



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

## EDUCATION & SOCIETY PROGRAM

# SUPPORTING STUDENTS TO BE INDEPENDENT LEARNERS: STATE AND DISTRICT ACTIONS FOR THE PANDEMIC ERA

In early May 2020, The Aspen Institute published [Fostering Connectedness in the Pandemic Era: Policy Recommendations to Support Social, Emotional, and Academic Development](#). The recommendations were developed by a diverse group of education leaders convened to explore the importance of safe and nurturing relationships in school and the long-term implications of the coronavirus pandemic for social, emotional, and academic development. **This new resource builds on those initial recommendations with a deeper focus on culturally and linguistically responsive and sustaining approaches.**

School climate surveys show too many students of color, English-learners, and students from low-income families say that school is not *for* them: they don't feel safe in school or feel like they belong, and they aren't asked to do challenging or interesting work.<sup>1&2</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic is drawing attention to *and exacerbating* prior, inequitable conditions, introducing new challenges and new opportunities. **An intentional policy stance that values culturally and linguistically responsive education (CLRE) is essential to addressing the inequities in expectations and opportunities that have been laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Culturally and linguistically responsive education can make education more effective, but it is not easily defined, especially in policy. Indeed, while there are multiple frameworks and approaches, CLRE is not a new concept. The basic tenet – developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings in the 1990s – is an approach to education that calls for engaging learners whose experiences and cultures are traditionally excluded from mainstream settings.<sup>3</sup> Over the last few decades, there has been a tremendous amount of new research into how children grow, develop, and become learners, allowing for a much more refined understanding of CLRE.<sup>4</sup> There are three essential attributes to CLRE:

- Students experience a socially-emotionally and intellectually safe learning environment that allows for learning through productive struggle;
- Students experience belonging as scholars in the intellectual community of school, with a particular emphasis on belonging for students that have been marginalized historically (e.g., students of color, English learners, and students from low-income families);
- Teachers leverage the brain's natural orientation for learning by engineering opportunities that ignite intellectual curiosity.

**Culturally and linguistically responsive education (CLRE) is fundamentally about helping students become independent learners**, so that they have the confidence, competence, and interpersonal skills to master academic content, the ability to apply knowledge and new skills, and the self-motivation that will enable them to be successful in postsecondary education, the world of work, and life.<sup>5</sup> Only learners do the learning, but an intentional focus on systems and actions is needed to *create the conditions* for students to learn so that students' brains can access rigor - instruction, schoolwork, and educational expectations that are academically, intellectually, and personally challenging.<sup>6&7</sup>

CLRE is an important component to closing gaps in expectations and opportunities to learn in the pandemic era, especially given the difficulty for students to find belonging from an online or remote setting. Accelerating learning amidst complex public-health, economic, and social challenges demands *both* technical change (e.g., ensuring every educator and student has the devices and connectivity needed for distance learning) *and* adaptive change (e.g., forging stronger school-community partnerships and ensuring every student experiences belonging and psychological safety in school).

In many ways, CLRE is an issue of practice and pedagogy — to be done well, approaches must focus on building students’ brain power and utilizing existing funds of knowledge (the accumulation of life experiences, academic and personal background knowledge, cultural ways of interacting, and skills and knowledge used to navigate everyday social contexts that are rooted in local context).<sup>8</sup> **Authentic CLRE requires rethinking partnership with families and community partners to draw on additional assets in education, acknowledging that family always is a student’s “first teacher,” and that other engagements in the community create knowledge that can be activated to advance learning in school.** While much of this work needs to happen organically and in context, there are important ways in which policy sets the guardrails and conditions for practice.

While there is significant variance in governance, authority and capacity, we offer five recommendations for advancing CLRE that can be implemented by state and district leaders this school year to foster the social, emotional, and academic development of our nation’s diverse learners.

