

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX: EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO EFFECT POSITIVE CHANGES IN SCHOOL CLIMATE

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Schools today are increasingly aware of the impact of school climate and safety on academic achievement. Educators across the country are clearly coming to understand the linkage between a child's need to be physically and emotionally safe and that child's ability to perform to his or her highest ability. There seems to be a new awareness to the fact that a child who is fearful for his or her emotional or physical wellbeing is not able to concentrate on academics to the extent that he or she would be able to if these concerns were not present.

Race relations within a school is one area of school climate that can have serious implications on the level of safety within a school. As demographics across the country continue to evolve, our schools are becoming more diverse than ever before. This is a trend that will only continue to grow. According to the United States Census Bureau, over the next 50 years, the white population percentage will decrease, while all populations of people of color will increase.¹

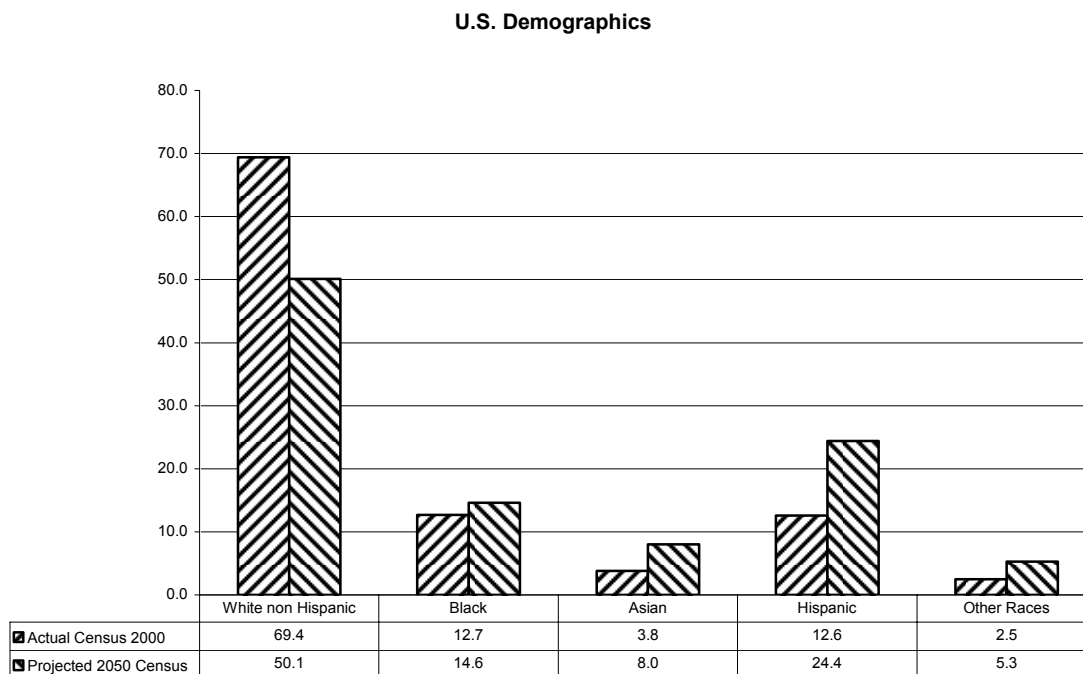
Schools must come to the realization that demographic change is a neutral fact – in itself it is neither positive nor negative. How a person, school, community or society at large reacts to demographic change affects whether or not the change is positive or negative. When newcomers are made to feel like welcomed and valued contributors to their school or community, then demographic change is positive. When newcomers are made to feel unwelcome and unvalued, then the reaction to demographic change is negative. Schools must take steps to ensure that every student is welcomed and valued, regardless of race, national origin, ethnicity, gender, religion, disability, sexual orientation or any other descriptor.

Judging the climate of a school with regard to race relations can be difficult for administrators. Many of the goings-on between students happen below the radar in areas of the school that are unmonitored by administrators. Increasingly, problematic interactions between students take place via technology – through email communications, instant messages, text messages and web-based forums like Myspace, U-tube and Facebook. The interactions themselves do not occur on school property nor do they occur during school hours, but the fallout from these interactions may have dramatic reprisals which do occur during school hours and on school property.

