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Oakland Hills

It has been four years since Barbara Campbell left the position of superintendent of Maple View School District. Her work as a consultant to districts throughout the country is personally rewarding. The joy of helping others nourishes her in ways she had not imagined possible during her climb up leadership ranks in the school system. Today, she carefully reviews files sent to her by Eduardo Soriano, superintendent from a nearby school district. The phone rings. It is Dr. Soriano.

Barbara: Eduardo, I received several files from your office. I am struck by the power of the mission statement.

Eduardo: Yes, it is a powerful mission. We developed it based on the Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency. It took a collaborative effort to develop it. It was a real struggle for members of the community, the board, teachers, students, and administrators to pull things together.

Barbara: I can tell from reading that you put a lot of work into the effort to make it happen.

Eduardo: (*Speaking quickly, on edge*) Well, it is a great mission statement. It is something to be proud of, but making it a reality has proven to take a little bit more work than actually crafting the statement.

Barbara: Mmm . . . I see. What seems to be the problem, Eduardo?

Eduardo: It is very difficult to put my finger on just where the problem lies. There seem to be several of them, not just one. One thing is for certain: what we say is our mission is not always consistent with what we do. What we say we want to do seems to be in conflict with what we *actually* do. I do not think we are walking our talk. It is as if we are working against ourselves

sometimes. I sent you a file about one of our high schools. I think you will get a flavor of what I mean after you read it.

Barbara: Okay, Eduardo. I have it. I will download it this morning, read it, and then we can discuss it in detail when we meet next week.

After hanging up the phone, Barbara ponders the anxiety in Eduardo's voice. Dr. Soriano had worked his way through the ranks in the Oakland Hills School District. He began his career as a fifth-grade teacher. After five years, he was transferred to the middle school to be the Dean of Students. After a few more years, he became assistant principal, a position he held for six years. His status was eventually elevated to principal, which he served for three years. He was then encouraged by top-level administration to pursue a central-office position, Director of Special Services. He held that position for only two years prior to his current rank as superintendent.

Some in the central-office administration questioned his rapid ascent to the top of the leadership ranks. He had managed to land the top spot of superintendent ahead of two other administrators. Both had worked in the district five years beyond Eduardo's tenure. In fact, they had each held the position of assistant superintendent for two years prior to Eduardo's coming to the central office. Chatter amongst many in the Oakland Hills School District was that either of these two administrators was in line to assume the title of superintendent. The School Board thought otherwise and recruited Eduardo instead. Cautiously, he accepted. Now, he called asking for Barbara's help. He wanted her to perform an audit of the system to inform the district on how well they were progressing toward implementing cultural proficiency. The audit would offer him an objective perspective as to what might be happening in the district.

Barbara knew too well the challenges involved in implementing cultural proficiency systemwide into a school district. She led the charge to make cultural proficiency a high-leverage strategy in the Maple View School District where she was formerly superintendent of schools. After the call ended, Barbara once again looked at Oakland Hills' mission statement.

OAKLAND HILLS SCHOOL DISTRICT MISSION

We strive for personal academic excellence in a safe and caring environment, which allows us to build and value relationships while honoring our cultural and social diversity in a newly developing global community.

We believe . . .

1. Every student learns in an academic culture that allows them to be successful at their own pace and allows educators to build on their strengths.
2. There is a dominant culture and it serves our staff, students, and community in varying degrees.
3. Developing a relationship of trust with students within the dynamics of culture leads to student success.
4. Teaching comes from the heart. The best teachers are called to their profession and all good teachers work as if they are called.
5. Educators must be supported emotionally, academically, and financially as they meet the inherent potential of every student and adapt to their students' changing needs.
6. Educators, school staff, parents, and students contribute to making students feel a part of an important community.
7. For decisions at schools, meeting student needs is the determining factor.
8. Education is not limited to academic settings, but is a valued gift also offered by other institutions or cultural factors as family, spirituality or religion, and community.
9. Public schools will successfully educate every child when people in all social and economic classes are valued in society.
10. Education is a major socializing force in creating an inclusive society that is based on equality of rights, sense of purpose, human dignity, justice, and hope.

Therefore, we will continually:

- Critique and assess the prevailing school culture in order to create culture that serves each student and staff member well.
- Acknowledge individual and group identities and needs within our school and community cultures.
- Recognize the importance of the vast diversity within cultures, as well as acknowledge the diversity that exists between cultures.

