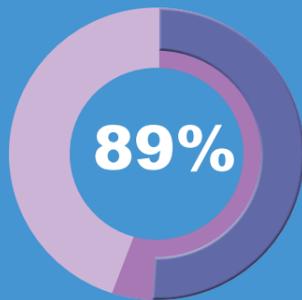


EVOLVING AS CULTURALLY PROFICIENT EDUCATORS AND PROVIDERS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION



Statistics help us to understand who Maryland’s students are, their racial/ethnic background, and the special services they receive to be ready to learn. Students’ racial/ethnic, linguistic, socio-economic, gender/gender identity and abilities can and should inform how we teach students and engage families in their children’s development and learning. To honor and affirm every student and their family as valuable education partners, we must evolve as culturally proficient educators and providers.



In **2015**, out of **874,514** students enrolled in grades PreK-12 in Maryland, **56%** were students of color. **89%** of those students were receiving special services such as 504 plans, special education services, free or reduced priced meals, limited English proficient, migrant, and/or Title I.

What is cultural proficiency?

Cultural proficiency, as defined by Lindsey, Nuri, Robins & Terrell, is “honoring the differences among cultures, seeing diversity as a benefit, and interacting knowledgeably and respectfully among a variety of groups.” What does this mean? This means that we view culture as an asset, not as a deficit and we recognize the strengths that every student and family brings into our programs. To be culturally proficient begins with a reflection on who we are as individuals and as part of organizations, it looks deeply at our assumptions about diverse students, and examines our expectations

about diverse students’ academic potential and their families’ potential to be meaningful partners for learning. There are **five core principles** that culturally proficient leaders follow:

1. Culture is a predominant force in people’s lives; it exists everywhere.
 2. The dominant culture serves people in varying degrees—both good and bad.
 3. People have both personal identities and group identities.
 4. Diversity within cultures is vast and significant.
 5. Each individual and each group has unique cultural values and needs.
- (Lindsey, Roberts, Campbell, Jones, 2005)



What does cultural proficiency look like in practice?

Cultural proficiency is a **mindset** that views diverse students and families as having assets that can contribute to their learning. So, what does being a culturally proficient early childhood provider or teacher look like? The culturally proficient provider: knows who their students and families are, their cultural backgrounds, can identify their assets, and understands how to meet their needs in a way that honors and affirms them (Gay, 2010). In an early childhood setting the center or classroom may display pictures or items representative of children’s cultural backgrounds, bilingual books may be on hand, or staff may learn some key phrases such as “hello,” “thank you,” and “I can help” in the languages most spoken by the children and families they serve.

Therefore, the culturally proficient provider or educator will be able to:

- Establish cultural bridges between children, families, and staff who come from different cultural backgrounds and perspectives.
- Understand the benefits of diverse cultures and dual language learning.
- Combat deficit-thinking about a student or groups of students and/or families from diverse backgrounds and focus on the positive aspects of diversity.

What are the benefits of applying cultural proficiency principles and practice to learning environments for early childhood and family, school, and community engagement?

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has stated “for the optimal development of all children, educators must value children’s home language, respect (hold in high regard) and value (esteem, appreciate) the home culture, and promote and encourage the active involvement and support of all families, including extended and nontraditional family units.”

Students succeed when they and their families have regular and positive interactions with school personnel and they participate in school activities (Crosnoe, 2013). Strong parent-community-school ties have been shown to improve performance on state reading assessments as much as four times and ten times more in math assessments than schools without strong ties (Bryk, 2010). Culturally responsive teaching is reflected by teachers’ use of student’s experiences and infusing it in the curriculum (Banks, et al., 2005). This may occur by selecting bilingual books that affirm children being dual language learners or incorporating traditional nursery rhymes and songs from a child’s home culture. Children whose teachers use culturally-responsive practices with greater frequency are more likely to demonstrate stronger reading comprehension skill growth than were children whose teachers used culturally responsive practices less frequently (Underwood, 2009). Learning environments that allow students to make use of **cultural elements, cultural capital**, and other **contextual knowledge** to learn new content and information enhance their schooling experience and propel academic success (Howard, 2013). If students and families feel honored and valued as part of the learning process, students feel at ease and have more success transitioning into new learning environments because the teacher is using prior knowledge and cultural elements to help the child feel comfortable.

