

Minority Families At LA Private Elementary Schools: Progress, But Enough?

Description

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Los Angeles is often described as one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse cities in the United States. A melting pot where people from all social and socio-economic classes can create a comfortable space for themselves and their families. The topic of diversity and inclusion has always been a top priority for many private elementary schools in Los Angeles. Most accredited schools have a diversity mission statement that fits with the school's educational philosophy. Diversity initiatives at private elementary schools are in place. Efforts are made to recruit and retain minority students. Why then, do some minority families feel like there are very few, if any, support services for them at their schools? Why are some diverse families feeling like they are excluded from social events, both at the school and outside of school?

A recent dinner I had with friends who work in some of LA's top private schools led me to think about this subject, one which I've spent a considerable amount of time working on when I was Director of Diversity at The Curtis School. Over dinner, my colleagues and I pondered the question, "why are so many minority students and families still feeling isolated within their private school communities?" The name of a very well-known music industry super-star and his family were mentioned as parents who are feeling isolated at their children's school. In this case, race, not class is the dividing issue.

I spoke with a private elementary school family who had recently fallen on hard times as a result of the recession. The woman's husband had to take a job in another state. The woman felt totally isolated from families at her child's school and was no longer invited to many of the social gatherings, party book functions and play dates where previously the family was often first on the list of invited guests.

This is one example of how minority families can feel isolation due to a change in socio-economic status. Although this situation is unique in its own way, it illustrates the fact that at some schools, additional time must be spent on developing effective retention strategies for minority families and incorporating more sensitivity training into professional development workshops.

The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) encourages schools to educate their teachers and staff on how to be sensitive to all students and work to develop these practices and lessons into everyday classroom

instruction and the admissions process.

Last week, a good friend shared with me that there was an amazing new family from out of state that had just joined her daughter's third grade class. The mother was friendly and always made time in her busy work schedule to volunteer and be an active member of the classroom community. The family lives in a gated community in Inglewood because the father had accepted a job at the last minute at a huge law firm in LA and this was the first house they found. The mother tried hard to set up play date after play date, but seemed to continuously have no luck. Finally, one day she called a mom that she was friendly with and asked if they could get together. The other mother's response was, "Sure, but I heard that you live in Inglewood and we DON'T DO Inglewood." Needless to say, these same patterns continued throughout the course of the next year and finally the family ended up leaving the school. In my experience, this is not uncommon. Some minority families can be isolated due to socio-economic status, geographic differences, race or other factors. Let's face it, race *still* matters.

If you are a minority family applying to schools, there are a few things you should look for during your tours, interviews and visits to the school. Do you see diverse students, teachers and staff at the school? Does the school have a diversity committee that allows parents to join? Once your child is at the school, if it does not have a diversity committee, talk to your head master about setting up one. In addition, you could help organize a parent-driven committee that is responsible for acknowledging and creating campus-wide programs that celebrate each cultural holiday (Chinese New Year, Black History Month, Cinco De Mayo and more). A guest speaker series that focuses on social justice and inclusivity is also a format that is used successfully by many private elementary schools in Los Angeles.

All of these practices will help ensure that diversity is welcome and celebrated throughout the school community, making the campus more inclusive to every family. A note of caution, however. If you tour a school and you don't see diversity in the students, teachers, administrators and/or parents, don't assume it's there, just missing in action that day. The diversity you are not seeing is probably because it's not there! There is one top LA private elementary school about which parents joke because it's known for having "one black student." Think about whether your child (and your family) would be happy at a school like that, not matter how great the reputation of the school is.

If you are a minority family applying to private schools, The Alliance, as it's known among private schools, can help with all aspects of the admissions process.

Independent School Alliance for Minority Affairs of So. Cal

www.thealliance-la.org or 213-484-2411

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