How Schools Can Foster a Better Racial Climate

Five tenets to disrupt racist thinking and practices

By Tyrone C. Howard

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A recent photo of a group of teachers smiling and holding a noose at a Palmdale, Calif., elementary school has caused understandable outrage about the racial sensitivity of educators. As someone who has worked in hundreds of districts across the country—including Palmdale—on issues of racial literacy and cultural awareness, I must say that the noose incident was not surprising. While many districts have not had a noose incident, they can still be teeming with racially hostile staff, creating a challenging learning environment for students of color.

Here are several pivotal steps that schools and school leaders should consider to create a more racially inclusive and healthy environment:

1. **One-time diversity professional development is not enough.** Many districts and schools commit themselves to a speaker who comes in once to discuss diversity, equity, or implicit bias, and then moves onto other compliance or curricular issues. Harmful attitudes, beliefs, and ignorance are hard to eliminate. Therefore, schools must commit themselves to sustained and intentional professional learning around race, racism, implicit bias, school-induced trauma, and other equity-focused efforts. This work needs to be sanctioned and supported at the district level where all schools and staff are part of the learning. Even if some teachers resist, and object to professional development on racial climate, and make comments such as "we don't need this type of training," or "this training is a waste of time," leaders need to double down and insist that everyone can improve in this area and proceed with the work that must be done.

2. **Leaders need to lead.** School leaders must play a pivotal role in having hard conversations and creating brave spaces to disrupt racist thinking and practices at their schools. Many leaders operate from a reactive point of view and not a proactive one. Leaders should be talking to their staffs regularly about how to create racially supportive schools and classrooms. Leaders must challenge their teachers around deficit-based thinking about students of color, and must let teachers know that there is zero tolerance for teachers when it comes to race-based jokes or pranks.

See Also: "Why We Weren't Surprised to See Teachers Holding a Noose"
3. **Bystanders need to speak up.** In many schools, teachers often make racially inappropriate comments, say dismissive things, or state jokes that are racially insensitive. Their colleagues remain silent, do not disrupt such comments, laugh at them, and do not repudiate their colleagues for making offensive comments. Bystanders who remain silent in the face of inappropriate comments, gestures, jokes, and behaviors made by colleagues are complicit in creating hostile learning communities. Bystanders need to demonstrate the courage to call their colleagues to task about inappropriate behaviors.

4. **Racially diverse staff must be heard.** In many schools, teachers and staff of color are all too aware of the hostile racial climate that exists in a school. Many speak up about how they and their students are subjected to racially inappropriate work environments. When such comments are made, leaders must listen to them, believe them, and take steps to address them—immediately. However, educators of color should not be expected to do the emotional labor of fixing or addressing such issues.

5. **Parents and students deserve a say.** Our most important stakeholders, students and parents, are frequently not listened to about school climate. Many students are aware of teachers who make disrespectful or racially demeaning comments. Many students are keenly aware of teachers who engage in differential treatment of students based on race. When school leaders receive recurring complaints about particular staff members, they must listen and act. Moreover, many parents and caregivers are also aware of teachers who are often dismissive and disrespectful of parents of color. Leaders must create spaces to bring together parents and caregivers and listen to their experiences with certain school personnel.

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*Tyrone C. Howard is a professor of education at the University of California, Los Angeles, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies and the director of the university's Black Male Institute. He is also the director of the UCLA Pritzker Center for Strengthening Children and Families. He is currently working with many of the schools in the Palmdale district in California on school climate issues.*

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