

CAMBRIDGE DAY

Upper school tackles race head on, weekly, with intense cultural proficiency initiative

At school of converts, unique effort faces next test: Achievement gap

By Jean Cummings

Wednesday, May 25, 2016

When Manuel Fernandez was growing up in the Brockton public schools, he was always “the only black kid in class.” A tall Cape Verdean boy, he got asked by everyone about basketball – which he didn’t play – and never about his classes.

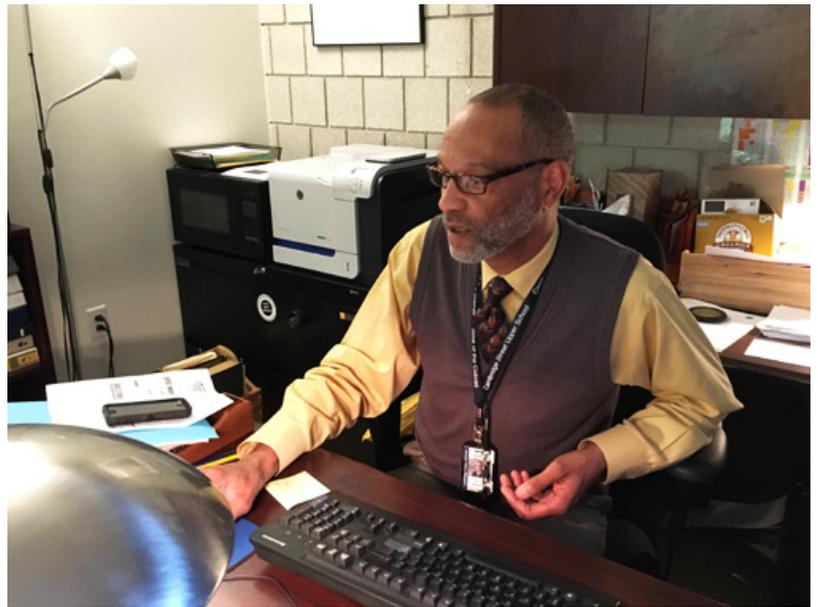


“I never had a black teacher until I was a senior in high school,” he said, “and that was in [physical education], my worst subject. I never felt affirmed by my teachers, never felt that when I

brought up issues of being called out [with] racial slurs that I was taken seriously. It struck me as I became older and went to college and had all these black professors that I became a better student when people recognized me for who I was and what I brought to the table.”

Today, Fernandez is principal of the Cambridge Street Upper School, and his experiences as a young invisible scholar are with him every day as he walks the halls. CSUS, one of four district middle schools created in 2012, reflects the diversity of the city’s school system – like other Cambridge schools, bringing together kids from different backgrounds, races, nationalities, resources, advantages and disadvantages. A third of the school is African American; a third is white.

His goal is to make his students feel supported. “It’s not just students in the minority racially or culturally,” he said, “whether they be black or Middle Eastern or Asian or Latino or gay or lesbian – but for also for white, heterosexual, privileged students. [James] Baldwin always talked about how part of your responsibility as a citizen of society is to change society so it affirms and respects all. So that’s what I try to do.” ▶



Manuel Fernandez, principal at the Cambridge Street Upper School, says his weekly cultural proficiency seminars “came from my heart. It came from my experiences.” (Photos: Jean Cummings)

One way Fernandez is trying to give the students the support and confidence he missed in school is by tackling the charged topic of race head on. He is starting with his teachers – as in many schools, mostly white, mostly female – by having every one of them talk about race every week. This project is entirely Fernandez’s, and CSUS may be the only school in the country doing anything like it.

Weekly seminars

Along with opening the upper school in September 2012, Fernandez launched weekly cultural proficiency seminars for his entire staff, focusing on race. Fifty minutes, four times a week, every week, the teachers get together in groups to read about and explore issues of race in professional development seminars – one each for the sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade staff and another for the specialists.

