



## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2021.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).


### PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: County of Henrico  
Program Title: Culture of Dignity and Responsive Action Plan  
Program Category: Customer Service

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

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Signature: 

## **Program Overview**

In response to issues of social unrest in the spring of 2020, the Henrico County Public Schools (HCPS) Department of Equity, Diversity and Opportunity developed a Culture of Dignity and Responsive Action Plan that addressed the well-being and needs of staff.

This plan includes affinity groups (collectives), book study and discussions, and an “Ensuring Equity” series of online learning courses in alignment with our Culturally Responsive Education Model (CREM) framework. These all center on anti-racism, belonging, culturally responsive principles and dignity. The design and content were based on conversations we had with staff members during the healing circles our department facilitated following the murder of George Floyd in Minnesota.

As a result of the action plan, more than 1,000 educators, staff members and school leaders participated in at least one of the opportunities, with exit survey results indicating overwhelmingly positive feedback about educators’ growth and understanding of themselves and others.

## **Problem/Challenge/Situation Faced by Locality**

When our schools closed to in-person learning on March 13, 2020, the Office of Equity, Diversity and Opportunity was consumed with meeting our most vulnerable families’ immediate needs related to food and technology access. However, as the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmad Arbery and George Floyd led to an increased focus on racial injustice, the office began to see and hear from educators that they wanted resources to help them learn and take action and a space to experience healing and support. The Office of Equity, Diversity and Opportunity saw this as an important need, given the anxiety and unrest surrounding both the pandemic and racial injustices — especially since most educators were not in their buildings and had lost their work-based social support. Subsequently, we sponsored healing circles before and after the funeral for George

Floyd, for all interested staff to express and process their feelings. Based on the concerns derived from our healing circles and the professional development strategic initiatives, we devised an immediate plan of action.

### **How Program Fulfilled Awards Criteria**

As communities across the nation grapple with racial injustice, the need for resources to support equity-mindedness, equity practices and cultural responsiveness has been brought to the forefront. This action plan represents an innovative approach to professional learning and support for educators and others working daily and directly with diverse groups of community members. Utilizing healing circles, book discussion groups and online learning and support, the Culture of Dignity and Responsive Action Plan provides a model for others to draw upon as they develop structures to support equity mindsets and practices within their own communities.

### **How Program Was Carried Out**

Last year a Culturally Responsive Education Model (CREM) framework was devised by the Equity Diversity Advisory Committee and approved by HCPS' Division Leadership Team. The CREM framework serves as a critical lens for the [Henrico Learner Profile](#), the school division's blueprint for learning. It uses culturally responsive teaching practices, equity pedagogy, knowledge construction, content integration and prejudice reduction (social justice) and empowerment. In the initial response to educator requests for support and resources, it was determined that given our office's focus on culturally responsive restorative practices, that we would offer an avenue of support for educators in a virtual healing circle format that was focused on affinity groupings of educators into a collective learning and processing experience. But following the social unrest over the summer, it was decided that an update to this plan was needed. The newly updated summer plan started June 2020 and supported the following objectives:

- Promote a sense of belonging for all student and staff populations, and work toward equal retention and graduation rates across demographic groups.
- Infuse equity-mindedness throughout the fabric of the division structure and create the capacity to work toward equity in all aspects of school endeavors.
- Ensure quality and effectiveness of cultural responsiveness in support of a safe and welcoming environment for all students and employees.
- Provide ongoing professional development that integrates equity and diversity into our classroom.

**Affinity groups:** We provided educators with the opportunity to engage in hour-long circles with their affinity groups to process what was happening in the world. The offering was so popular, we had to add additional sessions and based on the positive feedback, we established a schedule of virtual Educator Collective Affinity Group meetings throughout the summer. Our office was able to tailor the affinity group meetings to the specific educator groups and their needs. In addition to being able to respond quickly to the identified needs of the groups, the virtual format also meant that educators from across Henrico County were able to come together, which helped form new relationships. In cases where an educator may have been one of only a few Black educators or educators of color in their school, they could now have a much larger circle of support.

Our office held the first cycle of meetings throughout the summer with three distinct groups of staff members, Black educators, teachers of color and allies to the cause of anti-racism (co-conspirators). Each group had a specific purpose, as outlined below, and met three-to-four times throughout summer 2020.

**The Black Educator Affinity Group** (63 members) provided a space for staff members to:

- Process past and current feelings specific to being a Black staff member within HCPS.

- Identify strategies for communicating concerns to peers and leaders.
- Identify viable solutions for the concerns of Black staff and students.
- Cultivate a collective fellowship, support and network for Black educators.

