

Native American Community Academy (NACA) Inspired Schools Network
A Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Framework Case Study

Established

2006

Vision and Mission

The NACA Inspired Schools Network (NISN) is building a movement of students, families, and educators to create excellent schools relevant to the communities they serve. NISN works with fellows committed to Indigenous communities to establish schools in New Mexico and across the country to create strong leaders who are academically prepared, secure in their identities, and healthy, and ultimately transform their communities.

Model and Methods

Community-Led School Design
Holistic Indigenous Education
Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Pedagogy
Land-Based Learning and Healing
College and College Preparation

Sector

Charter Management Organization (CMO)

Headquarters

Albuquerque, NM

Total Network Schools

6 Network Schools (New Mexico)
7 School Leader Fellows/Schools in Progress (Colorado, California, South Dakota, and Oklahoma)

Total Enrollment of Network Schools in New Mexico

760

NISN School	Location	Established	Grades	Enrollment	Student Demographics
<u>NACA</u>	Albuquerque, NM	2006	K-12	480	94% American Indian 5% Hispanic/LatinX 1% White
<u>Dream Dine</u>	Shiprock, NM	2014	K-5	34	100% American Indian
<u>DZIL DIT Ł'OOÍ School of Empowerment, Action, and Perseverance (DEAP)</u>	Navajo, New Mexico	2015	6-12	40	100% American Indian
<u>Six Directions Indigenous Schools</u>	Gallup, NM	2016	6-12	66	99% American Indian 1% Hispanic/LatinX
<u>RAÍCES DEL Saber Xinachtli Community School</u>	Las Cruces, NM	2018	K-2	28	99% Hispanic/Latinx Less than 1% American Indian
<u>KHA'P'O Community School</u>	Santa Clara Pueblo, NM	2009	K-6	109	100% American Indian
NISN Fellow Schools in Colorado	Location	Established	Grades	Enrollment	Student Demographics
<u>American Indian Academy of Denver</u>	Denver, CO	2020	6-9	102	Data unavailable
<u>Kwiyagot Community Academy</u>	Towaoc, Ute Mountain Nation	2021	K-1	20	Data Unavailable

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Introduction

The legacy of boarding schools has gravely harmed the relationship between Indigenous nations and U.S education systems. These practices were mitigated at the federal level through the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978. ICWA provided Indigenous nations sovereignty over their children's adoption and banned the forced removal of American Indian children for placement in boarding schools. This legacy has resulted in community and generational trauma and distrust of the U.S education system. Subsequently, the U.S education system has systematically failed to meet the needs of American Indian students and communities since 1978; according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020) "The Condition of Education 2020," Indigenous students do not yet perform comparably to their white counterparts in attendance, academic achievement, and graduation rates. The Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2020) Factsheet reports that "19% of 18–24-year-old Native American students are enrolled in college compared to 41% of the overall U.S. population" (para. 1). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress Report (2019), American Indian students consistently report low incidents of



interacting with their identity and heritage in public schools (pg. 16). The Native American Community Academy (NACA) and the NACA Inspired Schools Network (NISN) were created to improve educational experiences and outcomes for Indigenous students in New Mexico and across the country.

NACA was established in 2006 in Albuquerque, New Mexico; it manifested from community demand and mobilization to improve the wellness and educational outcomes of the growing urban American Indian student population. Essentially, the school is co-created, designed for, and governed by the community. NACA serves approximately 500 students in grades K-12, representing over 60 Indigenous communities. NACA's strong outcomes for American Indian students in the areas of belonging, enrollment, retention, academic achievement, and graduation have garnered national attention and expansion.

