PROMOTING A CULTURE OF SUCCESS FOR LANGUAGE MINORITY LEARNERS IN SCHOOL

Language minority learners are the fastest growing segment of the school population, thereby creating a radical change in the ethnic and racial complexion of U.S. classrooms. It is estimated that by 2030 children of color will comprise 60% of the school population nationally; of this population 40% will be language minority learners. Although states like Maine are considered "low-density" language minority areas, it is nonetheless inevitable that the population of these learners will increase dramatically in Maine schools as part of the national trend.

As never before, schooling is essential for achieving success in today’s technology-oriented, information-saturated society. In the past, formal schooling was not a prerequisite for success; in addition, learners were schooled in a classroom context where there was a social, cultural, and linguistic match with the teacher. As a result, interactions were basically communicated, with few discontinuities between the student, the teacher, and the curricula.

Now, all of this is changing. As never before, it is vital for all educators to learn about the lives of their students, incorporate the students' diverse experiences into the curriculum, and foster meaningful learning through a constructive focus on literacy and content development. This process must continue throughout the students' entire public school experience. This Bulletin explores the practices which are necessary for schools to create environments that are safe, nurturing, and affirming to all students, especially language minority learners.

Promoting an environment of success depends upon school-wide efforts involving all personnel. These efforts include:

1. **Promoting cultural identification.** Schools can help students identify with and take pride in their cultural backgrounds as a foundation for self-identification and as a source of pride. A school culture of assimilation and insensitivity to students' heritage breeds internal conflict and alienation; a school culture of acceptance and pride in one's heritage builds confidence to engage in learning.
Some of the ways schools can promote cultural identification are:
- hiring and training staff that is self-reflective, sensitive to diversity, and aware of their biases;
- establishing personal relationships with students of diversity;
- creating culture- and language-sensitive curricula in all content areas;
- permitting the use of students' primary language wherever appropriate inside and outside the classroom;
- enabling students to establish ethnic-based extracurricular organizations;
- allowing for ethnic group clustering during recreational or lunch periods;
- providing lunches which reflect the diversity of the school population on a regular basis;
- promoting family participation;
- accommodating diverse learning styles;
- creating a physical environment which affirms differences;
- encouraging expression of culturally-based forms of art, music, dance, etc.

Schools which establish environments that promote cultural identification help to create learners whose self-esteem is valued and help to maximize student potential for success.

2. **Promoting significant involvement in non-academic activities.** Schools which actively promote involvement in organizations, hobbies, sports, or other activities significantly support and sustain academic success. Such non-academic activities create a sense of belonging and help to intensify the importance of school while at the same time providing time to relax from the stress of academic work. In addition, these activities help to contribute to critical thinking and leadership skills.

Some of the ways schools can promote involvement of language minority learners in extracurricular activities are:
- actively seeking participation by faculty, staff, and fellow students;
- ensuring that the school schedule and transportation needs do not conflict with participation.

3. **Promoting frequent interaction and participation with parents and other family members.**

Families are a source of strength and security for children and are crucial in helping them to maintain their primary language, value system, and overall stability in an unfamiliar culture. In addition, children assume a mature and responsible role by serving as translators and interpreters during emergencies or when communication in English is an immediate necessity. As a result, children often mature quickly and have more opportunities to build their confidence and self-respect. The potential for transfer of these skills to academic success is heightened. In general, frequent opportunities for dialogue establish communication and a climate of trust between the school and family members.

Some of the ways schools can encourage interaction with family members are:
- hiring interpreters to communicate with families when necessary;
- providing opportunities for parents and other family members to talk with teachers and other staff about their children's academic and social needs;
- whenever necessary, sending school staff personnel (social worker or bilingual aide) to the student's home to discuss issues relevant to the student's interests and concerns;
- encouraging parental communication with their children about significant issues related to school success.

In summary, schools need to make greater efforts to intervene in the lives of all learners if they are to help promote greater student involvement and success. Specifically, language minority learners need to have their cultural background valued, to get more involved in the extracurricular life of the school, and to involve their families more in their schooling, if they are to increase their potential for success.

