

BEYOND THE NUMBERS

Forget plain old diversity, Richmond's private schools want all students to feel at home / BY TOM NASH



While private schools don't report enrollment demographics to the state, the past 10 years have seen a huge shift, "from maybe 5 percent students of color to 15 to 20 percent. That's a pretty sizable jump in a short amount of time," says Jonathan Zur, president of VICIC. Two of Richmond's largest and oldest private schools — Collegiate and St. Catherine's — both say they have hit targets of 20 percent student enrollment from underrepresented groups.

Forget, then, the stereotype of private schools as isolated bastions of white privilege oblivious to the demographic and social changes beyond the school grounds. The challenges in private schools might not be as obvious, but they are no less pressing.

"[In public schools,] we're talking about whether students have meals on the weekend, whether there are inter-preters in the building," Zur says. "The challenges [in private schools] are around bullying and exposure to a culturally relevant curriculum."

Zur says the emphasis on diversity in private schools has focused more on who is attending the school rather than what happens in class. "What [they] haven't done is examine their curriculum," he says. "They're bringing in [students] of different backgrounds and hoping everything works out."

That's changing. The next decade, Zur and school officials say, will be about inclusion as much as it is about diversity.

At Collegiate, the school's in-the- →

Asking 200 high schoolers to sit quietly during a silent slideshow seemed optimistic on the part of the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities, which recently hosted students from 13 area schools at the University of Richmond.

But the students, many from private schools, were more than quiet. They absorbed and nodded along as photo after photo depicted peers holding signs that challenged stereotypes about them. "Just because I'm Russian doesn't mean I'm mean," one read.

This is VICIC's introduction to a program aimed at helping students dismantle prejudices around "The Big Eight" social identifiers — age, race, ethnicity, ability, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and gender.

It's a day of comparing notes to help

students and faculty to learn to trust one another and ask for help. The issues are as varied as the locales and contexts from which they come. A Goochland County educator tells of struggling with a card-carrying, teenage white supremacist. Two James River High School students say they wish students of different backgrounds would eat lunch together.

For the seven private schools in attendance (out of 20 total), the workshop served a larger goal of joining the conversation about a region whose identity is shifting along with that of their students.

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—CLARE SISISKY, DIRECTOR OF RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP, COLLEGIATE

← works master plan makes inclusion a centerpiece, says Clare Sisisky, the school's director of Responsible Citizenship. "Diversity is inviting people of difference to the table, and inclusion is making everyone feel part of the same family," she says.

Collegiate is crafting its plan with guidance from VCIC and the Virginia Diversity Network, a coalition of area private schools.

Why is inclusion something Collegiate needs to teach? Sisisky cites ongoing demographic shifts that will make a majority-white society increasingly difficult to find in the next few decades. "What's important to us is that we aren't developing students to feel more confident and more comfortable surrounded only by people who are like them," she says. "The best opportunities are not going to be in those places."

Bringing that into practice starts at the elementary school level, where students hear from Collegiate community members who have emigrated from Iran and Syria. A group of fourth graders has started a partnership with area students who fled Nepal.

"Ten years ago, the [classroom] focus was on early immigrants to the U.S. and the westward expansion," Sisisky says. "By connecting it to our community today, we're saying, 'Just like we value those contributions, we continue to welcome people of different backgrounds into our community to make it stronger.'"

In high school, efforts have included forums to discuss the Black Lives Matter

movement and protests at the University of Missouri. "We had 75 faculty members come to a working group on inclusion issues — where might we be unintentionally implying stereotypes that negatively impact students?"

Cynthia Grier Lotze, an upper school English teacher at St. Catherine's and secretary at the Virginia Diversity Network, says the school seeks a similar realignment.

"We're more and more focused on what we call the 'Seal of Inclusion,'" says Lotze, who has fostered a Gay Straight Alliance chapter at the school. "Diversity is just a number. You can put [categories] in a superficial measure, but what you can't tell immediately is how welcome people feel on a day-to-day basis."

