

# Thriving in Independent Schools

AN AISNE GUIDE FOR

## Educators of Color

Michael Brosnan

**AISNE** Association of Independent Schools in New England

## Foreword

This guide is a companion piece to the *AISNE Guide to Hiring and Retaining Teachers of Color*, also written by Michael Brosnan. Whereas the target audience for the first guide was school administrators involved in hiring and supervision, this new guide targets adults of color who are either considering working in independent schools or those in their first one to five years in schools.

From the beginning the guiding principle of this guide has been to be realistic so that adults of color might be able to make informed decisions about pursuing a career in independent education. To that end, the guide first traces the efforts of independent schools to become more diverse, and, ultimately, more truly inclusive. Drawing on the wisdom and experience of a number of educators of color in AISNE schools, the guide offers specific advice about understanding the culture of schools, finding support, and seeking out important professional experiences. And for those whose job it is to attract and retain adults of color, the guide provides specific suggestions about what to do and what not to do.

I am very grateful to all the folks who helped create this guide. I also want to single out for special mention Kimberly Willis, formerly of Phillips Exeter Academy and now at Georgetown Law School, and Luthern Williams, of The Winsor School, for the leadership they provided in helping to conceptualize the guide and in bringing people together to get us started; and Bobby Edwards, of Phillips Academy, who was kind enough to take on the task of providing the introduction.

Special thanks to Michael Brosnan, poet and editor of *Independent School*, who once again has done a masterful job of pulling together a document that is accurate, helpful, direct, and deeply passionate.

Steve Clem, Executive Director, AISNE

[www.aisne.org](http://www.aisne.org)

# Introduction

## Shepherding Our Schools and Ourselves

It is almost nine o'clock at night and my day is far from over. Despite the many answered e-mails, several meetings, extended one-on-one talks with students, and returned phone calls in between, there are still tasks yet to be crossed off my daily to-do list. A quick review of my planner informs me that — in addition to writing a draft of this Introduction — I need to speak to a couple of parents, write up a couple of interview reports, and check in the boys in the dorm where I serve as house counselor one evening a week. This is my life. This is the path I have chosen to walk for the last eighteen years. Often, I wonder: Did I choose this path or did it choose me? I guess, in the end, it is a combination of the two.

The stories of educators in independent schools, regardless of race, are varied and distinct. At the same time, we educators of color in independent schools often share a range of emotions about our work. Those emotions include uncertainty about our decision to join our respective communities, unease about our lack of cultural affirmation, and unavoidable feelings of exclusion and isolation. Other emotions include a tremendous sense of accomplishment resulting from the impact we have on the lives of students of all backgrounds, pride at connecting with and offering support to children of color, and gratification from being change-agents in the evolution of our schools.

When looking back some 18 years to the start of my career in independent schools, I first reflect on the fact that I never entered this profession expecting such longevity — although I always remained open to the possibility if all the pieces seemed to keep falling into place. I knew little about independent schools when I arrived. I grew up in a middle-class family in Washington, DC, where I attended public schools before entering Howard University. Becoming a faculty member at Phillips

Academy and a resident of Andover, Massachusetts, was as new an experience as possible for me. I was twenty-five and had a head full of hair (that no barber in town knew how to cut). For all the effort I made to connect with my new community, I felt like a guest in town and on campus for a long time. In many ways, my life was the personification of Patricia Hill Collins' theory of the "outsider within" from her text, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*.

In short, I was not "of" Andover (the school or the town). Despite my colleagues' best efforts to make me feel welcome, daily events, great and small, reminded me that I was from another culture, another tradition. I guess one of the best things I did was to accept this reality for what it was and seek to deal with it as I moved forward. The phone bills were high in the beginning, as I literally called upon my support network, far and wide, to keep me sane and grounded as I navigated my new surroundings. I buried myself in my work, determined to learn as much as I could about my school in order to be the best admission officer possible. As it turned out, by the end of the first year the school was pleased with me. Although the work was challenging on many levels, I felt good about the community and what I was able to accomplish — and there have been enough rewards to keep me coming back ever since.

Eight years ago, I moved from being the school's senior associate dean of admissions to my current position as Dean of Community and Multicultural Development. The charge of shepherding a school's efforts around diversity issues is complex and as challenging as it's potentially rewarding. From the need to understand basic alliance building and mediation skills, to giving voice to those of the unheard or misinterpreted, to engaging in hard and sometimes painful exchanges followed by a journey of healing and progression, to seeing big cultural

changes as a result of consistent small steps, the job is far more complex than the job description alone ever captures. Despite the need for such positions in our schools — and the potential for change they possess — those leading diversity work often speak of a sense of powerlessness, a feeling of being under-supported, and often fragmented due to a multitude of other campus responsibilities. Some report feeling as ignored or isolated as some of the constituents they serve. While my situation is far from perfect, my school has taken steps to address such issues. The establishment of the position as a senior level deanship reporting directly to the head of school reflects a degree of commitment to both internal and external communities (not to mention a commitment to whoever holds the position). I am not called to the discussion table only when a child of color is the topic, but on a regular basis. This too spoke, and continues to speak, to me as an important component of my sense of belonging and contribution to this community.

