




# Cornerstones of CULTURAL Competence

*by Libby Addison*



When a cornerstone is laid, it's part of the solid foundation upon which a structure is built. But it's also something more. A cornerstone is a promise – an assurance that something new and exciting is on the way. Buildings usually have just one cornerstone. But when it comes to teaching diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), The Potomac School has four.

A commitment to DEI has long been part of Potomac's mission, and that commitment requires keeping an eye on the horizon and never sitting back complacently. To that end, during the 2018-19 academic year, Assistant Head of School Tim Jaeger approached the school's Cultural Competence Leadership Team (CCLT) – a group of faculty members who work to further DEI efforts at Potomac – with a proposal.

"At Potomac, we recognize cultural competence as an essential life skill," says Upper School English teacher Torrye Parker, who chairs the CCLT. "Tim asked if we could create some tools to help teachers integrate DEI work more holistically throughout the curriculum. We decided that we needed to develop a framework for this effort – and that's where the Cultural Competence Cornerstones came from."

The team had a retreat in March 2019, participating in a full day of planning and discussion. Suzanne Bailey, also an Upper School English teacher and a member of the CCLT, recalls, "We asked ourselves a lot of questions. For example, what's the best way to organize themes and topics? We also discussed which cultural competence skills are most important for students to acquire along the K-12 continuum. We acted as a kind of think tank to get some ideas down and begin to organize them in a useful way." She adds, "The next step was to share our thinking with the academic deans in each division, to begin exploring how these ideas could be integrated into the curriculum."

In 2009, Potomac adopted a diversity statement developed by a committee of parents, teachers, and alumni. In 2019, under the leadership of a board-level committee, the school created and formally adopted a new Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statement, which includes many of the same principles as its predecessor and addresses additional dimensions of Potomac's commitment. Both statements served as touchstones for the CCLT's work.

In addition, Torrye notes, "We used materials produced by an organization called Teaching Tolerance, whose mission is to provide DEI resources to educators. In particular, we spent a long time discussing how the Teaching Tolerance curriculum might apply to the specific skills that we want Potomac students to develop."

The members of the CCLT were especially interested in Teaching Tolerance's Social Justice Standards – four principles that, according to the organization's website, "provide a common language and organizational structure that teachers can use to guide curriculum development for students and to communicate with professional learning communities about social justice teaching goals and practices."

The group decided to adapt the Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards to Potomac's unique program. After some discussion, they endorsed integrating three of the standards – "identity," "justice," and "action" – directly into Potomac's new DEI curriculum. However, they changed Teaching Tolerance's "diversity" standard to "connection." Torrye says, "It's ultimately the same thing, but we wanted to bring it a step further. At Potomac, we build strong relationships with people who are different from us in many aspects of their identities, whether that's race, religion, family structure, or something else. We want to embrace that

connectedness in our community."

The team next combined Potomac's four DEI principles into one document – the Cultural Competence Cornerstones – designed to serve as a strong foundation upon which to base further progress.

The members of the CCLT then began developing "essential questions" that faculty could use to guide conversations and curriculum decisions related to the Cornerstones. Each Cornerstone integrates three of these essential questions. For instance, "justice" asks members of the Potomac community to consider, "What power and privilege do I have?," "What are systems of power and privilege in my community?," and "How can I use my power and privilege to benefit others?"

On a faculty professional day in April 2019, the members of the CCLT introduced the Cornerstones to their colleagues. The essential questions were first shared at another meeting, in June. The new tools received a warm reception from faculty. Torrye says, "Many teachers told us that they had been looking for effective ways to weave cultural competence into their work in the classroom. They were happy to see Potomac adopting a more structured approach to teaching this very important life skill."

Intermediate School English teacher Jeremy Sandler observes, "The CCLT's work allows me to put more intentionality behind the way I engage students with work that relates to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Having this framework of guiding principles and essential questions helps me identify opportunities to discuss pertinent issues when they come up in what we're reading. One example is a short story we read in class – "Marigolds," by Eugenia Collier. Four different identifiers come into play there – race, gender, class, and ability – which gives the students a lot to think about as we analyze the story. This

year, I had Potomac's director of student diversity recruitment and retention, David Grant, and CCLT member Charlotte Berlin stop by my class to help facilitate our discussion of that story."

