



Second Edition

# Critical Practices for Social Justice Education



Cover illustration by Ellice Weaver

# Introduction

“The treatment of children from communities experiencing systemic oppressions—those at the intersection of race, gender, poverty and geography—will determine the fate of our democracy.” This statement from Learning for Justice Director Jalaya Liles Dunn in the Fall 2022 issue of *Learning for Justice* magazine reminds us to center the needs of young people.

*Critical Practices for Social Justice Education* is a resource to support K-12 educators in growing their understanding of social justice principles and integrating them into their practice. Formerly titled *Critical Practices for Anti-Bias Education*, this revised edition is informed by the current social and political landscape and acknowledges the ways educators have been challenged by increased political scrutiny, censorship and debate about what can be taught in schools.

Despite these challenges, educators across the country have renewed their commitment to inclusive, affirming and equitable education. And educators continue to uplift diverse perspectives to help students develop their understanding of themselves and others. This revised publication seeks to honor and continue the legacy of educators’ leadership in the pursuit of social justice by supporting teachers at every phase in their journey to develop their capacity as change agents.

*Critical Practices for Social Justice Education* is organized into **four pillars**, each representing a foundational aspect of social justice education:

**I. Curriculum and Instruction** helps educators select the content they teach, decide how to teach it, and assess students’ knowledge and skills. By using the strategies in this section, educators can support students’ understanding of justice and their ability to take action.

**II. Culture and Climate** provides educators with practical strategies and resources to create affirming, inclusive classrooms and schools. When students feel safe, seen and valued, they are more open to learning—not just from adults but also from one another.

**III. Leadership** encourages educators and students to continue learning about themselves

and others, including beliefs about identity and the value of diversity. Developing leadership skills helps everyone—educators, students, families and school staff—recognize and dismantle unjust systems.

**IV. Family and Community Engagement** equips educators with ways to build meaningful relationships with students’ parents and caregivers. These relationships can help educators connect students’ home lives to school and draw upon the wisdom of families and communities.

Within each of the four pillars are topics with accompanying strategies. Each topic provides educators with a research-based understanding of a social justice education practice. And each topic aligns with Learning for Justice’s Social Justice Standards, which offer a road map for social justice education from grades K–12 and are organized into four domains: Identity, Diversity, Justice and Action. The strategies within each topic include explanations for ways educators can put the topic into practice. *Critical Practices* Appendix C: Online Supplement provides additional resources for each strategy.

Many of the pillars, topics and strategies in *Critical Practices* overlap. For example, educators who prepare their students for critical conversations on challenging topics may find they need to consider their own and their students’ identities when introducing the topic, to strengthen their classroom culture by co-constructing community agreements, and to facilitate the conversation by developing cooperative learning structures. They may also determine that engaging caregivers and community organizers provides added supports and perspectives that contribute to a more inclusive discussion. We encourage you to consider how the four pillars reinforce one another.

We hope this guide honors the social justice work you are already doing while providing information and tools to further develop your skills as an educator. While every teacher will use this guide differently, *Critical Practices for Social Justice Education* can help educators push back against the status quo and reimagine what’s possible for schools and communities so students may thrive in our diverse democracy.

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# Curriculum & Instruction

## Critical Practices:

- Critical Engagement With Materials
- Supporting All Learners Through Differentiation
- Supporting Student Action
- Cooperative and Collaborative Learning
- Social Justice-Based Assessment, Evaluation and Grading

Educator and author Lee Anne Bell, Ed.D., provides an excellent analysis of social justice in the Learning for Justice article “What Is Social Justice Education?” Bell defines the critical role of social justice education as: “[providing] tools to examine the structural features of oppression and our own socialization within unjust systems. It helps us develop awareness of injustice in our personal lives, communities, institutions and the broader society. Such an education enables us to develop empathy and commitment, as well as skills and tools for acting with others to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in ourselves and the institutions and communities of which we are a part. Understanding the dynamics of oppression is important for developing effective strategies to counteract it.”

That understanding of social justice can inform the selection or development of curriculum (what is taught) and the practice of instruction (how the content is taught). The topics and strategies in this section provide educators with tools to build students’ understanding of justice and help them develop skills to take action and participate in a diverse democracy.

## Critical Engagement With Materials

Critical engagement emphasizes the value of students’ learning, increasing the likelihood that they will use the knowledge and skills they build in the service of their academic, personal, social and political lives. Educators who encourage critical engagement help prepare students to recognize and resist injustice.

Educators must also engage critically with materials. From auditing their curriculum through a lens of inclusivity to selecting materials that resist dominant narratives, educators can model critical engagement by continually interrogating their own work.

## Personal Reflection Activities

Using art, individual conversation, group shares or class discussions, students can engage in personal reflection by connecting to the text, identifying and explaining their emotional reactions to a text, and answering questions such as:

- What events or ideas in the text connect to your personal experiences? (Note: Depending on the content being reflected upon, students may choose to disclose or not disclose personal information. Support them in this inquiry by providing them with space and listening attentively.)
- What inspires or upsets you about the text?
- What questions does the text raise?
- How do you see issues from the text playing out in your school, neighborhood, community or society?
- What do you want to change as a result of your reading?

## Open-Ended and Higher-Order Questions

Higher-order thinking questions promote critical engagement and stimulate discussion. Because they have no single correct answer, open-ended and higher-order questions require students to form and defend an argument by hypothesizing, speculating and sharing ideas. As outlined in “How to Make Your Questions Essential,” available on the ASCD website, teachers can ask students open-ended and higher-order questions throughout a lesson or at the end of a lesson or unit.

The two questions below demonstrate the difference between a closed, lower-order question and an open-ended, higher-order question.

- Which rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights focus on economic issues?
- Which rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are most important? Why?

The first is a closed, lower-order question because there is one right answer and to reach it,



**Connections to Social Justice Standards:** Identity, Diversity, Justice

## Strategies:

1. Personal Reflection Activities
2. Open-Ended and Higher-Order Questions
3. Critical Reading
4. Teaching and Practicing Digital Literacy
5. Critically Surveying the Curriculum



students use basic thinking skills like memory or summary. The second is an open-ended, higher-order question that requires critical analysis of the text to defend a perspective. For more on higher-order thinking skills and for examples of open-ended questions, see “Generating Effective Questions” on the Edutopia website.

In addition, many educators use Bloom’s taxonomy to scaffold questions. However, Bloom’s taxonomy is a theory of assessment, not teaching. Applying Bloom’s incorrectly can have the unintended effect of lowering rigor for students. Instead, Roland Case, Ph.D., executive director and co-founder of The Critical Thinking Consortium and author of the article “Putting Bloom’s Taxonomy to Rest,” recommends that teachers:

- “Adjust the difficulty so that every student engages regularly in ‘higher order’ learning activities.”
- “Appreciate that understanding subject matter is not a ‘lower order’ task that can be transmitted; it requires that students think critically with and about the ideas.”
- “Understand that inviting students to offer reasoned judgments is a more fruitful way

of framing learning tasks than using verbs clustered around levels of thinking that are removed from evaluative judgments.”

### **Critical Reading**

Using strategies like Reading Against the Grain (6-12) or Resistant Reading (K-5), both available from Learning for Justice, can help students identify, question and analyze dominant narratives. Educators can also apply critical reading when selecting materials for their curriculum.

Asking questions like these can also help start the conversation:

*On publishing trends and which texts are designated as literature:*

- Whose stories are most often told? To whom?
- Whose stories are most often missing or left out? Why?
- What are some reasons different stories might receive different kinds of attention or exposure?
- How do you think this text supports or pushes back against these trends or traditions?

*On the role of the reader:*

- What do you think someone very similar to the main character might find most interesting about this text? What might they like or dislike about it?
- What do you think someone very different from the main character might find most interesting about this text? What might they like or dislike about it?
- What character do you most identify with? Why?
- What is something you wish this text included? Why?

*On the role of culture:*

- What critical topics (e.g., race, gender, religion, sexual orientation) does this text address? What can we infer that the author's family, friends and community thought about these topics?
- What critical topics are not addressed in this text?
- Are there any critical topics you thought the text might address that it doesn't?
- Why do you think that's the case?

### **Teaching and Practicing Digital Literacy**

Because students spend more time online than ever before, teaching digital literacy is increasingly urgent. In the LFJ article "Reimagining Digital Literacy Education to Save Ourselves," we define digital literacy as "a holistic approach that cultivates skills that allow people to participate meaningfully in online communities, interpret the changing digital landscape, understand the relationships between systemic -isms and information, and unlock the power of digital tools for good."

Digital literacy can help students recognize and combat hate speech, anti-democratic viewpoints, online disinformation and conspiracy theories. For multilingual students and families, digital literacy is especially important because—as outlined in the *Washington Post* article "Misinformation online is bad in English. But it's far worse in Spanish."—social media companies intervene less often when online misinformation is in languages other than English.

In addition to teaching students digital literacy, educators have a responsibility to use a critical lens when selecting and sharing online information and materials. Educators can analyze the author, the source, why the author created the material and how the author's biases affect the content.

### **Critically Surveying the Curriculum**

Being an effective social justice educator means learning the content—and the history of how it has been taught—from the perspective of historically underrepresented groups. Lorena Germán, author of *Textured Teaching: A Framework for Culturally Sustaining Practices*, explains in the LFJ article "What It Means to Be an Anti-Racist Teacher" that every discipline, including math and science, "has been implicated in the project of racism."

By knowing the history of their discipline, teachers can learn to avoid inflicting violence, as detailed in the LFJ article "Ending Curriculum Violence" by Stephanie P. Jones, Ph.D., and facilitate more inclusive, affirming learning experiences for all students. As noted in the article, curriculum violence doesn't have to be intentional. As Jones explains: "The notion that a curriculum writer's or teacher's intention matters misses the point. Intentionality is not a prerequisite for harmful teaching. Intentionality is also not a prerequisite for racism. ... [Curriculum] violence occurs when educators and curriculum writers have constructed a set of lessons that damage or otherwise adversely affect students intellectually and emotionally."

Educators who wish to critically survey their curriculum can investigate the Culturally Responsive STEAM Curriculum Scorecards—from New York University's Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools—to analyze their yearlong curriculum, a learning plan or even their classroom library. Specific tools such as those found in two of LFJ's publications, *Reading Diversity* and *Supporting LGBTQ+ Young People*, can also help educators assess their texts.

Teachers can also ask the following questions when selecting or curating curricular materials, as educators Lisa P. Stevens and Thomas Bean suggest in the article "Redefining Literacy":

- Who is the author? Why did they create this material?
- Who is represented in the material?
- What groups are absent, not represented or underrepresented?
- Who stands to benefit or be hurt by these materials?
- How do other texts and authors represent the ideas reflected in these materials?



# Supporting All Learners Through Differentiation

Differentiated instruction honors differences between students and highlights diversity as a positive aspect of the learning process. This can be accomplished by adapting strategies to fit individual student abilities, needs, backgrounds, skill levels, talents and learning profiles.

To effectively differentiate instruction, educators must be intentional about the following:

- Learn about your students, their particular needs and preferences, and how to individualize learning for them.
- Plan content and instruction with those differences in mind, rather than adapting after planning.
- Tailor both teaching strategies and student tasks to create an inclusive learning experience for all students in the classroom.

