

BUILDING BLOCK 3:

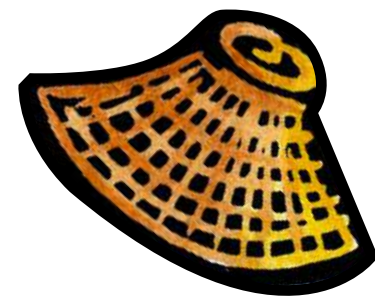
CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

*Don't teach me about my culture,
but use my culture to teach me.*

- Benny Shendo



BUILDING BLOCK 3: CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS



Value and lean on family and community ways of knowing

When school staff value family and community ways of knowing, families can bring their full selves into the school and can use their knowledge and strengths to support their students and schools. Respect for family and community cultures, languages, histories, and values is foundational to any successful partnership.

Key Concepts and Research

Every family has distinct traditions, values, stories, and connections to place. These experiences and affiliations, or culture, can influence parenting practices, communication, knowledge sets, and learning styles. Each of us uses our culture and experiences to build new knowledge, to make meaning of new information and experiences, and to integrate our skills. By incorporating a family's culture or experience, we can actually improve student learning and success.

In Alaska, schools are often very diverse or culturally specific. Some schools have students from many different backgrounds. The Anchorage School District has students whose families speak 100 languages, each bringing unique experiences to the classroom. In parts of rural Alaska, students may largely be raised

in a set of culturally specific values. In each of these cases, our cultural richness is a great storehouse of strength for our schools, for students, and for families. Bringing that strength into our schools requires **cultural responsiveness**.

Cultural responsiveness means using culture to integrate knowledge, skills, and practices. For many students, their culture is foundational to their identity, their learning style, and their social and emotional development. Each family adds their unique experiences, shaping the lens through which students and their families view the world. The better we understand a family's culture, the better we are able to ensure appropriate curricula, support effective ways of learning, establish reasonable policies, and develop common language or norms.

Understanding Alaska's history is also important for educators. For generations, colonial education systems actively separated Alaska Native children from their

families and punished them for speaking their languages, eating traditional foods, or practicing traditional cultural activities. These policies and practices, along with widespread abuse, have led to grief, anger, and mistrust that continues to impact students, their families, and the education system. When we understand this **historic or intergenerational trauma** and acknowledge the past, we are better able to establish the authentic relationships necessary for effective family partnership.

Relationship-building is at the heart of family-school partnerships. Authentic relationships stem from understanding a person's worldview, cultural background, values, and customs. This context is important for fostering trust and healing. This is also important so students and families can be free to be who they are and not have to "check their identity at the door" of the school.

Learning becomes more relevant when cultural knowledge and prior experiences are woven in.¹ And the corollary holds true: Disparities between the cultural values and communication patterns of the home and the school can undermine children's enthusiasm for learning and their belief in their own capacity to learn.² Experts advise using students' existing knowledge and strengths, whether teaching math or social and emotional skills.

"Culturally responsive systems are the key to improving outcomes for American Indian and Alaska Native students in school and in life," writes Mandy Smoker Broadus:

These efforts can also play a significant role in increased family and community interaction, dialogue and collaboration. ... When a system is culturally responsive, families and the community recognize these thoughtful intentions to value who the students are and where they come from.³

This applies beyond Alaska Native families to the 100+ cultures represented in Alaska schools. Real-world experience in Alaska supports the research: According to Anchorage's 90 by 2020 Graduation Initiative, when Anchorage School District data showed that Pacific Islanders had a high rate of absence, family members from the community came together to offer an after-school dance program. Attendance for those students significantly improved. Families and the school worked together to improve student outcomes by tapping cultural strengths. **Culturally responsive teaching and family engagement is a critical building block for equity in education.**⁴

Zaretta Hammond, author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, writes that a culturally responsive approach is not a program but a *mindset*:

That means that it's equally important to do the 'inside-out' work to build your social-emotional capacity to work across social, linguistic, racial, and/or economic difference with students and their families. Too often I hear educators say that they are 'color-blind' or don't understand the socio-political issues that lead to inequities in education – like disproportionate discipline outcomes for boys of color or low achievement data for English learners, poor students, and students of color in general. ... We have to make it our personal business to build our emotional stamina to address our own blind spots and biases.

