

**Intercultural Leadership Program
Focus Group Report**

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Introduction

Contracted by the Office of Educational Equity, we conducted focus groups with graduates of the Intercultural Leadership Program (ILP) in order to determine the strengths, weaknesses and ongoing needs of this intercultural proficiency approach. Five focus groups were held totaling 42 participants on November 11, 29, and December 7, 2010.

Participants included faculty and staff from Denfeld High School and principals who have participated in an Intercultural Leadership cohort. Faculty and staff received the same training, including administration of the DISC profile, the Intercultural Development Inventory, and a variety of interactive exercises that assisted them in reflecting on their own personal styles and assumptions and the enhancement of a variety of leadership, communication, and listening skills. The principals received the same training with the addition of the Leadership 360, a cross-cultural simulation, and one-on-one coaching sessions.

During the Focus Group sessions, participants were asked to discuss the following questions:

- How are you continuing to use what you learned in your leadership cohort?
- What, if anything, is getting in your way of using the things you learned?
- What do you need in order to continue using what you learned?
- How has the Intercultural Leadership experience impacted your relationships with colleagues? Students? Administrators? Families?
- Do you think the ILP should be continued? If so, why?
- What were the most important skills you learned and how have these contributed to the District's three educational goals?
 - Creating a safe and welcoming climate for students, families, and colleagues? How?
 - Creating effective and efficient systems? How?
 - Improving high achievement for all students? How?

General Trends Linked to the District's Goals

1) Creating a safe and welcoming climate for students, families, and colleagues:

Participants believed that the ILP helped them to: (1) build trust with colleagues, students, and families; (2) gain improved communication skills; and (3) develop a greater understanding and openness to differences through the following processes:

- a) An increased understanding of and willingness to discuss difference helped demystify student diversity, and allowed them to meet colleagues, families, and students with greater understanding and authenticity.
- b) The entire process built confidence in participants, and has helped them (to) be more open and proactive.
- c) Developing deeper levels of listening helped them to better understand students', colleagues', and families' issues and concerns.

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- d) Acknowledgement of successes and strengths allowed students and colleagues to feel valued in the jobs they do, and built self-efficacy and confidence.
- e) The DISC, Leadership styles inventory helped them focus on their own and others' personal styles and to value diverse strengths and approaches to problem solving.
- f) Learning about and being willing to ask powerful questions and not let issues remain under the surface helped them to build relationships and levels of trust.

Examples of participant insights:

- "At Denfeld – having all staff go through it – I saw dramatic climate change in our building."
- "Ultimately it [ILP] helped the kids because we know each other-we trust each other-and we know we are on the same page.... if you feel safe and secure can welcome others into it."
- "It [ILP] opened my eyes with parents who call with problems – I am listening deeper and understanding more."
- [from participant not originally from Duluth] "It has helped me to understand the culture of Duluth in a deeper way; helped me work with students and parents more effectively."
- [Example of a teacher at East who used extra copies of a worksheet that still had Denfeld written on it.] The teacher asked students if it was ok to use it. Most were fine with it but one student said; "Do I look like a kid from Denfeld?" The teacher said she wanted to jump down his throat but didn't. Instead the teacher took it as an opportunity to model/teach about similarities [ILP program component] and said; "yes you do...you're a kid in a different desk in a different part of town."
- [About a paraprofessional who hadn't felt important or significant]. "After the leadership training that person realized how important they were and become almost an honorary counselor in the building."

2) *Creating effective and efficient systems:*

Participants believed ILP helped them to: (1) build trust with colleagues, students, and families; (2) gain improved communication skills; and (3) increase collaboration; (4) create a common language and process awareness that helped them to accomplish tasks and develop programs more easily; and (5) develop "systems thinking" that helped them keep the "bigger picture" in mind through the following processes:

- a) *Understanding team toxins* (negative interpersonal processes) helps them to avoid creating unpleasant or stressful interpersonal situations and to work through them.
- b) *Designing Alliances* with peers and students helps to create relationships and commitments to necessary processes. The work up front makes what follows much smoother.
- c) *Making requests* and having a *counter offer* if the answer is "No" helps when negotiating with colleagues, students, and families.
- d) Opening oneself up to listening more deeply helps them to create alternatives to resolve an issue. (*Levels of listening*)
- e) The DISC helps them learn about different types of people and why all types are needed in a group for things to run smoothly.
- f) *Cleaning up messes* (dealing with issues, misunderstandings and hurt feelings) makes them more observant about how to come across/treat people – they are more aware of their impact on others.

Examples of participant insights:

- “It is difficult for others to see that a training that focused on personal change could have such an impact. As you become a better person you are more open and able to work with a multitude of different persons effectively.”
- “[The ILP training] creates open, creative, windows which impacts how well systems function.”
- [The ILP training] brings ideas that work in different places together (integrative quality) – it breaks down the culture of ‘no’ – it taught us to be better to each other.”
- “It has been immensely beneficial. I *clean up messes* at work and in my personal life all of the time.”
- “Through the DISC, I learned that there is value in all of those [leader styles]....I could not sell a program to save my soul, but I know who to bring with me to get the job done.”

