

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF:

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SCHOOLS

Issue at a Glance

Students of color (Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, or American Indian/Alaska Native) made up 55% of public school students nationwide in 2022. The [National Center for Education Statistics](#) predicts this population will increase to 57% by 2031. In addition, in 2023, [11.4 million or 16% of children](#) under age 18 came from families living in poverty. The poverty rate was highest among Black and American Indian/Alaska Native children (29% and 27% respectively), followed by Hispanic (22%), and white and Asian children (10% for both groups). Data from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2023](#) also indicates that 19% of all high school students self-report as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and another 3.3% identify as transgender. It is also important to note that many students may fall under multiple subgroups.

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, culturally responsive schools can help “support historically underserved and marginalized students in coping with bias, discrimination, and negative stereotypes they too often face because of their cultural, racial, and socioeconomic identities.”

While federal and state policymakers debate the importance of culturally responsive practices and incorporate certain aspects into state education standards, National Principals Association finds that most states do not provide a comprehensive description of culturally responsive teaching to strengthen the teaching process.

In September 2020, New America published “[Culturally Responsive Teaching: A Reflection Guide](#)” to help facilitate self-appraisal, goal setting, and critical conversations across the core culturally responsive teaching competencies which include eight competencies for culturally responsive teaching:

- Reflecting on one’s cultural lens
- Recognizing and redressing bias in the system
- Drawing on students’ culture to shape curriculum and instruction
- Bringing real-world issues into the classroom
- Modeling high expectations for all students
- Promoting respect for student differences
- Collaborating with families and the local community
- Communicating in linguistically and culturally responsive ways

In addition, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) in 2020 shared insights about leading and learning cultural responsiveness through student and family voice. Issues of social justice and community can be a connection to history, science, economics, and culture and focus on how inequality can shape society and education experiences. Certain strategies include:

- Creating opportunities for students and families to build awareness of their peers’ lives. Ask students and families to share their experiences in a variety of ways to push beyond surface observations.

- Empowering students to see themselves in their work. Encourage students to develop creative, personalized, project-based learning projects that express their ideas and concerns about their communities through paintings, blogs, social media campaigns, and storytelling. These activities create opportunities to recognize different perspectives, understand and acknowledge multiple voices, and imagine how different circumstances can shape our lives.
- Allowing space for self-reflection. Set aside time to reflect on what was learned and shared. For leaders and educators, exploring their own cultural identities and understanding the experiences that families and students have shared with them may lead to a shift away from a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning to one that centers on varied and unique cultural perspectives, which could diminish inequities and disparities.

National Principals Association Position

- National Principals Association supports the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) which states that effective leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
- National Principals Association believes that by establishing a positive school climate and setting high academic standards for all students, the principal plays a key role in ensuring their school is culturally competent.
- National Principals Association supports building relationships with students and parents as individuals rather than a particular racial or cultural group. Teachers and administrators can apply student and family voice, backgrounds and experiences to develop curricula that support academic achievement.

Recommendations for Policymakers

- Congress should prioritize funding under the Higher Education Act for partnership grants that prepare school leaders and teachers to create a culturally responsive climate for diverse populations, including children with disabilities, English language learners, and children from low-income families.
- The U.S. Department of Education should conduct research on the impact of culturally responsive schools on student achievement and provide support and technical assistance to states and districts to help them incorporate best practices into their education systems.
- Congress should authorize a competitive grant program to assist states and districts in implementing an early warning data system to identify struggling students and create a system of evidence-based and linguistically and culturally relevant interventions.
- State policymakers should adopt or adapt the PSEL to ensure that principal certification and licensure requirements include a focus on equity and cultural responsiveness.
- State policymakers should revise teacher certification and licensure requirements to ensure that new teachers understand the cultures of the students they teach, how different cultures affect student learning and classroom and school behaviors, and know how to change their management style and differentiate instruction to embrace the diverse learning styles of their students.

- State policymakers should revise teacher evaluation requirements to include a measure of culturally responsive practice and ensure that teachers have access to professional development to help improve their practice.

Recommendations for Educator Preparation Programs

- Prepare teacher and principal candidates to understand the cultures of the students they teach, how different cultures affect student learning and classroom and school behaviors, and know how to change their management style and differentiate instruction to embrace the diverse learning preferences of their students.
- Promote culturally responsive leaders by providing principal candidates with a curriculum that is focused on preparing school leaders to support diverse learners including instruction on data analysis, content knowledge, and learning experiences that strengthen leaders' ability to support all students' academic achievement.

Recommendations for District Leaders

- Develop school budgets which prioritize professional development and continued training of principals and teachers to help them assess their own cultural viewpoints and biases, set high expectations for all students, acknowledge diverse learning preferences and use culturally responsive pedagogy.
- Ensure that district staff reflect on their own identities, assumptions, beliefs, and values and how those factors influence decisions they make about the staff and students they serve.
- Develop a baseline of cultural competency for your district and all schools by conducting a cultural audit that incorporates various forms of stakeholder feedback including diverse families and community members and includes a review of key policies and practices. Use those results to identify areas of improvement and develop strategic goals and objectives.
- Develop schedules, structures, and staffing that provide opportunities for school leaders and teachers to enhance student, family, and community engagement.
- Implement multitiered systems of support that encompass prevention, wellness promotion, and interventions that are based on student need and promote close school-community collaboration such as restorative practices and positive behavioral interventions and supports.

Recommendations for School Leaders

- Ensure that all staff, students, families, and community members have a sense of belonging at your school and provide forums both inside and outside of the classroom where everyone can learn about diverse student backgrounds.
- Review special education referrals and participation rates of students to identify areas for improvement and provide insight on professional development needs.

- Use the College Board's Diversity Responsive Principal Tool to determine whether policies and practices have been implemented that enhance the academic success of students from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.
- Ensure your school has systems in place to mitigate racial or cultural tensions.
- Offer curriculum and assessments that are unbiased and culturally sensitive and consider teachers' knowledge and support of culturally responsive teaching in your hiring decisions.
- Reinforce professional development efforts by mentoring, supporting, and evaluating teachers' use of culturally responsive pedagogy and differentiated instruction.
- Create a school leadership team and student advisory council and utilize your school's student council comprising a diverse group of voices to help you make decisions about policies and procedures at your school.