Cultural Responsiveness in Action: Graduation Policy

For decades, graduating seniors at Anchorage high schools were required to wear the standard cap and gown to graduation without any alteration. “We didn’t want cuss words or symbols that offended people, so we were pretty strict about it,” said Kersten Johnson-Struempfer, the district’s senior director of secondary education.⁵

Jacqueline Morris wanted her son, who is of Yup’ik and Inupiaq heritage, to be able to wear traditional regalia as he received his diploma from Service High School in 2018. She won an exception for her son, but she didn’t want her younger daughter and others to have to wage the same fight. So her family, along with the district’s Native Advisory Committee, pushed for and achieved broader change.

It took hard work and months of advocacy, but a district regulation now states that Anchorage graduates can wear

traditional tribal regalia and objects of cultural significance at their graduation ceremonies.

“I think we have one of the most diverse school districts in the country, and really, for us, I think it’s important to recognize that,” Johnson-Struempfer told the Anchorage Daily News. “I’m excited to see how students express themselves at graduation this year.”

Coverage in the *Anchorage Daily News* captured the impact of this simple yet profound change:

Even nearly a year later, as Morris talked about watching her son cross the stage in his sealskin cap to get his high school diploma, she got goosebumps. She was just so proud, she said, and she knows her ancestors were too. She can now share that feeling with more families of more graduates.

“They’re honoring their past while stepping into the future,” she said, “and they’re bringing their culture with them.”

Morris’ daughter Nyche Andrew shared, “When I graduate, I want younger Native students to see me in something that’s familiar to them and their family and their culture. I want them to feel inspired.”

In 2019, 70 students took advantage of the new policy to wear traditional clothing with their cap and gown. Milana Stalder, who is part Yup’ik, wore a kuspuk under her gown in memory of her grandmother. Her cap was adorned with ivory carvings and seal and sea otter trim. “It is really important because this gives me a way to connect to my culture,” she said.⁶



Analysis: Graduation Policy

WHAT DO YOU NOTICE?

- How does the Anchorage School District's new policy allow students and families to bring their whole selves into the school?
- What does the policy communicate to students and families about their cultures?
- What does traditional regalia mean to students, their families, and Elders?
- How is the policy inclusive and encouraging of families to participate in their student's education?

WHAT ELSE COULD THE DISTRICT DO TO HONOR CULTURE AND COMMUNITY?

- How can the school work with tribes or cultural organizations to enhance ceremonies or educational milestones to incorporate cultural protocols?
- How can the community and school district extend this kind of cultural connectedness beyond graduation into everyday school activities?
- How can the school and community create more coherence so students can do less conceptual translation between school and their families?
- How can the school and families work together to create opportunities to include cultural protocols, ceremonies, representations, or objects with them to school?

PERSONAL EXTENSION:

- In your practice, how do you make room for students and families to bring their whole selves to school?
- How might you go further?
- How can you bring your students' cultures, languages, and cultural artifacts into your everyday practice?



Tools and Strategies

The Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB) works with school districts to embed the concepts of cultural responsiveness and cultural safety into district and school practice. The following components can be helpful for culturally responsive family partnership:

CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY-BASED TRAINING:

Establish on-boarding and continuing education for all staff to deepen understanding of community experiences and strengths.

CULTURALLY SAFE AND WELCOMING SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT:

Create a welcoming physical environment with physical space for community members and tangible cultural cues throughout the building, such as language, art, community history, and culturally significant materials. This can include space for families or Elders to use as a culture or community room.

OPPORTUNITIES THAT PROMOTE HEALING, HISTORIES, AND EQUITY:

Schools can promote healing through community dialogues, school-based activities, cultural protocols and ceremonies, and resiliency training.

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES THAT REFLECT CULTURAL CONTENT AND WAYS OF LEARNING:

By building on students' existing knowledge and ways of learning, school staff can accelerate students' academic or social and emotional learning, and help families feel more connected to their students' learning.

