

NC ACCESS BEST PRACTICES



Office of Charter Schools
NC ACCESS PROGRAM
NC Department of Public Instruction

School Culture

Racial Justice

Agents of Change

Implementation Description

IC Imagine, a K-12 public charter school in Asheville, focuses on developing students into leaders who advocate for change in their communities. This guiding principle is exemplified in the way IC Imagine addresses the issues of race, poverty, and justice in education. For years, IC Imagine's Director of Student Support Services noticed disturbing gaps in the pedagogical approach to historically marginalized populations and how discussions related to race were conducted (or more often, absent) in the classroom. These observations prompted him to initiate difficult, honest conversations about race with other staff members and the school administration. These small discussion groups quickly developed into a formal task force called the [Justice Equity Diversity Inclusion \(JEDI\)](#) committee. During the 2020-2021 school year, the death of George Floyd became a catalyst to further the work of the JEDI committee. This historic event brought equity issues to the forefront and provided unique opportunities for increased staff dialogue around the topics of race and diversity. IC Imagine staff engaged in timely NC ACCESS funded professional development, which prepared teachers to lead their classrooms in constructive dialogue regarding race and social justice issues.

The tragic death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 mobilized many in America and beyond to address issues regarding race (Hassan & O'Grady, 2020). IC Imagine's administrative team decided to engage with this cultural touchstone and thoughtfully drafted a [letter](#), which they distributed to their school community explicitly addressing their unified stance on the issue. Meanwhile, teachers began to have impromptu conversations, which led to more formalized collaboration and brainstorming of how to address race

About This School

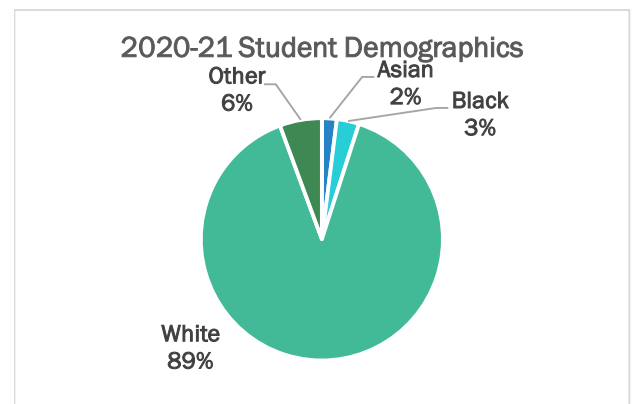
IC Imagine

IC Imagine is dedicated to ensuring that all students are learning at high levels through an integrated approach to the whole child. They strive to support students, families, and learning processes to move beyond embracing diversity towards actions that implement culturally responsive pedagogy within curriculum, field trips, cultural performances, service-learning projects, classroom activities, discipline policy, and community communication. Our educational policy recognizes the multitude of human expressions in localities, the United States, and the world as we prepare children to live and thrive in an interconnected and interdependent 21st century global society.

Year School Opened: 2014-15

Grant Awarded: 2019-20

Grade Levels Served: K-12



% ED Student Population: 22.5%

Urbanicity: Rural / Asheville, NC

Persons in Poverty (Buncombe)⁶: 12.2%

April 28, 2021

and equity at IC Imagine. With a newfound support from the administration, teachers felt empowered to openly discuss race, poverty, and social justice in the classroom.

In order to leverage the staff's enthusiasm, the administrative team shared details of their NC ACCESS subgrant, explaining how they planned to use the funds to ensure a more equitable education for disadvantaged students. Gaining teacher buy-in was an important step in engaging staff and aligning school initiatives (J. Townley, personal interview, March 22, 2021). IC Imagine was able to utilize NC ACCESS funds to provide individual training sessions with the Racial Equity Institute (REI), and in fall 2021, the staff will begin corporate training with REI. School staff also received equity training from the American Association of School Counselors, and by utilizing funds afforded by the NC ACCESS grant opportunity, they were able to purchase books for their staff training. In addition to the PD opportunities offered by school leadership, the JEDI committee began hosting workshops that provided a space for colleagues to share personal perspectives and instructional strategies for addressing race in the classroom. These combined efforts resulted in personal and professional growth for staff members (J. Townley, personal interview, March 22, 2021).

