

Case Study: Culturally Responsive Gifted Education in Denver Public Schools

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In 2019, two central office teams in Denver Public Schools, the Gifted and Talented (GT) Department and the Culture Equity and Leadership Team (CELT), collaboratively partnered to develop and implement a strategic, long-term professional learning plan grounded in racial healing, anti-racism, implicit and explicit bias work, and dismantling systems of oppression for gifted and talented Black Indigenous People of Color, or BIPOC, in Denver Public Schools.

The goal was to provide intentional professional learning that elevated the Denver Public School's Gifted and Talented Department's vision, *"To lead the nation in providing equitable, high impact gifted programming."* Objectives included:

- To shift adult GT teacher and central office mindsets to focus on strength, diversity, and equity.
- To examine internal policies related to access and opportunities.
- To change practices to be culturally responsive.
- To address disparities in identification data.

In addition to these goals supporting the vision, the ultimate desired outcome of this ongoing collaboration was proportional representation of Black, Brown, English Learner (EL), and Native American students identified as gifted, and who were receiving services. Of greater importance was to have each GT teacher prepared to create culturally responsive gifted classrooms for these students. It was critical that educators create environments and that central office

needed to develop anti-racist systems and structures for learners to thrive, not by accident, but by design.

To create these conditions, the planning team focused on disrupting historical patterns of oppression in gifted education that supported the research on educator mindset, including the educators in the central office who help set guidelines, implement policy decisions, and create systems for identification and services.

It was critical for CELT and GT to create the conditions for culturally responsive mindset shifts in how educators within gifted education see and understand the needs of African American/Black, Brown Latinx, English Learners, and Native American (BIPOC) learners. The planning team wanted to provide a gradual release of the professional learning to the Central GT team (GT Leadership) and the 9 central GT coordinators who support teachers across the district. The GT Coordinators would then continue conversations by embedding equity questions and examination of data and language/bias during monthly teacher check-ins to continue the learning beyond the stand-alone professional learning days and to help the teachers engage in necessary conversations around race and privilege.

To measure growth, participants were asked to analyze changes in their racial identity using the Hoffman Integrated Model for Racial Identity Development, a model used during the PD sessions. Additionally, qualitative data were collected from responses to open-ended questions. A couple of quotes are presented as indicators of the GT Leadership growth:

- *“To find all these doors open up inside myself has been a real gift. I see deeper into who I am and why culture matters as a critical starting place...”*
- *“I noticed that I am more confident and comfortable with the key terms and vocabulary- such as White supremacy and White supremacy culture, while continuing my own work as an antiracist educator.”*

The gradual release for the GT Central Team occurred in August 2020 with a full day of professional development for all GT Teachers across the district (approximately 200). “Equitable Gifted Education: Critical Next Steps in Continuing our Work,” provided participants the opportunity to build upon the cultural and racial identity work lead by the CELT team from the 2019-2020 school year by deepening our focus on our vision and mission for Culturally Responsive Gifted Education.

The full day was dedicated to content related to Equity and Social Justice work including discussions and hands-on applications to gifted identification and programming practices. The day focused on the work and projects the GT department had engaged in as a way of disrupting systems of inequity as well as identifying additional systemic barriers. Participants walked away with a deeper understanding and tangible action steps to dive into the critical role that racial identity plays within current practices.

Together, actions were identified that the department and individuals could engage in to reduce barriers and increase equitable opportunities for students. This included in-depth conversations through an inquiry-based framework that examined the impact of lived experiences and a review of practices including available access and opportunities.

“I just have to say thank you so much. That was an incredibly powerful session (August 2020 Teal Day), with a lot of digging in, and I am so proud to be a part of the DPS GT team and excited for the work that we are moving into. I appreciate the vulnerability and honesty that

you all shared with us, and I am hopeful for the difference that we can make with our students, families, and schools.” -DPS GT Teacher and Participant in the August 11, 2020, Teal Day

Results

The initial results for professional learning consist of qualitative data. The CELT and GT team wrote and reported the results within [“Creating Access to Inclusive Gifted Programs by Shifting Mindsets of Adults.”](#) The project’s leadership team was accepted to present our findings for the 2021 Virtual WCGTC Biennial World Conference as a recorded session and as the 2021 NAGC Professional Development Network Award Winners. This [video link](#) explains the structure and findings of this professional learning.

As a result of mindset shifts, the Denver Public School Central Office Gifted and Talented Coordinators use equity as a framework for designing systems, structures, and processes for students and families. Conversations focus on getting historically oppressed gifted learners access to culturally responsive gifted education and identification, changing complex systems that do not want to change, and embracing and understanding ambiguity of the law to serve our BIPOC learners. Central office also continually engaged in calling one another into conversations around privilege (white, social class, gender, etc.) and began audibly taking accountability for microaggressions while also attempting to repair harm.

GT teachers shared that they are more deeply focused and aware of the structures that may impact our students. They are repeating the language they hear in professional learning and are actively working to use the new systems set up to identify gifted BIPOC. They are reviewing data through a critical lens and asking how to create culturally responsive gifted environments.

Equity is a journey, not a destination and the GT department in Denver Public Schools will continue this journey continually reexamining policies, practices, systems, structures, and mindsets to ensure equitable access to gifted and talented services.