

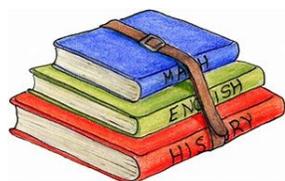
From Culturally Reactive to Culturally Proactive Schools – A Case Study

Hamden Hall Country Day School



Ideas & Tools for Community Change

An Interview with Sagacity Walker,
January 10, 2019



Achieving educational equity in our schools is not simply a math challenge. It's not even just about which schools are in which neighborhoods, public vs. private, or which schools have the most money to spend on its teachers and students.

It is a far more complex conundrum, and one that requires dedicated, culturally responsive, proactive leaders who are committed to listening to all voices, and incorporating those voices into school policies, curriculum and the development and maintenance of an educational environment that provides equitable learning opportunities for all. Hamden Hall Country Day School in Hamden, CT understands this importance, and has engaged with Everyday Democracy to assist them in the development of student dialogues that are designed for lasting democracy-strengthening, culturally progressive change.



Q: Why did the school reach out to Everyday Democracy?

A: The Upper School Dean of Students at Hamden Hall Country Day School was referred by a community member that underwent a positive dialogue experience in New Haven with Everyday Democracy's guidance, and suggested Everyday Democracy might be a good fit for the school's needs. Hamden Hall is an independent, college preparatory, co-educational Pre-K through Grade 12 day school founded in 1912 as a boys school. Attendance in its early days was exclusively a homogeneous group of white males 9 -14. Over the years, the student population became more diverse. The school expanded to Pre-K through 12th grade, with female, international and students from a broader range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. While the school's demographics were changing, the cultural responsiveness was lagging and they knew they needed to do something about it. Then, in the summer of 2017, racially insensitive language and slurs began appearing in the school's student and teacher's online platform. The urgency to do something sooner rather than later was evident.

The school first responded by holding an assembly to discuss the importance of embracing diversity in the schools. While a good start, the faculty and students wanted something more intensive. So they called Everyday Democracy to listen to their needs and to share how a dialogue to change process might support them.

Q: When did this all start and what was the process?

A: The school acted on their need for more for cultural responsiveness at the end of the 2017 school year and called Everyday Democracy. At the end of June, we established a focus on race and diversity and began to develop the program guide. The focus was later broadened to be as inclusive as possible, especially for marginalized populations such as LGBTQ students and international students, and those facing gender, racial and ethnic barriers. The plan was to begin dialogues when school started in the fall 2018. Despite a tight academic schedule, Program Associate, Malana Rogers-Bursen and I held a day long organizing training in October and two day long facilitator training sessions in November for two separate groups. The Upper School Dean of Students led an additional facilitator training session in November in order to have a sufficient amount of trained facilitators for the dialogues.

Overall, it was a monumental effort to involve everyone in the high school in these dialogues to ensure all voices in the school could be heard in conversations led by trained student and staff facilitators, but the team did what it took to get the job done.

Q: Did you have any “Aha Moments” as this process unfolded?

A: Aha Moment #1 – scheduling was more difficult than I had imagined. When working with the schools, it is important to always have contingency plans in place as schools have a lot going on that can impact the process. It is also critical to put all committed time on the calendar before the school year begins.

Aha Moment #2 - While “race” was a central issue in the school’s desire to become more culturally responsive, this school and others wanted to broaden the emphasis to focus on all marginalized students in the school who may be viewed as “different.”

Aha Moment #3 – Different people have different ideas on what “dialogue” means. The mechanics, complexity, and arc of the multi-session dialogues need to be explained to leadership and integrated in the planning process to ensure the dialogues are meaningful and discuss underlying personal and structural issues. We have to be clear that dialogues are an intentional deliberative process.

Each of these “Aha Moments” were recognized and accommodated. We hope as we work with other schools, we can take these learnings – what worked well and what could be improved – in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of effective dialogue that leads to desired and lasting change.

Q: Can Hamden Hall learn from other schools that are doing this well?

A: Montgomery County, MD has an excellent, ongoing dialogue process in their schools. They are continuously intentional about giving student voices in their policy making. That way, they create not just one, but numerous opportunities to enable school administrators to listen to their students – and in turn, making them less marginalized. There is a “champion” of the process in their schools, John Landesman, who coordinates the Montgomery County Public Schools Study Circles Program. I credit the Upper School Dean of Students at Hamden Hall as the “champion” of the process – with his assertiveness and determination to fit the process into the school’s schedule, and conducting a 4th training session to ensure there were enough trained facilitators to meet the needs of the dialogues. He went above and beyond to make this a priority and will likely be championing the ongoing efforts toward action and change.

Q: What do you think will happen as a result of the dialogues at Hamden Hall Country Day School?

A: The first dialogue session was well received. Each group had varied results – some were more talkative than others. They want to ensure marginalized voices are continuously heard in decision making, create more spaces and time for people to connect and share their voices and experiences, and ultimately carry on their tradition of Hamden Hall being a family. The goal now is to host the second and third dialogue sessions and hopefully implement the ideas from the dialogues to create a proactive action plan that will mitigate insensitive behavior/conversations in the school community.

Q: Final Thoughts?

A: Being culturally proactive can avoid the need to become culturally responsive. Schools spend a lot of time and energy focusing on disciplinary policies like school dress codes, cell phone use and the like. Moving forward, if we place the same priority on ensuring cultural sensitivity, awareness, and provide adequate platforms for all students to be heard and valued, then I believe we will create environments that are more intentionally inclusive. And that’s what I think Hamden Hall wants to do. They want the entire student body to know that this is home.



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