



# Closing Achievement Gaps with Cultural Proficiency: A Facilitator's Guide for Professional Learning

SEPTEMBER 2016



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## Overview

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) created *Closing Achievement Gaps with Cultural Proficiency* as a culmination of the three-year African American Young Men of Promise Initiative (AAYMPI). The professional learning activities use best practices and the experiences from years one and two of AAYMPI to build **cultural proficiency** with two actionable, effective, and research-based techniques: **academic vocabulary** and **positive phone calls home**. These components were used as the premise to bring awareness of cultural proficiency to Michigan educators.

The materials contained in the lessons are from workshops, professional presentations, and training sessions and are designed for implementation into a single work session or over multiple sessions. The intent of the lessons is to enhance educators', policymakers', and state education agencies' (SEAs) knowledge of cultural proficiency as a means to eliminate achievement gaps as well as incorporate the professional learning into existing programs and initiatives.

The lessons contained are fully adaptable and are arranged as discrete sections in order to provide natural breaking points. Altogether, the sessions should take about six hours, to complete. However, the learning would also be effective across multiple sessions. It is encouraged that administrators, SEAs, or school staff members modify the learning to best serve the needs and time commitment of the staff, school community, or district.

### Terms

**Academic Vocabulary:** Vocabulary instruction designed to build rich and flexible word knowledge. The Michigan state academic standards for English Language Arts define academic vocabulary as words that are "Tier 2", found across many types of texts and highly generalizable.

**Cultural Proficiency:** A framework that promotes and affirms a diversity of perspectives, recognizing that everyone belongs to multiple demographic and cultural backgrounds, including, but not limited to, race/ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, and sexuality.

**Positive Phone Calls Home:** An intervention whereby educators can foster student's academic growth and personal self-esteem by creating relationships with parents/families/guardians to share student successes and efforts. It should be noted that not all contact is expected via phone calls; other types of media engagement are encouraged.

## Purpose and Background

### *Closing Achievement Gaps*

An **achievement gap** is a “discrepancy in educational outcomes and access between various student groups in the United States, in particular, African-American, Native American, certain Asian-American, and Latino students on the low end of the performance scale, and their White and certain Asian-American counterparts at the higher end of the academic performance scale” (Howard, 2010). While the term achievement gap often refers to disparities in academic performance among various student groups, the primary focus of many studies remains on the existing disparities between African-American and White students.

According to Howard (2010), closing achievement gaps could help reduce both economic inequality in the United States and the social consequences associated with African American male students’ underachievement, including poverty, unemployment, and incarceration.

In 2012, the Michigan State Board of Education made a priority decision to focus on the elimination of the achievement gap between African American males and the highest performing academic group. In order to facilitate the process required to understand and make decisions about how to address the issue, an internal Core Planning Team was created. This group held weekly meetings, attended conferences, researched the work of multiple state education agencies, and formed subcommittees to work on this particular issue. Additionally, a Social Justice Framework was developed and used as a guide to identify and select specific strategies designed to increase achievement for underperforming African American males.

The efforts of the internal Core Planning Team led to published newsletters on effective strategies, webinars, lunchtime presentations and discussions, a series of conversations with nationally recognized researchers on the topic, the initiation of a review of relevant policies and practices, and a summit with community-based agencies. Three major components were identified as a result of the efforts. The first was the development of a “Closer Series” where internal leadership team members were informed about the issues, participated in structured dialogue sessions, facilitated a departmentally focused operational equity analysis, and constructed intervention strategies. A second result of this work was a “pre-pilot” program for seven schools interested in implementing ideas that would bring rapid turnaround in the climate and culture of their schools as it related to the participation and engagement of African American male students. The third was the work of facilitating specific strategies that were identified by MDE as critical components of a foundation for increasing the achievement of underperforming students in Michigan.