It can be easy to fall into the trap of making assumptions about some groups of students when differentiating instruction. This might look like lowering expectations for multilingual learners or for students who receive special education services. To prevent biased assumptions, teachers can use grading rubrics, provide students with multiple options to show their understanding of a topic and allow students opportunities to reflect on their learning.

This section offers strategies for differentiating content, student products, and the teaching and learning process while remaining responsive and equity focused.

## Scaffolded Activities

Scaffolded activities allow all students to engage with the same material but with different levels of support. Scaffolding ensures that teachers are not unintentionally lowering expectations for some students.

Depending on students' background knowledge or reading skills, scaffolding may look like:

- Providing multiple ways to engage with materials (e.g., printed text, audio readings).
- Developing multiple vocabulary lists.
- Asking a variety of higher-order questions.
- Preparing different student tasks for learning outcomes.

A common question teachers have about scaffolding is how to support multilingual learners. We recommend using Colorín Colorado,

a bilingual website for teachers and families of multilingual learners. They have practical guides for teaching multilingual learners, including “Content Instruction for ELLs.” Many Learning for Justice lessons also include scaffolding ideas for supporting multilingual learners as well as extension activities.

## Making Space for Student Choice

Being a social justice educator means planning for what Geneva Gay, a leading scholar of culturally responsive teaching, calls “multidimensional” teaching: using multiple approaches and perspectives to facilitate learning. This includes intentionally planning for different forms of student engagement and options for students to reach and demonstrate mastery. As outlined in “A Practical Guide to Planning for Intentional Differentiation” from Edutopia, providing students with choices honors students’ diverse ways of thinking and learning.

Teachers can also provide students with options for larger assessments, such as an end-of-unit performance task. For example, C3 Teachers offers a high school Inquiry Design Model that outlines how students can demonstrate their answer to the unit’s big question, “Does it matter who ended slavery?” through an essay, a poster or a detailed outline.

To see student choice in action, the case study “Balancing Student Choice and Needs with Playlists” from The Learning Accelerator serves as an effective example as it provides instruction on how to use a playlist for student choices.

## Use of Technology to Support Differentiation

From interactive whiteboards to tablets that read text aloud, technology can be an effective tool for differentiating instruction. Technology can also be helpful in providing students with synchronous and asynchronous options for learning. And technology can expand options for student communication, engagement and choice.

However, access to technology may not be equal across the district, the school or within the classroom. Providing technological support can help make a classroom more equitable, but expecting that all students have the same skills or access to the same technology can actually reinforce inequity. Carefully consider what technology is available to all students and provide choices for student tasks that allow all students to participate.



**Connections to Social Justice Standards:** Identity, Diversity, Justice

**Strategies:**  
1. Scaffolded Activities  
2. Making Space for Student Choice  
3. Use of Technology to Support Differentiation  
4. Universal Design for Learning

## Universal Design for Learning

By applying Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a research-based framework, educators can support all of their students by designing curricula and instructional practices through an equity lens. UDL asks teachers to provide students with multiple options for engagement, representation, action and expression to meet their learning goals. As noted in the LFJ article “Disability Is Diversity,” focusing on changing the learning environment, instead of the learner, opens up thinking about accessible learning practices that can benefit all students.

## Supporting Student Action

Students have a long history of leading social movements in our country, from the Birmingham Children’s March in 1963, one of the most celebrated and effective marches in U.S. civil rights history, to fighting for environmental justice and ridding their schools of Confederate icons.

Educators play a valuable role as adult allies to youth organizing for social justice. Teaching with the Learning for Justice Social Justice Standards, for example, helps students develop as leaders and change agents.

## Honoring Students’ Experience and Wisdom

When teachers use students’ lived experiences as the starting point for curriculum and instruction, they affirm students’ identities. In turn, when students have a strong sense of self, they are more likely to respect diversity of experience and to care about injustice in their communities and beyond. The Social Justice Standards can help educators identify grade-level appropriate outcomes for supporting students in their learning about identity.

Recognizing—and helping students to understand—how intersecting identities can function to compound injustice or to add pressure to separate aspects of one’s experiences is also essential in honoring students’ multiple identities. For example, in the LFJ article “Confronting Ableism on the Way to Justice,” disability rights activist Keith Jones explains: “But the fact that I have race and disability at play is often overlooked, as though parts of my identity should be siloed when focusing on other parts. And the times all my identities are recognized, they compound one another in society’s biased view of both my race and disability.”

## Connecting to Current Events and Real-World Issues

Asking students to connect what they are learning to what’s happening in the news and in their communities encourages them to draw comparisons, predict outcomes and identify differences. For example, analyzing statistics or other data can help students assign greater meaning to contemporary social trends. Reading primary source news clips or articles can help them connect contemporary or historical texts to current events.

Understanding the historical context of a current event requires students to trace the long-term effects of policies, attitudes, challenges and movements. Using content as a lens for understanding the world, past and present, helps students explore issues of injustice and embrace opportunities for justice and equity—information that can be found in LFJ’s “Digging Deep Into the Social Justice Standards: Justice.” Regardless of content area, making classroom connections to real-world issues promotes deeper engagement and more authentic learning outcomes.

## Project-Based Learning

Educators can implement the Social Justice Standards through project-based learning. Because of its focus on open-ended inquiry, as detailed in “Exploring Social Justice Issues Through PBL,” published by Edutopia, project-based learning intersects with social justice education by helping students explore themes of identity, diversity, justice and action through a classroom unit of study or a curricular learning plan, for example.

Edutopia and PBL Works are two websites that can help educators implement project-based learning.

## Positioning Students as Agents of Change

Educators can work in solidarity with students against injustice, equipping them with knowledge, skills and networks and supporting them in achieving their demands, as described in the LFJ article “Existence Is Resistance: Supporting Student-Led Social Change.” By positioning students as leaders, educators can promote civic and community education and help students develop social emotional skills like empathy, collaboration, communication, planning, problem-solving and working across lines of difference.



### Connections to Social Justice Standards:

Identity, Diversity, Justice, Action

### Strategies:

1. Honoring Students’ Experience and Wisdom
2. Connecting to Current Events and Real-World Issues
3. Project-Based Learning
4. Positioning Students as Agents of Change

# Cooperative and Collaborative Learning

Effective collaborative learning requires planning to avoid existing racial, gender, socio-economic, linguistic, academic or other divisions within the classroom.

Responsive collaborative learning might look like:

- Planning projects that require a broad range of skills, including artistic, theatrical, interpersonal, bilingual or community-awareness skills that don't necessarily correlate with academic achievement.
- Grouping students to bring together different demographics, skills, abilities and needs.
- Requiring groups to solicit and synthesize or compare and contrast the perspectives of all team members, and providing multiple response methods.

Educators can also focus on social justice and action by using cooperative and collaborative learning to structure dialogue around topics such as race and racism. Although most of the strategies included in this section are geared toward working with K-12 students, they can be modified to work with adults in professional learning communities, higher education settings or community groups.

## Cooperative Learning Roles

Cooperative learning promotes interdependence and requires meaningful participation as students work together toward a shared goal. Asking students to select their own learning role can help ensure individual and group accountability for what is accomplished, while also providing students with an opportunity to use their strengths.

Defining clear roles in group work can also support students in collaborating effectively and help democratize group work (see group work resources in Appendix C: Online Supplement). To learn more about setting up student roles, read “The Power of Protocols for Equity” by Zaretta Hammond, author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*.

## Collaboration Between In-Person and Remote Learners

Finding ways for students learning remotely to collaborate with students attending school in-person builds a sense of community; students who are at home feel less isolated and get to experience being part of a class. Using programs that require minimal internet, as detailed in

the Edutopia video “Making a Shared Space for In-Person and Remote Learners,” ensures that all remote learners have access to participate fully. Teachers facilitating remote learning should carefully consider whether their practices reduce or increase harm to students (see Appendix C: Online Supplement for further information).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, remote learning became the norm across the country. Many educators wrestled with their camera policies: Should they require students to turn on their cameras during virtual classes?

Learning for Justice recommends a camera-optional policy for several reasons:

- Having cameras on is not necessary for collaborative or cooperative learning.
- Having cameras off requires less internet bandwidth.
- Keeping the policy flexible allows students and families privacy in their homes.
- There have been instances where a cameras-on policy has caused harm.

If you feel you must use cameras, ask yourself why. In instances where the rationale is to monitor students' behavior instead of supporting learning goals, consider offering a camera-optional space. A camera-optional policy can mitigate potential harms for students that aren't always obvious.

## Jigsaw

Jigsaw is a flexible teaching strategy that fosters collaboration and cooperative learning. In Jigsaw, each student is a member of two groups: a home group and an expert group. Each home group member is assigned a different topic from a reading (no two students in the same home group have the same topic). Students then leave their home group and discuss their assigned topic with the other students assigned to the same topic (their expert group). Once the students have become “experts” in their particular topic by exchanging ideas and hearing multiple perspectives, they return to their home groups to share what they have learned. All students thereby benefit from the expertise their groupmates developed while away from “home.”

For an example of how to put Jigsaw into action, see the LFJ Racial Disparities Jigsaw Mini-Unit classroom resource.

## Value Lines

In this after-reading activity, students take a stance on a topic related to a text or other



**Connections to Social Justice Standards:**  
Identity, Diversity

### Strategies:

1. Cooperative Learning Roles
2. Collaboration Between In-Person and Remote Learners
3. Jigsaw
4. Value Lines
5. *Let's Talk!*



material and then listen while classmates explain their stances. The LFJ Value Lines teaching strategy (see Appendix C: Online Supplement) is designed to engage students in questioning the text and deepening their comprehension through observing and listening to others. The strategy incorporates movement, which can enhance student interaction, participation and understanding. By building in the opportunity to change one's stance, students see that personal positions and perspectives on the text evolve as their comprehension increases.

### ***Let's Talk!***

Educators play a crucial role in helping students communicate openly about the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of social inequality and discrimination. Learning how to discuss topics such as white privilege, police violence, economic inequality and mass incarceration requires practice, and facilitating critical conversations with students demands courage and skill.

The LFJ *Let's Talk!* guide offers classroom-ready strategies that can be used to plan discussions and facilitate conversations with students to support their collaborative and cooperative social justice learning.

## **Social Justice-Based Assessment, Evaluation and Grading**

Assessment and grading are among the most direct ways educators let students know what they value. Thoughtful assessment and grading policies can mitigate academic differences based on gender, home language, experience, socio-economic status or ability. For example, teachers who value equal opportunity for all students can support multilingual learners by distinguishing their assessment of analytical skills from their assessment of language proficiency. This may mean differentiating the student work product or adjusting assessment methods to focus more on content rather than on language proficiency.

Assessment systems can promote success for all, or they can foster competition. Ask yourself: Does your grading policy prioritize the skills students need to collaborate across differences? Or does it privilege individual achievement and label collaboration as “cheating”?

The strategies in this section emphasize and encourage collaboration, authentic engagement and equal opportunity for all students.

## Student Self-Assessments

Giving students the opportunity to assess their own work builds their metacognitive skills and facilitates independent learning. In addition, self-assessments have the added benefit of asking students to reflect on their journey of learning rather than focus on their grades.

Teachers can support students by facilitating discussions in which students determine what questions to ask about their learning and how to self-assess their work. Educators and other students can also provide regular feedback to their classmates to help them continually evaluate and reflect on their work.

