

# HOSTING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE

As we begin the new school year we are aware that race issues have been prevalent in our society lately. Additionally, the report: **An Examination of Student and Educator Experiences in Denver Public Schools Through the Voices of African – American teachers and Administrators** has heightened the focus within DPS.

The importance of race and bias dialogue in DPS cannot be understated. As a school leader we want to support you in being able to facilitate these conversations about race and bias with our colleagues, students and communities.

## TIPS ABOUT SETTING UP THE CONVERSATION AND GUIDING QUESTIONS TO FACILITATE DEEP AND MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE.

**Self – reflection:** Reflect on your life experiences with race and bias and think about your ability to engage in emotionally charged conversations. Assess your comfort level in facilitating race conversations and honestly look at your own readiness to have this conversation. Talk with other leaders to find strategies they have used to facilitate this conversation.

**Assemble a team:** In every building and team we have worked with, we have found that there are internal people who are well skilled in facilitating race and bias conversations. Ask your teams if there are people who would be willing to support these conversations and have the team meet prior to the conversation to plan out each person's role. If you are school based don't forget to engage your students and have them be a part of your team. If you work in the Emily Griffith offices, seek out students to engage with through the Emily Griffith campus.

**Set working agreements:** To encourage dialogue, mutual respect and hearing what others say we recommend establishing a set of working agreements. Recognize that talking about race and bias will be challenging and can be discomfoting. Examples of working agreements are: no judgment that leads to blame or shame, no side conversations, respectful use of electronics.

- Everyone should understand the purpose of the conversation is to hear and learn from each other (not to declare others to blame, guilty, ignorant; nor to all agree or to find a solution to the race and bias problem)
- People should be relaxed and comfortable with one another, but not assume that everyone shares their own ideas, beliefs, or experiences. A key for successful discussion is to be interested in and “hear” (openly acknowledge) what others have experienced and what they think.
- Saying “I’ve never thought of that before – could you explain why you think that?” is a lot better than “I don’t believe it; that’s never happened to me.”
- Recognize that people of good intent can mis-speak or say things that unintentionally offend others. Letting others know how their words affect you or might be understood by others is healthy and constructive; ascribing malice to their words is not.
- Saying “I feel frustrated (or I feel disrespected) when people say (*blank*) because (*blank*)” is a lot better than “That pisses me off; that’s such a stupid (or racist) thing to say”

- Establish a way for everyone to participate and be heard (inviting those who are more quiet to share their thoughts and/or questions and ensuring that the most talkative give space for other voices)
- Announce a strategy for brief “breather breaks” and “hit the restart button” in the event that the conversation veers into too conflicted or angry words.
- Select and discuss facilitator(s) responsible for guiding the conversations and supporting everyone to abide by the working agreements that everyone will acknowledge and respect.

**Conversation Starters:** Open the Conversation with begin with a few of these questions to help everyone get to know and feel comfortable with one another:

- Is there anything you would like to say to clean up the past?
- What have you always wanted to ask someone from the other side?
- What issues deeply concern you?
- What are some race or biased life experiences that have affected you?
- What is your comfort level in talking about race and bias?
- What is the most memorable advice from your grandparents or other elders?
- How have the social issues about race and bias in our communities affected you?
- How do you think race and bias issues have affected specific groups?
- What can you influence in DPS to mitigate the negative impacts of race and bias?

**Listen and be open to questions:** Use deep listening practices to deepen the conversation once you are all comfortable, get serious and deepen the conversation.

The simple proverb “listen to understand and then speak to be understood” rings true. Genuine listening takes patience and effort. Spending the least amount of time listening necessary to come up with a solution or response doesn't work in addressing racial and bias inequity. Real listening often results in questions, and encourages us to embrace this approach. Never be afraid of questions. They aren't disrespectful. Asking questions shows a willingness to learn and to understand.

**Allow for process time:** With a long term plan the people in your team who need process time will be able to engage deeply over time. Allow the conversation to unfold organically by giving people thought and process time.

**Embrace the discomfort of not knowing:** Admit to your own fears and/or uncertainty in having race and bias conversations. Showing that you are human and not sure how best to open the conversation humanizes you and models moving forward in the face of fear and uncertainty.

On our way to new knowledge, we have to resign from a place of comfort and embrace the discomfort of not having all the answers. We don't know what we don't know. This is true in life and especially true when it comes to race and bias. Be comfortable with the feeling of not understanding or knowing enough yet. Be comfortable changing your mind. Don't let it hold you back -- let it push you to learn more.

**Look to your community:** All schools have a larger community with elders who are willing to support conversations on race and bias. Ask community members who those people are and invite them in to the work. Race and bias are social issues that impact our communities and elders and others in the community will welcome the opportunity to talk and share stories.

**Ask for help:** Reach out to the Culture, Equity, Leadership Team (CELT) or the Family and Community Engagement (FACE) office. Race and bias conversations are challenging and there are people and groups throughout our communities who are willing to help you.

**Moving Forward:** “A mind that is stretched by new experience can never go back to its old dimensions.” -Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes

All of these recommendations can lead to changes that might be frustrating at times, and that's okay. This process brings about empathy, which is a crucial ingredient of meaningful action. Our hope is that we all become better equipped to talk about racism and bias and come together to make a positive difference in our DPS communities.

HELPFUL LINKS:

**Facing Up to Race:** <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/16/08/facing-race>

**Rocky Mountain PBS:**

- Standing In The Gap: <http://race.rmpbs.org/education/watch/>
- Local Programs: <http://www.rmpbs.org/localprograms/>

**Teaching Tolerance:** <http://www.tolerance.org/>

**New York Times: A Conversation on Race: A series of short films about identity in America:**

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/your-stories/conversations-on-race>

**Colorado History Museum:** <http://www.historycolorado.org/news-room/race-are-we-so-different-open-history-colorado-center>

**Microaggressions, Power, Privilege, And Everyday Life:** <http://www.microaggressions.com/about>

*For more information please contact the Culture, Equity and Leadership Team at 720.423.2222*