

Motivating and Inspiring Educators:

A Student-led Superintendent's Conference Day



By Dr. Dina A. Pannone

At the stroke of 8 a.m., the school's main lobby pulsates with vibrant energy as administrators, teachers, and staff members eagerly stream in. Their senses are immediately captivated by a kaleidoscope of cultural wonders adorning the hallways — students' crafted paintings, each a representation of diverse countries, traditions, and lifestyles; an impressive eight-foot inflatable globe, a collaborative canvas painted by the very hands that seek knowledge; and the distant notes of a steel drum serenading the air.

Stepping into this immersive environment, each staff member is warmly welcomed by students adorned in the rich tapestry of their family's cultural attire. As they receive a passport detailing the day's itinerary, a sense of anticipation and curiosity permeates the air. Today is no ordinary school day; it is an extraordinary journey orchestrated by students themselves – a superintendent's conference day, where education transcends boundaries and becomes a passport to a global learning adventure.

CATALYZING CHANGE: FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

The genesis of this transformative journey is supported by the culmination of a dissertation addressing a critical need within educational districts. The study underscored the imperative for districts to facilitate professional development opportunities, equipping teachers with essential skills to adeptly adjust classroom practices in support of students' social emotional (SE) needs and foster an inclusive, culturally responsive learning environment.

From the research a significant revelation surfaced: while teachers acknowledge the significance of social-emotional-cultural learning, a gap exists in their understanding of how to prioritize and effectively integrate these dimensions into daily activities. A unique vantage point provided by world language teachers identified integral components of a successful professional development program. Envisioned to empower educators with the skills to seamlessly adapt their classroom practices, these programs support the SE needs of students and cultivate culturally responsive learning environments. The study's findings underscore the necessity of a comprehensive professional development initiative harmoniously integrating social emotional learning (SEL) and culturally responsive teaching (CRT) to engender holistic social emotional-cultural (SEC) learning.

Practical recommendations from the research advocate for sensitivity training, addressing the SE needs of staff, guidance on creating conducive learning environments, instruction on

building alliances, and the incorporation of ongoing, culturally aware assessments. This research aims to bridge the gap between recognition and effective implementation of SEC learning in our classrooms. The journey toward this end took a leap of faith, marked by a novel approach to the superintendent's conference day – a first-ever, student-run event named "Passport to Culture Day."

UNLOCKING THE FULL POTENTIAL: A STUDENT-LED INITIATIVE

In support of the research findings, the initiative to create a student-led Passport to Culture Day took on added significance. This event provides a unique platform to address several aspects illuminated by the research. Firstly, it aligns with the theme of inclusivity in SE training by actively involving not only teachers but also support staff, recognizing their crucial contribution to the educational landscape. By placing students at the forefront of this initiative, it acknowledges their role in shaping the cultural fabric of the learning environment.

Passport to Culture Day directly addresses the importance of building strong student-teacher relationships. The event facilitates opportunities for educators to connect with students on a personal level, learning from the students, celebrating their cultures, and fostering an understanding of students' emotional and cultural needs. By creating an environment that encourages these connections, the initiative aims to strengthen the sense of rapport and alliance between students and teachers.

Furthermore, the event aligns with the research theme of providing comprehensive SE support for staff. As students take the lead in showcasing cultural diversity and fostering understanding, teachers and support staff can actively participate, gaining valuable insights into the cultural dynamics within the student body. This firsthand experience can contribute to the professional development of educators, helping them feel better prepared to engage with the diverse needs of the student population.

In essence, the creation of a student-led Passport to Culture Day

serves as a strategic response to the identified needs and challenges highlighted in the research. It embodies inclusivity, supports staff development, and actively fosters student-teacher relationships, creating a holistic and enriching educational experience for all involved.

STRUCTURED ENGAGEMENT: PASSPORT TO CULTURE DAY PROGRAM

Passport to Culture Day unfolded in a carefully structured format designed for maximum engagement and participation. Nine student groups, representing diverse cultural organizations, volunteered to host two rooms showcasing their unique contributions. These groups included the Black Student Union, French Honor Society, International Culture Club, Italian Honor Society, Latinx, Muslim Student Association, South Asian Culture Club, Spanish Honor Society, and English Language Learners.