I tell you all this in the hope that it will encourage you in your work. No matter where you find yourself working, your job is sure to present both challenges and joys. You can only pray for more joy, and make the best of it when it comes. Although better equipped and, in all honesty, more mature to handle some of the challenges today than in years past, I still face issues as a person of color that I wrestled with eighteen years ago. Among those issues is the sense of loneliness that results from insufficient visual/cultural affirmation. The significance of seeing others who look like, sound like, dress like, praise like, eat like and, yes, even party like you is often underestimated. Such issues generally don't present challenges for most of our colleagues in the same way that they do for us. Another issue is how often we wonder if our school, colleagues, friends, and students "get it" when it comes to the day-to-day (often unintentional, but not always) affronts to our presence. We feel the policies, practices, and

traditions that reflect a sense that we've been invited to a party but only if we dance to their music. We wonder if there is a desire to understand our experiences as much as we must possess to understand theirs. This leads to the third challenge — and that is simply being *tired*. Yes, just about everyone gets tired from the demands of working in independent schools; however, add the issues previously mentioned, plus the role of official or unofficial spokesperson of your respective race or culture, and you have one bone-tired person on the edge of burn-out. Whether one self-selects this work or is designated to the position, it is far too heavy for any person (or group) to carry — and, yet, this weight is an undeniable part of our experience as members of our school communities.

But there are joys, too. The kids need us, one and all. Every kid benefits from our presence, but especially those who look like us. There is, potentially, something extra that can bond us to one another. In their eyes we see glimpses of ourselves, and, more important, in us, they can see reflections of themselves. Their presence supports us as much, if not more some days, as ours supports them. Time allows us to see their development over the years. They come in bright-eyed and ready to face the challenge of their young lives. And, yet, inevitably, we witness them fall in ways unlike before, only to watch them discover and develop, with our help, the tools to pick themselves up and continue. Time allows us to see them graduate with pride, go on to college, become doctors, lawyers, and even a few teachers. Time allows us to be a part of their world long after they have graduated from our schools. While not all connections are as strong, I am reminded of the correspondence I received a year ago from a former student announcing his graduation from college. With the announcement was a note of thanks. He wrote that mine was one of the first notices sent, for were it not for the guidance and sometimes "tough love" he got from me during his time here, he would not be where he was at that

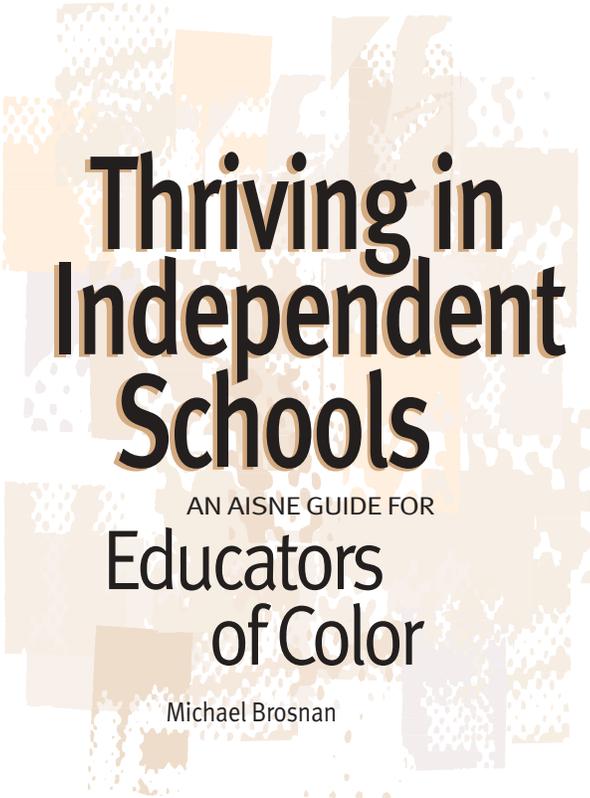
time. I shall forever treasure that note and recall it during those times when I question what, if any, impact is being made.

In order to experience these joys, we need to cope with the complexity of our lives in independent schools. I encourage you to discover and maintain ways to keep body, mind, and spirit intact. It is very easy to get lost in the pace of life we have come to accept as normal for our communities — where taking any amount of time for the betterment of one's self can be seen as selfish, “slacking off,” or antisocial. I encourage you to take an honest look at your community — to understand what you can do for the community and what it can do for you. I encourage you to find allies within your community. To assume that such can be found exclusively in another person of color would paint a very dreary portrait for many of us, considering our numbers are often few. Make the best of all those who are willing to both give to and take from your presence.

Finally, I encourage you to hold on to those things that bring you personal happiness. For me, these things include the unconditional love of my family and friends, music of all types (listening or singing), photos, getting off campus, and last, but certainly not least, spiritual feeding. My Sunday treks to Boston replenish me in ways untold. Being in the presence of a familiar worship experience sustains me from week to week. The sermons and music ministry at my church rock!

This AISNE guide for educators of color working in independent schools offers the reader testimonies of those who have lived the experience firsthand, as well as advice on ways to make the best of your particular situation. I hope it will help you find your way. Each journey shared here is done so in order to offer support and a frame of reference to those traveling their own paths as teachers of color in an independent school. No two patterns of hills and valleys are exactly the same. May they speak to you in important and vital ways as affirmation of the journey you are on and serve as a reminder that you do not walk this path alone.

Bobby Edwards  
Dean of Community and Multicultural Development  
Phillips Academy, Massachusetts  
December 2003



# Thriving in Independent Schools

AN AISNE GUIDE FOR

## Educators of Color

Michael Brosnan

A director of diversity at a New England independent school was explaining why he took the job at his school a few years ago. “I was sold on the students,” he said. “I liked the seriousness and enthusiasm with which they approached education. It was such a contrast to my previous experience in a school. And I liked the degree of teacher support for students, especially the residential component, which is such a phenomenal opportunity to teach values. It’s the full-spectrum of education.”

