The contents of this handout come from the book, *Culturally Responsive Standards-Based Teaching: Classroom to Community and Back* (Corwin Press, 2011) which offers a range of strategies for implementing Culturally Responsive, Standards-Based (CRSB) teaching—from making small changes to existing curriculum, to designing extensive projects, to developing districtwide programs. These ideas can be applied to any subject at any grade level.

Research shows that embedding students' cultures into a rigorous curriculum boosts student achievement and expands opportunities for parent and community involvement. CRSB teaching can help schools and districts—especially those that serve students from diverse and/or low-income families—accomplish these goals.

In a survey of educators who have participated in CRSB trainings and workshops, 100 percent said it provided a good process for closing the achievement gap, and more than 92 percent said they were able to make stronger connections with their students' families.
Culturally Responsive and Standards Based Together

Culturally responsive, standards-based teaching is the integration of two important aspects of education: culturally responsive teaching and standards-based teaching. Much has been written about culturally responsive and standards-based teaching separately, but it is the integration of the approaches that is critical to the goal of high achievement for all students. Culturally responsive teaching addresses the needs of students by improving motivation and engagement (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000), and standards-based teaching provides all students with the opportunity for rigorous, high-level learning. CRSB teaching means doing both, together.

CRSB teaching values students’ culture, draws on that culture as a strength in their education, and challenges them with rigorous, relevant curriculum. CRSB also succeeds, in part, because it fosters deeper, stronger school-family-community partnerships, which have been shown to improve academic achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Boethel, 2003). CRSB teaching strategies foster such partnerships because they bring family and community culture into the classroom and school in meaningful ways. When curriculum content and methods incorporate local norms, behaviors, objects, and practices, students and families feel there is a direct link between home life and school life. When teachers value and use the strengths of local cultures, they send a positive message that can improve the school’s relationships with family and community members.

Standards-Based Teaching

The primary drive behind the standards movement is to provide all students with the opportunity for rigorous, high-level learning. Federal requirements demand—and all educators expect—that students will achieve to their full potential. CRSB teaching is always grounded in state and local standards and the student achievement goals of the school and students. When discussing standards, we mean academic standards that are explicit learning expectations, usually written by the district or state. These are also referred to as content standards, performance standards, or benchmarks.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching infuses family customs—as well as community culture and expectations—throughout the teaching and learning environment. By providing instruction in a context meaningful to students and in a way that values their culture, knowledge, and experiences, culturally responsive teaching fosters student motivation and engagement.

Culturally responsive teaching is built on a foundation of knowledge and understanding of your own and your students’ family and community culture, which is critical to the process of teaching and learning. Learning about all the cultures represented in the classroom can seem like a daunting challenge, but the success of many teachers shows that it is worth the effort. Becoming culturally responsive is an ongoing process that evolves as we learn more about ourselves, our world, and other cultures. To become culturally responsive, first look at your own culture—especially if it is part of our country’s dominant culture—from the worldview of others; have an open mind to what you don’t understand; and be ready to learn new ways of looking at and doing things.
What is culture? Culture can be defined as a way of life, especially as it relates to the socially transmitted habits, customs, traditions, and beliefs that characterize a particular group of people at a particular time. It includes the behaviors, actions, practices, attitudes, norms, values, communication styles, language, etiquette, spirituality, concepts of health and healing, beliefs, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group. Culture is the lens through which we look at the world. It is the context within which we operate and make sense of the world and it influences how we process learning, solve problems, and teach.

Everyone has a culture, though most of the time our own culture is invisible to us. It is frequently thought of as the way things are and becomes the norm by which we measure all others’ behavior. In The Diversity Kit: An Introductory Resource for Social Educators, the authors write, “Nonetheless, one’s beliefs and actions are not any more natural or biologically predetermined than any other group’s set of beliefs and actions” (Alhearn et al., 2002).

Cultural groups are not homogeneous. They represent different geographical locations, histories, and experiences. Minority cultures also express varying degrees of assimilation to the dominant Anglo culture in this country. Cultures change over time, and vary across class and gender, even between families and individuals. The music we enjoy, how we spend our leisure time, what we talk about, and what we eat are examples of individual differences within the same cultural group. “Professionals who think of cultures as they were generations ago, who romanticize cultures, or who fail to see cultures as complex, dynamic, changing systems will quickly fall short of the goal of effective services,” writes Cross (1995–1996).

