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Creating Socially and Culturally Responsive School Environments:
Three Key Actions for Busy Charter School Leaders

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Introduction

High-quality charter schools provide rigorous academic opportunities while prioritizing student well-being and sense of belonging. This commitment requires taking a proactive approach to address academic and emotional learning needs. Central to this effort is establishing a socially and culturally responsive environment—one that not only honors diverse cultural backgrounds but also supports positive identity development.

This resource for charter school leaders outlines three essential actions to cultivate such environments, ensuring the holistic wellness of students. Each section provides concrete examples and valuable resources, empowering educators to build welcoming, responsive environments that benefit individual students and fortify the broader systems that support them.

Understanding Socially and Culturally Responsive School Environments

Drawing on insights from research and practice, this resource explores learning environments that are culturally responsive, sustain students' rich cultural identities, and foster positive social development. **Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education** (CRSE) enhances student engagement, learning, and achievement by centering classroom experiences on students' knowledge, cultural backgrounds, and everyday lives. Exposure to CRSE enables students to forge meaningful connections with academic content, cultivate purpose, counter stereotypes, develop the capacity to connect across differences,[1] and critically reflect on and solve problems affecting their lives. In these contexts, educators engage in deep personal and collective reflection to cultivate the skills for facilitating CRSE.

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1   New America Foundation. (2020). *Culturally responsive education resources for federal, state, and local stakeholders.* https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/collections/culturally-responsive-education/?gclid= Cj0KCQjwz96WBhC8ARIsAATR253EoZTUjIFO8KoVGlKgof42wKjAETYbu28-9fHeFSLgPamT_S_0bE0aAtgiEALw_wcB

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) has developed a framework to set a vision and support schools in implementing culturally responsive education. This framework includes guidelines for students, teachers, school leaders, district leaders, families and community members, higher education faculty, and state policymakers. At its core, the framework situates students' recognition of their cultural assets as an important part of fostering positive identity development. Using a culturally responsive–sustaining (CR–S) approach to education, NYSED affirms that "all families are believed to have cultural capital—knowledge, abilities, and networks that can, and should, be leveraged in classrooms. While schooling has traditionally privileged the capital of families from dominant backgrounds, culturally responsive–sustaining education positions educators to acknowledge, value, and leverage the wealth of knowledge found in communities that have been marginalized" (p. 13).[2]

Approaching learning with a focus on cultural and social responsiveness, we explore **three key actions** for cultivating socially and culturally responsive school environments:

✷ **Utilize diverse sources of data and information to understand your school community and student needs, including student perceptions of their learning experience.**

✷ **Empower identity development through culturally responsive and sustaining teaching and learning.**

✷ **Support a school culture of psychological, emotional, and physical well-being.**

Key Action #1: Utilize Diverse Sources of Data and Information to Understand Your School Community and Student Needs, Including Student Perceptions of Their Learning Experience

Fostering an understanding of students' needs requires that charter school leaders cultivate relationships, curiosity, and a culturally responsive approach when interpreting student- and community-level indicators. Achieving this depth of comprehension involves utilizing diverse sources of data beyond conventional academic metrics such as test scores, grades, and attendance. Culturally responsive leaders consistently gather a wide range of information to form a holistic understanding of students' experiences and needs. This approach allows them to pinpoint both successes and challenges in supporting students' physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

While traditional indicators are important, they provide only a limited view of a student's overall needs. Establishing a supportive environment involves students feeling a sense of belonging and the freedom to express their authentic identities in their learning.[3] Likewise, meaningful learning unfolds when students collaborate and co-construct knowledge with their peers, appreciating diverse perspectives. Leaders can attain a comprehensive understanding of student learning experiences by **observing and inquiring about student learning conditions**, **monitoring social and emotional indicators**, and **staying engaged with the school community**.

