

# A SEAT AT THE TABLE

*Student-Centered Approaches to*

*Engage and Empower*



**CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE-  
SUSTAINING EDUCATION**

*Across  
Learning  
Environments*

# Back to School, Back to Work

*Every September, we teachers come in with full hearts and high expectations for our school year, ready to educate, inspire, and ignite the fire in every student we see.*

We make lesson plans, decorate bulletin boards, and we tell ourselves that this will be the best year yet. Though our intentions are good and our impetus for teaching stems from a place of service, our best laid plans may center around curriculum and systems rather than the students themselves.



*In this session, the TALE Academy invites us to reconsider our approach to culturally responsive and sustaining education.*



We are asked to shift our CRSE techniques from teaching-centered to student-centered and to make these portable across learning environments. Here we are given the opportunity to be open to the possibilities of high expectations, identity-centered learning, and critical thought processes that empower our students with the tools they need to create a more just world for themselves.



## Students know.

When we give a “gimme” quiz or award extra points for arbitrary activities, the message we send is clear: “I don’t expect much from you.” It is only when we challenge students to push past their comfort zones that we convey high value, high expectations, and an understanding that they can and are expected to be their best selves every day.

*We know that as teachers we set the tone in our classrooms.*

*Will we be fun and engaging?  
Will we be stern and strict?  
Is there a way to be all of these at the same time?*



According to the idea of the “warm demander,” there is. In her 2014 book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, author and educator Zaretta Hammond defines the warm demander as a teacher who displays personal warmth toward students while demanding that students pursue high standards for learning. “The teacher provides concrete guidance and support for meeting the standards, particularly corrective feedback, opportunities for information processing, and culturally relevant meaning making.” By using high-warmth and high-demand practices, we cultivate a classroom that is not only effectively managed, but that also produces high academic achievement for students of varying identity markers.

It can be tempting to make excuses for our students and to rationalize their failures as a result of low opportunity, oppression, or poverty. However, when we consciously hold lower expectations out of sympathy for a student’s outside experiences, we do them no favors. Though this type of teacher is compassionate, they are not effective.

**Conversely, the warm demander provides challenges, encourages productive struggle, and instills a growth mindset to support students in reaching their highest potential.**

# Once we set that high bar, our work is still not done.

Now we must ask ourselves how we as teachers can foster the impetus within students to set their own high bar and take that bar with them to college, into their careers, and beyond. Across learning environments, we can leverage the power of peer pressure – the good kind! By providing a space across learning environments that showcases exceptional student work, we provide all students with not only examples of quality work, but also a tangible and proximate goal to work toward. Platforms such as [Artspace](#) and [Artsonia](#) exhibit student images and art. Blog spaces such as [Weebly](#) and [Edublogs](#) host student opinion pieces and writing. Giving students a means to showcase their work gives rise to the self-motivation to do their best work.

The New York State Education Department's *Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework* offers ways that students can contribute to the creation of a culturally responsive-sustaining environments. In addition, check out the infographic below for ways students can set a high bar for their learning.

Students can set their own high bar by...



Drawing upon past learning, prior experiences, and the richness of their cultural background to make meaning of the new concepts and apply learning on an ongoing basis.

Striving and taking pride in producing high-quality work, using feedback to revise work, continuously improve, and set new goals.



Voicing and expressing the need for challenging work and extension activities after achieving a goal.



Promoting the group's success and supporting the participation of everyone in the learning task.

Developing or sustaining the mindset that having high expectations means caring about more than just a grade, but also personal growth and character development.



# Student-Centered Engagement

If we want to start off with enough flexibility to allow for true student-centered engagement, it is important to revisit backward design. In Module 1 – Session 5: *Instructional Planning Across Learning Environments*, we explored the three stages of backward design:

1. *Identify desired results*
2. *Determine acceptable evidence*
3. *Plan learning experiences and instruction*

In backward design, student-centered engagement would be front-loaded as a “desired result” across units of both study and learning environments. It would just always be there as an outcome to remind us that no matter where or what we are teaching, the CRSE objectives listed above are fundamental to engaging, responsive, and sustaining education.



*For more on backwards design, explore tale academy Module 1 - Session 5: Instructional Planning Across Learning Environments*

## 3 PHASES OF BACKWARD DESIGN

IDENTIFY DESIRED RESULTS.

DETERMINE ACCEPTABLE EVIDENCE.