Fernandez is well-trained for this. A seasoned middle school educator and administrator, he also has more than 20 years of experience as a consultant on cultural proficiency – that is, being adept at working well with people from a variety of backgrounds. Being able to lead his staff “to help them embrace a culturally proficient environment” was an important factor in taking the principal job, and he said he’s grateful he found “a school in a progressive community and the support of my superordinates, [in a district] that says it celebrates social justice” and lets him do something about it.

After two years of running the seminars, Fernandez chose six staff members to be trained to run sessions on their own (paid for with School Improvement Plan funds.). Fernandez also built a partnership with a Harvard program, now called Reimagining Integration, that provides him with interns.

The seminars are built around weekly readings, initially “Culturally Proficient Instruction” by Kikanza Nuri-Robins and Delores Lindsey and other contemporary articles, that help prime the pump for the staff members. Conversations often connect to classroom experiences, though, with teachers sometimes bringing in an incident or discussion from class to bounce off ideas and get feedback.

Exciting and new

Angela DePalma, an eighth-grade social studies teacher, says Fernandez’s seminar “absolutely needs to happen in elementary school. The achievement gap is no secret and it widens so that by the time [students] are in sixth grade, the disparity is huge.” ►



Eighth-grade teachers at the upper school hold their weekly cultural proficiency seminar.

Defining the term

“Cultural Proficiency is the knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs that enable people to work well with, respond effectively to and be supportive of people... from an ever-widening range of ethnic and sociocultural backgrounds.” **Source: The American Academy of Family Physicians**

Social studies teacher Angela DePalma says Fernandez’s seminar “absolutely needs to happen in elementary school” to address race-based achievement gaps.

“This is the first school I’ve ever worked at that really focused on cultural proficiency,” said Angela DePalma, an eighth-grade social studies teacher. With a background in urban education and Africana studies, and teaching experience including at a Boston public high school, she had never heard of a school dealing with race so regularly and explicitly.

“I was really excited about the idea of the seminars,” said sixth-grade special education and math teacher Tracey Pratt, who had been teaching in Cambridge for eight years before the upper school was created. Before that she taught in Washington, D.C., public schools. Even there, where most of the staff and students were African American, race wasn’t a topic of discussion. “Maybe some people don’t see race as an issue if the district is all one race,” she mused, “but that’s an issue itself.”

Gym teacher Dan Fusco also was in the Cambridge school system well before the upper school. “[The seminar] was different, but I love doing it,” he said. “It’s created a place for me to feel comfortable trying things, talking about things, going out on a limb, especially being a white male. I know that I’m supported.”

There are plenty of professional development opportunities for cultural proficiency – some quite good, said library technologist Norah Connolly, formerly of Somerville Public Schools and now in her second year at the school. But the more traditional model “is with people you generally don’t know. You’re not continuing to develop relationships with them, to dial down deeper, to work as a team to connect with the [students].” It’s different to work every week with colleagues.

“The more you talk about something with the same group of people,” Pratt said, “you build cohesiveness and a safe space. We get to a place of understanding that this is about me and my role and thinking about myself and my beliefs, my background, and how it can impact the children in front of me.”

Leaning into discomfort

The seminars started somewhat slowly. “Maybe, initially, the word might be ‘reticence,’” Pratt said. “If you’re uncomfortable, then you play it safe.” Fernandez worked hard to get the discussions going at first, she said, and using readings was one way for “people to be more grounded in the text as opposed to, ‘This is about me and about how it impacts my teaching,’” Pratt said. ▶



Eighth-grade teachers at the upper school hold their weekly cultural proficiency seminar.

And the seminars clearly are about the “me” in the teaching. “This issue is one around identity,” Fernandez said. “Who am I? What do I bring to the table? The identity that you and I carry isn’t just the one that our parents taught us about, but it is also about what other people think we have when we walk down the street. Other people place identities on us whether we want them or not.”