### *African American Young Men of Promise Initiative*

During the 2013-14 school year, 27 schools volunteered to participate in a three-year initiative to close the achievement gap for African American males. Known as the **African**

**American Young Men of Promise Initiative (AAYMPI)** the project required schools to implement research-based climate and culture strategies and intentional instruction practices, support data collection, participate in professional learning opportunities, and host student voice sessions. The MDE provided technical supports to these schools for the design, implementation, and monitoring of their strategies. Year two of the AAYMPI included 37 schools, 13 returning from year 1 of the initiative, and represented 17 districts across Lower Michigan. A key focus for year two of the initiative was to build an awareness of cultural proficiency in educators, also dubbed “champions.” Specifically, AAYMPI champions engaged in professional learning for the essential elements (assess culture, value diversity, manage dynamics of difference, adapt to diversity, and institutionalize cultural knowledge) of cultural proficiency. These essential elements provide the standards for individuals as they journey towards understanding and reflecting on personal attitudes, beliefs, and values, as well as organizational practices, policies, and structures.

In years two and three of the initiative, champions implemented **positive phone calls home** and **Academic Vocabulary** instruction in their schools. These two strategies were chosen based on research done by MDE during the pre-pilot phase and due in part to ease of implementation by cohort one schools. The initiative took a twofold approach to cultural proficiency by having champions implement a climate and culture strategy and an intentional instructional strategy.

### *Nurturing Cultural Proficiency*

Cultural proficiency is a mindset shift that requires an awareness of worldviews that enable individuals and organizations to develop positive attitudes towards cultural differences. When school and district leaders approach achievement gaps through the lens of cultural proficiency, they delve into underlying causes that may be unique for each demographic or cultural group. By understanding these underlying causes, school leaders can then determine which of their current practices contribute to these causes and how they can address and change those relationships. The goal of cultural proficiency is to develop effective communication strategies and skills for interactions across cultures to effectively support, promote, and embrace cultural differences that exist among students, educators, families, and the community being served.

### *A Note to the Reader*

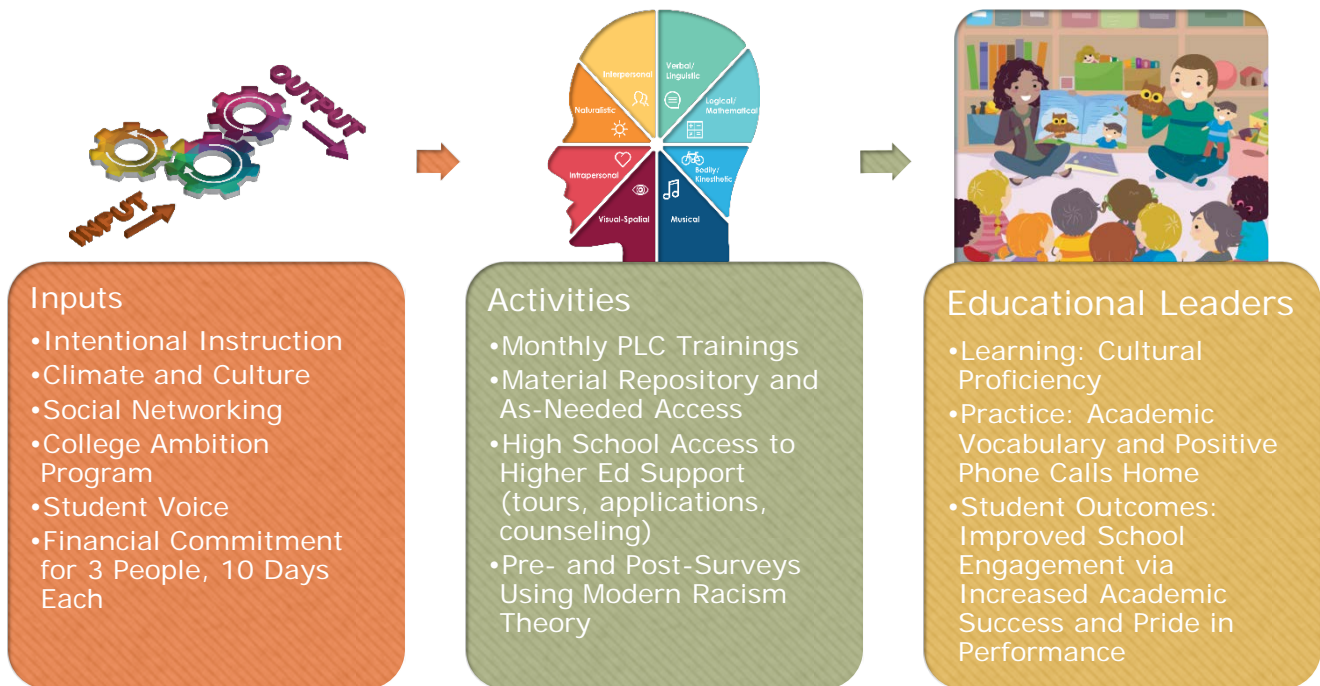
This professional learning will change you. It doesn't matter whether you have been in education a few months or several decades, it provides a structure and information that will challenge how to think about, plan for, and work with adults whose work could impact children from a cultural proficiency perspective. The **Logic Model** (below) was the paradigm used to understand the relationship between the inputs that the Office of Education Improvement and Innovation (OEII) of the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) would support, the participation activities necessary, and the outcomes on teacher learning and teacher practice that could positively impact student achievement. It was