One of IC Imagine's goals was to *"implement social justice as part of [their] social emotional curriculum and increase opportunities to engage in this curriculum"* (Townley, 2020). As a result, middle school and high school students have begun participating in optional discussion groups that meet weekly or bi-weekly to discuss current events, their personal analysis, and their emotional responses. In discussions both inside and outside of the classroom, student participants learned appropriate vocabulary for respectful and effective conversations regarding these issues. Setting guidelines for discussions and agreeing on common definitions of terms can prevent confusion and hostility ("Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism", n.d.). IC Imagine has provided a safe space for students to practice these difficult conversations with teachers and fellow students, so they can grow their communication skills through trial and error in a supportive environment. The overarching goal is for students to be able to think critically and recognize how to become *"agents of change"* - whatever that may look like - in their own communities, and school leadership is beginning to see that change take place in their students (S. Vervain, personal interview, March 22, 2021).

Results

The JEDI committee more than doubled in size as it grew from 12 to 25 participants, and interest in their efforts continues to grow.

IC Imagine staff and families alike have noticed a change in the school's climate and culture (S. Vervain, personal interview, March 22, 2021). These issues and conversations are still difficult at times, but comfort levels are increasing as students and staff have opportunities to learn more, practice positive communication, and build trust.

The head of school, who also has children enrolled at IC Imagine, noted that her 5th grade daughter's vocabulary related to issues of race, poverty, and social justice has increased exponentially (J. Townley, personal interview, March 22, 2021). Overall, student confidence and leadership skills have grown, empowering them to start their own groups, for example a Gay/Straight Alliance group in the high school.

Challenges

Sometimes equity-based conversations went awry in the classroom. When this happened, the teacher would contact families to explain what happened, and explore ways to ensure a more productive and

successful discussion occurred the next time, which often involved asking a colleague to co-teach, perform classroom observations, or review a lesson plan before implementation.

Future Modifications

IC Imagine plans to continue building on their momentum. More equity-focused professional development is scheduled for fall 2021. School administration is currently facilitating research into culturally-relevant curriculum options to be implemented in the 2021-22 school year. Additionally, as more students are able to return to in-person learning, they hope to plan field trips which highlight more diverse experiences.

Critical Components

Getting Started

Based on feedback from the school, a school that aims to provide a more equitable educational experience will need to establish a school-wide culture of trust, a clear understanding of their goals, and have the patience to see these goals accomplished gradually over time. The administration will also need to identify one or more staff member(s) who have an ability to lead the effort and mobilize others. Additionally, it is essential to provide training for staff so they feel equipped to implement social justice strategies in their classrooms and moderate student conversations.

Ongoing Supports

Administration and staff members will need to continue to conduct personal research and pursue professional development opportunities to further develop their understanding of race, equity, and justice. One of the ways the JEDI committee has continued to engage and empower participants is by including a “*nugget of wisdom*” related to equity in the staff’s weekly newsletter and hosting regular workshops to train colleagues (J. Townley, personal interview, March 22, 2021).

Equity Connections

Increasing a school’s capacity to have an open dialogue around equity, race, and social justice begins with the administrators, because they “*play the primary role in setting the tone for the school, and they have the ability to hold staff accountable to provide an equitable education to all students*” (Hersey, 2020). IC Imagine began setting the tone for their school by issuing an open letter to stakeholders following the death of George Floyd.

When addressing issues of race and poverty, it is important for educators to serve as a “*trusted adult*” who can help students think critically and conduct challenging discussions in a knowledgeable and respectful manner (Landsman, 2016). As a result of discussion groups at IC Imagine, students are now equipped with racially sensitive language, as well as communication and leadership skills.

Research

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3. Landsman, J. (November 2016). "Helping Students Discuss Race Openly". Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). *Education Leadership* Volume 74, Number 3, Disrupting Inequity. Accessed on May 11, 2021. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov16/vol74/num03/Helping-Students-Discuss-Race-Openly.aspx>
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6. United States Census Bureau, Quick Facts North Carolina, Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/NC/PST045219>