## **5 State Actions**

- 1. Enable community partnerships to bring valuable cultural capital into schools.**
- 2. Ensure all students have access to rigor.**
- 3. Equip the education workforce to engage students with rigor through culturally and linguistically responsive education (CLRE).**
- 4. Amend state laws and regulations to define “safety” and “school safety” in ways that encompass students’ experience of psychological/intellectual safety and belonging.**
- 5. Improve and prioritize school climate measurement and support to better attend to cultural and linguistic diversity.**



- 1. Enable and fund community and family partnerships to bring valuable cultural capital into schools.**
  - a. Leadership in this moment must be about ceding power to those most directly affected by the challenge. Young people and families are voicing **concerns** and **suggestions** about the next school year.
    - i. States and districts can empower students, families and community leaders with authentic decision-making authority by formalizing local site councils to hire principals, as is the case in **Chicago**.
    - ii. States and districts can provide guidance and templates to local education agencies (LEAs) and schools on how to leverage partnerships with community partners and youth-development organizations to promote home- and community-based organizations (such as 4-H and Boys & Girls Clubs) as hubs for project-based or experiential learning. Recognizing the assets community partners bring and being more transparent about priorities for healthy learning environments, can enable partners to delib-

erately reinforce and accelerate school success.<sup>i</sup>

- iii. **Tacoma (WA) Public Schools** built community partnerships into its strategic plan, data collection, and public reporting. Tacoma signals this work is central to student success by tracking the number of community-based organizations in formal partnership with schools, the number of volunteers registered, and the number of expanded learning opportunities created with partner organizations.<sup>9</sup> States and LEAs can create templates to track this work and provide networking, technical assistance, and resources to support school-community partnerships.
- iv. Multiple states fund community school coordinators to assess student needs and identify/connect with community assets (e.g., utilizing Medicaid reimbursement or connecting with other health or legal resources such as immigration attorneys for immigrant families).<sup>10</sup> These positions will be more vital than ever in the next couple of years, when students likely will have to continue to access opportunities to learn and develop *outside* the traditional classroom so schools can meet public-health guidelines. Equity demands that states protect current investments in community connections and augment investments in communities with the greatest need.

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- b. Over the next two school years at least, the need for social-emotional support and academic tutoring will be immense. Service corps are a proven, efficient mechanism for providing additional capacity in schools and youth-development organizations.<sup>11</sup> SEAs can partner with state departments of Health or Human Services, Economic Development, local workforce investment boards, and career centers to organize community partners to apply for AmeriCorps positions, and fund a state-level service corps. By proactively promoting this strategy, allocating states funds, and supporting *local* organizations to navigate eligibility requirements, state leaders can bring valuable cultural capital into school. This approach is also an efficient way to provide employment opportunities in a highly constrained job market.
- c. Direct state agencies that oversee childcare, youth development and summer camp programs to integrate CLRE principles into their re-opening guidance (in addition to guidance around health and physical space).

## 2. Ensure all students have access to rigor.

- a. CLRE increases students' engagement and success with academic rigor; these concepts are not separate or in tension with each other, but mutually reinforcing.<sup>12</sup> States and districts can:
  - i. Expand the concept of rigor to encompass challenging work imbued with purpose and meaning. Share examples of instructional materials and student assignments that expect students to engage with rigorous academic content and to demonstrate

<sup>i</sup> Work remains to be done to forge better coherence and partnerships across sectors and agencies in the education, youth development, health and human services space. This is an area that will receive additional treatment from the Aspen Institute and partners.

knowledge and skills in multiple formats. The Models of Excellence library curated by EL Education in collaboration with Harvard Graduate School of Education, is a [free collection of exemplars](#). PBLWorks (focused on project-based learning) has guidance for [rigorous instructional activities during distance learning](#).

