

Creating Welcoming and Affirming

COMMUNITIES



CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE–SUSTAINING EDUCATION

Across Learning Environments

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“I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

Maya Angelou

BELONGING

Maya Angelou famously said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

This quotation is the perfect concept to root ourselves in this session as we learn more about cultivating welcoming and affirming communities across learning environments. One word that sums up the goal of this culturally responsive-sustaining education (CRSE) principle is belonging. As educators, we want to do our best to make our classrooms – whether physical or virtual – places where students not only feel a sense of belonging, but also feel that they can show up fully as their authentic selves.

In the previous session, we introduced the New York State Education Department (NYSED) Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education (CRSE) Framework and its four principles. In this session, we will take a deeper dive into what welcoming and affirming communities are and how we cultivate them, especially across learning environments.

Before we unpack each of these and consider ways to practically integrate these elements into our everyday practice, let’s examine how one school leader set out to have her school embody these principles.



Gail Joyner-White, former principal of Cross Hill Academy in Yonkers, made a commitment to equity backed by action. In a blog post on Education Trust-New York’s website, we learn how Joyner-White equipped teachers to weave students’ cultures into the lessons in meaningful ways while still maintaining intellectual rigor. Joyner-White also created My Sister’s KeepHer (a young woman’s equivalent to New York’s My Brother’s Keeper program). Joyner-White developed this program at the request of students who called for a counterpart program for young women of color.

4 Elements of a Welcoming and Affirming Community

- Collective responsibility to learn about students’ cultures and communities
- Close relationships with students & families
- Social-emotional learning programs
- Materials that represent and affirm student identities



NYSED Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education (CRSE) Framework

STRATEGIES FOR DESIGNING

Welcoming and Affirming Environments

Just as the Cross Hill Academy leadership and faculty intentionally designed ways to cultivate a welcoming and affirming community, so can we, using the four elements of welcoming and affirming communities outlined in [NYSED's Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education \(CRSE\) Framework](#):

1

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY TO LEARN ABOUT STUDENTS' CULTURES AND COMMUNITIES

Strategy: Proactively reach out to families to gather information about their children's cultures, goals, and learning preferences through surveys, emails, and/or calls



2

CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

Strategy: Establish trust and a rapport with students and families by incorporating opportunities to connect, such as "meet and greet" videos, digital communication, and in-school engagements



3

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAMS

Strategy: Incorporate welcoming routines and welcoming rituals, such as greeting every student at the door and posting an agenda on the board that conveys expectations for the flow of the day



4

MATERIALS THAT REPRESENT AND AFFIRM STUDENT IDENTITIES

Strategy: Present content (literature, current events, articles, etc.) that includes the intersectional identities of students and presents issues that will resonate with students' cultures and interests



Five Statements a Teacher Can Make to Help Students Feel a Sense of Belonging

(adapted from the SchoolCues Blog titled, "[How To Create a Sense of Belonging in the Classroom](#)")

"I'm so glad and excited you're here today!"

This seemingly small but quite impactful statement allows students to feel valued as a person, which creates a deeper connection with you.

"I would love to know what you think about this topic."

This statement lets students know that you value their opinions and ideas, which makes them feel like an important part of your class, and it also encourages future sharing. Bonus points if you're able to ACT on those ideas in some way!

"I'm inspired by what a hard worker you are!"

This statement promotes a growth mindset, as it emphasizes effort over innate ability and makes it clear that you actually notice their efforts, which will enhance their sense of belonging and prompt continued action and perseverance.

"I believe you can be and do anything you want."

This statement helps to give students a healthy boost of confidence in their capacity to excel, and feeling confident in your class will increase the likelihood of their engagement with and ties to your community.

"Thank you for [whatever they have said or done]."

This statement expresses your gratitude for their unique contributions and likely leads to them feeling appreciated and a valued member of the community.

HOW TO GO FROM

Physical to Virtual Classrooms

Because this is the TALE Academy, it's important to examine how we can extend our existing brick-and-mortar classroom environment into a virtual classroom.

Below are questions you can use as prompts when designing a virtual classroom.

Physical Classroom



Floor plan of the room: teachers often designate different areas for different activities

Physical Classroom



Types of seating arrangements: teachers seat students in traditional rows, U-shape, clusters, etc. in order to facilitate certain types of relationships and interactions

Virtual Classroom

What are different ways to re-create diverse physical spaces within digital ones (e.g., do you create "static" digital spaces that students can "enter" and engage in, such as a "reading nook" that shares various reading recommendations or links to digital libraries)?

What are visual ways to signal a virtual classroom (e.g., do you designate certain background colors for certain activities)?

Virtual Classroom

What are the different types of interactions I want my students to have with me and with one another?

What types of "breakout rooms" can I create to promote particular kinds of conversations, relationships, and dynamics, and how can I consider students' cultural backgrounds and personalities when selecting/creating protocols to promote stronger communities (e.g., how can I incorporate a mix of spoken and written communications that will allow students to leverage the traditional ways that their cultures prefer to communicate)?

HOW TO GO FROM

Physical to Virtual Classrooms

Physical Classroom



Decorative, informational, and celebratory visuals on the walls of a classroom: teachers tend to hang up encouraging messages or important reference materials or showcase samples of exemplary student work

Physical Classroom



Classroom routines and rituals: teachers establish a variety of systems and procedures for how to enter and leave the room, how to communicate/participate, how to submit work and/or retrieve missed work, how to greet students, how to prepare for visitors, etc.

Virtual Classroom

What are different ways to create a mood or “vibe” using digital tools (e.g., can I use a variety of fun backgrounds to convey or elicit certain emotions that also provide an opportunity to affirm students’ cultures)?

What are the various reference materials I want to share, and what is the best way to digitally organize these reference materials? For example, is it in digital folders? Is it through hyperlinks on a teacher page/classroom website? Are these docs fixed, or do they allow for student customization?

What are different ways to celebrate student wins and successes, as well as their intersectional identities? For example, is there a digital newsletter that honors a “student of the week” or includes exemplary student work? Do students get to share their pieces orally with other students during class time, etc.?

Virtual Classroom

What are the various routines and rituals you as the teacher should engage in (e.g., greetings, check-ins, conferencing, etc.)?

What are the various routines and rituals your students should engage in (e.g., “room entry/exit” protocols, submission of work, use of sentence starters, etc.)?

What are the ways you can promote positive student-to-student interactions to enhance community?

How can you incorporate more student agency and leadership?

HOW TO GO FROM

Physical to Virtual Classrooms

Physical Classroom



Getting to know you activities: teachers tend to include activities that will allow students to share more about themselves with one another and help to build community

Virtual Classroom

What are the digital equivalents of name tags?

What are some virtual icebreakers that can be included (e.g., people scavenger hunts)?

Now It's Your Turn!



As we conclude Session 2, let's remember that while rules are important, relationships are one of the biggest drivers of student success.

Therefore, we must prioritize cultivating a welcoming and affirming community across learning environments that ensures students not only know they are safe and free to be themselves, but also that they are valued by and connected to a community.

In your next workbook activity, you will consider distinctions in cultivating welcoming and affirming communities in different learning environments. For example, how might showcasing exemplary student work look in an in-person classroom versus a virtual classroom? Let's find out!

Works Cited

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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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