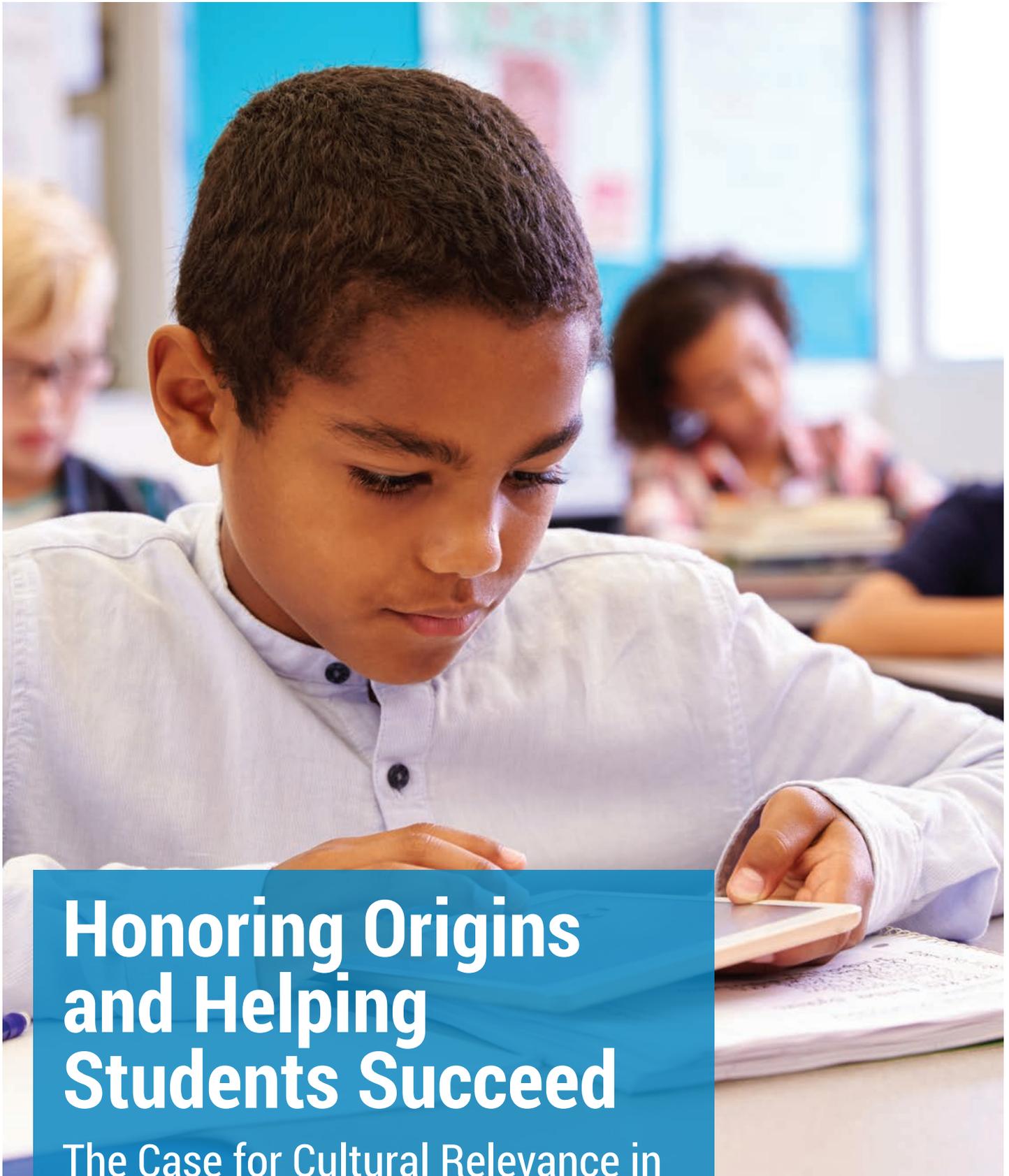


2019 February



Honoring Origins and Helping Students Succeed

The Case for Cultural Relevance in
High-Quality Instructional Materials





Honoring Origins and Helping Students Succeed: The Case for Cultural Relevance in High-Quality Instructional Materials

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

February is Black History Month, and many of our nation’s schools have used these past few weeks as an occasion to remember and celebrate the history, culture, and important achievements of African Americans. But our focus this month on African-American history also serves as a reminder that many schools, while committed to commemorating the African-American experience during the month of February, often fail to take a culturally relevant approach to teaching and learning—

for all historically underserved and underrepresented students—during the rest of the year. That’s a mistake, and one that can negatively affect students, especially students of color.

