

**LOOKING INWARD:**

## Embracing Inclusive and Diverse Practices

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By Kim M. Smithgall

There's a distinct and visible imbalance characterizing America's classrooms and school buildings today. And that imbalance is especially apparent in New York State, where black and Latino students comprise 43 percent of total enrollments, while just 16 percent of teachers are black or Latino. The balance shifts in some cases when counting school leaders, but the numbers are still disheartening: in the ranks of assistant principals in the state, 21 percent are black and 12 percent are Latino. However, for principal positions, those numbers decline to 15 percent and 9 percent, respectively (*The Education Trust – New York/NYSED*).

“Education is not a field that’s been common for black or brown people to get involved with. I think it’s just not often promoted on a broad scale as a good thing to do or a viable career option,” said Dr. Regina Huffman, who is science chairperson of Elmont Memorial Jr./Sr. High School and district coordinator in the Sewanhaka Central High School District (Nassau County). She was recently named president of the SAANYS Board of Directors and is also serving as the chair of the board’s newly created diversity committee.

The data points and statistics seem to populate news cycles and research studies on a regular basis, driving ongoing discussions regarding the need for more diversity in education. Huffman feels that an important first step toward positive change involves embracing a more realistic definition of diversity.

“Diversity comes in all different forms,” she said. “Yes, race does play a part, but it’s so much more. It could be gender or a woman who identifies herself as a single mom or any other way people identify themselves.”

Shenendehowa Central School District Superintendent Dr. Oliver Robinson would agree, adding that discussions about culture and being a culturally responsive school can yield the same initial thoughts. “People hear ‘culture’ and they automatically go to race – someone who’s not white – and thinking that’s what we’re talking about,” he commented. “We all have culture in many different ways, from age to race to religion to

main objectives of the board at the time was to diversify our staff and that has been a focus for well over a decade in Shenendehowa,” he said.

Robinson continues that work with colleagues in the district and beyond in an attempt to make inroads that will, in turn, positively impact all students. He and Shenendehowa Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Dr. Elizabeth Wood recently presented at a diversity summit hosted by the New York State Council of School Superintendents, focusing on anti-bias hiring practices – especially as they relate to ensuring students feel connected to their school environments.

“The biggest challenge and the reason we participated in the summit is so people have an appreciation of why diversity is so important in every community, not just communities that have a quote – unquote diverse student population,” Robinson commented.

Still, the progress has been slow – in every region of New York and beyond. And in looking at the bigger picture, the lack of diversity (in any of its many forms) is, plain and simple, a disservice to *all* of today’s youth. They all have the potential to lose out on the personal experiences and interactions that help them understand that different backgrounds form the foundation for a successful democratic society... and all students can lose out on growth opportunities that will empower them to flourish in multicultural and global workplaces.

**SMALL POCKETS OF POSITIVE CHANGE**

As this new mindset begins taking hold, there are pockets of change – glimmers of positive light. And these glimmers are coming from all angles. For example, some college and university teacher preparation programs are recruiting more diverse populations of students and also developing creative opportunities for nontraditional applicants to be successful in earning teaching and administrative certifications. The federal My Brother’s Keeper philosophies are

trickling down to the state level, allowing New York schools to apply for grant funding to not only diversify the teaching staff, but also to link students of color with adult mentors who share similar backgrounds (see page 3). In addition, the New York State Education Department recently released a grant application for teacher diversity pipeline pilot projects. Under this program, districts can identify promising teacher aides and teaching assistants to receive stipends, tuition, and other perks to help them on the road to becoming certified teachers.

This latter initiative is part of the emerging popularity of “grow your own” programs. For Shenendehowa and other districts, that trend may also include recruiting from the ranks of current students, not just current educators. To this end, the district held a “so you want to be a teacher” event last year.

“These types of activities speak to an unfortunate reality that there are sometimes shortages in people who have a desire to go into education,” Robinson said. “So, we have to ask ourselves, how do we tap into the interest of young people early and make sure education is an option for them?”

For Shenendehowa’s event, multiple districts got in on the action. “Many Capital Region schools asked teachers to participate and we tried to find those who were great ambassadors for the profession. They were from all content areas and people could have informal conversations with them and learn about the profession,” Wood explained, adding that colleges and universities with teacher prep programs were also represented. “As for attendees, we had current students right through to people who were considering mid-career changes. There were a few hundred people there and it was all ranges.”

Wood and Robinson are planning something similar this year, with some tweaks to improve the event.

**GROWTH IN ANOTHER WAY**

The philosophy of “grow your own” may have originated with the idea of promoting from within, but it can also be applied to growing and

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ethnicity. Part of what we have to try to do is to demystify the word.”

Robinson was hired more than 13 years ago as a black school leader in a Saratoga County community he describes as “the quintessential type of middle class, largely white community.”

“When I was hired, one of the

expanding the minds of those who are happy in their current positions but ready to grow intellectually. In these scenarios, professional development/professional learning is vital. In fact, Huffman, Robinson, and Wood would likely argue that ongoing training is absolutely essential to effect significant change. Huffman suggests that districts begin with an assessment to determine what issues and challenges already exist. "Then you have to reassess at every stage of professional development," she advised.

In Huffman's district, the process moved from the assessment stage to activities that involved building trust among staff members; this happened over a period of time – before the actual diversity topics were even introduced in a series of ongoing training settings.

