

Cambridge Public School District

Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Schools and Classrooms Profile Series

This series of profiles highlights programs, schools, and districts that are leading efforts in Massachusetts to establish [Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Schools and Classrooms](#). Other profiles in this series can be accessed [here](#).



In [Cambridge](#), the district has made a public commitment to “putting racial equity front and center in terms of colleagues we’re working with and students we’re serving. We’re really working with our educators, school leaders, and the district to ensure that everyone feels welcome and marginalized identities are reflected in materials, educators, and policies,” according to Director of Diversity Development Ramon De Jesus.

When Dr. Kenneth Salim was appointed as the new Superintendent of Cambridge Public Schools in 2016, his [entry plan](#) focused on “Listening, Observing & Analyzing” to better understand the successes and challenges in the school district from a variety of perspectives. Rosalie Rippey, the district’s Communications Manager, explains that “the process allowed stakeholders to come together around different areas of concern and build a shared commitment.”

The stakeholder engagement was intentionally designed to hear from a range of voices, including those who historically hadn’t been prioritized for outreach, particularly families of students of color and immigrants. “Big, public meetings have a tendency to promote dominant patterns,” Rippey explains. “You can do what you want to structure them, but to hear from historically silenced perspectives you need more targeted and tailored outreach.” The Superintendent’s Transition Team partnered with the Community Engagement Team (CET), which operates out of the Department of Human Service Programs and is comprised of individuals from historically underserved communities, to share and gather information from a wider range of families. The CET facilitated the “meat of the listening through phone or in-person focus groups with different subgroups in community - specific immigrant groups and American-born Black outreach,” Rippey explains. “The plan itself reflected Dr. Salim’s commitments around continuing to work in an inclusive way and being intentional about not assuming what people think or just listening to people at big meetings and thinking they represent everyone,” she adds.

One of the biggest themes that emerged from families was the inconsistency in experiences for students from different backgrounds, a theme that was supported by persistent opportunity gaps in the district. “When we looked at parents’ perception of where they wanted to see improvement broken down by demographic, the pattern was clear,” Rippey shared. “We don’t want to just say that a majority of our students are doing well, we want to ensure that all students are having equal opportunities and that we’re narrowing those discrepancies in experience.”

From these conversations and visits to all of the schools in the district, the Transition Team compiled and shared an [Entry Plan Report](#) in January 2017, and continued to adapt that plan through conversations with community members through the spring, resulting in the [2017-2020 District Plan](#). The vision established in that plan is “Rigorous, Joyful, and Culturally Responsive Learning + Personalized Support” and “Builds Postsecondary Success and Engaged Community Members.” The first strategic objective to achieve that vision is Equity and Access.

Rippey adds, “There has been a long history of individuals working to improve various aspects of equity and build greater cultural responsiveness in the curriculum. The new plan promised culturally responsive teaching to all students and made a commitment that it shouldn’t be one-off or just in pockets, but everyone getting training and having opportunities to reflect on what that means for their role and practice.”

As Rippey explains, the definition of cultural responsiveness in Cambridge is broad. “Cultural responsiveness includes curriculum, teaching practices, working with families, communicating about the work to reflect our community, and responding to the diverse needs of our community when we work with them. As curriculum is developed, it is done with

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an eye towards relevance, respect, and inclusivity towards students. We also want to reflect them in their experience and in who their educators are. It is multidimensional, and you can sense that through how it is infused throughout different aspects of the work.”

COMING TOGETHER AS SCHOOL AND DISTRICT LEADERS

The importance of cultural responsiveness is also clearly communicated by district leaders to ensure clarity around the vision. Rippey explains, “People are sometimes afraid to show the vulnerability [that is required to do this work well]. Dr. Salim shows them how to learn. The School Committee hears about specific equity initiatives, how they are going, and what impact they are having. We are not just doing culturally proficient trainings and saying, ‘We did our job.’ We continually have it as our goal because we believe that the ultimate outcome is that students will do better in more equitable ways.” De Jesus adds, “Everyone needs to be about this work at the leadership level because they implement the policies and make decisions.”

