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Exploring curricular materials, instructional practices, and pedagogy in Lower Merion School District

LOWER MERION SCHOOL DISTRICT EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT PROJECT RESEARCH BRIEF NO. 2

January 2023

Project summary

Education Northwest is partnering with the Lower Merion School District (LMSD) to review the district's practices and policies related to building and establishing an equitable and inclusive learning environment. From late 2020 to early 2021, LMSD leadership engaged the community in a collaborative process to identify three critical focus areas to guide Education Northwest's study.[1]

Curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy

Professional learning

Staff diversity and hiring

This is the third in a series of research briefs that share the findings from the various focal areas of the equity review. **This research brief presents findings from Education Northwest's inquiry into curriculum at LMSD.** To explore the district's efforts to use equity-oriented curriculum, we used the following questions to guide our work:

1. To what extent is the district's curriculum diverse, equitable, and inclusive in embedded and explicit ways?

2. To what degree is there fidelity to and accountability for implementing diverse, equitable, and inclusive curricula?

3. To what extent do all students see themselves in the curriculum?

4. To what degree is a culturally responsive, racially literate perspective embedded in the day-to-day experiences of everyone in the district?

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[1] For more information about Lower Merion School District's commitment to equity, please visit
https://www.lmsd.org/equity

Culturally responsive data collection activities

At every phase of the audit, Education Northwest sought insight and guidance from the LMSD community. In collaboration with LMSD, the project team established a 12-member advisory group of parents, educators, counselors, school board members, and community leaders. The advisory group met regularly with Education Northwest to provide feedback on the audit plan, inform data collection efforts, and develop recommendations for the district.

An **educator survey** was distributed to all educators across the district. Eight hundred and sixty-six educators were invited to complete the survey, and 744 responded for a response rate of 86 percent. About 74 percent of survey respondents identified as white; 10 percent identified as Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC); and 16 percent elected to self-describe their racial identity. LMSD staff perspectives from open-ended survey responses, as well as select closed-ended survey questions, appear throughout the report.

Student and caregiver surveys were distributed to students in grades 4–5, students in grades 6–12, and caregivers for all students in the district. A total of 1,158 students in grades 4–5, 3,485 students in grades 6–12, and 1,043 caregivers completed the survey.

Learning walks were conducted within each school to observe the school and classroom learning environments. School administrators were matched with a school in their respective school level (elementary, middle, or high school) to conduct school and classroom observations. Observers conducted one schoolwide observation and three to five classroom observations at each school in the district. A total of 28 elementary school, nine middle school, and nine high school classrooms participated in observations.

This report describes a **review of LMSD curricular materials.** Education Northwest reviewed English language arts (ELA) curriculum across one grade band at the elementary, middle, and high school level. The district office and grade-level ELA teachers provided the ELA curriculum for Education Northwest to review. Likewise, Education Northwest discussed findings from the curriculum review with the district's curriculum team and grade-level ELA teachers.

Key findings

Integrating students' diverse cultures and languages into school curriculum and practices is key to developing culturally responsive school climates (Hernandez & Burrows, 2021). Culturally responsive teaching practices include incorporating students' lived experiences into the curriculum and using cultural heritages and orientations to improve academic achievement (Gay, 2018). Additionally, culturally responsive practices should value and sustain multiculturalism (Paris, 2012). This creates a more accessible classroom environment that is more personally meaningful and interesting for students.

In this brief, we explore curricular materials, instructional practices, and pedagogy at LMSD. We detail findings in three areas: **the learning environment**, **curriculum**, and **instruction and pedagogy**. Drawing on a districtwide educator survey and classroom observations, we examine staff knowledge and implementation of culturally responsive, racially literate practices and the degree to which they implement diverse, equitable, and inclusive curricula with fidelity. Using districtwide surveys of students and families, we describe the extent to which all students see themselves in the curriculum. Through a review of curricular documents, we analyze the extent to which the district's curriculum is diverse, equitable, and inclusive in embedded and explicit ways.
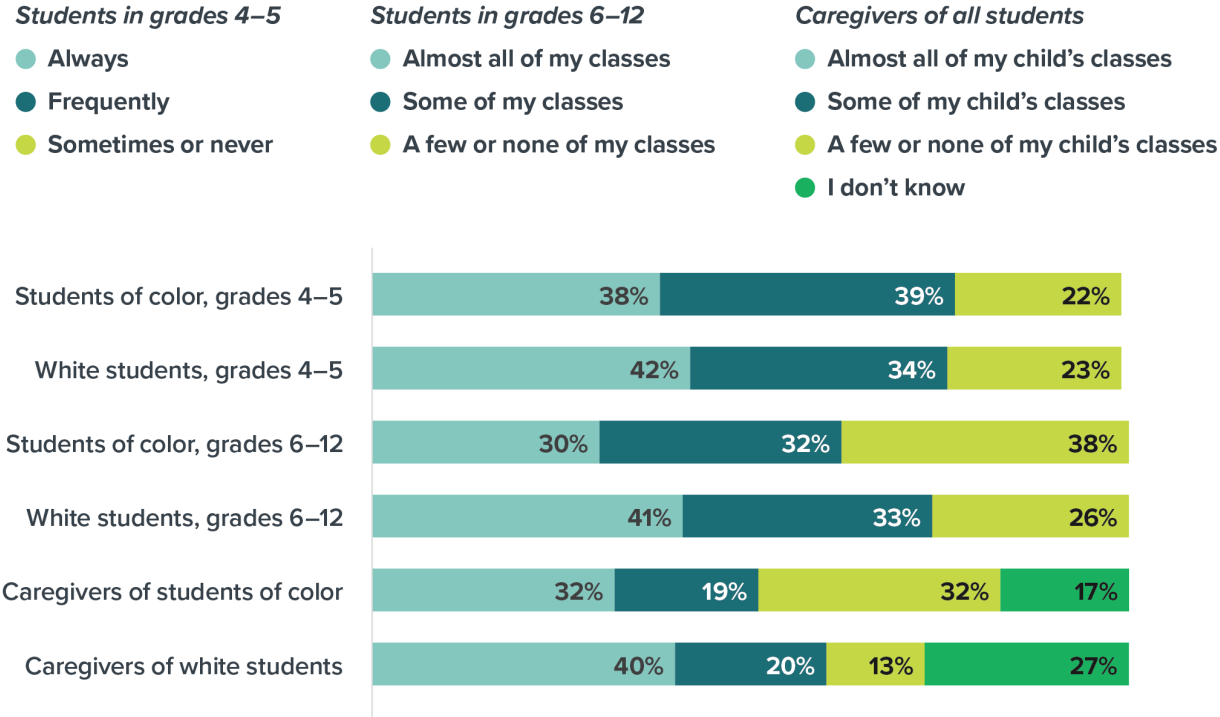
The learning environment

A key component of culturally responsive practice is creating learning environments that are physically and culturally inviting (Lowery, 2018). Students need to see themselves and their cultures respectfully reflected in pictures, displays, artifacts, and curriculum. An inclusive learning environment can foster a positive sense of belonging for students.

Many students, though fewer secondary students of color in high school, feel that their classroom environments reflect a variety of cultures and experiences.

We asked students in grades 4–12 and caregivers of students of all ages to reflect on their and their students' classroom environment. On average, students and caregivers feel that the classroom

environments in some or all classes reflect a variety of cultures and experiences (figure 2). When disaggregating responses by race/ethnicity, we found that fewer students of color in grades 6–12 have inclusive classroom environments compared to white students (62% of students of color and 74% of white students). More students (nearly 80%) in grades 4–5 feel that the classroom environments in some or all their classes reflect a variety of cultures and experiences.

Figure 1. Many students feel that their classroom environments reflect a variety of cultures and experiences

Students in grades 4–5
- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes or never

Students in grades 6–12
- Almost all of my classes
- Some of my classes
- A few or none of my classes

Caregivers of all students
- Almost all of my child's classes
- Some of my child's classes
- A few or none of my child's classes
- I don't know