But in the next breath he also said he was ready to leave his school. Why? “It’s tough work, because you’re brought in to help hold a mirror of truth up to the school. The school asks you to do this, then gets mad at you for doing it — and tries to find a way to avoid the questions of power and privilege. On the one hand, they say they embrace the idea of changing the culture of the school so that it’s more multicultural. But when you push for the needed change — the change they say they want — the tendency is to turn on the messenger. What’s wrong with this guy anyway? Who does he think he is? What does he know about the history of our school? Where does he get off criticizing our culture considering all the work we’ve done for minority students over the years? That sort of thing.”

This educator is not alone. A recent survey of educators of color in New England independent schools suggests that many educators of color feel the dizzying disconnect between the life they expected to find in an independent school and the life they do find. There is, to be sure, a broad array of experiences — from those who love their jobs and plan to stay for years and those who don’t know if they can make it through the day.

The purpose of this guide, then, is to offer some hope, support, and direction for educators of color working in independent schools so that, ideally, their experiences will meet with their expectations. More specifically, this guide is intended primarily for educators of color (teachers, administrators, and staff members) who are either starting their first job in an independent school or still early in their independent school career. Other educators, of course, are welcome to read — even encouraged to read — the guide for the insights it might offer into their professional lives as well. The wisdom shared here by experienced educators can be of value to anyone searching for a more enriching professional experience in school. It can help individuals and teams of educators better shape

## What Schools Can Do to Support Educators of Color

Schools can do a great deal to improve the experiences of educators of color (See the *AISNE Guide to Hiring and Retaining Teachers of Color* for more ideas). Educators of color say that schools can do a great deal to make their experiences in independent schools better by doing a combination of the following:

- As one long-time director of diversity planning says, “Too many schools have brought in teachers and students of color and then tried to figure out the implications. Rather, a school needs to work on itself first, examine the institutional culture — and honestly identify its strengths and weaknesses. Heads and gatekeepers in schools also need to think about their own commitment to the process.”

a school’s diversity goals so that they are as effective as intended. School leaders (heads, trustees, and top administrators) can also use the guide to better understand the needs of the adults of color working in their schools — and to understand their own roles in supporting these educators in the shared mission of the school. In fact, most of the educators of color interviewed for this guide say that schools — even those doing a good job with diversity — need to devise more conscious plans to support teachers of color, especially those in their early years, or else risk losing them to other schools or other professions.

Primarily, though, the guide is designed to help individual educators of color better understand the world they have entered and find the support they need in order to thrive in their chosen careers.

### Welcome to the World of Independent Schools

When you accepted your job in an independent school, you may have researched the position carefully — not only presenting your best side to the school in hopes that the school would hire you, but also taking careful stock of the school, talking with teachers and administrators about their experiences, inquiring about the students, the curriculum, the school’s approach to teaching, the student/teacher ratio, the diversity of the student and adult populations, the course load for teachers, and other such concerns that would give you a full picture of life in this community. You may have visited numerous schools looking for the best match. And when the offer came in, you may have discussed the idea of working here with your family and friends, carefully weighing the pros and cons.

On the other hand, you may have accepted the job blind, or on a whim, or just because it seemed like the best job available to you at the time. You may have liked the look of the campus, the ease with which the head of school greeted you and listened during the interview. You may have seen the joy in the eyes of students of color you met on the campus tour and decided you wanted to be here for them. Maybe the school is in the right location — a city you’ve always wanted to live in, or one near friends and family. Maybe you’re hoping for a long career here, or maybe you’re just finding your way through until you get a clearer picture of how you want to live your life. Maybe you have a deep and abiding commitment to push for changes that will benefit students of color. Maybe you want just to teach science in a school with a fabulous science facility.

The point is that there is no single reason for taking any job. All that matters is that you are here and you’ve brought along a certain faith and hope that you’ll be mostly happy in your new work, and that you come with skills that will be of help to the school. If there is any universal truth, it’s that you do not come with neutral feelings. This is your life, after all.

*Schools — even those doing a good job with diversity — need to devise more conscious plans to support teachers of color, especially those in their early years, or else risk losing them to other schools or other professions.*

**WHAT SCHOOLS CAN  
DO TO SUPPORT  
EDUCATORS OF  
COLOR**  
*cont'd*

- Schools should understand that the culture of the school may feel foreign to incoming educators of color — especially if they did not attend an independent school — and consider what information they need to feel comfortable in the community.

Experience suggests, however, that at this point in the history of independent schools what educators of color expect to find and what they are likely to find don't always match up. A survey of adults of color in New England independent schools indicates that many people of color are greatly satisfied with their work — with everything about an independent school, from the quality of the students, to the autonomy in the classroom, to the respect from colleagues and administrators, to professional development opportunities (even, on occasion, with salary and benefits — although one teacher wisely qualified this by saying, “for teachers, that is.”). Educators of color who have expressed satisfaction also tend to appreciate their school's efforts in diversity. Although, in the survey, it's interesting to note that some teachers who expressed satisfaction with their job were not necessarily happy with the current state of diversity at the school especially with the low percentages of students of color and/or teachers of color. But they did find job satisfaction on many other levels and often felt the school was at least addressing diversity issues with honesty and openness and invited educators of color to be an essential part of that dialogue.