“Cultural relevance” or “cultural responsiveness,” by contrast, constitutes an ongoing commitment to value students’ identities and experiences. This approach can entail a variety of actions, such as recruiting more teachers and education leaders of color, adopting

“All children deserve a culturally relevant instructional program that prepares them for college, meaningful careers, and life.”

– Statement on the Need for High-Quality Curriculum, Chiefs for Change, June 2018

policies and practices that reflect high expectations for all students, and implementing the use of high-quality, culturally relevant curriculum and instructional materials. This report focuses specifically upon the latter.

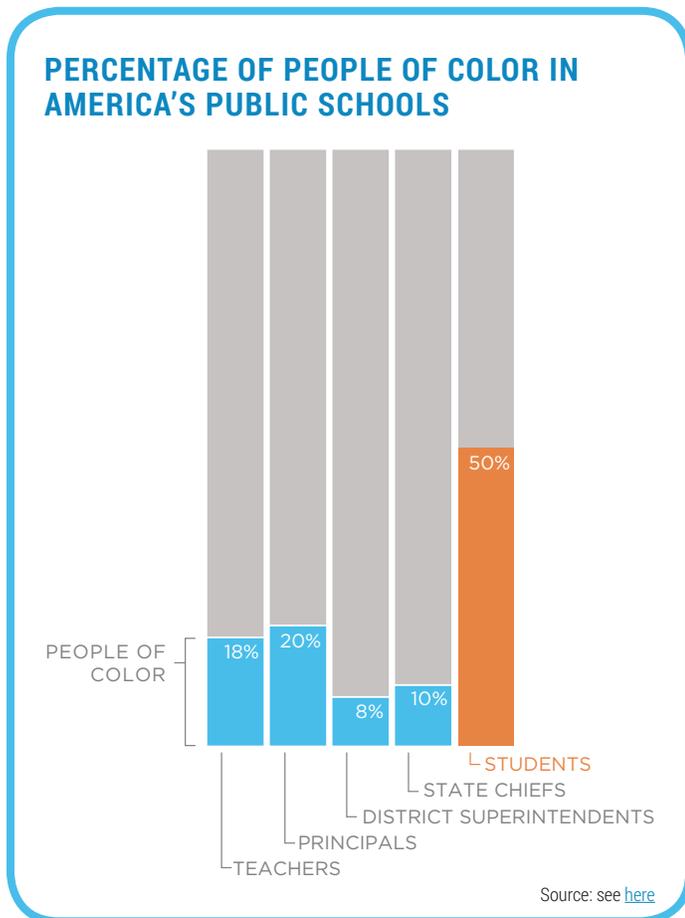
In the Chiefs for Change [Statement on the Need for High-Quality Instructional Materials](#), the chiefs write that “all children deserve a culturally relevant instructional program that prepares them for college, meaningful careers, and life.” America’s schools must give all children opportunities to see themselves in the content they learn,



while also developing their knowledge about the people, places, ideas, and events that have shaped the human experience. Honoring the diversity of America’s students cannot mean sacrificing quality teaching or abandoning challenging, standards-aligned approaches to literature, math, history, and science. Cultural relevance should be a tool used to increase student engagement, not to decrease academic rigor.

This matters more today than ever before. The makeup of America’s public K-12 classrooms is changing, and our approach to teaching and learning must change as well. [In 2014](#), students of color became the new majority, collectively outnumbering their non-Hispanic white counterparts for the first time. These demographic shifts are even more pronounced in urban districts, where students of color now comprise [80 percent](#) of the public school population.

Despite the growing diversity of our nation’s public school students, however, the majority of the country’s educational workforce remains white. That trend is even more stark at the highest levels of district and state leadership. [Current demographic information](#) illustrates the lack of representation from educators of color.



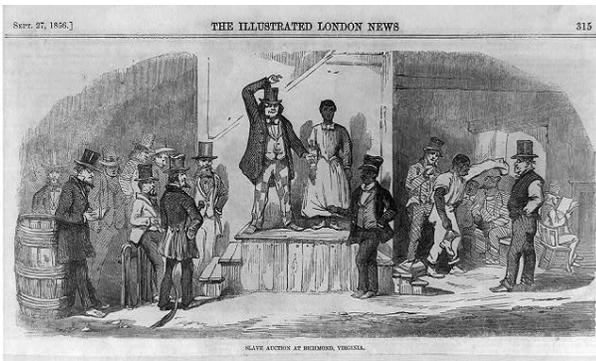
Such profound demographic asymmetries suggest a disconnect, in which the cultural identities, life experiences, and perspectives of many students differ from those of their teachers and educational leaders. That disconnect—between an increasingly diverse student population and a predominantly white educator workforce—can prevent schools from honoring the culture and history of their students, making it difficult for some students to relate to the content and learn. **Culturally relevant pedagogy and instructional materials can play an important role in helping to systematically remove prejudices about race and class and in honoring students’ diverse backgrounds.**

All too often, however, textbooks and instructional materials do not reflect the diversity of America’s students. Research studies and news reports have documented a [lack of children’s books by or about people of color](#) and textbooks that “[gloss over](#)” the historical oppression of racial minorities. Even when instructional materials do address the experiences of minority groups, the texts themselves are often of low quality or reinforce exclusively negative experiences such as police brutality and incarceration—without commensurate attention to the triumphs and contributions of cultural minorities.