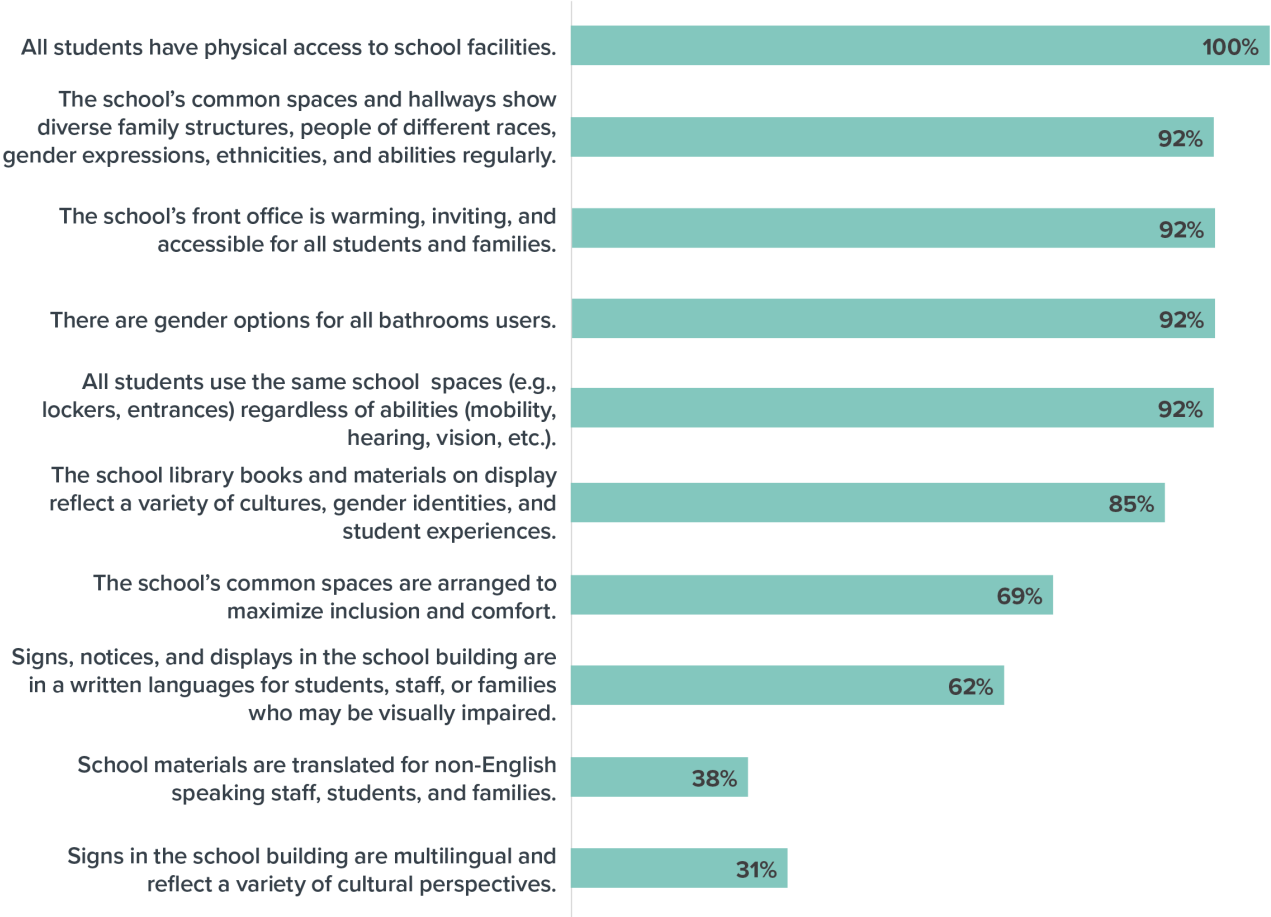|	Always / Almost all	Frequently / Some	Sometimes or never / A few or none	I don't know
Students of color, grades 4–5	38%	39%	22%	
White students, grades 4–5	42%	34%	23%	
Students of color, grades 6–12	30%	32%	38%	
White students, grades 6–12	41%	33%	26%	
Caregivers of students of color	32%	19%	32%	17%
Caregivers of white students	40%	20%	13%	27%

Source: Education Northwest analysis of LMSD survey for students in grades 4–5 (n = 1,158), grades 6–12 (n = 3,485) and caregiver survey (n = 1,043).

Nearly all school common spaces reflect diverse identities, cultures, and abilities. Fewer schools contain supports for multilingual families.

To examine the inclusivity of LMSD school environments, observers conducted learning walks at each school and looked for 10 elements of a welcoming and inclusive learning environment (figure 1). They found that nearly all schools provide all students physical access to school facilities; common spaces that reflect diverse identities and cultures; and a warm, inviting, and accessible front office. Fewer schools have materials translated for people who do not speak English or signs that are multilingual and reflect a variety of cultural perspectives.

Figure 2. Almost all LMSD schools offer physically accessible facilities, inclusive common spaces, and inviting front offices

Element	Percentage
All students have physical access to school facilities.	100%
The school's common spaces and hallways show diverse family structures, people of different races, gender expressions, ethnicities, and abilities regularly.	92%
The school's front office is warming, inviting, and accessible for all students and families.	92%
There are gender options for all bathrooms users.	92%
All students use the same school spaces (e.g., lockers, entrances) regardless of abilities (mobility, hearing, vision, etc.).	92%
The school library books and materials on display reflect a variety of cultures, gender identities, and student experiences.	85%
The school's common spaces are arranged to maximize inclusion and comfort.	69%
Signs, notices, and displays in the school building are in a written languages for students, staff, or families who may be visually impaired.	62%
School materials are translated for non-English speaking staff, students, and families.	38%
Signs in the school building are multilingual and reflect a variety of cultural perspectives.	31%

Source: Education Northwest analysis of diversity, equity, and inclusion school environment observation checklist (N = 11).

Most educators feel effective in designing physically and culturally inviting classroom learning environments.

To gauge teacher efficacy with culturally responsive practices, Education Northwest asked instructional staff members to rate themselves as "novice," "apprentice," "practitioner," or "advanced" on several survey items about designing a classroom environment that reflects diverse cultures and student experiences. We looked at the differences between educators of color and white educators to better understand how racial and ethnic identity may influence educator experiences in the classroom.

Most educators feel effective in designing an inclusive classroom environment (81% of educators of color and 76% of white educators; figure 3). Approximately 18 percent of educators of color and 21 percent of white educators rated themselves as an apprentice or novice in this area.
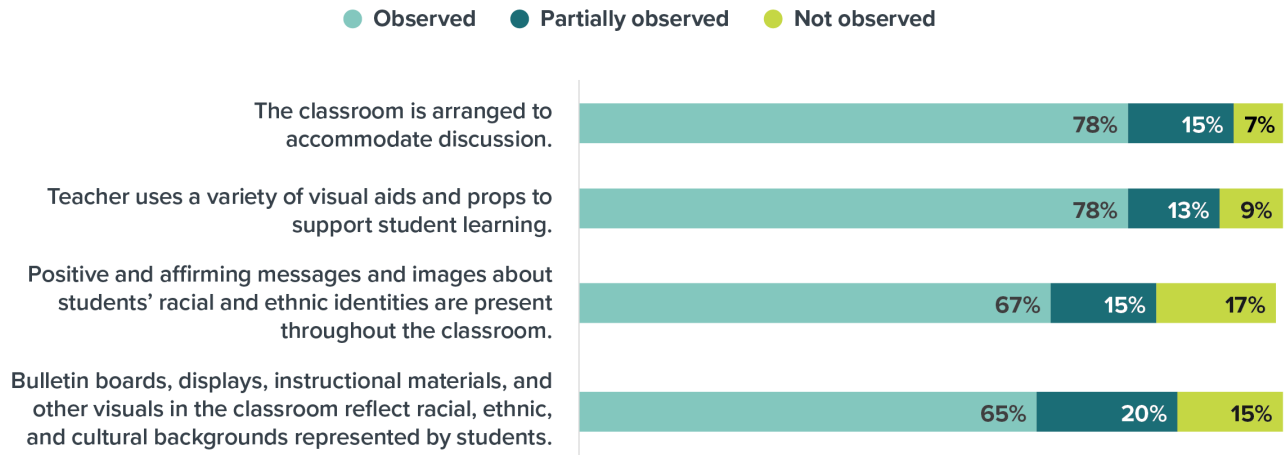
Figure 3. Most educators feel effective in designing a classroom environment that reflects diverse cultures and student experiences
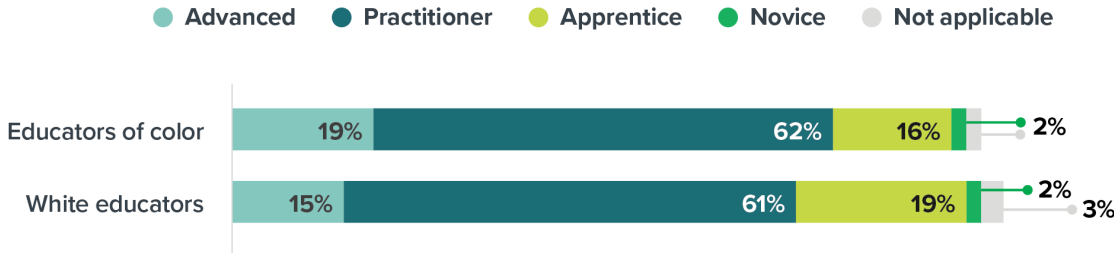
Source: Education Northwest analysis of LMSD educator survey (n = 695).

In addition to the educator survey, LMSD administrators conducted classroom observations across elementary, middle, and high schools to examine how educators implement culturally responsive curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy. Most observers found that participating classrooms accommodated discussion and that the observed teacher used a variety of visual aids to support student learning (78%; figure 4). Slightly fewer observers found positive and affirming messages about student identities throughout the classroom (67%) and that visual displays in the classroom reflect the backgrounds of students (65%).

● Observed   ● Partially observed   ● Not observed

The classroom is arranged to accommodate discussion.	78%	15%	7%
Teacher uses a variety of visual aids and props to support student learning.	78%	13%	9%
Positive and affirming messages and images about students' racial and ethnic identities are present throughout the classroom.	67%	15%	17%
Bulletin boards, displays, instructional materials, and other visuals in the classroom reflect racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds represented by students.	65%	20%	15%

Source: Education Northwest analysis of diversity, equity, and inclusion classroom observation protocol (N = 46).