## Scoring Guides and Rubrics

Rubrics and scoring guides that define performance at all levels support student learning by making performance expectations clear and reducing subjectivity in grading practices. They can also be used to describe social justice-based expectations for students, such as working respectfully with peers or including multiple points of view in their writing. In addition, using a rubric or other scoring method that evaluates each student's performance individually helps educators "lose the curve" and move away from comparing students to one another.

## Assessment of Process and Product

The purpose of assessments is to help educators understand what students have learned. However, as the ASCD article "Confronting Inequity/Assessment for Equity" indicates, assessments are often used to track and sort students, replicating inequities. Expanding assessments to include an evaluation of both what and how students learn can counter the harmful effects of assessments and tracking. In addition, Edutopia's "How to Help Students Focus on What They're Learning, Not the Grade" reveals that this practice emphasizes that learning, rather than grades, is the relevant outcome of completing a lesson plan.

For example, to assess the skills and knowledge students are learning in addition to the final graded outcome, teachers could ask students to turn in an end-of-unit reflection on how they applied their learning in the performance task. Students could write a response to a reflective question, engage in a one-on-one conversation with the teacher, or even record their reaction through a free program like Flip (formerly Flipgrid), which allows students to share reflections and respond to classmates in video or writing.

## Allowing Multiple Ways for Students to Show Understanding

When educators provide students with multiple options to demonstrate their understanding of the content, they honor the diverse strengths and interests represented in their classrooms.

While it is common to use practice versions of standardized tests as assessments, remember that standardized testing contains rampant examples of bias. Providing other ways for students to show mastery can mitigate these biases while allowing students to showcase their strengths and interests in other formats.

Providing student choice through different approaches to assessment might look like:

- Doing informal checks for understanding by asking students to write in a group chat, annotate a text or verbally respond to a question.
- Creating opportunities to respond to essential questions through writing, oral presentations or student-created art.
- Assigning a menu of end-of-unit performance tasks, such as writing poetry, performing a song, recording a podcast, writing an essay or preparing a presentation.

## Centering Student Well-Being While Grading

When external factors disrupt students' learning or add undue stress to their emotional well-being (for example, extreme weather events, pandemics, or violence or hate incidents in the community), approach grading with flexibility. Traditional grading practices can exacerbate inequities and ignore disruptive circumstances, as explained by *Education Week* in the article "Should Schools Be Giving So Many Failing Grades This Year?" which addressed the effects of remote learning in 2020 prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Focusing on providing feedback rather than grades and allowing students multiple ways to show their understanding of a topic can help counter grading inequity.



**Connections to Social Justice Standards:** Identity, Diversity, Justice

### Strategies:

1. Student Self-Assessments
2. Scoring Guides and Rubrics
3. Assessment of Process and Product
4. Allowing Multiple Ways for Students to Show Understanding
5. Centering Student Well-Being While Grading

# Culture and Climate

## Critical Practices:

- Social and Emotional Support
- Centering Student Experiences
- Shared Inquiry and Critical Conversations
- Social Justice-Based Community Facilitation

“To feel safe and to feel seen. To feel valued and capable of growth. These are simple concepts—basic pillars of student achievement and the results of good pedagogy.” These opening words from Learning for Justice’s guide to support LGBTQ+ young people capture the importance of school culture and climate on the learning and well-being of students.

School culture usually refers to the physical and social environment of a school and its values as expressed through curricula and practice. Culture influences decisions and actions, and the way things are done at school shapes the feelings and experiences of learners and educators, affecting the overall climate of the school.

## Social and Emotional Support

Research shows that students need to feel physically and emotionally supported to learn, but culture, climate and social emotional learning must focus on more than just empathy, kindness and inclusion. Skilled social justice educators know this and respond by fostering authentic safety and trust in their classrooms and schools. Doing this effectively requires educators to directly address social differences and biases, two factors that underlie many unsafe and exclusionary behaviors. Intellectual safety is another important consideration; building a community of trust allows students to feel confident as they engage with complex and difficult ideas.

Educators who nurture social and emotional safety in the classroom also model the behavior necessary to maintain inclusive, respectful connections across lines of difference. This is especially powerful when teaching about relationship-building, conflict management and community.

An important note on the term *safety*: Safety looks and feels different for every student.

It is therefore important to get to know your students as individuals and adjust your climate and culture work accordingly. Working toward braver and safer spaces must be an ongoing and consistent practice to make schools a space where all students can learn and thrive.

## Fostering “Safe-r” and “Brave-r” Spaces

Because safety means different things to different students, it is impossible to promise that a space will always be 100% safe. Consider aiming to establish a “safe-r” or “brave-r” space, building upon what educators Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens outline in the article “From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces.” Fostering safer and braver spaces (the difference between the two spaces is highlighted in “Do We Need Safe or Brave Spaces?” featured on the Break Away Blog) in our classroom community will help prepare students to participate and interact more authentically with one another during conversations around race, power, privilege and other social justice issues.

The LFJ article “Solidarity as Social and Emotional Safety” provides an example of recognizing the need for emotional safety in the classroom and a model of partnership with community organizers that emphasizes mutual aid, restorative justice and safety by design.

## Addressing Positionality, Difference and Bias

The bravest classrooms acknowledge positionality, difference and bias. When educators and students understand how their social identities relate to power and privilege, they can use their positionality to better inform conversations around equity and justice.

Many effective anti-bullying and community-building curricula give educators ways to address difference and bias with their students in safe and supportive ways. When integrated into the academic curriculum, the coursework can build social emotional skills and teach students to manage conflict. When students’ multiple



**Connections to Social Justice Standards:**  
Identity, Diversity

**Strategies:**  
1. Fostering “Safe-r” and “Brave-r” Spaces  
2. Addressing Positionality, Difference and Bias  
3. Supporting Intellectual Safety  
4. Honoring Student Input, Disclosure and Feedback



identities are seen, they will feel safer speaking up and engaging in the classroom community.

The following resources from LFJ may be useful to help address positionality, difference and bias with your students:

- Analyzing Bias Through Digital Literacy lesson
- *Supporting LGBTQ+ Young People* (forthcoming from LFJ)
- Bullying & Bias resources
- *Let's Talk!* guide
- *Reading Diversity*
- *Responding to Hate and Bias at School*
- Lessons from the film *Bibi*:
  - *Bibi Lesson 1: What Makes Us Who We Are?*
  - *Bibi Lesson 2: Intersectionality in Bibi*
  - *Bibi Lesson 3: The Power of Letter Writing: Enhancing Communication and Understanding*

### **Supporting Intellectual Safety**

An important aspect of social and emotional support is intellectual safety: an environment where students can be vulnerable, where their experiences are valued and where they can be

challenged to expand their worldview. When educators create an intellectually braver space, students develop the ability to share their stories and learn from other perspectives. Students can also take risks in their own learning.

In an intellectually safe classroom, students:

- Trust the teacher and one another.
- Are empowered to value their own identities, their communities and the knowledge they bring with them to school.
- Appreciate multiple perspectives and value disagreement that pushes the dialogue forward.
- Feel brave enough to take risks, share out and be challenged.

To create an intellectually safe space, teachers can start the year by asking students to co-construct a classroom contract. A classroom contract provides a common reference point throughout the year, creating a space for open dialogue and predetermining how the class will respond if conflict arises.

LJF's Classroom Constitution provides a specific example of contracting that you can build on. Additionally, Facing History and Ourselves provides a contracting resource that offers more general strategy for creating your classroom agreements (see Appendix C: Online Supplement).

### **Honoring Student Input, Disclosure and Feedback**

Social and emotional support can only exist when student input, disclosure and feedback are honored. Checking in with students on a regular basis about their wants and needs is one way to ensure the community is rooted in true collaboration between adults and young people. For example, educators can take a “temperature” check of their classroom before they begin a lesson, asking how their students are feeling. This could look like asking students to share an emoji or rate their readiness on a scale of one to five (one being tired, five being ready to learn).

Educators should also acknowledge that students will have varying levels of comfort with the information they hear and disclose during classroom conversations. If students choose not to disclose sensitive information, their choice should be honored. For example, students who come out to you as members of the LGBTQ+ community or immigrant students who share their families' undocumented status with you should never be pressured to disclose those parts of their stories in class.

Teachers can also support students' comfort and honor their perspectives by:

- Providing different modalities for them to share personal information.
- Regularly asking for student input on teaching practices.
- Transparently using student perspectives to shape future lessons and conversations.

These practices show students how you value their ideas and center their perspectives.

One way teachers can honor student input, disclosure and feedback is to provide multiple avenues for participation. Some students may feel safer writing their responses while others choose to share verbally; their preferences could change based on the topic. Regardless of what they decide to disclose and how they choose to disclose it, be sure to thank them for sharing their feelings or identities with you. However, when recognizing students who are sharing sensitive information with the class, remember

to be conscious of not overemphasizing their “bravery” to the whole group, as this can send an unintentional message that those who choose not to share are not being “brave enough.”

Additionally, educators should periodically ask for student feedback around projects, lessons or routines to learn what is working for them and what might need to be adjusted moving forward. This can be done through an anonymous survey, having two students share out two things they like and one thing they would like to adjust, or a student-led discussion. When students have agency over their learning and can give input regarding the classroom environment, they feel more seen, heard and valued, contributing to greater engagement and a better overall learning experience.

## **Centering Student Experiences**

When asking students to explore issues of personal and social identity, teachers must help establish braver spaces where students are seen, valued, cared for, respected, and have opportunities to learn from one another's experiences and perspectives. Teachers can show they value students' lives and identities in a variety of ways. Some are small, like taking the time to learn the proper pronunciation of each student's name, respecting their pronouns and learning about their families. Others require more time and investment, like building a curriculum around personal narratives or incorporating identity-based responses into the study of texts.

At the community level, it is important to understand neighborhood demographics, strengths, concerns, conflicts and challenges. Like students themselves, these dynamics may change frequently and affect how students engage with learning materials.

By embodying the following mindsets, educators can show students that their experiences are central to the learning process:

- An asset-based view of youth and identity groups.
- A commitment to avoiding and challenging stereotypes.
- A sense of openness and cultural humility.
- A willingness to let students define their own identities.

Remember: Perfection is not expected, grace is appreciated, and effort matters. Being open



to learning and unlearning as you center your students' experiences is key to upholding the type of culture and climate that allows them to thrive.

### Defining and Expressing Identities

Students can define and share their identities through an identity chart or an identity map exercise like the one created for the film *Bibi* (see Appendix C: Online Supplement). Once students have defined their identities, teachers can then create space for students to share their stories. Whether it is sharing a family or personal history or discussing their responses to a prompt, this activity allows students to learn how to honor one another's identities and lived experiences.

### Decentralizing Dominant Identities in School Spaces

How you choose to design and decorate your classroom sends a message to your students about your values. Decentralizing dominant identities and making thoughtful, inclusive choices about bulletin boards, posters, book displays, etc., are effective ways to ensure all students' identities and experiences are reflected. The LFJ article "I Start the Year With Nothing" provides insight into the importance of classroom decoration and design.

A nonjudgmental audit of classroom decor involves interpreting the messages conveyed by the images on the walls and the books on the shelves. Teachers can audit their classrooms or invite others in to "read" the implicit and explicit messages sent by the decor and the arrangement of the classroom.