The current research base, although limited, suggests that culturally relevant practices can impact student outcomes for the better. [Several studies](#) demonstrate that culturally relevant pedagogy and instructional materials may increase student attendance, GPA, and course completion; [others suggest](#) that culturally relevant approaches boost students’ interest in school and their sense of belonging. More research is needed, but there appears to be little risk to implementing these practices when they are demonstrably rigorous and high-quality.

Fortunately, forward-thinking districts and states are leading the way in transitioning to rigorous instructional materials that honor the origins and experiences of their diverse students. Three examples are Baltimore City Public Schools, The School District of Palm Beach County in Florida, and The School District of Philadelphia, all led by members of Chiefs for Change.

→ **Baltimore:** Sonja Santelises, CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools, partnered with the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy and other organizations to conduct an in-depth review of the district’s curriculum. As she [says](#), “We learned that much of our content did not provide mirrors and windows. It didn’t reflect students’ own histories, and it didn’t give them opportunities to connect their experiences to other people’s histories and the larger world.” In a district in which eight out of 10 students are African American, the audit also [revealed](#) that the curriculum was overly focused on negative aspects of African-American history—like slavery and Jim Crow—but paid little attention to positive contributions like the Harlem Renaissance. In response, the district partnered with researchers, teachers, parents, and community members to overhaul the curriculum. Baltimore City Public Schools is now implementing a new English Language Arts curriculum that raises the bar for both rigor and cultural relevance.



Source: Library of Congress

An in-depth review of the curriculum in Baltimore City Public Schools revealed that the curriculum was overly focused on negative aspects of African-American history—like slavery and Jim Crow—but paid little attention to positive contributions like the Harlem Renaissance.

→ **Palm Beach County:** As the 10th largest district in the United States, The School District of Palm Beach County serves more than 190,000 students, of whom roughly one third are Hispanic, one third are African American, and one third are white, with a small but significant Asian-American population as well. To address the needs of this diverse student body, the district created the [Office of African, African American, Latino, and Gender Studies](#), which reviews curricular materials with an eye to representation and provides supports to teachers in choosing culturally relevant resources. Under the leadership of Superintendent [Donald Fennoy](#), a member of Chiefs for Change who completed the [Future Chiefs](#)

program, the district also uses a standardized rubric to assess the cultural relevance of instructional materials.

→ **Philadelphia:** A system with a number of autonomous schools, The School District of Philadelphia allows campus leaders to select their core instructional resources, to implement the district’s curriculum, from a list of district-approved resources. The list includes at least one curriculum highly rated by EdReports that also incorporates a significant number of culturally relevant texts. Superintendent William Hite and his team are taking steps to review the various curricula used across the city to determine whether they provide a coherent instructional program or omit important content that could lead to gaps in knowledge. The district requires all students to take African-American history and is exploring the creation of courses focused on the history of Latinos and Asian Americans.

States, districts, and teacher-preparation programs are also equipping educators with culturally relevant pedagogical techniques. These techniques help teachers understand and honor the diverse backgrounds of students in their classrooms, making learning encounters more relevant and effective for students. Ohio, where Chiefs for Change member Paolo DeMaria serves as state superintendent, has implemented culturally relevant standards and competencies for both teachers and school leaders. Similarly, in New York, Deputy Commissioner of P-12 Instructional Support [Angélica Infante-Green](#), a member of the Chiefs for Change Future Chiefs program, oversaw the creation of a culturally responsive-sustaining education framework, a set of guidelines for seven stakeholder groups, including teachers and school leaders. At the district level, Chiefs for Change members Robert Runcie, superintendent of [Broward County Public Schools](#) in Florida; Emmanuel Caulk, superintendent of [Fayette County Public Schools](#) in Kentucky; and Sharon Contreras, superintendent of [Guilford County Schools](#) in North Carolina are all preparing and supporting teachers with culturally relevant teaching strategies.