Observers found that LMSD teachers demonstrate and create an ethic of care in their classrooms.

Another element of a culturally sustaining learning environment is the teacher demonstrating and creating an ethic of care among the students (Lowery, 2018). For example, in a responsive classroom, the teacher refers to students by name and promotes an environment that is safe for all students. Students interact in respectful ways, and there is a sense of belonging in the classroom. On average, observers found that LMSD teachers created an ethic of care in their classrooms (figure 5).

Figure 5. Most observers found that teachers demonstrate and create an ethic of care

● Observed   ● Partially observed   ● Not observed   ● No opportunity to observe

Teacher refers to student by name and uses personalized language with students.	91%	7%	2%
Students interact in respectful ways and know how to work together effectively.	85%	11%	4%
There is a sense of belonging in the classroom; students express care for one another in a variety of ways.	78%	17%	2%
Teacher promotes an environment that is safe for all students, including culturally and linguistically diverse students; students seem comfortable participating in the classroom.	78%	15%	7%

Source: Education Northwest analysis of diversity, equity, and inclusion classroom observation protocol (N = 46).
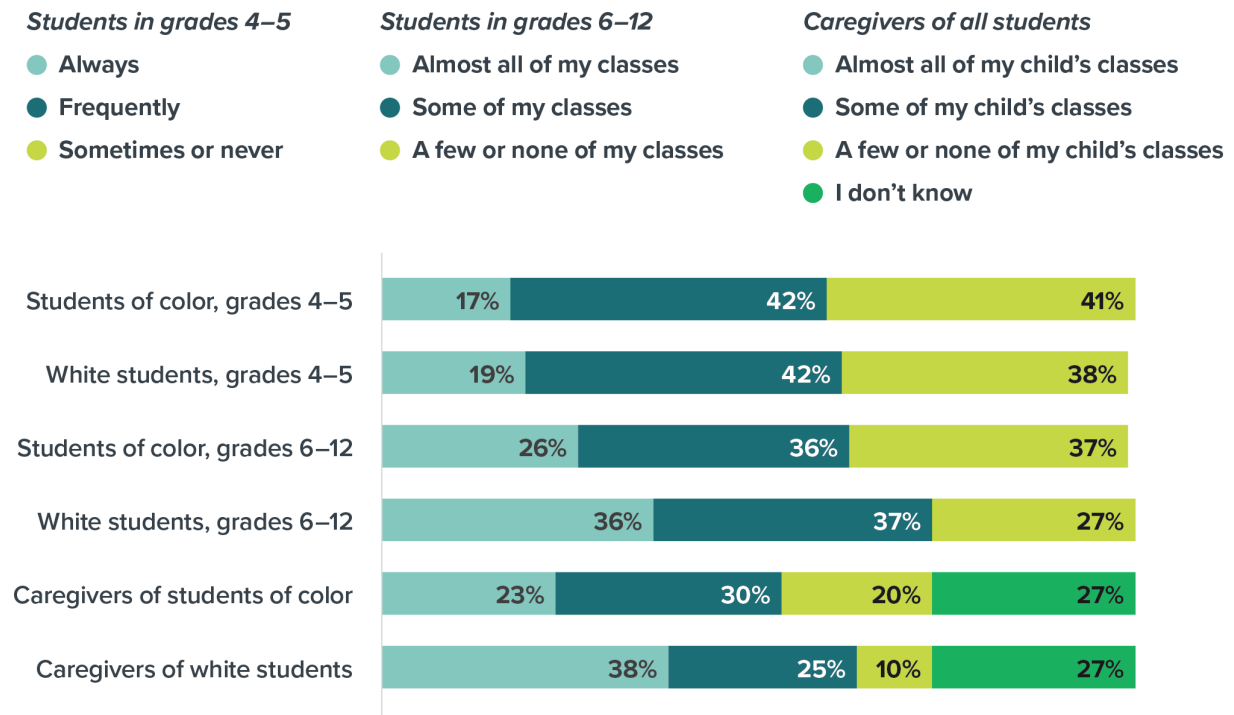
Culturally responsive curriculum

In this section, we focus on how curriculum and content can support the implementation of culturally responsive teaching. Researchers have developed tools and frameworks to understand and evaluate how the principles of culturally responsive education may be reflected in a curriculum or other course materials (e.g., Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019). Common elements in curriculum review resources include representation of diverse perspectives, authors, and characters; a focus on social justice; and resources for customizing curriculum to meet students' unique needs (Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019). We draw from surveys to explore how LMSD educators understand components of culturally responsive curriculum, along with student and family perspectives on the representativeness of curriculum in LMSD. Using the essential elements of cultural competence identified by Lindsey et al., 2008 and 2018, we assess the cultural responsiveness of LMSD curriculum.

Elementary students and secondary students of color are less likely to indicate that LMSD curriculum reflects a diversity of cultures.

Culturally responsive curriculum fully integrates students' cultures and languages to create a more inclusive school climate (Wachira & Mburu, 2019; Hernandez & Burrows, 2021). In doing so, culturally competent curriculum maintains students' cultural integrity and harnesses students' cultures as a vehicle for learning (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Scharf, 2018). To assess the extent to which students see themselves in the LMSD curriculum, we surveyed students and families. Over 60 percent of students in grades 4–12 said they read texts about diverse authors (figure 6). However, fewer students of color in grades 6–12 (62%) said they read texts by diverse authors in some or all their classes compared to white students (73%). Though students in grades 4-5 rated this slightly lower than students in grades 6-12 (about 60%), there were not substantial differences between perspectives of students of color and white students in grades 4–5.
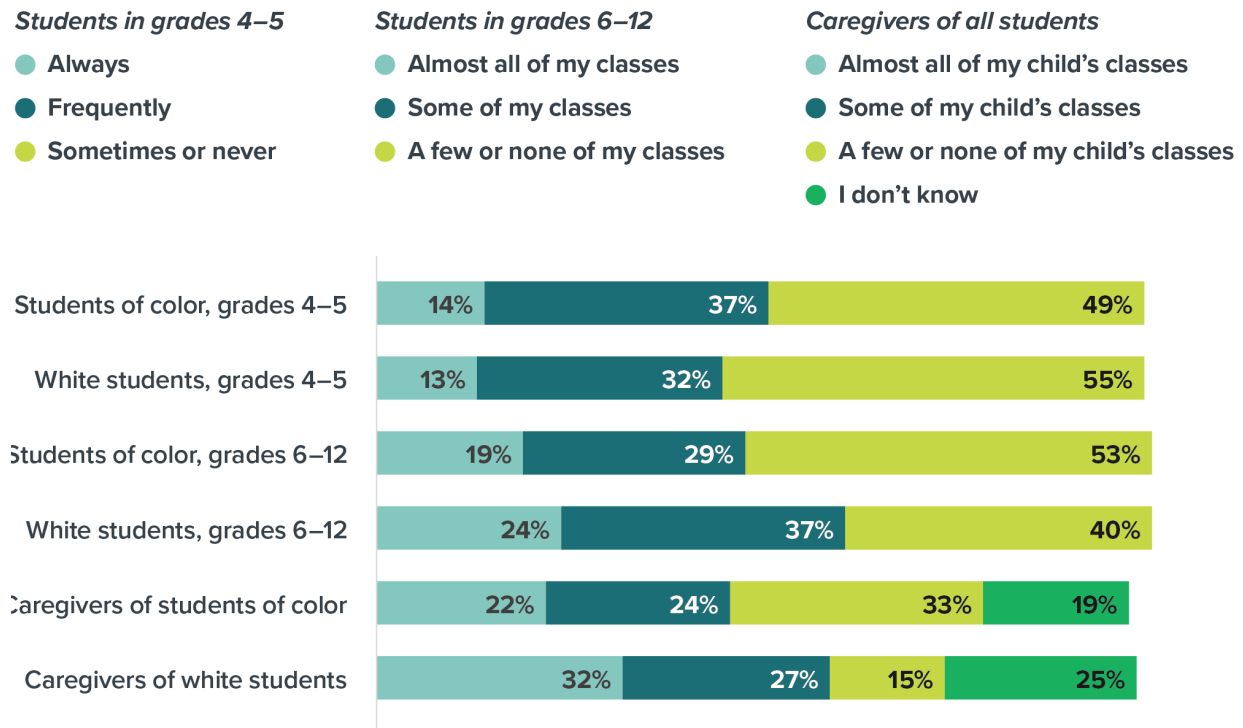
Figure 6. Some students read texts by diverse authors in some or almost all their classes

Students in grades 4–5
- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes or never

Students in grades 6–12
- Almost all of my classes
- Some of my classes
- A few or none of my classes

Caregivers of all students
- Almost all of my child's classes
- Some of my child's classes
- A few or none of my child's classes
- I don't know

Students of color, grades 4–5	17%	42%	41%
White students, grades 4–5	19%	42%	38%
Students of color, grades 6–12	26%	36%	37%
White students, grades 6–12	36%	37%	27%
Caregivers of students of color	23%	30%	20%	27%
Caregivers of white students	38%	25%	10%	27%