This guide looks at culture very broadly. It includes all the aspects of students’ lives that could engage and motivate them to learn and to do their best work, including—but not limited to—family culture, community culture, youth culture, and pop culture. Teachers can start by thinking and learning about their students’:

- Differences in ways of thinking, feeling, and expressing pleasure, distress, and concern
- Similarities in the cares and concerns of an individual or her family
- Country of origin, history, practices, health, beliefs, and language
- Frames of reference—religion, valid ways express oneself, and acceptable and unacceptable behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Things to Remember About Culture…</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Culture is complex, dynamic, and ever changing.</td>
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<td>• All humans are cultural beings. We all have several primary cultural identities that “shape” us. Sometimes our culture is “invisible,” even to ourselves, and can be difficult to describe. Important cultural identities in U.S. culture are race (including skin color), class, gender, language, religion, and national origin.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Culture, which includes values, beliefs, histories, stories, and traditions, both shapes the lens with which we view the world, and moves and motivates us.</td>
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<td>• When diverse cultures come together it creates a “cross-cultural zone” that is filled with a wide range of emotions, perspectives, values, beliefs, and both personal and community history.</td>
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<td>• Key elements/emotions in the cross-cultural zone include identity development,</td>
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Building bridges between teachers and students begins with simple questions: Who are these kids? What’s important to them? It takes time to learn the answers to those questions and to know how they understand themselves, each other, and you—their teacher. It takes practice to ask yourself and your students questions, and it also requires a safe and secure space to explore those questions and to share the answers.

**Why focus on culture?** The dominant U.S. culture is reflected in all aspects of most schools, from the curriculum to the way teachers interact with students and to how we communicate with families. Many of the lowest performing schools have a student-family population that differs culturally from that of the school, whether racially, ethnically, socioeconomically, or in some other way. For example, many classrooms emphasize individual responsibility and achievement, competition, and teacher-led learning. Other cultural groups, such as some Asian groups, Native Americans, and Alaska Natives, may be unaccustomed to this style of learning, and instead place a higher value on group work that fosters shared responsibility. Such differences may thwart learning in the school context.

Researchers have found that by the age of eight, disparities between the cultural values and patterns of communication of the home and the school may undermine children’s enthusiasm for learning and their belief in their capacity to learn (Cummins, 1986; Entwistle, 1995). Some students also believe that schooling can be detrimental to their own language, culture, and identity (Ogbu, 1993). This clash between a student’s home culture and school culture—which is often an unrecognized, hidden barrier—can have a huge impact on that student’s ability to learn and achieve.

When youth, family, and community culture are included in the classroom, students feel a sense of belonging, see purpose in learning, and are motivated to do well. School relationships with families and communities improve. As Cleary and Peacock (1998) report, “Schools that acknowledge, accept, and teach a child’s cultural heritage have significantly better success in educating students” (p. 108).

**The Essential Elements**
CRSB teaching promotes six essential elements that are embedded into and woven throughout the teaching.

- It is always student centered
- It has the power to transform
- It is connected and integrated
- It fosters critical thinking
- It incorporates assessment and reflection
• It builds relationships and community

These elements are basically good teaching practices that can be used by all teachers. Throughout this guide, we focus on these elements; they are described briefly here and in more depth in later chapters.

Becoming Student Centered
CRSB teaching is always student centered. Content is taught through individualized learning that is connected to goals and standards. CRSB practices promote authentic learning that is relevant and meaningful to students and connect learning in the school to what the students know and are learning outside the classroom. Teaching becomes more student centered when:

• Students’ lives, interests, families, communities, and cultures are the basis for what is taught
• Students are involved in planning what they will learn and how they will learn it
• The social, emotional, and cognitive strengths and needs of the students are recognized by their teachers and reflected in individualized learning plans
• Instruction is built on the students’ personal and cultural strengths

Some ways that teachers can make lessons more student centered are to:

