What does my four-year-old need in 15 years?" He concluded that his son would need to know and understand how to work with people who are different than him. Then he set out to create a school where his son and others could learn how to do just that. The core

value of his school, says Richards, is an inclusive environment that is safe for every student. Similarly, Abdulla says she and her team took the time to define what diversity means in their region before they started their school. They wanted a student body that was reflective of the community in terms of faith, culture, geographies and income, providing a space for a diversity of perspectives.

INTENTIONAL CONVERSATIONS

While homogenous schools don't need to promote their values of equity and inclusion before school starts, intentionally diverse schools must explain how their mission, vision and values

align to a larger goal even before they open their doors. Racial equity is the core of Densen's school, and he knows creating a culture of equity and inclusion can be more demanding of families. Because of those demands, he begins his recruitment efforts with a deep explanation of his mission. "We want to advance educational equity by preparing students of diverse backgrounds to be innovators who change the world." He works to ensure families understand he and his team are trying to create a community where there are equitable outcomes for all students and where difference is celebrated. Over the years, he has learned that Bricolage's mission creates certain demands and is understanding of families who decide the school is not for them.

We want to advance educational equity by preparing students of diverse backgrounds to be innovators who change the world.

At Canaveral's school, New School of San Francisco, an inherent part of the mission is to overcome the racially complex power structures we all live in. "It's not just that our school is diverse," she says. "It's that we are talking about equity and privilege and making sure our students, our faculty and administration, and others in the community are having those intentional conversations as well." Not all staff members are comfortable or equipped to have these types of conversations. New School of San Francisco determines staff comfort with conversations on race and equity through their interview process. They ask candidates to discuss their experience talking with students about privilege and inclusion, and also explore their own experiences with these topics. Similarly, Densen says his school is clear in conversations with parents that equity is at the core of the school's mission, built into the culture and the curriculum. Recently, Densen partnered with the Racial Equity Institute to run a two-day workshop for his families to explore the impact of institutional racism on the entire community. The workshop has sparked conversations among families and staff about

race and equity. We are now constantly asking the question, "What is the racial equity implication for all decisions we make?"

School leaders also must learn to handle and mitigate implicit bias. Assisi said a parent decided to withdraw her student from the school because another student was not welcome at a sleepover. While most people will say they welcome cultural differences, when it comes to including a broader group in personal activities like play dates, birthday parties and other out-of-school social outings, some may be far less comfortable. She says staff at her school are tuned in to hear phrases from parents like "those kids" or "my kid feels uncomfortable," and she supports her team in coaching parents through courageous conversations around these issues. However, she



understands that some parents might not be ready for this level of complete immersion and may ultimately choose a different school for their child.

What diversity means in action must be an integral part of the student learning experience. One school did research to find out how diversity impacts learning. Another supports teachers in creating safe classroom spaces that can support conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion. Intentionally diverse schools are not only creating a more diverse school environment, they are preparing students to live out their futures as part of a diverse culture. Densen wants to prepare students for the world they will enter as adults. They should be learning how to empathize, live, learn and collaborate with people who are not like them. "If we as school leaders aren't preparing them to do that," Densen tells us, "then we are perpetuating a country driven by only a dominant set of sensibilities."

It takes a lot of time and attention to create a community in which everyone belongs, according to the school leaders we interviewed. One school, for example, uses a social and emotional learning framework and relies on creating a collaborative group dynamic where everyone's voice is heard and valued.



The message of tolerance and diversity must go beyond the school's walls and out into the community. Bringing students together isn't enough, noted the leaders interviewed for this paper. The school needs a larger goal of wanting to help communities come together and increase equity. School leadership needs to be comfortable speaking out on these issues in the community.

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Recruiting Targeted Populations

Recruiting students and families to an intentionally diverse school takes a different approach than recruiting at a school that doesn't design for diversity. Homogenous schools have a steep climb in their early years to establish a reputation. Once that is done, however, that reputation serves as the recruitment plan. Intentionally diverse schools do not have that luxury. In order to keep a school diverse, recruitment efforts must be ongoing and targeted to specific populations, based on an ongoing assessment of school demographics.

We heard from many school leaders that it takes very little effort to attract affluent white families. Affluent parents are more likely to be early adopters of these new schools, and are less likely to need to be sold on them because they might feel more culturally aligned with the school leader. Densen noted that even in New Orleans where very few white families send their children to public school, his intentionally diverse school was overwhelmed by applications from white and affluent families.