HOW TO UNDERSTAND STUDENT LEARNING CONDITIONS

Be Curious and Ask

Charter school leaders can glean valuable insights into students' learning experiences through informal classroom observations. By focusing on indicators such as engagement, connection, agency, and

2 New York State Education Department. (n.d.). *Culturally responsive-sustaining education framework.* https://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/programs/crs/culturally-responsive-sustaining-education-framework.pdf

3 Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest. (n.d.). *The importance of student sense of belonging.* Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/RELMW-6-2-3-4-StudBelong-508.pdf

collaboration, leaders can gather powerful information about student experiences. Students themselves should have the opportunity to reflect on and provide feedback to educators about how they are or are not feeling safe, affirmed, and encouraged to contribute to a positive classroom and school culture. This can be done through various formal and informal methods, such as empathy interviews and empathy walks, student experience surveys, and opportunities for students to engage in conversations with school and network leaders.

Monitor the Pulse of Social and Emotional Indicators

Monitoring the pulse of social and emotional (SEL) indicators involves establishing routines for regularly collecting schoolwide data. Key indicators include students' feelings of physical and psychological safety, connection, optimism about the future, supportive relationships with adults, and the sense of developing skills for positive peer interactions. While schoolwide mental health screeners and well-being surveys provide valuable broad social and emotional data, charter leaders should also promote organic check-ins on emotional and mental well-being between students and educators.[4]

It is crucial to consider how SEL indicators may vary along racial, economic, gender, ability, and language lines. Examining student data across different identities allows schools to better understand how equitably students are accessing and benefiting from SEL efforts. Part of this understanding involves considering the impact of unintended biases on students. Addressing unconscious bias and incorporating diverse perspectives when interpreting student indicators is essential. Without explicitly addressing race and bias, charter schools risk a form of color-evasiveness, approaching students' experiences in a culturally deficient way.

Engage the School Community

Understanding the interests, priorities, and needs of families is crucial for informed decision-making in instructional and leadership roles. Parent and caregiver perceptions serve as valuable data, influencing decisions at both the classroom and building levels. Surveys, such as the Panorama Family–School Relationships Survey, offer insights into the relationship between families and schools.

Charter school leaders can also informally collect information from families by participating in events at which families gather or directly through teachers conducting home visits. Empowering teachers and staff to arrange home visits is a powerful way for teachers and staff to learn about a family's values and help the family establish a personal connection to their child's education. When integrating home visits to get to know families, educators should receive support through communities of practice and skill-building to conduct visits in safe, nonthreatening ways that focus on students' knowledge and cultural assets.

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

* Co-construct the classroom environment with students, developing and upholding shared classroom agreements.

* Conduct empathy interviews with students or families, fostering connections and providing a forum for shared experiences.

* Explore direct ways to understand student experiences, such as brief one-question exit ticket exercises or postlesson reflections from students.

* Regularly self-assess SEL skills and reflect on evidence of how they manifest with students.

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4 If conducted poorly or by those without training in cultural responsiveness, check-ins can lead to assumptions that have drastic consequences for students and families when educators misinterpret the experiences of students of color. School leaders can equip educators for leading these types of check-ins. These resources may be helpful for leaders: https://mhttcnetwork.org/centers/global-mhttc/product/mhttc-networks-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-dei-reference-guide and https://mhttcnetwork.org/centers/global-mhttc/now-available-free-online-course-educators-mental-health-literacy.

WHAT CAN LEADERS DO?

* Establish and support educator learning communities to build skills for data gathering, critical inquiry, and analysis.

* Stay informed about various aspects of the school climate by engaging with the school community. Gauge whether students and families feel safe, welcomed, and challenged.

* Adopt a historical approach to getting to know the school community by learning about how different communities have engaged with and experienced education systems.

* Create the formal structures and processes needed to ensure that each student has at least one adult in the building who knows them and has met their family.

* Provide educators with the time, support, and learning opportunities needed to do this critical inquiry into student and family experiences.