- ii. Young people are often engaging in meaningful and challenging work, outside of school. Bringing educators and school personnel together to plan lessons that tap into students' existing funds of knowledge from home and community is an important element of rigorous instruction because *for learning to occur, new knowledge and concepts must be connected to prior knowledge and understanding*.<sup>13</sup>
- iii. Ensure CLRE and science of learning and development principles are embedded in expectations for SEL standards (if they exist or are being considered). This should include treatment of safe and supportive environments for *all* students, differentiated for the needs of adolescents as distinct from children. Issues of agency and identity are important to developing independence and motivation for learning and should be included in SEL standards to advance CLRE.
- b. Ensure all teachers and students have access to high-quality instructional materials.
  - i. Negotiate contracts and streamline procurement for rigorous, high-quality instructional materials, including access to high-quality open-source materials.
  - ii. Negotiate favorable contract rates and streamline procurement for PD providers who align their work with teachers to high-quality materials, as identified by the state.
  - iii. Create and/or support innovative assessments for school systems that use rigorous assessments that are embedded in high-quality instructional materials, which will forge coherence across teaching and learning, assessment, and accountability. Set up a mechanism for learning from waivers and pilots to create more coherent systems and practices in the longer-term.<sup>ii</sup>
  - iv. Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) used [EdReports](#) to select a highly-rated ELA curriculum. When (BCPS) leaders realized its curriculum had very few positive representations of African American history and culture, they worked with curriculum designers and their own teachers to create the [BMore Me curriculum](#), which engages Baltimore students in learning about and reflecting on the history and culture of their hometown.<sup>14</sup> Systems can explore similar approaches to meet the needs of the students they are serving and identified gaps in their curricular offerings.
- c. Create models of rigorous instruction that draw directly from and respond to students' experience of the pandemic, school closures, social distancing, job loss, and other impacts on their communities – including protests related both to stay-at-home orders and those

### Rigor

"Rigor refers to instruction, schoolwork, experiences and educational expectations that are academically, intellectually, and personally challenging. Rigorous learning experiences, for example, help students understand knowledge and concepts that are complex, ambiguous, or contentious, and they help students acquire skills that can be applied in a variety of educational, career, and civic contexts throughout their lives."

- The Glossary of Education Reform

<sup>ii</sup>The Louisiana Department of Education modeled many of these practices under the mantra of "making the best thing to do the easiest thing to do." Louisiana's strategy is profiled in [Practice What You Teach](#), The Aspen Institute, 2017.

focused on police brutality. This will advance CLRE in three important ways: (1) provide a model of classroom instruction and student academic discourse that is rigorous and standards-aligned; (2) create an authentic context for students to do work that is relevant and meaningful to the healing that is required, and (3) give teachers insights and greater understanding of the lived experiences of their students.

- i. Convene trusted curriculum developers, teachers, experts in teaching & learning, and students from secondary grades to identify and/or create high-quality, standards-aligned units in ELA and/or social studies that use grade-appropriate texts from literature, history, current events, and the arts to create a context for students to write and speak/listen on their experiences of the pandemic. It is important that this process also includes curriculum developers and teachers of color. Consider allowing summative work from these units to aggregate into accountability determinations and coordinate with higher education so the work counts toward graduation requirements as well.
- d. Provide incentives, status, technical assistance and networking opportunities to LEAs that expand dual-language immersion and other language instruction programs and provide guidance for dual-language approaches during remote learning.
  - i. Subsidize teacher and leader training for bilingual educators.
  - ii. Share research-informed practices related to supporting multilingual learners' access to rigor.<sup>15</sup>
- e. Prioritize English Learner students, younger students and others who experience the greatest challenge with remote learning to return to in-person instruction sooner than others.
- f. Modify high school graduation requirements to allow native language to count for world language credit and consider creating a permanent high school diploma of distinction or seal of biliteracy.