Recommendations

Building on the important work of its members, Chiefs for Change makes the following recommendations for states and districts seeking to incorporate cultural relevance into high-quality curriculum and instructional materials:

→ Partner with experts to assess the status quo in every subject, and transition to high-quality curriculum and instructional materials

- States should incentivize the use of materials that are content-rich, high-quality, aligned to standards, and culturally relevant.
- Districts should transition to curricula that are highly rated by independent entities, such as EdReports, or other curriculum resource reviews, such as those produced by the Louisiana Department of Education. In addition, districts may consider creating a marketplace in which teachers and school leaders choose from rigorous, culturally relevant materials that have been evaluated and are standards aligned.
- Districts should involve school leaders, teachers, parents, and community members in reviewing instructional materials.

→ Ensure that teachers and school leaders receive appropriate training and development

- States should adopt standards and competencies focused on the skills necessary for teachers and school leaders to work with high-quality, culturally relevant instructional materials.
- Districts should consider the creation of professional learning communities focused on culturally relevant content and pedagogy.

→ Partner with institutions of higher education and other teacher-preparation programs

- States and districts should work with institutions of higher education to ensure that teacher-preparation programs provide training on cultural relevance.
- States and districts should work with alternative-certification programs to ensure the integration of cultural relevance into preparation and training.

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ABOUT CHIEFS FOR CHANGE

Chiefs for Change is a nonprofit, bipartisan network of diverse state and district education chiefs dedicated to preparing all students for today’s world and tomorrow’s through deeply committed leadership. Chiefs for Change

advocates for policies and practices that are making a difference today for students, and builds a pipeline of talented, diverse Future Chiefs ready to lead major school systems.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Chiefs for Change is grateful to our members and their teams for the information they provided about their initiatives. We are also grateful to David Steiner, Ashley

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THE NEED FOR CULTURAL RELEVANCE

The Changing Face of America’s Public Schools

In 2014, students of color became the majority in America’s public schools; in urban districts, students of color now represent [80 percent](#) of the student body. Driven by [increasing birth rates](#) among some groups and lower birth rates among non-Hispanic whites, this trend is likely to continue, with students of color expected to comprise [55 percent](#) of the nation’s public school population in the coming years. These shifting demographics mean that educational leaders are increasingly serving children who speak different native languages and come from a variety of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. All of this reinforces the need for cultural relevance in curriculum and instruction, which can help to systematically remove prejudices about race and class and honor students’ diverse backgrounds.

What does “culturally relevant” mean?

In curriculum and instruction, [culturally relevant practices](#):

- Value students’ cultural and linguistic resources and view this knowledge as capital to build on rather than as a barrier to learning
- Build on students’ personal experiences and interests as the basis for instructional connections that facilitate student learning and development
- Apply interactive, collaborative teaching methods, strategies, and ways of interacting that support students’ cultural, linguistic, and racial experiences
- Integrate the interactive, collaborative teaching methods with evidence-based practices

A Cultural Disconnect and Its Effect on Pedagogy

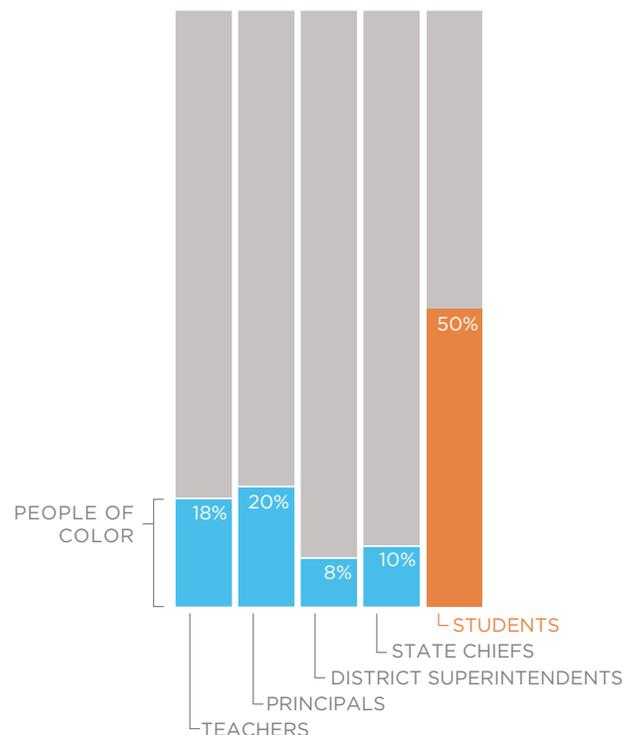
The need for culturally relevant instruction is further underlined by the disconnect between students and the teachers and leaders responsible for their education. Despite the changing student population, the [educational workforce remains predominantly white](#). People of color make up only about [one-fifth of all teachers and](#)

[principals](#). At the highest levels of [district](#) and state leadership, there are even fewer people of color.