Key Action #2: Empower Identity Development Through Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Teaching and Learning

School-based learning is inherently social, providing fertile ground for positive self-development through student interactions. Educators play a pivotal role in shaping students' identity development through a ***Culturally Responsive–Sustaining Education Framework***. At its core, CRSE adopts an asset-oriented approach, genuinely celebrating diverse cultural identities as pedagogical assets, especially those from marginalized communities. In an environment valuing pluralism, CRSE aims to build positive identities, especially for students of color disproportionately affected by race-related challenges and low expectations.[5]

By leveraging students' existing skills and knowledge, CRSE promotes positive identities, academic growth, and SEL. Research underscores the significance of incorporating students' prior knowledge to enhance motivation and facilitate the processing of new information.[6] A central tenet of CRSE's approach involves guiding students in developing critical consciousness—a set of critical thinking skills that equip them to discern, critique, and redress systemic bias and social inequalities.[7]

HOW?

Use Instructional Practices That Authorize Students to Cocreate Their Learning

Educators can enhance engagement and agency by recognizing students' cultural identities as valuable assets for learning. Introducing real-world challenges not only clarifies the learning purpose but also empowers students in actively shaping their educational experiences. Similarly, instructional practices that enable personalization align with students' preferences, interests, and needs, fostering a sense of authority over their own learning. These practices challenge educators to decenter themselves as the sole holders of the "right" answer, encouraging a transfer of authority for knowing to students.

Instructional approaches that promote self-directed learning encompass techniques from formative assessment, deeper learning, CRSE, and personalized learning.[8]

Teach in Ways That Support Positive Social and Cultural Identity Development

To support positive social and cultural identity development, educators play a crucial role in fostering student agency, equity, and a sense of

5   Diamond, J. B., Randolph, A., & Spillane, J. P. (2004). Teachers' expectations and sense of responsibility for student learning: The importance of race, class, and organizational habitus. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 35*(1), 75–98.

6   Byrd, C. M. (2016). Does culturally relevant teaching work? An examination from student perspectives. *Sage Open, 6*(3), 1–10; Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain.* Corwin Press.

7   Ladson-Billings, G. (Ed.). (2003). *Critical race theory perspectives on the social studies: The profession, policies, and curriculum.* Information Age; Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the remix. *Harvard Educational Review, 84,* 74–84; Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher, 41,* 93–97.

8   Browning, A., Kaminsky, C., & Gerzon, N. (2022). *Moving toward instructional coherence: How four popular student-centered approaches deepen identity, agency, equity, and community.* WestEd. https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Moving-Toward-Instructional-Coherence-Brief_ADA.pdf

community.[9] Recognizing the visible and valuable nature of positive identity development, educators empower students to deepen and appreciate their own cultural capital. To facilitate this, teachers must understand their own cultural frames of reference, comprising what Zaretta Hammond refers to as the surface, shallow, and deep aspects of culture.[10] Practices such as integrating storytelling into learning—creating windows and mirrors for students to see their identities—tap into students' funds of knowledge, fostering language and culture revitalization and instilling pride in their racial and cultural backgrounds.

Prioritize Social and Emotional Learning to Help Students Connect With Others, Take Action, and Build Communities to Be More Inclusive and Welcoming

Culturally responsive and sustaining educators recognize SEL as an opportunity to embrace and validate diverse social and cultural identities. Rather than focusing solely on individualized learning, they situate SEL as a tool to advance interpersonal relations, humanize school contexts, and foster community building. Aligned with CASEL's (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) guidance, this approach advocates for both *participatory* and *transformative* SEL, explicitly including skills necessary for ensuring democratic, fair, and inclusive communities.[11] These SEL approaches are *humanizing* and encourage young people to actively contribute to making their schools and communities better.

> ***Transformative SEL** is "a process whereby young people and adults build strong, respectful, and lasting relationships that facilitate co-learning to critically examine root causes of inequity, and to develop collaborative solutions that lead to personal, community, and societal well-being."*[12]

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

✳ Deepen cultural responsiveness through personal exploration of racial and cultural identity development.

✳ Engage in structured, critical self-reflection through the lens of equity to gain insights into areas for growth.

✳ Create learning activities offering authentic opportunities for "voice and choice," enabling co-construction of learning.

✳ Lead classroom conversations that position students' lived experiences as valuable sources of expertise for the entire class's learning.