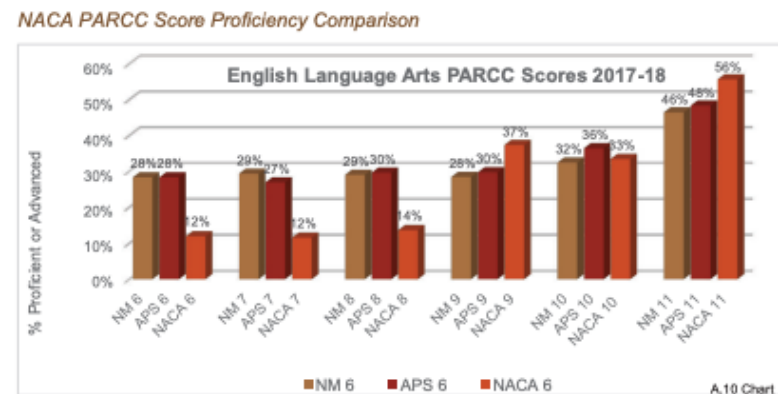
NISN is a nationwide network of schools that create strong school leaders who are prepared to transform their communities through the NACA model. Additionally, NISN provides a fellowship to Indigenous school leaders across the nation. The NISN fellowship includes the school leaders of two new Colorado charter schools: The American Indian Academy of Denver and Kwiyyagat Community School. The NISN model is rooted in Culturally-Responsive Sustaining (CR-S) practice that aims to center the identity and experience of American Indian students. NACA and its culturally sustaining model offer promising implications for policy and practice for diverse racial and ethnic groups in Colorado charter schools.

NACA Academic Outcomes

The National Charter School Resource Center (2018) reports that “students who attend the Native American Community Academy (NACA) demonstrate academic achievement, proficiency, retention, graduation, and college attendance rates that outpace their Native American peers at the district, state, and national levels” (para. 1). According to the NACA 2019 Tribal Education Status Report, Indigenous elementary students at NACA perform comparable to their Indigenous counterparts in Albuquerque Public School (APS) and across New Mexico and then out-perform them over time in middle and high school (pg. 11). Performance varies when comparing all students at NACA to all students in APS and New Mexico. For example, Figure 1 displays significant achievement disproportionality between all NACA students and all APS and New Mexico students in English Language Arts (ELA) on the 2018 PARCC exam; however, the achievement becomes more comparable in high school.

Ten percent of 11th-grade students at NACA were more proficient in ELA than APS/New Mexico students on the 2018 PARCC exam.

Figure 1. 2018 NACA PARCC ELA Comparative Data



PARCC Score Proficiency Comparison

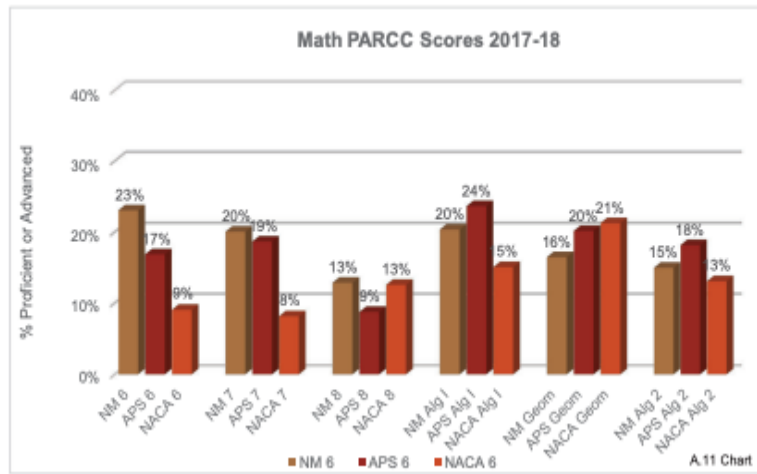
The charts above compare the English Language Arts and Math PARCC scores for grade levels 6–11 as a percentage of proficiency for the state of New Mexico, Albuquerque Public Schools (APS), and NACA (Chart 3 and Chart 4). The sharp increase in Chart 3's proficiency in English Language Arts from middle school grade levels 6–8 to high school grades 9–11 demonstrates NACA's commitment to preparing students for college and beyond and the effectiveness of NACA's Indigenous Education model and holistic wellness approach to student instruction.

From National Charter Resource Center. (2018). *Deep community engagement at the Native American Community Academy*. Charter School Center-US Department of Education.