Auditors ask questions like:

- Which identities can students *see* when they walk into my classroom? Which are absent? What message does that send?
- Which identities can students *read about* when they look through my class library? Which are absent?
- How do the materials in my classroom reflect my students' identities? Are all my students represented? Are they all represented in similar, equitable ways?
- What first impressions are given when entering my classroom? Who would feel welcomed in this space? Who might feel uncomfortable here? Why?

Depending on the answers to these questions, adding posters, texts and other visuals can signal to your students that their experiences are important in your classroom community.

This same "reading" process can be applied to auditing the messages conveyed by the arrangement of materials and furniture or the seating chart (if applicable). An auditor of the classroom setup might ask:

- What does the arrangement of the room say about how I view my power as a teacher?
- What does the room arrangement say about how I view my students' autonomy? Are all areas of the room and all materials accessible to all students? Are different spaces clearly defined and easy to maneuver between?
- What does the room arrangement say about how I view collaboration? Is there a designated space for students to come together and problem-solve or hold class meetings? How is my classroom a student-centered space?
- What does the arrangement of students say about how I view identity? Do I encourage students to collaborate with those whose identities differ from their own? Do I divide students by gender when asking them to line up or take their seats? Would a trans or nonbinary student feel included in my classroom?

Based on your responses to the questions, adjust your classroom setup to foster student collaboration, agency and learning across lines of ability, race, gender, ethnicity, religion and more.

### Decentralizing Dominant Identities in Curricula

Just as decentralizing dominant identities in the classroom is important, the same is true of curriculum. Choosing texts that reflect classroom demographics and following the readings with discussions or reflective writing assignments can provide teachers with powerful information about their students' hopes, concerns, strengths and life circumstances.

When looking for texts, try to find what renowned educator Rudine Sims Bishop, Ph.D., refers to as "mirrors and windows" for your students. Mirror texts reflect students' own experiences and identities. Window texts offer them insight into experiences and identities that differ from their own. Encourage students to find ways to convert windows into "sliding glass doors," seeking out opportunities to engage more actively with people who are different from themselves.

These practices open channels of understanding among students. Successful conversations about issues of identity frequently lead to deeper dialogue about students' own backgrounds and the experiences of others.



**Connections to Social Justice Standards:** Identity, Diversity, Action

#### Strategies:

1. Defining and Expressing Identities
2. Decentralizing Dominant Identities in School Spaces
3. Decentralizing Dominant Identities in Curricula
4. Avoiding and Challenging Stereotypes



As you plan to diversify your curricula, be sure to avoid falling into the “heroes and holidays” trap. Examples of this include teaching about Black history only during Black History Month or teaching about Native and Indigenous peoples in a stereotypical manner that treats them solely as historical figures. Focus on including multiple perspectives—including modern perspectives—within each unit and across the year. More information related to *Beyond Heroes and Holidays* from Teaching for Change is listed in Appendix C: Online Supplement.

### **Avoiding and Challenging Stereotypes**

Teachers and students enter the classroom with implicit biases: ideas about groups of people that create stereotypes based on false or limited information. Often, these stereotypes are so common that people do not challenge them. However, to effectively engage in social justice practices, it’s important that educators not only avoid stereotyping but challenge these preconceptions when they arise.

Avoiding or challenging a stereotype might look like:

- Cultivating awareness of one’s own biases. This includes considering the deficit views teachers may have about multilingual

students, students of color, students with disabilities or students from low-income households. Teachers sometimes hold the beliefs that these groups of students are less capable or that their families do not care about their education. These are false assumptions that lead to a lower-quality educational experience for these students. Upon recognizing these biases, teachers can establish high expectations for all students and provide extra support where necessary.

- Working to increase empathy among students. Include activities that increase empathy, encourage civic action and promote intergroup engagement. Stereotypes become less powerful the more exposure students have to people whose identities differ from their own.
- Checking your language. Be aware of and avoid all generalizing or essentializing language. For example, it is common for educators to use gendered language that implies generalizations about “boys” and “girls” or to use the word *guys* when getting the attention of the entire class.
- Being aware of stereotypes students express. Instead of administering quick punishments, challenge stereotypes with questions or dialogue that fosters learning.

# Shared Inquiry and Critical Conversations

Differences shape who we are and what we know. History, society and power cannot be understood from a single perspective; we need multiple viewpoints to truly see the world. Because of this, inclusive classrooms must function as learning communities built on shared inquiry and critical conversations.

Critical conversations are a form of dialogue in which people engage in discussions around difficult topics. They are different from debates, in which someone wins and someone loses. Critical conversations require openness to new ideas and collective learning. This is not an easy practice; for students and teachers to engage in critical conversations, they must build and exercise specific skills:

- *Listening.* Deeply hearing what others say and the feelings, experiences and wisdom behind what they say.
- *Humility.* Recognizing that, however passionately we hold ideas and opinions, other people may hold pieces of the puzzle that we don't.
- *Respect.* Trusting the integrity of others, believing they have the right to their opinions (even when different from your own) and valuing others enough to risk sharing ideas.
- *Trust.* Building a safer, braver space to explore new ideas and work through conflicts, controversy and painful moments that may arise when talking about issues of injustice and oppression.
- *Advocacy.* Speaking the truth as we see it and asking questions about things we don't know or understand, particularly on topics related to identity, power and justice.

## Naming Shared Inquiry and Ongoing Learning

It is important for teachers to create a safer classroom environment before asking students to engage in this work. Classrooms are safer when students have the opportunity to discuss principles of engagement and co-create discussion agreements. Many social emotional support strategies commonly taught in schools can also help establish a foundation for inquiry.

However, new experiences arise, new research informs moments of unlearning, and everyone in the classroom is human. Students and educators alike should understand that social justice learning is an ongoing process. When committed to learning together, the entire classroom

community can engage in more fruitful conversations about critical issues.

## Let's Talk! Critical Conversations and Dialogue

Critical conversations are any discussions about the ways that injustice affects our lives and our society. They are conversations that explore the relationships between identity and power, trace structures that privilege some at the expense of others, and help students think through the actions they can take to create a more just, equitable world.

Most students want to talk about these issues. They recognize the injustice inherent in racism, gender bias, ableism, anti-immigrant sentiment, religious and anti-LGBTQ+ bias, and more—and they see how these prejudices harm people every day. LfJ's *Let's Talk!* guide includes strategies and resources to help educators facilitate these discussions confidently and skillfully, from kindergarten to high school. The guide includes how to set up and prepare for the conversation, what to do during the conversation, and how to follow up.

## Foundations for Student Advocacy and Civic Engagement

Research shows that democratic classrooms, classrooms in which students have agency and can take ownership of their experience, are more effective for learning. In a democratic classroom, students feel more comfortable sharing their opinions and listening to other perspectives. Students who participate in democratic classrooms will be better prepared to take active roles in their wider school communities and beyond.

Teachers who center student perspectives in their practice believe in the importance of student agency. Students are more likely to advocate and engage with their peers and community if they are taught to:

- Interrogate multiple viewpoints.
- Make differences visible.
- Examine competing narratives.
- Produce counternarratives to dominant discourses.

In classrooms where teachers honor student perspectives, there is an increase in engagement, ownership of learning and social confidence. Students see their teacher as someone who respects them and is on their side, which can motivate them to work to improve their skills and expand their knowledge.



**Connections to Social Justice Standards:** Identity, Diversity, Action

**Strategies:**  
1. Naming Shared Inquiry and Ongoing Learning  
2. *Let's Talk!* Critical Conversations and Dialogue  
3. Foundations for Student Advocacy and Civic Engagement

Honoring student perspectives might look like:

- Co-constructing the teaching and learning that happens in the classroom.
- Taking students' knowledge, culture and interests seriously.
- Engaging in ongoing conversations and deliberations with students about the classroom environment and content.
- Prioritizing inquiry-based approaches to learning.

Practices such as using inquiry-based projects that center student questions and interests, allowing students to help develop classroom agreements, and facilitating democratic classroom discussions show students that their perspectives are important to the classroom community. This level of advocacy and engagement in the classroom will also help set students up for community activism.

Learn more about student advocacy with LFJ's online course *Youth in Front*, designed to promote student-led perspectives in civic engagement, at [learningforjustice.org](http://learningforjustice.org).

## Social Justice-Based Community Facilitation

Behavior management grounded in social justice principles creates connections rather than divisions. Learning for Justice provides a toolkit for educators to promote these principles in "Reframing Classroom Management."

Shifting to a more equity-based behavior management approach might look different in each classroom, but the following suggestions offer a good starting point:

- *Understanding and distinguishing behavior.* All behavior is communication aimed at meeting a need. While disruptive behavior may not be an appropriate way for a student to get their needs met, they engage in it because, on some level, it works for them. Determining the function of a behavior is essential in developing a response or intervention.
- *Rethinking control and power dynamics.* Reframing classroom facilitation requires an understanding of what is realistic to expect of a student. Our expectations should be based on what we know of their personal circumstances, the message their behavior sends and their developmental level. Research indicates that excessive control on the part of educators undermines student motivation and development and creates reluctant compliance

instead of the excitement that comes from self-determination.

- *Be proactive, not reactive.* Proactive classroom culture calls for preventative steps, such as building relationships and fostering engagement, instead of reactive steps, like meting out punishment after misbehavior occurs. Simple strategies such as greeting students outside your classroom, for instance, can have profound effects on behavior. Many of the strategies in *Critical Practices* are examples of proactive practices that establish strong teacher-student relationships.

### Restorative Practices

Restorative practices emphasize repairing harm and restoring relationships rather than simply punishing those who have engaged in misconduct. Restorative justice spans a wide variety of practices and strategies, including peacemaking circles, peer jury processes, mediation, conferencing and classroom discussions focused on building empathy.

To learn more about restorative practices, please check out the following LFJ resources:

- *Transforming School Discipline* (forthcoming from LFJ)
- "Healing Through Restoration and Transformation"
- "Toolkit: Restorative Circles"
- "Toolkit: The Foundations of Restorative Justice"

Information on additional resources, such as those from the International Institute for Restorative Practices, can be found in Appendix C: Online Supplement.

Note that without proper training and preparation, restorative justice can perpetuate harm between students. Implementing restorative justice practices is a specific skill that requires professional development and ongoing support.

### Zero Indifference, Not Zero Tolerance

Evidence demonstrates that zero tolerance policies, though popular, do not make schools safer and fuel the school-to-prison pipeline. An alternative—recommended by organizations including the American Civil Liberties Union, GLSEN and the Respect for All Project—is taking a zero-indifference approach to bullying, harassment and other disciplinary issues.

Zero indifference means never letting disrespectful conduct go unaddressed;



**Connections to Social Justice Standards:**  
Justice, Action

**Strategies:**  
1. Restorative Practices  
2. Zero Indifference, Not Zero Tolerance  
3. Classroom Community Facilitation  
4. Schoolwide Community Facilitation

educators always name and respond to behaviors, but they do not implement automatic punishments. For recommendations for addressing biased language, see pages 18-23 in the LFJ guide *Speak Up at School* (the Leadership section of *Critical Practices* offers more information on our *Speak Up* resource).

the school is overly rigid or claims to be race neutral and does not honor student identity. Giving students a seat at the table leads to school policies that are more adaptable and responsive to students of all backgrounds and abilities, which allows young people to feel seen, heard and valued at an institutional level.