“It was a good mission statement,” Barbara thought to herself. It had all the qualities needed to foster a culturally competent environment. She

reflected upon her experience leading the effort to create a mission statement at her former school district and imagined how things must have been for the Oakland Hills community. They tussled with every word and sentence throughout the entire process. They were careful to embed multiple perspectives from the entire community to capture everyone's values and beliefs. It was a great achievement. It set in motion a vision for providing the best education for each child. But what was going wrong in the Oakland Hills School District? What was the cause of the anxiety in Eduardo Soriano's voice?

Barbara set the mission statement aside. She retrieved an article in the file from the local newspaper, the *Oakland Hills Harbinger*. It was a scathing indictment of one of the district's schools. Titled "Educate or Incarcerate," the article highlighted the divide in the Oakland Hills community along racial lines dating back to court-ordered school desegregation in the 1960s. As local residents resisted school integration, it was a difficult time for the community. African American schools were closed down, forcing children from these communities to attend what were once White-only schools located in White communities. The district bused the children into the schools. Although the event of school integration transpired, social mixing along racial lines was a more difficult achievement. Overt segregationist behaviors transformed into subtle underground practices. Although children attended the same campus occupying the same space, they tended to group themselves along racial lines. This observation was most prevalent in the higher grade levels. In the local high schools, it was common for a White student to attend school and not interact with a single African American student the entire day. In fact, it was possible for that same student to spend his entire high school career without an interracial social experience. The same was true for African American students.

This self-imposed social segregation by students was sanctioned by the school's institutional practices creating student traffic patterns for academic coursework tracked along racial and ethnic lines. Entire floors and wings of the school building were considered Black, White, Latino, or for English Language Learners (ELL) based upon the number of students taking classes in the area. Many Latino and Asian students, particularly newcomers to the school, were placed in the ELL wing specially designed to help them gain language acquisition toward English proficiency. On the other hand, advanced placement and honors classes were primarily attended by White students with a few Asian students and an occasional African American or Latino student in attendance. African American, Latino, Native American and/or First Nation,¹ and Asian students new to the school occupied most remedial courses.

When looking at the Oakland Hills community, the same patterns existed. For all practical purposes, the students followed the lead of their parents. Neighborhoods were segregated as well as religious institutions. This became the way things were in Oakland Hills. Defacto racial segregation was woven into the fabric of the community culture.

However, with the recent boom in housing developments, the old tensions had risen above ground once again. The previously mentioned newspaper article exacerbated the situation. Its central theme pointed to a demographic trend toward increased numbers of residents of color moving into the area. The article raised questions as to whether this change might affect the “standing” of the local schools. Since a great number of Oakland Hills’ graduates attended college beyond high school, the article raised doubts as to whether that tradition might continue, given that many “minorities tend” to be incarcerated throughout the country. It cited data showing the high incarceration rate of Blacks and Latinos. “These populations tend to need extra attention so as not to overly use resources in the community,” the article concluded.

After the article’s appearance, a series of letters and e-mails circulated throughout the community. A letter to the editor written by a long-time resident was printed in the local paper’s opinion section, *Voice of the People*.

Regarding, Educate or Incarcerate, it is clear that things are changing in the Oakland Hills community and they may not always be for the better. Shouldn't we be more concerned about the status of our community? It is my opinion that the long-standing, respected residents of this community should seriously consider how we want to be viewed. It is clear from your article that everyone may not be capable of attending schools at the caliber for which we are accustomed in this community.

—Grace Richards

The newspaper article also generated a reaction from school employees. A highly influential veteran teacher and president of the teachers union wrote an e-mail to the principal of Pine Hills High School, Dr. Harry Staples. He copied his message to the superintendent. Barbara read the copy from the file.

Dear Dr. Staples,

I am sure you are aware of the difficulties that we face in maintaining the prominent national academic standing of Pine Hills High School. The school is known throughout the state and indeed the country for its outstanding academic achievements. Many of

our students are national merit scholars, hold the highest scores on college placement exams, and attend the best colleges and universities this country has to offer. Our alumni are university professors, corporate executives, medical doctors, prominent lawyers, and outstanding citizens in the community.

The teachers at Pine Hills High have worked very hard to make sure students achieve at the highest level possible. It is our responsibility to make sure that we cultivate their innate abilities and give them the opportunity to achieve rigorous academics provided they are willing to put forth the effort to be successful.