<https://charterschoolcenter.ed.gov/case-study/deep-community-engagement-native-american-community-academy-naca>

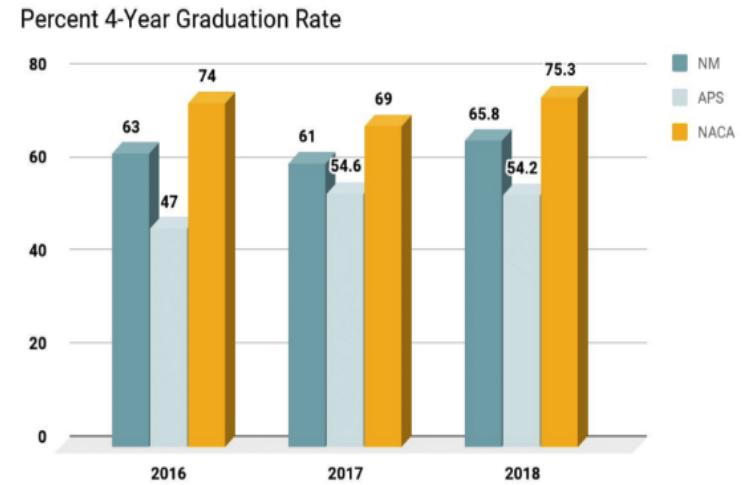
As demonstrated in Figure 2, there is achievement disproportionately between NACA and APS/NEW Mexico in math for all grades except 10th (pg. 13). Last, Figure 3 displays that graduation rates for students at NACA have remained significantly better than the graduation rates for APS and New Mexico from 2016-2018 (pg. 16).

Figure 2 2018 NACA PARCC Math Comparative Data



From National Charter Resource Center. (2018). *Deep community engagement at the Native American Community Academy*. Charter School Center-US Department of Education.
<https://charterschoolcenter.ed.gov/case-study/deep-community-engagement-native-american-community-academy-naca>

Figure 3. NACA Graduation Comparative Data 2016-2018

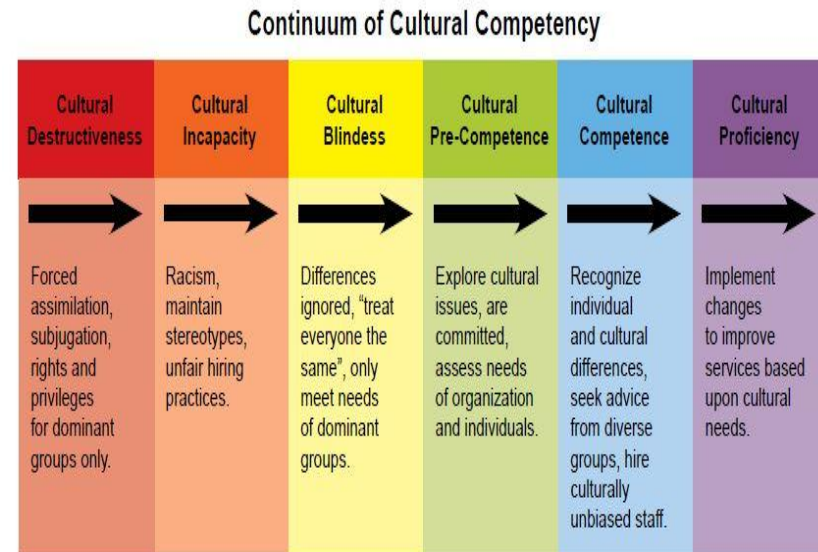


From NACA Inspired Schools Network. (2021). *Uplifting the genius of our communities: Why community-led schools matter*. 2021 Colorado Department of Education Equity Convening.
https://www.dropbox.com/sh/3weidzk2feqzj70/AAD84vKcGIV3yGtOStyhW2wna/Culturally%20Sustaining-Responsive?dl=0&preview=NISN+Equity+Convening+Presentatio%20n6.18.21_updated.pdf&subfolder_nav_tracking=1

