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INTENTIONALLY DIVERSE CHARTER SCHOOLS: A Toolkit for Charter School Leaders





The National Charter School Resource Center (NCSRC) is dedicated to supporting the development of high-quality charter schools. The NCSRC provides technical assistance to sector stakeholders and has a comprehensive collection of online resources addressing the challenges charter schools face. The website hosts reports, webinars, and newsletters focusing on facilities, funding opportunities, authorizing, English learners, special education, military families, board governance, and other topics. The NCSRC is funded by the U.S. Department of Education and led by education consulting firm Safal Partners.

National Charter School Resource Center (<http://www.charterschoolcenter.ed.gov/>)



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INTRODUCTION



2016 marks the 25th anniversary of the charter school sector. To date, the charter school model has been commonly used to create school options with a mission to facilitate innovations in school design and pedagogical models, particularly for the most underserved children and communities. This has been driven by parent demand and educator visions for learning environments otherwise unavailable in traditional public schools.¹

Recently there has been increasing interest in schools with the intentional purpose of serving a balance of students who reflect the diversity of their larger communities. This toolkit describes some of these intentionally diverse charter schools and the strategies their leaders pursue to achieve their goals.

Research on school diversity efforts finds that students of color and from low-income families benefit from attending schools that are not segregated by race or socioeconomic status. These benefits include:

- Academic improvements demonstrated through higher test scores, fewer dropouts, and higher graduation rates;²
- Behavioral benefits such as a greater likelihood of doing homework, attending class regularly, and being subject to disciplinary actions less often;³
- Long-term benefits such as increased college enrollment, employment, and earnings.⁴

These studies have further found that students from both low-income and middle-income families benefit from diverse educational settings. Students from low-income families see improvements from working with students from middle-income families where parents are likely to have larger vocabularies, have time and resources to be more involved in school, and set greater expectations for their children to attend college.⁵ Students from middle-income families who are educated with less affluent peers were able to more effectively work with more diverse people throughout adulthood.⁶ All students in diverse settings benefit from cross-racial and cross-cultural understanding, breaking down stereotypes, and decreasing bias and prejudice.⁷

Within the body of research on school composition, there is evidence of the negative impacts of concentrated poverty and segregation in traditional district schools, along with descriptions of strategies that can help overcome these impacts, such as busing, magnet schools, and inter- and intra-district school choice programs.⁸ Generally, traditional public schools serve those who live within the school's attendance zone; correspondingly, these schools' student populations are often homogenous, reflective of local housing patterns.⁹ In many circumstances, charter schools can be affected by these dynamics, similar to other public schools. Various strategies have been used in

non-charter settings to address these challenges. For example, magnet schools are district-run public schools that draw from a larger geographic catchment zone, but unlike charter schools, may have a selective admissions process that could include testing, auditioning, or portfolio requirements. Charter schools are open enrollment public schools. To ensure equitable access, generally charter schools use lotteries for enrollment when there is greater demand than available seats, do not have attendance zones, and may be open to students throughout the district in which the school is located or to families in the surrounding districts.¹⁰

Since charter schools often have more flexible enrollment procedures than their traditional district school counterparts that typically assign students based on residence-based attendance zones, charter schools may be better able to attract and enroll students who reflect the broader community.¹¹ As such, a small but growing strategy among charter schools is to design and implement a model that aims to serve an all-encompassing variety of backgrounds, including but not limited to a racially, culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse student body (hereafter referred to as “intentionally diverse” schools).

Reflecting the growing interest in charter schools’ potential to lead school diversity efforts, the National Coalition of Diverse Charter Schools was formed in 2014 and currently has 93 member charter schools located in 15 states and the District of Columbia.¹² The Coalition’s growing membership of intentionally diverse charter schools shows interest and commitment to diverse educational settings within the charter school sector.

Intentionally diverse schools are one educational model that aims to prepare all students to excel academically while cultivating students’ ability to engage and interact with peers and adults from different backgrounds.¹³ In these schools, diversity is comprehensively woven into all aspects of the school model in order to ensure it translates into a meaningful, daily experience for every member of the school community. This means setting rigorous equity goals with actionable accountability measures at the school-, classroom-, and student-levels.

PURPOSE AND USE OF THE TOOLKIT

There is a large body of work and research on school desegregation efforts, but there are limited resources that specifically focus on how to achieve student diversity in the charter school context. To contribute to this growing body of work, the National Charter School Resource Center (NCSRC) presents this toolkit for charter school leaders who are interested in creating and maintaining intentionally diverse charter schools.

AUDIENCE

This toolkit is designed to help charter school leaders and their stakeholders design and implement intentionally diverse charter schools.

Using this toolkit, leaders—defined broadly to include school founders as well as active parents and governing board members—will learn more about how to measure student diversity, how to intentionally recruit and retain students, how to ensure that diversity is supported and experienced meaningfully at the individual, classroom, and schoolwide levels, and how to create and run schools that help all children thrive.

USING THE TOOLKIT

The toolkit presents decisions and actions to consider when designing and implementing an intentionally diverse school. Leaders developing intentionally diverse charter schools should:

- Define, Measure, and Share School Diversity Goals
- Plan School Features to Attract Diverse Families
- Design Processes to Recruit and Enroll a Diverse Student Body
- Create and Maintain a School Culture that Supports and Values Diversity

These actions are related and can be considered holistically as school leaders create plans to serve a diverse student body. These considerations are informed by the existing body of research as well as interviews conducted with charter school leaders across the nation who have successfully established and maintained a diverse student body.¹⁴

Laying the foundation for diversity in the early stages of school planning and design will help schools effectively attract, enroll, serve and retain diverse students. That said, leaders of existing charter schools can also use this toolkit to revisit diversity goals or to solve implementation challenges. Because student enrollment in a charter school is not static, areas for improvement may emerge as the charter school and the surrounding community it serves evolve over time.



The NCSRC developed this toolkit in conjunction with case study videos that feature concrete examples of how a Valor Collegiate Academies, a charter school network in Nashville, Tennessee, approaches racial, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity. [View the case study videos.](#)

The toolkit provides context about research and the legal and regulatory guidance on pursuing an intentionally diverse school. Although the toolkit discusses legal frameworks that may guide charter schools' diversity efforts, it does not constitute legal advice. Charter school leaders should seek legal counsel if they have legal questions as they pursue an intentionally diverse school model.

There are significant policy barriers that impede progress toward opening and operating intentionally diverse schools. District, state, and federal law and regulations govern charter schools and may include obstacles such as geographic restrictions on where schools can operate and recruit students or a lack of tools to manage enrollment — such as limitations on weighted lotteries or attendance zones. Other barriers include housing segregation, transportation and facilities costs, and political resistance.¹⁵ This toolkit acknowledges the significant impact these policies and barriers have on a school leader's ability to design and operate an intentionally diverse charter school, but limits its focus to school leaders' actions and decisions in establishing their schools and not on district, state, and federal law and regulations. For resources on policy areas that guide charter school operation, please visit the [NCSRC](#) at (<http://www.charterschoolcenter.ed.gov/>).

