



Culturally sensitive teaching can close gap, coalition says

Schools need to engage students, civil rights groups say

By [Frank Wolfe](#)

Although [NCLB](#) reauthorization has stalled, a broad coalition of civil rights groups is working to ensure a new bill contains provisions for "culturally based teaching" that integrates native language, culture and traditions into secondary school classrooms -- an approach the coalition says can significantly close the achievement gap.

"It is critical to the success of all students that federal, state and local education policies account for culturally based teaching programs and provide teachers with tools and resources to effectively incorporate culture into the classroom," said Michael Wotorson, director of the [Campaign for High School Equity](#).

Formed last June, the group is engaging policymakers to improve how the nation's secondary schools serve racial and ethnic minorities.

The coalition includes such groups as the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#), the [National Council of La Raza](#), and the [National Indian Education Association](#).

CHSE said integrating culturally based teaching in U.S. education policy could take several forms:

- Promoting culturally relevant content knowledge and teaching in the classroom to prepare all students for participation in the global economy.
- Implementing quality high school models proven to support different learning styles, cultures and student situations.
- Promoting instructional practices designed to meet diverse learners' needs, such as reflexive learning and culturally competent learning techniques.

Immersion leads to success

Rushern Baker III, executive director of the [Community Teachers Institute](#), said a key component of culturally based teaching is community inclusion. Baker noted [Mary Harris "Mother" Jones Elementary School](#) -- a high-achieving [Title I](#) school in Adelphi, Md. -- where parents "were incorporated into the school" through frequent meetings with school personnel. The former principal, Cheryl Logan, spoke fluent Spanish and could engage with the students, 80 percent of whom are Latino, Baker said.

"She hand-selected her teachers, not only based on quality, but based on whether they would stay for the long haul and whether they were willing to be challenged in getting engaged in the community," Baker said of Logan.

One big challenge of community engagement by teachers, however, is the "disconnect between teachers and students," said Willard Sakiestewa Gilbert, president of NIEA. "The majority of teachers don't live in the neighborhoods where the students do."

Gilbert said teaching content areas, native language and culture "are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary and enhance academic achievement in other subject disciplines."

NIEA cited a 2006 study by the [Education Policy Studies Laboratory](#) at [Arizona State University](#) that found Navajo immersion students at the Arizona Fort Defiance Elementary School not only acquired a second language but also performed well on assessments and, in some areas, better than their non-immersion peers.

In addition, a [National Science Foundation](#)-funded effort, the Native Science Connections Research Project in Flagstaff, Ariz., is incorporating native language, culture and traditions into elementary school science classrooms. Thus far, evidence points to an increase in students' math and science achievement, NIEA said.

Sheryl Denbo, executive director of the [Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium](#), said culturally based teaching helps student achievement by validating students' self-worth and sparking their curiosity about other cultures.

"We're now operating under a deficit model that gives some kids extra help -- supplemental educational services. That's not working," she said. "Kids are not going to SES, which is not linked to what's going on every day in their lives. We need to have classrooms that make them feel validated."