POLICIES: School district policies, administrative regulations, and school handbooks can support cultural connections. The AASB has 40 policy recommendations for culturally responsive and trauma-informed policy integration. Likewise, job descriptions, interview questions, and candidate evaluation components can establish culturally responsive expectations from the start.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATIVE PLANNING AND CO-CREATION:

Schools can host conversations and gatherings where families can share their priorities and actively participate in creating curricula or goals. This "co-creation" incorporates family views and deepens a sense of shared responsibility for student success. First Alaskans Institute (FAI) provides tools and training to support these dialogues. The FAI and AASB support communities and schools interested in hosting dialogues.

CURRICULA AND LANGUAGE: This can include regionally accurate histories, appropriate content, and language. This can be tied to place and people.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE FAMILY PARTNERSHIP IDEAS

Participate in subsistence activities or cultural festivities.

Use place-based content, such as dissection of a moose to learn biology.

Learn and incorporate local or family histories.

Recognize past and present community leaders in social studies classes.

Consider cultural modifications when talking to families, such as less direct eye contact.

Listen carefully and practice silence when meeting with families and those who may speak less fluent English or who use longer “wait time” before speaking.

Work with families to conduct a cultural inventory of content and classroom materials.

Use art, language, and stories that reflect students’ cultures.

Incorporate questions into each lesson that draw on community experiences and knowledge.

Review curricula with families to ensure it reflects students’ cultures.

Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive

Schools, published by the Alaska Native Knowledge Network, provides the following standards for family partnership:

Culturally responsive educators work closely with families to achieve a high level of complementary educational expectations between home and school. Educators who meet this cultural standard do the following:

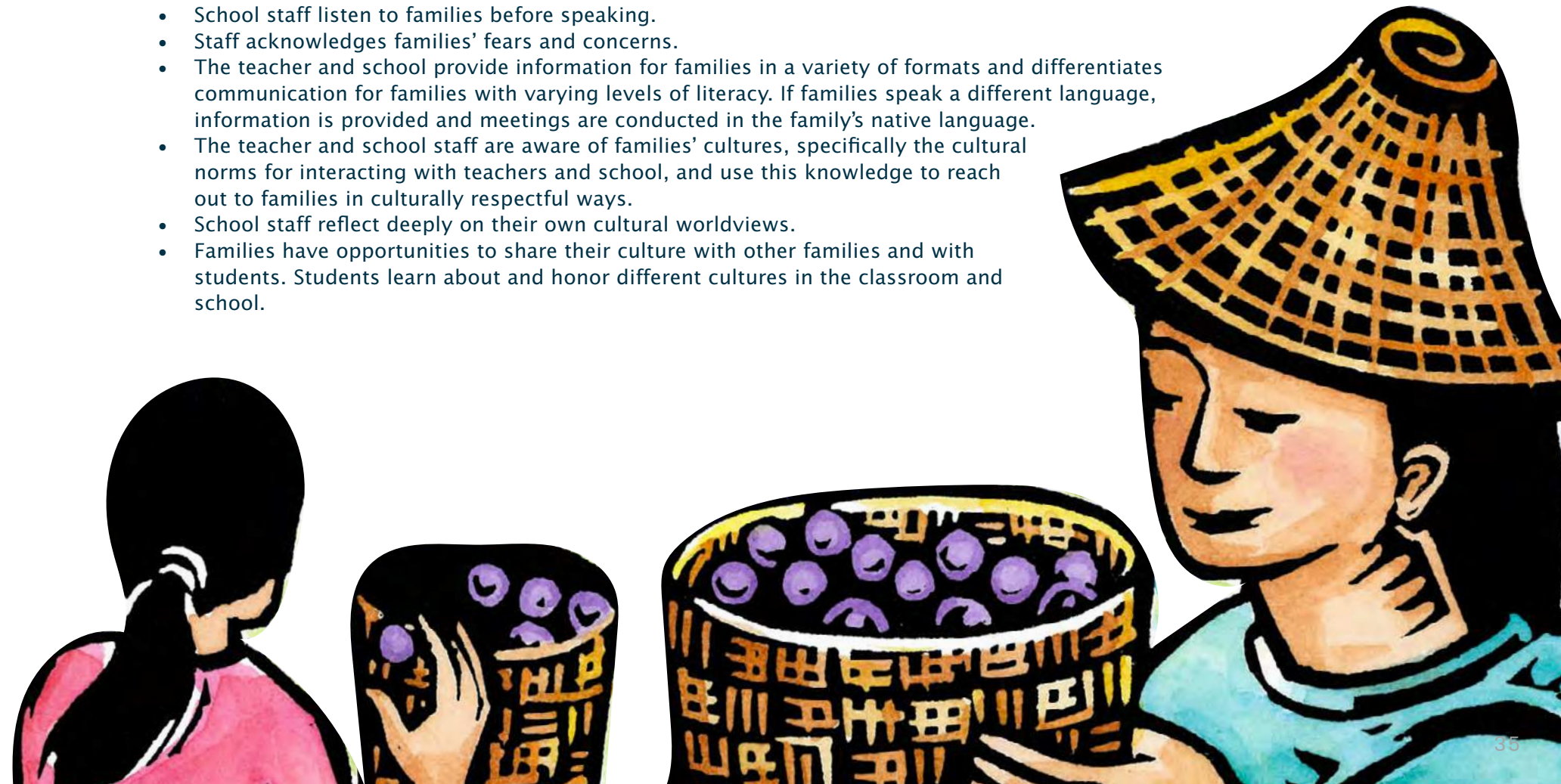
1. Promote extensive community and family interaction and involvement in their children’s education;
2. Involve Elders, parents, and local leaders in all aspects of instructional planning and implementation;
3. Seek to continually learn about and build upon the cultural knowledge that students bring with them from their homes and community; and
4. Seek to learn the local heritage language and promote its use in their teaching.