So the seminars are presented as an opportunity for the staff to talk about what it is like for them in school. One of the credos read at the start of each seminar is “lean into discomfort,” eighth-grade math teacher Kendal Schwarz said. “Being a new, young teacher from Vermont, with a primarily white background, there have been uncomfortable meetings for me ... those ones where you go home, laying in bed and thinking about those things: ‘Okay, I recognize I’m feeling uncomfortable right now.’ But it’s what you do with that. How will you change what you do?”

“For white teachers in particular,” DePalma said, “the first time white privilege is pointed out to you and you own it, I think that’s kind of hard.” DePalma said she has a Latino background, “but for all intents and purposes I’m a white woman.” She recalls a seminar with two white female staff members whose turn it was to publicly interview each other about identity and discrimination, who “thought their conversation was really boring because they had never faced discrimination. But we had to explain to them why this was a really important conversation they had: It was the first time they recognized their white privilege.”

Having staff members run the seminars has helped move the seminars to another level of comfort, Fernandez said, and the teachers agreed. The comfort level with the seminars, and the topic, has grown, and even absorbing new teachers each year into what Pratt called the school’s “automatic norm” has gone smoothly. (One benefit of having “a culturally responsive administrator who is doing most of the hiring,” she said.)

First-year math interventionist Stephen Abreu last taught in the public schools in Lawrence, where he grew up. “Kids in front of me looked like me and I looked like them; I knew what was going on in their home,” he said. That’s much less true in Cambridge, he said. Although he grew up in the majority, as a male teacher of color, he is now definitely in the minority, and he found the seminars an important part of learning how to make connections to a variety of students, “helping them be able to identify a sense of self, both academically and culturally, to develop enough self-confidence so they can break through an image that others may project on them to say, that’s not who I am.”

Abreu recalled a colleague who started this past year – a white man. “It’s been interesting seeing his experience going through the seminar the first time,” he said. He encouraged his colleague’s participation in the seminars by saying, “I’m in the same place you are. Just because I’m a person of color doesn’t mean that I’m more right or haven’t experienced this, or don’t know how to express what’s going on.” ▶

About CSUS



Cambridge Street Upper School was created with three other middle schools in September 2012 as part of the Innovation Agenda. Its students stream from the Cambridgeport School, Fletcher Maynard Academy and King Open School, each with its own character. Cambridgeport stresses project-based learning; FMA, the smallest of the three, has an extended eight-hour day and has twice the district’s rate of African-American students; King Open has roots in an alternative open-classroom style program and includes a Portuguese bilingual program that helps serve East Cambridge’s significant Portuguese-speaking population.

By comparison

| | CSUS | District | State |
|--------------------|------|----------|---------|
| Students | 252 | 6,607 | 953,429 |
| BY PERCENT: | | | |
| Male | 54 | 50 | 51 |
| Black | 35 | 27 | 9 |
| Hispanic | 17 | 14 | 19 |
| White | 32 | 40 | 73 |
| Econ. Dis.* | 35 | 28 | 27 |
| High-needs | 50 | 47 | 44 |

* Economically disadvantaged; all figures are as of Spring 2016

Source: Cambridge Public Schools, state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Graphic: Jean Cummings and Marc Levy

Is it “working”?

As the school ends its fourth year of seminars, teachers are recognizing their own growth. “Thinking and talking about race is getting to be second nature, especially for someone who hasn’t had to think about race at all,” said Schwarz, the math teacher. “It comes up all the time. I’m making it a part of my daily routine – like when you are doing a seating chart,” meaning that race and cultural background are now on her list of things to consider in deciding who sits next to whom.

Fernandez appreciates “the comfort and ability our teachers have in bringing up subjects of race and other issues of diversity, particularly if they are not pleasant. Teachers notice things more than they used to – they notice race and racial differences.”