### **Classroom Community Facilitation**

One way to be proactive about social justice facilitation is to establish classroom roles for your students. Many daily tasks can be done by students, who, given the opportunity, may create new and interesting ways to approach them. Real-world lessons related to work and responsibility can be reinforced in a classroom. Students can apply for a position and be rewarded or promoted for a job well done; positions might also be distributed as a way to indicate that a student shows a particular kind of potential.

Classroom jobs can include passing out materials, documenting or taking notes, managing a classroom library, assigning team leaders for group work, serving as the technology assistant, or helping with a bulletin board. The job of peacemaker can work nicely in classrooms where students have been trained in conflict resolution.

Giving students ownership over daily classroom procedures, as Edutopia recommends in the article “New Class Roles: Building Environments of Cooperation,” can help shape a community in which social justice initiatives thrive. You may choose to incorporate an agreement around student roles and responsibilities to signify the value of student participation and facilitation in your braver space classroom community.

### **Schoolwide Community Facilitation**

Students can not only participate in classroom facilitation but also play a role in schoolwide community facilitation. Schools that prioritize building relationships and community view students as human beings with agency. Therefore, if students are speaking out against the dress code policy, for example, administrators should provide space to listen to their concerns and work together to reconstruct the policy in a way that integrates those concerns. (LFJ has a number of resources about the underlying issues in dress codes and other policies; see Appendix C: Online Supplement.)

When students act out against school policies, it is often not due to an individual child’s misbehavior but rather because the culture of

# Leadership

## Critical Practices:

- Self-Awareness and Cultural Competency
- Creating and Upholding Just Systems
- Collaboration and Building Alliances
- Student Leadership

As advocates for social justice, educators shape curriculum and demonstrate leadership inside and outside the classroom. This means discussing social justice education with colleagues, school leaders, parents and caregivers, and community partners. These discussions can benefit not only students but also families, the larger community and the education profession.

## Self-Awareness and Cultural Competency

Cultural competency—the ability to work effectively and sensitively across cultural contexts—involves learning, communicating and connecting respectfully with others regardless of differences. Culture can refer to an individual’s race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, immigration status, disability and age, among other things. All these factors strongly influence people’s lives and experiences.

Regardless of their background or identities, effective social justice educators bring both cultural understanding and self-awareness to their work. The process of building this understanding and awareness includes several key commitments:

- Seeing diversity as a strength and an opportunity rather than as an issue or problem.
- Asking how issues of similarity, difference and power affect relationships with colleagues, students and families.
- Understanding how identities, including experiences of privilege and marginalization, shape how we see one another and the world.
- Developing skills and attitudes that bridge cultural differences, such as empathy, flexibility, listening without judgment, appreciation for multiple cultural perspectives and cross-cultural communication.
- Committing to ongoing learning and engaging in relevant professional development, dialogue, study and personal reflection.

- Understanding how sharing life experiences can help build relationships with students and enhance the curriculum.

Many educators work in schools and communities with changing demographics. Commitment to cultural competency, therefore, requires ongoing effort, reflection and personal humility.

## Self-Assessment

A number of cultural competency self-assessments exist, including one offered by the Georgetown University National Center for Cultural Competence (see Appendix C: Online Supplement). Most include either self-reflection questions or checklists of indicators related to culturally competent practices against which teachers or organizations can measure their work. These tools can be used for personal learning and group discussion.

## Ongoing Reflection and Learning

Journaling regularly is an effective reflection and self-discovery practice. Journals help capture evolving thoughts on social justice content as well as classroom or school dynamics related to identity and diversity. They also offer an opportunity to record and reflect on personal experiences related to social justice teaching and relevant insights from discussion groups and training sessions.

Helpful reflection prompts include:

- Who am I? What are my identities? How do they relate to power and privilege? How do they show up in my classroom?
- How can I use my life experiences to build relationships with students and improve my curriculum and teaching?
- How do issues of similarity, difference and power affect my interactions with colleagues, students and families?
- How would I describe my own educational experience? How does that affect the way that I teach? What messages does that send to my students?



**Connections to Social Justice Standards:**  
Identity, Diversity, Justice, Action

## Strategies:

1. Self-Assessment
2. Ongoing Reflection and Learning
3. Professional Development
4. Critical Friend Relationships



Learning for Justice provides virtual and in-person professional learning opportunities. Please visit [learningforjustice.org/](http://learningforjustice.org/) professional-development for current offerings.

### **Critical Friend Relationships**

Collegial friendships can provide safe, constructive opportunities to work through curricular material, implementation issues or difficult interactions. Critical friends can observe one another’s classes, review assignment ideas, discuss the joys and complexities of social justice education, and point out biases or oversights. To be successful, all of this must be done within a context of mutual care, regard and trust. The National School Reform Faculty is one organization that offers

protocols and activities for critical friends to use in helping each other work toward a specific goal.

- What power dynamics are present in my classroom? Are there imbalances of social power? What can I do to address those?
- What did I learn from this professional development? How can I implement it in or adapt it for my classroom?

### **Professional Development**

School communities benefit when teachers and other staff participate in professional development opportunities focused on working with LGBTQ+ youth, students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and specific racial, religious or ethnic groups. Reading and sharing professional journals, books or blogs related to social justice education can augment professional development.

Researchers from the Learning Policy Institute define effective professional development as “structured professional learning that results in changes to teacher knowledge and practices, and improvements in student learning outcomes.”

Effective professional development:

- Is content-focused.
- Involves active learning.
- Invites collaboration.
- Uses models and modeling.
- Involves coaching and extra support.
- Offers participants feedback and time for reflection.
- Results in sustainable, positive changes to practice.

## **Creating and Upholding Just Systems**

While individual actions can support or impede inclusion and equity in schools, systems and policies hold the greatest power to influence social justice in education. Social justice leadership includes regularly assessing and improving systems and structures that promote student well-being and equity—in both experiences and outcomes. After all, as highlighted in the LfJ article “The Curb-Cut Effect and Championing Equity,” research indicates that everyone in the school and community benefits from policies and practices that center the needs of underserved people.

### **Analyzing and Addressing School Policies and Practices**

Education leaders who are invested in equitable and just schooling identify and work to change inequitable policies. Educators Deena Khalil and Elizabeth Brown developed a social justice leadership framework that can guide leaders in addressing these policies. Published in the *Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, and Research*, the framework includes:

- *Cultural competency.* Teachers and administrators are aware of privileges and prejudices within the school that affect diverse student bodies.

- *Communication skills.* Teachers and administrators honor student perspectives, allow those perspectives to inform policy, and communicate “engagingly and responsively” with all students.
- *Commitment to the community.* Teachers and administrators demonstrate a commitment to positively affecting the community in which the school resides.

An analysis of school policies and practices for bias and discrimination should look for:

- Sexist, homophobic and anti-trans policies, such as dress codes that restrict the clothing of girls more than boys, prohibit gender-nonconforming dress, or prevent teaching or discussion of LGBTQ+ topics and issues in the classroom.
- Policies that discriminate on the basis of race, ethnicity or religion, including dress codes that police hair length and styles, facial hair, and head coverings.
- Zero tolerance discipline policies, which have been shown to disproportionately punish students of color and feed into the school-to-prison pipeline.

Once identified, discriminatory policies should be rewritten with input from students, staff and community members, especially those who have been negatively affected by the previous policies.

### **Responding to Hate and Bias at School**

Schools have plans and protocols in place to respond to fires, severe weather, medical emergencies, fights and weapons possession. But what about school incidents that involve bigotry and hate? Are plans in place to respond to a bias incident or hate crime? Too often, these plans are created in the moment during the actual crisis.

Hate and bias incidents are far too complex for on-the-fly planning; an early misstep can heighten tension and damage chances for long-term success. School leaders need to set expectations, and everyone on staff—from bus drivers and custodians to classroom teachers and the IT department—must know that hate, disrespect and intimidation have no place on campus.

LFJ’s *Responding to Hate and Bias at School* resource guide is designed primarily for school administrators, but teachers, staff, counselors, students and others may also find useful information within.

The guide is divided into three sections:

- **Before a Crisis Occurs:** How can you and other school leaders assess your school’s climate with an eye toward defusing tension, preventing escalation and avoiding problems?
- **When There’s a Crisis:** What are the key points to consider when responding to a crisis that has been triggered by a hate or bias incident at your school?
- **After the Worst Is Over:** How can you address long-term planning and capacity-building for the future in responding to hate and bias, including the development of social emotional skills?

### **Speak Up at School**

The LFJ guide *Speak Up at School* offers extensive guidance for addressing bias. Here are a few examples to use if students, colleagues or families express bias, use slurs or bully others.

- *Interrupt.* Stop what you’re doing and address the comment without delay. It’s important that you address biased language immediately and consistently. Addressing biased language, bullying and harassment every time is the clearest way to signal your disapproval of these behaviors.
- *Question.* Try to figure out why the speaker made the comment. The goal is not to be judgmental or to put the speaker on the defensive. Instead, ask questions like “What do you mean?” or “What makes you say that?” to try to understand the roots of the speaker’s prejudices so that you can address them.
- *Educate.* Sometimes hateful speech is motivated by ignorance rather than hate. When possible, give the speaker the benefit of the doubt and explain why what they’ve said is biased or hurtful.
- *Echo.* If you’re not the first to speak out against biased language, you can still reinforce the message. By thanking the person or people who have already interrupted and voicing your agreement, you reinforce their message and provide support to others who might be hurt by the comment.

### **Leading Beyond the School**

Educators’ social justice advocacy and leadership can extend beyond the classroom. This can include discussing social justice education in religious or other community spaces, presenting at conferences, and seeking elected office. These efforts can benefit students, families and the broader community.



**Connections to Social Justice Standards:** Diversity, Justice, Action

- Strategies:**
1. Analyzing and Addressing School Policies and Practices
  2. *Responding to Hate and Bias at School*
  3. *Speak Up at School*
  4. Leading Beyond the School
  5. Leading Through Crisis



The following questions provide a starting point for educators seeking to build or expand their leadership efforts:

- What is the role of social justice education in and beyond our school? How can a focus on identity, diversity, justice and action be woven through our community?
- In what ways does our own behavior (and sharing of personal knowledge) model social justice values? How can we do more?
- What relevant community issues would we like our classes or schools to actively address?
- What successes, ideas or lessons from our own work might interest our broader communities?

### Leading Through Crisis

Educators can proactively address equity, safety and belonging at school, but unexpected crisis events still occur. Some of these events might happen within the school community, such as a hate incident or an intrusion. Others might happen in the broader world but still affect school, such as a pandemic, violence in the community or political unrest.

Research has found that schools that invest in climate, culture and equity work recover more quickly after an incident occurs, as noted in the LFI article “We Were Ready,” which highlighted the response of school leaders in Charlottesville, Virginia, following the deadly 2017 “Unite the Right” rally. Effective social justice educators like those in Charlottesville prepare to lead through crises and attend to the physical, mental and emotional needs of students and other members of the school community.

Use these nine key considerations from *Responding to Hate and Bias at School* to help you prepare to respond to crises:

- Put safety first.
- Denounce the act.
- Investigate.
- Involve others.
- Work with the media.
- Provide accurate information—and dispel misinformation.
- Support targeted students.
- Seek justice and avoid blame.
- Promote healing.