### **3. Equip the education workforce to engage students with rigor through culturally and linguistically responsive approaches.**

- a. Apply Title II ESSA funds to develop teachers' knowledge and application of the science of learning and development, which is crucial to advancing CLRE. Title II funds are now more concentrated toward higher-poverty districts, where needs are most acute, and states have additional flexibility in allocating state leadership funds and setting aside Title II funds to focus on school leadership. These mechanisms create an opportunity for state leadership that prioritizes the science of learning and development as a driver of more equitable learning opportunities.
- b. Review and revise professional teaching standards and continuing education requirements to ensure key principles of CLRE are represented, especially building students' cognitive capacity for independent learning, improving learning for traditionally marginalized populations, and affective development.
  - i. The University of Chicago Consortium for School Research has identified four mindsets that powerfully influence students' engagement and investment, which ultimately determines their achievement:
    1. I belong in this learning community.
    2. I can succeed at this.
    3. My ability and competence grow with my effort.
    4. This work has value for me.<sup>16</sup>

Educators should learn about these four mindsets and how to build relationships with students and cultures in classrooms that affirm students' belonging, efficacy, orientation toward effort and growth,<sup>iii</sup> and relevance of learning.

- c. Review and update any required or recommended teaching frameworks and observation tools, to ensure key principles of CLRE are represented. Teacher observations should be focused on whether teachers are 1) building relationships with students and families, 2) creating safe learning environments rich in challenging academic discourse, and 3) shifting cognitive load to students and equally activating and engaging all students. Systems can empanel educators to work with framework publishers to embed CLRE in expectations for planning, instruction, and assessment.
- d. Align educator preparation program requirements/program approval with these expectations. Require teacher and principal candidates to demonstrate knowledge of culturally and linguistically responsive education on certification exams and require preparation programs to offer coursework and practical/clinical experiences.
- e. Require, support, or encourage professional learning opportunities for educators on CLRE that is aligned to the science of learning and development.
  - i. Create training opportunities that engage higher education, youth development organizations, and regional service providers that make lessons from science of learning and development and CLRE research more accessible and actionable for teachers, principals, and other youth-serving adults.
  - ii. Be cognizant that state-led teacher and principal PD is not ideal, but might be required to meet the magnitude and urgency of need over the next two years. Distill lessons from previous rollouts of major initiatives (e.g., Common Core) to determine what has worked well in the past and what has not to design most effective PD.
  - iii. Design and launch a teacher-leader micro-credential and guidance on differentiated roles that increases schools' capacity to implement CLRE.

#### **4. Amend state laws and regulations to broaden the definition of “safety” and “school safety” to encompass students’ experience of psychological safety and belonging.**

- a. Update school safety planning requirements and templates to address the characteristics of safe and respectful learning environments, as well as identification of signs of trauma and stress.
- b. Reallocate resources away from School Resource Officers/law enforcement to hire and train more school counselors, social workers, psychologists, and parent liaisons. There is insufficient evidence that placing law enforcement personnel in school improves safety, and strong evidence.<sup>17</sup> that police in schools undermine students' psychological experience of safety, reflecting a misallocation of resources that are going to become even more scarce in the coming years.
- c. Increase access to school counselors, psychologists, and nurses. Set a baseline by partnering with regional service agencies or other research partners to count school support staff (i.e. psychologists, counselors, nurses) per student. Examine and publicly acknowledge gaps in access, especially by demographic factors, and make public, measurable commitments to adding student-support capacity this year and next.

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<sup>iii</sup> While there is promising research supporting this concept, implementation must be approached with care to avoid a deficit approach, an assumption that some students need to be “fixed” or “saved.”