3) *Improving high achievement for all students?*

Participants believed ILP helped them to: (1) increase trust with their students; (2) build a stronger learning community; (3) provide acknowledgement and empowerment at all levels; and (4) use deeper levels of listening to understand where students are through the following processes:

Examples of participant insights:

- “I create alliances with kids all of the time now – a discussion about what their role is, what my role is, and what we can expect from each other.”
- “Knowing who you are and being comfortable with yourself makes you a better teacher and student.”
- “*Asking powerful questions* helps students to take their knowledge to a higher level on Bloom’s taxonomy.”
- “*Building alliances* creates a climate in a building where kids can learn. You can’t learn in a toxic environment. We back each other up. People are on same page, work as a team, and kids feel like you care, so they are more willing to ask for help. All know what the expectations are.”
- [*Regarding the achievement gap*] I have a better understanding that people are different, and that schools are a culture, and you can work to improve that.

Differences Between Groups

1) Central/Denfeld Faculty and Staff

- a) There was a strong sense of in the Central/Denfeld faculty and staff that they needed to pull together, depend on each other, and problem-solve in order to survive the transition to the new environment. They engaged in a greater degree of systems-oriented thinking. They were viewing what was going on around them in more complex ways.
- b) They believed that the training has provided some skills that helped them through the transition, and to build new relationships with colleagues and students.
- c) Faculty and staff were more focused on survival and safety than the other groups, and were very focused on getting through the process without losing the skills they had learned.

2) The Principals

- a) The principals were much more focused on the self-actualizing elements of their training. They talked a great deal about the value of the self-awareness, knowledge and personal growth that resulted from the training—particularly the Leadership 360 and the personal coaching.

- b) While they also struggled to some degree with issues related to the transition, they felt that they were more able to use their skills in their positions.

Barriers

While the ILP participants indicated several ways that the training has provided them with the skills and capacities to further the goals of the district, they also indicated several barriers to their full utilization. Barriers identified by all participants included difficulties in dealing with the new environment:

- (1) They were conscious of feeling more isolated;
- (2) They needed opportunities to connect with peers who had shared the training in order to problem solve;
- (3) They were missing a “critical mass” of people who were committed to a more systems-oriented and less hierarchical approach to working with other professional and paraprofessional colleagues, and meeting the needs of students and families;
- (4) They needed to make extra effort to reach out to their peers in order to make use of the skills they had learned; and
- (5) With the transition and moving to different schools, not everyone has the same skills and language that the ILP provided.

Central/Denfeld faculty and staff were having a particularly hard time because they were not consciously welcomed, given orientation, or given mentoring to “learn the ropes.” They found they were often at odds with the administration at the school, i.e., that their training and experience was undervalued, and seen as being at odds with the Restorative Learning Project, even though they saw the two systems as potentially being mutually beneficial for students. This sense of being in an “us vs. them” environment seemed to increase their bonding with others who had transferred from Denfeld, while increasing the difficulty of their integration into the new school.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations emerged from the participants that focus on the themes of: (1) Ongoing support and enrichment for the groups/individuals who have completed the Intercultural Leadership Program; and (2) Continued training of district staff, faculty, and administration in the ILP:

- 1. Ongoing support toward continuing to grow and use the skills via “mini trainings,” in-service days, email reminders, and encouragement. One suggestion included in-service days similar to the immersion experiences of the ILP to “take a day and walk around our community rather than drive in from the suburbs.”
 - “What we *really* need is time to talk issues. That’s what leadership afforded us, time to talk as professionals.”
 - “We also need the follow-through component.”
 - “I need to feel validated-supported, a continuation of it [ILP] so I don’t feel isolated. I have been teaching 20 plus years, and this is one initiative that makes sense to me. I don’t want to lose it.”
- 2. A phase II that takes the learning of the ILP to the next step.
 - “Leadership training has been great – hopefully we continue to use it and to move forward.”
- 3. Many suggested that ideally the district could work through the rest of the buildings/units similar to the Denfeld project.
 - “I hope we can continue this work for ourselves and our schools.”

- “It [ILP was] powerful enough to change our group and powerful enough to change a building.”
- “Regardless of what cohort you went through – it’s knowing that other people have gone through the same process and have the same language. It allows you to take more risks and feel safer.”
- “It’s not just another program – it alters who you are as a leader and a person.”

Additional recommendations based on our observations of the focus groups include the need for ongoing support for faculty in the merged schools, particularly Central/Denfeld.

- Include faculty from Denfeld in planning the reintegration of faculty and staff from Central/Denfeld next year when they move to the new high school. Based on their own experience and ILP training, they would be perfect resources for setting up a welcoming and collaborative transitional environment.
- If the district decides to continue with the ILP as recommended by this focus group assessment, one recommendation is to include these past participants as mentors. This would both continue the “train the trainer” model which started in the ILP, while at the same time providing ongoing support and skill building for new ILP participants as well as their mentors.