

## Using Mastery-based and Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education (CRSE)

Equity and culturally responsive-sustaining education (CRSE) are core values for the Mastery Collaborative community of practitioners. Our shared belief is that mastery shifts create more clear, student-centered, and effective learning environments for all stakeholders. Mastery and CRSE have common ground philosophically and pragmatically. When these practices are combined, the power of both CRSE and mastery are amplified. Together, these approaches can increase dynamic responsiveness to learners, change power dynamics in schools, and support students to be active learners with increased engagement, motivation, positive learning identity, metacognition, and with a sense that all belong and can experience success in the academic sphere.

**What does CRSE involve?** In 1994, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings defined 3 pillars of Culturally Relevant Education:

1. **Academic Success:** Learners are working with educators who believe all students are capable of learning, achieving academic success, and being prepared for college and careers after high school.
2. **Cultural Competency:** being clear on one's position and identity, how we perceive issues/others, and how others perceive us. For teachers, cultural competency is the ability to interact effectively with learners who we perceive to be most different from us culturally.
3. **Critical (sociopolitical) Consciousness:** ability to analyze, critique, and actively challenge inequitable systems of access, power, and privilege.

In the 2010s, the field has evolved into culturally *responsive-sustaining education*—along with being relevant, education must be responsive and sustaining of students' cultural identities. New York State's 2019 [CRSEFrameworkNYS](#) builds on Ladson-Billings's three pillars, and is an indispensable new resource for us all.

## What happens when we use both mastery-based and culturally responsive-sustaining practices?

- **Transparency:** The path to success is clear and learning outcomes are relevant to students' lives and interests. Clear criteria shared from the start reduce opportunity for implicit bias.
- **Power shifts and role shifts:** Roles of students and teachers are refocused for active learning, flexible pacing, and an inquiry-based, collaborative approach. Students drive their own learning, and teachers coach them.
- **Positive learning identity:** Mindsets for learning (growth, value, belonging), culturally competent school culture, and active learning build agency, and celebrate and sustain learners' identities (regarding academics, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability status, socioeconomic status, etc.)
- **Independent mastery of key skills:** Learning is a process undertaken by the learner. As students gain capacity, supports/scaffolds are strategically reduced and removed. The goal is for all learners to experience/demonstrate independent mastery of relevant, high-leverage skills and knowledge.

Developing a culturally responsive-sustaining environment starts with reflection on one's own beliefs and positionality, and includes ongoing self-examination on these fronts, as well as commitment to serving young people in schools that value their identities and interests, and foster critical consciousness and active learning. In the words of [student-centered educators](#), we don't give students voice—they already have voices.

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*On the next page, we share a set of "crowd-sourced" indicators at the intersection of mastery and culturally responsive-sustaining education, offered by MC members across the city over the course of a series of conversations about how mastery and CRSE, used together, can amplify the power of student-centered learning.*

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## Indicators of Mastery & Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education (CRSE) Practices<sup>1</sup>

### Curriculum Moves:

- Learning targets are high leverage (worth building, owning, coming back to), and focus on relevant academic skills and knowledge.
- Tasks and opportunities involve meaningful interaction and active roles for students, shifting away from passive learning and “behaving” as a norm or goal.
- Eurocentric/dominant materials (“The Canon,” etc.) and perspectives are balanced by and critiqued by other perspectives; students learn to analyze events, texts, etc. from multiple points of view.
- Learning experiences honor the strengths students bring from their backgrounds, perspectives, lives—and are developed through a racial justice, social justice, and equity lens.
- A culture of independence is fostered through design strategies such as use of backwards-planned projects with opportunities for student choice, and multiple opportunities to build mastery.

### Interactions with Learners:

- Power dynamics shift to allow for active rather than passive learning.<sup>2</sup> There is a norm of “productive noise” in the classroom.
- Meaningful opportunities for flexible pacing, voice, and choice support learners to develop the ability to shape their educational experiences.
- Peer/self-assessments and conferencing create a culture of reflection/revision for students and teachers.
- Students see themselves and their cultures represented and valued in the academic discourse and the visual appearance of their classrooms.
- Teachers foster strong bonds with students, and are readily accessible through office hours, email, etc.
- A framework for progress-based restorative practices supports student success with personal/academic skills, work habits, behavior standards, etc.
- Discussions regularly examine and critique history/current events from multiple/non-dominant perspectives.

### Grading Moves:

- Grades are not rewards nor punishments, but are a way of communicating where students are in their learning.
- Outcomes-based feedback helps learners understand the “why” driving their level of mastery, and focuses on progress, growth and learning, instead of on grades; this helps to avoid a culture of learning as competition.
- A focus on transparency about learning goals and criteria for success reduce opportunities for subjectivity and implicit bias to play out in grading, and reduces labeling/stigma aspect of grades.
- Learning and assessment include and norm multiple opportunities for revision and reassessment.
- Responsiveness between teachers and students is improved via timely, focused feedback with the purpose of informing learning, rather than sorting students.
- Focus is on mastering academic skills and knowledge, and habits of success—and away from grading for compliance, extra credit, etc.

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<sup>1</sup>The indicators here are offered by practitioners at Mastery Collaborative member schools.

<sup>2</sup> Even teachers with years of experience can struggle with this all-important shift. However, using an active learning model benefits learners in many ways, offering frequent opportunities to practice/apply newly acquired skills and knowledge, building increasing capacity for independent learning, and creating space and time for students to build critical consciousness.