



Creating State Education Systems That Value Student Cultures

State boards can set the stage for learning environments that connect and engage all students.

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The last two years disrupted public education systems, but they also highlighted opportunities. Schools and districts can apply the nimbleness they demonstrated during the pandemic to efforts to reconnect and reengage their students. In this moment, state boards of education are in the perfect position to guide schools and districts, not just to a return to normal, but to a system that invites back students' whole selves through inclusive, culturally relevant practices.

Schools and classrooms have always been cultural spaces, but as Zaretta Hammond suggests, education communities ought to understand whose culture is being attended to.¹ Students bring cultural knowledge and expertise to their classrooms. Are diverse cultures welcomed there? How do districts and states support the development of classroom and school culture?

At a time when school systems have reported sharp declines in student enrollment, it is important to recognize that when students are disconnected from school they are disconnected from multiple facets of development.² Culturally responsive practice makes use of culture as a basis for engaging and motivating students, and it fosters proactive classroom management and positive student behavior.³ Such practices also lead to improved academic performance, attendance, credits earned, retention rates, and positive self-identity.⁴

The Role of State Boards

State boards set conditions. Although the levers within a state board's control vary, most boards have jurisdiction over learning standards, professional educator qualifications, accountability systems, and standards of accreditation. Even in cases where state boards do not have direct

control over policy areas, they function as guides for directing districts and schools. State boards raise citizen voices on education issues, engage experts and stakeholders, and bring coherence to state policy.

In shaping state policy, setting standards for practice, and advocating for equitable supports, state boards can set the stage for ensuring that districts and schools are culturally responsive environments. Being culturally relevant and responsive requires that educators exercise pedagogical dexterity as they learn aspects of their students' lives, what would be relevant to them, and how best to respond to what their students reveal about their interests. What would be relevant in one class with one group of students would be completely irrelevant to students in another (see box).

To emerge from the instability of the past two years with a state education system that values culturally responsive practices, state boards should lead an ongoing strategic process with an eye toward consistent understandings and evidence of culturally responsive practices.⁵

Education policy often falls into a trap of reform and policy churn, resulting in contradictory or disconnected policies that hamper consistent implementation across districts and schools. States can lay the foundations now for consistency—to create ongoing processes of meaning making to ensure that education systems value culturally responsive practices.

There is no perfect or singular algorithm for shaping district or school culture. For schools to be responsive to culture, the direction and support they receive must be dynamic and ongoing. State boards can lead by example. They can engage in their own continuous process of learning as they engage varied communities across the state. They can create definitions for

Box 1. Lesson Plan

While cultural relevance is wholly contextual, this example may help illustrate its classroom impact: Consider a lesson on the environmental impact of the closure, removal, and relocation of a large neighborhood Walmart. The building was torn down, leaving a vacant space in a local strip mall.

Students might ask the following: How were building materials disposed of? What impact could there be on air quality, water, electricity? How does the loss of the building affect the local economy? How might it affect local transportation patterns for citizens who rely on public transportation? Such an exploration would afford students an opportunity to explore specific content in environmental science as it relates to their local context. Students could then apply their content knowledge to the cultural dynamics around them.

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what it means to be culturally responsive. They can engage stakeholders and build coalitions to advance implementation strategies aligned with that statewide understanding.

The Delaware Department of Education facilitated a process that began with state-level education leaders engaging in deep reflection on what it means to be culturally responsive and on what should occur at the state level in order to achieve an equitable education for every student. Staff at the department reflected on their own personal biases and used that reflection to review policies, procedures, and practices that were barriers to creating a culturally responsive education system. They worked to develop a statewide shared understanding of and definition for culturally responsive education and sought answers to strategy-defining questions across relevant topic areas:

- **Priorities.** What will you focus on in your area? Each agency leader challenged their groups to choose three or fewer priorities to avoid committing to too many.
- **Goals.** What do you hope your priorities will accomplish? It is ideal to have no more than three goals for each priority.
- **Activities.** What activities are needed to achieve each goal for each priority?
- **Outcomes.** What are the intended outcomes for each priority? This portion gave leaders a way to measure progress on their priorities.
- **Evidence.** What will be the evidence of success for each priority? This is where leaders

were able to connect and align department-level work.

- **Resources.** What resources are needed to meet the goals? Asking this question gave leaders an understanding of what was needed to achieve the goals set by each department.