At St. Catherine's, changes include finding more teachers of different backgrounds to teach its 900 K-12 students. Lotze says programs such as VCIC's, and the school's own statewide diversity conference, have expanded consciousness around the campus.

Besides efforts to make students of other religious backgrounds feel welcome at the Episcopal-affiliated school, where chapel is held three times a week, Lotze says St. Catherine's is working on how to address the needs of a student who may come out as transgender.

"We have no set policy right now," she says, with the question being, "How do we make a student know they can make that statement under our roof and feel supported and loved?" **R**

A group of students at Tawheed Prep



OPEN DOORS AT TAWHEED PREP

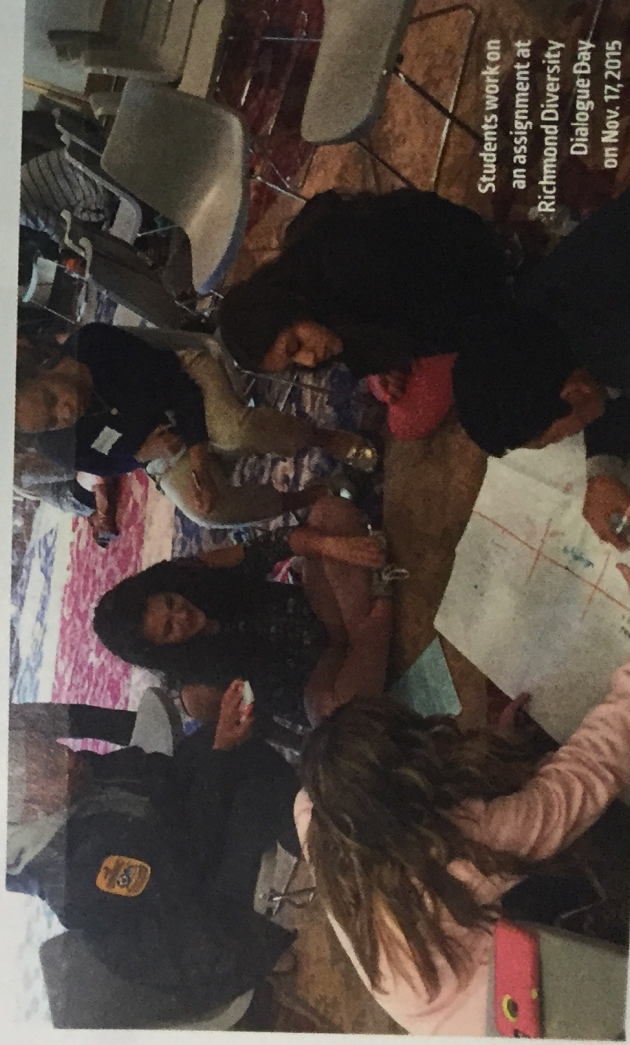
Thucked into an industrial park off Chamberlayne Avenue, Tawheed Prep School offers 39 students in grades six through 12 a rigorous and innovative education centered on Islamic traditions. Principal Mary Abdul-Lateef says fostering a sense of belonging in the community-at-large is as important as providing a haven for its students.

"Our doors are always open," Abdul-Lateef says. "We're trying to dispel the idiosyncrasies people have about Muslims. We just try to uphold our faith and try to be other than what the media portrays us as. We hope people will knock on the door and see what it is we have to offer people."

Participating in VCIC's workshop was one of many ways the school has worked to establish partnerships. Students also spend their junior and senior years studying at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College.

Abdul-Lateef adds that Tawheed, founded eight years ago, straddles a difficult line outside the public education system but without the sprawling campuses and alumni networks established at other religious schools. Half of her students are on some form of economic assistance.

"We pride ourselves on trying to be the best at what we do, even without the glory of millions of dollars," Abdul-Lateef says. "We hope that when these children graduate and become mothers and fathers, they'll come back and give us the support we gave them." / TOM NASH



Students work on an assignment at Richmond Diversity Dialogue Day on Nov. 17, 2015