Findings: Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Practice and NISN

NISN leaders and fellows presented at the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) Schools of Choice (SOC) Unit’s 2021 Equity Convening and shared how they have used the CR-S framework to improve experiences and outcomes for American Indian children at NACA and other NISN schools. These presenters included Valerie Siow of NISN, Sherrell Lang of Kwiyaogot Community School in Tawaoc, Ute Nation, and Terri Bissonette of the American Indian Academy of Denver. CR-S pedagogy and practice take a stance that racial disparities in educational outcomes are partly the result of the Judeo-Christian White culture that dominates the educational system. The framework proposes an alternative to this dominant perspective by calling for cultural pluralism and cultural equality. Figure 4 from the University of North Carolina’s Project READY (Reimagining Equity & Access for Diverse Youth) (2019) displays a continuum of approaches that range from deficit-based (i.e., assimilation) to asset-based (i.e., cultural pluralism). Paris (2012) describes the need for CR-S models as, “for far too long, scholarship on access and equity has centered implicitly and explicitly on: how can we get these working-class

Figure 4. Culturally Responsive Continuum



From UNC-Chapel Hill. Project READY. (2019). *Reimagining equity & access for diverse youth module 17 CR-S*.

<https://ready.web.unc.edu/section-2-transforming-practice/module-17/>

kids of color to speak/write/be more like middle-class White ones” (p.3). In contrast, CR-S calls for the transformation of the school system itself to be more inclusive. Several states and school districts have adopted a CR-S approach in their equity frameworks, including the New York and Massachusetts state education departments.

Literature on CR-S practice in K12 schools reveals these common highlights: centering and sustaining the social and cultural factors of diverse communities, considering cognitive factors for learning, ensuring transformational leadership, and committing to deep engagement and partnership with families and communities. A CR-S approach considers Indigenous culture an asset, a resource, and a right. Jacobs, M. et al. (2018) found that “beyond framing Indigenous knowledge and culture as the rights of Indigenous peoples, they are also resources that can educate and enrich all students, as well as society, more broadly” (p.160). The CR-S-driven practices utilized at NISN are

- NISN schools are co-created, attended, led, and governed by the Indigenous communities they serve.

- The preservation of Indigenous culture and community at NISN schools allows students to develop secure and confident identities.
- NISN provides a holistic education that centers Indigenous well-being.

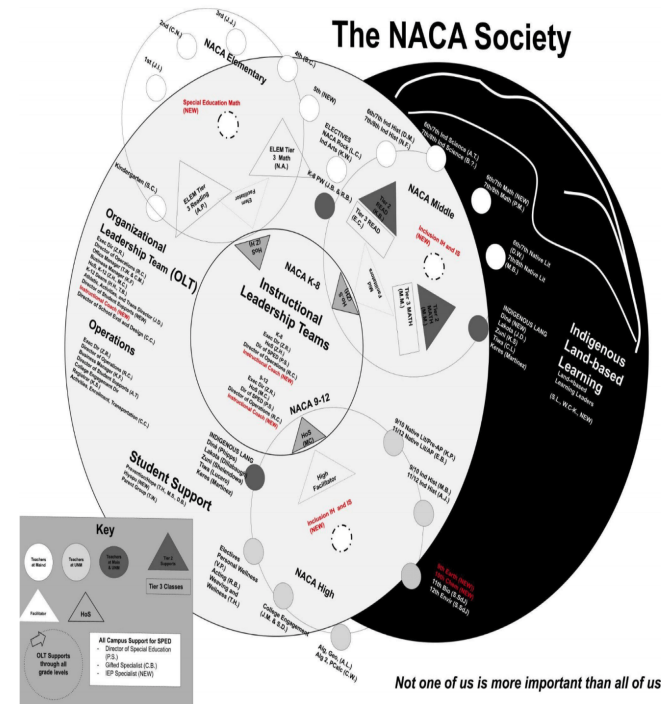
Community Designed and Led

The CR-S framework emphasizes family and community engagement and partnership. According to the New York University’s Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative (EJ-ROC) (2020): “CR-S family engagement is absolutely critical for meaningful learning to take place. CR-S family engagement is the practice of authentic, equal partnership with families, rooted in a deep knowledge and appreciation for the rich social and cultural identities, assets, habits, and contexts that families bring to learning” (p.1). NACA and NISN are co-designed, attended, led, and governed by the Indigenous community. The NACA website indicates that upon the school’s inception, they posed this question to the community: how can public education embrace the future while sustaining our identities, culture, and traditions? The community’s resounding answer was the necessity to integrate essential

Indigenous values into the school culture and programming (para. 4). These values reflect the community's traditional, cultural, and educational values: respect, responsibility, community service, culture, perseverance, and reflection.