In addition, select members of the Black Affinity Group established an African-American (Black) Staff Task Force to identify recommendations for establishing, or re-establishing, a social contract to (a) improve the outcomes of African-American (Black) students; (b) engage African-American (Black) parents; and (c) and create an environment where all African-American (Black) staff feel like they can thrive.

**The Teachers of Color Affinity Group** (nine members) provided a space:

- For affirmation and empowerment of staff of color.
- Where staff of color can have discussions on how to defy stereotypes and advocate to leaders about their concerns.
- Where staff members can discuss media headlines that affect them.

**The Allyship/Co-Conspirator Affinity Group** (104 members) provided a space for staff to:

- Recognize and process the impact of privilege on White educators or others.
- Recognize the positionality and roles of individuals for social change, personally and within the educational ecosystem.
- Understand racial consciousness and Whiteness.
- Practice the dialogue skills that allies need to advance the work of racial equity.

Upon seeing the positive impact of the educator affinity groups and the concerns shared by various participants, these groups have now transitioned into an educator collective. The focus of these groups is bringing together the gifts, perspectives and insights of individual educators to

benefit the good of the whole. Educators across the school division voluntarily meet monthly to discuss opportunities for professional development and growth, specifically focusing on diversity, equity and inclusion among staff.

**Book discussion groups:** A total of 104 educators participated in seven book discussion groups. Some of the books include “Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain” by Zaretta Hammond; “We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom” by Bettina Love; “Teaching for Black Lives” by Dyann Watson; “Everyday Anti-Racism” by Mica Pollock; “How to Be an Anti-Racist” by Ibram X Kendi; “White Fragility” by Robin Diangelo; and “For White Folks Who Teach In the Hood and The Rest of Y’all Too” by Christopher Emdin. It was important that there be some action associated with the book groups, so the culminating activity for participants was the creation of a personal action plan based on what they had learned by participating in the book group.

The positive impact of educators from across Henrico County coming together for the educator collective affinity groups and the book discussion groups was evident all summer and we wanted to provide a final opportunity for educators to come together at the conclusion of the groups this summer. A virtual summit was held Aug. 28, 2020, with participants from all of the groups. The summit provided an opportunity for networking, discussion and problem-solving related to future professional development needs and ideas to enhance the recruitment and retention of teachers of color.

Finally, our department also recognized through the interest in our educator affinity groups and book discussion groups that educators were interested in self-paced professional learning that could provide educators with specific skills and resources needed to address “hot topics” related to cultural responsiveness and equity.

**Online courses:** In coordination with the Division of Learning, an online course called “Culturally Responsive Education in the Online Environment” was developed as part of the Online Educators Workshop suite of courses offered to all educators as a tool to prepare for virtual instruction. As of Feb. 1, 2021, 337 educators have completed this course. Not only did the Office of Equity, Diversity and Opportunity offer affinity groups and book studies, we developed an Ensuring Equity Series for educators who desired to deepen their understanding of equity and culturally responsive education practices. A total of 571 educators completed courses in the Ensuring Equity series this summer. The course offerings focused on topics such as understanding unconscious bias and microaggressions, rejecting a deficit mindset about students in poverty, addressing the needs of students with housing instability, building relationships with students and families across cultural differences and addressing disproportionate numbers of African-American students in special education and culturally responsive educator practices.

### **Financing and Staffing**

During the 2019-20 school year, we were fortunate to have been allocated federal Title II funds to build a professional library. We purchased a significant number of books that support our culturally responsive education model, which coincided with staff members’ requests for book discussion groups centered on anti-racism and social justice. Grant funding was able to infuse our professional learning resource library with \$8,000.

The human capital needed to develop, facilitate and oversee the action plan is another fiscal consideration. Our office includes two full-time staff members, one office assistant and four part-time hourly paid staff members for the summer that were part of our budget. Using these human resources strategically, this endeavor was accomplished with no additional salary expenses incurred by the school system.

In addition, our department leveraged our school division's already existing online learning management system, Schoology, to build online communities with book groups. Book group members interacted on Schoology through discussion boards and activities and came together for virtual discussions two-to-three times in the summer.

### **Program Results**

Through the Culture of Dignity and Responsive Action Plan, the HCPS Office of Equity, Diversity and Opportunity was able to reach more than 1,000 educators during the summer of 2020.