PLAN LEARNING EXPERIENCES & INSTRUCTION.



*START at the END*



If the ultimate goal is to foster our students' sense of self-discipline and high expectations of themselves, we must consider who they are from a whole-identity perspective.

**Centering our students' intersecting identities is key to creating an environment that provides the motivation needed to keep them moving toward their goals.**

*We consider their experiences not as a story to justify their outcomes, but rather as a tool to center their learning around what matters most to them.*

Across learning environments, we can give students access to films that include children who look and act like them. We can provide online peer groups and the space for students to share their identities through getting-to-know-you activities that span in-person, remote, and hybrid learning environments.

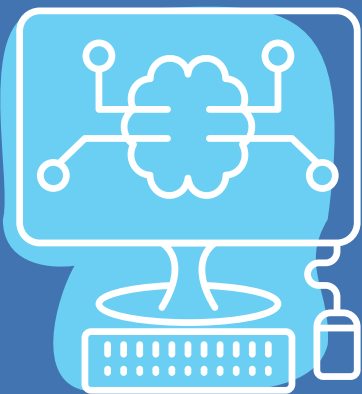
**In addition, students must be able to see themselves – their race, gender, sexual orientation, language, ability, and economic background – in their curriculum, activities, and assessments.**

The NYSED *Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework* suggests that we “highlight resources written and developed by traditionally marginalized voices that offer diverse perspectives on race, culture, language, gender, sexual identity, ability, religion, nationality, migrant/refugee status, socioeconomic status, housing status, and other identities traditionally silenced or omitted from curriculum.”



*In doing so, we develop a sense of ownership and affirmation in our students that lets them know that who they are matters. And when they believe they matter, they believe they will achieve.*





# We Think

Once we have addressed and overcome our personal biases to set high expectations for our students regardless of their backgrounds, cultivated an environment in which our students believe in their abilities, and centered learning around their intersecting identities, we have laid the groundwork for growing young people who are empowered to create a future of equity and justice for themselves and their peers.

*The first step in any discussion of change is the acknowledgment of power and privilege in our society.*

Allowing our students to participate in these critical thought experiments within a safe and supportive environment is akin to putting training wheels on a bike – we slowly and steadily develop the tools that will one day allow our young people to ride off on their own to create the future that matters to them.

In classrooms that are on-campus, remote, or hybrid, our job is to task our students with identifying the issues that power and privilege create, then give them the confidence, knowledge, and skills to dismantle these factors of inequity. Across learning environments, students can bring their own seats to the table by collaboratively writing to legislators or participating in debates with other young people across the country. Our goal as teachers must be to help students create a future not only for themselves, but for all people, regardless of their identity markers.

Consciously and continuously centering students and their experiences is an ongoing task that requires our full diligence and commitment. As teachers, we know that the only way to motivate a student is to get to the heart of their identity and to use that knowledge to ignite the proverbial fire.



*Across all learning environments, we can help our students to be themselves, see themselves, and create for themselves. The task is mighty, but as we have seen over the past few years, New York State educators are always up to the challenge.*

# *Now It's Your Turn!*

In your next workbook activity, you will reflect on two important questions.

What are the high expectations I (will) have for my students?

What culturally responsive-sustaining and student-centered strategies align with these expectations?



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# About Us

## **The TALE Academy**

The TALE Academy is a series of virtual learning experiences available to all New York State educators and offers a rich array of resources on topics related to teaching across learning environments (TALE). The TALE Academy is built upon the work New York State educators carried out during emergency remote teaching (ERT) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and extends it toward the future. TALE invites educators to think beyond online learning to consider a broader perspective on teaching and learning that encompasses teaching across multiple environments (in-person, remote, and hybrid).

## **The Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE) Project**

The TALE Academy is part of a broader New York State Education Department (NYSED) initiative known as Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE). In July 2020, NYSED was awarded funding through the United States Department of Education's Education Stabilization Fund-Rethink K-12 Education Models Grant to implement TRLE – a three-year project to build the capacity of teachers and educational leaders to effectively implement remote/hybrid learning for all students. Launched in the depths of the pandemic, the first phase of the TRLE project focused on getting resources to the field through partnerships with Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and school districts across the state. The second phase, which began in February 2022, focused on aggregating lessons learned and emerging teaching and learning strategies to address a broader field of practice: teaching across learning environments.

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