During the 2021 CDE Equity Convening, NISN leaders described how these values drive everything from creating policy to approving curriculum. Specifically, they highlighted how the Indigenous value of community shaped the school. For example, the organizational chart is circular instead of a hierarchy (Figure 5). Conceptually, leadership is at the organization's center and not on top of it. The saying “none of us are more important than all of us” adorns the chart. Also, NISN leaders noted that it is essential for the staff to reflect the community, stating that approximately 70% of teachers are Indigenous and are from the communities they serve. Furthermore, school and network leaders and board members also reflect the community.

Figure 5. The NACA Organizational Chart



From NACA Inspired Schools Network. (2021). *Uplifting the genius of our communities: Why community-led schools matter*. 2021 Colorado Department of Education Equity Convening.

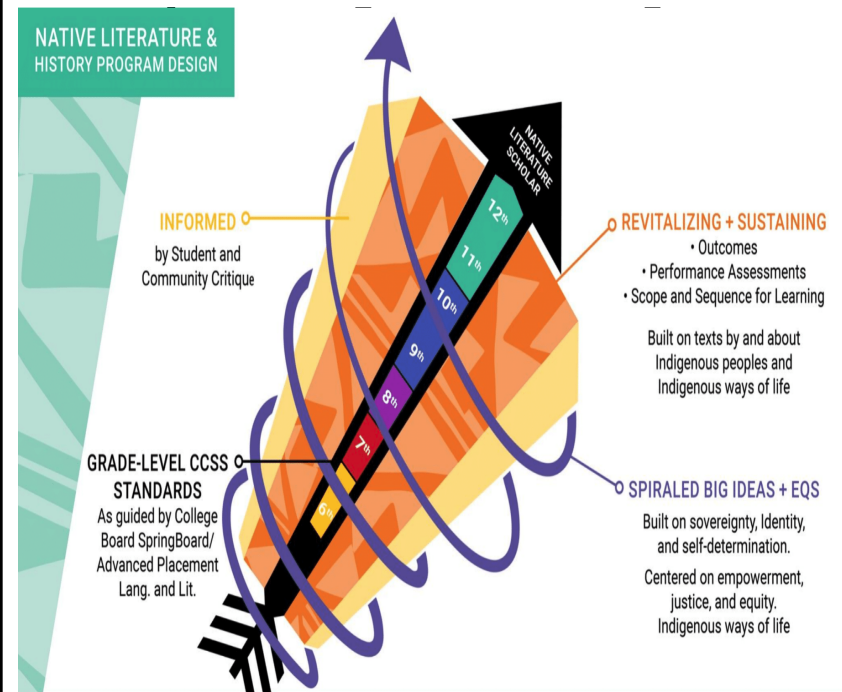
https://www.dropbox.com/sh/3weidzk2feqzi70/AAD84vKcGIV3yGtOStyhW2wna/Cultural%20Sustaining-Responsive?dl=0&preview=NISN+Equity+Convening+Presentation6.18.21_updated.pdf&subfolder_nav_tracking=1

Additionally, the curriculum is co-designed with and rigorously reviewed by the community to ensure alignment to the organization's mission and core values. As displayed in Figure 6, the curriculum is tethered to sovereignty, identity, and self-determination. It is also centered on justice, empowerment, and equity while integrating state content standards and college preparedness. Furthermore, both formal and informal, school and community partnerships deepen the integration of the school and the Indigenous community. These experiences include service-learning, class projects requiring community engagement, and cultural activities. As one NACA alumna articulated, “NACA focuses on community engagement. They really get students to think about contributing to the community like your tribe, New Mexico, or the larger Native community” (Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, 2017, pg. 8).