I: DEFINE, MEASURE, AND SHARE SCHOOL DIVERSITY GOALS



Charter school leaders designing and running schools to serve a diverse student body need to clearly define “diversity” for their school, set diversity goals, and select metrics to measure those goals. This approach is especially important if the school’s mission explicitly calls for an intentionally diverse student body.¹⁶ Such definitions will determine the school’s measures and metrics for achieving its diversity goals and guide important decisions regarding the school’s design and operation. Diversity goals, measures, and metrics affect more than enrollment — they are likely to touch on a school’s performance, engagement, discipline, and other areas as well. Incorporating diversity into these measures can inform and promote a school’s ability to make diversity a meaningful and integral experience for all students.¹⁷

DEFINE DIVERSITY

As noted earlier, school leaders should also consider the legal implications of their chosen measures. Student diversity, especially racial measures, are litigated and regulated topics in education. State and federal legal precedents may impact a charter school’s design and ability to pursue student diversity.¹⁸

Questions that school leaders might consider as they define diversity include:

- **What does diversity mean to us? Are we seeking to reflect:**
 - The demographics of the neighborhood where the school is located?
 - The demographics of the community we serve?
 - The demographics of only public school students?
 - The demographics of the entire school district?
 - The demographics of the whole city, town, or state?
- **How do we define diversity over time? What happens if:**
 - The demographics of the neighborhood where the school is located shifts?
 - In the case of charter schools that are affected by district attendance policies, the state redefines district requirements regarding attendance eligibility that change school feeder patterns?
 - Example 1: A district adopts a city-wide enrollment process. A unified enrollment process can limit the school’s ability to impact student enrollment through recruitment efforts. Parents who are best able to navigate the city’s enrollment process could be advantaged and disproportionately apply for charter schools and other schools of choice outside of the family’s neighborhood school option. Details in the design of a city-wide enrollment

process can further or restrict efforts to create an intentionally diverse school.¹⁹

- Example 2: A state changes how charter schools can operate. In some states, charter schools can enroll students from throughout the state. Statewide enrollment could widen the applicant pool, depending on the family's ability to transport their child to the school. Other states, such as Illinois, restrict charter school attendance to particular cities. In Alabama, new charter schools must first give preference to students within the district boundary, and then may enroll students without regards to residency if there are still available seats.²⁰
- **What type(s) of data do we use to develop and measure our diversity goals regarding enrollment?**
 - Data collected through the Census?
 - Data collected through parent surveys?
 - Data collected appropriately through the application process?²¹
 - Data collected by public or private service organizations, as applicable (e.g., afterschool or early childhood care providers, real estate companies, etc.)?
- **How do we incorporate diversity into the school charter agreement with the authorizer? Does diversity or related measures factor into:**
 - The mission statement?
 - Performance indicators or frameworks?
 - Renewal criteria?
 - Governance and staffing?
- **How does diversity affect data and metrics used in the school? How will the school track, analyze, and report data regarding:**
 - Academic performance?
 - Attendance and retention?
 - Discipline and engagement?
 - Parental involvement and satisfaction?
 - Staff recruitment and retention?

SELECT METRICS TO MEASURE DIVERSITY

Once school leaders, with the school's governing board, have set a vision for a diversity plan, they can then select specific measures to gauge whether the school is achieving its diversity goals. This can include school leaders setting goals and accountability metrics to track any student-level inequities. Monitoring any discrepancies between individual and groups of students can help ensure that all students are being integrated into the school community. As mentioned earlier, measures of socioeconomic status (SES) in diversity considerations can be less legally fraught and more effective than race-based measures.²²

Free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) eligibility is one of the most widely-available and used data points for student demographics. Census data contain other SES measures such as parental income, parental education, home ownership rates, number of single-family households, and

number of residents who are not proficient in English. All of these indicators can be used as proxies for income levels. A school may want to consider these non-race-based SES measures, along with FRL eligibility, for a fuller picture of student and family backgrounds.

In addition to SES measures, school leaders may also consider other ways to increase racial and ethnic diversity within the bounds of existing laws. Measures involving race are some of the most legally complex, due to the many laws that prevent discrimination based on race and the decades of related legal actions. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 bars public and private institutions that receive federal financial assistance from discriminating based on race, color, or national origin. The Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution and Titles IV and VI also prohibit schools from discriminating by race. Schools should adopt measures that do not consider the race of an individual student before considering measures that take race into consideration.

According to guidance issued by the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education, schools may use approaches that do not rely on the race of individual students to achieve greater student body diversity. The guidance clarifies, “race-neutral approaches can take racial impact into account but do not rely on race as an express criterion. Race-neutral approaches can be used for decisions about individual students, such as admissions decisions for competitive schools or programs, as well as for decisions made on an aggregate basis, such as the drawing of zone lines that affect a large number of students.”²³ Schools that are pursuing diversity should exhaust all race-neutral approaches before pursuing other measures. Race-neutral measures include:

- Students’ socioeconomic status
- Parental education
- Students’ household status
- Neighborhood socioeconomic status
- Geographic location
- Composition of area housing

If a school is unable to achieve its “mission or priorities” to serve a diverse student body by employing race-neutral approaches, the guidance states that the school can then move to consider generalized race-based approaches. Generalized race-based approaches, “employ expressly racial criteria, such as the overall racial composition of neighborhoods, but do not involve decision-making on the basis of any individual student’s race.”²⁴ A school can consider individual racial classifications only if race-neutral and generalized race-based approaches still do not achieve a diverse student body. A school should seek legal counsel to confirm that all race-neutral possibilities have been ruled out and that generalized race-based or race-based measures need to be used for the school to achieve its diversity mission or priorities.

If a school uses race-based measures, race cannot be the student’s only defining characteristic; other student features must also be considered. A school that chooses to use race-based measures will need to keep careful documentation to prove that these measures are necessary and that all other non-race-based measures have been exhausted. For example, these documents should include the school’s educational mission, diversity plan, and diversity approaches that were considered or ruled out. Finally, race-based measures should periodically be revisited in case they become unnecessary to achieve the school’s diversity goals, and the school can instead rely on race-neutral or generalized race-based measures.

Questions that School Leaders can Consider to Help Measure Diversity Race-neutral measures

- What percentage of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch within the district or city?
- Where do students live? (e.g., urban or rural area)
- Are there two parents in the household? Or is it a single-parent household?
- How many years of education has the parent completed?
- What is the average household income in the zip code that students live in?
- What is the home ownership rate in the neighborhood the students live in?
- Is the neighborhood where the students live comprised mostly of subsidized housing, single-family homes, high-density public housing, or rental housing?
- What percentage of residents are not proficient in English within the district or city?

Generalized race-based measures

- What is the racial composition of the neighborhoods within the district or city?
- What are the racial demographics of feeder schools or neighborhoods?

SHARE SCHOOL DIVERSITY GOALS

After school leaders work with their governing board to thoroughly consider the school's approach to educating an intentionally diverse student body, school leaders should communicate that vision to key stakeholders. For schools in the planning phase, its board may choose to explicitly include diversity in the school's mission statement. For an operating school that seeks to improve student diversity, the school's board could adopt a resolution or propose an amendment to the school's charter that includes the school's vision for diversity goals. Intentionally diverse schools should seek to mirror the diversity they value in their student body as well as in their leadership. Therefore, it is important to build a board with diverse backgrounds and perspectives so that the school's mission is reflected throughout all levels of the school.

