



Leading Now



CAMPAIGN FOR
OUR SHARED FUTURE

Positive Impact of Student-Centered Educational Practices

Seek to defeat injustice and ignorance, not people.

An Education for All Our Children¹

As of Fall 2020, there were 48.1 million public school students enrolled in kindergarten through grade 12.

Of these students:

- 45.7% (22 million) are White
- 27.9% (13.4 million) are Hispanic
- 15% (7.2 million) are Black
- 5.4% (2.6 million) are Asian
- 4.6% (2.2 million) are of two or more races
- 0.8% (0.4 million) are American Indian/Alaska Native
- 0.4% (0.2 million) are Pacific Islander

Further, 49% of children in the United States are female and a recent survey found that 14% of middle and high school students identify as LGBTQ, with nearly 1 in 50 U.S. high school students identifying as transgender.

The majority of our nation's students are people of color, from non-white and non-Caucasian backgrounds. It is projected that percentage will continue to grow. Yet, some people argue that addressing identity and understanding the perspectives and experiences of different people is unnecessary or even harmful and that educational practices intended to include this in student learning are ancillary to the purpose of our schools. Ignoring and erasing the histories, realities, experiences, identities, and needs of more than half of our students is akin to saying that we only care about educating the minority of young people. As Americans, we must do better than that; we must be better than that.

Educational practices that are meant to engage, include, and develop all students in the context of their identities and communities—such as culturally responsive and affirming practices, social emotional

¹ This resource has been adapted from our friends at Campaign for Our Shared Future (COSF). To learn more or contact COSF directly, visit <https://www.campaignsharedfuture.org/>.



Leading Now



**CAMPAIGN FOR
OUR SHARED FUTURE**

learning, and whole child approaches—are proven to have a positive impact on academic outcomes, student well-being and school culture. [Research shows](#) that when students see themselves (their language, culture, race, interests, etc.) recognized and represented in the classroom and in the curriculum (through language, in stories and texts, and as a part of history), they engage more in their learning, retain more information and build the skills critical for healthy childhood and adolescent development.

Author and scholar [Rudine Sims Bishop](#) is widely cited for her theory of materials as mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors. As Bishop explains, books and materials ought to act as both a mirror—reflecting students’ lives and realities—and as a window, giving them a look into experiences different from their own. Instructional content that does both can create a sliding glass door that allows students to step into new bodies of knowledge with understanding and empathy.

For many students, including students of color and LGBTQ+ students, instructional materials present many more windows than they do mirrors. Historically and currently, textbooks used by public school districts in the U.S. center and [require a knowledge of white, Eurocentric narratives](#). When this happens—when content is predicated on whiteness and requires a personal understanding and knowledge of it to make sense—white culture becomes the single, dominant narrative against which everything else is measured. This phenomenon holds significant implications for racial equity, as well as beyond it: those who are not able-bodied, straight, cisgender, Christian, or English-speaking, for example, are either regarded as “other” or not considered at all.

Dismissing these established and evidence-based approaches to student learning and development undermines decades of research and innovation that have helped our education system evolve past ill-performing one-size-fits-all schooling, deprives our teachers of valuable tools to advance learning, and robs millions of students of the access to the education and learning they deserve. We must use all the tools available to reach and teach all our students. We must rely on the evidence and on the experts, and they agree: culturally relevant and inclusive content and classrooms help our students learn and grow.

Student-Centered Approaches to Teaching and Learning

Culturally responsive teaching, social emotional learning, and whole child learning are three student-centered approaches to education designed to more deeply engage students in their learning and develop competencies which will help them become self-actualized and self-sufficient. Rather than being separate, these approaches should be employed in tandem. Culturally responsive social emotional instruction ensures access to the benefits of SEL and whole child learning to students of all backgrounds, leveraging the inherent knowledge and strengths students bring into the classroom to support them in their development and learning.

Culturally Responsive Teaching



Leading Now



**CAMPAIGN FOR
OUR SHARED FUTURE**

[Culturally responsive teaching](#) (also referred to as culturally and linguistically responsive, culturally responsive and reflective, and culturally responsive and sustaining, among others) sees student identity and classroom diversity as assets to leverage to increase child learning and development. It seeks to advance student academic achievement and positive identity by connecting the interests and realities of the students to their lessons. A range of benefits are associated with this approach to schooling.

Social Emotional Learning

[Social emotional learning \(SEL\)](#) emphasizes the importance of students gaining the necessary non-academic knowledge and skills to thrive and succeed. SEL helps students develop self-awareness and healthy identities, self-management to manage their emotions and behaviors, social awareness to build empathy and understanding of others, relationship skills to establish and maintain healthy relationships, and responsible decision-making. It engages classrooms, school communities, parents, caregivers, and families to create the conditions for students to thrive as learners, growers, and individuals.