This can have implications for pedagogy, because teachers and leaders understandably make decisions that are often based on their own experiences, even when those experiences differ sharply from those of their students.

Likewise, many of the textbooks and curricula used in schools across the country fail to address the cultural disconnect or, worse, omit historical truths about oppression. In [one study by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin](#), an analysis of 3,400 children’s books revealed that only 22 percent were about people of color or written or illustrated by people of color. Another [example demonstrates how textbooks can gloss over the oppression of racial minorities](#): in 2015, McGraw Hill published an American history textbook that featured a graphic about immigration patterns, captioned, “The Atlantic Slave Trade between the 1500s and 1800s brought millions

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE OF COLOR IN AMERICA’S PUBLIC SCHOOLS



Source: see [here](#)

of workers from Africa to the southern United States to work on agricultural plantations.” A student in Texas took a photo of the textbook and shared it with his mother, who posted it on social media, criticizing the publisher for characterizing Africans as seemingly voluntary “workers” rather than slaves. Although McGraw Hill modified print and online versions to describe this as the “forced” migration of enslaved people, more than 100,000 copies were already in Texas schools, with another 40,000 throughout the country.

As this example shows, even when textbooks feature the experiences of racial or ethnic minorities, the books may reinforce negative experiences and biases. Moreover, cultural relevance does not ensure quality: states and districts cannot implement culturally relevant approaches at the expense of rigorous, standards-aligned instructional materials. Quality and relevance must be considered dual imperatives of an equity agenda as it relates to curriculum.

THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL RELEVANCE

A rigorous, culturally relevant curriculum can help to address inherent disparities and engage students. [Emerging research](#) indicates that students who perceive their classrooms and schools as promoting cultural competence have an increased sense of belonging and take a greater interest in school. We must give all children opportunities to reflect on their own backgrounds and experiences while simultaneously gaining knowledge of the people, places, ideas, and events that have shaped the human experience.

Mirrors and Windows

High-quality, culturally relevant instructional materials can boost student learning by providing “[mirrors and windows](#)”: “mirrors” reflect students’ own experiences, while “windows” allow them to connect their own lives to the people, places, ideas, and events that have shaped the human experience.

Utilizing high-quality, culturally relevant instructional materials and pedagogical practices is not simply about honoring students’ origins; it’s about helping them succeed. Although evidence on the effects of culturally relevant curriculum and instruction is limited, several studies illustrate their promise. In particular:

- [Stanford University’s Center for Education Policy Analysis \(CEPA\)](#) studied the San Francisco Unified School District’s Ethnic Studies program, a course that “encouraged students to explore their individual identity, their family history, and their community history.” CEPA found significant gains in attendance, GPA, and credits earned, specifically for at-risk students with GPAs less than 2.0 in eighth grade.
- [A scholarly study by Thompson and Byrnes](#) indicates that students taught by educators who participated in in-service diversity training were “more inclusive in their mutual friendships than students in classrooms with untrained teachers at the same schools.”
- [A study](#) that included 315 sixth- through 12th-grade students from across the United States suggests that students who perceived their classrooms and schools as promoting cultural competence had a greater sense of interest and belonging in school.

Growing interest in this topic is likely to yield robust studies in the coming years. In the interim, when used in conjunction with evidence-based, academically rigorous approaches, there is little risk to implementing policies that advance culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Chiefs for Change believes “all children deserve a culturally relevant instructional program that prepares them for college, meaningful careers, and life.” The membership issued [a statement](#) advocating for the use of challenging, engaging, thoughtfully sequenced content that is culturally relevant and aligned to high standards. The leaders of education systems in Baltimore; Palm Beach County, Florida; and Philadelphia, all members of Chiefs for Change, are among those doing some of the most important work in the nation to support and implement the use of these materials.

School Districts Are Analyzing Their Curricular Choices

Baltimore City Public Schools

In 2018, Sonja Santelises, CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools, wanted to gain a better understanding of the academic content for every grade. The district partnered with several educational experts, including the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, to audit the quality and cultural relevance of its K-12 ELA curriculum. Unlike traditional curriculum audits that look only for standards alignment, this audit mapped the themes, topics, and subjects covered in the instructional materials. This allowed Dr. Santelises and her team to assess the curricular alignment, coherence, and cultural relevance, so they could ultimately identify and address deficiencies and gaps.

The audit [found](#) that “much of [the district’s] content did not provide mirrors and windows. It didn’t reflect students’ own histories, and it didn’t give them opportunities to connect their experiences to other people’s histories and the larger world. For example, [the] more than 80,000 students—80 percent of whom are black—were taught about tragedies of African-American history such as slavery and Jim Crow but learned nothing about the Great Migration and very little about the Harlem Renaissance.”