Charter school leaders and their boards have control over defining the school's diversity plan, the measures to track progress towards diversity goals, and recruiting a board and staff that support the school's mission. However, attracting philanthropic funding can be a challenge to opening an intentionally diverse charter school. Many individual funders and foundations focus on students with the greatest unmet needs, and thus target their resources toward schools with a high proportion of students from low-income families. An intentionally diverse charter school is likely, for example, to have fewer children from low-income backgrounds than charter schools in the area that do not prioritize attracting middle-income students. Private funders may face a philosophical challenge when an intentionally diverse school requests funding and it has a less than 50 percent FRL student population.

A school leader and board may need to pursue a new or broader set of donors if the per pupil funding is inadequate to meet operating and capital needs of the school. When speaking to charter school funders, school leaders could emphasize the social, cognitive, civic, and academic benefits that all students experience in diverse educational settings.²⁵ Studies suggest that students from low-income families enjoy academic benefits from diverse educational settings when about 30 to 70 percent of the students are FRL eligible and the remainder of the student body is from middle-

income backgrounds.²⁶ Researchers suggest that students from low-income families show academic gains in diverse settings because the effects of poverty are worse when the majority of students are from low-income backgrounds.²⁷ Further, middle-income students do not show academic losses from attending schools with peers from lower-income families.²⁸ All students in diverse settings have cultural competency benefits through breaking down stereotypes and decreasing bias and prejudice.²⁹ The majority of the National Coalition of Diverse Charter Schools members enroll student bodies that are between 30 percent and 70 percent FRL eligible.³⁰

School leaders seeking grants from private funders who prefer to support children from low-income backgrounds may direct foundation investments toward programs and activities that target the underserved students within their school. For example, targeted funds could support enrichment and support services (discussed further in Section IV). Some funders view opening the door to more resources for students as their ultimate goal and have embraced diverse settings as a tool to reach underserved students.³¹ New fundraising opportunities may arise as the body of evidence and practice on intentionally diverse charter schools continues to grow.

Other important stakeholders in supporting diverse educational settings include community organizations, school staff, and families. Engagement and support resources for these stakeholders will be discussed in the following sections.

II: PLAN SCHOOL FEATURES TO ATTRACT DIVERSE FAMILIES



By its mission, an intentionally diverse student body requires a broad applicant pool. As charter school leaders know, parents seeking the right school for their child will consider a wide range of factors. Many of these factors might be school-based elements, such as the school's quality, mission, location, transportation offerings, instructional program, discipline system, culture, and approach to pedagogy. This section explores school-based design and programming factors that charter school leaders can purposefully craft to draw families from diverse backgrounds.

Household wealth determines the neighborhood a family can afford. In turn, where families live affects their children's educational options.³² Data show that household income is related to school performance: in 76 percent of neighborhoods with poverty rates higher than 20 percent, the local elementary schools perform in the bottom half of the state's schools.³³ Further, some school attendance zones are drawn based on real estate and housing patterns—often reinforcing a neighborhood's racial and economic segregation. The vast majority of students in the U.S. (82 percent) attend schools based on assigned zones,³⁴ in comparison to 18 percent of students who choose to attend district, magnet, or charter public schools.³⁵ Therefore, the accessibility and the location of a suitable facility strongly impacts a charter school's applicant pool and recruitment strategy.

While a charter school's location can be a powerful tool for increasing diversity, access to facilities is a significant barrier. Many charter school operators have few, if any, choices for their facility or its location in a neighborhood or city. Nevertheless, some school leaders have used their school's location as a tool to shape student diversity. Facilities located in an area of urban renewal, at the border of neighborhoods or cities of differing income levels, or near affordable housing units can all impact applicant pools and enrollment. For example:

- **Valor Collegiate Academies**, a charter management organization (CMO) in Tennessee, purchased facilities for two middle school campuses in southeast Nashville. Southeast Nashville is home to a large population of recent immigrants and refugees, including the largest Kurdish population in the U.S.³⁶ While lower-income and immigrant families comprise most of the families that live in the school's immediate neighborhood, there are more affluent neighborhoods within a few miles of the school. Valor Collegiate Academies Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Todd Dickson noted, "One of the key things if you want to get socioeconomic diversity is locating the school in a lower-income area. This is really smart and important because it's easier for your families from disadvantaged backgrounds to get to the school if it's closer to them." Dickson adds that, "If you could pick the perfect spot,

you'd also want to be close to multiple different communities so that they all have access to the school. Southeast Nashville was a perfect spot for us for that reason.”³⁷

- **Voice Charter Charter School**, is located in Long Island City, New York. This part of the New York City metropolitan area was founded as an industrial center. Long Island City in the borough of Queens, just across the river from Manhattan, has a large immigrant population and the largest housing project in the U.S. and is also surrounded by middle-income suburbs, like Jamaica Hills.³⁸ The K–8 school has two campuses that are two blocks apart. One of those campuses is co-located in a district school facility and shares the space with a New York City traditional public school. Voice’s Long Island City location helps the school attract lower-income immigrant families from many different countries of origin, families living in the surrounding housing projects, and middle-income families living in more affluent neighborhoods.³⁹
- **The Denver School of Science and Technology (DSST)** is an expanding charter school network that currently has 7 secondary school campuses throughout the Denver, Colorado metro area. DSST is regarded as one of the top STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) schools in the United States. Their reputation generates great parental demand and subsequent long wait lists for enrollment.⁴⁰ All DSST schools have valued diversity since their inception, and DSST’s newer schools were deliberately located in underserved communities to increase enrollment of students from underserved backgrounds. The DSST: Green Valley Ranch (GVR) campus opened in 2012, and it was intentionally designed to serve the diverse neighborhood in which the school is located.

Transportation can also affect families’ access to schools. State laws vary greatly and should be consulted about funding, restrictions, and procedures. State laws can include policies affecting whether local districts may provide transportation to charter school students, or if a charter school can or must directly provide transportation.⁴¹ Relying on district services for transportation can have unintended consequences. For example, the charter school may become tied to the district calendar or daily schedule.⁴² Charter school leaders deciding where to locate a school may want to consider the implications of transportation options on their school’s location, such as:

- Is the district responsible for funding any transportation options—such as busing, or free or reduced-price fare for public transportation?
- Are there public transportation options within walking distance of the school?
- What are the demographics of the neighborhoods that are within walking distance of the school?
- What are the costs for the school to provide busing for students?
- Are there specific distance restrictions that should be prioritized for school busing services?⁴³

Below are examples from the field that range from a school providing all transportation services to schools that are able to access district or city transportation resources:

- **Valor Collegiate Academies** provides five school buses that serve about 300 of the 700 enrolled students. The school prioritizes bus service for students from low-income families who would not be able to get to Valor schools without transportation. This low-income priority means that buses primarily serve the families in the school’s immediate area. Many of the

middle-income families who live farther from the school organize carpools or drive their students to the school. Valor spends about 5 percent of its operating budget on transportation.⁴⁴