To ensure smooth coordination, groups filled out a spreadsheet detailing their chosen country and activity. Presentations, executed through Canva or Slides, adhered to a predefined template. A supply list for decorations and activities was created, and all items were procured through Amazon. This structured approach aimed to deliver a seamless and enriching experience, fostering inclusivity.

TAILORED EXPERIENCES FOR DIFFERENT GROUPS

Passport to Culture Day tailored experiences for two distinct groups. Group 1, consisting of elementary teachers, permanent substitutes, teaching assistants, and administrators, had a unique day extending beyond classrooms. This day started off with breakfast and a welcome address from the superintendent. It then featured student-led Passport to Culture room sessions and an ENL workshop, concluding with a breakout session. Group 2, comprising secondary teachers, teaching assistants, permanent substitutes, and administrators, had a dynamic day starting with a breakfast and welcome address from the superintendent, followed by an ENL workshop and a journey through Passport

to Culture, concluding with breakout and recap sessions. Each group's tailored itinerary ensured a comprehensive and impactful encounter with diverse cultural presentations, aligning with the overarching goals of inclusivity and cultural understanding in Passport to Culture.

STUDENT-LED PASSPORT TO CULTURE CLASSROOM SESSIONS

A standout feature of Passport to Culture Day was the student-led classroom sessions, wherein students took on the role of educators, presenting insights about various countries, including their home nations. The presentations covered country introductions, the district's student data, cultural activities, phrases in the country's language, and personal reflections.

Some session highlights included the Italian Honor Society treating attendees to the delights of coffee, Italian desserts, and mosaic art, while the Muslim Student Association offered a taste of street food from Bangladesh. The International Culture Club presented diya designing from India, and the Black Student Union featured arts and crafts with bracelet making from Ghana. The Spanish Honor Society tantalized taste buds with coquito from Puerto Rico, and the Bangladeshi students organized a chai tea session. From the Dominican Republic, attendees savored habichuelas con dulce, and from Haiti, there were lively dance performances and refreshing shaved ice. Vietnam brought the joy of karaoke, and Senegal offered tote bag painting. This immersive experience provided valuable insights into diverse cultures and showcased students' depth of understanding about global perspectives. The event exemplified the educational community's commitment to fostering global awareness and celebrating diversity.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

The breakout sessions were designed to provide targeted insights and practical tools to enhance teaching practices and support students' language development across academic disciplines.

Breakout sessions for elementary educators covered topics such as

"Duolingo for Vocabulary Building," "Translation Services," "Microsoft Translator for Whole-Class Engagement," and "Google Translate for Translating Resources." These sessions, accompanied by resource materials, empowered educators with practical tools to enhance teaching practices and support students' language development across academic disciplines.

Breakout sessions for secondary educators facilitated reflection and discussion, guided by meaningful questions. The sessions focused on key takeaways, integration into curricula, resource needs, and strategies for lasting impact on school culture.

ENL workshop breakout sessions centered on insights, challenges, strategies, and envisioning technology use for English language learners.

These breakout sessions collectively fostered a collaborative and reflective environment, ensuring ongoing growth and support for educators and students alike.

A MEMORABLE SUPERINTENDENT'S CONFERENCE DAY

In the wake of Passport to Culture, superintendent's conference day has evolved into an unforgettable and enlightening experience, leaving an indelible mark on our educational community. The event's transformative power is evident in the heartfelt sentiments expressed by staff, administrators, and students alike. As one associate principal described, the day was a harmonious blend of being "heartfelt, rewarding, and educational," resonating with the overarching theme of celebration and understanding. The profound impact echoed by the president of the board of education and the executive director of elementary education underscores the significance of Passport to Culture as the most meaningful professional learning experience in their careers. Teachers, inspired by students' courage and individuality, speak to the event's success in fostering a positive school culture that motivates and engages. The words of a special education teacher emphasize the event's meaningful utilization of superintendent's conference day, build-

ing empathy and understanding for students from diverse backgrounds. This success extends beyond a single day, as noted by a teacher who deemed it the best superintendent's conference day in 18 years. The collective commitment of elementary educators and students to compassion and cultural understanding underscores the enduring impact of Passport to Culture. As we move forward, the flame of mindfulness and inclusivity ignited by this event will guide us to not only recognize and celebrate but also to learn from the rich tapestry of our diverse community, shaping a future where diversity is not just acknowledged but celebrated.

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