## 5. Improve and prioritize measures of climate and conditions for learning.

- a. Rebalance accountability for the 2020-2021 school year to provide greater weight to school climate and lower weight to test scores. Questions abound about how to assess the quality of education and how to hold schools accountable, given the likelihood of significant learning loss and increased trauma, ongoing closures and potential new outbreaks that will lead to inequitable access to learning. While there is debate about the ability to measure individual student SEL competencies, there is much more consensus about the validity and reliability of measuring climate.<sup>18</sup>
- b. Issue practical guidance on the frequency with which to administer school climate surveys and/or collect climate data. For example, states can recommend specific instruments for LEAs to use and direct LEAs to focus on shorter pulse-check surveys during remote learning and focus on domains related to belonging and safety when school re-starts.
  - i. Ensure teachers have access to quick-cycle formative measures that collect students' experience of instruction (disaggregated by different groups of students) and provide evidence-based strategies that teachers can use to improve climate. The [Copilot-Elementary survey](#) is free for any teacher or school and returns data and analysis to teachers within a week.
  - ii. Augment surveys with additional measures of student engagement needs/gaps during distance learning (e.g., how often are students logging in, how frequently are they in 1:1 and/or small group discussions with teachers or other supportive adults outside home?).
- c. Issue guidance and create dashboards and report templates for analyzing student climate survey data by race, gender, disability and native language to identify, among other things, student's experience of micro aggressions and racial hostility. These resources should also support systems in comparing climate data alongside attendance and exclusionary discipline data.
- d. Consider similar constructs for measuring climate in out-of-school settings, including youth development programs and after school. This allows for coherence in measurement and supports.
- e. Provide resources and access to experts that support LEAs and schools in acting on climate data to improve conditions for learning and advance CLRE. These supports include: professional development, structures for cultivating healthy relationships with students and families, restorative justice, behavior management, family engagement and student agency, among others.
- f. Engage experts to work with LEAs to make school climate instruments that better assess the attributes of CLRE: learning conditions that foster safety and belonging, and rigorous learning experiences where students report being both challenged and supported. Systems can partner, for example, with local institutions of higher education to review and update instruments and assess how well CLRE is affirmed or not in teachers', students', and families' experiences of school.
- g. Empanel local educators and families to vet instruments already available in the market to ensure cultural relevance and appropriateness. One example is Village of Wisdom who created the [Culturally Affirming Climate Survey](#).
- h. Draw attention to gaps in the market where high-quality products are not available, and work with higher education partners and market actors to accelerate research and development.



## Endorsers

This resource was authored by the Aspen Institute Education & Society Program with the active participation of a broad cross-section of education leaders that included students, district leaders, state education agency staff, researchers, education support organizations, funders, and policymakers. The following individuals and organizations endorse the content and join in a call to action to ensure a culturally and linguistically responsive approach to social, emotional, and academic development in the pandemic era.

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- <sup>3</sup>Ladson-Billings defines CLRE as a threefold approach that includes academic success, cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness — which means letting students choose to investigate problems that affect them rather than teachers setting their own social justice agendas in the classroom. For more, see: Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. *Theory into Practice*, 34(3). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1476635>
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to their learning and future engagement. Human brains cannot maintain focus on things we find to be boring, even with extensive effort, and feeling anxious, threatened, or unwelcome interferes with cognitive functioning” (p. 3) and “teachers need to reflect on how relevant and connected the material is to students of differing cultural backgrounds. Culturally responsive teaching practices build off of students’ personal experiences and interests, engaging students through interactive and collaborative practices” (p. 11).

<sup>13</sup>Bransford, et. al. (2000). *How People Learn, Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*. National Academy Press.

<sup>14</sup>See, for example: Baltimore City Schools. *BMore Me*. <https://www.baltimorecityschools.org/bmore-me>.

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<sup>17</sup>Barnum, M. (2019, February 19). New Studies Point to a Big Downside for Schools Bringing in More Police. *Chalkbeat*. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2019/2/14/21121037/new-studies-point-to-a-big-downside-for-schools-bringing-in-more-police>.

<sup>18</sup>A positive school climate can be measured through student surveys and on-site reviews of practice, such as School Quality Reviews. For guidance on using school climate surveys in accountability, see: Holahan, C. & Batey, B. (2019). *Measuring School Climate and Social and Emotional Learning and Development: A Navigation Guide for States and Districts*. Council of Chief State School Officers & Education Counsel. [https://ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/CCSSO-Ed-Counsel%20SE%20and%20School%20Climate%20measurement\\_0.pdf](https://ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/CCSSO-Ed-Counsel%20SE%20and%20School%20Climate%20measurement_0.pdf)

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