- **Voice Charter School** can access the New York City Department of Education's Office of Pupil Transportation (OPT). Based on the distance between a student's home and school, OPT provides yellow buses or free/reduced student fare passes for public transportation. Most of Voice's K–5 students ride the yellow school bus or take a public city bus to school with their family. The older students in grades 6–8 tend to take a yellow or public city bus or the subway to get to the school. There also is a staggered schedule between yellow school buses and parents that drive their students.⁴⁵
- **DSST: GVR** students can access Denver Public Schools district bus services, which are offered to any student in a district, magnet, or charter public school that meet eligibility criteria. The citywide school bus service prioritizes service for students attending their zoned school, but students that are accepted into a school of choice and meet eligibility criteria, such as living a specified distance from their school of choice, may apply for bus service on a first-come, first-served basis.⁴⁶

The instructional model of the school is also an important tool to attract a broader range of families. A school can survey local families to learn about their educational preferences and offer programming accordingly. Schools should not simply assume they know what families want. For example, some families may place the highest value on proximity, while others focus on pedagogy or school safety. While every parent has unique preferences for their child's education, a national survey conducted by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute on parents' educational preferences found that, in general:

- Families from all income levels valued programs that focused on critical thinking skills, strong reading and math curricula, and an emphasis on STEM as top priorities;⁴⁷
- Middle-income parents are often attracted to progressive educational approaches, in which students play a stronger role in shaping their learning, or where a school's specific mission or orientation is shaped to facilitate student engagement. Examples include schools that "emphasize arts and music instruction," and in which their child "develops an appreciation for nature" and "develops fluency in a foreign language";⁴⁸
- Low-income parents are more likely to choose a structured educational pedagogy, such as a model that emphasizes core academic subjects;⁴⁹
- Black parents and politically liberal parents are more likely to favor educational settings where students learn to work with peers from diverse racial, ethnic, or socio-economic backgrounds or cultures;⁵⁰ and
- Dual language immersion programs are attractive to families that have recently immigrated or have students who are English Learners. Language immersion programs also have appeal for middle-class families that want their children to be fluent in another language and learn with native speakers.⁵¹



EXAMPLE FROM THE FIELD

Voice Charter School: A Unique Instructional Model

Federal Charter School Program Grantee: Yes

Location: Long Island City, New York

Grades Served: K-8

Student Enrollment: 593

Student Demographics, 2014-2015

- 1% White
- 11% Black
- 58% Hispanic
- 17% Asian
- 3% Other
- 78% FRL eligible
- 16% English Learners
- 14% Students with disabilities

Voice Charter School was founded to help English Learner (EL) students with language acquisition. Voice's model is built on incorporating choral music into instruction every day. The research behind the program is based on Total Physical Response (TPR). TPR theory suggests that physical movement, including singing, accelerates learning in any language.⁵² The foundational language instruction that is designed for EL students is given to all Voice students because the intervention has benefited students at all language levels.⁵³

Principal Franklin Headley asserts that students' ability to learn through music is based in good teaching versus a student being musically gifted. The school's choral music program includes daily phonics instruction, which helps all students learn the fundamentals of pronunciation. As a result, at the end of the year, students are able to sing songs in many languages because they understand the components of pronunciation. For example, Voice kindergarteners typically learn more than 250 songs throughout the year. The music program is an opportunity to share world music and learn songs from many of the students' countries of origin. The school has also received grants to bring in performers to sing in foreign languages and perform traditional dances. Parents are invited to join these cultural performances.⁵⁴



TOOLBOX TIP

Supporting School Culture Through Alternative Discipline Approaches

School discipline policies and practices directly impact the school's climate and student achievement.⁵⁵ Intentionally diverse schools thrive when school culture recognizes and celebrates student and staff diversity at the individual and schoolwide levels. Such structures contribute to a

safe and supportive school culture. All school leaders can benefit from analyzing their discipline policies and practices. Periodic examination of discipline

Exclusionary discipline, defined as any disciplinary action that removes or excludes a student from his or her usual educational setting, is disruptive to student learning. Additionally, K-12 public schools tend to disproportionately apply exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions and expulsions, to children of color and those with disabilities.⁵⁶ However, there are research-based, alternative discipline models that have been shown to improve students' academic and non-academic skills and outcomes.⁵⁷ To learn more about alternative discipline practices in charter schools, please visit the NCSRC [page on discipline](#) for a host of resources.

Cultural-responsiveness, which considers how students' different cultures are reflected in communication, behavior, and engagement norms, can be incorporated into instructional methods. A culturally-responsive pedagogy can provide connections and affirmations about a student's family origins. Franklin Headley of Voice Charter Cultural-responsiveness, which considers how students' different cultures are reflected in communication, behavior, and engagement norms, can be incorporated into instructional methods. A culturally-responsive pedagogy can provide connections and affirmations about a student's family origins. Franklin Headley of Voice Charter School observed, "When we think about people 'other' than us, it makes us question our own identity too." At Voice Charter School, various subject areas provide opportunities to explore identity alongside academic objectives. Voice's Social Studies curricula examines world religions, and students and staff are encouraged to share experiences to be culturally responsive.⁵⁸



EXAMPLE FROM THE FIELD

Programs that Support Diversity and School Culture at Valor Collegiate Academies

Federal Charter School Program Grantee: Yes

Location: Nashville, Tennessee

Grades Served: 5-7, growing to 5-8

Student Enrollment: 740

Student Demographics, 2014-2015

- 40% White
- 17% Black
- 15% Hispanic/Latino
- 20% Middle Eastern/North African
- 8% Asian/Other
- 50% FRL eligible
- 24% English Learners

Valor Collegiate Academies integrates diversity into a variety of its schools' structures that support a positive school culture. The Valor schools use restorative justice as their discipline system. Restorative justice is a subset of restorative practices that focuses on intervention after a student has committed an offense. Valor schools have weekly instruction in social-emotional learning (SEL), referred to as a "compass" model, which challenges scholars to have "sharp minds, big

hearts, noble purpose, and aligned actions.” “Curiosity and diversity” are guiding principles of the sharp minds goal.⁵⁹

As part of the SEL and culturally-responsive instruction, students and staff undergo training on “cultural humility.” The schools use this frame, instead of the more commonly heard “cultural competency,” because the latter implies mastery over a culture that isn’t yours. Instead, cultural humility poses the challenge to recognize the bias or lack of understanding that one may have about some else’s culture and to approach the learning process with curiosity and respect. In addition, Valor leaders train students and staff on identity development. The identity instruction seeks to help each person recognize their biases and worldview. Instruction on how to form and nurture relationships, especially across lines of difference, is taught to students and staff in conjunction with identity development.⁶⁰

III: DESIGN PROCESSES TO A RECRUIT AND ENROLL A DIVERSE STUDENT BODY



The recruitment and admissions process is an important aspect of creating an intentionally diverse charter school. Although this can be complicated, there are several strategies intentionally diverse charter school leaders can use to enroll the student body they hope to serve.