Even when curricular materials included culturally-relevant texts, as the district intended, the quality and content was lacking. The study found that a substantial number of the elementary-school texts, and slightly more than one-third of the secondary-school texts, described the African-American experience. While there were strong anchor texts, the vast majority of the supplemental texts were of “low quality,” defined as having little literary

merit or having been culled from lesser news sources. Moreover, these texts overwhelmingly reinforced negative experiences such as racial bias, police brutality, and incarceration, without a commensurate exposure to the successes of the African-American community culturally, intellectually, and professionally.

Because of what Dr. Santelises described as “heartbreaking” findings, the district worked with curriculum experts to adopt a standards-aligned, culturally relevant K-8 ELA curriculum that is highly rated by EdReports, an independent, nonprofit organization that publishes reviews of instructional materials. Baltimore City Public Schools is supplementing its K-8 ELA curriculum with a unit on the history of Baltimore. In addition, the district is working to revise the ELA curriculum in grades 9-12, in partnership with the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, to include stronger supplemental texts and a more representative offering of materials that reflect African-American experiences.



Baltimore City Public Schools is implementing a new English Language Arts curriculum that raises the bar for both rigor and cultural relevance.

The Knowledge Map: An Innovative Tool to Address Gaps in Knowledge

State and district leaders must work with experts to evaluate instructional materials and ensure they are rigorous, aligned to state standards, and culturally relevant. This is an extensive process.

As one approach, Chiefs for Change partnered with the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy to create the [Knowledge Map](#), a tool that can be used to analyze an ELA curriculum.

THE KNOWLEDGE MAP HELPS TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

Which content knowledge do students encounter through the ELA curriculum?

Which content do students not encounter in the classroom?

Which knowledge domains and topics are reinforced across the grades?

A team of teacher experts trained by the Institute reviews all required texts in an ELA curriculum and rates them based on depth of knowledge, accuracy, and academic rigor. The Institute then produces a Knowledge Map and related reports that help instructional leaders assess whether their materials encompass a variety of rich texts—including those that reflect the diverse cultures and experiences of their students—and the degree to which those texts expose students to cumulative knowledge across key domains.

The box to the right illustrates how the Knowledge Map sparked substantive change in one large urban district. It depicts the shortcomings of a previous unit and the structure of a new unit designed around a strong anchor text with interesting and high-quality supplementary texts that build, reinforce, and extend the same core areas of knowledge.

Knowledge-Building at Work: A Comparison of an Original Unit and a Content-Rich Alternative

ORIGINAL UNIT

Background knowledge: unclear. In addition to several pieces about racial prejudice, the selections touch on deprivation and resilience across numerous contexts.

- (1950s) “Smokers of Paper,” [poem](#) by Italian poet Cesare Pavese (1950s)
- 2011, “Can a Devastating Shark Attack Really Lead to a Better Life?” by Melanie Greenberg, [here](#).
- 2000, “Police Seek Pair in Killing,” *Baltimore Sun*, [here](#).
- 2011, “Hope and Survival: The Power of Psychological Resilience,” *Huffington Post*, [here](#).
- [Farewell to Manzanar](#), by Jeanne Houston Wakatsuki.

NEW UNIT

Background knowledge: racial prejudice in the late 20th century; Colin Powell; Kurt Schmoke; Rhodes Scholarship; Baltimore Riots of 1968.

- Baltimore Riots of 1968 (when Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated).
 - *Baltimore Sun* retrospectives, [here](#).
 - *Baltimore Sun* photographs, [here](#).
- Colin Powell and Military Service
 - Membership in the Academy of Achievement, [here](#).
 - Brief interview (2014) on the role of the military in his formation, [here](#).
 - Commencement Address, Rice University, 2015, video, [here](#).
 - “Black Soldiers: Fighting America’s Military Abroad and Racism at Home,” *NYTimes*, 2017, [here](#).
- Crack Cocaine
 - 1990, “Children of Crack Turn Five: Are the Schools Ready?” *NYTimes*, [here](#).
 - Criminal Justice Policy Foundation, “How Destructive is Crack Cocaine?” 1999, [here](#). (Important as it indicates the criminalization, early on.)
 - Kurt Schmoke, wanted to end the drug war, [here](#), during his tenure as mayor of Baltimore.
- “What the Rhodes Scholarship Means to Me,” [here](#).