based on a theory of action that stated our beliefs. That is, we believe that when educational leaders are made aware of their implicit bias on the Cultural Proficiency Continuum, its impact on individual and group behavior, and given strategies of change, then they will create Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that work collaboratively to improve educator learning and practices that can positively impact student achievement.

### *African American Young Men of Promise Logic Model*

Theoretical Foundation:

- Adult Learning Theory – Malcom Knowles
- Social Learning Theory – Albert Bandura
- K-20 Education Network (K – graduate school/employment technology support)
- Student Voice Theory – Michelle Fine and Mary Poplar



## Guide Components

The following materials are part of this module:

- Closing the Achievement Gap with Cultural Proficiency: A Facilitator's Guide to Professional Learning
- Closing the Achievement Gap with Cultural Proficiency handouts
- Closing the Achievement Gap with Cultural Proficiency slide presentations for each section

These materials may be used and adapted to fit the needs of a school's or district's unique context. To cite the content, please use the following statement: These materials have been adapted in whole or in part with permission from the Michigan Department of Education.

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*This guide is available on the Michigan Department of Education's [AAYMPI webpage](http://www.tinyurl.com/aaympi) at: [www.tinyurl.com/aaympi](http://www.tinyurl.com/aaympi)*

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## Work Session Goals

The work sessions based on *Closing Achievement Gaps with Cultural Proficiency* have the following goals for participants:

- Develop awareness and understanding of cultural proficiency and its relationship with academic achievement;
- Learn strategies, including Academic Vocabulary and Positive Phone Calls Home, to promote cultural proficiency at the classroom, school and district levels.

## Intended Audiences

District and school administrators, school and teacher leaders, and classroom teachers would all benefit from engaging in work sessions and content in these professional learnings. District and school administrators and leaders would learn how they can institutionalize cultural knowledge and support strategies to close achievement gaps. Teachers and teacher leaders would learn how individual cultural aspects intersect with curriculum and instruction by supporting the student assets in their classroom which would provide for access and equity in our schools.

## This Guide

The purpose of this book is to provide school teams with some of the structures and information we found to be most effective in our work with schools to eliminate the achievement gap. Each section presents one of the Elements of Cultural Proficiency, along with activities and critical questions for reflection and discussion.

We believe that this work is from the inside out and is rooted in the assets that each of us – staff and students, brings to the conversation and work of school improvement and improved academic performance by students. We appreciate your joining us for the journey.