We are keenly aware that children have different learning aptitudes and that it is our duty to help them live up to their potential. Hence, we are deeply concerned about the proper readiness of the children entering our classrooms. Therefore, we call on you to consider appropriate programs that might assist students at the proper levels, so they have a degree of “readiness” upon their arrival at Pine Hills High.

Sincerely,
Tom Pratt

THE OAKLAND HILLS COMMUNITY

Oakland Hills is a rapidly expanding community nestled at the base of the foothills. The community population has spiraled upward 8% each year for the last 10 years. In a short amount of time, the population grew from 30,000 residents to 64,000. Census data show population distribution as 40% European American, 15% African American, 25% Latino, 15% Asian, 3% Pacific Islander, and 2% Native American. Middle-class residents comprise approximately 70% of the population and are essentially the economic base of the community. Approximately 18% are low salaried with 7% considered to be of the “working” poor. The remaining 5% are of the upper class. A major state highway divides the community creating a clear separation of Eastside and Westside.

Ten years ago, the newly built Pine Hills Estates was completing its first phase of construction for “executive” homes. Located on the Westside of the community, the development is now complete, with more than 300 homes nestled around the exclusive Pine Hills Golf Course. Additional Westside housing developments include Pine Hills Terrace, located just north of the Pine Hills Golf Course and featuring upscale single-family town homes

designed with “the professional” in mind. Westside development also includes Waverly Hills and Snowberry Meadows, which target middle-income residents. These developments provide housing for many of the new employees of the Oakland Hills School District.

Added to the growth of established communities in Oakland Hills, a new housing development, South East Hills, has created an influx of middle-class residents. Although the homes are more affordable in the Eastside than the Westside community, the residents identify with members of the Westside. In spite of failing to pass the proposal for affordable housing for the Westside, the Economic Development Subcommittee managed to successfully pass and fund a similar project for the Eastside community. The plan includes a 180-unit apartment complex. Although it met with major resistance from members of the South East Hills community, the proposal passed with a 5–0 vote by the county governing council. A similar proposal was floated for the Westside, but stalled in the subcommittee. Eventually, it was removed from the agenda.

The old downtown has gone through revitalization. Young entrepreneurs moved into the area and created a garden district showcasing fine wines, cafés, coffee houses, bookstores, and music shops. What were once old grain and feed buildings now house attractions for an expanding college-aged population. Tri City Community College, in conjunction with a state university, established a satellite campus two blocks off Main Street.

OAKLAND HILLS SCHOOLS

Over the years, the Oakland Hills Public School system has maintained a reputation of greatness. The school system has consistently scored in the top 8% throughout the state on standardized testing. One of its six high schools, Pine Hills, has recently been ranked 100th nationally among high-achieving schools. In fact, many of the new residents moving to the area said they chose the Oakland Hills community because of the “excellent” schools in the district. Many families “fled” other nearby school districts voicing that they were not good for kids. Even in a down market, some parents sold their homes for the opportunity to have their children attend the Oakland Hills School District. “I only want the best for my child. If selling our home is what it takes for our children to have a good education, then that’s what we will do,” a resident stated in the local newspaper.

The Oakland Hills School District serves 24,900 students from preschool through Grade 12. The ethnic composition mirrors that of the Oakland Hills community:

African American 20%

Asian American 10%

European American 55%

Latino 10%

Native American and/or First Nation 3%

Pacific Islander 2%

OAKLAND HILLS DILEMMA AS EMBLEMATIC

Barbara's investigation of the Oakland Hills School District gives you the sense of why Eduardo's voice had a tone of urgency as he spoke about implementing cultural proficiency systemwide. Clearly, the Oakland Hills schools face a dilemma. How are they to serve *every* child to meet high academic standards when they have a tradition of serving a few (NAEP, 2007)? This question presents other entanglements that must be carefully unraveled:

1. Does *every* mean *each*?
2. What will happen to the existing hierarchy on campus and in the community when rigorous education is given to each student regardless of gender, race, socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation, or ethnicity?
3. Do parents want each student to be well educated or is their interest only in *their* child being the better educated?
4. How would staff positions change? Who gets to teach advanced placement and honors college preparation courses? Will these courses be for everyone? Does every teacher possess the knowledge and skills to teach courses of this "caliber" to all students? Should they be required to teach at these levels?

These are not purely academic questions. The quality of education one receives affects individual success and, indeed, that of a group in society. The response to each question has far-reaching implications that determine fundamentals in society, such as how wealth is distributed; who gets what job; how communities are formed; how families are structured; who

shapes political policy, legislative oversight, and law enforcement; and who teaches the next generation.