Some examples staff offered:

■ Schwarz tells of a time some of her students were speaking with each other in Haitian, and another group was speaking in Portuguese. “They were getting freaked out about others talking in languages they couldn’t understand,” and Schwarz did something she probably wouldn’t have done a few years ago: She stopped teaching math, and they talked about language – the way it can create community and richness, but also the ways it may exclude. It was only a five- or 10-minute discussion, she said, and the students were able to go right back to math afterward because the tensions were defused. As middle schoolers, she said, the kids are struggling with identity all the time. “Identity is the biggest thing they are thinking about and worrying about,” Schwarz said. “It’s their reality, and my job is how to help them address this in their lives in conjunction with math.”

■ Abreu remembers when he took a hair pick away from a student in class because its use seemed to be distracting him. “He didn’t have his pencil in his hand,” Abreu said, “so he wasn’t doing his classwork.” He thought nothing of it until he saw African-American Studies professor Cornel West – who has a large afro – interviewed on television by his former college roommate, James Brown. Pointing to West’s large metal hair pick, Brown laughed, “Do you take that through security at the airport?” West smiled and said, “They are going to have to kill me and pry this out of my hand.” It made Abreu realize that for West, that hair pick was an important part of his identity, and perhaps the student’s had a similar meaning. “Maybe I should have handled that differently – should I have communicated to the student that the reason I was taking his hair pick away was that he was not on task? Was I removing something that was part of his identity? This kid is being singled out. If you didn’t have the seminar, I don’t think you can start making those connections on your own.” ►



Social studies teacher Angela DePalma says Fernandez’s seminar “absolutely needs to happen in elementary school” to address race-based achievement gaps.

■ Fernandez remembered an all-school assembly where students were to offer feedback. “When it was over, several teachers said, ‘Did you notice what I noticed?’ It was mostly the white kids who answered,” he said. It wasn’t until Fernandez started asking specific kids if they wanted to chime in that they got more diverse representation. “The conversation wasn’t about race,” Fernandez said, “but everything is about race. As a mentor of mine used to say, race and culture are ‘always operative and sometimes relevant.’”

■ Schwarz gave another example: She likes to find rap videos on the Internet about math and show them in class. “It’s really hard to find videos that have black students in them,” she said, because the schools that are able to make them are primarily white. Because of the seminars, she said, she realized the problem, and puts extra effort and time into finding videos with more representation.

“This is the most functional school I’ve ever been in, both student-wise and staff-wise,” said Fusco, who felt strongly that the seminars have led to a more cohesive staff and student body. “I feel that there’s less disrespect here than in other places I’ve been. People are more accepting of each other. I see more welcoming among the kids. The [cultural proficiency] seminars have created the environment where it’s comfortable for people to address the kinds of issues that we need to be addressing in order to serve these kids the best we possibly can.”

“We have a really strong community here,” DePalma said. “There’s a mutual culture of respect.”

Staff also said talking about race, culture and background has become easier as it’s steeped into the school environment – not just in the seminars. For the white members of the staff, in particular, thinking broadly about culture, race and background is becoming a matter of course. Gym teacher Fusco said, “Not only has it opened my eyes to the way I teach, but also about how I raise my daughter. I’m being deliberate about certain things I raise with her. I’ve started changing my conversations with her the last two years.” Connolly, the librarian, finds herself thinking about her own life choices and started interviewing her parents about deciding to move their family from the city to the suburbs when she was a child. “That affected my world view,” she said.

They’ve also come to feel tackling cultural proficiency belongs in every school. “Even if you are running a school that is just white kids. It never occurred to me before, but there, too, we should be talking about race. Race is an issue in the world and it’s important that people understand. If they are white, then they have privilege. It’s something they need to know when they go out into the world. We need to face the obvious,” Connolly said. “I am now a believer.” ►



Gym teacher Dan Fusco said the seminar has not just opened his eyes “to the way I teach [but] to how I raise my daughter.”

Impact on students

While staff pointed to what they feel is a healthier school environment, and growing confidence in their ability to connect with students and confront important issues head on, the impact on student achievement has been less satisfying.