Source: Education Northwest analysis of LMSD survey for students in grades 4–5 (n = 1,158), grades 6–12 (n = 3,485) and caregiver survey (n = 1,043).
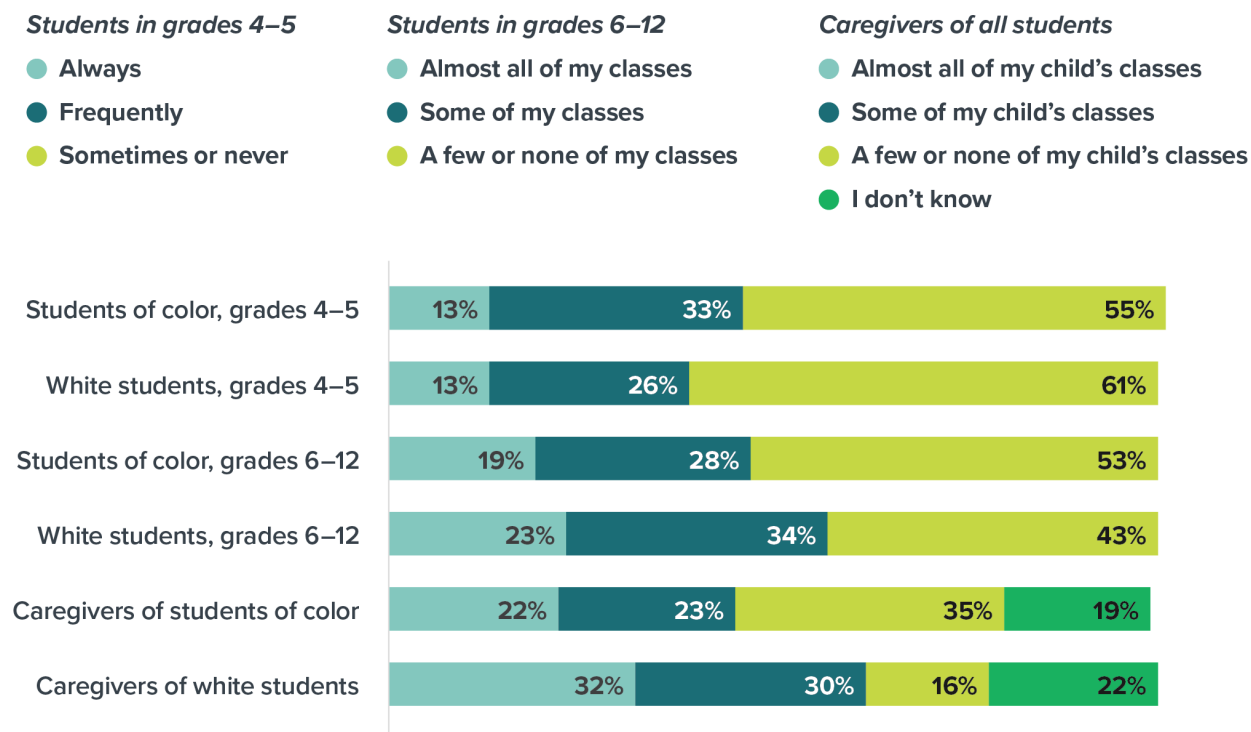
Overall, fewer students indicated that experiences across different identities are reflected in their assignments. In particular, fewer students of color in grades 6–12 (48%) said experiences across different identities are reflected in some or almost all their classes compared to white students (61%; figure 7).

Figure 7. Fewer students of color in grades 6–12 find experiences across different identities reflected in their assignments

Students in grades 4–5
- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes or never

Students in grades 6–12
- Almost all of my classes
- Some of my classes
- A few or none of my classes

Caregivers of all students
- Almost all of my child's classes
- Some of my child's classes
- A few or none of my child's classes
- I don't know

Students of color, grades 4–5	14%	37%	49%
White students, grades 4–5	13%	32%	55%
Students of color, grades 6–12	19%	29%	53%
White students, grades 6–12	24%	37%	40%
Caregivers of students of color	22%	24%	33% / 19%
Caregivers of white students	32%	27%	15% / 25%

Source: Education Northwest analysis of LMSD survey for students in grades 4–5 (n = 1,158), grades 6–12 (n = 3,485) and caregiver survey (n = 1,043).

Fewer students encounter issues of social justice in their assignments.

Culturally relevant curriculum develops a broader socio-political consciousness in students and critiques cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities (Hodge & Collins, 2019; Re-imagining Migration/UCLA, 2019). In the survey, we asked students and caregivers if they encounter issues of social justice[2] in their assignments. About half of students said that social justice issues are reflected in their assignments; however, fewer students of color in grades 6-12 (47%) had social justice issues infused into almost all or some of their classes compared to white students in grades 6-12 (57%; figure 8). Additionally, while about a fifth of caregivers were

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[2] A focus on social justice includes centering decolonization, power, and privilege, including multiple perspectives, and connecting learning to real life action (Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019).

unsure, more caregivers of students of color (35%) than caregivers of white students (16%) said that their students' teachers infused social justice into their classes.

Figure 8. About half of students in grades 6–12 find social justice issues reflected in their assignments

Students in grades 4–5
- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes or never

Students in grades 6–12
- Almost all of my classes
- Some of my classes
- A few or none of my classes

Caregivers of all students
- Almost all of my child's classes
- Some of my child's classes
- A few or none of my child's classes
- I don't know

Students of color, grades 4–5	13%	33%	55%	
White students, grades 4–5	13%	26%	61%	
Students of color, grades 6–12	19%	28%	53%	
White students, grades 6–12	23%	34%	43%	
Caregivers of students of color	22%	23%	35%	19%
Caregivers of white students	32%	30%	16%	22%

Source: Education Northwest analysis of LMSD survey for students in grades 4–5 (n = 1,158), grades 6–12 (n = 3,485) and caregiver survey (n = 1,043).

Educators of color expressed higher levels of efficacy with developing culturally responsive curriculum.

In district wide surveys, Education Northwest asked LMSD educators to reflect on their experience implementing culturally responsive curriculum. As with the analysis of learning environments, we looked at differences between educators of color and white educators to better understand how racial and ethnic identity may influence educators' experiences of culturally responsive curriculum.

When disaggregating responses by race/ethnicity, we found that teachers of color were more likely than white teachers to rate themselves as effective in culturally responsive curriculum practices (figure 9). Most teachers feel effective in designing lessons and activities that explore different cultures (87% of educators of color and 71% of white educators). However, teachers rated

themselves slightly less effective at revising instructional materials to include, honor, and elevate various cultural groups (81% of educators of color and 64% of white educators). Fewer educators rated themselves as effective in selecting culturally and linguistically appropriate assessments and making modifications as necessary (68% of educators of color and 54% of white educators).

Figure 9. Educators of color were more likely than white educators to report a high level of expertise in culturally responsive curriculum practices
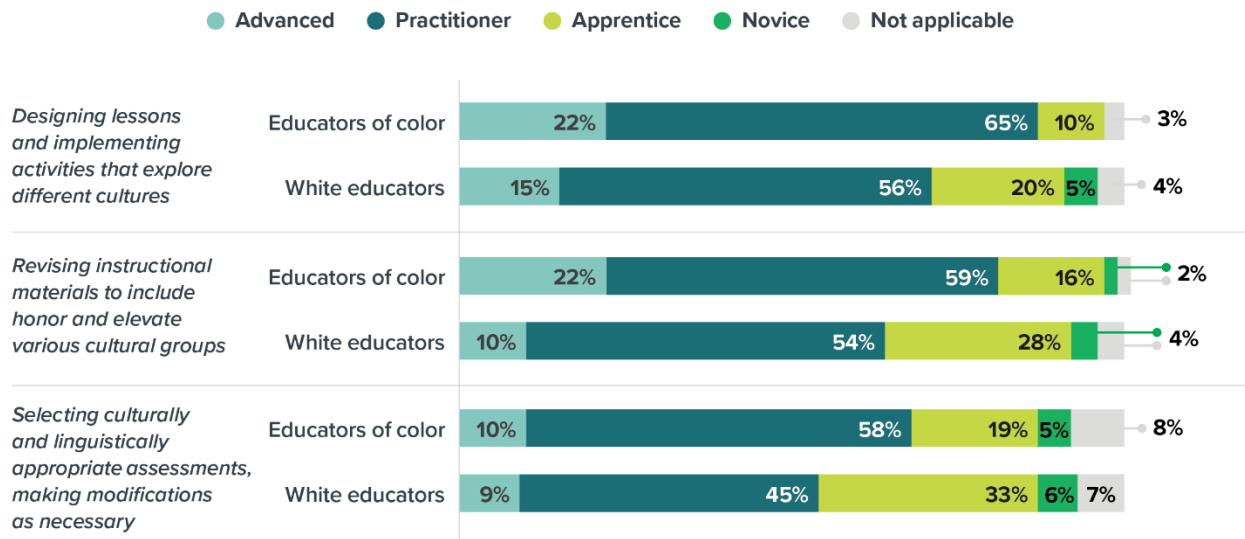
Source: Education Northwest analysis of LMSD educator survey (n = 695).

CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CURRICULUM

In an open-ended survey question, we asked what equity-focused, culturally responsive practices have been most challenging to implement. The most commonly described challenging aspect of culturally responsive practices (55 of 370 respondents) was designing, selecting, and adapting curriculum to explore different cultures. Educators specified challenges designing and implementing culturally responsive lessons across subjects, especially math and science. Others voiced hesitancy to incorporate different cultures, particularly cultures different than their own, into lessons for fear of making students uncomfortable.

"I find it challenging to include lessons that explore different cultures. In math, it is difficult. I would love to include real-world problems, but I always worry that since I'm not submersed in that culture that I may word something incorrectly and ultimately make a student from that background feel uncomfortable or that I do not care."

– LMSD educator survey respondent

LMSD curriculum shows evidence of literature by diverse authors and opportunities to explore different points of view.

Curricular choices made by districts, schools, and educators have a significant impact on whether students feel connected to their learning experiences, build a greater sense of belonging, and engage authentically with material and instruction. When those choices prioritize and celebrate diversity and the inclusion of all communities and cultures, students can expand their understanding, knowledge, and empathy for others.

Lindsey et al., 2008 and 2018, identify five essential elements of cultural competence to serve as standards to develop individual and organizational standards of practice. We used three of the five Essential Elements Defined in Context (table 1) domains to review ELA curricular materials for one grade band in elementary, middle, and high school (Lindsey et al., 2008; 2018). The instructional material included curriculum maps, syllabi, sample lesson plans, literature lists, unit overviews, benchmark guides, and other teaching resources. In reviewing this material, both culturally relevant or sustaining content or instructional techniques were noted. This included the items below noted in the rubric for "At Standard for Cultural Competence" - differentiated learning opportunities that promote diverse perspectives or the exploration of differing points of view, text choices that provide accurate portrayals of historical events and cultural groups, and development of student advocacy and social justice.

Table 1. Essential element used for ELA curriculum review, description, and cultural competence in context

Essential element	Description	Cultural competence in context
Valuing diversity	Extent to which curriculum reflects diversity	Select, develop, and implement curricula that reflects diverse perspectives and languages and provides an inclusive, accurate portrayal of historical events and cultural groups
Managing the dynamics of difference	Extent to which curriculum promotes multiple perspectives	Provide curricular options that are challenging and incorporate inquiry and higher-order thinking skills that personalize connections and evoke multiple perspectives. Provide students opportunities to develop academic ability, intellective competence and advocacy for social justice.
Adapting to diversity	Extent to which cultural knowledge is integrated into the curriculum	Integrate and infuse culturally relevant content into existing curriculum and differentiated instructional approaches/resources to meet the needs of all students. Promote multiple perspectives in the curriculum to model and develop advocacy and practices for social justice.

Source: Lindsey, R. B., Graham, S., Westphal, C. R., & Jew, C. (2008). Culturally proficient inquiry: A lens for identifying and examining educational gaps. *Thousand Oaks, CA.*

In our review (table 2), the most observable evidence of cultural competence was literature by diverse authors (selected or listed as optional for students) and student learning opportunities to explore points of view that differ from their own, particularly through writing and reading. Other evidence included emphasis on community advocacy, intersectionality, and cross-cultural experiences, primarily at the high school level.

Table 2. Essential element, example where element is exhibited, and suggestions for growth

Essential element	Comments and/or examples where element is exhibited	Suggestions for growth
Valuing diversity: Extent to which curriculum reflects diversity	**Elementary school:** A supplementary multicultural reading list is provided alongside the Journeys text. In addition, the ELA Essential Curriculum for this grade level requires students to engage in learning activities that explore points of view that differ from their own.	For middle and high school, provide additional learning opportunities for students to develop and articulate their sense of personal advocacy and social justice through the content explored.
	Middle school: Multicultural literature selections appear in a majority of the material reviewed.	
	High school: A curriculum map posed essential themes with the question: "How is story/language impacted by social, cultural, and historic context (and in different contexts)?"	
Managing the dynamics of difference: Extent to which curriculum promotes multiple perspectives	**Elementary school:** Students are asked to complete a writing assignment that explores the point of view of another person.	For elementary school, further explore whether instruction connects curriculum to the lives, experiences, values, norms, and cultural knowledge that students bring to school.
	Middle school: An "Introduction to Black Excellence" unit, exploring cultural contributions and advocacy from multiple perspectives in literature and text.	For middle and high school, further explore how the curriculum provides opportunity for students to investigate and understand how cultural assumptions and biases can impact content and subject areas (see Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019).
	High school: Students are required to build presentations that include contemplating other views, questioning assumptions, contributing one's own ideas, and adjusting the message for the audience.	
Adapting to diversity: Extent to which cultural knowledge is integrated into the curriculum	**Elementary school:** Experience-Based Informational Writing Unity Overview ((EBIW) provides guidance to teachers on selecting lessons that meets the needs of different student writers while giving multiple options for input from peers, the teacher and through independent review.	For middle and high school, explore how local funds of knowledge in the community can be more integrated in curriculum (see Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019).
	Middle school: Students are asked to explore cultural contributions and advocacy practices.	
	High school: Syllabus includes texts that offer varied authorial and cultural experiences and enable students to gain insight into their role and responsibilities within a community, both in local and global contexts.	

The material provided showed the least amount of evidence in the third domain of the rubric, adapting to diversity. While some materials did regularly integrate culturally relevant content, they did not always explicitly provide strategies or methods that teachers could use to differentiate instruction and meet the varying needs of student learners. However, there may be additional information, guidance, or material not included in our review that more specifically outlines how and when teachers differentiate their instruction.

It is important to note that educators' pedagogical frameworks, lived experiences, and personal histories inform how they deliver instruction and that those important nuances often do not appear in the curricular material we reviewed. In addition, our review was not intended to be a comprehensive assessment of the cultural responsiveness of LMSD's curriculum since it only covers three grade levels in one content area. Instead, this review can serve as a starting point for discussion and future work by the district.
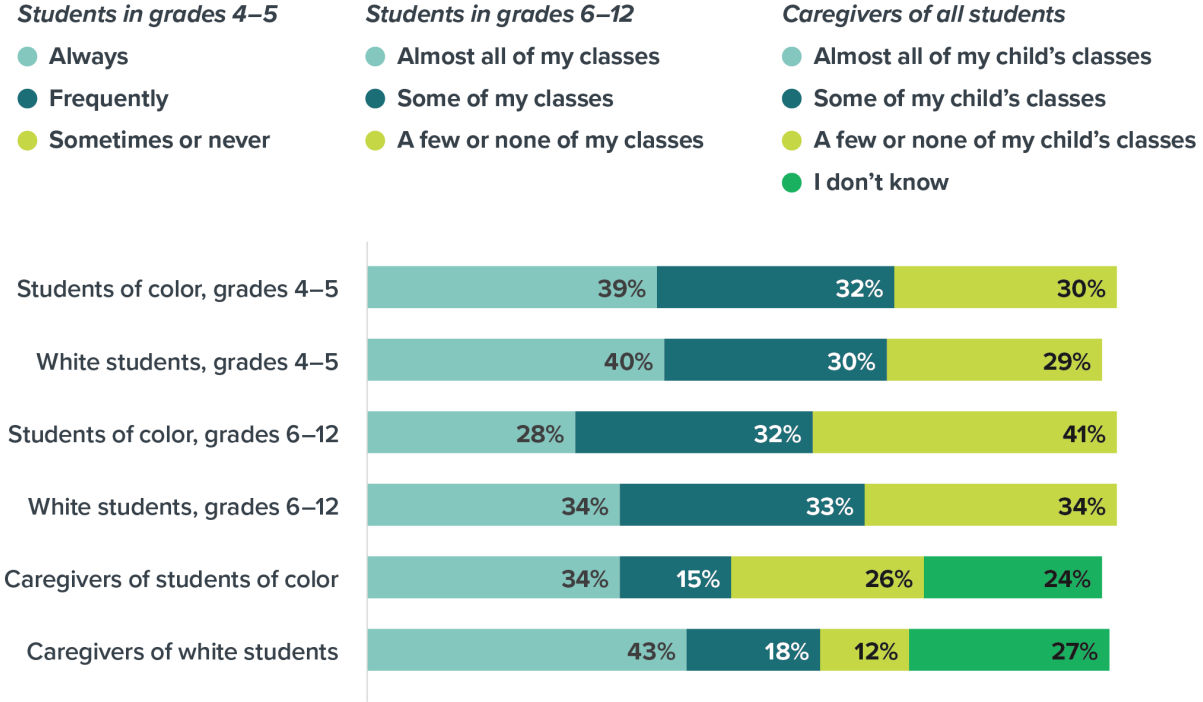
Culturally responsive instruction and pedagogy

Culturally relevant instruction and pedagogy incorporates a student's lived experiences and frames of reference into the teaching of academic knowledge and skills and makes the learning experience more personally meaningful and assessable (Gay, 2018). This section focuses on LMSD teachers' use of culturally responsive strategies to contextualize instruction in students' lives and form culturally specific relationships with students and families.

