

Diversity and Inclusion at AppleTree Early Learning PCS

How one network set about to improve teachers' experiences with diversity and inclusion.

Background

Located in Washington, D.C., AppleTree PCS's ten schools serve three- and four-year-old children, preparing them to succeed in kindergarten, putting focus on the academic readiness *and* social-emotional development. To achieve their mission, they know it's important their teachers have a responsive awareness to the needs of their students and families, and yet they've struggled with *how* to help their staff in this way – until they developed their *Connecting the Dots* professional development series.

Among the concerns of the leaders of the AppleTree network, which they aimed to address via *Connecting the Dots*, were:

- AppleTree often hires teachers who may be a different demographic (e.g. income level or race) from the students they are teaching, and who had no prior training on working with diverse populations.
- They have seen an increase in the number of homeless families, and staff members have had difficulty in working with parents who were dealing with multiple challenges in their lives (e.g. a parent living in a shelter and caring for other siblings);
- AppleTree continues to expand their services into D.C.'s Southeast Ward, where the families served are much more likely to be homeless or living below the poverty line. This expansion is central to the mission of AppleTree, and they want to be effective, both in academics and overall support to families.
- During an internal school review the leadership team at AppleTree heard both explicit and implicit comments from staff which provided support for the need for more training on these topics, especially for staff working in their schools in Southeast.

Their Approach

Knowing that a one-and-done professional development was not the solution the organization needed, AppleTree's leaders waited until the time was right, and then, as they prepared to launch the 2015-16 school year, they put their plan into place. As they outlined the strategy for addressing their needs in diversity and inclusion, a few design principles were solidified:

1. The professional development series, *Connecting the Dots*, would be held during "all-hands" days when all ten of the AppleTree campuses would be closed, and all staff could be together.
2. *Connecting the Dots* would take a "self-out" approach, where staff would start by unpacking their own biases, build an understanding of the challenges faced by the families the schools serve, and then consider ways of adjusting their practices to better account for those challenges.
3. During the "all-hands" sessions, staff from AppleTree's central office would serve as table facilitators, for groups mixed from across all ten campuses. This ensured staff had the chance to interact with people they didn't know from their day-to-day work in the schools, and allowed the facilitators to prep in advance to be sure their own biases did not affect their facilitation.

Next, they designed the *Connecting the Dots* materials, which you can [download here](#) in a compressed folder. Start with the "Read Me" document.

Their Results

In the Fall of the 2016-17 school year, the AppleTree network's Insight score in *Diversity and Inclusion* was 8.2, compared to the national top-quartile average of 8.3, with five of their ten campuses scoring above, and four more within a half-point of, the national top-quartile average.