Recommended resource: *The Principal’s Guide to Building Culturally Responsive Schools* by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (n.d.).²

Signs of Success and Growth

The following indicators of successful beliefs and strategies for family engagement are adapted from the Flamboyan Foundation's School-Wide and Classroom Family Engagement Rubrics:

- School staff work to understand families' histories, communication styles, and cultures, and adapt partnership styles.
- School staff listen to families before speaking.
- Staff acknowledges families' fears and concerns.
- The teacher and school provide information for families in a variety of formats and differentiates communication for families with varying levels of literacy. If families speak a different language, information is provided and meetings are conducted in the family's native language.
- The teacher and school staff are aware of families' cultures, specifically the cultural norms for interacting with teachers and school, and use this knowledge to reach out to families in culturally respectful ways.
- School staff reflect deeply on their own cultural worldviews.
- Families have opportunities to share their culture with other families and with students. Students learn about and honor different cultures in the classroom and school.



Reflection Questions

Consider your school and community. You may want to discuss these questions with a colleague or community member, reflect on them on your own, or journal about them.

- What are the cultures of the families I serve?
- What are some important cultural practices to acknowledge or participate in?
- What are the stories of my students' families? What is their relationship with the education system?
- What opportunities exist for families to share their culture and experiences with school staff? How are these included in our course content?
- What am I doing to reach out to families who have been marginalized from school, and what structures might be helpful (e.g., family liaisons, dialogues, parent-peer groups)?
- Which components of the cultural safety framework do my district and school consider?
- Do I consistently value and acknowledge the strengths and gifts that families from diverse backgrounds and languages can bring to the teaching and learning process? How do I do so?

- How are families teaching culture to their children? What cultural strengths do my students and their families bring?
- How can I help families harness those cultural strengths to drive their students' success?
- How do I bring my own culture and world to the classroom and link it back to your current home, Alaska?

FOR STAFF WORKING IN THEIR HOME COMMUNITIES

- What are some roles I can play to support family school partnerships?
- What information and tools might be helpful to my colleagues?
- What assumptions or expectations might I have to put aside to meet families where they are?