Upper School Head Doug McLane is also a fan of the Cornerstones. He notes, "We've taught through the lens of the 'identity' Cornerstone for a while. Our humanities curriculum fuses elements of novels with issues of identity, and in world language classes, a lot of work happens around questions about what it means to be from a particular place." He adds, "This Cornerstone is a vital first step in achieving cultural competence. It's about examining the factors that make each of us who we are. When we learn to understand and value our own identities, we are in a better position to move past assumptions and be open to learning about – and respecting – others' identities. So understanding identity is a first step toward achieving the goals of connection, action, and justice."

Doug notes that growth in cultural competence isn't just important for students while they are at Potomac: "Empowering individuals to value being part of a diverse community is important in all stages of their lives. It encourages them to support and learn from others, and to explore different perspectives, voices, experiences, and cultures. Ultimately, a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion will make our country and our world stronger and more just."

Jenni Hoffmann – second grade teacher, K-6 chair of Potomac's Social Studies Department, and a CCLT member – has made cultural competence part of her teaching practice for years. She says that the Cornerstones have helped her and her colleagues in the lower divisions weave it into their curriculum in new ways.

"This year, the second-grade team developed a cultural competence unit

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– David Grant, Director of Student Diversity Recruitment and Retention

that we will string through the entire academic year,” she reflects. “We’ve always done a lot with identity and connection in our classrooms, but now we’re taking those lessons a little bit further.

One thing we focus on is that perspective really matters when you’re studying history. When we study history in second grade, for example, we try to consider events from all perspectives, including those of Native Americans, African Americans, and women.” To accomplish this, second graders read non-majority-centered books such as *Mumbet’s Declaration of Independence* and *Henry’s Freedom Box*; study the Pamunkey tribe, who were native to Virginia when the colonists arrived; and visit the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

The biggest change to the second-grade curriculum is a shift in what was previously called Colonial Day – a longstanding Potomac tradition that is a fond memory for many alumni. The event will still take place each May, but it will now be called “Virginia’s Past, Our Present” and focus on historical figures representing a variety of different groups and perspectives from this time period. The students will also reflect on what the Commonwealth is like today in all of its rich, diverse complexity and give presentations about their lives in modern Virginia.

In a few years, when those students hit the seventh grade, they will revisit some of the same periods of U.S. history – but this time, their studies will go deeper. As a CCLT member, Intermediate School history teacher, and 7-12 History Department Chair, Charlotte Berlin helped to create the Cornerstones. She

believes that cultural competence and an accurate understanding of history are inseparably linked.

Charlotte observes, “In the lower grades, teachers might focus primarily on identity and connection. But in Intermediate School, there are a lot of moments where all of the Cornerstones appear very clearly. During the second semester, for example, we study westward expansion, indigenous life, the Civil War, and the experience of enslaved people. Though identity and connection are part of these units, they heavily feature the justice and action Cornerstones. I ask my students to contemplate a big, important question – one of the essential questions under the “action” Cornerstone: – ‘What is worth fighting for?’”

To help her students answer this question, Charlotte introduces a project that she created with former Intermediate School humanities teacher Jared Williams, called the Abolitionist Convention. Each student takes on the role of a famous abolitionist and then dives into researching that person’s approach to the eradication of slavery. What they find is that, though everyone from Frederick Douglass to Lucretia Mott did all that they could to stop enslavement, these historical figures’ plans for how to stop it varied greatly. Could slavery be ended by forming abolitionist political parties? By boycotting all slave-produced goods? The students memorize the perspectives of the particular abolitionists they’re studying, then debate about which method is best.

“As students learn the abolitionists’ arguments, they start to realize just how embedded slavery once was in American life,” says Charlotte. “That sparks the understanding that there are systems

of power that need to be examined, which is what the ‘justice’ Cornerstone is all about. And so much of the ‘action’ Cornerstone is about how we seek to make change in the world. When we recognize that something is wrong in society, what do we do? What kind of action do we choose to take? These are things that we want our students to begin to think deeply about.”

The Cornerstones have also been integrated into arts classes at Potomac. Middle School music teacher Russell Nadel has long emphasized a global perspective on music, teaching his students that people from every country and culture express themselves through this art form in unique ways. Russell highlights this global connection by greeting students in a different language each day when they arrive for class – and that’s only the beginning. Posters of composers from many nations, cultures, and backgrounds decorate the classroom walls, and Russell’s students learn about one each week. Through his class, students have been exposed to the work of Persian classical singer Mohammad-Reza Shajarian, Chilean folk artist Violeta Parra, Choctaw American musician Samantha Crain, and many more.

“In addition to appreciating the music, it’s a good opportunity to tell stories about people’s lives and journeys,” Russell notes. He adds that, often, conversations about identity, action, and justice come up organically during this process. He says, “I believe it’s important to show students that there is no one ‘right’ kind of music. If someone’s initial reaction is to laugh at music that sounds different from what they’re used to, we interrupt that. If someone says, ‘That’s weird,’ we investigate that.”

Even a subject as seemingly unlikely as mathematics can incorporate the Cornerstones. Intermediate School math teacher Sharyn Stein emphasizes both identity and connection through the word problems she uses. “I have changed the language in many of them,” she notes. “Many problems, regardless of the conceptual topic, have traditionally been set up as ‘boys versus girls’ or ‘men versus women.’ I didn’t like that, so I changed them to things like ‘Yankees fans versus Red Sox fans,’ thereby de-gendering them. I also added problems that involve two moms or two dads to use alongside the ones that involve a mom and a dad.”

Sharyn believes that small changes like this make a difference in the lives of students. She asserts, “Using more inclusive language and connecting what happens at school to the realities of students’ lives helps make the material more meaningful for them.”

Looking ahead, Potomac teachers are excited to continue their work with the Cornerstones and come up with more ways to integrate these principles and the related essential questions into the curriculum. David Grant, who has worked with a number of teachers as they have introduced cultural competence elements in their classrooms, says this means the future is bright: “Ultimately, we want to provide students with an understanding of identity, connection, justice, and action in a way that maximizes learning for everyone involved. That will contribute to our students being able to work across differences effectively, with curiosity and humility, and without judgment – which is the very definition of cultural competence. And if our students can do that, then the sky’s the limit. They’ll be able to build purposeful lives and help make the world a more just and equitable place.”



## The Student Diversity Leadership Conference

When Brandon Potts '21 first heard about the Student Diversity Leadership Conference, he knew right away that he wanted to go. “A friend who went last year told me about the work she did there,” he explains. “It’s focused on helping students to better help others, and that really interested me.”

The conference – known to attendees as SDLC – is an immersive educational experience that takes place concurrently with the annual People of Color Conference, an opportunity for faculty and staff to further their own efforts toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. Both conferences are sponsored by the National Association of Independent Schools.

The SDLC’s website says that the program, “focuses on self-reflecting, forming allies, and building community,” and the participants “develop cross-cultural communication skills, design effective strategies for social justice practice...and learn the foundations of allyship and networking.”

The conference originated in 1993, and Potomac students have participated since the 2001-02 school year.

Like Brandon, Shelby Thompson '21 attended this year’s conference in Seattle. She says, “I loved SDLC. To get to know such a diverse group of people, including many who looked like me, was such an energizing experience. When I talked about certain topics and had people understand exactly what I meant, that was just so amazing.” She adds, “There were a lot of different groups represented at the conference. I also think it’s really important to take opportunities to be in cultures and groups outside of your norm. If you don’t branch out and listen to other people’s views, you won’t be able to learn.”

When SDLC participants return to Potomac, they use their experience to enrich the school community. Director of Student Diversity Recruitment and Retention David Grant explains, “When they come back, they lead assemblies for students in all four divisions, and they present at faculty meetings. Armed with the knowledge that their perspectives and experiences are valuable and needed, they’re ready to make a difference.”

Upper School Head Doug McLane agrees: “I have been impressed by the confidence with which these students share what they learned at SDLC. They speak with authority and enthusiasm about complex issues, and their focus is on helping to make our school a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable place. Their investment in this work and their leadership within our community are really great to see.”