• Study family or community history, using it to study other historical ideas
• Relate lessons to students’ personal, family, or community cultures
• Speak (and value) their home languages
• Allow students to suggest topics that grow out of their interest in the community, as well as personal and group interests
• Invite students to write about their own lives, as well as things and people who are important to them
• Use literature written by people whose culture reflects that of the students

Promoting Transformational Teaching
CRSB practices can transform teaching and learning by valuing and building on the knowledge all students bring to class. Transformation happens in the following ways:

• The role of the teacher is transformed from instructor to facilitator by allowing students’ experiences, perspectives, and interests to help shape the curriculum
• The curriculum is transformed as the subject matter is examined from many different perspectives, in ways that promote growth and discovery
• The participants’ points of view are transformed as they begin to value and respect things and people that they may not have valued or respected before

Some ways teachers can make their teaching transformational include:

• Helping students recognize the strengths and significance of their culture, family, and community, and see their own lives and perspectives as subjects worthy of study
• Studying curricular concepts from the point of view of students’ cultures, comparing them with the way concepts are presented in textbooks
• Helping students critically examine and challenge the knowledge and perspectives presented in the curriculum and textbooks; address inaccuracies, omissions, or distortions by bringing in multiple perspectives
• Encouraging students to take social action by doing things like contacting government representatives or educating the community on issues
• Providing opportunities for community members to see students in a new and positive light—through meetings, presentations, and exhibitions—thus increasing their support for the school

**Connecting and Integrating CRSB Practices**
CRSB teaching should not be an “add-on,” or separate activity, but rather an approach that is connected and integrated with what is happening in the rest of the classroom and school community. CRSB teaching is connected and integrated when:

- Learning is contextualized and builds on what students already know, allowing them to comprehend new information more easily
- Interdisciplinary work is used to illustrate the relationships among different subjects and their applicability
- The work encourages students and teachers to connect with other students, teachers, administrators, families, and community members

Some ways teachers can connect and integrate the curriculum include:

- Discussing how subject matter is related to students’ lives and why the information is important to them
- Connecting projects with other activities that the school promotes
- Linking study to local issues and events by allowing students to investigate, measure, calculate, and write about those issues
- Incorporating a variety of standards to be learned within each task, from basic skills to cultural awareness and interpersonal skills
- Sharing information with other students, teachers, classrooms, and parents

**Fostering Critical Thinking**
As you make the curriculum more relevant to students, and draw in their families and community, you bring depth and breadth to learning. You also help students develop one of the most important abilities of a well-educated person: critical thinking. Critical thinking is a fundamental part of learning, involving high-level thinking processes such as decisionmaking, logical inquiry, reasoning, artistic creation, and problem solving. CRSB teaching creates opportunities for students to build critical thinking skills by using these skills in real-life situations and understanding how to apply them in other contexts. Practices that promote critical thinking include:

- Teachers pose questions that probe student thinking
- Students monitor their own level of understanding and become self-directed, self-disciplined, and self-corrective
- Teachers and students approach learning in different ways

Some ways to promote critical thinking skills are:

- Involving students in the planning of a project
• Asking students to reflect and report on why they chose their topic of interest, how they researched it, how they completed their task, what they found out about the topic, and how they liked studying the topic
• Persuading students to formulate, share, and debate their opinions
• Encouraging students to examine the perspective put forth in the text, question it, and discover any alternative perspectives (this also promotes transformational learning)
• Teaching students to recognize stereotypes

Incorporating Assessment and Reflection
Assessment and reflection, for both the teacher and student, should be ongoing and infused throughout the curriculum. In CRSB teaching, a variety of authentic assessment measures are used to monitor progress throughout the year and to make midcourse adjustments. In addition, students and teachers develop and pose rich questions to reflect critically on lessons learned. As students and teachers practice assessment and reflection, both groups better understand their own teaching and learning styles and make academic, personal, and cultural connections. They become more skillful in evaluating and improving their own performance and thinking.