On the other hand, many teachers of color (about a third of those surveyed) expressed frustration with their work in independent schools, saying they plan to leave their current school, or were considering leaving, in the coming year. Among the reasons cited are a lack of respect from colleagues, a lack of diversity of the faculty and staff, a lack of support from the administration, a weak overall diversity effort at the school, and, perhaps the most frustrating of all, a feeling that their contributions don't matter. For one history teacher who cited all of the above and more, the bottom line is that he feels overworked and under-appreciated in a school that hired him with a promise that it would not be thus. Other teachers of color point out the sense of isolation they feel — being one of a handful of teachers of color (or, in some cases, the only one) in a school with a small percentage of teachers of color. A dean of multicultural affairs spoke about the immense frustration about being hired to bring about change and then criticized (and quietly ostracized) for pushing for the asked-for change. “It's so maddening to be hired with the promise of institutional support only to find that, when push comes to shove, there is actually little support. You're trying to do your job and suddenly everyone's saying that you're using you position to push your own agenda.” Another director of diversity observes, “I am supported as long as I make faculty and staff feel good about the many “isms” prevalent on our campus. But when I ask the tough questions, I'm viewed as that angry black person.” Sustaining oneself in such a scenario is difficult at best. Some educators of color manage to do it for a few years — usually in the hope of changing the school culture for the better — but eventually it wears them down. When asked if these educators planned to stay in their current school, most said no — though many said (and this is the good news for schools) they would like to stay in independent education.

*I am supported as long as I make faculty and staff feel good about the many “isms” prevalent on our campus. But when I ask the tough questions, I'm viewed as that angry black person.*

**WHAT SCHOOLS CAN  
DO TO SUPPORT  
EDUCATORS OF  
COLOR**  
*cont'd*

■ A number of educators of color ask that heads and key administrators make a conscious effort to get to know the teachers of color personally. Invite them to dinner. Ask them to invite you to dinner. Spend some free time with them. One new diversity director, who says he'll probably leave his current school, noted that he would stay if the head of school and top administrators would only acknowledge his existence as an individual with much to give the community.

Between those who want to stay and those anxious to move on are those on the fence — compelled to stay by certain school qualities and compelled to leave by others. A director of diversity who falls into this category says she thinks her work is essential and important, but the lack of diversity of faculty, poor salary and benefits, and the feeling that her contributions don't matter make the job close to intolerable. She also notes a "lack of real commitment to diversity from the head and trustees." A first-year administrator and teacher echoes these feelings. "I love the students," he says, "But it's hard to continue with the lack of support I get from the head of school and the community in general."

A young Spanish teacher is also uncertain about staying. "The school is rich in resources," she says. "Some efforts have been made [regarding the diversity efforts at the school], but there is much institutional racism." If she leaves, she says, she'll leave because of this embedded racism that manifests itself in a lack of diversity among faculty, administration, and staff; the lack of diversity of students; and a curriculum that "ignores the history, experiences, and contributions of people of color."

Schools, take note. Educators of color, take heart; there are many ways to make your experience in an independent school a positive one. And if things are clearly not going to work out for you in your present school, there are many other schools that might be a better match.

### **Background on Independent Schools**

It's clear that the mixed experience for educators of color is connected not only to a school's perspective and leadership on diversity, but also to the nation's complex history regarding race. The enlightened goals of democracy contain the goal of equality among all people. But, right from the start, the ideal America ran up against the limitations of its architects — the Founding Fathers whose noble vision of equality was tempered by their daily actions as slaveholders. Thomas de Zengotita (an independent school educator), in his *Harper's* essay titled "Common Ground: Finding Our Way Back to the Enlightenment," points out how this disparity between ideas and actions has persisted throughout our history, and is as problematic today as it ever was — especially in our schools. De Zengotita, for instance, criticizes the current presidential administration for what he calls "the pious blather about leaving no child behind and the reality of resource distribution in our schools." In the distance between democratic ideals and social practice in America lies racial tension. And it is played out in varying degrees in every school in America — public and private.

Recently, Gary Orfield, director of the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, expressed similar frustration, timing his remarks with the national celebration of the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. "Dr. King would not be at banquets celebrating the triumph of civil rights," Orfield said, "he would be leading protests against courts and school officials making decisions which send minority children back to inferior schools then

*It's clear that the mixed experience for educators of color is connected not only to a school's perspective and leadership on diversity, but also to the nation's complex history regarding race.*

**WHAT SCHOOLS CAN  
DO TO SUPPORT  
EDUCATORS OF  
COLOR**  
*cont'd*

- There is much about life and expectations in an independent school community that is not recorded anywhere. Don't leave new educators guessing. It's best to bring all educators up to speed about a school's culture, climate, and history.
- Schools need to know "that having an acceptable number of teachers of color is not enough," writes a director of community life. "It's a matter of the quality of life you provide. It's the culture of the institution that determines whether or not educators of color are happy and satisfied with their work."

punishes them for their inferior education, and for decisions that leave young whites deeply isolated and unprepared for the multiracial society they will live and work in."

Around the same time that Orfield published his remarks, three Georgia State University professors published reports revealing that, during the late 1990s, white elementary school teachers in Georgia were much more likely to quit at schools with higher proportions of black students. After the 1999-2000 school year, 31 percent of white teachers quit their jobs at schools where the student population was more than 70 percent black, and those who changed jobs went to schools that served lower proportions of black and poor pupils. Many Georgia teachers say they felt pressured to leave low-performing schools after the state passed an education reform law that tied teacher pay to test scores. Still, the study found that white teachers were leaving predominantly black schools even in the Atlanta and suburban DeKalb County districts that were among the state's highest paying.

The point is not to pick on Georgia — it's a story taking place in most states — but to put the challenges of diversity work in independent schools in a broader context.

In his 1996 book, *Lessons from Privilege: The American Prep-School Tradition*, Arthur Powell points out the path independent schools have taken toward more inclusive, diverse communities. Prior to the civil rights movement, Powell notes, racial diversity was not a serious concern of independent schools. In 1963, independent school educators began to experience what Powell describes as "a moral awakening" — "because of the Birmingham demonstrations, the tense integration of the University of Alabama, President Kennedy's eloquent civil rights address followed by his legislative proposals, the summer March on Washington, and the November assassination with the aftermath of rededication." In the following four decades, the percentage of students of color in independent schools slowly climbed to today's national level of 19 percent, according to the annual statistics published by the National Association of Independent Schools. The percentage of students of color is significantly higher in the west (32 percent) than in any other region of the country. In New England schools, the percent of students of color is 12.5 percent.

