

## 2. Culturally Responsive Design Principles

Our Culturally Responsive Design Principles provide the blueprint for a school that is both student centered and equity focused. These principles consider the impact various structural, environmental, instructional, and relational factors have on students and the wider school community. While each design team that engages with *Building for Equity*

will have different inquiry questions and ultimate goals, these principles provide a touchstone for teams as they seek to define what a culturally responsive school design looks like within their own community and undergo a redesign process to bring these principles into everyday practice.



### Culturally Proficient Teachers and Leaders

School and district leaders as well as classroom educators have the shared responsibility to move toward ever-greater cultural proficiency. This includes learning about their own identities as they intersect with existing systems of privilege and oppression—in short, their positionality. It also includes a data-informed approach to decision-making about school policies and practices.

Leadership is critical. Culturally responsive teachers are supported by a strong, collaboratively developed mission and vision for the school and a distributed approach to leadership, one that leverages structures such as professional

learning communities and varied advisory and governance structures to support continuous growth for all educators, for the benefit of all students, especially those who have traditionally been marginalized within our schools. Successful leadership groups explore disaggregated data to regularly evaluate the school's pursuit of equitable outcomes; they also sharpen their asset-based approach to meeting all students' cognitive, academic, and social-emotional needs and potential. All these goals are accomplished through aligned professional development that balances collaboration with personalization.

### Inclusive School Culture

An environment that is culturally and emotionally sustaining for all students, as well as the wider community, ensures a bedrock foundation for learning. Sustaining school cultures feature a balance of high expectations, a welcoming atmosphere, warm student-teacher relationships, and a growth mindset. These are fostered not merely by reactive actions and individual initiatives but also by sustained commitment to proactive culture-building. Social-emotional learning and restorative discipline approaches help ensure that all students are able to engage fully in the school community and in the complete range of learning experiences it offers.

While proactive culture-building is essential, culturally responsive schools are prepared with consistent responses to challenges that arise. School discipline within a culturally responsive school emphasizes both emotional and physical safety

for all students. To avoid inequities in discipline practices, the school regularly reviews discipline data disaggregated by factors such as special education status, gender, and race/ethnicity. When inequities emerge, the school works to uncover and address the root causes. Restorative discipline approaches focused on restoring relationships and repairing harm are supported by clear and fair consequences that avoid exclusionary discipline practices such as suspension and expulsion.

Inclusive School Culture also ensures that there is full integration (rather than segregation) of all subgroups in all programs within the school, such as honors courses and special education, among others. Inclusion is universal: all students are welcomed, and all barriers are removed to ensure that all students can access the benefits provided by full membership in the school community.

## Student-Centered Academic Learning

The principle of Student-Centered Academic Learning in culturally responsive schools focuses on instruction and assessment practices facilitated by teachers and tailored to meet individual student needs. These include authentic learning opportunities that break the wall between classroom and community; the fostering of student agency through student voice, choice, and ownership over their learning; flexible learning structures that can adapt to meet various students' interests and needs; and the adoption of [quality performance-based assessment systems](#).

Most centrally, this principle emphasizes that all students are exposed to “mirrors and windows”—that is, both to curriculum, resources, and experiences that are culturally relevant

and supportive of a student's strengths and identity as well as to curriculum, resources, and experiences that are challenging, outside of a student's own sphere of prior exposure. By providing maximum opportunities for student agency and designing for students “at the margins” rather than for the illusory “average student,” educators can ensure that all students are able to access content that meets their interests and needs. Meanwhile, educators acting as learning facilitators (rather than sages) can help ensure that students are gaining important cognitive and social-emotional skills *through academic instruction and assessment*, which in turn helps these students progress toward competencies aligned with college and career readiness.

## Supportive Resources

Supportive Resources are the curricula, materials, support staff, planning time, co-curricular activities, and even wrap-around services that support the various needs students bring into school. Schools without these resources are typically unable to make progress toward the other principles, since these are fundamental to teachers, students, and the school environment.

Schools with Supportive Resources are not simply well-resourced. The resources must be curated and managed in a way that supports a culturally responsive environment. For example, curricula and materials must be rigorous and rich while also depicting diverse cultures, identities, and perspectives. And not only must educators be afforded the time to plan and to engage in data-based inquiry but also supported in their efforts to do so with a sharpened equity lens.

## Engaged Community

The walls of culturally responsive schools are permeable. Rather than insulating students from the larger community, these schools leverage this community as an asset. This involves three main considerations: parent and family engagement, community partnerships, and student civic engagement. Parent and family engagement requires both the removal of barriers to deep participation in the life of the school *and* the establishment of structures that enable parents

and family members to have authentic roles in the school. Community partnerships take advantage of the expertise of agencies, businesses, and organizations while also providing opportunities for students to benefit from learning opportunities outside the walls of the classroom. Finally, the principle of Engaged Community looks at equity-minded approaches to giving students the chance to avail themselves of these community connections and build leadership skills.

## Using These Principles

These Culturally Responsive Design Principles serve as a blueprint for design teams in their work to improve their schools as well as a touchstone during the entire Equitable Redesign Cycle. Design teams may consider these principles during visioning (Phase 1), use them to identify assets and areas of growth during Phase 2 (Rediscovering Our Community), leverage them to inspire innovations (Phase 3), or revisit them during early implementation (Phase 4).

specific indicators of each principle, which can help schools bring into reality design considerations that previously resided only in theory. After all, culturally responsive schools exist not only on the pages of a strategic plan but also—when we build for equity—in the quotidian life of the school. Only when theory becomes reality can we hope to see the kinds of sustainable, equitable student outcomes that inspired us to begin *Building for Equity*.

The [Building for Equity School Self-Assessment Tool](#), found in the Supportive Reading and Resources section at the end of this guide provides tangible guidance for the