Examples of how teachers can encourage assessment and reflection include:
• Having students define an identified need, then create a plan to address the problem
• Assessing students through multiple, authentic means—reports, portfolios, and presentations—and by a variety of people (teachers, students, and community members)
• Helping students to create the rubric by which they will be assessed
• Encouraging students to use journals to set personal goals and reflect on what they learned
• Having students reflect on their progress and make adjustments as needed

Building Relationships and Community
CRSB teaching builds and supports relationships and community. When you recognize family and community members’ knowledge and experiences as strengths that are valuable to a child’s education, you are valued and respected in turn by students, staff, families, and community members. CRSB teaching fosters partnerships because family and community members are reminded that they have something to offer the school and that they can have a significant positive impact on the quality of their children’s education. CRSB teaching builds relationships between individuals and among groups as people learn what others have to contribute: They learn to rely on each other; work together on concrete tasks that take advantage of their collective and individual assets; and create promising futures for youth and the community.

Teachers can build relationships by:
• Getting to know their students, students’ families, and the community they serve—using what they learn to help inform what is taught
• Communicating with parents about what they are teaching and how parents can be involved
• Helping students to meet and get to know other people in their community
• Using multiple avenues to include families in what is done in the school
As with all relationship building, it can take time to gain families’ trust and participation, particularly when it’s necessary to overcome decades of exclusion or poor school-community relations. Some ways teachers can build relationships with families and community members include:

- Making an event that is extremely important (and exciting) to the community a subject of study
- Bringing outside resources into the school
- Inviting family and community members to speak to the class or share a special skill
- Involving students in making presentations to the community
- Talking to community leaders about what they consider appropriate and critical subjects to be taught
- Learning about the students’ cultures by spending time with people of that culture, reading books, attending community events, and learning the language

Implementing CRSB Teaching

In our work with teachers, we have found that beginning the CRSB process usually includes the following steps:

1. Think about the various ways you can effectively bring your family and community culture into the classroom. Ask yourself: What self-exploration do I need to do? How does my own cultural framing affect the way that I see my students and their families?
2. Think about what more you need to know about your students before you begin. Ask yourself: What are my students’ cultural backgrounds and perspectives? What are the various things they and their families value? How can I tap into the cultural strength of my students’ family and community cultures? How can I make sure I am not operating on stereotypes?
3. Consider how you build relationships and community in your classroom. Ask yourself: What activities or actions can help me and my students get to know one another better and learn from each other? How can I show students, families, and community members that their cultural framing and knowledge are valuable?
4. Start small and then build up to larger activities and projects. Ask yourself: How can I bring a “cultural responsiveness” to current lessons and activities? This means expanding lessons or activities to make sure they are student centered, transformational, and build relationships. How can I help students see and consider various points of view, and understand ways that concepts apply in other contexts?
5. Find allies—in students, teachers, parents, community members, administrators, and others. Ask yourself: What other teachers in the building currently practice or would support CRSB teaching? How are my CRSB lessons connected to other initiatives or projects in the school? How do my CRSB activities connect to our building or district mission? It helps to have support!

Continuum of Options and Opportunities for CRSB Teaching

There is a broad array of options and opportunities for implementing CRSB teaching in your classroom or program. The graphic on the following page shows the variety of options and where they fall along a continuum: from informal and brief to formal and elaborate. The continuum moves from less complex areas (such as engaging students in dialogue about their family or community culture) to more complex ones (such as interdisciplinary units centered on family or community connections).
Culturally Responsive Standards-Based Teaching
Continuum of Options and Opportunities

Engaging students in conversation about their home, family, or community culture

Incorporating culturally relevant materials into the environment

Adding aspects of home, family, or community into existing lessons

CRSB lesson

CRSB project

CRSB unit

CRSB Interdisciplinary activity

Teacher training

Whole school focus

Districtwide focus

FOUNDATION
- Standards-based curriculum
- Knowledge and understanding of students' home, family, and community culture
- Self-reflection and understanding about one's own home, family, and community culture

Less Complex
- Single activity, but still connected to larger goals or outcomes
- Can be done in a short period of time
- Engages students in critical thinking and reflection
- Rigorous learning is occurring

More Complex
- Takes place over an extended period of time
- Multiple opportunities for connections: to students, family, community, and standards
- Active, interactive, and collaborative
- Critical thinking, reflection, and rigorous learning is occurring
- Culminates in demonstration of what staff and students have learned