Powell notes that the academic success of students of color in independent schools has always been high (although some schools, through self study, still report a noticeable achievement gap between white students and students of color), but that social integration in independent schools has proven more difficult. By the 1990s, Powell concludes, most schools "were perhaps more apt to celebrate diversity than attain it."

In the years since, independent schools have begun to reach beyond the question of numerical diversity toward the ideal of a multicultural community in which the school community not only reflects the diversity of the nation (or local community) but also creates an academic program and community life that best supports all members of

*Independent schools have begun to reach beyond the question of numerical diversity toward the ideal of a multicultural community.*

**WHAT SCHOOLS CAN  
DO TO SUPPORT  
EDUCATORS OF  
COLOR**  
*cont'd*

■ For many educators of color, an essential component of a healthy professional life is a mentoring/support program that gives them a place to turn when in need. Considering that nearly all educators of color will be involved in diversity work to some degree, professional development in this area is also essential.

the diverse community. In the process, many schools have made a conscious effort to improve the school community by including diversity goals in their respective mission statements, by actively recruiting more teachers of color and more administrators of color, by studying their curriculum for biases that exclude the experiences of certain cultures, and generally taking stock of the various ways in which a school community unintentionally marginalizes people of color.

But all these efforts are meeting with mixed results. The number of students of color in independent schools may be around 20 percent, for instance, but the teacher of color population is significantly lower. Nationally, people of color make up 10.1 percent of the teachers in independent schools. In New England, the percentage is only 6.7 percent. Some schools have no teachers of color. Others have one or two. Some may have African-American teachers and Asian-American teachers, but no Latino teachers. In their research on faculty of color, Pearl Rock Kane and Alfonso Orsini point out the importance of teachers of color being there for the students of color who face the challenges of navigating a white-dominated world, “The teacher of color who has already successfully negotiated such a world could be a great source of inspiration, and a cultural decoder.” In many schools, however, the teachers of color are just not there.

In addition, there is still a wide spectrum of views on the question of how to approach diversity issues. As Lani Guinier notes in the introduction to *The Miner’s Canary* — a book advocating for race-conscious policies and programs that can help us fulfill America’s democratic ideals — her son attended two Quaker schools, one that aimed for colorblind policies, in the goal of making sure that all children were treated equally, and the other that openly discussed racial issues, in the goal of supporting the varying needs of a diverse population of students.

Guinier and coauthor Gerald Torres, both professors of law, also point out that this duality between those who believe in colorblind policies and those who believe in the need for race-consciousness exists in the broader American community. At this point in time, the authors say, those who support colorblindness as a theory have the upper hand. Political conservatives and liberals alike subscribe to the notion that colorblindness (essentially, laws that don’t favor one race over another) is the best way to achieve equity and justice in America. But there are a number of problems with this thinking. “First, colorblindness disables the individual from understanding or fully appreciating the structural nature of inequality,” Guinier and Torres write. “Second, it disables groups from forming to challenge that inequality through a political process. The denial of race not only reduces individuals’ psychological motivation for challenging unfairness but also contributes to their internalization of it as a purely personal problem.” Those who are hired to do diversity work in independent schools and then accused of pushing their personal agendas understand this problem all too well.

*The number of students of color in independent schools may be around 20 percent, for instance, but the teacher of color population is significantly lower.*

**WHAT SCHOOLS CAN  
DO TO SUPPORT  
EDUCATORS OF  
COLOR**  
*cont'd*

■ The truth is essential. If you're asking a person of color for a long-term commitment, you have a responsibility to be upfront. If the job for a teacher of color will be a challenge, then say so in the interview. Explain, for instance, why people of color have left in the past. Explain exactly where the school community is regarding diversity — how, for instance, the administration, board of trustees, and parent body feel about the school's diversity efforts. For a teacher of color to be hired believing one thing about the school only to discover something else upon arrival is obviously problematic.

In giving advice to schools on how to best support educators of colors, one director of alumni affairs writes, "Schools today want to be race blind and not make special efforts for any one group. This is a mistake. Effort must be made to make teachers of color feel accepted in the private school environment."

The bottom line is that independent schools do a lot of things very well. But, when it comes to diversity, they are, like the nation that contains them, a mixed bag.

Into this world you enter. The primary concern here is how you can make your experience in an independent school a fulfilling one, personally and professionally.

**Advice for Educators of Color**

As a new teacher or administrator and staff person of color in an independent school, you may think you need only to stay focused on the parameters of your job as outlined in your job description. You may want to stay focused on, say, teaching history or science or 20th century American poetry, and not view the broader social and cultural life of your school as your concern. But, at some point, students of color or parents of color or other teachers of color will knock on your door and ask for help. And, by opening the door, you'll be drawn into discussions about the broader culture of the school.

Experienced educators of color describe it as a great balancing act — being the best teacher or college counselor or dean of students or communications director and getting involved in the myriad community issues shaped by race. For directors of diversity, the balance is more between the diversity issues in a school community and maintaining any sort of private life.

