



Cultural Competence – It's a Process

Whether its front-line employees, departmental employees, classroom instructors or food service personnel, feeling competent – having the ability to deal with just about any situation or request - increases confidence and productivity.

Being culturally competent takes time, but it can be done. People who achieve cultural competency are effective in different cultural contexts – meaning they are conscious of cultural dynamics and adapt the way they communicate and interact to show respect and understanding.

Four elements contribute to an employee's and an institution's, like the Anchorage School District, level of cultural competence:

- Diversity is valued
- There's a capability to conduct cultural self-assessments
- Increased awareness of the dynamics when cultures interact
- Adhere to institutionalized communication styles that reflect respect for diversity

Cultural competence develops over a continuum with generally six stages. Most human service agencies and organizations fall between the cultural incapacity and cultural blindness stages:

Cultural destructiveness: “That may be the way you did things where ever it is you come from, but you're in America now, and we do things differently.”

Cultural incapacity: “I don't have the time or interest to be an expert on everyone's culture. I get paid to provide specific services.”

Cultural blindness: “I see all my customers (students) as the same. I don't see race or ethnicity, and I treat all people the same.”

Cultural pre-competence: “Maybe I am going about it all the wrong way. I want to learn more about this customer's (student's) cultural background. Then I can be more helpful.”

Cultural competence: “I know that asking this co-worker (student) to adopt a nickname I can use when I speak to him is inappropriate. I should practice to say his name correctly.”

Cultural proficiency: “One of my customers (students) told me that I have created an environment where everyone feels respected, and no one feels awkward or put down during group sessions. That comment is worth a million bucks to me.”

Learning to respect, understand, appreciate and value differences, and develop empathy for others, takes time. Since it is a comprehensive process, it requires a sincere commitment from school administrators and community leaders to make cultural competence an important part of education for students of the 21st century.