



National Urban Alliance: Minnesota SUCCESS Stories

In Eden Prairie, Minnesota in 2008, the gap between black and white students on statewide reading assessments was 42 points, a staggering chasm. After extensive work with teachers inside classrooms to help them to eliminate bias, appreciate cultural differences and recognize the strengths—as opposed to the deficits—of minority students, the gap narrowed to 26 points in just three years.

The catalyst for such improvement? The National Urban Alliance for Effective Education.

Conventional wisdom says that teachers need to avoid seeing their students' race and ethnicities for fear of bias. But at NUA, we know the way to really make change is to embrace race and culture, to nurture and capitalize on it.

Our partnership with Minnesota's schools is proof that the NUA way works.



Minnesota Teacher of the Year Touts NUA as Factor in Her Success

Jackie Roehl was named Minnesota Teacher of the Year in 2012, beating out more than 300 exemplary teachers for the honor. At the time, Roehl—who has been teaching since 1998—said she was “shell-shocked” to receive the award.

But the honor was a long time in the making, the culmination of at least a decade of Roehl employing things she'd learned from NUA's tool chest of teacher strategies and skills.

“As an early adopter of NUA strategies, I was one of the first teachers to realize the positive impact that culturally responsive teaching could have on struggling students, while raising the level of engagement and achievement for all students,” Roehl says.

While teaching at a high school in Edina—a suburb outside of Minneapolis—Roehl took note of the fact that the state had the one of the widest achievement gaps in the nation. Roehl had grown up in a nearly fully white community, but had parents and role models who insisted she understand more about the world around her. With that background, Roehl made it a personal charge to help reverse that gap. NUA helped teach her to disregard pre-conceived notions and stereotypes about students, and work to find each student's strength.

Roehl realized that her decade of NUA studies could help fellow teachers as well. In addition to her regular classroom duties, Roehl volunteered to become a part-time literacy coach. Helping teachers to understand the importance of combining literacy with equity—meaning showing teachers how to help students use their diverse cultural backgrounds and skills as a strength—became a major goal. And one that paid off.

“Seeing student success in my classroom through culturally responsive pedagogy and spreading that pedagogy to my colleagues has brought me great satisfaction in my career,” she says.

Edina eventually succeeded in closing the achievement gap in reading. And Roehl credits NUA with much of her success.

“Embracing a culturally responsive mindset took me from a mediocre teacher to a respected educator in my school district,” Roehl says. “My philosophy of teaching was transformed when I began my work with the NUA.”



Superintendent Aldo Sicoli

Everywhere Aldo Sicoli Goes, NUA Goes With Him

“We saw the fruits of NUA’s work in empowering both staff and students to do a better job.”

As principal of a public school in Edina, Minn., Aldo Sicoli was introduced to the work of a nonprofit he’d never heard of before: the National Alliance for Urban Education. NUA was there to conduct professional development with the school’s teachers to help them change their mindsets about low-income children and those of color, and then provide strategies to help those same students learn.

“The teachers in the school said it was the best professional development they ever had,” Sicoli says now.

It was so successful that when Sicoli was promoted to be superintendent of Robbinsdale Area Schools—where just over half of the student population are non-white and low-income—he remembered the lessons shared by NUA and opted to bring the nonprofit there, too.

“I started by sending some principals and administrative staff to NUA’s summer academy,” Sicoli said. “Again, many people came back saying it was the best PD they’d ever had. So we ramped up our engagement.”

Eventually, Sicoli partnered with NUA to work not only with teachers in its K-12 school buildings, but all school administrators and the school board.

“NUA really strengthens cultural relevance, which I don’t see other organizations doing,” Sicoli says. “They also combine mindset work with strategies so staff really sees the difference they can make. We saw the fruits of NUA’s work in empowering both staff and students to do a better job. And it has had a big impact.”

Since 2015, Sicoli has been superintendent of Roseville Area Schools. Roseville is smaller than Robbinsdale, but more challenging. The district, which borders both Minneapolis and St. Paul’s school systems, has more than twice the average number of non-native English speakers as the state. Many are recent immigrants or refugees.

One of the first things Sicoli did after taking the helm of Roseville’s schools: “I brought in NUA.”

Tough Year at Roseville Area Middle School Made Easier Because of NUA Training

As a Korean girl growing up in a predominantly white town in northern Minnesota, Libby Otto knew what it felt like to be one of the only students of color in a classroom. After college—chosen partially because of its rich diversity—Otto went into teaching. Otto has found the support of NUA to be invaluable.

“None of us knew what to expect,” says Otto, about spending a day in NUA trainings once a month with fellow teachers at Roseville Area Middle School. “Now, it’s become a main part of our teaching lives.”

NUA has helped Otto get to know her students, and learn to best support them “in ways we haven’t thought of intentionally. We receive a lot of strategies and help with mapping for different lessons. It has forced me as a teacher to think in different ways. How can we be certain that our teaching and learning relates to them?”

The teacher’s NUA training was tested this school year after St. Paul’s Philando Castile was shot by police after being pulled over during a traffic stop. Castile’s killing was broadcast online and became national news.

“The shooting actually happened in our district,” Otto says. “We have students who live right where it happened. We have students related to both parties.”

“NUA training helped us center our focus,” Otto says. “It’s

been so important for us to have someone to go to and say, ‘These are the things that we have been seeing and what’s the next strategy?’”

Teachers rehearsed a lesson on police brutality in a NUA daylong training sessions before introducing it to their classes. “Being able to practice in the trainings and then being confident enough to do it in front of our students was so helpful. NUA gives us the time and the space to do that, and it’s extremely important.”

To end the school year, teachers are helping students stage a culminating celebration. The celebration is needed, Otto says, after such a tough year.

“Planning the school celebration is just one way to show the things we learned from NUA: Understanding our students; pulling them from the informal knowledge they learn outside of school to further their formal learning in school; framing; mind-maps; paying attention to talents and gifts. NUA has helped us with all of that and I’ve definitely seen it help. Definitely,” Otto says.



Libby Otto, left, and one of her students in a Korean Hanbok