In the survey of educators of color, an overwhelming majority note that they are involved in diversity work in some form or other, whether or not this work is noted in their job descriptions. They also report that they have either been the target of racism or are aware of racial incidents among students and adults in their school community. In most cases, the racism was, as a number of survey respondents describe it, "based on ignorance." But, still, it was there — and needed to be addressed. Research by a University of Pennsylvania team (published in an article in *Independent School* — Summer 2003) indicates that, even without incidents of racism, students of color, many of whom praise their schools for high academic preparedness, often feel socially and emotionally isolated in their predominately white communities. In the long run, experienced educators of color say, it's impossible to ignore the diversity issues in your community for the simple fact that they are powerful issues in the world. Some educators will flat out tell you not to take a position as a diversity director or director of multicultural affairs; the work is too politically and emotionally charged and, in the end, you won't get the sort of support you expected to get. Others say that it's important that people of color take on this work. It's

*Students of color, many of whom praise their schools for high academic preparedness, often feel socially and emotionally isolated in their predominately white communities.*

**WHAT SCHOOLS CAN  
DO TO SUPPORT  
EDUCATORS OF  
COLOR**  
*cont'd*

- If your school has established diversity goals, also develop a system of accountability that measures everyone's commitment to and support of those goals.
- Schools should consider establishing a formal community of faculty in alliance with the diversity director. They need that support.
- Lani Guinier, speaking at an AISNE conference, says we need to move the discussion from the margins of school life to the center of school life. "Diversity works best for students of color if the school makes it an integral part of the school life."

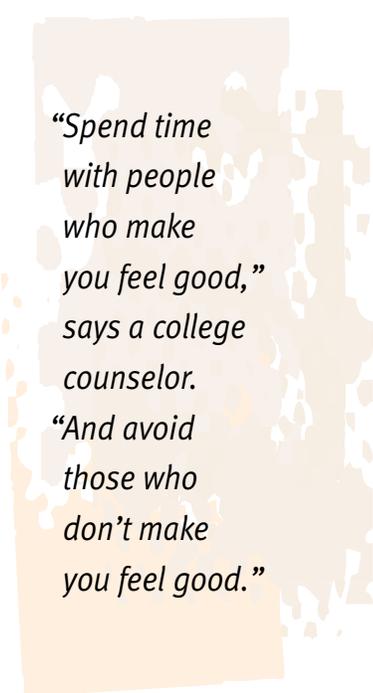
tough work, but they are the ones who can bring the necessary commitment and passion, and because students of color need the support of adults of color and white students need to see this kind of commitment from adults in their community.

Educators of color obviously don't speak with a single voice about their experiences. But there is enough common advice in their comments to offer that advice here. Although this advice is designed to make your professional life more fulfilling, a number of educators of color point out that there is nothing quite like experience. In other words, you are likely to discover for yourself the pitfalls that others warn you about. But perhaps there is some comfort in knowing this, too.

## Support

Developing a network for personal and professional support is essential.

- Make strong connections with colleagues of color. You're looking not only for emotional support, but also for professional mentoring in your area of focus.
- As one middle school admissions director says, find one member of the faculty who can be the educational equivalent of a soul-mate — "a sounding board, a person to whom you can vent to or confide in."
- Make strong connections with white colleagues. Look for white allies who can offer support, mentorship, and friendship.
- "Spend time with people who make you feel good," says a college counselor. "And avoid those who don't make you feel good. If too much of the time you spend with people feels obligatory, stop spending time with them."
- Find a mentor outside your school community to help keep perspective. Also develop a support network outside of your school, but within the independent school world. (Although many educators suggested this, a few noted an inherent danger in doing this. As a long-time teacher noted, "Getting outside counseling may strength you personally, but it may also pull you away from the school. You are more likely to stay in a school when you have support within the school.")
- "If you can't find a close friend, at least find a colleague who can make you laugh," says a long-time teacher and administrator. "It's really important to find people who can just make you let go and laugh. Not caustic humor, but real heartfelt humor."
- Get involved in your region's POCIS group — People of Color in Independent Schools (check with your state or local association for contact information).



*"Spend time with people who make you feel good," says a college counselor. "And avoid those who don't make you feel good."*

## **WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO TO SUPPORT EDUCATORS OF COLOR** *cont'd*

■ If life is better for students of color, life will also be better for teachers of color. One director of community life encourages schools to invite alumni of color back to school to talk about their experiences, what worked for them and what didn't. He also suggested that schools make a concerted effort to connect with families of color — and offer parents of color an opportunity to connect with each other — so they not only feel comfortable and valued in the school community, but can contribute their energy and ideas. All efforts a school makes to live up to its diversity goals will naturally improve the experiences of educators of color.

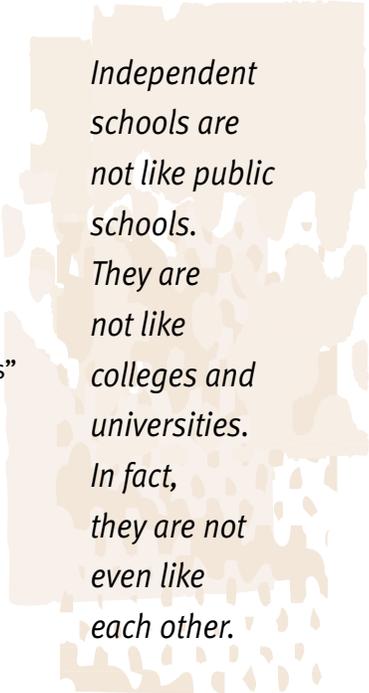
- Ask experienced educators of color in your school to share social information (about restaurants, churches, hair-dressers, banks, food stores, etc.) — all the little things that make daily life easier.
- Find out who “the movers and shakers are,” says a director of community relations. Writer Malcolm Gladwell spoke at a recent NAIS conference about unacknowledged significance of people with social power. These “connectors” are the people who shape culture — in schools as well as in society.
- Take advantage of professional development opportunities that connect you with like-minded educators outside of your school community.