WHAT CAN LEADERS DO?

✳ Honor educators' identities and cultural assets, recognizing the richness that cultural pluralism brings to educational experiences.

✳ Regularly collect and critically reflect on teacher-level data and perspectives, considering differences across indicators, including race/ethnicity and years in their positions.

✳ Model critical self-reflection through the lens of equity to both support teachers and identify areas for their growth.

✳ Develop an understanding of how school expectations, policies, and formal and informal expectations of students affect identity. Support teachers by creating spaces and professional learning opportunities where they can develop and practice culturally sustaining pedagogies.

✳ Consider transforming SEL initiatives to embrace a more participatory and transformative approach, emphasizing community building in the pursuit of democratic, fair, and inclusive communities.

9   Krasnoff, B. (2016). *Culturally responsive teaching: A guide to evidence-based practices for teaching all students equitably.* Region X Equity Assistance Center, Education Northwest. https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/resources/culturally-responsive-teaching.pdf

10 Hammond, 2015.

11 Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (n.d.). *Transformative SEL.* https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/how-does-sel-support-educational-equity-and-excellence/transformative-sel/

12 CASEL, n.d.

Key Action #3: Support a School Culture of Psychological, Emotional, and Physical Well-Being

The challenges posed by the post-Covid landscape have compelled charter schools to address a spectrum of community needs, particularly in response to the mental health toll inflicted by the pandemic. National research indicates a concerning uptick in depression, anxiety, impulsive behavior, and attempted suicide among students.[13] In this context, charter leaders must play a pivotal role in fostering a school culture centered on psychological, emotional, and physical well-being.

Modeling a culture of "collective care," where the entire school community shares responsibility for well-being, is crucial. This ethos extends to teachers, emphasizing that their wellness is paramount for effective student support. Integrating collective care into a school's culture and its mission ensures ongoing conversations on mental health and incorporates staff development activities that prioritize well-being.

Fundamentally healthy schools are trauma informed and trauma responsive, creating an environment where students feel safe expressing a range of emotional experiences. Trauma-informed educators possess the knowledge and skills to recognize and respond to signs of trauma and stress in students. Educators can contribute to student well-being by learning about the effects of trauma on students' learning and by engaging with high-quality professional learning that guides them in addressing their own trauma responses.

HOW?

Humanize the School Experience

In positive school cultures, fostering an environment where students feel secure in expressing their full humanity is crucial. This approach acknowledges that learning involves the entire body and allows for a range of emotional expressions. Humanizing the learning process means recognizing that learning is not solely a mental activity but is also a physiological one that involves understanding the intricacies of the learning brain. Likewise, incorporating mental health topics into regular classroom discussions enables students to learn and practice empathy and perspective-taking. Applying empathy, as noted by Warren, expands teachers' "knowledge of students, families, and communities such that there are necessary shifts in their beliefs, attitudes, and values determining their teaching dispositions" (p. 173).[14] These shifts align with the principles of culturally responsive and sustaining teaching and learning.

Care for the Adults Who Care for the Kids

Research underscores the unequivocal connection between adult well-being and positive effects on students' social, emotional, and academic development. Educators' social–emotional competency and well-being contribute to the cultivation of warm, positive student–teacher relationships.[15] Addressing teachers' personal and work-related burnout correlates with improvements in students' academic self-perception.[16] Moreover, positive teacher well-being is linked to higher academic performance in students.[17] Charter leaders can play a role by providing access to at least one employer-provided mental health support, such as

13 Office of the Surgeon General. (2021). *Protecting youth mental health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf

14 Warren, C. (2018). Empathy, teacher dispositions and preparation for culturally responsive pedagogy. *Journal of Teacher Education, 69*(2), 169–183.

15 Jennings, P. A. (2018). *The trauma-sensitive classroom: Building resilience with compassionate teaching*. Norton & Company.

