

PTA Diversity: Enhancing Cultural Competence in our Schools

By Wendy Stewart, Diversity Chair, East Cobb County Council of PTAs

Last year, a new first-grader was enrolled in an East Cobb elementary school. Like so many of her classmates, she was excited to go to school, make new friends, and have fun. Her behavior, however, was unlike that of her friends. When she spoke to her new classmates, she spoke very loudly. When she engaged her new friends in conversation, she gestured with her hands and stood unusually close to them. She made some of the students uncomfortable. The teacher was concerned and identified her as a behavior problem in the class. Her parents were contacted and an intervention process was initiated. Her concerned parents came to meet with the teacher to understand the issues and what steps needed to be taken to address her behavior. As the teacher described her concerns to the parents, the child's mother suddenly made the connection. Speaking loudly, using animated hand gestures, close-in personal space are all typical cultural behaviors: her Latin American cultural behaviors. Her family, natives of Colombia, had only recently moved to the United States. Her daughter was simply communicating in a manner typical of that of many of Latino heritage. Her realization, as she shared it with school officials, was like the proverbial "light bulb" in the darkness for both teacher and parent. The teacher gained some insight into the understanding of another culture's norms and the parent saved her daughter a lifetime of labeling as a behavior problem.

This is a true story. And, no doubt, stories like this are taking place all over Georgia all the time and with less fortunate outcomes. As our state becomes increasingly culturally diverse, teachers are finding themselves handling challenges in their microcosmic classrooms for which their education could never have prepared them. In East Cobb schools, however, PTA leaders are facilitating a solution for them. And it all begins with understanding.


Cultural competence is a popular catch phrase you may have heard lately. But beyond the trendiness of the phrase is an important concept that's actually the key to understanding and to bridging the culture gap in our schools. Cultural competence is the ability of a person or organization to interact easily and effectively with people of different cultures. In the context of our schools and PTAs, this means understanding the students we serve, what cultures they represent, what norms and behaviors they might bring to the classroom, how their families view and interact with schools and teachers, etc. If our teachers and PTA leaders understand the cultures that make up our school communities, they are better equipped to ensure every child, and their classes as a whole, have the best chance for success. The PTA offers two programs specifically designed to help schools enhance their cultural competence.

Before a school can become appropriately culturally competent, they have to know which cultures belong to their school family. Unfortunately, this information isn't easily accessible. Creating a "Cultural Resources Group" offers an opportunity to help schools identify the cultures and nationalities of their families, while identifying "cultural experts" willing to help teachers enhance classroom instruction with first-hand knowledge. By sending home a simple form, parents and caregivers who could be considered "cultural experts"

for their native country, culture, and faith are recruited to make themselves available as resources to teachers in the event that they are teaching something about that country, culture, or faith, and would like to have a little more first-hand experience to supplement their lesson. For example, a teacher might ask a volunteer to come to speak to a class about their country, to bring in cultural artifacts that support a lesson, or talk about particular observances or holidays. So the cultural competence advantages of this program are twofold: expert resources for the classroom and a database of which countries, cultures, and faiths which comprise a school's community. That data can then be used to produce our second cultural competency program.

Once a school has identified its various cultures, a "Cultural Summit" is a great way for the faculty and staff to enhance their cultural competence, particularly as it relates to education. A Cultural Summit involves the creation of a panel of cultural experts representing the countries, cultures, and faiths represented at a school. These experts might be volunteers from a school's Cultural Resources Group or from community or religious groups. Panelists and faculty members participate in an honest, open, and respectful question and answer discussion, with the faculty asking questions of panelists regarding topics such as their culture, traditions, faith, holidays, and, in particular, their perspectives on education. Questions may range from things like "What is the significance of a bindi?" or "Is Chanukah the most important Jewish holiday?" to "How do Hispanic parents view their role with respect to their children's education?" or "What cultural norms or behaviors might affect classroom situations?" There is a strict emphasis on respect, honesty, and understanding during the meeting. No political or religious debate or argument is allowed. This forum is strictly for the purposes of educating faculty and staff about the participating cultures and faiths so that they can facilitate the understanding of those cultures and faiths at school, enhance student success, and further everyone's inclusion in school programs.

The value of cultural competence in our schools cannot be understated. It offers the tools for understanding that our faculties need to bridge their classroom culture gaps. The PTA is dedicated to serving as a cultural broker with programs like the Cultural Resources Group and Cultural Summits. We recognize that the more our teachers know about all of their students, the better they can work together and the more successful they are as a class. It's true. It's easy. And it all begins with understanding.

For information on these or any other PTA diversity or cultural programs, please contact Georgia PTA Diversity Chair Wendy Stewart at wstewart@georgiapta.org. 



Wendy Stewart is East Cobb County Council of PTAs' Diversity Chair as well as Diversity Chair for the Georgia PTA. An East Cobb resident for 6 years, Wendy lives in the Somerset subdivision with her husband, Joe, and two children: Will, 10, is in 4th grade; and Jack, 6, is in Kindergarten. Both attend Sope Creek Elementary School.