In some traditional public schools, leaders who strive to create an intentionally diverse environment have historically done so through limiting which students are admitted. For example, some magnet schools have shaped their enrollment demographics by using admissions requirements—including tests scores—to select higher-performing students. However, charter schools, like most public schools, are generally open to all students and are not allowed to use admission requirements to choose their students.⁶¹

Intentionally diverse charter schools can employ a few strategies to design a recruitment and enrollment process with a broad applicant pool in mind. To establish and maintain diversity, school leaders should:

- Understand the likely enrollment that would occur in the absence of targeted recruitment strategies;
- Know the specific recruitment strategies that will help increase interest among the students the charter school hopes to attract;
- Determine what is most important to a broader set of families. This knowledge will guide leaders to refine their outreach and recruitment strategies, including communication styles, outreach activities, and marketing; and
- Aim to recruit a student body with a diversity of needs—like English Learner students and students with disabilities—in addition to diversity of race, culture, home languages, and income levels.⁶²

Parents with the most information use educational choice the most—typically parents with higher education and income levels.⁶³ Interviews with school leaders reveal that once an intentionally diverse school establishes a strong reputation in the community, wealthier families tend to apply in greater numbers.⁶⁴ This is especially true in communities with few high-quality public school options, where wealthier families have frequently sought out other educational choices that may not be affordable or practical for low-income families.⁶⁵ Therefore, intentionally diverse charter schools face the challenges of:

- Attracting more wealthy families who may have the resources to attend other educational options;
- Convincing parents to enroll their child in a school that may be in its planning phase or first year(s) of operation and does not yet have proven academic, enrichment, or extracurricular programs;
- Retaining families during early years of operation; and
- Maintaining a balance between students from low- and middle-income families:
 - If the school's reputation boosts applications among more affluent families;
 - If the demographics of the school's recruitment areas, such as the school's surrounding neighborhoods, significantly shift; or
 - If the school develops a reputation as the only high-quality school in the community.

Charter schools have tools available at the school, city, state, and federal levels to encourage applications and enrollment from a diverse set of families. According to Richard Kahlenberg, an expert on school integration efforts, and the school leaders interviewed for this toolkit, it is much easier for a school to create, implement, and maintain an effective diversity strategy than to try and change an already operational school toward diversity.⁶⁶ Throughout his research and interviews with school leaders, Kahlenberg has found that to encourage diversity:

- It is easier for a school that is high-performing and serves predominantly middle-class families to attract lower-income families — although the school's location and transportation options may restrict low-income families' ability to enroll at these schools.
- It is easier for underserved families to access high-quality charter schools if enrollment obstacles are removed and support services are provided.
- It is easier to attract middle-class families to low-income schools if there are strong academic programs, skilled teaching staff, and enrichment programs.

There are recruitment strategies that charter school leaders can use to reach middle-class families. Information sessions can be held at the school or at community venues—such as coffee shops, grocery stores, and farmers' markets—at a variety of times. Scheduling these events in the early morning, evening, or on weekends helps to accommodate the schedules of people who work a standard 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM work day.⁶⁷ For example, Valor CMO leaders asked interested parents and prominent community members to host parties in their homes and invite their friends to learn about the school. During these gatherings, Valor CMO leaders gave a presentation about the school, families could ask questions and express concerns to school leaders, and potential Valor families could meet and learn more about each other.⁶⁸ DSST: GVR, Valor, and Voice charter schools all host open houses so that families can tour the school, meet teachers, and observe students in class.⁶⁹

School leaders can help make the application and enrollment process transparent by having a section on the school's website that explains the application process, highlights key dates in the process, and has online application forms that are accessible and available in multiple languages, including languages indicated by area demographics. A Valor parent said that she learned about the CMO when she heard a story on the radio about the schools. This led her to Valor's website, where she learned about an upcoming open house. She and her family attended the open house and then applied to the schools.⁷⁰

Leaders of an intentionally diverse charter school can take additional actions to reach underserved families who many have fewer resources and networks to learn about school choice options. School leaders should think through the possible barriers preventing families from applying to the charter school and what the school can do to reduce or eliminate these barriers. For example, underserved families are less likely to have home or high-speed internet service.⁷¹ A Brookings Institution report found that one in ten people living in the U.S. don't speak fluent English.⁷² Further, English proficiency is a strong predictor of low-income status and academic risk for immigrants—no matter what their educational level.⁷³ Since underserved families may face technology and language barriers to online and printed outreach in English, in-person recruitment efforts may be the most effective way to reach them. In-person recruitment efforts should include materials in multiple languages, bilingual school representatives, and access to translation services.

Some other questions to consider when thinking through recruitment, application, and enrollment challenges include:

- **Has the school communicated the application and enrollment processes widely and transparently?**
 - Has the school implemented a transparent, legal, and fair application process?
 - Has the school been transparent about what kind of lottery the school will hold if it receives more applications than its capacity for each grade level?
 - Has the school adequately reached out to underserved communities and families that lack traditional networks?
 - Has the school made marketing efforts in the community through:
 - Direct mailing of school brochures;
 - Creating marketing materials in multiple languages;
 - Door-to-door informational campaigns;
 - Informational sessions in community organizations;
 - Hosting school tours (for operating schools)?
- **Is the application form widely accessible?**
 - Is the application form available in multiple languages and in large print?
 - Is the application form offered along with translators to help non-English speaking families?
 - Is the application form available in hard copy for parents who do not have access to the internet?
 - Is the application form available in locations besides the school building?
 - Is the application form requesting information that could deter undocumented families (e.g., social security numbers) or homeless families (e.g., permanent address)?
- **Are there any school practices or policies that could deter families from applying?**
 - If uniforms are mandatory, are there stipends or scholarships to provide free or reduced-price uniforms?
 - Is parent participation overly burdensome? Would parents who work multiple jobs or non-traditional hours still be able to meet these requirements?

- Is the school's approach to discipline and school culture supportive or punitive?
- **Is there a lack of services that could prevent families from applying?**
 - Does the school or local district provide or facilitate transportation options?
 - Does the school participate in the National School Lunch Program or provide other low-cost breakfast and lunch options?



EXAMPLE FROM THE FIELD

Recruitment Efforts at Voice Charter School

Voice Charter School direct mails every student in the district that is eligible for grades K–8. This means mailing materials to about 25,000 homes. The school receives about 2,000 applications as a result of this mailing outreach. The school also places ads in neighborhood newsletters and free non-English newspapers. These efforts help promote the school in multiple languages and communities. Voice does presentations about the school at community forums and has a booth at citywide student recruitment fairs. Voice has enrollment applications in English and Spanish. Through the New York City Department of Education, a translator is available via telephone. The school utilizes this service to support home language needs beyond English and Spanish.

Parents of students enrolled at the charter school can be a powerful “word of mouth” recruitment network. Providing parents with promotional materials and enrollment applications, in other languages as applicable, enables them to share information about the school with their networks—such as religious groups, cultural organizations, book clubs, or their children’s sports teams.⁷⁴ Parents sharing their experiences of the school spreads information across communities and SES levels. Parents who speak another language might also volunteer to help the school translate materials or act as translators for other families to give back to the school community.⁷⁵ School leaders can communicate through parent listservs and attend local school fairs to reach parents in the broader community.