"What has to happen across the board is you have to build relationships in your organization so you can have the hard conversations," she said. "Once that happens, nobody is going to be offended or go on the defensive. You can be transparent and not feel like you're going to be ridiculed because of it. But, it's important to have the relationships first."

"Start with a core group of people," Huffman continued. "We have five buildings in our district. We pulled around ten people from each building to come together to set up some guidelines for discussions and everyone agreed to live by those guidelines. So, you agreed that you wouldn't interrupt people and wouldn't be judgmental about what a person had to say. And you had to agree because if you weren't willing to live with the guidelines, people couldn't be free to have open and honest discussions."

The process took time; the trust-building took time. But Huffman feels it was a good investment of time because the educators were able to open up and talk about experiences and interactions that deeply affected them. Later, students began participating, as well, and the results were similar.

"For this, we had administrators and teachers and students listening as students honestly discussed how

they felt about teachers who had said they [the students] shouldn't be in an AP class because of who they were – whether it was because they were female, for example, or a person of color," Huffman said. "It was very beneficial for the students to be there because we got to hear things from their perspective and they got to see us not just as the authoritative figures in the buildings, but as people who have their own issues."

The experiences were powerful for everyone and a wake-up call for many. They also paved the way perfectly to a topic that is often the starting point for many diversity trainings: implicit biases.

### WE ALL HAVE THEM

"All of us have some implicit biases," Huffman said. Diversity trainings often start with activities that allow participants to accept this as being a natural part of human nature. They then begin to explore and understand their own (conscious and unconscious) biases and how these may affect their interactions with others, including students. This sets the stage for teachers to subsequently learn to develop classroom activities that embrace all of their students' varied backgrounds and help those students feel accepted and supported for who they are.

For school leaders like Robinson and Wood, this type of reflection prompted a review of the materials used in Shenendehowa classrooms. "From a practical standpoint, we started looking at the literature and texts that we were exposing children to and what messages we were sending to students based on those texts," Robinson said.

### BIAS IN THE HIRING PROCESS

Implicit biases also come into play in recruiting and hiring situations, potentially affecting who ultimately gets hired. "People feel more comfortable with people who are like them or who seem like them," Huffman commented. "And when you see that happen, you eliminate the possibilities of being able to engage in something that's new and different – and, better,

in most cases."

"I have a science background, so I compare it to a mutation," Huffman mused. "If you have a mutation, you keep replicating that mutation rather than doing something different. It's not that the mutation is bad, but you don't let anything else enter into it that might make it better."

Wood concurs. When she spoke at the summer diversity conference mentioned earlier, she covered some of the biases that can occur when hiring new staff. "Some of the common biases we talked about included sorting people out because they're not 'the right fit.' There's also the idea that bias is sometimes positive; in other words, we might have a positive bias toward someone we already know," she said. "Many people in the audience were nodding their heads as we were talking and they acknowledged that bias is hard to overcome in the hiring process. They were anxious to have conversations on how to address it."

Robinson added that unconscious biases can begin even before someone arrives for an interview. "Even the wording in the ads we place sends messages about certain genders or ethnic groups who are welcome and not welcome in a district," he said. "As a district leader, you have to think about that and also about who is on a hiring committee and the mindset of that committee."

To help guide the process in Shenendehowa, the district requires anyone who will be on a hiring committee to view a video that discusses best practices for recognizing and overcoming implicit biases and embracing the benefits of a diverse workforce (see [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mvhfPhq\\_dynjW4FU-SiC7hTABGzdJwX1/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mvhfPhq_dynjW4FU-SiC7hTABGzdJwX1/view)).

Committee members are also asked to take careful notes during interviews. "We want to be sure we're really listening to what the candidates say rather than what we think they say through our own filters," Wood explained. "We try to avoid oversimplification or summarizing candidates by talking about the right fit, but instead talking about the specific strengths and skills they could bring to our organization."

So, the training process is just as important for human resources and those serving on hiring committees as it is for educators working directly with children. "The formalized process is important," Robinson said. "We've been focused on having objective practices for a long time, but in the past six years or so, we really enhanced the focus on diversity." So, why is this training important? Why is diversity important? Someone playing devil's advocate might say this is just another educational initiative that will go away – just be patient; this, too, shall pass.

**ADJUSTING THE BALANCE...  
BECAUSE IT'S THE RIGHT THING  
TO DO FOR KIDS**

For Robinson and other progressive school leaders, that would be a flat-out breach of his duties...and a breach of humanity. "It's not just another initiative," he said. "It's really not an initiative at all. It's something that reframes how you look at the collective that is our work. You have to look at this through the lens of how it truly impacts the success of

all students. Once you do that, you realize this isn't something that will come and go. It affects your larger work."

"We want every student to feel like the school environment maximizes their potential and that every student feels included and valued in our system – and that means every student," Robinson added.

This happens when a diverse group of educators embraces the diversities – and similarities – of their students. Students will feel good about going to school (think about those attendance issues and achievement gaps), will have a support system, will embrace diversity themselves...and may even consider schools as places where they want to spend their careers.

"If we believe education is truly the bedrock of our democratic society and we all want to be participants in the process, then our work is mightily important and this defines what public education is all about. We

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cannot differentiate or discriminate in terms of who can access public education. Schools are supposed to be safe havens for kids to come and grow and explore and become whatever their beautiful little minds can take them to be," Robinson concluded.

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