Secondary students of color are less likely to indicate that their teachers incorporate their backgrounds and experiences into teaching practices.

In surveys, we asked students in grades 4–12 and caregivers of students of all ages to reflect on their or their students' experiences in the classroom. Over 70 percent of LMSD students in grades 4-5, as well as 71 percent of students of color in grades 6–12 and 67 percent of white students in grades 6–12, indicated that teachers encourage them to share their own experiences in the classroom (figure 10). Additionally, more caregivers of students of color (26%) than caregivers of white students (12%) said that their students' teachers did not give them opportunities to share their own experiences in the classroom.
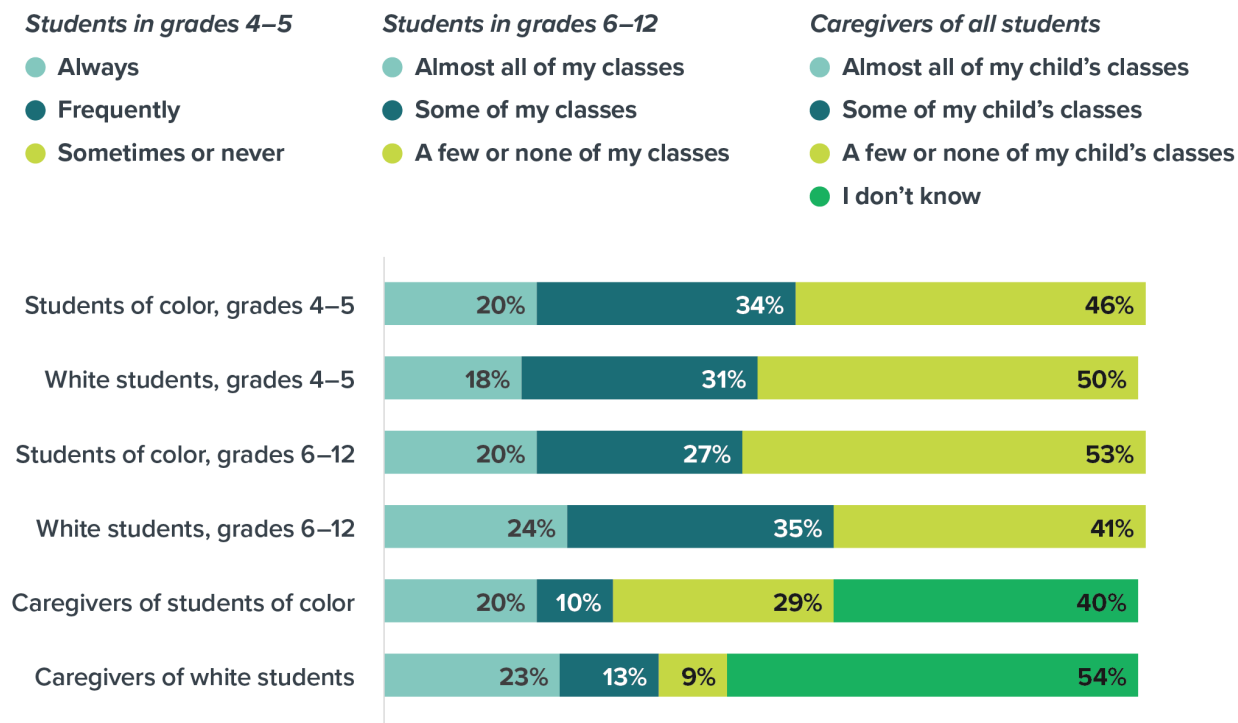
Figure 10. About two thirds of students indicated that their teachers encourage them to share their own background and experiences

Students in grades 4–5	Students in grades 6–12	Caregivers of all students
● Always	● Almost all of my classes	● Almost all of my child's classes
● Frequently	● Some of my classes	● Some of my child's classes
● Sometimes or never	● A few or none of my classes	● A few or none of my child's classes
		● I don't know

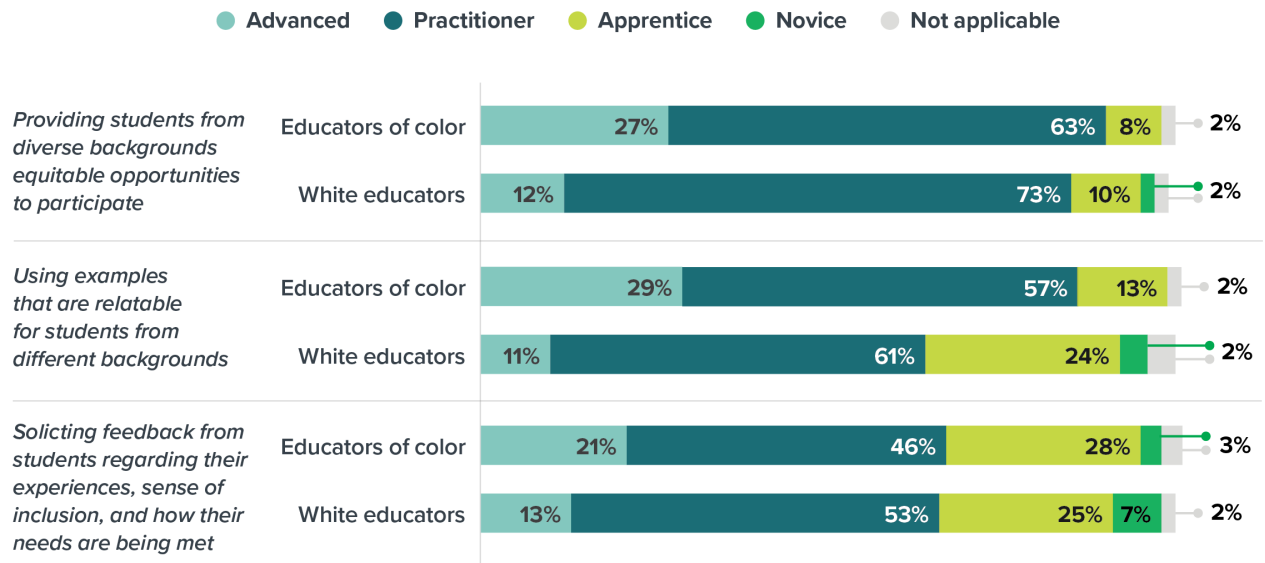|			
Students of color, grades 4–5	39%	32%	30%
White students, grades 4–5	40%	30%	29%
Students of color, grades 6–12	28%	32%	41%
White students, grades 6–12	34%	33%	34%
Caregivers of students of color	34%	15%	26%	24%
Caregivers of white students	43%	18%	12%	27%

Source: Education Northwest analysis of LMSD survey for students in grades 4–5 (n = 1,158), grades 6–12 (n = 3,485) and caregiver survey (n = 1,043).

In addition to providing space for students to share their background and experiences, a culturally responsive teacher uses real-life examples from the community in the classroom (Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019). In surveys, about half of students of color in grades 6–12 (47%) said their teachers use real-life examples in the classroom, compared to 59 percent of white students in grades 6–12 (figure 11). Additionally, while about half of caregivers were unsure, more caregivers of students of color (29%) than caregivers of white students (9%) said that their students' teachers do not use real-life examples from their communities.

Figure 11. About half of students indicate that their teachers use real-life examples in their classroom

Students in grades 4–5
- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes or never

Students in grades 6–12
- Almost all of my classes
- Some of my classes
- A few or none of my classes

Caregivers of all students
- Almost all of my child's classes
- Some of my child's classes
- A few or none of my child's classes
- I don't know

Students of color, grades 4–5	20%	34%	46%
White students, grades 4–5	18%	31%	50%
Students of color, grades 6–12	20%	27%	53%
White students, grades 6–12	24%	35%	41%
Caregivers of students of color	20% / 10%	29%	40%
Caregivers of white students	23% / 13% / 9%		54%

Source: Education Northwest analysis of LMSD survey for students in grades 4–5 (n = 1,158), grades 6–12 (n = 3,485) and caregiver survey (n = 1,043).

Most educators provide students equitable opportunities to participate in class, but fewer feel effective at incorporating students' backgrounds and feedback.

