



## **Pre-Conference Materials for the 2016 Student Conference**

### ***Every Step Leaves a Trail***

Hosted by the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools

The Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools planning committee has prepared readings and materials for your team to review and reflect on prior to arrival at the conference. These required readings are available for download from the conference website. While no formal written response is required, you might find notes helpful as the readings will relate to the work and action planning that will happen at the conference.

“The Chapel Hill-Carrboro City School district is committed to promoting the rights, welfare, and educational needs of all students through high quality, rigorous instruction in order to prepare future leaders for a rapidly changing world. This can only be accomplished in a school culture and climate that ensures that all students and staff are treated in an equitable manner with regard to the social and historical context of marginalized individuals. This includes, but is not limited to, those individuals who may be marginalized due to the following: race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, disability, English language proficiency, religion, and national origin (including legal status). As a district, we are intentional in our efforts of replacing racism, discrimination, and racial prejudice with attitudes and behaviors that reflect acceptance, compassion, integrity, understanding, fairness, cooperation, and respect. The district believes addressing racial disparities within the district’s culture and in all areas of operation is paramount to all else. Using a Racial Equity Impact Assessment, a racial equity lens undergirds the foundation of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools. We envision rigorous instruction through purposeful planning and authentic relationships that will engage all students regardless of ability.”

(CHCCS District Equity Plan, 2016)

Given our district’s vision for equity, we would like for each MSAN school district to analyze the following materials (two articles and one video) prior to attending the student conference. ***Every Step Leaves a Trail*** is the conference theme. We challenge your district to use this information to blaze your own trail towards eliminating the barriers of academic achievement for students of color. The guiding questions we have developed should help to provide clarity.

After examining the pre-conference materials, assemble with members of your school district in a Socratic seminar setting. The chief goals of the Socratic seminar are to summarize the key components of each text, analyze the guiding questions, and share your thoughts with your peers. The pre-conference materials will help you engage in deeper conversations throughout the conference and inform your action planning.

Please read the following articles (available on the MSAN website) and watch the video below prior to attending the MSAN Student Conference.

**1) Facing Race Issues In the Classroom: How To Connect With Students by Katrina Schwartz** (April 4, 2014)

Guiding questions:

1. Define Culturally Responsive Teaching. In what ways should educational leaders (teachers, administrators, counselors) take into account a student's race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, disability status, English language proficiency, religion, and national origin (including legal status) when engaging with students?
2. What training would you suggest teachers/educators obtain to improve instruction and academic outcomes for students of color?
3. Explain which Student Six strategy would be most applicable and valuable in your district.
4. How would you use student voice to create and implement a project similar to Student Six in your school? What tools would you need to implement it?

**2) Want to Know How Your School Handles Equity and Diversity?: Just Ask The Students** by Nick Tutolo (May 16, 2016)

Guiding questions:

1. How does your school address issues of race, gender and class?
2. In what ways does the presence of school administrators suppress or lead you to express your voice?
3. Do you feel you have a safe space to voice your opinion(s) regarding your education? Why/why not?

**3) Pre-Conference Video: Education Gap - The Root of Inequality**

Watch the first three minutes of the video "Education Gap: The Root of Inequality" (Usable Knowledge, Harvard Graduate School of Education, February 17, 2016)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lsDJnJqoY>

Guiding questions:

1. What barriers prevent your school district from closing opportunity/achievement gaps?
2. Take the lead and connect your conversation to the MSAN conference theme: *Every Step Leaves a Trail*: Use the sub-themes below to guide you in conversation.

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***Every Step Leaves a Trail: Reflective and Essential Questions***

(these can also be found in the Pre-Conference Handbook)

- What are your core beliefs about who you are? What is your truth?
- Define student advocacy. In what ways can student advocacy create opportunities to achieve equity and excellence for all students in your district?
- The goal of MSAN is to improve and enhance the educational quality and academic outcomes of students of color. Given this mission, in what ways can student voice influence student policies, practices and procedures in your school district?

**References:**

Schwartz, K. (2014). Facing Race Issues In the Classroom: How to Connect With Students. Retrieved from:

<http://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2014/04/04/how-can-teachers-address-race-issues-in-class-ask-students/>

Tutolo, N. (2016). Want to Know How Your School Handles Equity and Diversity?: Just Ask The Students, IntoEdupassion's Blog. Retrieved from:

<https://intoedupassion.wordpress.com/2016/05/16/want-to-know-how-your-school-handles-equity-and-diversity-just-ask-the-students/>

Harvard University. (Education, Solution to Inequality). (2016) Education Gap: The Root of Inequality.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lsDJnJqoY>

# Facing Race Issues In the Classroom: How To Connect With Students

By **Katrina Schwartz**

APRIL 4, 2014



Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools noticed a troubling trend, one that's [common across the country](#). Although [the district](#)'s overall performance on standardized tests and other achievement measurements are high, when the data is broken down by race and ethnicity, students of color are being left behind. In the [2012-2013 school year](#), more than 83 percent of the white high school students in the district passed the end of year tests, but just about 48 percent of the Hispanic students did and only 28 percent of the African-American students passed.