Teams within the department engaged in the same facilitated process and used their understanding to align to interdepartmental and statewide definitions. Departments then had a foundation for engaging districts to identify evidence of cultural responsiveness in their own local school contexts that could inform contexts across the state. Critical to Delaware's work is a recognition that the process is ongoing and evolving, with flows of understanding that move back and forth between state and local contexts.

To ensure that a process of culturally responsive practice is clear and sustainable, states should keep in mind several key considerations.

- **Expert and public engagement.** Culturally sustaining teaching requires placing value on community languages and practices and community input.⁶ State boards should understand how districts vary, ensure inclusion of stakeholders that are representative of those diverse communities, and communicate clearly across audiences.⁷
- **Partnership development.** Partnerships with teacher preparation programs, community organizations, and state teaching organizations can be valuable resources in understanding varied contexts within the state and identifying evidence of culturally responsive practices.

■ **Data integration.** Goals and decisions should be clearly linked to data collection and analysis that will allow state leaders to monitor progress and hold themselves accountable.⁸

■ **Feedback loops.** Evidence from data should highlight needs, promote promising practices, and be used to reassess strategic goals and decisions. Evidence can also be used to inform the field more generally to promote a national understanding of impact.⁹

With a process in place, states can focus on four areas to support culturally responsive practices statewide: teacher skill development, teacher diversity, high-quality and representative instructional materials, and inclusive school contexts.

Teacher Skill Development

Culturally responsive teachers recognize ways to develop students as individuals, are willing to nurture cultural competence, and can engage with social and political topics.¹⁰ However, teachers are often not able to articulate culture and factors of discrimination themselves and are operating in environments where valuing diversity has become political.¹¹ State boards can support teachers in this work by reviewing requirements for preservice skill development through teacher preparation programs and in-service teacher skill development through professional development programs.

Preparation Programs. States can amend requirements in teacher preparation programs to ensure that programs include courses to help teachers demonstrate culturally responsive instructional strategies. However, states should be cautious of programs where cultural responsiveness is a single course as opposed to integrated throughout coursework that affirms students as “included, validated, valued, and safe.”¹² They can also ensure that courses help educators reflect on their biases, explore the cultures within the contexts where they plan to work, and build relationships with the students, families, and community members from those communities.

States should consider if candidates are learning how to

- connect students’ funds of knowledge to make learning contextual across intersections of culture;
- positively interact with students and identify discriminatory disciplinary practices; and

- form relationships with students, families, and community members to bridge the divide that often exists between families and school.

States should consider if programs include

- professors who are themselves experts in culturally responsive pedagogy with relevant, recent classroom experience;
- observations with classroom teachers identified as exhibiting quality culturally responsive practice; and
- strategies for diversifying their pool of candidates.

Professional Development. Amendments to preparation programs should be mirrored in changes to teacher professional development requirements and program design. States should take into consideration that teachers trained in traditional approaches to education are often resistant to adopting culturally responsive practices and may harbor misunderstandings about discrimination and exclusionary practices.¹³ Resistance to culturally relevant practice is a multilevel problem of learning that cannot be addressed by courses or training that are perceived as add-ons.¹⁴ States should push for training that situates culturally responsive practice as integral to holistic education and to supporting social, emotional, and academic development.¹⁵ Teachers also need the time, resources, and support that will allow them to develop deep understanding of how to implement culturally responsive practices in their respective contexts, which may be starkly different from their own or from those they encountered in preparation programs.¹⁶

Teacher Diversity

Creating a pipeline for a more diverse workforce is another important path toward more culturally responsive practice. Nearly 80 percent of public school teachers are White and non-Hispanic. It is no surprise then that teachers are often predominantly White and non-Hispanic in schools where the majority of students are not.¹⁷ A more racially, culturally diverse teacher workforce benefits all students and can lead to improved test scores, discipline rates, and graduation rates.¹⁸ However, like culturally responsive practices more generally,

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a diverse teacher workforce is especially beneficial for students of color.¹⁹

State boards can push for a statewide process for collecting and analyzing workforce data that reveals which candidates are being recruited, how teachers are being hired, and how resources are allocated to support and retain teachers of color.²⁰

■ **Recruitment.** Partnerships can inform strategies and tap into existing on-ramps for teachers of color. Those partnerships can be with organizations with expertise in recruitment, like the Center for Black Educator Development and the Black Educator Collaborative. States should also partner with minority-serving institutions, historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, and tribal colleges within their states to build from existing educator preparation programs. Finally, states should partner with community organizations and districts implementing local “grow-your-own” programs (see also article on page 39).