## Collaboration and Building Alliances

As educators plan to implement social justice curricula, joining and sustaining diverse alliances will grow the effect of their social justice efforts. Building alliances is about working together,

giving and receiving support, and creating a sounding board for social justice planning. Alliance-building also gives educators space to discuss the critical practices outlined in this guide. Members of the group can be colleagues within the school or from outside networks. Connecting with individuals beyond the “choir” and outside personal friendship circles diversifies the network of allies and deepens the work.

Diversity and social justice topics such as race, immigration and LGBTQ+ issues may be difficult or uncomfortable for more privileged or less experienced members of the community to acknowledge or discuss. Having a critical mass of support can nevertheless help move the work forward and provide support in the face of resistance. If the group promoting social justice education includes a diverse range of members, the work won’t become identified solely with the perceived self-interest or agenda of a specific group.

### Collaborative Planning and Interdisciplinary Projects

Collaborative planning and cross-class projects offer both students and teachers opportunities to deepen their shared understanding of social justice issues. Additionally, educators can create and showcase social justice strategies and approaches with colleagues during planning processes, within professional learning communities or with larger audiences (in online communities or conference presentations, among others). For example, history and art classes could work together to create memorials or monuments for a member of the local community who advocated for civil rights or social justice.

### Professional Learning Communities

Professional learning communities, such as reading or discussion groups, provide regular opportunities for building relationships, supporting professional development, and focusing on issues that directly affect students and communities. Some groups have an assigned organizer and facilitator, while others rotate planning and leadership responsibilities.

Professional learning communities can also include vertical and horizontal collaboration. Alliances can evolve through developing a joint curriculum or action project. These projects can be developed across grade levels or classes or in collaboration with groups from other schools and communities. Establishing and reviewing a shared spectrum of standards and expectations



#### Connections to Social Justice Standards:

Identity, Diversity, Justice, Action

#### Strategies:

1. Collaborative Planning and Interdisciplinary Projects
2. Professional Learning Communities
3. Networking
4. Building Community With Learning for Justice

will help students transition smoothly between school levels and strengthen educator practices.

Consider applying for a Learning for Justice Virtual Professional Learning Cohort or seek out other opportunities for support.

### **Networking**

Teachers can tap into local groups and online communities to network with others who are interested in social justice teaching and organizing. Attending and presenting at conferences is another way to learn new strategies and build alliances outside their immediate school community.

National conferences and conference organizers of particular relevance to diversity and social justice education issues include the National Association for Multicultural Education, Teachers 4 Social Justice, the White Privilege Conference, Creating Change, Facing Race, the National Association of Independent Schools People of Color Conference and the National Association for Bilingual Education (Appendix C: Online Supplement has more information about these organizations).

### **Building Community With Learning for Justice**

Learning for Justice regularly participates in and convenes events for social justice educators. Stay connected and build relationships with the LFJ community by subscribing to the magazine, attending in-person or online workshops, attending webinars or learning cohort meetings, subscribing to the LFJ newsletter, and following us on social media (Appendix C: Online Supplement has more information).

## **Student Leadership**

Educators and other adults can help students develop their leadership skills in a variety of ways, from preparing students for formal leadership positions to supporting student-driven actions for social justice. Whatever the role, adults should remember that authentic youth participation means that students are driving the decision-making. The ladder of youth participation from the Kentucky Student Voice Team is a helpful tool for adults to assess meaningful youth leadership.

### **Formal Leadership**

Youth who serve in formal leadership roles bring important perspectives to school leadership discussions and support policies that are more responsive to the needs of young people. Formal

leadership can include traditional student government associations, a student diversity and equity council, a teacher-student advisory council, or a student seat on the local board of education or town council. Giving students a seat at the table validates their concerns and deepens their connections to the school community.

Students can hone their formal leadership skills and find other opportunities to lead through after-school and summer leadership development programs, such as:

- Global Leadership Academy
- United We Dream
- Student Voice
- Immigrants Rising
- GLSEN's National Student Council

Students can also lend their perspectives to state and federal government bodies that oversee education, including the United States Department of Education.

### **Student-Led Resource and Affinity Groups**

Resource and affinity groups are identity- or interest-based organizations that support students who share common backgrounds and experiences. These groups typically serve student communities that have been historically marginalized because of racial or ethnic identity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, or gender.

Some examples of affinity groups include:

- Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) Clubs
- Black student unions
- Jewish student unions or associations

Establishing affinity groups at school can provide important support for students who belong to traditionally marginalized identity groups. (Young people need to understand why, for example, a Black student union is OK while a white pride group is not. Awareness of historical and ongoing marginalization will clarify that distinction.) When students play a role in leading affinity groups, it can deepen the level of support its members receive.

Learning for Justice has advice for teachers who want to support student affinity groups at their school. These resources can be found in Appendix C: Online Supplement. Additionally, the Great Schools Partnership has created a resource for establishing racial affinity groups at your school.

### **Board Membership**

Students can get involved in school leadership and policy by either attending board of education



**Connections to Social Justice Standards:**  
Identity, Diversity, Justice, Action

**Strategies:**  
1. Formal Leadership  
2. Student-Led Resource and Affinity Groups  
3. Board Membership  
4. Informal Leadership  
5. Youth in Front

meetings to share their opinions or even serving on the board as a student representative. An article in *Kentucky Teacher*, for example, highlighting a high school junior named to the state board of education explained that the student “will not vote on official matters, but will provide input on policy decisions that affect Kentucky’s public schools.”

There are many models of education boards that allow for varying levels of student representation:

- Student Advisory Board
- Student Board of Education
- School board members (voting or non-voting)

The more power a student has to influence votes and decisions, the more authentic their leadership experience will be. Regardless of the model, when students have a seat at the table and can directly affect educational policies, they get to experience democratic education in practice.

Students can also get involved in local, state or even national government. Youth leadership in local government can look like youth commissions, advisory boards, internships, or seats on local town or city councils. For example, Washington state has a Legislative Youth Advisory Council that serves as the official perspective of young people on multiple policy issues and helps effect real change.

When students get involved in local, state or national governments, they develop and use decision-making skills, engage in community service, and help leaders make better policy decisions that affect young people’s everyday lives.

### **Informal Leadership**

Historically, informal student leadership—like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) has led to some of the largest, most influential social movements in our country. LFJ’s article on a trajectory of the power of youth activism, “From Birmingham to Parkland: Celebrate the Power of Young Voices,” illustrates the effects of students’ leadership.

In education, students—like those in Tucson, Arizona, featured in the documentary film *Precious Knowledge*—have led the fight for including ethnic studies courses in high schools. Recently, students have been leading walkouts against proposed bills that would limit accurate teaching of history, including Native American students in Flandreau, South Dakota. In Vermont, students are working to remove racist

symbols and imagery. And nationwide, students have been protesting anti-LGBTQ+ policies and racially motivated education censorship and book bans.

Educators who nurture informal student leadership learn about the wealth of skills and knowledge young people in their classes bring to any space. Then, by asking students to serve as teachers, they shift the dynamics and create a more welcoming, inclusive space for youth ideas. In addition to framing students as knowledge holders, educators can support programs and curricula that foster civic engagement, speech, protest and freedom. These experiences help mold student leaders, like those at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, who speak out against inequity and work toward creating justice.

### **Youth in Front**

Youth in Front, a collaboration between LFJ, Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is an online learning resource for adults who want to support student activism and leadership. This online course, comprised of three powerful interactive units, includes tools and actionable strategies for supporting youth activism.

The course units include:

- **Normalizing Student-Led Activism:** Understand the context of youth-led activism and the importance of adults embracing their roles as listeners and supporters.
- **Legal and Practical Considerations:** Learn about students’ and adults’ rights regarding protests and activism and how educators’ professional identities can influence how they support students.
- **Preparing Ourselves and Colleagues to Support Student Activism:** Examine how adults can prepare themselves to support student leadership for social justice, including building coalitions with other adults.

# Family and Community Engagement

## Critical Practices:

- Recognizing Caregivers as Funds of Knowledge
- Home-to-School Connections
- Inclusion of Community Wisdom
- Engagement With Community Interests and Concerns

The Learning for Justice article “Community Organizing Uplifts Immigrant Students” reminds us that engaging caregivers and community members “is critical to student success and a building block for wider civic participation for both children and adults.” Collaborating with families and communities provides educators with opportunities for reciprocal sharing that can benefit students, educators, schools and communities. When we center children and their needs, we recognize that school is only one aspect of a child’s life and experiences. Educators are not alone in the work of social justice education, and families and community members can be strong advocates and teachers as well.

Because all students’ households are different, we use the terms *caregivers* and *families* interchangeably to define the adult(s) responsible for the care of the student. Using the language of caregivers and families references the larger support system around students, including parental partners, stepparents, extended family members, foster parents, coaches, mentors, teachers and community leaders.

Educators can model inclusivity in their language by ensuring all materials addressing families and caregivers are inclusive. For example, instead of sending home a note that opens with the phrase “Dear parents,” use a more general greeting like “Dear families.” Instead of asking for “mother’s name” and “father’s name” on a form, have a space for “names of caregivers/family members.”

## Recognizing Caregivers as Funds of Knowledge

When educators take the time to build and sustain engagement with students’ caregivers, they illustrate social justice in action, showing students that their identities and living situations are valuable and worthy of understanding. This approach recognizes

that students’ linguistic, cultural and familial diversity are strengths and resources to support student learning, a concept also known as funds of knowledge.

## Recognition of Key Relationships

Educators can signal their interest in and appreciation for their students by developing relationships and partnering with the caregivers in students’ lives. For example, teachers can invite caregivers to share knowledge about their student’s experiences, interests, hopes, struggles, and family cultures and traditions.

Additionally, educators can maintain open communication with caregivers, learning about what supports have worked well for students at home and sharing advice on how families can support their student’s education.

## Building Relationships Among Caregivers

Building relationships among families benefits students of all identities by introducing them to different family structures and traditions. These relationships can also help caregivers feel more connected to the school community, generate a grassroots network of support for social justice education and provide opportunities for families to work together with their children on social justice issues.

## Home Visits

Home visits can be a great way to begin building relationships and strengthen communication with those families who would welcome such engagement. Noting local laws and policies about home visits, educators can transform their relationship with a student’s family by visiting the student’s home—if and only if the family agrees—and understanding the home environment and culture. To accomplish this, teachers can conduct home visits in a tiered fashion:

- First, work on establishing mutual trust and respect with the caregivers.
- Then, ask open-ended questions about the student’s daily practices.



**Connections to Social Justice Standards:**  
Identity, Diversity

## Strategies:

1. Recognition of Key Relationships
2. Building Relationships Among Caregivers
3. Home Visits
4. Beginning-of-the-Year Questionnaires or Conversations
5. Use of Home Languages



- Once genuine trust is established, seek to learn more about the family and their history, culture and educational background.

### **Beginning-of-the-Year Questionnaires or Conversations**

Teachers can gather valuable information about students by connecting with families and caregivers early in the school year. Ask family members about students' strengths, interests, challenges and lives in and out of school, as well as caregivers' hopes and fears. These conversations provide important background, set a collaborative tone and support culturally responsive classroom practices.

Consider asking students and families to work together to answer the following questions:

- Who is in your family?
- What's your favorite thing to do as a family?
- What makes your family unique?
- What's your favorite holiday, and how do you celebrate it?

For additional ideas on how to build a partnership with families at the beginning

of the year, read Teaching Tolerance Award winner Liz Kleinrock's suggestions in "Families Are Such an Asset."

