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“Unleashing the Infinite Possibilities”

Introduction

Good morning.

Today, I want to share with you my vision for a kinder, more inclusive world.

A world in which we learn from one another.

A world where our cultural and linguistic differences bring us closer together, rather than driving us further apart.

*My vision is for nothing less than a **global transformation**.*

It’s a vision of empathy and sympathy; of caring, civility, and respect.

And it’s within our reach – but only if we allow ourselves the freedom and the space to achieve it.

This is my invitation to you; it’s an invitation to discover and unleash the infinite possibilities we can achieve in a world that embraces diversity.

So, how do we unleash these infinite possibilities?

How do we get people to think differently about languages and cultures?

How do we do this in a society that is monolithic in so many ways?

How do we invite individuals, especially individuals from the “dominant” culture, to learn about other people and their languages, customs, and practices?

In short, how do we create the transformation that will lead us to a kinder, more inclusive world?

*One of my favorite writers and thinkers is Paulo **Freire**, the renowned Brazilian educator.*

*In his seminal work, **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**, Freire wrote that there is **no such thing as a “neutral” education process.***

Instead, he said that education can function in one of two ways:

It can serve as an instrument to enforce conformity with the way things have always been done.

Or it can become “the practice of freedom” – which he described as the way in which people “discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

I think we can all agree that the status quo has failed too many of our children. It is time for a transformation.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

We trust schools to teach our children; to nurture them and keep them safe.

So, it makes sense that school should always be warm and welcoming; a place where children are supported and feel free to be who they are.

But imagine if you were a young child who just arrived here from another country. Maybe your family escaped war, or poverty, or famine. And then imagine how frightening it would be if you couldn't read, or write, or even understand English very well.

Think how alone you might feel if you were the only child in your school who needed a wheelchair to get around.

Or if you were still trying to figure out your sexual orientation.

Or your gender identity.

Imagine that you came to school hungry every morning because the homeless shelter you were living in didn't provide breakfast.

School can be a scary and lonely place for students who are perceived as being “different.”

Of course, learning becomes that much more difficult for students who face daily struggles like these.

Unfortunately, schools aren't always equipped to provide the kinds of support that some children need.

That's why it's so important that they adopt and implement strong Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policies.

At their core, these policies are designed to empower students from all backgrounds to visualize successful futures for themselves – and to provide them with a sense of belonging and self-worth.

Which is precisely why the Regents and I are working to make Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion part and parcel of everything we do at the Education Department.

And it's why we're working so closely with schools and school districts to make sure they understand the benefits too.

Let me repeat: At their core, DEI policies are designed to empower students from all backgrounds to visualize successful futures for themselves – and to provide them with a sense of belonging and self-worth.

And we know that these benefits can lead to improved student achievement – which in turn can lead to better outcomes in other areas of their lives, including work and civic engagement.

DEI is the framework that holds the promise. *It is the vehicle that will help us move and evolve toward a more empathetic, sympathetic, caring, and respectful world.*

DEI in our Schools

So, what does it mean for a district to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion in its schools? What does it look like in practice?

It starts with the people that our children see leading their schools and their classrooms every day.

And that, of course, requires greater diversity in our teaching and administrative staffs.

A recent report on the state of educator diversity by the Albert Shanker Institute is instructive [here](#).

The report finds that while Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students would be the greatest beneficiaries of a diverse teaching force, there is compelling evidence

that all students – and our democracy at large – would benefit from a teaching force that reflects the full diversity of the U.S. population.

Specifically, the research finds that:

Minority teachers tend to have higher academic expectations for minority students – which can result in increased academic and social growth among students.

Minority students benefit from having teachers from their own racial and ethnic group – teachers who can serve as successful role models, and who likely have greater knowledge of their students' heritage, culture, and language.

Positive exposure to individuals from a variety of races and ethnic groups – especially in childhood – can help to reduce stereotypes and implicit biases.

Perhaps most importantly, the research shows that all students benefit from being educated by teachers from a variety of different backgrounds, races, and ethnic groups – as this experience better prepares them to succeed in an increasingly diverse society.

In addition to staffing, schools must also present learning materials in a culturally responsive way.

Doing that requires thought and effort.

It means that educators must avoid what we call “the single story” – which presents history, literature, and all subject areas through the perspective of the dominant culture.