De Jesus also notes that creating his position to lead the Dynamic Diversity Development initiative also sends a signal of the importance of equity work to district leadership. “When we look at my role,” he says, “It is very top down from the School Committee encouraging the district to really do something in terms of moving the needle for educators of color.” The School Committee has not been hesitant to allocate resources to its equity initiatives. De Jesus explains, “Your priorities are visible in your budget and you need to put your money where your mouth is. If a district values certain student-teacher ratios, they bake additional staffing into the budget. We think similarly about equity, and racial equity in particular. If the district were to just add this work to the plates of folks who were already in the district to run afterschool or on weekends in addition to their existing work it would be disingenuous.”

The unity coming from district leaders has helped avoid some pushback from stakeholders. “If, from the Superintendent on down, everyone is clamoring for this and making decisions that signal this is important, it is difficult not to listen to it,” De Jesus adds. “I am comfortable having the courageous conversations that are often needed with principals and teachers because I have close proximity with the Superintendent and he comes to my events. It is implied that if I am saying something it has likely been vetted by him. It is one thing to have someone in the middle promoting this work, but it is different to have it as a mandate from the Superintendent. That visibility is really important.”

In addition to sending a clear message to stakeholders about the importance of this work, district leaders have committed to advancing their own understanding of cultural proficiency through ongoing professional development. The Administrators’ Council, comprised of the Superintendent’s cabinet, curriculum coordinators, and principals, participated in monthly intensive seminars led by the [Disruptive Equity Education Project \(DEEP\)](#) and a book group focused on *School Talk*, by Mica Pollock, in 2017-2018. De Jesus explains, “That work speaks about the language in schools and how it impacts colleagues and students. It helped us unpack our personal biases and beliefs about which groups of students were capable of what.”

The Administrators’ Council continues to meet for monthly intensive professional development and hold book groups for ongoing learning. De Jesus says, “All the leaders convene for 7-8 full day sessions engaged in thoughtful and challenging discussions about, ‘What does it mean to be school leader in New England and in Cambridge?’” In the 2018-2019 school year, the Administrators Council book group focused on *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, by Zaretta Hammond, and the School Committee also participated in cultural proficiency training. Many cultural proficiency teams within individual schools also engaged with Hammond’s text, as did an affinity group of new teachers led by De Jesus, and the Family Liaisons in the district. “Essentially everyone in district [is reading Hammond’s text this year]. It created shared language, from the Superintendent through the school leaders and all the way down to classroom teachers and school staff, so we are speaking in the same terms and knowing what they mean,” De Jesus explains.

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The ongoing nature of this work is essential for its success. “It isn’t enough to say, ‘Here’s a text, go implement this,’” De Jesus explains. “You need to carve out the time and resources so educators can do this work, grow and evolve. How are leaders, administrators, principals, and department heads wrestling with centering equity in their everyday practices? We partnered with DEEP to unpack white supremacy and how it lives, breathes, thrives in school systems. In CPSD, our work is to think about analyzing our systems and turning mirrors on ourselves to think about how we perpetuate and uphold white supremacy.”

RECRUITING, HIRING, AND RETAINING TEACHERS OF COLOR

A key area of focus for De Jesus has been analyzing the CPSD systems for recruiting, hiring, and retaining teachers of color. In Cambridge, approximately 60 percent of students identify as persons of color, compared to 22 percent of teachers in 2017, when De Jesus joined the district. He explains that this is a concern for achieving equitable outcomes and culturally responsive schools. “A lot of recent research that is coming out is backing up the feeling that has long been coming from communities of color that they learn better when teachers are reflective of their communities. Now, we have data that speaks to its impact, like the stat that having one black male teacher in school impacts high school graduation rates. That impact lasts for years, and is tremendous.”

De Jesus has led the district’s efforts to reform their recruitment and hiring practices. First, De Jesus reviewed job postings to identify language that unintentionally signaled a white, male-dominated culture. “One of the big things I think about is what our language says and how you communicate priorities through language,” De Jesus explains. Using existing language about the impact of language in job descriptions, De Jesus reviewed and revised the language in [CPSD’s job description](#) using research about the impact of language on marginalized communities. “I took that information and applied it to work we’re doing here, so folks feel more reflected and more comfortable with the language we’re using in job descriptions.”