Culture and Identity

Author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* Zaretta Hammonds (2018) argues that neuroscience tells us that culture plays an important role in learning. She proposes that culturally responsive teaching can help students shape their identities, experience trust and belonging, and ultimately build intellectual capacity.

Figure 6. NACA Curriculum Development Process



From NACA Inspired Schools Network. (2021). *Uplifting the genius of our communities: Why community-led schools matter*. 2021 Colorado Department of Education Equity Convening. https://www.dropbox.com/sh/3weidzk2feqzj70/AAD84vKcGIV3yGtOStyhW2wna/Culturally%20Sustaining-Responsive?dl=0&preview=NISN+Equity+Convening+Presentation6.18.21_updated.pdf&subfolder_nav_tracking=1

She defines intellectual capacity as “the power the brain creates to process complex information more efficiently” (pg. 16).

The preservation of Indigenous culture and community at NISN schools allows students to develop secure and confident identities. The organization’s culture, curriculum, and instruction are centered on Indigenous identity and specifically building confidence and pride, resulting in a strong sense of self-efficacy and self-determination. American Indian culture and scholarship are preserved by centering Native literature, language, science, and art. American and world history are taught through the relevant Indigenous perspective of the location. NACA has developed a land-based curriculum inspired by the relationships Indigenous peoples have with the land. The 2019 NACA Tribal Status Report (2020) describes this curriculum:

This curriculum integrates land-based elements of learning throughout all K-12 coursework. It results in land-based student-defined performance tasks that will support understanding of sovereignty, stewardship, and environmental preservation. Beginning in 2018-19, students began

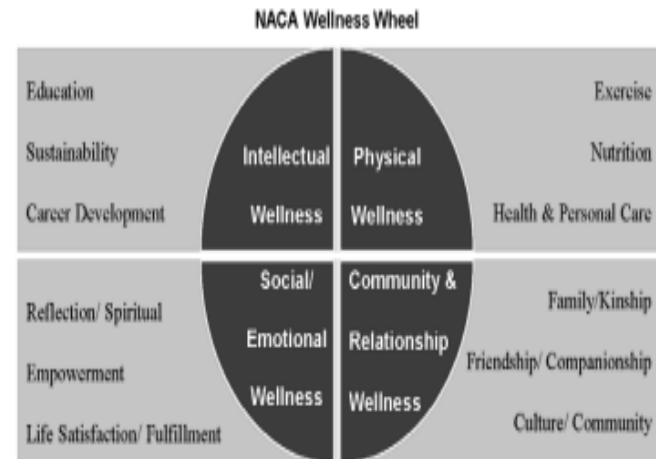
completing land-based performance tasks that demonstrate the comprehensive application of multidisciplinary coursework in the context of land-based Indigenous knowledge. Outcomes are measured by teachers using competency-based grading and by the annual Quad qualitative survey completed by students, teachers, administrators, and families to gauge alignment with the mission (pg.127).

Thus, Indigenous culture and identity drive the teaching and learning cycle and state standards. Additionally, the NISN CR-S approach makes the curriculum relevant to Native students’ lives by incorporating experiential learning techniques that utilize the community as the classroom and bring meaning to the local context. Furthermore, NISN integrates cultural concepts, practices, and events throughout and beyond the school day, establishing belonging and strengthening identity. These practices display the “sustaining” component of CR-S; a student’s heritage or culture is not allocated to a marginal unit of study or cultural celebration and is instead thoroughly embedded in the school's culture, curriculum, and instruction.

Holistic Approach

CR-S is considered a strategy for teaching the whole child because it attends to relationships, culture, identity, belonging, and social-emotional well-being. NISN provides a holistic education centered on Indigenous well-being; there is an intensive focus on the holistic development of Native students according to Native philosophies. This development is considered a healing approach for cultural, cognitive, and emotional harm Indigenous communities have experienced in public education systems. NACA's holistic approach is guided by a Wellness Wheel that conceptualizes its approach into four domains. The concepts of the "whole," "the wheel," and the "four directions" are sacred symbols in Native American knowledge. NISN schools implement various social-emotional programs and support based on need. For example, according to its student services website, NACA has the following social and emotional supports available to students and the community: First Nations Community School-Based Health Center, a Student Health Advisory Council, and the Eagle Room culturally-based meditation room.