How do you ensure your school stays diverse even when overwhelmed by applications from one particular demographic? According to several school leaders, the answers to that question are

planning and monitoring. It's critical, they note, to have a recruitment plan that includes diversity goals, and to then monitor the application data daily and adjust strategies as necessary.

INTENSIVE, TARGETED, LONG-TERM CAMPAIGNS

The work of recruitment begins long before holding a school tour, organizing a neighborhood visiting campaign, or sending a mailer. 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. How are public

schools perceived in that community? How are schools and neighborhoods segregated? What is important to the different communities from which you are trying to recruit? How will your school address those needs? How do you talk about equity during recruitment so families understand your mission and are excited about your school?



CULTIVATING COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

As a school leader who might come from a different racial, socio-economic or cultural background than those in the community where the school will be located, it is critically important to establish and cultivate relationships across all facets of the community you are trying to reach. Kriste Dragon and Andrew Hodgson, both from Citizens of the World Charter Schools, suggested meeting with allies and organizations doing community-based work or with goals similar to your school's mission. They say the next step is engaging them in your school, and then building out from there by asking those contacts who else in the community would support what you are trying to do. Other school leaders suggested bringing in businesses, houses of worship, influential local leaders, and other key community

stakeholders. Building a diverse, multi-cultural base of critical support in the community will strengthen your recruitment efforts later on. Dragon and Hodgson told us their new Site Development and Community Engagement Director did 130 engagements with stakeholders before the school opened.

Several members of our portfolio met with preschool programs across their cities to get the word out about their schools and why their mission is important. One school leader also sent representatives to the neighborhoods they wanted to recruit from to talk one-on-one about the school and its benefits. Both of these strategies highlight a key tactic in building an intentionally diverse school: developing face-to-face relationships with the families you want in your school.

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These tactics may sound similar to the way most schools recruit from diverse communities. However, when recruiters from outside the community are asking families to join a school in a new neighborhood with a mixed demographic, it is even more important to engage community allies.

RECRUITMENT TEAM

As discussed earlier, a homogenous school rarely needs to continue employing a recruitment team once its reputation is established. At heterogeneous schools, however, it is often essential to permanently employ a recruitment team that is responsible for maintaining the school's diversity through ongoing recruitment, data analysis and enrollment tracking. Many of the school leaders we interviewed employ a full-time recruitment director who is responsible for recruiting a balanced lottery pool with equal racial and socio-economic representation each year.



Reducing Barriers to Enrollment

Providing the support that a diverse set of students and families will need requires careful thought and planning. Common kinds of support mentioned by the school leaders we interviewed are location, transportation, child care, communications, and equitable access to technology and extracurricular activities.

Many of the families you are trying to recruit may already have their children in public school, but may not be compelled to send their children to a different public school because they aren't convinced it will provide a substantially better experience. These parents don't necessarily perceive public school as a positive. Many may have experienced their own public school education as negative and may have also had negative experiences with their children's current schools. It is critical to take the time to listen and understand what matters to the parents you are trying to reach, and the barriers and obstacles that may stand between them and enrolling their children in your school.

Although many of the school leaders noted that it was easier to recruit higher income families, many affluent families did have concerns about choosing an intentionally diverse school. Some of

those concerns included safety, the rigor of the curriculum, and the school's reputation. Abdulla mentioned that when her school first opened, charter schools were new in Nashville so parents had a lot of questions about how charters worked and their value. A couple of the school leaders also noted that higher income parents wanted to know about the school's values and culture. Deeper engagement with parents can build trust and help them understand the benefits it will provide their children.

For low income families, the day-to-day effort it can take to get their children back and forth to school may alone be a significant enough barrier to prevent them from enrolling. If parents are facing food or transportation insecurity, they are less likely to take a risk on a new school model, especially one they learn about only through a mailer. Understanding those barriers and helping

families with support to overcome them can bring them into your school.

For others, the effort required to apply may be overwhelming. As many schools move to an online application, parents with access to and comfort with technology will find it easier to apply. Lower income families may need help with the enrollment process, or they may be late getting their applications in. Building in ways to assist or accommodate them so that they can apply may help you meet your demographic targets. Understanding that applications from some populations may be late is also a good incentive to track your application data daily to ensure that you will meet your targets.



Location: All the school leaders emphasized the importance of location—and considering how that would impact the families whose children would be attending. In fact, all but two of the school leaders noted that the most important factor was finding a location that is easily accessible.

While an easily accessible location was also important to the Valor founders, Abdulla said they looked for and found a location that was in the heart of a diverse community. Densen noted the importance of finding a location that is neither in a super-affluent nor in a very low-income neighborhood.