De Jesus also shifted the networks used to recruit candidates for Cambridge teaching positions. He has started outreach to historically black colleges and universities to identify potential candidates who would be willing to relocate to Massachusetts, and has taken a close look at the pipeline Cambridge has with local educator preparation providers. “We have 26 stipend opportunities for student teachers to complete their practicum experience. When I first came to the district, 24 of the student teachers in those positions were white. That isn’t reflective of our students. This year, 20 are white, and I hope to continue to balance that as we move forward,” he explains. He has also tried to prioritize partnerships with educator preparation programs or pathways that are more diverse, such as the Donovan Urban Teachers at Boston College. “Right after our next Administrators’ Council meeting we are having candidates from Teach Next Year [at the University of Massachusetts Boston] learn more about our schools,” he adds.

Ultimately, the role of hiring often lands with school-level leaders, so De Jesus worked closely with them to help them understand the implicit biases that were often at play in hiring decisions. “It is essential for school leaders who make the final decisions to understand that we’re all biased and operate within systemic racism, but also that systemic racism is created by individuals who enact and design policies that make our organization unwelcoming, centering whiteness and marginalizing others. It was about exposing those biases and the fact that they exist,” he explains. He worked closely with principals and the Human Resources department to craft questions and strategies to better understand the candidate and the competencies and skillsets they offer. “One big piece was disrupting the notion of culture fit – if you have an organization that is 76 percent white, then whiteness is part of the culture and not being white means you’re not a cultural fit,” he emphasizes.

De Jesus communicates the expectation clearly with principals and shares data to hold them accountable. “At the end of the hiring season, I send out a spreadsheet to all of the principals that has the number of teachers at their school, the number of teachers of color, the number of openings they had, and the number of persons of color they hired,” he

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explains. “I’m aiming for positive peer culture – if you’ve had three openings year after year and no people of color were hired, the other principals will ask questions. I’m trying to rally everyone to look at this issue.”

Right now, 24 percent of Cambridge’s teachers identify as persons of color, a slight increase from 22 percent in 2017. De Jesus notes, “This is still significantly short of our student community that is at 60 percent [persons of color], but among new teachers hired this year, 46 percent identified as persons of color.” Four of the district’s 18 schools have 30 percent or higher teachers of color, and CPSD is seeing retention rates among teachers of color increase, as well.

Focusing on retention rates, which remain lower among teachers of color, is De Jesus’s next strategy. “Originally, this work focused on working with leaders, now we’re focusing on teachers to help disrupt those patterns.” De Jesus conducted interviews with educators of color across the district to better understand this pattern and found that they identified patterns in their working conditions that didn’t make them feel affirmed as individuals. Beginning at the end of the 2017-2018 school year, he created Employee Resource Groups, or affinity groups, that provide a “very active space for Black educators and anti-racist white educators. We are also working to develop a strong space for our Latinx and Asian educators and are working to identify the leadership for those groups,” De Jesus explains. “We’re hoping to identify issues of inequity for educators of color and give them that voice and space.”

Another new initiative to diversify the workforce is focused on paraprofessionals, 31 percent of whom identify as persons of color. De Jesus launched Project Elevate during the 2018-2019 school year to help paraprofessionals transition to a licensed, lead teacher role with support to take the MTEL and guidance for the licensure process. In addition to the teaching skills held by many paraprofessionals that would make them effective lead teachers, De Jesus explains, “When we look at pay equity, we have the highest concentration of persons of color in our lowest paying roles in the district. That’s not something we can watch happen.”

STUDENT PLACEMENT AND ASSIGNMENT

In addition to work with educators and teacher leaders, CPSD is focused on improving how racism is reflected in class arrangements. De Jesus says, “Looking at Honors and Advanced Placement English and History classes back in 2015-2016, we didn’t see many students of color. Looking at the [lower level] classes and they are predominantly or majority students of color. You can literally see racism playing out in the classroom.” After recognizing this pattern, teachers in those departments began working towards a disruptive model. “They wanted to disrupt long-held beliefs about who belongs where and dismantle that piece of systemic racism,” De Jesus explains. In 2016-2017, the group of teachers researched how other schools had addressed this problem, and in 2017-2018, they launched the Level Up Initiative. Beginning with English, and followed with History classes the following year, all ninth grade students enter high school and take Honors-level classes. During the 2019 summer, educators of color will receive training to teach Advanced Placement classes to ensure that students are better reflected in the adults that teach advanced coursework.