When the school begins to receive enrollment applications, leaders can perform periodic analyses during the application period to assess the demographic composition of the application pool. School leaders can then conduct additional targeted outreach efforts to any underrepresented groups. Valor Collegiate Academies’ Director of Community Outreach estimated that she spent 90 percent of her time out in the community and 10 percent at the school during the planning year before the school opened.⁷⁶

In addition to reaching parents, school leaders can build partnerships with businesses, local institutions, service providers, and civic groups with strong community ties to recruit, raise awareness, and build credibility among various populations within the community. Charter schools may partner with faith-based organizations “so long as charter schools select partners without regard to their religious affiliation, ensure that no public funds are used for religious purposes, and do not engage in or encourage religious activity.”⁷⁷ A school may want to seek legal counsel to ensure partnerships with faith-based organizations follow all legal restrictions. Sometimes schools can leverage these partnerships to provide academic or enrichment programming. School leaders interviewed for this toolkit noted that building a strong reputation with community organizations

contributes to a “word of mouth” network because families trust school endorsements from community leaders.⁷⁸

It is important to begin with charter school basics when starting the relationship-building process with families and community-based organizations. There is often a public misunderstanding about charter schools, so having information ready (in multiple languages) that explains they are free, non-religious public schools of choice is a good starting place.⁷⁹ From there, school leaders share the school’s mission, educational offerings, and plans to serve the community. It is important to remember that the purpose of this community engagement is not just about marketing; it’s about developing relationships that enable schools to draw on the talents of the people in the community organizations. As relationships are formed, community organizations might allow the charter school to post informational and application materials on community bulletin boards, hold information sessions at their facility, provide enrichment activities, or host fundraisers for the school. Potential community organizations to partner with could include:

- Head Start and other pre-school and early childhood centers
- Health clinics
- Civic or cultural groups
- Churches, mosques, synagogues, and other faith-based organizations
- Cultural venues such as museums, theaters, arts spaces or workshops, or sportscenters
- Local businesses

Another tool that charter schools can consider to help enroll a diverse student body is a weighted lottery. For details on what is permissible in regards to conducting a weighted lottery, schools should consult their authorizer, State charter law, and their State Education Agency—especially if they are receiving or plan to apply for a federal Charter School Program (CSP) grant. Federal law stipulates that charter schools that receive CSP funds are required to hold a lottery, if they receive more applications for admission than can be accommodated. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) permits charter schools to receive CSP funding if they use a weighted lottery that aims to give slightly better chances of admission to all, or a subset of, “educationally disadvantaged students.”⁸⁰ This includes students from low-income families, students with disabilities, migrant students, English Learner students, neglected or delinquent students, and homeless students.⁸¹

There are policies at the city- and district-level that can improve a school’s ability to enroll a diverse student body. Intra- and inter-district integration efforts are well-researched and have shown positive results for students.⁸² Some integration proponents, including the Century Foundation, believe that charter school autonomy can be leveraged as an intra- and inter-district choice tool. Charter schools are well-positioned to enroll a diverse student body because they can draw enrollment outside of district attendance zones, depending on state law.⁸³

In recent years, some cities have moved toward a “portfolio” approach to educational options. A portfolio approach opens up choices to families across an entire city among district and charter schools.⁸⁴ The Center for Reinventing Public Education’s Portfolio Network includes 35 cities serving more than 4 million students, with the Tennessee Achievement School District, New Orleans Recovery School District, and the cities of Denver (CO), Grand Prairie (TX), and Lawrence (MA) rated as national exemplars for implementing collaborations among all public school models.⁸⁵ A comprehensive portfolio approach empowers parents with better data, along with a fair

and open process to choose the best public school option for their child. This portfolio approach presents families with an array of public school choices—traditional, magnet, and charter school—within the city. If a family lives within the city boundaries, the family can seek to enroll in any school in the city. In this way, families are not limited by attendance zones, like in traditional school assignments. Charter schools that are located in portfolio cities can therefore reach a wider applicant pool, which can be a great asset for schools with missions to serve students in diverse educational settings.

Like the portfolio approach, cities like Denver, New Orleans, Newark, and Washington, D.C. have created a city-wide enrollment system to make educational options more accessible to all families.⁸⁶ A unified enrollment system lets parents rank their school preferences among all city public schools in one application.⁸⁷ The unified enrollment system allows for all schools in the city to share resources that eliminate some of the application barriers for families (e.g., access to translators, as discussed above).

School leaders interested in creating intentionally diverse schools may be able to help promote unified enrollment systems by participating in their design or opting-in to existing systems. Unified enrollment systems are often voluntary, so school leaders can work with other leaders and community members to shape a system that encourages and enables diverse educational settings. School leaders can also include factors in their school's enrollment process, such as a sibling or neighborhood preference, in the unified enrollment system to support the school's diversity.

Unified enrollment also lessens a school's uncertainty about student matriculation because families get their notifications of school placement at the same time. This means that families do not withdraw their acceptance to one school because they later gained admission to a different school. For schools, this means more stability in student enrollment projections and budgeting, which is based on per-pupil funding. In turn, this may incentivize school leaders to advocate for or opt-in to enrollment systems. As more cities consider unified enrollment systems, perhaps these systems could include preferences of school diversity as an option for parents. Even in locations with a city-wide enrollment system, charter schools still need to invest time and resources in community engagement to attract families to apply to the school.



EXAMPLE FROM THE FIELD

Operating an Intentionally Diverse School in a City-wide Enrollment System at Denver School of Science and Technology: Green Valley Ranch High School

Federal Charter School Program Grantee: Yes

Location: Denver, Colorado

Grades Served: 9-12

Student Enrollment: 450

Student Demographics, 2014-2015

- 8% White
- 24% Black
- 53% Hispanic
- 10% Asian

- 5% Multiracial
- 67% FRL eligible
- 23% English Learners
- 8% Students with disabilities

Denver Public Schools (DPS) launched its city-wide enrollment program, SchoolChoice, in 2011–12 to “ensure equity, consistency and simplicity in school enrollment.” The Green Valley Ranch campus of DSST, a highly-regarded network of STEM schools, opened in 2012 and has always operated under the SchoolChoice system. The DSST network had positive “word of mouth” in the Denver metro area and proven academic success, so the DSST: GVR campus was oversubscribed and met its enrollment targets from the outset.⁸⁸

The DSST network has a positive working relationship with DPS, so it was able to negotiate that the DSST: GVR campus could have preferences in the SchoolChoice enrollment system for applicants with siblings already enrolled in the high school and for applicants from the school’s immediate neighborhood. Many siblings have been admitted to the school through the preference, thus limiting seats available for new families. However, the neighborhood preferences help DSST: GVR maintain a diverse student body. DSST: GVR accepts mid-year transfers if a student moves into the DPS district from another area.

The DSST network has recently focused on increasing the enrollment of English Learner students and students with disabilities to mirror DPS’s enrollment percentage. Meghan Janci, the Associate School Director of DSST: GVR, credits the “word of mouth” from parents of students with disabilities who share positive anecdotes of their child’s experiences at DSST among other parents in their social networks as the largest contributor to the school’s increased enrollment of students with disabilities.