Thrive Public Schools in San Diego took a different approach when they picked locations for their four schools by deciding to locate them in communities where residents may not have good nearby schooling options, with the goal of creating schools that affluent families will choose to drive to, said Assisi.



Transportation: The school leaders we interviewed noted that they were careful in choosing locations that were accessible either because they were in communities where families who could least afford transportation lived, or because they were easily accessible by public transportation. While charter schools don't typically provide transportation, Kyle Smitley of Detroit Prep purchased a school bus to pick up and drop off children to address the needs of parents who could not otherwise get their children there.



Child care: Child care is another critical support for many families. Providing child care during recruitment events, school events like parent meetings, and student events like plays or sports can make your school more available to the families whose children you want to attend, and can make it easier for parents to participate in school life. Providing before and after care can also make a difference for parents bringing their child to a school in a different neighborhood where they don't have friends nearby to help with child care.

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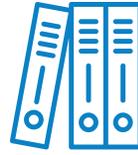


Communications: Intentionally diverse schools must also have communications strategies to reach every demographic that is part of the school. Printed communications may need to be in multiple languages, and you may need to use different channels to communicate with parents, including those who may not have access to social media. It's important to be sure you are communicating in ways that your targeted audiences will respond to. For example, Valor's scholars are 8 percent Asian/Other, 15 percent Hispanic/Latino, 17 percent African American, 20 percent MENA (Middle Eastern / North African) and 40 percent white, and they provide communications in English, Arabic, Spanish and Urdu to ensure that their families have the information they need.



Equitable Access: Many academic programs today require that students have technology at home to complete assignments and projects, but some of your students may not have access to Wi-Fi or a computer at home. It's important to make sure students whose families may not have adequate financial resources can still participate in field trips and extracurricular activities that require expenditures that may be beyond many families' means.

Almost all of the school leaders said that their schools' curricula emphasize the importance of collaboration, creative problem solving, and learning to work and communicate with people who are different.



Curriculum and Pedagogy: Supporting diverse families also means carefully considering the goals parents have for their children's academic program. Some low-income families want schools that offer a rigorous, highly structured curriculum that prepares their children for entry into college. More affluent families may be looking for less structure and more creative learning approaches. It may not be possible for schools to do both, but school leaders should explain how their approach provides the academic access many low-income families want for their children. For instance, Canaveral noted that traditional public schools are increasingly segregated by race, and racially isolated schools often have poorer test scores. She focuses on the benefits of diversity and social-emotional learning, in addition to academic rigor.

Almost all the school leaders said that their schools' curricula emphasize the importance of collaboration, creative problem solving, and learning to work and communicate with people who are different. As Canaveral said, the end goal is the same: ensuring parents can realize their hope of enabling their children to live the lives they choose.

Because intentionally diverse schools are by design attempting to attract and maintain a student body that includes many different kinds of students who come with varying needs and goals, it is important for school leaders and administrators to constantly check in with students and parents to ensure they are getting what they need, whether that's transportation to school, access to needed technology, the ability to achieve their academic and career goals, or something else.

Conclusion

It's easy, when seeing the phrase "intentional diversity" to go directly to the word "diversity." And diversity is indeed the aim of the school leaders interviewed for this paper, their teams and families. But it is the "intentional" part that must have equal or perhaps even greater weight as one goes about opening an intentionally diverse school.

The first takeaway from our conversations is that almost everything about setting up and running an intentionally diverse school requires working from an original template—how you recruit families, where your school is located, what your curriculum looks like, and how you create a culture that not only welcomes diversity but nurtures its growth and expression.

The second is that creating an intentionally diverse school demands constant attention to balance, from keeping a balance among the students attending the school so that no one group overwhelms the others, to balancing the needs of low-income families with those of more affluent families. School administrators must pay constant attention to access for all, including ensuring all students have a level playing field in terms of academic resources and ability to participate in school life.

The third is that families are as much a part of school life as students, and must be integrated into the school before the doors open and must stay central. Their participation and their willingness to help create the diverse, engaged community school founders seek are critical. While certainly families are always a critical part of a school's success, in the case of an intentionally diverse school, those families will be from vastly different backgrounds with a range of goals and desires for their children's academic lives.

With all those challenges, why attempt such a venture? While the school leaders interviewed for this paper had different ways of expressing it, the heart of the reason is this: the opportunity to nurture a culture of acceptance and appreciation for difference in the generation coming up is worth it. That will enable us as a society to advance equity for all.

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