16 Carroll, A., York, A., Fynes-Clinton, S., Sanders-O'Connor, E., Flynn, L., Bower, J. M., Forrest, K., & Ziaei, M. (2021). The downstream effects of teacher well-being programs: Improvements in teachers' stress, cognition and well-being benefit their students. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.689628/full

17 Caprara, G. V., Barbaranelli, C., Steca, P., & Malone, P. S. (2006). Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs as determinants of job satisfaction and students' academic achievement: A study at the school level. *Journal of School Psychology, 44*(6), 473–490. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2006.09.001

counseling, employee assistance programs, and peer support groups. These kinds of mental health supports for teachers can be [delivered through a partner organization](#).

Make Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Efforts Meaningful and Visible

Commitment to meaningful diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) in charter schools necessitates wellness and well-being supports that are responsive to diverse populations within the school community. Making DEIB efforts meaningful involves charter leaders actively learning about the experience of students and community members traditionally at the margins. Transparent decision-making is crucial, showcasing how resources are allocated to support traditionally marginalized populations, such as neurodiverse students and multilingual learners. A truly inclusive community ensures that everyone feels heard, which is achieved by providing educators with choices and input on policies and professional development. Utilizing staff surveys and interviews on policy changes and preferred professional learning opportunities becomes a straightforward way to implement meaningful DEIB actions. Ultimately, authentic DEIB efforts create opportunities for students of color and other students who are marginalized to develop a sense of pride in their racial and cultural backgrounds, challenging internalized oppressions.

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

* Honor students' cultural and social traditions, celebrating joy and connection in the classroom.

* Establish a classroom environment in which students feel encouraged to [talk openly about their emotions, contributing to a supportive learning atmosphere](#).

* Learn to embody a physically and emotionally regulated state, adopting techniques for coregulation, such as engaging in [deep breathing](#) exercises together to foster a sense of connection.

* Integrate physical movement and physical expression, such as singing and dancing, into classroom activities, recognizing the importance of kinesthetic movement.

* Understand emotional and well-being needs. Establish reliable practices and techniques for stress management, such as [this body scan](#).[18]

* Learn about and implement everyday ways to support [positive peer-to-peer interactions](#) in the classroom.

WHAT CAN LEADERS DO?

* Stay up to date with the research on educator mental health and well-being. For example, one recent study that examined national data from the 2021 State of the U.S. Teacher Survey[19] found that the following things were linked to better well-being and job satisfaction: a focus on school climate; positive school environments; and strong, positive adult relationships among colleagues.

* Include opportunities for teachers in professional development to understand the science behind how [stress and trauma affect the brain](#) and to learn cognitive and behavioral strategies for [coregulating with students](#).

* Provide leadership that is humanizing, modeling care for others and remaining person-centered, even when making system-level decisions.

* Prioritize supports and resources that can be used responsively as students' behavioral, social, emotional, and academic needs emerge or shift.

* Find ways to offer mental health supports to educators, such as implementing an Employee Assistance Program or collaborating with a community mental health organization.

* Consider utilizing school and community resources to support collective approaches to wellness. Center community and family well-being, emphasizing partnership as core elements to students' overall wellness.

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18 For more about supporting mindfulness and stress reduction in the classroom, see https://childmind.org/article/mindfulness-in-the-classroom/ and https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/usable-knowledge/19/01/making-time-mindfulness.

19 Steiner, E. D., & Woo, A. (2021). *Job-related stress threatens the teacher supply: Key findings from the 2021 State of the U.S. Teacher Survey.* RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1108-1.html

How to Get Started

When considering these three key actions that can support socially and culturally responsive school environments, charter leaders have multiple entry points for strengthening their efforts. Charter school leaders will benefit from discussing this resource with their leadership teams and considering what strengths are already in place across the three key actions. Building from existing successes and strengths that are already established in your school communities can be an excellent avenue for deepening shared efforts.

Alternatively, to build toward a school environment that is welcoming and responsive, school leadership teams might collectively choose one area for their focus based on what is in alignment with existing commitments, efforts, or known needs in your school communities. No matter which path you choose, helping teachers and leaders develop and practice these skills and habits can, over time, fortify the well-being of your school community and a school culture in which everyone feels that they belong.

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