Surveys conducted with the members of the educator collective affinity groups and the book discussion groups indicated 100% positive feedback about the experience. Qualitative data from the surveys included these remarks:

- "I learned that my voice is important and that there are people that I can reach out to for support. I loved having the affinity group meetings; it helped me not feel so alone in some experiences."
- "It was so encouraging and empowering to 'meet' and learn from colleagues across Henrico County with similar passions and values that motivate us as educators."
- "I learned about effective ways to increase student engagement and ownership in my classroom from the book [I read]."
- "I have learned that my voice matters and there are many who share similar experiences that I have. As I listen to others in their professional roles I learned strategies in ways to respond and react when someone has placed me in an intimidating situation."
- "My biggest takeaway is that, thankfully, there are many thoughtful, culturally competent educators in our county. I walked away from this group feeling better prepared to engage in conversations about anti-racism and I am thankful for the participation of a couple of my [school] building colleagues, who are working with me to implement projects related to this group."



In addition, 87% of survey respondents indicated that they were likely or highly likely to continue to meet with their affinity group during the 2020-21 school year.

Data on the Ensuring Equity courses, measured by pre- and post-survey, indicated that participants grew in their knowledge of culturally responsive practices.

Survey Question	Pre-Course Survey	Post-Course Survey
I feel comfortable facilitating conversations about culture and equity with students.	Strongly Disagree 2.9% Disagree 32.2% Agree 48.9% Strongly Agree 16.1%	Strongly Disagree 2.4% Disagree 4% Agree 65.3% Strongly Agree 28.2%
I know different dialogue structures that can be used to frame Daring Dialogue conversations.	Strongly Disagree 24.1% Disagree: 44.8% Agree 25.9% Strongly Agree 5.2%	Strongly Disagree 0% Disagree 1.6% Agree 41.9% Strongly Agree: 56.5%
I have an understanding of the barriers faced by students and families experiencing poverty.	Strongly Disagree 0% Disagree 8.8% Agree 61.8% Strongly Agree 29.4%	Strongly Disagree 0% Disagree 0% Agree 13.3% Strongly Agree 86.7%
I have an understanding of deficit thinking as a result of taking this course.	Strongly Disagree 17.6% Disagree 47.1% Agree 26.5% Strongly Agree 8.8%	Strongly Disagree 0% Disagree 0% Agree 16.7% Strongly Agree 83.3%

I have an understanding of the strategies that are beneficial to students from poverty.	Strongly Disagree 14.7%	Strongly Disagree 0%
	Disagree 32.4%	Disagree 0%
	Agree 44.1%	Agree 31%
	Strongly Agree 8.8%	Strongly Agree 69%

Henrico County Schools’ Office of Equity, Diversity and Opportunity was able to provide educators with options to connect, learn, and grow their professional skills during a time when many educators were feeling disconnected and enormous stress from the many challenges and polarization brought about by both a pandemic and racial injustice. Through innovative program delivery that utilized online platforms and the expertise of our department, meaningful and intentional experiences were created for educators. The sheer number of educators participating, and the overwhelmingly positive feedback and indicators of professional growth can serve as a model for other systems and organizations who wish to truly commit to equity, inclusion and justice with their employees.

**Brief Summary**

Henrico County Public Schools includes equity and opportunity as core values (cornerstones) and defines this as the “collective effort of all stakeholders to reduce disparities among students from varying demographics and backgrounds through engaging, meaningful and relevant experiences.” In addition, “relationships” is also a core value, defined as “building authentic, trusting connections that encourage collaboration and engagement among students, families, staff and communities.” The Culture of Dignity and Responsive Action Plan is directly correlated with these core values.

This action plan provides the opportunity for staff members to build relationships through the educator collective affinity groups, has strengthened the trust among educators and has been an integral part of reaching the goal of ensuring the quality and effectiveness of cultural responsiveness in a safe and welcoming environment for all students and employees. This plan includes affinity groups (collectives), book study and discussions, and an “Ensuring Equity” series of online learning courses in alignment with our Culturally Responsive Education Model (CREM) framework. These all center on anti-racism, belonging, culturally responsive principles and dignity. The design and content were based on conversations we had with staff members during the healing circles our department facilitated following the murder of George Floyd in Minnesota.

As a result of the action plan, more than 1,000 educators, staff members and school leaders participated in at least one of the opportunities, with exit survey results indicating overwhelmingly positive feedback about educators’ growth and understanding of themselves and others. In addition, the opportunity for staff members to engage in professional learning opportunities through both the book discussion groups and the “Ensuring Equity” online courses is a key way to address the disparities seen in our marginalized populations related to both academic and behavioral outcomes.

## Culture of Dignity and Responsive Action Plan Supplemental Material

Feedback about the summer 2020 Culture of Dignity and Responsive Action Plan gathered at the August 2020 virtual summit:

**Welcome! What is ONE WORD that describes this summer's equity experience?**