The School District of Palm Beach County

Led by Superintendent [Donald Fennoy](#), a member of Chiefs for Change who completed the [Future Chiefs](#) program, The School District of Palm Beach County is the 10th largest district in the country. It is a majority-minority school system serving more than 190,000 students, of whom roughly one third are Hispanic, one third are African American, and one third are white, with a small but significant Asian-American population as well. To address the needs of its diverse student body, the district created the Office of African, African American, Latino, and Gender Studies. Managed by Brian Knowles, the office reviews instructional materials for relevance, supports teachers, and designs and manages secondary-level courses such as African-American Studies and Latino History. The district also recently created a standardized, rigorous process and rubric by which to analyze the quality and cultural relevance of its curriculum at any grade level or in any subject area. Now any time the district considers adopting a new curriculum, it evaluates the instructional program against the criteria in the rubric. The criteria include ratings from independent entities such as EdReports and tiered curriculum resource reviews produced by the Louisiana Department of Education. EdReports and the Louisiana reviews are nationally recognized as measures of quality for instructional materials. “We go through the textbooks before the adoption process,” Knowles explained. “We tell publishers who are submitting sample materials for our consideration that all students must be represented in those resources.”

Prior to the development of the rubric and the district’s requirements for a culturally relevant curriculum, it was not unusual for publishers to submit history books with a Euro-centric narrative. “You might get a thick textbook and not see anything about other cultures until chapter 23,” Knowles recalls. He has also seen publishers submit a sample science textbook in which all the scientists were men and all the lab assistants were women, as well as a book where the only representation of an African American was a picture of a girl playing basketball in a public housing complex. “That does nothing to build esteem for a black girl,” Knowles says. “Yet when students can relate to and connect with the content, that can give them a sense of pride because they see themselves in a positive light.”

Since the district developed the standards for culturally relevant materials and began using the rubric, it has seen publishers modify their materials in an attempt to meet the requirements. In some cases, publishers have tried

to cut corners. Knowles describes one example, saying, “They used the same scenarios and experiences (as those in their standard textbook) but put in names that were culturally relevant.” He remembers a problem in a math textbook that talked about “Jose and Enrique” going to a ski lodge in the Poconos. “We still didn’t connect there,” he says. “They changed the names of the people in the math problem, but the scenario still isn’t one that’s relatable for students of color in Florida.”

Still, Knowles explains that there has been some progress: “We had one publisher who responded to us. They put in infographics that highlighted the work of African-American scientists and mathematicians, and they made the scenarios more realistic.” In a math problem about measurement, the publisher had a scenario involving a person who is Hispanic and talked about measuring an ingredient that would be used in a traditional Latino household.

The School District of Philadelphia

The School District of Philadelphia, under the leadership of Superintendent William Hite, is another system working to promote the use of high-quality, culturally relevant instructional materials. As a district with a number of autonomous schools, the central office allows campus leaders to select their core instructional resources, to implement the district’s curriculum, from a list of district-approved resources. The list includes at least one curriculum highly rated by EdReports that also incorporates a significant number of culturally relevant texts. Given that the governance structure provides greater flexibility at the campus level, district administrators are taking steps to review the various supplemental resources used across the city to determine whether they provide a coherent instructional program or omit important content that could lead to gaps in knowledge. In a district where nearly half the students are African American, Philadelphia also requires all students to take African-American history in high school and is considering ways to integrate African-American history into other grade levels. It is also exploring the creation of courses focused on the history of Latinos and Asian Americans, since 22 percent and 9 percent of students, respectively, identify as Latino and Asian American.

States and Districts Are Ensuring Teachers and Leaders Are Prepared for Culturally Relevant Instruction

Several states have implemented a range of measures to help ensure that teachers and school leaders are prepared to incorporate cultural relevance in curriculum and instruction. One of the more comprehensive approaches, although focused specifically on the English Language Learner (ELL) population, was the work of [Angélica Infante-Green](#), deputy commissioner of P-12 instructional support for the New York State Education Department and a member of the Chiefs for Change Future Chiefs program. In 2014, New York released the [Blueprint for ELL Success](#), a statewide framework designed to improve instruction for the state's increasingly diverse student population; provide guidelines for administrators, policymakers, and practitioners to

Culturally Relevant Teaching Strategies

On [its website](#), the Georgia Department of Education lists a number of culturally relevant preconditions, characteristics, and teaching strategies. The list describes culturally relevant approaches that call for teachers to:

- Recognize and validate a student's culture
- Believe that all students will succeed
- Appreciate the cultures represented in schools
- View teaching as “pulling” knowledge out vs. “putting” knowledge in
- Incorporate students' cultural strengths into the learning process
- Demonstrate personal connectedness with all students
- Recognize and give voice to differing perspectives and worldviews
- Deliver instruction in linguistic and behavioral codes
- Legitimize students' real-life experiences
- Link students' histories and world to the subject matter

prepare all students for success; and recognize and respect the languages and cultures of all students. [Researchers suggest that the Blueprint offers important recommendations](#) for other states, including developing and communicating a state-level vision; designing policies that treat diversity as an asset; establishing statewide competencies for teachers and leaders; and coordinating with higher education institutions housing teacher-preparation programs.