The Oakland Hills School District typifies the experience of many public-school systems in the United States. They are strapped within a tradition of inequity reflecting a history of bias, discrimination, and disproportion against many groups for the benefits of others. Public schools were not designed in the first place to educate all children to achieve at high academic standards (Spring, 2000). In fact, most schools are structured to sort students along academic and vocational tracks. Beginning in the early years, students in these schools are labeled “below grade-level,” “proficient,” or “advanced.” In some cases, entire schools and communities are grouped according to these designations. For some educators, a student’s success in school is more closely related to street address or postal code, rather than academic performance. These groupings determine the quality of educational rigor they will receive throughout their educational experience.

The shift from educating *some* students to educating *each* is paradigmatic. What this suggests is that all of the rules and regulations governing how we view and function in the old paradigm—*some*—will not necessarily apply to the new paradigm—*each*. When a shift of this kind occurs in any organization, in this case schools, the organization has to start from zero to redefine itself to function effectively in the new paradigm (Barker, 2001). The successful organization will begin that journey with a fundamental critique of its purpose relative to its values and beliefs.

In this book, we argue that cultural proficiency is the framework that successfully guides school systems in the journey of redefinition that provides equitable education for each child. Cultural proficiency is an *inside-out* approach to change, where the individual and the organization intentionally engage in transformational processes to effect change. Moreover, applying this approach requires school-system members to critically reflect on the moral underpinnings of school and address, the structures and practices for which these moral foundations support.

Throughout this book, we introduce you to the conceptual framework of cultural proficiency. A description of the conceptual design and its components serves to enhance your understanding of the application of this framework for profound change in schools. We also introduce you to other theoretical frameworks that deepen your understanding of morality and the implications of how ethics govern practices and policies in schools. Interwoven throughout the book are case dilemmas based upon the unfolding Oakland Hills story. Each case has reflective exercises prompting your response for greater comprehension of the framework. All characters, city locations, and schools mentioned in the cases are fictional. However, the cases are based upon actual events.

In the next chapter, you will review the conceptual framework of cultural proficiency highlighting each tool. Before proceeding, review the following questions prepared for the Oakland Hills School District. Think of how you might respond to each one when reviewing your own school. The questions below are organized under the headings of the *Barriers to Cultural Proficiency*. Here, we present them with a brief description, but discuss them in detail later in the book. Each barrier highlights the historical and present-day struggle to advance equity in schools.

- Resistance to Change—Views change as needing to be done by others, not by one’s self.
 - How do the educators view their children and families? Do they describe the children as insiders or outsiders? For example, do they use pronouns such as “those” to describe children and families, viewing them as outsiders? Do educators use pronouns such as “our” to create an atmosphere of inclusion when describing students, families, and communities?
 - Do educators critique their values and beliefs when addressing the needs of children and families?
- Systems of Oppression—Acknowledges and recognizes that racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, and other forms of oppression are real experiences.
 - What practices are in the schools that reinforce these barriers? Does the school forcibly track certain students into nonacademic courses? Are new, inexperienced teachers, with the lowest skill levels, assigned to teach students with the greatest needs?
 - What policies are in place at the school or system level that encourage or support these barriers?
 - What artifacts exist that indicate that these barriers are in place, e.g., student achievement gaps between demographic groups, inequitable proportionality of student demographic groups in college preparatory courses, etc.?
 - What beliefs are present that maintain and propagate these systems? For instance, “I believe that children have innate learning abilities that will allow them to experience certain levels of learning. Some have it and some don’t.”
- A Sense of Privilege and Entitlement—Unawareness of indifference to benefits that accrue solely by one’s membership in a gender, race, or other cultural group.

- Are there practices or policies in place that serve one group better than another? Do veteran teachers get their choice of students? Are certain families served better than others?
- Do some groups purposefully have unfair advantages over others? What beliefs support these practices?
- Do new teachers get the least support? Are they forced to move from room to room due to space issues, while veteran teachers stay in a single room? What are the underlying values that support this practice?

Reflection



What questions resonate with you when reading the list above?

How do these questions relate to your school or district?

What other questions come to mind when reading the Oakland Hills School District case?

NOTE

1. A collective and emerging term that describes indigenous people who are not Inuit or Metis—Province of Ontario, Canada. *Human rights code.*