Figure 7. The NACA Wellness Wheel



From Native American Community School (NACA).
<https://www.nacaschool.org>

Implications for Colorado Charter Schools

Community Designed and Led

This strategy roots the organization's core values and practices in the desires, values, and assets of the community it serves. It includes providing all parents explicit and relevant opportunities to engage, offer feedback, make decisions, and govern. The aim is to share power with students, families, and communities. The community sees itself in the school's staff, operations, culture, and programming. The cultural components of the school and the community mirror each other rather than oppose each other.

- Use culturally and linguistically responsive methods of collecting data and feedback from parents, students, and the community (e.g., multilingual surveys, focus groups, and 1:1 phone calls). Use these methods as an opportunity to listen deeply to the community.
- Create and sustain Community Design Teams that represent various stakeholder groups when designing or redesigning schools.
- Augment the School Accountability Committee (SAC) structure and designate cultural and community-specific SACs to focus on success and accountability for specific student groups.
- Augment Board of Director (BoD) committees to provide Black, Indigenous, LatinX, Asian, and Middle Eastern community members and families the opportunity to review budgets, monitor curriculum for relevancy, etc.
- Create and develop robust leadership pipelines and partnerships in the community to hire and retain Black, Indigenous, LatinX, Asian, and Middle Eastern teachers and leaders.
- Adjust organizational and cultural systems, routines, and rituals to align to the values and norms of the community (i.e., the cultural components of the school and the community should mirror one another).
- Partner with community organizations dedicated to racial equity and family advocacy; they can guide the organization with culturally relevant communication strategies, outreach, professional development, etc.

Culture and Identity

It is through identifying with their ethnic and cultural group that students build confidence and a strong sense of self-efficacy. The vehicle to getting there is an inclusive program that harnesses belonging. CR-S pedagogy focuses on sustaining cultural pluralism; It implies a more systemic approach than a unit on a particular culture or heritage in a traditional humanities textbook or a celebration during an assigned history month. Creating a confident identity at school requires a sustaining and positive reflection of oneself.

- Adopt or develop clear criteria for sustaining cultural practice in the teaching and learning cycle. Use the requirements in developing and reviewing curriculum, teacher evaluation systems, and school culture models.
- Center curriculum and instruction around the perspective, literature, and scholarship of diverse peoples.
- Use a specific protocol for applying culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy to build a positive student identity alongside content knowledge and skills. Protocols provide educators with a step-by-step process for revising the existing standards-based curriculum for cultural pluralism and equality.
- Center curriculum and instruction on what Black, Indigenous, LatinX, Asian, and Middle Eastern Students can relate to and feel optimistic about identifying with; this includes using an ample amount of literature, scholarship, science, art, and philosophy of diverse peoples across all content areas.
- Incorporate neuroscience in your equity framework as Hammond (2018) does in her Ready for Rigor framework. Apply the interconnections of intellectual capacity and culture to the organizational culture and classroom. She recommends intentionally attending to these skills: self and social awareness, learning partnerships, and information processing.
- Provide cultural opportunities within and beyond the school day that cultivate and sustain belonging for teachers and students.

Holistic Approach

The holistic component of CR-S, attends to all aspects of a child's well-being: social, emotional, psychological, physical, cognitive, and for NACA, community connectedness. In a CR-S framework, the whole child is defined by the community.

- Use a culturally based or relevant metaphor for the whole child and plan for systemic implementation around it; for example, NACA uses the “Wellness Wheel” (Figure 7).
- Implement tiered, social-emotional programming rooted in school values and is culturally based.
- Provide physical and mental wellness; design activities that cultivate joy, celebration, and pride.
- Consider financial wellness as a liberatory approach to educating the whole child, particularly in secondary school.
- Partner with community organizations and providers to meet the unique needs and desires of the community.

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