Other states have taken some of these steps, including establishing statewide competencies for teachers and leaders. In Ohio, where Chiefs for Change member Paolo DeMaria serves as state superintendent, the [Standards for the Teaching Profession](#) recognize that “[e]ffective teachers understand the impact of students' backgrounds and experiences on their learning.” In “Standard 1: Students,” Ohio articulates the need for teachers to “understand student learning and development and respect the diversity of the students they teach.” Likewise, the [Ohio Standards for Principals](#) include an emphasis on “cultural awareness,” with “Standard 6: Equity and Cultural Responsiveness” suggesting that “[t]he effective educational leader demonstrates cultural knowledge and sensitivity in decision-making, practices and interactions with staff, students and families.” Through distinct elements and indicators, each standard seeks to drive reflection and continuous improvement among educators. Cultural relevance is considered a means, not an end; the standards contemplate culturally relevant approaches as a method of improving instruction and ensuring that “all students learn and achieve at high levels.”

Other states have focused on professional development opportunities for teachers. Tennessee, Washington, and New York, for example, have introduced “micro credentials” for teachers “mastering a specific skill or content area.” [According to New America](#), some states have micro-credentials designed to “prompt principals and vice principals to analyze their own identities and cultural backgrounds, before requiring that they facilitate campus-wide discussions about diversity and equity grounded in data.”

Similarly, some districts are integrating culturally relevant competencies into their educator training. Florida's Broward County Public Schools, led by Chiefs for Change member Robert Runcie, [piloted a series of professional learning opportunities](#) focused on cultural competence, with the goal of supporting educators and administrators in providing equitable learning opportunities for all students, particularly those who live in poverty.

In Fayette County Public Schools, Superintendent Emmanuel Caulk, also a Chiefs for Change member, has a dedicated [Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning](#) Coach within the district’s Office of Equity, School Support & Community Engagement. This approach includes “an in-depth focus on culture and language that benefits teachers and learners,” recognizing that the goal is “to close achievement gaps by adjusting our lenses.”

In Guilford County, North Carolina, where Sharon Contreras, another member of Chiefs for Change, serves as superintendent, the district has launched a number of initiatives with the goal of “[improving relationships between teachers and students and addressing implicit bias among educators.](#)” In one, the African American Male Initiative, the district asked “tough questions”: “What are our pedagogical approaches, and are they relevant for this population? How do we relate to these young men, and do they believe that we believe in them?” In 2017, Guilford County Schools launched a new rubric to evaluate professional development based on “[extensive work in the district on diversity and culturally relevant practices.](#)”

Teacher Preparation Programs Are Incorporating Training on Cultural Relevance

Successful implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy goes beyond the work of forward-thinking states and districts. Today, many colleges of education and alternative-certification programs include culturally relevant training in their coursework. For example:

- San Diego State University offers a [professional certificate](#) in cultural competence for educators.
- Michigan State University’s College of Education [provides support to schools and districts to strengthen cultural competence](#) among administrators, teachers, and staff.
- Teach For America incorporates [the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy](#) into its summer pre-service training.



In Guilford County, North Carolina, where Chiefs for Change member Sharon Contreras serves as superintendent, the district is integrating culturally relevant competencies into educator training.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE AND DISTRICT LEADERS

Today's increasingly diverse students deserve rich, academically challenging content that also reflects their background and personal experiences. Chiefs for Change makes the following recommendations for state and district leaders seeking to identify and implement high-quality, culturally relevant instructional materials:

→ Partner with experts to assess the status quo in every subject, and transition to high-quality curriculum and instructional materials

- States should incentivize the use of materials that are content-rich, high-quality, aligned to standards, and culturally relevant.
- Districts should transition to curricula that are highly rated by independent entities, such as EdReports, or other curriculum resource reviews, such as those produced by the Louisiana Department of Education. In addition, districts may consider creating a marketplace in which teachers and school leaders choose from rigorous, culturally relevant materials that have been evaluated and are standards aligned.
- Districts should involve school leaders, teachers, parents, and community members in reviewing instructional materials.

→ Ensure that teachers and school leaders receive appropriate training and development

- States should adopt standards and competencies focused on the skills necessary for teachers and school leaders to work with high-quality, culturally relevant instructional materials.
- Districts should consider the creation of professional learning communities focused on culturally relevant content and pedagogy.

→ Partner with institutions of higher education and other teacher-preparation programs

- States and districts should work with institutions of higher education to ensure that teacher-preparation programs provide training on cultural relevance.
- States and districts should work with alternative-certification programs to ensure the integration of cultural relevance into preparation and training.