A Whole Child Approach

A whole child approach to education seeks to attend to the broad spectrum of student's development needs and conditions to help them grow and achieve lifelong success. Whole child learning is based on [five tenets](#): 1) each student enters school healthy and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle; 2) each student learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students and adults; 3) each student is actively engaged in learning and is connected to the school and broader community; 4) each student has access to personalized learning and is supported by qualified, caring adults; and 5) each student is challenged academically and prepared for success in college or further study and for employment and participation in a global environment.

Benefits of Student-Centered Education

Personal and Academic Success

Inclusive and personally meaningful lessons across subject areas develop students' ability to think broadly and critically and meet state-set standards and learning benchmarks. In language arts classrooms, students are best positioned to practice comprehension skills, make inferences, and express their conclusions when they can read texts that are written by people they relate to; when they can learn about the world and their place in it; and when they can think, read, write, and communicate about topics they care about.

In STEM classrooms, racialized and gendered ideas about who does well or is good proliferate, despite common views that math is a neutral discipline. Ensuring that students, particularly Black and Latinx



Leading Now



CAMPAIGN FOR
OUR SHARED FUTURE

students, adopt STEM identities and proficiencies requires abandoning legacy practices and “color blind” approaches. A culturally responsive approach to mathematics, for example, helps students see mathematics as a lens through which to view the patterns that exist in the world around them. It allows students to use data and mathematical concepts to answer questions about issues that matter to them, drawing upon content from relevant issues such as neighborhood resources, environmental concerns, or youth culture. These activities meet critical standards, while eliciting students’ curiosity and motivation.

Courses that explore the experiences and identities of diverse racial and ethnic groups in an effort to enhance social and political awareness have shown positive impact on short and long-term student outcomes. Research has shown that ethnic studies courses boost student achievement and college-going rates. [A recent study](#) found that taking an ethnic studies course led to better attendance, graduation rates and college enrollment. Positive results are also linked to [ethnic studies courses in San Francisco](#) and [Mexican American studies courses in Arizona](#). Access to inclusive and representative content is not simply a convenient bonus, but a necessity for all students, regardless of their identity, to learn more about themselves and others ([CDE, 2021](#)).

SEL programs positively impact students’ academic performance and well-being. [One comprehensive study](#) showed that SEL programs increased student academic performance by 11 percentage points, improved classroom behavior and student attitudes, and helped students better manage their stress. [Additional research](#) showed SEL programs led to a 10% decrease in psychological, behavioral, or substance abuse problems. These benefits were shown across demographic groups and were still evident in students as they moved into adulthood nearly two decades later. This broad and long-term impact suggests that strong SEL practices have the potential to positively influence lifetime outcomes for a wide range of students.

Emotional Safety and Wellbeing

Positive racial identities have long-been favorably linked to positive academic and psychological outcomes. [One recent study](#) found that opportunities for adolescents to explore, develop clarity about, and build positive ethnic and racial identities led to stronger academic outcomes and psychological health. [Research](#) has shown that positive racial identities can even buffer the effects of racial discrimination and *stereotype threat*—the idea that individuals perform worse on assignments when they feel they are living up to a negative stereotype. [Studies of LGBTQ+ students](#) have shown that when students see and learn about themselves, suicide rates decrease, and overall mental and physical health improves.

School Culture and Belonging

Ample research suggests that [feelings of identity, safety, and belonging](#) in school facilitate learning, while [feeling threatened](#) can alter the learning process. Experiences of belonging in school are particularly



Leading Now



CAMPAIGN FOR
OUR SHARED FUTURE

important for students of color whose racial groups are intellectually stereotyped. In one study, Black middle school students who felt they belonged in school set higher educational goals for themselves and experienced improved academic success than peers who did not share feelings of belonging. This relationship [did not hold for White students](#), who researchers think may not have the same level of belonging uncertainty.

SEL programs have been [linked to](#) improved relationships with peers, teachers, and school, and developing strong social emotional skills [prevents](#) students from being the subject of bullying and from bullying others. [Research](#) on LGBTQ+ school resources and reports showed that students in schools with alliance and affinity groups or inclusive curriculum were less likely to hear negative remarks about their identity or feel unsafe in their schools, indicating a correlation between inclusive activities and content and positive and more tolerant school cultures.

Engagement and Persistence

Consistent evidence shows that connecting learning to what students find personally meaningful can improve engagement, particularly for lower performing students. In one [small-scale study](#), Black students who participated in a culturally responsive mathematics course reported feeling more motivated to engage in mathematics and more confident in taking standardized tests. Evidence also suggests students are also more likely to [persist in difficult assignments and remain focused](#) amidst distractions if they see assignments as meaningful and connected to [self-transcendent goals](#)—that is, a purpose bigger than themselves.