It is necessary for school administrators to take a barometer reading as to their schools' climate. There are many ways in which to do this, including staff and student surveys; boxes, email or voicemail accounts for anonymous comments; utilizing feedback from teachers and guidance counselors; and more. Another way to find out what is going on is to engage students in a dialogue that not only names both the positives and negatives of the school, but also tasks students with finding solutions for the negatives. Schools who engage students in both the naming and resolving of problems is often viewed as "thinking outside of the box."

¹ Bergman, M. (2004). "Census Bureau Projects Tripling of Hispanic and Asian Populations in 50 Years: Non-Hispanic Whites May Drop To Half of Total Population," March 18, 2004 Press Release available at <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/001720.html>.

Figure 1. U.S. demographics forecast



Historically, students were viewed as blank pages of a book. Teachers were to fill these pages by imparting their knowledge to their students. Students were not actively engaged in the learning process – their function was to digest and regurgitate facts and figures through rote memorization. As time passed, educators realized that this type of learning was flawed in that it did not teach students critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The American educational system continues to evolve to incorporate these higher learning skills into the education of our youth.

Schools must recognize the value of having students participate in the process of improving their schools, by encouraging students to engage in critical thinking and problem solving exercises relative to their schools. By engaging students thusly, they will feel ownership of the schools and will be actively involved with working to make positive changes in the climate of the school. One way to engage students in this process is to work with the U.S. Department of Justice, Community Relations Service (CRS) to bring a SPIRIT program to individual middle- and high-schools.

CRS designed the SPIRIT program in 1985 to assist school administrators in gaining insight into student perceptions of racial problems. SPIRIT stands for Student Problem Identification and Resolution of Issues Together. SPIRIT is available to schools experiencing racial or intergroup tension free of charge.

CRS recognizes the value of student input in solving racial tension in their schools. CRS believes that, as objective outsiders with facilitation skills, they could be helpful organizing and leading discussions among youth to acquire candid perceptions on school racial problems and solutions. CRS applies the principles of mediation, problem solving, and full engagement of the school community, to help improve the racial climate of the schools. SPIRIT brings students, administrators, teachers and parents together to identify issues, develop solutions, and take action on conflicts within their schools.

CRS has 10 regional offices located throughout the country. CRS developed the SPIRIT program and first implemented it in Los Angeles, in response to school violence between Crips and Bloods gang members. Since 1985, SPIRIT programs have taken place in schools in all 10 CRS regions. To date, SPIRIT programs have been implemented across the country. CRS, in conjunction with the Pennsylvania Interagency Task Force on Civil Tension has conducted 24 SPIRIT programs since May of 2002 in schools across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The schools which conducted SPIRIT programs varied from small, rural districts, to large, urban districts. They all were experiencing racial or intergroup tension. SPIRIT was conducted at the schools to help them get a better understanding of the degree of racial and intergroup tensions, and to empower the students as stakeholders in the climate of their schools.

SPIRIT brings natural student leaders of diverse backgrounds together to discover commonalities and appreciate difference. The SPIRIT model teaches students new and better ways to develop solutions and make decisions. SPIRIT improves communications among diverse student leaders and reduces racial tensions in schools. Spirit helps to improve student/teacher and student/administrator relationships. SPIRIT works to prevent violence and conflict among students in schools with changing demographic populations.

Although SPIRIT comes out of the U.S. Department of Justice, CRS conciliators do not have law enforcement authority. CRS Staff does not assign blame, impose solutions, investigate or prosecute. CRS is required by law to conduct its activities in confidence and is prohibited from disclosing confidential information. Following the two-day student dialogue, CRS conciliators prepare a detailed report of the strengths and concerns which students identify, as well as the solutions students proposed to address their concerns. This report is given directly to the school administrator who initiated the SPIRIT program. CRS does not supply copies of school reports to any person or agency, as these reports are confidential.

In summary, SPIRIT creates new safeguards to prevent future conflict and minimizes tensions. It establishes a proactive model to use for problem solving. SPIRIT: empowers students; builds collaboration; brings diverse groups together; and develops decision-making skills. By “thinking outside the box,” schools are able to harness the power of the students to generate positive changes in the climate and safety of their schools.