“If I saw the change, we would see the achievement gap closing, and we are not there yet,” Pratt said. “That’s something that could take years.”

Last year’s state standardized MCAS scores for the upper school persisted in showing a significant achievement gap between white students and non-white students, and between girls and boys. These gaps exist across all of the Cambridge schools – in fact, across virtually all schools in the state with enough students of color to report data. The achievement gaps across race and gender at Fernandez’s school are similar to the district’s as a whole.

“That is my biggest struggle,” DePalma said. “I pride myself on my cultural proficiency. But when it’s time to do the grades, the kids who are failing are boys of color, and it kills me. I openly have this conversation with them. I talk about the school-to-prison pipeline, but it can be really hard to get to the kids by the time they get to middle school.”

Fernandez and his staff keep the closing of the achievement gaps as their goal, but they feel this is a work in progress. It’s still early in their process, and they have more to come.



Next steps

Fernandez plans to get students and families more engaged in the conversation. A couple of years ago he ran a six-week project with 25 teachers and some parents to talk about race and culture at the schools, to develop goals and action steps. Another initiative, with more focus on the students, is next.

■ **Direct student involvement.** “Right now, our work is going on in the background,” Abreu said, “and the kids don’t know about it. Hopefully we’re developing our lessons around it and influencing them indirectly. Another way would be to introduce the conversation to the kids in the [daily] advisory program, where it could directly influence them.”

“We do not have enough conversation with white children about these issues where we give them space to talk about how they feel,” Fernandez said. “I still think we drop the ball by not finding ways to have affinity-group conversations. I’m all for multicultural settings, but every once in a while we need to go in a room with people who look like us and and close the door and have a conversation about what we bring to the table and what we take from that table.” ▶

Math and special education teacher Tracey Pratt – a seminar co-leader – recommends some reading: “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color-blindness,” by Michelle Alexander.

“We do that with kids of color to some extent, but not with white kids, so some white children leave us ill-equipped to have these conversations in mixed racial groups when they get to college,” Fernandez said.

■ **Parental involvement.** Part of cultural proficiency in a school is recognizing that different families have different notions of what engagement means, Pratt said. Getting more families involved has been a citywide goal for years.

“So many people have had poor experiences with parent-teacher conferences when they were young,” said Connolly, who would like to see more money “for out-of-school events that are really fun. Where we are able to have nights where we could provide lots of things for families, whether it’s food or a trivia night. That would be so helpful.”

■ **Curriculum control.** “Every time I have flexibility in the curriculum,” social studies teacher DePalma said, “I make a choice to do something relevant to them. The way they are being educated doesn’t necessarily seem relevant to them.” In one seminar, DePalma remembered, the first unit of the year was one on “identity,” and she thought it went very well, bringing the class together and creating trust. “Then it’s very, very hard to switch to Japanese history. All the good work of the Identity unit just blew up.”

“As educators, we’ve been taken out of the conversation about who it is we are teaching,” Connolly said. “Providing [middle schoolers with] curriculum they can identify with helps them be able to retain as much as they can because they are engaged. We need hands-on projects, at a slower pace. I wish we could do more development of the whole child.”

■ **More time with the students.** In one seminar, several teachers talk wistfully about “looping,” when teachers are with the same students for two years. “It would be great if we could get to know more of the students, and spend more time with them,” one teacher said. “We just get to a place where we are really connecting,” said another, “and it’s May already.”



Library technologist Norah Connolly says “There is a concerted, positive, purposeful effort here to make us a community that can connect with families and students and make that part of how to make scholars.”

Replicability

At a districtwide meeting her first year, DePalma was shocked to find out CSUS was the only school doing the seminars. “I thought everyone was doing this in Cambridge,” she said.

But it needs to start earlier, staff members agree. What would it take? ►

■ **Commitment.** First, it needs a commitment from the school leader. The fact that for two years, four seminars a week were run by the school principal sent a strong message.