IV: CREATE AND MAINTAIN A SCHOOL CULTURE THAT SUPPORTS AND VALUES DIVERSITY



Diversity should be infused in all aspects of an intentionally diverse school's model and practices. A school's staffing, training and professional development, school programming, family engagement, and classroom integration all contribute to a school culture that is designed to help students of all backgrounds thrive, feel they belong, and succeed. A comprehensive orientation also ensures that all students are not just attending, but thriving, in an intentionally diverse school.

SCHOOL STAFFING, TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

School leaders should consider creating staff positions to manage community engagement, student and staff recruitment, staff diversity training, and related work. Charter school leaders might also want to include someone in this role on the leadership team. These diversity- and community-focused staff members should seek to understand the varied needs and priorities of students and families in the school community. Students and parents may differ substantially in communication style, expectations, and needs. Surveys of the school's staff, students, and parents are a valuable way to get insights and feedback on the experiences and perceptions of people within the school community. Survey results can guide the leader's adjustment of school offerings to meet the needs of the families it serves.⁸⁹

Surveys can be distributed online and in paper format and written in multiple languages to ensure accessibility for all families. Schools can also conduct focus groups. Focus groups encourage dialogue and let participants express feedback in real time. Franklin Headley of Voice Charter School found that focus groups with people from diverse backgrounds produce a rich conversation, and this format accommodates parents who are verbally fluent in English but lack written fluency.⁹⁰

Schools should strive to hire administrative and instructional staff with different life experiences and backgrounds, just as they seek to attract diverse students. When families see staff members who represent their own backgrounds, the school will gain credibility among all communities the school strives to serve. Research has suggested that teachers who identify as the same race or ethnicity as their students may set higher expectations for their academic achievement than teachers of a different race.⁹¹ While having instructional staff with backgrounds similar to that of their students may have academic benefits, school leaders should be mindful of the critical shortage of teachers of color in the United States. The National Center for Education Statistics found that throughout the U.S., 82 percent of public school teachers are White, 8 percent are Hispanic, 7 percent are Black, 2 percent are Asian, and 1 percent are multiracial.⁹² The U.S. Department of Education launched

a campaign in 2016 to raise awareness and share data about the racial disparities in the public educator field.⁹³

In many schools the proportion of teachers and school leadership who are people of color is less than the portion of students of color in the schools where they work. Increasing the representation of teachers and leaders of color is a frequent challenge for many public schools, charter and district-run. Intentionally diverse charter schools must be particularly creative and innovative in shaping their talent pipeline. When possible, schools can partner with local institutions to attract high-quality teaching and leadership candidates. Partners can include higher education institutions with teacher preparation programs, alternative teacher credentialing programs, and teacher and school leadership residency programs. The staff member leading diversity efforts or responsible for staff recruitment might also attend state and national minority teacher recruitment fairs to attract diverse teachers and leaders to the school.⁹⁴



EXAMPLE FROM THE FIELD

Minority Staff Recruitment Efforts at Valor Collegiate Academies and Voice Charter School

CMO leaders of Valor Collegiate Academies dedicate significant staffing and budget resources to meet their CMO and school staff diversity goals. More than 90 percent of public school educators in Tennessee are White, which is higher than the national average.⁹⁵ In the 2016–17 school year, the Valor CMO and schools have 25 percent staff members of color. The CMO has a goal to increase staff diversity by 5 percent each year until it reaches its target of maintaining 40 percent staff members of color.⁹⁶

Valor has a CMO staff member whose responsibilities include teacher recruitment. This staff member attends educator recruitment fairs throughout the country to promote the school. Valor CMO leaders budget \$20,000 per year to fly in high-quality teaching candidates of color. Once the teacher is onsite, school leaders get to know the candidate and see them interact with the school. The candidate can also learn about the school in-person.⁹⁷

Valor CMO leaders have also formed partnerships and pipelines to find high-quality teachers of color. Valor leaders initially formed a partnership with Vanderbilt University's Teacher Apprentice Program. However, the school leaders found that Vanderbilt was not producing enough candidates of color. In response, the CMO now works with five partners to expand its talent pipeline. In the 2016–17 school year, Valor schools have about 15 percent of their educators as apprentice teachers of color through the Nashville Teacher Residency program.⁹⁸

Franklin Headley of Voice Charter School acknowledges that minority teacher recruitment is challenging and extremely competitive. In New York City, charter schools face competition for talented minority candidates not only from other charter and traditional public schools, but also from other sectors that have diversity improvement goals, such as Wall Street. Leaders from Voice attend teacher and minority recruitment fairs, but since many of the other area charter schools attend as well, this has not been the most effective strategy.⁹⁹

Voice leaders have considered how other staff positions could be a source of diversity while still striving to increase the number of teachers of color, which in the 2016–17 school year comprise

about 10 percent of its instructional staff. Voice's leaders focused on its non-teaching administrative and operations staff as an area to increase the proportion of people of color working at the school. Voice leaders decided that a college degree is an unnecessary barrier for candidates from low-income backgrounds to apply to some entry-level positions, so they removed this standard requirement. Voice provides up to \$5,000 to subsidize undergraduate classes for employees who do not have a degree or certification and have worked at the school for one year. Voice leaders found that this approach to non-instructional positions has increased the overall diversity at the school, even though educator diversity in the classroom still lags.¹⁰⁰

Voice leaders have developed strong relationships with temp agencies to increase minority non-instructional staffing. Voice leaders take the time to convey exactly what the school is looking for in candidates. Voice's clear expectations and high placement rate from area temp agencies leads them to prioritize sending candidates that meet Voice's specifications. Voice leaders intentionally cycle candidates from the temp agencies through several different job positions to see if a candidate has natural talents that suit work they might not have tried before.¹⁰¹ Several placements from temp agencies have become permanent staff.¹⁰²

Having staff dedicated to diversity issues will ensure that all members of the school community have equal access to the administration, ability to participate in school programming, and opportunities to express any concerns. This community liaison role is especially impactful when filled by staff members whose backgrounds reflect those of the broader community. Some schools have designated community officers who help families navigate the application and enrollment processes and access school services. Some schools also have dedicated staff who work on community development that focuses on creating opportunities for families to interact, volunteer, use different communications channels to reach parents, and build networks. Staff who work with families can monitor data points—such as family retention rates, parent responses on surveys, and parental volunteering—as indicators of families' satisfaction with the school and its services. Staff with diversity roles can also be involved in creating, evaluating, and revising the student recruitment and application processes, described in the previous sections.