The district decided to address the problem using a personal approach. Starting in fourth grade all the way through senior year of high school, students are [paired with a mentor](#), someone in the community who spends time with them and exposes them to diverse cultural activities, like going to the museum or sporting events, with the goal of nurturing untapped potential in students by giving them someone to rely on outside of their school, family, and friends.

Apart from the mentoring, another big part of the program is creating [more culturally sensitive classrooms](#). But rather than taking the top-down approach, the students themselves have had a big hand in creating a set of guidelines based on [researched-based strategies](#) and using their own experiences to distill the research down into the six most important components.

The process of creating the guidelines, called the Student Six, has brought up issues that neither students nor teachers had ever addressed before — at least not in school. And the act of allowing students to take ownership of the process gave them a better understanding of their teachers' perspective.

“I didn’t know that [teachers] felt so uncomfortable talking about it until we started doing this,” said Alexa Parvey, a junior at Chapel Hill High School and one of the Student Six facilitators. “It helped me understand that teachers aren’t doing it because they don’t want to include you, they just don’t know,” she said. Now that she and other student facilitators spend a lot of their free time training teachers about race sensitivity, she feels like it’s her job to help educate her teachers even when they aren’t asking for it. But she also understands that most of her teachers are well-intentioned but lost when it comes to talking about race.

***“The teachers treat us like we’re peers and we respect that.”***

“It’s necessary to talk about race because most of the time race takes the backseat to everything,” said Jotham White, another Chapel Hill junior and student facilitator. “Once they know that we need to talk about race, we can help students build a positive race identity.” The students described how uncomfortable they feel when teachers ignore blatantly disrespectful comments from other students or when it’s clear that their teachers don’t trust them. Volunteering as Student Six facilitators has helped students understand where teachers are coming from and has strengthened relationships with many of them so they can check in beyond the seminar.

“All of this has helped me have a better communication with my teachers,” said Jazmin Rosales, a junior at Chapel Hill. “I happen to be the only Hispanic girl and it has helped me to achieve more than I usually achieve.” Since she started taking a leadership role and advocating for herself in discussions about race, Rosales has vastly improved her academic performance.

“The teachers treat us like we’re peers and we respect that,” said Simon Lee, a junior at Chapel Hill. “They ask us what we can do better and if they don’t ask us we give a suggestion.” Lee observed his old middle school teacher as he tried to implement the tips learned at the Student Six training. It was amazing to watch younger students respond more positively to the teacher and know that they were being set on a better path, Lee said.

All the students stressed that it can be tough to give teachers feedback. They try not to criticize and never approach teachers in the middle of class. Instead, they give suggestions after class, alerting teachers to how the structure of a project or an assignment disadvantages some students over others. It’s a constant process, but the students feel good knowing that their teachers want to improve in an area that is so uncomfortable for them to discuss.

Half of these strategies apply to all students, not just those of color. Students want to feel that their teachers know who they are individually and care about them. While that would be the ideal for all students, it is a crucial foundation for building relationships strong enough to create safe

discussions around difficult topics like race. The six strategies work together and are weakened individually when taken piecemeal.

## **STUDENT SIX TIPS**

**1. Be visible.** Make sure every student feels welcome and part of the class. The simplest examples of this are greeting each student when he or she comes into class and knowing everyone's names. Small signs that teachers know and are interested in students go a long way to forming trust.

**2. Create a safe space.** The way a room is arranged and a teacher's physical proximity to students can make a difference when trying to reduce the vulnerability students feel. If teachers stay behind their desks, they inadvertently signal they want space between themselves and students. Teachers who walk around the room and check in on student progress, create a more equal and focused space. "I can get a kid to focus better just by placing myself near them," said Teresa Brunner, academic support specialist at Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools. Research shows that humans are more engaged when they are within eight feet of the person talking to them. That's why being asked to sit up front isn't just a punishment, it's a strategy.

**3. Connect to students' lives.** Give students a reason to care about what they're learning by connecting it to situations and concepts that are relevant to their lives. For example, in English class, teachers can assign current event articles on subjects students care about or that affect them. Math teachers can make strides just by making sure the problems deal with quantities and situations kids understand. Learning could be even more relevant to kids' lives, but starting with a basic connection is a good way for students to feel teachers cares about their lives.

**4. Connect to students' culture.** Make positive connections with student culture through class assignments. For example, one teacher in the Carrboro district created an ancestor project around the traditions of Day of the Dead. The class studied the Mexican holiday, but also talked about the ways various cultures connect with ancestors.

