

Child & Family Network Centers

Diversity Works Uncovers the Value of Workplace DEI to a Nonprofit

The Child & Family Network Centers (CFNC) of Alexandria, Virginia, delivers a year of quality preschool education to eager learners from low income households. It fills a critical gap in the community by serving families who cannot afford private preschool but do not qualify for Head Start programs. As the demographics of Alexandria change to reflect an increasingly diverse mix of cultures and languages, CFNC sought to assess its own performance in the area of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

CFNC's DEI Challenge

CFNC takes a lot of care to deliver a high-quality curriculum to its vulnerable population of young learners. This requires an approach that takes educational value as well as cultural relevance into consideration. Yet every year brings a new cohort of students with a different mix of backgrounds and languages spoken in the home. While CFNC has very deliberately staffed its classrooms with native Spanish speakers, its leadership is primarily Caucasian. This is true both in terms of the school administration as well as its board of directors. Finally, even though CFNC leadership has a sense that a thoughtful approach to DEI is an asset for the organization, it does not have a written DEI strategy that outlines objectives and the necessary steps to achieve those objectives.

Diversity Works' Approach

Diversity Works starts every engagement by doing a deep dive with the client's leadership team to understand why DEI matters to the organization, what they hope to get out of the engagement, and who they will make available to us during the process. Based on our intake discussion, we understood that CFNC wanted a baseline measurement of their DEI activities to date and a set of recommendations that can form the basis of an organizational DEI strategy.

Diversity Works designed a quantitative and qualitative research program to gather the data needed to assess CFNC's DEI performance. The quantitative element consisted of a 44-question survey that was administered to all CFNC staff, regardless of position or function within the organization, and a 72-question survey that was administered to all CFNC board members. The staff survey evaluated employee perceptions of the organization's culture, management, and ability to serve its diverse student body. The board survey evaluated how important different aspects of DEI are to fulfill the mission of the organization.

The qualitative element of the project consisted of in-depth interviews with board members and staff leaders. The interviews allowed us to ask hard questions about CFNC's past performance and future aspirations so that we could make very strategic recommendations.



Results

Like a lot of organizations that take proactive steps to evaluate their DEI performance, CFNC is taking a number of positive actions despite not having a written strategy or roadmap to guide its DEI efforts. Our final report showed that on an objective scale, CFNC is performing somewhere between a proactive and progressive level, and in some areas is very close to achieving the top best practice level. Further, we were able to identify exactly how a focus on DEI can help CFNC achieve its mission and better serve its learners and their families.

While there is merit to pursuing workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion for its own sake, Diversity Works believes that organizations set themselves up to succeed when there is a clear business case for making the investment. For CFNC, making a concerted effort to improve DEI means strengthening the organizational culture, increasing the demand for its services from families from a wide range of backgrounds, and establishing itself as a leader in the community.

About CFNC

For 34 years, Child & Family Network Centers' (CFNC) mission is to provide caring, high-quality, free education and related services to at-risk children and their families in their own neighborhoods in order to prepare them for success in school and life.

Today, CFNC serves approximately 150 at-risk children and their families each year at eight accredited preschool classes in low-income neighborhoods in Alexandria.

In addition to our preschool program, we offer comprehensive services for children and bilingual family support for parents including parenting education and workshops, health screenings, and social, emotional, and behavioral support.