A culturally relevant teacher utilizes students' cultures as a vehicle for learning (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Bonner, et al., 2018). We asked LMSD teachers to gauge their efficacy in several items related to contextualizing instruction to students' lives, experiences, and abilities. Most teachers feel effective in providing students from diverse backgrounds equitable opportunities to participate in class, but fewer white educators feel as effective using examples that are relatable for students from different backgrounds. About two thirds of all teachers feel effective in soliciting feedback from students regarding their experiences, sense of inclusion, and how their needs are being met. When disaggregating responses by race/ethnicity, we found that teachers of color were more likely to rate themselves as practitioner or advanced in culturally responsive instructional practices than teachers who identified as white (figure 12).
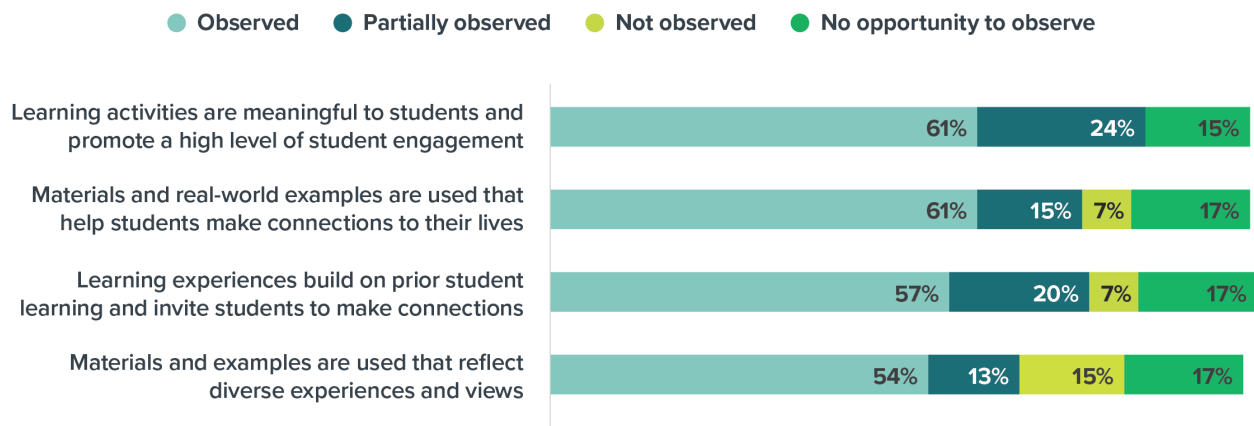
Figure 12. About three quarters of educators feel skilled in contextualized instructional practices

● Advanced ● Practitioner ● Apprentice ● Novice ● Not applicable

Providing students from diverse backgrounds equitable opportunities to participate

| Educators of color | 27% | 63% | 8% | | 2% |
| White educators | 12% | 73% | 10% | | 2% |

Using examples that are relatable for students from different backgrounds

| Educators of color | 29% | 57% | 13% | | 2% |
| White educators | 11% | 61% | 24% | | 2% |

Solicting feedback from students regarding their experiences, sense of inclusion, and how their needs are being met

| Educators of color | 21% | 46% | 28% | | 3% |
| White educators | 13% | 53% | 25% | 7% | 2% |

Source: Education Northwest analysis of LMSD educator survey (n = 695).

Across elementary, middle, and high schools, observers examined how educators incorporate students' lives, experiences, and abilities into their teaching practices. Nearly all observers found that learning activities were meaningful to students and promoted a high level of student engagement (85%). Most observers found that teachers used materials and real-world examples to help students make connections to their lives (76%) and that learning experiences built on prior student learning (77%). Fewer observers found that materials and examples reflected diverse experiences and views (67%).

Figure 13. Most observers found that instruction is contextualized in students' lives, experiences, and individual abilities

● Observed ● Partially observed ● Not observed ● No opportunity to observe

Learning activities are meaningful to students and promote a high level of student engagement	61%	24%		15%
Materials and real-world examples are used that help students make connections to their lives	61%	15%	7%	17%
Learning experiences build on prior student learning and invite students to make connections	57%	20%	7%	17%
Materials and examples are used that reflect diverse experiences and views	54%	13%	15%	17%

Source: Education Northwest analysis of diversity, equity, and inclusion classroom observation protocol (N = 46).

CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTION AND PEDAGOGY

In general, teachers face challenges in maintaining contact with students and their families while supporting students' social and emotional health, keeping students engaged, and adapting to new technologies and teaching strategies (Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, 2022). Similarly, when educators were asked what makes implementing equity-focused, culturally responsive teaching practices challenging in an open-ended survey question, around 10 percent of LMSD educators described time as a barrier to implementing culturally responsive instructional practices. One educator described a lack of time to devote to understanding student backgrounds and experiences, along with academic and social-emotional priorities.

> *"I find it very challenging to address the many social-emotional and academic needs of the students and be addressing the race, ethnicity, language, immigration status, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Ratio 1 teacher to 23 varying students' needs. It is overwhelming. We already work 10–12 hours daily plus weekends."*
>
> – LMSD educator survey respondent

Professional development that provides practical guidance and sustained learning opportunities support can support educators integrate culturally responsive instruction and pedagogy into their teaching practices (Darling-Hammon et al, 2021.

White educators express lower levels of efficacy with culturally specific relationship strategies and family engagement.

A key concept of culturally responsive education is forming relationships with students and families, including collaborating with families and the local community, and communicating in linguistically and culturally responsive ways (Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019). Over half of LMSD educators felt effective in educating themselves on students' cultures beyond food and holidays to include learning styles, approaches to problem-solving (cooperative versus individual), expectations for behaviors, and gender roles (66% of educators of color and 57% of white educators). White educators rated their efficacy lower in using culturally specific relationship-building strategies with diverse families (46%). Similarly, white educators felt less effective in welcoming parents, caregivers, and community members from diverse cultural backgrounds to be part of the school community (65% of educators of color and 46% of white educators; figure 14).

Figure 14. About 50 percent of white educators indicate lower levels of efficacy with using culturally specific relationship-building strategies with diverse families
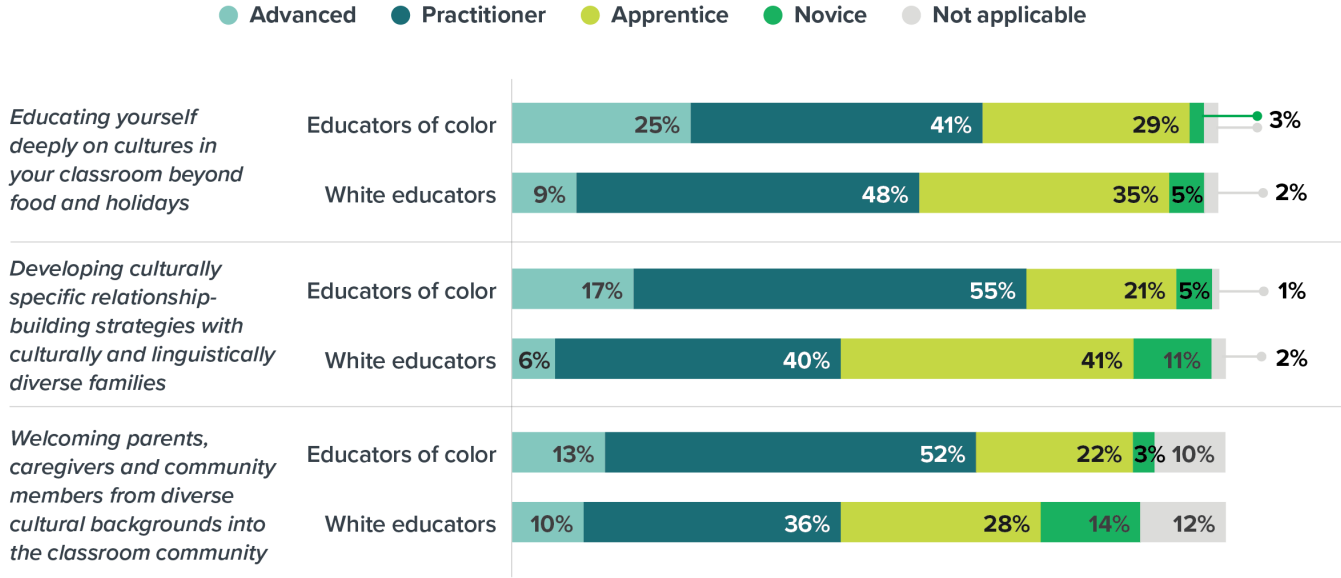
Source: Education Northwest analysis of LMSD educator survey (n = 695).

In classroom observations, we asked observers to examine a series of instructional techniques to accommodate differences among learners. All teachers who participated in observations modeled,

explained, and demonstrated skills and concepts and provided appropriate scaffolding. Most observers (76%) noticed that teachers used comprehensible inputs (e.g., gestures, familiar words and phrases, slower speech) to facilitate understanding when needed. Fewer observers (72%) witnessed use of a variety of teaching strategies to assist students in learning content (e.g., demonstrations, visuals, graphic organizers, reducing linguistic density).

Figure 15. About half of observers found that teachers use instructional techniques that accommodate differences among learners
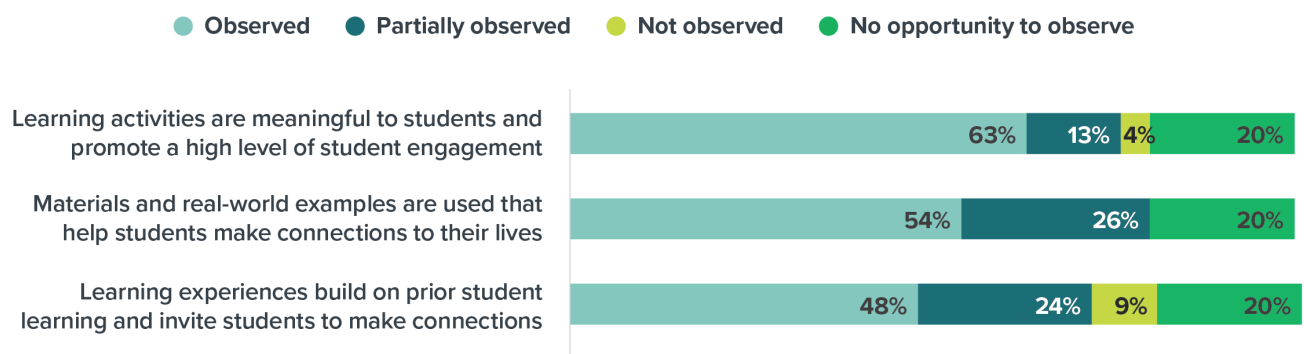
● Observed   ● Partially observed   ● Not observed   ● No opportunity to observe

Learning activities are meaningful to students and promote a high level of student engagement: 63% | 13% | 4% | 20%

Materials and real-world examples are used that help students make connections to their lives: 54% | 26% | 20%

Learning experiences build on prior student learning and invite students to make connections: 48% | 24% | 9% | 20%

Source: Education Northwest analysis of diversity, equity, and inclusion classroom observation protocol (N = 46).