### **Getting to know school culture**

- Independent schools are not like public schools. They are not like colleges and universities. In fact, they are not even like each other. Many independent schools share cultural norms, but these norms are rarely written down. Take time to get your bearings and understand the culture of your school community. This is particularly true if you're new to independent schools. Some educators of color encourage you to observe for a year (or until you have a clear sense of how the school functions culturally) before entering the debates and discussions about school culture and directions in curriculum.
- Ask questions. If it appears that others (particularly white colleagues) seem to know things about the school that you don't know, don't panic or think it's a conspiracy. One picks up the code of independent schools over time. You can pick it up more quickly if you're willing to ask questions of trusted colleagues.
- If the school has a published history, read it. If the school doesn't have a published history, read any publication that offers insights into the school's past.
- Understand that you will probably get involved in diversity work, one way or another. Expect, on occasion, to be a representative for your race and gender, expect to have surprising and difficult conversations with students who relate to you and need to confide in you (more on this later).

### **Developing personal survival skills**

- A long-time teacher (and former administrator) says, “You must set up boundaries. This is very difficult when you are starting out. For one, you're trying to prove yourself to the community. For another, you want to dedicate yourself to the students. And the community is going to be all too willing to let you take on extra work. It's part of the culture of most schools, especially boarding schools. But those who maintain their psychological health do so by setting up boundaries.

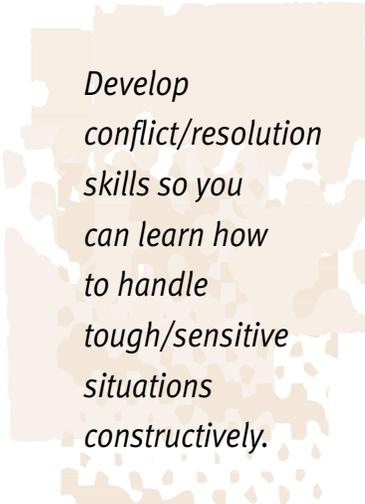


*Independent schools are not like public schools. They are not like colleges and universities. In fact, they are not even like each other.*

**WHAT SCHOOLS CAN  
DO TO SUPPORT  
EDUCATORS OF  
COLOR**  
*cont'd*

- Evaluate the curriculum to see to what degree it is weighted toward white culture and excludes people of color.
- Establish a peer-mentoring program. Also provide professional development programs designed to improve teaching methodology. Along with helping educators of color feel like an essential part of the school community, schools need to help teachers of color — help all teachers — develop their teaching skills.

- Many educators who responded to the survey said that new teachers need to know that they will work hard. That they should expect to work hard. But you should also know when to take time for yourself. On paper, in comparison to public schools, working in an independent school sounds easier — the academic freedom, smaller class sizes, etc.. But most schools make demands of all teachers in and out of the classroom that, in sum, make the work hard — surprisingly hard for some new teachers.
- That said, experienced educators remind you that it's okay to say, "No." Most independent school educators feel overworked at times. And most independent schools will ask a great deal of teachers. It's important to know the details of your job description well and not stray too far outside those boundaries — unless you are willing and able to do the extra work without harboring resentment.
- One educator of color says, "Be the best teacher you can be, first and foremost." It's easy to get caught up in broader school cultural issues. But if you are hired to teach science, make sure you give your students the time they need, and give yourself the time you need to be the most effective teacher possible.
- A history teachers says, "Let your assets shine. You know your strengths; use them to your best advantage."
- Stay connected to family and friends. "Pray/journal/meditate," says an administrator of color. "And get off campus when you can."
- Develop conflict/resolution skills so you can learn how to handle tough/sensitive situations constructively. Along these lines, a Spanish teacher says, "If you rock the boat you might get pushed off. Therefore, present your issues/complaints/ideas in a non-threatening way."
- A diversity director says, "Don't walk out the door in the morning until you feel centered and ready for the hard stuff."
- Expect to educate certain adults in your school about diversity issues.
- Be ready to be an advisor or confidant for students of color.
- Inform your dean of faculty, head of school, or supervisor about what you are doing that isn't in your job description, such as the time you spend working with families of color.
- Take time to "energize yourself culturally by participating in events in the nearest city that make you feel comfortable."



*Develop  
conflict/resolution  
skills so you  
can learn how  
to handle  
tough/sensitive  
situations  
constructively.*

**WHAT SCHOOLS CAN  
DO TO SUPPORT  
EDUCATORS OF  
COLOR**  
*cont'd*

■ In *The Color of Excellence*, authors Pearl Kane and Alfonso Orsini point out that cultural change in a school requires “getting a handle on where the power lies. If the board or the parent body are controlling the school on matters of diversity then that group must be fully apprised and in agreement about where the school is headed. Otherwise, the school will be hampered in its efforts.”

■ Save the summers for yourself. If you want to teach summer school or attend classes that give you credit toward a master’s or doctorate degree, fine. If you want to spend the summer traveling, or fishing, or writing poetry, fine. Do what feels good for the soul.

### Professional experiences

- Seek out professional development opportunities — both in your area of expertise and in diversity work (even if this is not your primary area of expertise). Get to know the regional and national offerings and ask for support from your school.
- Subscribe to professional journals that offer professional advice and a national perspective. (But don’t try to read everything.)
- The best educators, says author and educational consultant Roland Barth, are also life-long learners. Engage in learning with your students and the adults in the school community and you’ll carry more energy into each day.