Similarly, at the upper school level (grades 6-8), Cambridge Street Upper School piloted honors-level math for all eighth grade students in 2017-2018. In 2018-2019, following the successes demonstrated by the CSUS team, the other upper schools in the district also de-tracked their math classrooms.

To support these efforts, CPSD directed significant investments to ensure teachers were well-supported in the classroom. “When we think about English and History, they are co-taught, full inclusion courses,” De Jesus explains. “At CSUS, [Head of School Manuel Fernandez] selected his squad and told them, ‘You’re going to implement this, but I will be in the classroom all the time to support and adjust.’ Fernandez wanted to give our district the data that this is possible.” The CSUS math classes have two teachers and a paraprofessional in the de-tracked math classes to ensure students have access to the differentiated resources they need to be successful.

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LISTENING TO STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

Students are also acting as leaders to help CPSD identify issues of equity and hold the district accountable for change. “Students are wonderful at this. They uncover additional forms of racism, microaggressions from their peers and educators,” De Jesus says. The district convened a working group to better understand the issues students were experiencing and identify action steps to do better, including added protections for students against retaliation from faculty and staff for raising concerns about racial equity. “Students felt we should target our resources towards educating staff and families. They encouraged providing support and professional development and holding multiple conversations with our educators.”

“Children spend most of the day in a classroom with adults who will control their destiny,” De Jesus adds. “We give them multiple at-bats to understand how their actions and behaviors impact children, but if we are not all on the same page about treating someone with compassion and dignity, those adults don’t belong in school buildings.” Based on the work of the microaggressions working group, CPSD instituted new supports for students to streamline how to report concerns to the district and will be rolling out a new training about microaggressions and anti-bias education.

The district-wide focus on equity and cultural responsiveness came out of conversations with families from different communities in Cambridge, and CPSD has worked to maintain open lines of communication as their work progresses. Rippey explains, “Over time, folks have really better understood and embraced the amazing opportunity to build family connections that were previously puzzling – they used to throw an event and no one would show up. Now, they are thinking about building multifaceted relationships.” Through the professional development provided by the district, school leaders are gaining a better understanding of how to approach communication with their families. “Not everyone is best served by the same type of communication. School leaders are thinking about how different life experiences, backgrounds, languages, economic status, and education come together to mean we can’t just send an email out to everyone.” Rippey adds.

When family and student surveys initially brought up disparities in the experiences of families from different backgrounds, it “sparked fragility for many leaders,” Rippey says. “We had to encourage them to wrestle with the information and not just dismiss it.” Beginning in the upper schools, school leaders began bringing in the community for dialogue around race and equity on an ongoing basis. Rippey adds, “Conversations are happening with families and the school community so there’s a sense that we’re all part of this work. It isn’t one training, it is an ongoing community conversation.”

Community members were also concerned that the work outlined in the District Plan would translate to a better student experience. “There’s a lot of natural skepticism toward the idea of a strategic plan and skepticism about starting a process and saying things will change,” Rippey explains. She emphasizes the importance of ongoing communication with stakeholders about what is happening. “The best answer is to make progress and communicate about what is happening. It takes time and effort, but we are being transparent,” she adds. In addition to continuing conversations about the work that is happening across CPSD, the district created a data dashboard to help demonstrate their efforts towards progress in their equity initiatives.

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*Rosalie Rippey, CPSD
Communications Manager*

SIGNS OF PROGRESS

As De Jesus and Rippey emphasize, equity work takes a significant amount of time. Two years into many of these initiatives, they are starting to see signs of progress in the representation of educators of color and anecdotal evidence about improving student experiences. They are also seeing more honest conversations happening about how CPSD can become an anti-racist organization. “I feel really thankful that our Administrators’ Cabinet is comfortable using language

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and setting the tone for the type of language we need to have an identity change and make structural changes,” De Jesus explains. “It is about using honest language and acknowledging that white supremacy is real. We are having the conversation as a district about the continuum of becoming an anti-racist organization, and how to become fully inclusive, sharing power with our stakeholders.”

De Jesus adds that, while there is significant work that remains to be done, he is seeing signs that community members feel empowered to hold the district accountable to that work. “If you do a quick search of Cambridge and racism, there have been a number of news stories published in the past year about our community [highlighting racist practices or incidents]. In a way, it is a positive indication that the work is happening and more people can speak up. When you open up conversations of race and racism, you have more confrontations about race and racism. A conversation is happening in a way that perhaps historically it wasn’t able to happen,” he explains.

