Cultivating New Achievers

Experts say K-12 teachers who adopt culturally relevant teaching strategies can engage minority students and prime them for higher education.

By Marc Hequet

Widening the use of K-12 classroom cultural relevancy tactics to engage minority students and help them do better in school could create a new breed of curious, college-bound students.

That’s according to the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education and other groups, who are conducting nationwide teacher-training workshops to show thousands of K-12 educators how to improve the performance of underachieving students by drawing out their strengths and incorporating their culture into learning activities.

As a result of learning in a culturally inclusive K-12 atmosphere, these new achievers may come to college with the expectation that their own cultural context will be included in college classrooms. NUA says the concept will give rise to a different kind of college student, one who expects professors to be culturally competent as well.

They will come to college with strategies that will enable them to better learn how to learn, to use the content that the college professor is providing them, says Dr. Eric Cooper, NUA president. The strategies that we’re talking about are as appropriate for K-12 as they are for college education.

He says thinking maps and other techniques really enable [students] to learn the content in a way that sticks.

Cooper and his colleagues presented their research at NUA’s Teaching for Intelligence: Believe to Achieve conference in Minneapolis earlier this month. NUA has taught its engagement techniques to teachers in 75 cities and to college education majors as well.

NUA has shown promising results. In Birmingham, Ala., where NUA partners with schools, the share of students meeting state standards doubled to 80 percent in 2006 from 40 percent a year earlier. NUA claims its techniques have also helped improve performance among under-achieving students in Minneapolis, Newark, Indianapolis and Seattle.

Dr. Marybeth Gasman, an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania who does research on Black colleges, confirms that Afrocentric classroom approaches work for African-American students, and her own experience is that students of color are more active in discussions when she uses examples from other cultures.

One example of incorporating cultural relevancy into instruction is including historical figures from the same ethnic background as the students. It’s very empowering for a student to see himself or herself in the curriculum, says Gasman.

Dr. Tyrone C. Howard, an associate professor of education at the University of California, Los Angeles, watched one teacher do it the wrong way during a geometry class in one inner city Los Angeles high school earlier this year.

The young, White male teacher tried to explain the geometrical concept of slope by using skiing terms. His students were hard-pressed to get the notion of a bunny slope, skiing jargon for a gentle decline where beginning skiers start. Skiing wasn’t part of this group’s cultural context. Needless to say, Howard observes, not one of these kids in his classroom had any clue what he was talking about.

Another inner city middle school math teacher did better working with students on the subject of ratios and proportions. This White male teacher asked students to record the number of alcohol billboards and liquor stores they passed on their way to school, and calculate the number of each per block. This, says Howard, was their cultural knowledge.

Most young college faculty have learned such techniques to accommodate various cultural contexts, Gasman says, but some older faculty aren’t going to buy into it. You can’t really tell them how to teach.

In short, the burden may be on minority students to point out if some faculty teach ineffectively. Students of color have been making it for a long time, for years, in institutions that weren’t interested at all in accommodating a variety of different cultures.
viewpoints, Gasman says.

Howard adds that today’s students realize that they don’t need to surrender their own culture to succeed in another.

It’s okay to be well-versed in both of these ways of understanding, he says.

For far too long, kids have had a sense that they had to give up their own cultural knowledge to be educated. Now kids are sophisticated enough to understand that it’s about appropriateness.