“I worked at a charter school that had in their mission the notion of cultural proficiency,” Abreu said, “but in their practice they did not exhibit it or communicate it toward the faculty.”

The specialist staff devotes one of their two precious weekly common planning sessions to the seminar, Fusco pointed out. “Scheduling is never easy,” he said. “We could very easily do two business meetings. But we have to decide what’s important.”

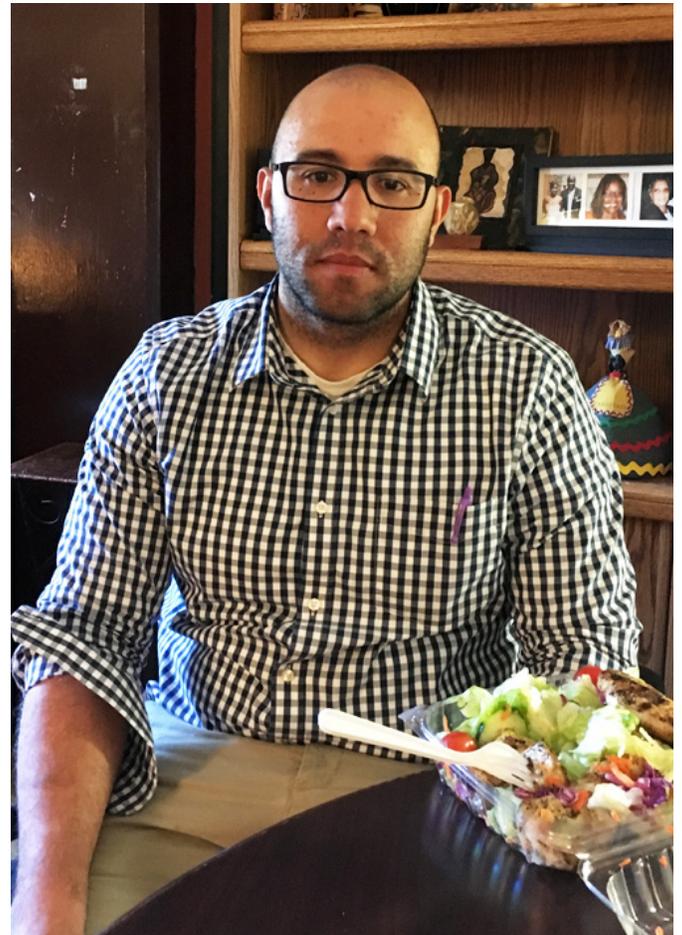
■ **District support.** “It should be happening at the district level,” Pratt said of the seminar. “This problem is never going to go away until it begins to be addressed at higher levels. The district is planning to set up professional development training, but it should be happening with the cabinet weekly just like we do.”

■ **Hiring.** Developing and hiring a staff willing to make the commitment is critical. Fernandez and his staff all say they would like to see more teachers of color, particularly men of color, who can better relate to some of the student body and act as role models for all the students.

“The vast majority of the people who are here, I brought here,” Fernandez said. “I’m proud of that. But we need to continue to make strides in that area. We have to be a lot more creative and innovative. We cannot rely only on the district office to do that.”

Fernandez has hired using contacts from his teaching and consulting, but also cast a wider net, such as going to LinkedIn, where he “put in ‘middle school math,’ then sent a message to every person of color” to invite them to apply for a job. He has put out feelers on Facebook, at conferences, in email exchanges. “I talk about it wherever I go. We can’t rely on traditional forms of recruitment,” he said. “We talk about differentiated instruction. We need differentiated recruitment.”

There are a couple of questions he uses to test candidates’ openness to do the work, chief among them asking how race plays a role in their life. “If they say it hasn’t,” he said, laughing, “it’s not going to work.” ■



Math interventionist Stephen Abreu called CSUS “the first place I’ve seen where we are actually working on cultural proficiency, where I go home and think about it.”