Walking the Talk: A Courageous Approach to Honoring Diversity

Thomas W. Pyle Middle School
Bethesda, Maryland

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School Facts

- Public Middle School
- Approximately 1,300 Students
- Bethesda, Maryland (affluent suburb of Washington, D.C.)
- 134 Professional Staff (84 Teachers)
- 80% White, 3% African American, 11.4% Asian, 5.5% Hispanic/Latino
The Crisis

- A pattern of racial intolerance surfaces
- African American students are subjected to racially insensitive/abusive language from white students
Core Values

• The staff members at Thomas W. Pyle Middle School are committed to:

  – Demonstrating a passion for learning
  – Encouraging academic and personal growth
  – Sustaining a nurturing and respectful environment
  – Honoring diversity
The Problem with Diversity Programs

• Focus on helping white children take on the perspective of minority students without acknowledging their own perspectives
• Invalidate the experiences of white students
• Ignore the stages of white racial identity development
• Offer “off-the-shelf” or canned approaches that are not customized to the school
• Focus on tolerance versus resisting false notions of superiority and embracing diversity
• Often result in creating a backlash against anti-bias efforts and actually cause students to become more entrenched in their resistance to anti-racist ideology
Three-Pronged Approach

- Staff
- Students
- Other stakeholders
Staff Initiatives

• County teaching for equity course
• Summer leadership team training
• Study circles
• Staff Development that addresses race, culture, and the achievement gap
Student Initiatives

• Focus groups and facilitated conversations
• Developing a Character Education Program that focuses on:
  – Developing authentic identities based on personal abilities and interests
  – Promoting comfortable and empathic interactions with people from other races
  – Identifying and challenging stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination
  – Building capacity for caring, cooperative, and equitable relationships with others
Stakeholder Initiatives

- **Study circles**
  - Facilitate honest, productive, discussions
  - Develop greater understanding of cultural differences and the effect of race and culture on teaching and learning
  - Create action steps for change
- **Community meetings**
  - Share information
  - Seek feedback
  - Promote involvement
Results

- Awareness
- Dialogue about race
On-going Challenges

• “The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

  - Marcel Proust
Summary Points

• Key Learning's

• Challenges Ahead