### **Use of Home Languages**

To be truly inclusive, all take-home materials should be published in students' home languages. Because asking students to translate can put them in an awkward position, it is best practice to use a school-employed translator for these communications. Like all take-home materials, these communications with family should be checked for assumptions about circumstances, including household resources, family traditions, cultural practices or political affiliations. For more information on language access, read LFJ's guide on *Best Practices for Serving English Language Learners and Their Families*.

For in-person events, such as conferences and town halls, and for meetings about special education services, schools should work with interpreters. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that schools take necessary actions, including arranging for an interpreter, to ensure parents understand

the proceedings of an individualized education program meeting (IDEA Sec. 300.322 (e)).

Teachers can use online services for quick, short translations. To learn more about available online services, please refer to Appendix C: Online Supplement. Free apps like TalkingPoints have built-in translators. Although imperfect, they can be helpful when sending short messages, such as posting reminders, sending a positive note home or writing captions for photos. When signing up for the app, families and educators can select which languages they want to use.

## Home-to-School Connections

Partnering with caregivers is an essential part of honoring students' lived experience. Educators who connect their teaching to students' cultures, languages and heritage create classroom environments that value critical home-school relationships, affirm student identities and challenge stereotypes.

### Family History and Heritage

Tapping into students' family histories, backgrounds and cultures through classroom activities is a critical and empowering practice that allows students to explore and celebrate their heritage. (Keep in mind that not all students will have access to extensive information about their family, and classroom activities must be modified to accommodate that reality.) Importantly, when students share stories and hear about the lives of their classmates, their appreciation for the value of diversity grows. Providing space for historically underrepresented narratives and histories affirms students' identities and caregivers' experiences.

Additionally, allowing caregivers to see themselves as a valuable resource in children's learning strengthens interactions between educators, students and caregivers. Strong home-school relationships equalize the power balance by treating caregivers as invested partners who want the best for their children.

### Caregiver Service and Engagement Programs

Service projects can help educators bridge family and community engagement and classroom activities. Ideas for service and engagement programs include family volunteer action days; working together on neighborhood political and social issues; attending community events such as film

screenings, Juneteenth celebrations or LGBTQ+ Pride events; or fundraising projects for community causes.

### Honoring Family and Community Wisdom in the Classroom

After learning about students' families and lives outside of the classroom, educators can honor caregiver and community wisdom through their instructional choices.

Honoring caregivers and communities in the classroom might look like:

- Incorporating what you have learned about students' values and identities into your teaching and learning.
- Restructuring classroom norms and practices to reflect community dynamics and conversation styles familiar to students and their families.
- Incorporating local and cultural stories, histories and values into the curriculum.
- Asking families and caregivers to share their perspectives on historical or current events.

For example, stories of environmental education, like Edutopia's "Building a Sustainable Future—One Classroom at a Time," show how teachers across disciplines can help students focus on local sustainability efforts, analyze environmental injustice, and connect to familial or community practices.

### Adult Education Programs

Adult education programs support the community and can help foster trusting relationships with caregivers. Such programs should align with the community's needs and might include language classes, GED programs, Know Your Rights sessions or assistance with passing citizenship tests. Programs can also include back-to-school resource fairs, cultural events like watching films or listening to speakers, or discussions for families and caregivers on topics such as bullying prevention, identity development, racial experiences, gender expression, sexual orientation, learning differences and family diversity.

### Events for Caregivers

Events that bring students and caregivers together might include potlucks, school carnivals, affinity events (for caregivers from groups that share identities or lived experiences, such as adoptive or foster care families or LGBTQ+ families), showcases of student work, student or community performances, and film nights or game nights. During these events,



**Connections to Social Justice Standards:**  
Identity, Diversity, Justice, Action

**Strategies:**  
1. Family History and Heritage  
2. Caregiver Service and Engagement Programs  
3. Honoring Family and Community Wisdom in the Classroom  
4. Adult Education Programs  
5. Events for Caregivers

teachers can connect informally with families to share information and resources and to support one another in times of need.

The school can support these connections by prioritizing the planning and execution of schoolwide events. To keep equity and accessibility front and center in the plan, use these questions as a guide:

- How much does the event cost the school to host?
- How much does the event cost families to attend?
- What changes could be made to ensure that the event is free and accessible to all families, including families with disabilities, child care needs and transportation barriers?
- How much time will it take to participate in the event? Will adults who work in the evenings and on weekends have opportunities to participate?
- Will there be child care available, if needed?
- What language interpretation services will be provided to ensure all families can participate?
- Will food be provided? If so, does the menu or selection take into account dietary restrictions, including allergies and cultural or religious practices?
- Are there transportation options for families to and from the event?
- If the event is online, will any families be unable to access it? What are some alternatives?

## Inclusion of Community Wisdom

Students benefit from family and caregiver knowledge and from community wisdom. Partnerships with community organizations can help extend classroom activities, provide additional support for students' needs and add new perspectives to teaching material—all while sending the message that communities are valuable learning resources.

### Neighborhood Explorations

Educators can connect classroom topics to historical or cultural features of students' cities and neighborhoods. For example, Montgomery, Alabama, is home to many civil rights landmarks and monuments, important sites that can help students honestly reckon with our country's history. Visiting sites like these can add richness to students' curricular learning while honoring the experiences and the wisdom of the community. Teachers

can also infuse local history and provide a place-based perspective on national events, including current events. Lessons that involve neighborhood explorations can also help students become more civically engaged.

### Connecting With Community Organizations

Many communities have local organizations that engage in cultural activities, community service efforts or social justice advocacy. Community organizers are often happy to partner with schools, provide students with information and offer opportunities for students to participate in their projects. The article “Resources for Building Community Partnerships” from Edutopia can help you get started on building those types of relationships. The LFJ article “Community Organizing Uplifts Immigrant Students” provides examples of partnerships with community organizations that support students and families.

Youth-serving organizations are particularly important partners for educators and schools. With their understanding of local contexts, they tend to be strong at building relationships with young people and can be effective in supporting students holistically.

Connecting with community organizations has the added benefit of providing essential services and materials for students and families. For example, many community-based groups run back-to-school events that provide students with school supplies before the fall semester. Other organizations might run coat and jacket drives or provide food for families during school breaks. When educators and schools take the time to learn about what students and families need, they're better equipped to identify the community partnerships that will make the biggest difference—educationally and materially.

### Integrated Classroom and Community Spaces

In addition to encouraging students to get out into the community, it's beneficial to invite community members into intergenerational discussions on topics that are of interest to students. Community members can contribute their knowledge of local contexts, while students can share their perspectives on local issues. These discussions foster greater intracommunity understanding and even improve organizing efforts.

As with other critical classroom conversations, it's important to be mindful of power dynamics



**Connections to Social Justice Standards:**  
Identity, Diversity, Justice, Action

**Strategies:**  
1. Neighborhood Explorations  
2. Connecting With Community Organizations  
3. Integrated Classroom and Community Civic Spaces



during the discussion. By creating norms for discussion and facilitating the conversation in a way that centers historically marginalized groups, educators can build an equitable space for dialogue. For more information on how to set up these conversations, review LFJ's *Let's Talk!* publication. Also, the LFJ article "Solidarity as Social and Emotional Safety" details a model of partnership that brought community wisdom into the classroom to share experiences and lessons on mutual aid, restorative justice and safety by design.

Guest speakers can help send the message to students that their community holds valuable knowledge. Teachers can invite community leaders, organizational representatives, and family and community members to speak about how their life or work experiences relate to social justice themes and classroom topics. Their connections to these topics may be personal, professional or both. If possible, allow time for questions and authentic discussion with the speaker.

## Engagement With Community Interests and Concerns

When students witness activist resistance to injustices in their own communities, it helps them better understand a core component of social justice education: learning to take action against exclusion, prejudice and discrimination. This level of engagement supports students in their ability to both name social injustices in their community and organize to confront them.

## Community Research and Outreach

Conducting community-based research can deepen students' understanding of social justice issues. This research might include opinion surveys, needs assessments, interviews with local activists, visits to historic sites or museums, or online research about the community's history. This type of research allows students to reflect on and analyze their community's strengths and challenges and raises awareness of larger structural inequalities.



Community-based outreach can be a unit, semester or yearlong partnership that offers students the chance to establish deeper connections with particular topics, community groups or projects. A partnership spanning multiple years gives each class a chance to build on work done by previous classes, multiplying its effect.

### **Student-Designed Community Projects**

Any social justice issue could inspire an individual or group project designed to support the local community. When students identify a salient local issue and explore strategies for possible solutions, they learn to identify the roots of social problems and how to take action to address them. During this process, they will develop skills in community development, problem-solving and social justice organizing. Possible projects include designing a public service announcement; solving a community issue, such as responding to a natural disaster; providing direct service through a community agency; or hosting a justice-themed art show or event.

Read more about incorporating local history into your classroom in articles like LFIJ's "Recovering and Teaching Local History."

### **Supporting Student Action**

As previously described in the Youth in Front subsection, educators and schools can support student-led action by encouraging young people to learn about and engage with social justice issues that are important to them. Educators can also support students' activism by working with community organizations that can help students understand various topics more deeply and suggest ways to maximize their time and talents.

Supporting student action could look like:

- Drawing on students' knowledge of and personal connections to the issues involved—the more specific the project, the better.
- Including a strong research component that ensures students connect specific local problems to wider societal contexts, causes and challenges. For example, students who volunteer at a food bank should also learn about social and economic factors that drive food insecurity.
- Incorporating opportunities for reflection about student attitudes to ensure the project doesn't reinforce assumptions or stereotypes about specific people or communities.
- Providing writing prompts to help students consider personal changes they can make to challenge bias, exclusion and injustice.

- Using texts to spark student reflection about community strengths and challenges.
- Working *with* people or groups the class wants to support, not *for* them.

After facilitating learning about social justice topics, support students by asking them to create their own personal action plans. This assignment allows students to focus on ways they can enact change within the context of a larger social movement. Give students an opportunity to share their plans with classmates to build accountability for implementing their plans.



**Connections to Social Justice Standards:**  
Identity, Diversity, Justice, Action

**Strategies:**  
1. Community Research and Outreach  
2. Student-Designed Community Projects  
3. Supporting Student Action



## Continuing to Build Critical Practices for Social Justice Education

“In promoting diversity and fighting racism, inclusive education programs forged pathways toward building equitable societies. Now, as our nation confronts multiple assaults on democratic values, we hold firm in the fight to protect—and to expand—democracy through social justice education.”

These words from the Fall 2022 issue of *Learning for Justice* magazine are a distillation of our organization’s work and goals.

Educators have always been at the forefront of civil rights and social justice movements. This guide honors and seeks to support that legacy. We hope the information and tools in this publication will strengthen your practice and connect you to a broader community of social justice educators and activists.

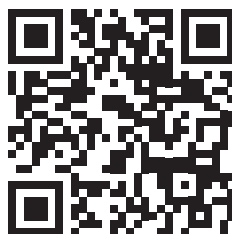
The following appendices (A and B) provide additional resources. *Critical Practices* Appendix C: Online Supplement is available online only at [learningforjustice.org/appendix-c](https://learningforjustice.org/appendix-c) and provides additional resources for each strategy and links to the works cited in this guide. (You can also access Appendix C via the QR code below.) Organized for easy reference, this appendix is regularly updated. And the LFJ website has further information—including workshop and engagement opportunities—to continue to support you.