### [What's Behind the Lack of Ethnic Diversity in Science Education?](#)

Conversely, cultural differences can make for classroom clashes if teachers aren't aware. One teacher sent a student to the principal's office for being disrespectful because he answered a rhetorical question. The student didn't understand why he was being disciplined because his culture doesn't have rhetorical questions; he'd been taught to answer teachers. "Often times what is a discipline problem is really a disconnect in culture between the teacher and the student, even

if they look like each other,” Brunner said. Sometimes it takes a little more time to sort those differences out.

“We may not be able to prevent everything, but we can control how we react to things,” Brunner said. If a student isn’t usually a troublemaker, take the extra time to find out why he’s suddenly acting out of turn. “Talk to the kids, watch patterns, read so you better understand,” Brunner said. The key thing is to open up dialogues and listen to what students say.

**5. Address race and racial dynamics in the classroom.** This is one of the most uncomfortable steps for many educators who either don’t know what to do when a racially-charged incident occurs in class or don’t want to see racist themselves by calling out a student’s race. But by ignoring a fundamental part of student identity, teachers can inadvertently misstep and damage student trust. A common example is calling on students of color to represent their entire race in a discussion where few others minorities are represented.

“Don’t have a false conversation,” Brunner said, but do address race every time it comes up. One teacher overheard black students in her class calling one another the “n” word. Instead of sending them out of class or ignoring their comments, she held a seminar discussing the history of the word, how it connects to a history of slavery, which students happened to be studying in their history class. Race was brought front and center, connected to the curriculum and not allowed to pass unnoticed.

**6. Connect to students’ future selves.** Teachers need to recognize that all their students have dreams about what their futures will look like. Too often, the implicit message in school is that white students have bright futures with many career paths to follow, but students of color aren’t likely to go anywhere. “We recognize that kids have hopes and dreams and goals for themselves and we can help them to see how to get there,” Brunner said. Students and their families have a lot to offer schools and that should be celebrated. Too often curriculum implies that only white Americans made important discoveries and positively impacted the outcome of the country. With a little more research and attention to race in the classroom, teachers can easily highlight the many people of color who have made scientific discoveries, are brilliant mathematicians or have added to our collective literary history.

# Want to Know How Your School Handles Equity and Diversity?: Just Ask The Students

Nick Tutolo



A few years back, I was talking with one of my students. Somehow the conversation led to me asking what people in his neighborhood thought of our school. Very emphatically he exclaimed: “Nobody in my neighborhood knows about this school. This school’s for white people.” I learned then that if you wanted to know about how your school measures up in terms of equity and access just ask your students.

Over the weekend, I attended EdCamp Pittsburgh and had the opportunity to co-facilitate a discussion on diversity and equity in education. This is a topic that forms the basis for the work that I do each day. Allowing every student to have an equitable opportunity at a quality education should be the primary objective of education in this country. Truth be told: “It’s not.” I was excited to engage with educators who have realized that this creating equitable opportunities for students isn’t just another topic, it’s **THE** topic. What I wasn’t expecting was being graced by the presence of two students who attended Sci-Tech. As each person in the circle was asked to talk about the reason that they had decided to join the conversation, the students showed up. What ensued was a very articulate and critical assessment of how their school measures up in terms of equity across the lines of gender, race and class. The voices of these students were spoken with the poise and clarity that only someone who could have.



They discussed their remorse for having had access to an abundance of materials and quality teachers while students in the same district were relegated to using second-hand materials in classroom led by struggling teachers. One student admitted that the voices of girls in the classroom were heard far less and the voices of students of color were all but silenced. Although I'm sure that those who teach and run this school are very well-meaning and likely do not mean for this happen, there is so much that can be done with this information. All you have to do to get this information is ask a student.

Hearing these students speak, I continue to wonder: "Has anyone ever asked them what they thought about their school?" I am heartened by the fact that they were in the presence of one of the upper administrators of the Pittsburgh Public Schools while they spoke. When engaging in conversations about schools, we should be asking ourselves: "Whose voices are missing or not being represented?" In conversations about improving our schools in any number of ways, the voices of the people in the communities are very rarely asked what they think—least of which are the voices of students. The students exist in these spaces every day. They are more aware of the pulse of the school than any of us give them credit for. If we want to create more equitable spaces for our students to learn and grow as people, then we need to bring their voices to the table and start asking *them* how they feel about *their* schooling. The truth is that their voice matters most of all. After all, isn't it their education? We spend countless hours and dollars treating the symptoms of a problem that we haven't even identified in the first place. All this time, energy and money would have been better spent if we would have just asked the students.

### **For More Information:**

If you are interested in learning more about this topic and how you can bring more student voice to the places that you teach, I highly recommend reading Chris Emdin's work on Cogenerative Circles in the book *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood— and the Rest of Y'all too*.