Training and professional development geared toward intentionally diverse charter schools benefits all schools. School staff can be trained to understand their own biases, including those related to race and equity.¹⁰³ School staff can also receive ongoing training and support on how to facilitate issue resolution among students from different backgrounds.¹⁰⁴ The school programming discussed in the next section can reinforce students' opportunities to find commonalities and learn to work together.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

An intentionally diverse school should explicitly recognize and celebrate differences, while also recognizing commonalities, among students. To do this, underserved students need social supports and services—just like underserved students in a high-poverty school. These supports include mental and physical health, such as access to food programs, healthcare options, counselors, and social workers. Valor CEO Todd Dickson noted that he does not see many budgetary obstacles to an intentionally diverse school model compared to other school models. In fact, Dickson says having a mix of SES levels might be a slight financial advantage because

resources can be allocated towards underserved students who may have faced traumas and have unmet needs resulting from poverty, while students from middle-income families may need less of these supports.¹⁰⁵ Offering advanced coursework, a breadth of enrichment opportunities, and other academic programs can attract middle-class families to the school.¹⁰⁶ Please refer to Section II for more school-design practices that appeal to families from various backgrounds. School leaders may find it challenging to address the wide array of student needs, but these support services provide benefits for all students regardless of their background.

Volunteer opportunities can bring middle and high school aged students together with a shared purpose to learn more about their community. Community partnerships, as discussed on page 22, can be a starting place for volunteering and community engagement opportunities. For example, a school can partner with a community organization to staff a soup kitchen. Volunteering provides a way for students to learn how to work together to accomplish a shared goal. Some leaders who incorporate volunteerism into their school model noted it also gives the school a presence in the community.¹⁰⁷ In turn, community members see students from the charter school contributing to their neighborhood. This makes community organizations more likely to help the school with recruitment efforts and share information about the school with others in the community.

Parents are another important part of the school community. Intentionally diverse charter schools need to thoughtfully engage parents of diverse backgrounds, while recognizing differing communication styles, scheduling constraints, and participation methods. School leaders should note that some parents may have work schedules that do not easily permit active involvement in the school. Or there may be language barriers similarly inhibiting their active involvement. Offering an array of events, at various days and times, in different formats can help more parents find opportunities that fit with their availability and capacity to participate. With all of this in mind, if a school has a Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), that group should schedule and structure meetings in a way that encourages interaction and engages as many parents as possible across the school community.



TOOLBOX TIP

Parent Engagement Opportunities

- If the school draws students from multiple districts or zip codes within a city, parents from different districts or zip codes could co-lead each PTO meeting. This would allow the school staff and attending families to hear different perspectives from the school community.¹⁰⁸
- Schools might consider facilitating afterschool opportunities for families to interact with each other. This could include teachers leading small groups of students and parents from different backgrounds on weekend excursions or afternoon enrichment activities.
- Parents may want to consider having liaisons to school groups for parents who are not able to attend meetings in person due to scheduling, child care, or transportation constraints.
- The school could also setup weekend play dates at a central location for families living in different areas of town.
- Morning “coffee with the principal” sessions can be scheduled before the school day starts. These regular sessions are an opportunity for parents to learn more about what is happening

at the school, hear about upcoming events, learn of opportunities to volunteer, and ask questions. Holding an event early in the morning tends to appeal to middle-income parents because it enables families to drop their student off at the school and have time to attend the meeting before the start of a standard 9am to 5pm work day.¹⁰⁹

- Cultural events held during the school day, afterschool, or on weekends are another way to encourage families from different backgrounds to share their heritage.¹¹⁰
 - Valor school leaders held an event in December with students, parents, and instructional staff where parents from different faith traditions shared stories about their winter holiday practices. The format of the event was structured similarly to a core component of the school's social-emotional learning program so that parents learned more about what their children practice in school.¹¹¹
- Food-related activities are a popular way for students and parents to learn about and experience each other's culture.
 - Voice parents run a "Parade of Nations" at the school. There are tables to represent each continent, and parents bring in food and share stories and information about countries in that continent. Students bring a "passport" and get stamps at each table they visit. This event is a way to publicly celebrate diversity and invite the community into the school.¹¹²

CLASSROOM INTEGRATION

School leaders can take steps to ensure that the school's overall diversity is also reflected at the classroom level. Rethinking or avoiding tracking, which separates students by achievement levels, and proactively employing academic supports like targeted remediation and mentoring, will foster integration within classrooms. Although differentiated instruction requires strong structures and preparation to be successful, there are ways to incorporate the needs of EL students, students with disabilities, and students seeking advanced coursework within the same classroom. For example, if a school builds in flexible instructional periods, a science writing class could be an enrichment opportunity for students who excel in science and a chance for students who are struggling in writing to get extra support. Schools that differentiate instruction often rely on frequent interim assessments for all students, not just those who are receiving interventions, to monitor progress across all students' levels and needs.¹¹³ Formal and interim assessment data can be coupled with student surveys that ask questions about students' experience of academic programs and the diversity school culture.¹¹⁴

Full inclusion for students who receive English language instruction and students with disabilities is one way to increase in-classroom diversity. Schools could consider educating all students together for academic courses and providing targeted pull-out instruction for English Language learners and students with disabilities during non-academic time. Students who want to take honors or advanced coursework can receive general classroom instruction and complete additional assignments for advanced credit. This embedded honors model enables struggling learners to benefit from informal observations of the vocabulary and study habits of higher-performing students.¹¹⁵



EXAMPLE FROM THE FIELD

Supporting Diverse Learners at Valor Collegiate Academies

Valor school leaders and teachers structure the classroom toward full inclusion whenever possible. Students who perform below grade level receive intensive targeted instruction through push-in and pull-out remediation during their 5th and 6th grade years, as needed. The goal is to close the preparation gap to a level where teachers can effectively differentiate instruction while addressing student needs in the general classroom. If the remediation is successful, students are educated in the general classroom, with small group instruction and push-in supports, as necessary, during their 7th and 8th grade years.

This strategy has been particularly effective with EL students, who represent 24 percent of Valor schools' student body. Valor schools had the highest academic results in 2014-15 for EL students among Metro Nashville Public Schools.¹¹⁶

CONCLUSION



There is a growing number of intentionally diverse charter schools in the United States. The NCSRC has drawn lessons from research on school diversity efforts and the work of charter school leaders focused on diversity to help other school leaders who are just beginning this challenging work. Charter school leaders committed to opening diverse schools, or those trying to increase student diversity, must understand numerous factors. This includes how to measure and target diversity, what attracts parents of different backgrounds, how to retain these families, how to make diversity meaningful at the schoolwide and individual classroom levels, and how to help all students thrive in their school.

It is our hope that this toolkit will help charter school leaders who are opening a school that explicitly seeks to serve a diverse student body, or leaders who are operating a charter school with a different mission but want to increase student diversity, to recognize the benefits and plan for the challenges on the path toward diverse educational settings. Serving students and families from different backgrounds takes great thoughtfulness, intentionality, and careful progress monitoring, and there are great academic, social, and long-term benefits for students educated in diverse settings. Operating intentionally diverse charter schools is one model within the charter school sector that focuses on fostering, recognizing, and celebrating diversity to increase student learning and achievement.

Please contact the NCSRC with questions at NCSRC@safalpartners.com.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ In 25 percent of all public schools, more than 75 percent of the students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (FRL), a common measure of poverty. Twenty-four percent of traditional public schools have more than 75 percent of their students eligible for FRL, whereas 39 percent of charter schools have such high concentrations. Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. "Characteristics of Traditional Public and Public Charter Schools." Available at https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_cla.pdf.
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