As LFJ’s director Jalaya Liles Dunn reminds us: “It’s critical to continuously assess where we are in this collective movement, how we are growing, and what we can do better. We are in this work not only to transform but also to be transformed. We must commit to *learn for justice* to make justice real in our lives.”

Please visit us at [learningforjustice.org](https://learningforjustice.org).



Scan this QR code with your phone to access the Appendix C: Online Supplement of this guide:



# Appendices

## Appendix A: The Social Justice Standards

The Social Justice Standards are a road map for anti-bias education at every stage of K-12 instruction. Comprised of anchor standards and age-appropriate learning outcomes, the Standards provide a common language and organizational structure educators can use to guide curriculum development and make schools more just and equitable.

The complete framework is available at: [learningforjustice.org/frameworks/social-justice-standards](http://learningforjustice.org/frameworks/social-justice-standards).

### Identity Anchor Standards

1. Students will develop positive social identities based on their membership in multiple groups in society.
2. Students will develop language and historical and cultural knowledge that affirm and accurately describe their membership in multiple identity groups.
3. Students will recognize that people's multiple identities interact and create unique and complex individuals.
4. Students will express pride, confidence and healthy self-esteem without denying the value and dignity of other people.
5. Students will recognize traits of the dominant culture, their home culture and other cultures and understand how they negotiate their own identity in multiple spaces.

### Diversity Anchor Standards

6. Students will express comfort with people who are both similar to and different from them and engage respectfully with all people.
7. Students will develop language and knowledge to accurately and respectfully describe how people (including themselves) are both similar to and different from each other and others in their identity groups.
8. Students will respectfully express curiosity about the history and lived experiences of others and will exchange ideas and beliefs in an open-minded way.
9. Students will respond to diversity by building empathy, respect, understanding and connection.
10. Students will examine diversity in social, cultural, political and historical contexts rather than in ways that are superficial or oversimplified.

### Justice Anchor Standards

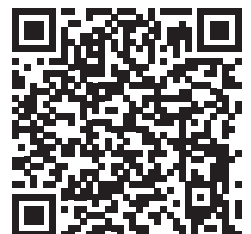
11. Students will recognize stereotypes and relate to people as individuals rather than representatives of groups.
12. Students will recognize unfairness on the individual level (e.g., biased speech) and injustice at the institutional or systemic level (e.g., discrimination).
13. Students will analyze the harmful effects of bias and injustice on the world, historically and today.
14. Students will recognize that power and privilege influence relationships on interpersonal, intergroup and institutional levels and consider how they have been affected by those dynamics.
15. Students will identify figures, groups, events, and a variety of strategies and philosophies relevant to the history of social justice around the world.

### Action Anchor Standards

16. Students will express empathy when people are excluded or mistreated because of their identities and concern when they themselves experience bias.
17. Students will recognize their own responsibility to stand up to exclusion, prejudice and injustice.
18. Students will speak up with courage and respect when they or someone else has been hurt or wronged by bias.
19. Students will make principled decisions about when and how to take stands against bias and injustice in their everyday lives and will do so despite negative peer or group pressure.
20. Students will plan and carry out collective action against bias and injustice in the world and will evaluate which strategies are most effective.



Scan this QR code with your phone to access the complete framework:



## Appendix B: Glossary of Terms

**Action** in the context of the Social Justice Standards is a domain that includes honoring and celebrating identity and diversity as well as bringing about justice. Both individuals and groups can take action toward social justice.

**Assessment** refers to an evaluation of a student's knowledge and or skills. They can range from formative (formal and informal assessments that check for a student's understanding) to summative (such as an end-of-unit project that measures multiple skills and knowledge). Assessments are different from grading, but both send messages to students about what educators value. The best assessment strategies take equity into account.

**Bias** refers to conscious or unconscious prejudice against an individual or a group based on their identity. In the Social Justice Standards, *bias* is used to designate the prejudice held by individuals.

**Braver space** builds on important critiques of the terms *brave* and *safe* space to describe a learning community where students and educators seek to deepen their relationships with one another in support of challenging social injustice. The term *braver* instead of *brave* alludes to the continuous process and work educators and students must do to cultivate this type of space.

**Caregivers** references the larger support system around students, including parents, parental partners, stepparents, extended family members, foster or adoptive families, coaches, mentors, teachers, and community leaders.

**Civic engagement** is the action that students, educators and community members can take—either individually or collectively—to address injustice. In addition to preparing students to be responsible voters, civic engagement can include providing students with information about social issues and supporting them in addressing these issues in their communities.

**Climate** represents the experiences of students and educators in the school's environment and the extent to which it feels welcoming and inclusive for all students, especially students from historically marginalized groups.

**Culture** is similar to climate and refers to the physical and social school environment and values as expressed through curricula and practice. Culture influences the decisions, actions and ways things are done at the school.

**Cultural competency** refers to the ability to work effectively and sensitively across cultural contexts. According to Gloria

Ladson-Billings, educators can exhibit cultural competency when they understand the role of culture in schooling, initiate learning about students' cultures and communities, use students' cultures as foundations for learning, and help students understand their full identities.

**Culturally responsive practices/pedagogy/teaching** asks educators to make connections to students' prior knowledge. The goal of culturally responsive pedagogy is engagement, academic achievement, cultural competency and critique of the existing social order. Notable scholars include Gloria Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gay.

**Culturally sustaining pedagogy** builds on culturally responsive pedagogy and focuses on how teachers sustain and build on students' knowledge, values, beliefs and practices. Culturally sustaining pedagogy shares the goals of culturally responsive pedagogy and sees students' cultural practices as resources to honor, explore and extend. Notable scholars include Django Paris and Lorena Germán.

**Curriculum** refers to the content educators teach in their classrooms, such as the texts and sources they select. Educators should be intentional about auditing and selecting their curriculum to include students' interests as well as a diversity of perspectives.

**Differentiation** refers to adapting strategies for content and instruction to fit the learner. Educators who successfully differentiate their classroom tailor their materials to meet students' diverse needs while still holding high standards for learning outcomes. By applying a framework like Universal Design for Learning, teachers can differentiate by using what they know about students and provide students with different ways to achieve an objective.

**Digital literacy** is a holistic approach to cultivating skills that allow people to participate meaningfully in online communities, interpret the changing digital landscape, understand the relationships between systemic -isms and information presented as factual, and unlock the power of digital tools for good.

**Diversity** refers to the variety of identities, backgrounds and experiences that make up a group of people. In the context of the Social Justice Standards, Diversity is a domain that includes helping students explore and celebrate the differences within their communities.

**Dominant identity group** is an identity group whose members share a common privilege. An individual may simultaneously belong to dominant identity groups (for

example, straight, white) and nondominant identity groups (for example, undocumented, experiencing poverty).

**Equity** is the set of conditions that allows each person, regardless of societal or cultural factors, to reach their full potential. Equity is different from equality, which treats everyone the same despite disparate circumstances and outcomes and can actually further marginalize people.

**Family** references the larger support system around students, including parents, parental partners, stepparents, extended family members, and foster or adoptive families. Family can also include chosen or found families, people who are not biologically related to the person but fulfill the role of family members through their love and support.

**Gender** refers to a set of social, physical, psychological and emotional traits, often influenced by societal expectations, that classify an individual as female, male, androgynous or other. Gender is a spectrum, not a binary structure, and words and qualities ascribed to these traits vary across cultures. Gender identity (a person's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither) and gender expression (the external appearance of a person's gender identity) are related terms.

**Identity** is the set of visible and invisible characteristics we use to categorize and define ourselves and those around us (for example, gender, race, age, religion, ethnicity, socio-economic status, language, marital/family status, ability, sexual orientation and more). Identity shapes our experience by influencing the ways we see ourselves and the ways others see us. At Learning for Justice, the Identity domain of the Social Justice Standards includes students developing a positive sense of self, including celebrating aspects of their identity that have been historically marginalized.

**Instruction** refers to *how* educators teach the curriculum (the content, or *what* they teach). In other words, instruction includes the pedagogical choices teachers make, such as using inquiry-based teaching when engaging with challenging historical topics.

**Justice** is achieved when people have equal rights; it is a combination of fairness and opportunity. The Justice domain of the Social Justice Standards emphasizes students' ability to recognize and respond to injustice and unfairness at the individual, institutional and systemic levels.

**LGBTQ+** stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (the plus sign represents other sexual identities). The word *queer* has a complicated history, and its reclamation as a positive and encompassing term of identity isn't

universally accepted. In this guide, we use *queer* as an inclusive term to refer to those who do not identify as cisgender or heterosexual.

**Multilingual learner** refers to a student who speaks a language other than English at home. About 1 in 5 children in the United States fall into this category. Many schools refer to multilingual learners as English language learners, but we are moving away from this language because *English language learner* is a deficit-based perspective that centers the English language. Another term that educators can use is *emergent bilingual students*, coined by Ofelia García, Ph.D., in 2008, which affirms the unique potential for multilingualism of students who are learning English in school and have grown up communicating in one or more other languages.

**Positionality** refers to the context of someone's multiple or intersectional identities, which assigns power to certain identities. Positionality influences not only how one perceives and experiences the world but also how the world perceives and experiences them.

**Project-based learning** is a teaching method through which students learn by engaging with projects that help them analyze or solve real-world problems. In a project-based unit, the end product is a project rather than an exam.

**Race** is a system created by white people that classifies and groups people in a way that gives power to white people. Race is not biological. See *Undoing Racism: A Philosophy of International Social Change* by Ronald Chisom and Michael Washington.

**Racism**, as defined by sociologist David T. Wellman, author of *Portraits of White Racism*, is "a system of advantage based on race." Psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum, author of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* indicates that this system includes cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals.

**Safer space** builds on important criticism of the terms *brave* and *safe* space to describe a learning community where students and educators work to ensure that community members from historically marginalized backgrounds feel welcome to be their full selves. The term *safer* instead of *safe* recognizes the continuous process and work educators and students must do to cultivate this type of space.

**Scaffolded activities** provide students with support structures to assist them in navigating learning materials. By learning more about students, including their values, beliefs, experiences and prior knowledge, teachers can more

effectively add different forms of scaffolding to ensure that all students reach the learning objective.

**Sexual orientation** is an inherent or immutable emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people. Oftentimes the term is used to signify the gender identity (or identities) to which a person is most attracted.

**Social emotional learning (SEL)** goes beyond assessing students' social and emotional outcomes and connects to culturally responsive teaching, social justice and the process of healing. Dena N. Simmons, Ed.D., founder of LiberatED, explains that true SEL works toward "a world where all children feel safe to thrive in the comfort of their own skin."

**Social justice**, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is "a state or doctrine of egalitarianism." The goals of social justice, as explained in the LFJ article "What Is Social Justice Education?" by Lee Anne Bell, Ed.D., are "creating a society where everyone has fair access to the resources and opportunities to develop their full capacities, and everyone is welcome to participate democratically with others to mutually shape social policies and institutions that govern civic life."

**Social Justice Standards**, in the context of the LFJ Social Justice Standards, are a framework for anti-bias education at every stage of K-12 instruction. Comprised of anchor standards and age-appropriate learning outcomes, the Standards provide a common language and organizational structure educators can use to guide curriculum development and make schools more just and equitable. There are four domains within the Social Justice Standards: Identity, Diversity, Justice and Action.

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