



# Schools must meet students' diverse needs

## Economics, race have an impact

By DEBORAH WILSON, PAUL HERDMAN and HOWARD WEINBERG • June 7, 2010

Delaware stands at the threshold of education innovation and reform with its Race to the Top win, a one-time \$100 million federal grant that will allow Delaware schools to revamp their education policies and practices.

Education reform is a key issue on Governor Jack Markell's and President Barack Obama's agendas. Both agree on the need to turn around struggling and underperforming schools, and the state of Delaware, school districts and school leaders are now charged with creating strategies and programs that will do just that.

The question is: Given the changing demographics in our neighborhoods and the rising expectations of a global economy, are Delaware's public schools ready to meet the needs of children where they are and prepare them to be career and college ready?

We encourage the experts around the table to ensure that reform efforts include a problem-solving orientation that systematically considers cultural difference and the preparation of teachers who can connect, commit, and provide a culture of caring for diverse students and their families.

To truly understand the students in our classrooms, it is critical we understand cultural values such as child-rearing practices, family relationships, and interpersonal communication transmitted at home that can be far different from those values that children encounter at school. This understanding is referred to as Cultural competency. Cultural competency does not mean coddling a child and ignoring the need for high expectations. Caring without rigor is an empty promise. Rigor without understanding can lead to frustration on all sides.

### Cultural competency

By the year 2030, nearly half of the population of the United States will consist of people of color. As we increasingly transform to globally diverse communities and schools, we have the inherent responsibility to examine our own socio-cultural consciousness and confront head-on the deep-seated issues of race and class.

In this extraordinary moment of change and opportunity across our education system, we need to recognize how cultural competency must infuse all our work. All of us must declare that one's ZIP code is no longer an excuse for failure, and must set high expectations for parents and children, teachers and administrators, school board members, public officials in Dover, and private sector leaders throughout the state. No one is exempt.

Economic, educational, racial and gender gaps directly impact life's outcomes for children, and too often contribute to the cradle-to-prison pipeline. Our children should not have to pay a penalty because the 21st century face of diversity is broader and more complex.

The bottom line is that longstanding academic challenges in our poorest neighborhoods are not a condition that we must bemoan; they are a challenge that we can and must overcome. We must create environments where all students want to work hard.

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States that have demonstrated that the children in our most challenged communities can excel and compete with other top students.

### Islands of success

In Indian River School District, Sharon Brittingham led her team at Frankford **Elementary School** from perennial poor performance to a nationally recognized Blue Ribbon award-winning school. Jack Perry is showing remarkable gains with students from the Eastside at Prestige Academy charter school, and demonstrating clearly that they can perform at the highest levels.

Creating islands of success like the ones that Sharon and Jack created with their teams demonstrates two important lessons. First, that success in these communities is fundamentally about what an educational leader believes and does. And second, islands of success are no longer sufficient. We need a system of success.

Along with many of our education partners, we feel a deep sense of urgency to ensure that our school leaders and teachers are equipped with the tools necessary to enable them to meet the educational challenges of learner diversity -- teaching and learning are connected activities.

The Urban League has and will continue to support the deepening of cultural competency at Bayard Middle School and help the staff create an effective, culturally relevant school and rigorous learning environment in Wilmington's first inner-city middle school in over 20 years. Our goal is to guarantee a learning experience that is more relevant and effective.

### Not a luxury

Cultural competency is not a luxury. It is an important foundation that encourages and values cultural differences and can ultimately improve the social, educational, economic, and health outcomes of all children and youth. We must start in the institutions of **higher education** by rethinking current instructional approaches for pre-service teachers.

Consideration should be given to integrating the teacher education curriculum with multicultural

education pedagogy and field experiences with students from varying backgrounds. Our efforts must extend to the doors of our community schools where leaders have the power to create practices and policies that provide meaningful immersion in multicultural schools and communities to produce and support the essential attitudes needed to respectfully serve diverse populations.

Cultural competence begins when we acknowledge that it matters. It is a key piece that must be incorporated into the reform puzzle.

Today, we have the opportunity to create culturally responsive, trusting, and rigorous educational systems and shift the paradigm. We need to make it happen. In our race to the top we can't afford to leave any one behind.

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**Mom Dilemma #36:**  
Your daughter insists on wearing her princess costume to the grocery store. Allow it or not?

**YES, at least she's dressed!**

**NO, I have some rules!**

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