### Directing diversity efforts

If you are a diversity director or director of multicultural affairs, or in any position that primarily focuses on diversity, you know that your work is highly politically and emotionally charged. As a long-time college counselor says, “The most difficult job for faculty of color is in the position of diversity director. We can’t seem to fully anticipate the pitfalls of the job. This fact, combined with some people’s natural inclination to ‘rescue’ a community (and therefore take on more work than is reasonable) and to have leaders who are too willing to let you take on this extra work, sets up teachers of color for burnout and resentment.”

On the other hand, many diversity practitioners are bolstered by the work — by the opportunity to support students of color and help transform a community. “What I like,” says one diversity director, “is getting people to speak with each other. In a world where there is really little sense of community these days, we can help build a sense of community.”

All the above advice applies here. In addition:

■ In an article in *Independent School*, Ilana Kaufman, assistant head of school for academic affairs at Lick-Wilmerding School in San Francisco, encourages educators primarily involved with diversity work to, among other things, “enter situations that are not comfortable. Go to those places where you are the only person of color. There, you will learn the inner workings of a school, you will rub elbows with folks who you need to know and who need to know you, and you will develop the skills and thick skin necessary to meet the obligations of your charge.”

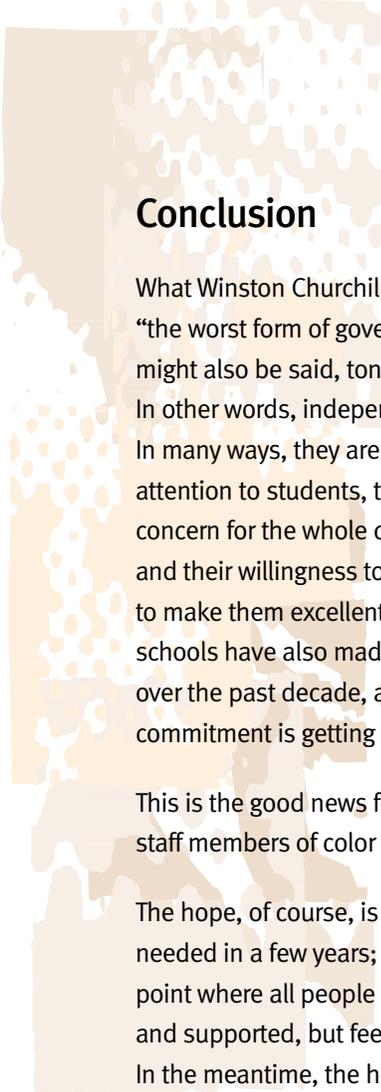
*“What I like,”  
says one  
diversity director,  
“is getting  
people to  
speak with  
each other.  
In a world  
where there  
is really  
little sense  
of community  
these days,  
we can help  
build a sense  
of community.”*

**WHAT SCHOOLS CAN  
DO TO SUPPORT  
EDUCATORS OF  
COLOR**  
*cont'd*

■ Kane and Orsini also say that institutional change is “about educating the entire community about race, not just helping people of color accommodate to the school. Diversification [must focus] on working with the majority. As one leader stated, ‘The culture of the school has to change; otherwise you have lip service and a revolving door.’”

- Be calm. Take the high road. Always present “your best, most learned, circumspect, and professional self,” writes Kaufman.
- Find a voice on important committees. You’re not there just to support currently enrolled students of color, but to help guide the institution through essential cultural change. To the degree possible, you need to be involved with those committees that have the power to bring about cultural change.
- Invite feedback and constructive criticism.
- Attend national and regional diversity conferences and workshops.
- Diversity directors in their early years need to know that, in many schools, there is a “culture of politeness,” as researcher Howard Stevenson puts it, that masks true feelings. On the one hand, this makes changing school culture immensely difficult, and, on the other hand, makes diversity directors feel isolated. It’s important, therefore, to make sure you report directly to the head of school and other administrators with authority to get things done, and to make sure you build your support network.
- Seek support for diversity work from other adults in the school community. As one college counselor who works on a support team for the office of diversity at her school, says, “It helps to amplify one’s message and makes it less of the complaint of a single individual, and more of a broad concern about the community and its mission.”
- As Ilana Kaufman also says, “Never throw tantrums when upset or unsuccessful. Once you abandon professionalism, you can expect to be marginalized as a lone ranger, a maverick, or even worse, someone who ‘is working through her own stuff on the school’s time.’ Always stay strong, think hard, call upon your allies, and breathe. There are a thousand more battles to be fought, and you can’t afford to exhaust yourself or undermine your credibility by sweating the small stuff.”
- Connect with diversity directors at other schools — to share ideas and support each other.
- If part of your job is to encourage and orchestrate changes in the school culture, ask key administrators to support this work and to undertake diversity training to help them better understand this work.

*To the degree possible, you need to be involved with those committees that have the power to bring about cultural change.*



## Conclusion

What Winston Churchill said about Democracy (that it is “the worst form of government, except for all the others”) might also be said, tongue-in-cheek, of independent schools. In other words, independent schools are works in progress. In many ways, they are great places. Their small size, their attention to students, their academic excellence, their concern for the whole child and for moral development, and their willingness to evolve with the world — all combined to make them excellent institutions. Many independent schools have also made a solid commitment to diversity over the past decade, and the shape and direction of this commitment is getting clearer with each passing year.

This is the good news for teachers, administrators, and staff members of color working in independent schools.

The hope, of course, is that such a guide as this won’t be needed in a few years; that schools will have evolved to the point where all people of color will not only feel welcomed and supported, but feel central to the school community. In the meantime, the hope is that this guide will help make your life and work more fulfilling.



**AISNE**

**Association of Independent Schools in New England**

600 Longwater Drive, Suite 208, Norwell, MA 02061

[www.aisne.org](http://www.aisne.org)