EDUCATORS REQUEST MORE SUPPORT DEVELOPING CULTURALLY SPECIFIC COMMUNICATION WITH STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

In an open-ended section of the survey, about 10 percent of LMSD educators described challenges related to learning about students' cultural backgrounds and integrating those backgrounds into curriculum and instruction in an authentic way. One educator said:

> *"Finding out what cultures are represented in the classroom is difficult. To imply that someone is representative of a minority culture is a microaggression. Then, to include a lesson about the one student from another culture feels forced. It's difficult to do this in an authentic way, especially if the student does not want to be singled out or identified by that culture."*
>
> – LMSD educator survey respondent

Other teachers want additional support on how to welcome families into the classroom community. About 16 percent of educators described challenges related to forming relationships with families, including a lack of time, limited opportunities to interact, and restrictions due to COVID. In particular, educators would like support working with linguistically diverse families.

"Working with linguistically diverse families and helping them to feel included and heard in the same way as other families has been especially difficult since meetings moved virtual, specifically when a translator is involved."

— LMSD educator survey respondent

Conclusion

The goal of the project was to explore curricular materials, instructional practices, and pedagogy in LMSD. The findings from the equity review suggest that LMSD schools create common spaces and classrooms that reflect diverse identities, cultures, and abilities. Educators are efficacious at creating learning environments that are physically and culturally inviting and demonstrate and create an ethic of care. Most students read texts by authors from diverse backgrounds and identities. A curriculum review shows evidence of literature by diverse authors and opportunities to explore different points of view.

The results from surveys, observations, and curriculum review also show areas for growth. The English curriculum review shows less evidence of differentiated instruction depending on student needs and fewer opportunities for students to foster a sense of personal advocacy and explore issues of social justice. Likewise, fewer students encounter issues of social justice in their classroom assignments and students of color are less likely to indicate that their teachers incorporate their backgrounds and experiences into teaching practices. While educators create welcoming learning environments, fewer express efficacy with culturally specific relationships strategies and family engagement. In the following section, we highlight key recommendations related to these findings.

Recommendations

In addition to describing their experiences implementing culturally responsive curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy, educators provided several recommendations to improve districtwide support. Education Northwest reviewed key findings from the educator survey with the study advisory group to refine these recommendations for LMSD.

Use screening tools to center equity in curriculum adoption.

ENGAGE IN A DIRECTED CURRICULUM REVIEW PROCESS

Several researchers have developed frameworks, tools, and rubrics for evaluating how the principles of culturally responsive teaching are reflected in curriculum and course materials. The framework for culturally responsive practice introduced in this report (Lindsey, 2008; 2018) may help LMSD personnel and educators screen curricular materials for potential bias. Another recommended tool is the Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard (Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019). While these tools require training and preparation to be used effectively, they can contribute to a more thorough curricular review that yields authentic and important findings, conclusions, and next steps that are grounded in local context and community understanding. LMSD uses tools, such as the Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard (Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019) to evaluate new curriculum. Similar tools and rubrics can be used to evaluate existing curriculum to ensure fidelity curricular materials.

INCLUDE FAMILY AND STUDENT VOICE

Curriculum reviews are designed to be collaborative processes that engage educators, families, community members, and students. LMSD personnel could support a more in-depth, directed curriculum review, specific to grade level and subject area, for a group of teachers to complete together. The collaborative team can include families, LMSD community members, and students with diverse identities that reflect the community populations to promote transparency and communication. This team can be involved in the selection of a tool or process and the school or district can ensure that members are provided orientation and training in using the selected source. Finally, allow time for the group to build consensus on the key words, ideas or concepts they are

looking for as they look over the curriculum. This will help to ensure team members are able to score and rate more effectively as a group.

REVIEW LITERATURE SELECTIONS FOR BIAS

Literature selections at the district, school, and classroom level should be reviewed for bias using a comprehensive matrix that accounts for BIPOC representation and affirms diverse experiences, accurate and authentic historical experiences, and contemporary contributions. A summary of tools that support this type of review, including important local considerations, appears in the Region 8 Comprehensive Center (2020) report *Tools and Guidance for Evaluating Bias in Instructional Materials*.

Develop communities of practice.

Opportunities for collaboration are crucial for educators to review curriculum and instructional practices. As one educator wrote in the survey, "We need more opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration, practical [guidance on] how to have tough conversations, and additional opportunities to engage student voice around this work." Using communities of practice or talking circles, educators can collaboratively read, analyze, and reflect upon race, religion, and gender—particularly aligned to the populations of students they serve—to develop greater understanding and cultural proficiency. Communities of practice or talking circles could include community members who share funds of knowledge that educators can incorporate in teaching and learning, helping bridge the lives of students at home and school.

Support outreach to families.

Research has shown that engagement between families and teachers leads to higher grades and test scores, fewer absences, and more advanced social skills for students (Epstein et al., 2019). Teachers also experience improved performance and job satisfaction and families become more empowered to be effective learning partners (Epstein et al., 2019). Caregivers often reported not knowing if equity-oriented practices, like a discussion of social justice, were present in their students' classrooms. Additionally, caregivers of students of color often reported that these practices were present in only a few or none of their students' classes.

In their survey, LMSD educators requested additional support from the district in building relationships with families and the community, in particular with the district's growing population of emergent bilingual students. One educator said, "We need support reaching out to new and expanding diverse populations moving into our district. Leadership needs to provide more opportunities for classroom teachers to learn how to support their [English language development] students." One resource that may help strengthen family engagement is the Teaching for Change publication _Between Families and Schools: Creating Meaningful Relationships_. This resource includes suggested actions and questions to investigate within school communities to support meaningful partnerships with families.

Offer practical guidance to implement culturally responsive teaching practices.

In surveys, educators requested more professional development, toolkits, guidance, and other learning opportunities to support the implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices. Some educators would like more consistent professional development options focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). When asked what the district could provide to support culturally responsive teaching practices, one educator requested "more training for all faculty and staff to engage in – not just a two-hour snapshot." Another suggested that the district "make [DEI professional development] a focus, rather than mixing it with the other professional development opportunities." Likewise, research has shown that, for diversity, equity, and inclusion professional development to be effective, educators need intensive, sustained learning opportunities (Darling-Hammon et al., 2021; Cobb & Jackson, 2011).

Other educators suggested that LMSD provide more practical guidance on implementing culturally responsive teaching practices. One survey participant said, "We really need concrete examples of how this can be used in the classroom." Another said, "Instead of talking about why equity and inclusion are important, provide practical steps for teachers to implement." Educators specified challenges to implementing culturally responsive teaching practices across subject, especially math and science. DEI professional development should provide practical guidance specific to subject matters and grade levels (Darling-Hammon et al, 2021). See _Exploring diversity and inclusion in professional development at Lower Merion School District_ for additional professional development strategies and recommendations.

SUPPORT ALL TEACHERS PROMOTE EQUITY WORK

Educators of color expressed higher levels of efficacy implementing culturally responsive teaching compared to white educators. In particular, educators of color report more skills developing culturally specific relationships with families and students. Rather than overburdening BIPOC teachers with school activities related to diversity and racism, schools can respect and learn from BIPOC educators and share the responsibility of equity work (King, 2016; Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2018). Schools should provide professional development opportunities to all staff on racial equity to improve school climate (Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2021). To support all teachers sharing equity work, professional development can be tailored to educators' existing knowledge of culturally responsive teaching practices. Educators with less knowledge or commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion can have professional development that is catered to their needs and abilities (Darling-Hammon et al., 2021).

Build organizational capacity for DEI work.

Educators said they would like to see LMSD build more capacity to support DEI efforts across the district. One survey participant said the district needs "new organizational infrastructure dedicated to supporting culturally responsive practices, not limited to teacher leaders tasked with supporting the work." The imposition of racialized labor, or the "invisible tax" imposed on BIPOC teachers and leaders can lead to exhaustion, burnout, and push-out of teachers of color from the profession (King, 2016; Kohli, 2018; Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2021). Therefore, schools should share the responsibility of improving the school's racial climate (Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2021). Many see the new DEI director as a critical vehicle for building organizational capacity and aligning DEI efforts across the district. They hope to see the new DEI director "build a comprehensive plan and provide DEI education in the district in a systematic way."

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