

# What is Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy?

**Culturally sustaining pedagogy is a strengths-based instructional approach that centers and sustains the cultural and linguistic identities, experiences, and ways of knowing of diverse students, families/caregivers, and communities.** This approach recognizes that culture is a dynamic set of values, beliefs, and practices that varies across students' social identities (related to gender, sexuality, disability, socioeconomic status, geographical location, and time period).<sup>1</sup> Educators adopt culturally sustaining pedagogies so that culturally and linguistically diverse students might leave schools with a sense of pride in themselves, a sense that they belong at school and have access to meaningful postsecondary pathways.<sup>2, 3</sup>

Culturally sustaining pedagogies are inherently dynamic approaches. They meaningfully center the communities and identities of students by affirming and uplifting their perceptions and experiences and incorporating their expertise into classroom practices. Therefore, what is culturally sustaining will look different across communities and contexts. Despite this variance, **four common elements tend to emerge** across teachers implementing culturally sustaining pedagogical practices.<sup>4</sup>

## Including student and intergenerational community agency and input.

### Example Practice:

Recognize that families/caregivers and community members are experts in their own right. Learn about important cultural practices from families/caregivers that might be incorporated into classroom practices (for example, how to make tamales or weave mats). Partner with, not just involve, families/caregivers and communities in classroom planning and goal-setting.<sup>6, 7, 8</sup>

## Supporting positive relationships with the land and the people of the land.

### Example Practice:

Develop reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities through cross-cultural learning settings. This might include centering the values, knowledge, sovereignty, and expertise of Indigenous students, families/caregivers, communities, and educators in the curriculum or implementing feedback cycles with Indigenous communities about educational goals across the home and school. Lesson topics can include environmental sustainability and vulnerability, sociopolitical history and citizenship, or ethnomathematics.<sup>9, 10, 11</sup>

## Centering dynamic communities and their languages, practices, and knowledge.

### Example Practice:

Learn about students' racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and their communities. Incorporate knowledge students gain from their families and communities and rich cultural and linguistic ways of being into instruction. Doing so helps to expand and sustain students' ways of being and promotes their conceptual understanding, language competence, and mastery of analytical practices.<sup>5</sup>

## Providing structured opportunities to contend with internalized oppressions.

### Example Practice:

Create opportunities for students to learn about the histories of their own and other students' cultures. Support students in using their voices to raise awareness about or push back against oppressive systems and structures in culturally relevant ways that simultaneously foster a critical awareness of the world, move beyond damaging narratives, and highlight the joy and resilience of communities of color (for example, Hip-Hop Pedagogy).<sup>12</sup>



Adopting or incorporating culturally sustaining pedagogy can help educators affirm students' identities and engage students, families/caregivers, and communities in determining their own agentic goals and outcomes for learning. This pedagogical approach has also been shown to be positively correlated with educational outcomes, such as student engagement, attendance, and performance on traditional academic indicators (such as grades and test scores).<sup>13, 14, 15</sup>

# Culturally sustaining pedagogy is best supported through a systemwide approach.<sup>16, 17, 18, 19, 20</sup>



## Culturally Sustaining Classrooms

- **Educators** who explore their own beliefs and cultural identities, highlight their students' experiences, leverage students' strengths to support their learning, and provide opportunities to critically reflect on implicit bias.
- Safe, inclusive, and sustaining learning **environments**.
- Positive teacher-student and peer **relationships**.
- **Curriculum** and **materials** reflect students' experiences.



[California's Presentation on Leveraging the Assets of Student Diversity](#)<sup>21</sup>



[National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments' Cultural & Linguistic Competence Topic Brief](#)<sup>22</sup>



## Culturally Sustaining Schools

- Supportive school **leadership** that authentically partners with families/caregivers and community members.
- A safe and inclusive school **culture and climate** that address bias-related incidents constructively and celebrate the strengths of diverse student backgrounds.
- High-quality, culturally sustaining **curricula**.



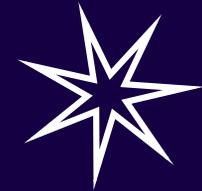
[Intercultural Development Research Association's Four Leverage Points for Culturally Sustaining Practices](#)<sup>23</sup>



[Rhode Island's High Quality Curriculum Materials \(HQCM\) Review Tools for Culturally Responsive & Sustaining Education](#)<sup>24</sup>



[Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center's Equity Dispatch Issue on Universal Design for Learning and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy](#)<sup>25</sup>



## Culturally Sustaining Education Agencies

- **Assessment** systems that measure multiple ways of learning, center students' identity and experiences, and focus on issues and problems relevant to students' lives.
- Supportive district or state **leadership** that champions culturally sustaining education initiatives and hires and retains teachers of color and teachers who are versed in culturally sustaining pedagogy.
- **Policies** that ensure all students have access to a culturally and linguistically sustaining and equitable education.
- **Teaching and learning standards** that allow schools and communities to examine the extent to which they are supporting the educational and cultural well-being of students.



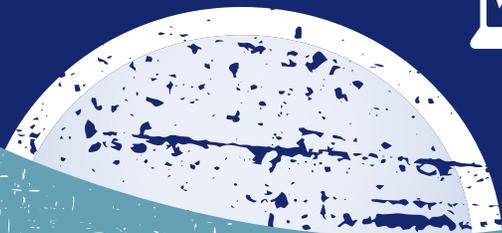
[New York's Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework](#)<sup>26</sup>



[Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools](#)<sup>27</sup>



[Equity Assistance Center-South's Webinar on Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Practices at the LEA Level](#)<sup>28</sup>



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### A Resource from the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance

This infographic builds on previous work on culturally relevant and culturally sustaining education, as well as related work that includes, but is not limited to, language revitalization and Indigenous education. The infographic was created by REL Pacific in collaboration with representatives from each of the RELs who participate in a working group on culturally sustaining pedagogy.