■ **Hiring.** State boards should use workforce data that unpacks at the district level the demographic makeup of candidates who apply, are extended interviews, and are hired to teach. These data should help state boards learn when and why teachers of color leave as well in order to better inform supports being provided to keep them in the classroom.²¹

■ **Targeted supports.** States can incentivize efforts to diversify local workforces and to support the working conditions and opportunities for personal and professional growth for teachers of color.

High-Quality, Representative Instructional Materials

A major component of culturally responsive practice is providing teachers with high-quality instructional materials (HQIM). When teachers receive HQIM that supports culturally responsive practice, it saves them from having to find supplemental materials on their own.²² State boards can advocate for HQIM that are closely aligned to standards, allow students to see themselves in their learning, and engage and challenge students in a straightforward way.

■ **Alignment to standards.** States should advocate for instructional materials that

have been reviewed for quality, such as those identified by EdReports, which conducts rigorous reviews of materials to ensure they are aligned to Common Core State Standards and that materials are user friendly for students and educators. States should additionally review the alignment of materials to state-specific standards.

■ **Representational balance.** High-quality materials are representative materials. States can take advantage of the many tools for reviewing how student cultures and languages are represented in curriculum, such as the culturally responsive curriculum scorecard from the NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, the tool for assessing bias from the Great Lakes Equity Center, and the guidelines for improving English language arts materials for English learners from the English Learners Success Forum.

■ **Incentivization.** States can use the information they gain from reviewing materials to incentivize districts to adopt curriculum that are high quality and representative and ensure they are supported in implementation.

Inclusive School Contexts

State boards can also focus on the ways in which schools support learning that engages students’ cultural strengths. Budgets are value-defining documents, and a major lever for creating inclusive contexts is ensuring that funds are equitable and directed to student supports. Although most state boards do not make direct funding decisions, they often are well placed to advocate for adequate, equitable funding.

■ **Equitable funding.** State boards can review state funding policies using the FundEd tool.²³ They can recommend that funding formulas include additional weights for students whose families face economic hardships, English learners, and students with disabilities and can target funds for districts with rates of low property wealth.²⁴

■ **Holistic supports.** States can ensure funding is more equitably directed to support districts and schools in adopting policies and practices for holistic student support.²⁵ They can suggest that funding be directed, for example,

to support districts and schools' adoption of evidence-based restorative justice policies and practices, and where possible, provide wraparound services. When students see themselves as belonging in the school building, it decreases negative student behaviors and disciplinary encounters.²⁶

Conclusion

Recent attacks on public education necessitate clarity of vision, a willingness to educate oneself against the misinformation about critical race theory and how it is being conflated with cultural responsiveness and responsibility. There are no silver bullets, and it often feels as if the goalposts keep changing. However, ensuring an excellent, equitable educational experience for every child in this country requires concerted, deliberate, sustained effort. State boards play an important role by forming strategic partnerships and seeking consistent evidence that schools and districts are using every tool at their disposal so that children receive the education that each state has committed to providing. ■

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³Kristine E. Larson et al., "Examining How Proactive Management and Culturally Responsive Teaching Relate to Student Behavior: Implications for Measurement and Practice," *School Psychology Review* 47, no. 2 (2018): 153–66.

⁴Ellen Eliason Kisker et al., "The Potential of a Culturally Based Supplemental Mathematics Curriculum to Improve the Mathematics Performance of Alaska Native and Other Students," *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* 43, 1 (2012): 75–113; Thomas S. Dee and Emily K. Penner, "The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance," *American Educational Research Journal* 54, no. 1 (2016): 127–66; Thomas S. Dee and Emily K. Penner, "My Brother's Keeper? The Impact of Targeted Educational Supports," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* (2021); Adriana J. Umaña-Taylor et al., "A Small-Scale Randomized Efficacy Trial of the Identity Project: Promoting Adolescents' Ethnic-Racial Identity Exploration and Resolution," *Child Development* 89, no. 3 (2017).

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¹⁵Education Trust, "Is Your State Prioritizing Students' Social, Emotional, and Academic Development?" online data tool, <https://edtrust.org/is-your-state-prioritizing-sead/#US>.

¹⁶Anthony S. Bryk et al., *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2015).

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