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

But when one story becomes the only story, it becomes the “definitive” story.

When that happens in school, it cheats students of the opportunity to learn the entirety of our nation's history. And it deprives them of the chance to see themselves as part of the American story.

We must tell the stories of all who have contributed to the development of this country and all who continue to make it the diverse and beautiful tapestry it is today.

Educators must create opportunities for all students to learn from multiple perspectives – perspectives that are just as important and just as valid as the narrow point of view from which history has traditionally been taught.

Translanguaging

Of course, any discussion about DEI in the classroom has to include the ways we educate students who are new to the country; who speak little or no English; and who may be unfamiliar with American customs and practices.

A recent policy brief published by the CUNY-NYS Institute on Emergent Bilinguals provides interesting insights into the practice of translanguaging.

Here are some of the critical takeaways from CUNY's policy brief:

Research shows that bilinguals don't have two separate languages. Instead, they have what is referred to as a single "linguistic repertoire" which consists of features of the languages they speak.

Bilinguals aren't simply two monolinguals in one person. Rather, they're individuals whose language includes features of all the languages they speak.

So, effective instruction involves finding ways to help students draw on all their linguistic resources – their full repertoire – to learn academic content in a new language.

And, while students do need solid and extended instruction in English language to acquire English, strategic use of their home language can accelerate both their acquisition of English and their understanding of math, science, social studies, and language arts being taught in the new language.

As they learn a new language, they aren't forgetting what they've already learned in their home language; rather, they're leveraging that knowledge to learn the target language.

Translanguaging is a normal practice in bilingual communities. But educators are finally beginning to realize that it should also be a strategy that they can use to help students draw on all their linguistic resources as they read, write, and discuss academic subjects in a new language.

Making space for translanguaging enables all teachers across all program types to educate all students bilingually.

It's a win/win for everyone.

So, what does it look like in the classroom?

As a child raised in a home where English was not the primary language spoken, I wasn't told the stories of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs or The Three Little Pigs.

I heard similar stories, but they were contextualized in slightly different ways – to make sense in the culture and the language that I understood.

The CUNY policy brief recounts a really clever use of translanguaging in the classroom:

*In an early childhood program in Brooklyn, one teacher set the stage for her students to use their bilingual imaginations and extend their language practices through a puppet show reenactment of *The Three Little Pigs*.*

In their play, the teacher asked questions and encouraged students to put their own spin on the story, rather than simply reenact it.

One group of students decided that each pig had recently arrived in New York from different countries and spoke different languages.

The pigs became neighbors and friends, and they communicated with each other using English and their different languages.

They decided that the pigs' houses were built of seaweed, the palms of coconut trees, and wooden planks – instead of straw, sticks, and brick, like in the English language version.

The students ended their version of the story with the wolf climbing down the kitchen window and landing in a big, boiling pot of sancocho, a traditional soup from the Dominican Republic.

*As they played and imagined new possibilities for the story of *The Three Little Pigs*, a translanguaging transformation was clearly at work.*

Students were encouraged to bring their experiences with diverse language practices and their own dynamic bilingual practices into their play.

The way the students reimagined the story reflected their own experiences in a multilingual, urban context and they applied their pride in that context to a creative transformation of a traditional story.

Like I said earlier – it was a win/win for everyone.

Conclusion

How do you raise peoples' consciousness? How do you move them to a place where empathy, sympathy, civility, and respect are the norm?

I began by talking about Paulo Freire and the vision of a global transformation – so, it's fitting that I end there, as well.

Freire talked about something he called “critical consciousness.”

He described critical consciousness as the ability to intervene in reality in order to change it.

And that’s exactly what we aim to do.

We are going to intervene in reality in order to change it.

And we’re going to start this global transformation by making sure our schools have the tools, the knowledge, and the resources they need to implement meaningful DEI policies.

We’re going to transform the world by making every school a warm and welcoming place for all; a place that values and celebrates our differences.

We’re going to transform the world by ensuring that no one’s language or culture is ever treated as inherently superior or inferior to anyone else’s.

And we’re going to transform the world by recognizing that every person and every culture has something unique and valuable to add to our shared experience on this planet.

I believe that we are finally ready to unleash the infinite possibilities that can be achieved in a world that embraces our differences and our diversity.

Thank you for allowing me to share my hope and my vision for a kinder, more inclusive world.