While these types of conversations are necessary to drive change, they remain difficult for many community members. “This work is not easy to do and people struggle the moment you tell them, not even that they are racist, but that the thing they did felt racist. We have to hear hard truths from other people,” De Jesus explains. While some educators initially resisted these conversations, “What does it mean when the truth you are hearing across communities of color is uniform? Are they wrong or are you wrong?” he says.

Riphey adds that some community members have struggled to accept the new focus from the district. “There has been some pushback from families who feel the system is working well for their child and they don’t want to mess that up. It is a lot of work convincing people that if you create better equity, there is a better experience for everyone.” The district is working to communicate this message to families while reiterating that the district is not going to lose focus on equity. “When the Superintendent sends out a message about the [Christchurch mosque shootings] in New Zealand, for example, we heard back from some families that it was so PC and they don’t support it. Our approach is to continue to speak this set of values and let them decide how to be a part of the community. If they are educators, they won’t be comfortable here if they don’t hold the values. If they are families, we won’t be less social justice-oriented, but we need to leave open a doorway and create a sense of safety so we’re not punishing them for their different opinions but they understand these are our core values.”

CPSD also continues to work on identifying the root causes of inequity in its system. Riphey says, “This is an ongoing cycle – we identify an area to improve, come up with plans to address it and look at whether we see improvement. The ultimate goal is always the students.” This year, CPSD received a grant to help them better understand the ongoing challenges. “I’m excited to come out of a giant process with so much community participation – local non-profits, parents, teachers, students – all digging into how we are messing up and what we could do better,” De Jesus explains. The stakeholders engaged in the equity audit had nearly a year to “make sense of the data and make recommendations about what the data tells them and where the district needs to move,” he adds. The district will begin developing an action plan over the summer.

CPSD is also trying to help educators and leaders understand their role in the data. “It is easy to say that systemic racism exists, but systems are made up of people. When you’re confronted with data about the referrals you’re making, you are implicated, you did play a role. It is a really powerful call to action for the community to think not only about the systemic approach but what are you doing and how are you disrupting the system?”

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Ramon De Jesus, Director of Diversity Development

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SCHOOL COMMUNITIES’ FOCUS ON RACIAL EQUITY

In addition to the initiatives happening at the district level, several school communities in CPSD have maintained a focus on creating culturally responsive, social justice-oriented communities for their students and staff. Putnam Avenue Upper School (PAUS) and Cambridge Street Upper School (CSUS) were early leaders in this work, beginning their efforts when the schools were created during a district restructuring in 2012. While the work at PAUS and CSUS looks different, there are several common themes in their work:

1. **Leadership setting clear expectations and holding their community accountable.** As De Jesus explains, “The piece that helps [CSUS Head of School Manuel Fernandez and PAUS Head of School Mirko Chardin] is that they don’t make this optional. It is part of their culture. If you are a leader, you have certain non-negotiables.” Rippey adds, “We often think of hostile work environments for people of color. I would argue that [Fernandez] is creating a hostile work environment for people who don’t think this work is necessary.”
2. **Ongoing professional development for staff.** At both schools, cultural responsiveness was not a focus of a few training sessions. Rather, it is connected with all of the professional development happening for staff members.
3. **Embracing student voice and reflecting students in curriculum and the physical space.** At both schools, efforts have been made to ensure that visual displays throughout the building are reflective of their core values and their students’ backgrounds and experiences. Curricular materials have also been reviewed and revised to ensure they are reflective of diverse backgrounds and perspectives.
4. **Ensuring a diverse staff.** Chardin explains, “You can’t do this work in a sustainable way without committing to hiring a diverse staff. It is not just about celebrating one or two new brown people. If practitioners don’t have to develop relationships with people different from them it is easy for things to just be ideas. They need to be able to practice this work in real life.”
5. **Authentic engagement for families from diverse backgrounds.** Both schools prioritize engaging with families and the broader community early in the school year, to build positive relationships, and in formats designed to meet their needs. Fernandez explains, “[My message to families is] it is a new year, new teachers for your child. We want to know from you who your child is before we reach out and tell you.”

To learn more about their efforts, see their profiles [here](#).