

Minnesota Principals Academy- Action Learning Project

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Explicit Conversations about Race and its Impact on Students, Staff, and School

Abstract

This action learning project sets out to determine if the leaders and staff in one suburban middle-school can promote racial justice and improve the experience of Black and Brown students in our school by growing deeper in the understanding of the historical context of whiteness, white privilege, implicit bias, and institutional racism through explicit conversations about these topics. To what extent might these conversations deepen educators understanding of their own beliefs, perceptions, and biases? To what extent might a deeper understanding of these concepts prompt teachers to implement meaningful changes to their mindsets, relationships, and practices? Will explicit conversations about race mitigate the disproportionate representation Black and Brown students have on our Ds and Fs audit, students with a grade-point average in the bottom 10 percent, behavior referrals, referrals brought to the Student Assistance Team (SAT)?

At monthly staff meetings and department meetings, the only items on the agenda related to racial equity issues. The goal was stated at the beginning of the year- to deepen the understanding of the role race played in staff lives, student lives, and in the life of the school. These meetings led to more conversations about race and racial inequities, and an increase in the number of staff who are able to talk more comfortably and honestly about how race has affected them as people and as professionals. However, consistently disproportionate representation of Black, and Brown students exists within our Ds and Fs audit, the lowest 10 percent of grade-point average, behavioral referrals and referrals brought to SAT.

Vision: To be a racially-just middle school where all can learn and contribute

Background/Context: We have an underlying belief that all students and adults within our school community can learn and contribute. Yet, we have too much evidence that shows Black and Brown students are neither learning nor contributing at the same levels as white students. Black and Brown students make up 20% of our students, but they are disproportionately identified as struggling learners and underrepresented in terms of positive contributions to school.

Why a change? The discrepancies between the experiences of Black and Brown students in relationship to the experience of White students at St. Anthony Middle School (SAMS) do not stem from inability, lack of potential, or little support from home. Nor do they exist because teachers are explicitly racist. Before this school year, few conversations occurred about how race impacts students, the school, and staff as individuals. Educational equity and racial justice discussions only happened informally with few exceptions. Staff actively avoided racial conversations, remained silent when they did occur, and a few of them disagreed it is an issue relevant to public K-12 education. However, as a school with the underlying belief that *all will learn and contribute*, our quantitative and qualitative data provided evidence that too often the students not learning nor contributing were Black and Brown students.

What we did: The SAMS staff meets once a month for staff meetings, and it has two days throughout the year dedicated to professional development. All of this professional development time spent together focused on one goal specific to racial equity: ***to deepen understanding of the role race plays in our own lives, in the lives of our students, and in our school.*** Three different strategies were identified to support this work: A. Deepen understanding of implicit bias and growth mindset B. Unpack whiteness, white privilege, and our own multiple and complex identities and C. Build stronger relationships with Black and Brown students and families. Additionally, one of the four department meetings each teacher attends every month was facilitated by the equity and instruction coach and focused on the racial equity goal and strategies. Teachers reported their comfortability and skill at navigating conversations about race, and they reported the ways in which their learning was impacting them as individuals and teachers throughout the year. Data regarding grade-point average, Ds and Fs, behavior referrals, and SAT referrals was gathered throughout the year as well.

What we found out: Our data suggests that our staff was engaged in this work, and their feedback suggests it was meaningful and impactful, yet we do not have data that shows we are moving the dial toward more proportional student achievement data. ***We continue to fall short of all will learn and contribute.***

Teachers report:

- Growth from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence
- Deeper understanding of the role race played in their own lives and the lives of their students
- Uncertainty regarding how race impacts their curriculum and their instruction; however, teachers in every department can list a new practice, skill or lesson they have brought to their classrooms
- More confidence and proficiency at navigating conversations about race in small groups as well as more opportunities to invite racial conversations
- 23% of staff are not comfortable having conversations about race
- 90% of staff report racial conversations as important to be having in our school community

Even though Black and Brown students only make up 20% of the population, they represent:

- 39% of the students who received one or more D or an F for a semester grade (a small shift toward proportionality from last year when it was closer to 50%)
- 39% of the students who are in the bottom 10% for GPAs
- 34% of the students who received a behavior referral (this is a slight shift toward proportionality from the last two school years when it was closer to 45%)
- 39% of the students discussed during Student Assistance Team meetings

Implications for practice:

- We will continue having explicit and purposeful conversations about essential knowledge around racial socialization: whiteness, white privilege, implicit bias, institutional racism, multiple and complex identities.
- Even as we shift toward ***equity through high-quality instruction***, we must continue to support teachers as they move away from unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence.