Better Together

The director of equity and inclusivity and the head of school at Graland Country Day School (CO) reflect on how they’re creating a sense of belonging and educating the whole school community

By Rebecca Scherr, Artwork by Josue Eeilla

In spring of 2017, when Oscar Gonzalez saw the job posting for director of equity and inclusivity at Graland Country Day School (CO), he knew he had to be in this role and at this school. Nearly two decades before, Gonzalez, a student of color, had attended school about seven miles away, at Kent Denver School (CO), on a financial aid scholarship. He remembers his parents paying $250 a year in installments. He attended the Student Diversity Leadership Conference at NAIS’s People of Color Conference in 2014 and now serves as co-chair. But what drew him into this work was the skills and understanding he built as a student navigating a world that was completely different to him and his family.

Graland has had a strategic focus on diversity since the board adopted a diversity policy statement in 1994. In the school’s latest strategic plan, adopted in 2017, diversity, inclusivity, and equity have even more prominence. Head of School Josh Cobb knew that expanding the director of equity and inclusivity role from a part-time to full-time position would really help the school focus on this initiative and achieve its mission of fostering intellectual excellence and building strong character. He needed to find someone who’d take on this long-term work with a deep commitment and methodical approach. Cobb liked Gonzalez’s experience and temperament, and he was hired. In this edited exchange, Cobb and Gonzalez discuss their philosophy of diversity and inclusion, the difficult conversations they’ve had, and how they’re moving their work forward with faculty, students, and parents, and other schools.
GONZALEZ: I remember one of our first conversations, Josh, discussing this idea of a sense of belonging and what inclusivity means. This means hearing all voices and making sure that everyone has a seat at the table—and not only that they have a seat but that they feel valued and can use their voice.

COBB: Work in diversity, inclusivity, and equity can be so broad that you can feel like you're losing your focus. You've helped bring it down to this one idea: How do we enhance the sense of belonging for all members of the Graland community? That was so helpful to me to have that North Star to guide us.

GONZALEZ: What I find helpful, too, is taking the portrait of an eighth-grade graduating student and backward planning, really setting up our students to succeed when they leave Graland. We've talked a lot about the convergence of academic excellence and character-building, and inclusivity plays a huge part in that. We need to make sure our students can work across lines of differences, that they have the skills necessary to live in today's world.

COBB: I think most independent schools are thinking about who they send out into the world as leaders and what impact they're going to have. This is a huge challenge because independent schools by their nature are exclusive. They have an application process. They have tuition. There are hurdles you have to jump through to be part of that community. As schools, we have to work much harder to create inclusive environments and fully devote ourselves to that work day in, day out.

This is not just about the folks that are coming from a diverse or underrepresented background. It's really about everyone asking themselves, "How do I enhance a sense of belonging of others, and what's my part in that?"

GONZALEZ: We've got to make sure that we embed this into the fabric of our culture and everyone owns this work. Seemingly small things, like a wave or saying hello, are very important, and we want to be sure that we understand and recognize what might be going on in another person's life. I want to make sure that students aren't distracted by questions like, "Do people like me?" "Am I going to be accepted?" Or, "Do I just have to keep my head down and be grateful that I'm receiving a scholarship to this awesome school?"

Another part that I'm charged with is educating our community on why this work is important. It's a bit about changing mindsets and having people lean into discomfort, and sometimes it's about disrupting the status quo or inconveniencing the majority—or that's how it's perceived.

COBB: We've been talking at a pretty high level about our philosophies. I have been at the school for 16 years. This is your first year. What were some things you experienced or some challenges you had?

GONZALEZ: Early on, I learned about polarities, and they're different than problems because they don't have just one solution. No matter what decision we make, both sides aren't going to be satisfied. We talk about how we can leverage the best possibilities to find that common ground to bridge the various points of view.

AIM FOR YOUR STRATEGIC EQUITY GOALS

Graland Country Day School (CO) is using the NAIS Assessment of Inclusivity and Multiculturalism (AIM). For the past 12 years, the tool has provided schools with a deep understanding of the climate of inclusion on their campuses, from seven different constituency groups including students, alumni, teachers, administrators, and trustees. Learn how your school can use AIM's online climate survey and self-assessment to build community and plan strategically at nais.org/analyze/assessment-of-inclusivity-and-multiculturalism.
COBB: Something that comes up often at independent schools is this tension between traditions and change. This year you've reviewed some of our sacred traditions through a lens of equity and inclusivity. One example is our knighting ceremony for the fifth-graders, which is a very important rite of passage, emblemizes student growth, and is very important to our mission. But it has elements that may feel off-putting from an inclusivity line. You gave your feedback and helped us tweak it to maintain the purpose while making it more inclusive.

GONZALEZ: What was great about evaluating the knighting ceremony was that while I was reviewing it, the teacher who leads it approached me. That shows our efforts are paying off, and our faculty is looking at things through the lens of inclusivity.

COBB: What other things have been hard for you, some of those polarities?

GONZALEZ: I think there are a lot of events or ways we celebrate holidays—for example, before Thanksgiving, we were able to talk about going beyond heroes, celebrations, and food, and also thinking about how we're representing history.

COBB: We see those types of conversations during our work with the School Climate Advisory Committee, a group of about 40 parents who gather on a monthly basis. The group, now in its second year, meets as a forum for conversation, education, and to make recommendations to the head of school. Sometimes discussions result with ideas that are helpful to me in supporting our strategic goals, like when we were evaluating the true cost of tuition for students. Other times, we have leaned into the educational part, and had charged yet productive discussions about systems of power and inclusivity terminology to support our collective and my personal growth.

GONZALEZ: I learned a great deal after that process as well. It's great that we have these touchpoints where we can unpack these sorts of things and strategize how to go forth with these messages. And I've learned that one size does not fit all, and we have to create opportunities to meet people at different places in their growth.

I think what's also great about the School Climate Advisory Committee is that this year we elevated that group all the way to the board of trustees. The chair now will have an ex-officio position on the board, so I think that speaks volumes that the board and the administration really take this work seriously.

COBB: Another area where we've had some productive yet often messy conversations is in the diversity and equity cohort. We ask for faculty members to join this group that throughout the year takes about a day a month to gather with an outside consultant, Regina Lewis, to go deeper with their diversity and equity work. Through that work, they come up with special projects they can then bring to the entire school community.

GONZALEZ: The work that the cohort did last year has rippled into the curriculum this year from smaller things like making sure all the kindergarten classrooms are intentional about the multicultural representation with toys and books. This year I've seen it also at a policy level in terms of evaluating our hiring practices.

The cohort definitely stood out to me as something this school does really well. We take at minimum 20 faculty and staff members. They have six or seven release days. They're spending more than 40 hours going in-depth into these conversations,

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learning and figuring out how to apply these lessons to be culturally competent and how to be culturally responsive educators. It’s been great seeing how the teachers have really empowered the students. Students even took the initiative to come up with a proposal to make our dress code gender inclusive.

COBB: We have accomplished a lot, but the next challenge is to measure success. What’s one way we can measure success in this area?

GONZALEZ: To get a pulse on what our community thinks on what the climate is, we are using the NAIS Assessment of Inclusivity and Multiculturalism (AIM). Graland administered the survey in 2008 and 2015, and we just finished fielding the survey in Spring 2018. Moving forward, our goal is to conduct the survey every three years. These results will really give us more clarity on where we need to focus.

One thing I’ve learned from you, Josh, is this idea of all ships rising, and so our work with the Colorado Diversity Network has been really great. It’s a network of schools that was created statewide to provide faculty training on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusivity, and it benefits all schools in the Association of Colorado Independent Schools (ACIS). We’re thinking beyond even ACIS and bringing public schools into the mix. It’s about everyone sharing our best practices so that we’re equipping all students, not just here in the city but in the state, and ideally in the country, to really move this work forward.

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