

Raising Global Citizens: Focus on Cultural Competency

By Sirin Koprucu

There's no doubt about it, we live in a global village. We've seen the Internet transform our world and change how we do business. We now leverage international opportunities to run businesses more effectively and efficiently.

During the past few months, the worldwide financial crisis has emphasized how truly connected we are; we can thrive and collapse together. This is tomorrow's reality as well.

Corporate leaders of high-growth initiative employment sectors, such as advanced manufacturing, aerospace, automotive, biotechnology, health care, hospitality, information technology, and homeland security, are

not the only ones who list intercultural communication and management skills as business requisites. The entrepreneurs who are expected to revive the American economy must also be led by cosmopolitan minds capable of identifying global needs and operating internationally to succeed.

Individuals who are going to work in this environment must gain many skills early on, including foreign languages, out-of-the-box thinking, and the ability to work, lead, and motivate people from different cultures. This increased need for cultural competency skills, combined with the many corporate training and employee exchange programs, is prompting students from Asia,



Europe, South Africa, and South America to travel abroad to countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Austria for better education and international experience.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), more than 60% of students from its member countries that travel abroad are Asian; only 3.5% of students are from North America. It's true that the reputation of good schools determines the destination countries in the student mobility world; however, it also means that significantly fewer North American students are learning about new cultures during their studies.

Need for Cultural Competency

Let's look at some other statistics that indicate an increased need for cultural competency—statistics related to diversity. According to OECD, the United States receives the most immigrants per year—about 1.26 million in 2006. Britain ranked second with about 340,000, followed by Spain, Canada, and Germany. This influx continuously changes the country's demographic profile.

If current trends continue, one in five people in the United States is expected to be of Hispanic origin in 2030; in 2050, that statistic is one in four. In 2050, about 10% of the population is expected to be Asian. The United States' changing demographic profile brings challenges but also opportunities to remain competitive in the increasingly global marketplace.

How can schools in the United States help students develop the essential intercultural skills that global thinking requires? By increasing their own cultural competency, schools will set the best example for their students. By connecting with foreign-born students, by having the right programs to integrate them into American education and the workforce, and by fostering cultural exchanges, schools can expand their students' minds and better prepare them for the global village.

In addition, abilities to manage diversity among the staff and to develop partnerships with schools from other countries are other indicators that a school system values diversity and acknowledges the importance of effective intercultural interaction for future success.

Successes and Challenges

Rockwood School District in Missouri encountered and responded head-on to demographic changes in its district. I had the opportunity to sit down with Shirley Broz (brozshirley@rockwood.k12.mo.us), the executive finance director of Rockwood School District, to talk about the school system's successes and challenges.

Q: Could you tell me a little bit about the cultural diversity in your school district?

A: About 10% of students and faculty are foreign-born. Students' families come from India, Pakistan, China,

Korea, eastern Europe, and Mexico. While a number of them participate in our English-as-a-second-language (ESL) programs, many have great English-language skills.

With regard to staff, fewer than 10% of our staff members are foreign-born. Those who are, originate from eastern Europe and Latin America. We have very little diversity within our administration and faculty.

Q: How did cultural diversity in your school develop? Did you identify any major trends?

A: Major trends in the student population are set by the local employers: major hospitals and drug research companies. Therefore, the students tend to come from highly educated families. Major trends in the diverse staff population are set by the tendency of foreign-born nationals to attract family and friends to the same geographic area.

Q: How is educating international students different from educating American students?

A: Language is certainly the greatest challenge; 45 different languages are spoken here. The district offers an extensive ESL program to improve the English-language skills of foreign-born students. In addition, we have several programs tailored for gifted students and for those students with special needs (slow development, hearing, sight or speech impediments, etc.).

Our teachers must have the adequate skills to communicate effectively with the families of our foreign students. All teachers are certified and receive cultural training in their professional development programs. We have a growing number of National Board-certified teachers.

The district also has a parents-as-teachers program in which certified employees visit families with young children to enroll them in an early child education program. This helps non-English-speaking families start assimilating into the American culture and gives their children a head start.

Q: How would you define cultural competency?

A: It's the ability to both recognize and celebrate the differences in others from a racial, nationality, language, religious, or social perspective. These differences may manifest themselves in beliefs, values, customs, ways of communication, dress, thoughts, and actions. We must integrate that recognition into the classroom.

Q: How do you enhance the cultural competency of your students?

A: Throughout the students' K-12 careers, we focus on

- Providing culture lessons alongside language lessons,
- Offering site trips and guest speakers,
- Exploring different worldviews, and
- Stressing respect for different cultures.

Specifically in the high school, we teach students about expectations in the business world and offer internships in local companies.

Q: Do you advertise the cultural competency of your school?

A: We inform the real estate professionals about our school performance primarily through our Website. The school enrollment has tripled in the past 20 years. Achievement is at the top of the state (in the 10 highest-performing districts) and the nation (25 National Merit scholarship semifinalists and 7 scholarship recipients; several students last year had perfect ACT scores).

Q: How do you fund cultural competency programs?

A: We have a strong tax base, employ talented administrators, offer a competitive salary and benefits package, practice conservative spending, and use title programs and grants.

Setting an Example

School leaders who would like to set an example with regard to cultural competency should consider the following strategies for success:

- Establish a value statement for cultural competency. For example: “We recognize and celebrate the differences in others from a racial, nationality, language, religious, and social perspective and realize that these differences may manifest themselves in beliefs, values,

customs, ways of communication, dress, thoughts and actions, assumptions, and judgments. We strive to capitalize on this knowledge to operate our school more effectively and safely and to develop graduates who are confident with living and working in a highly globalized world.”

- Research the diversity and related cultural dilemmas in your school population.
- Understand the drivers of diversity in your area.
- Strengthen your school culture by facilitating intercultural interaction through ESL programs, language programs in early childhood education, family integration programs, and special-education programs tailored for students’ needs, as well as general educational events that celebrate cultural diversity.
- Network among peers, parents, and local employers to develop better programs and financing for these programs; keep in mind that well-designed, results-oriented programs have a higher chance of receiving funding.
- Reward good practices of cultural competency.

Acknowledging the role of culture in your students’ lives will help you raise confident global citizens who respect one another in the international arena, who will advocate for a trusting, peaceful world, and who will champion their school wherever they go.

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