## Using this Facilitator’s Guide

### Materials

The following materials are recommended for the work session and associated activities:

- Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders, 3rd edition; one copy per participant (CP)
- Personal Journal for each participant
- A computer, projector, and screen for the slide presentations
- Poster paper
- Painter’s tape
- Multicolored beads
- Clear plastic cups
- Colored markers
- Creative props for skits
- Index cards
- Red, yellow, and green dot stickers
- Adequate reserved space and time
- Tables arranged to support small-group discussions
- Printed materials:
  - Sample agenda
  - Slide deck
  - Handouts Session One
    - Cultural Proficiency, (CP, 130-131; 277-279)
    - Academic Vocabulary one page guide
    - Positive Phone Calls Home one page guide
    - Common Core State Standards Appendix A, 32-35
    - Cultural Competence Self-Assessment, (CP, 295-296 or alternatively provided via SurveyMonkey or Google Form)
    - Planning template
  - Handouts Session Two
    - Assess Your Culture (CP, 127-128)
    - Relative word Activity (3 x 5 notecards)
    - Assumptions activity
  - Handouts Session Three
    - Value Diversity (CP, 128)
    - Diversity in Your Life (CP, 170-171)



- Positive Phone Call Home scenario(s) (note: this will need to be created by facilitator)
- Handouts Session Four
  - Managing the Dynamics of Difference (CP, 129)
- Handouts Session Five
  - Adapt to Diversity (CP, 129-130)
  - Vocabulary Words (6 words, each on a full sheet: Race, Tolerance, Culture, Discrimination, Equity, Prejudice; One set for entire group)
- Handouts Session Six
  - Institutionalize Cultural Knowledge (CP, 130-131)

## Preparation for Work Session Activities

Prior to the start of the work session, prepare the following:

- Print off all of the handouts and the slide-deck.
- Create/load the Cultural Competence Self-Assessment into Google Forms or SurveyMonkey
- Distribute the creative materials among the tables

## Section Scripts and PowerPoint Links

- Section 1: Overview
- Section 2: Assess Culture
- Section 3: Valuing Diversity
- Section 4: Managing the Dynamics of Difference
- Section 5: Adapting to Diversity
- Section 6: Institutionalizing Cultural Proficiency

Each section is designed to be facilitated within a 1 – 2 hour timeframe. All sections are merely suggestions; modifications are encouraged in order to accommodate each unique participant group.

## Lessons Learned

After a year of implementing four academic strategies and six climate and culture strategies the participating schools were asked what strategies they believed were having the greatest positive impact on student achievement. They overwhelmingly chose academic vocabulary and positive phone calls home. Additionally, they found the Student Voice component to be informative and the college access program to be particularly helpful in exposing students to colleges and the process of application. But they also recognized, via these data, that cultural proficiency was required as race, gender, and cultural proficiency became identified as issues of concern by students, staff, and the design/support team.

As a result of these discussions the focus of the second year shifted to working with staff to understand and apply a cultural proficiency lens in their schools and classrooms as they implemented academic vocabulary and positive phone calls home. The “inside-outside” change in the school educators –teachers and administrators, was significant. Teachers found that this training improved their ability to value diversity in significant ways. Administrators had significant change in managing the dynamics of difference and institutionalizing cultural knowledge. Progress was being made in both why and how educators worked with students and other adults to improve the academic outcomes of African American young men.

In many ways the lives of those participating in the AAYMPI have been effected. Their beliefs, expectations, and aspirations for the young men and for themselves have shifted. They expect more, better, and differently than they did prior to the training. They now know that they can make a substantive difference in their own lives as well as in the lives of others. This is how the achievement gap will be eliminated and it is a good thing.

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*The Office of Education Improvement and Innovation Unit members at the Michigan Department of Education, extend their sincere appreciation to the Great Lakes Comprehensive Center for their extensive and ongoing support throughout the process of developing this Facilitator’s Guide.*