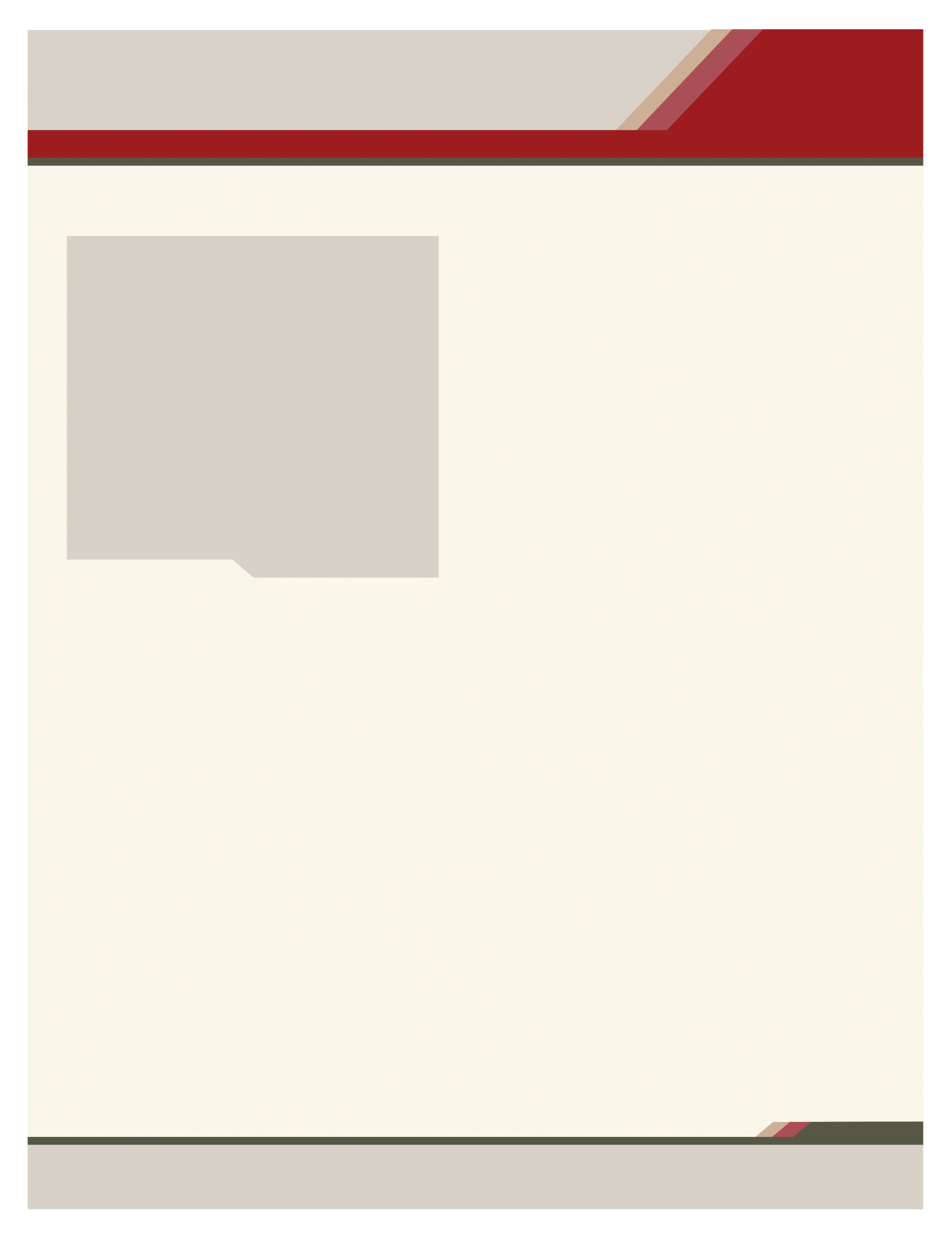


**Developing**

**Effective Curriculum**



**Defining Curriculum**

In accord with Kelly (2009), we believe that “within a democratic society, an educational curriculum at all levels should be concerned to provide a liberating experience by focusing on such things as the promotion of freedom and independence of thought, of social and political empowerment, of respect for the freedom of others, of an acceptance of variety of opinion, and of the enrichment of life of every individual in that society, regardless of class, race or creed” (p. 8). At FirstSchool, we work with teachers to think deeply about curriculum because doing so matters tremendously to their abilities to ensure the success of the students they have right here, right now. We challenge teachers to examine what the curriculum *includes* and what it *excludes*. In the words of Slattery (2006), we examine curriculum so “we find a way around hegemonic forces and institutional obstacles that limit our knowledge, reinforce our prejudices, and disconnect us from the global community” (p. 35).

**First**School - *Uniting the best of Early Childhood, Elementary, and Special Education in order to improve the school experience for African-American, Latino, and low income children and their families.*

**Framework: Levels of Curriculum**

Content can be operationalized at four levels. We view these levels as layers essential to providing an enriching experience that prepares children to succeed both in and outside the school building. Each level is nested in its relationship to the others. The *Common Core State Standards* and *State, District and School programs* establish the national, state and district expectations for essential learning. The *Funds of Knowledge* level emphasizes the importance of considering children’s sociocultural environments as a resource in their learning, and the *Generative Curriculum* level provides opportunity for the students and/or the community to have input into their paths of learning, as well as the ways in which they demonstrate it. Each of these levels will be explored in detail.

**First**School

Developing Effective Curriculum Curriculum

**Funds of Knowledge**

In many cases, teachers do not venture beyond the Common Core State Standards or the state and district core programs when considering

what to teach their students. However, limiting curriculum development

to the first two levels of our nested framework does not take into account the cultural backgrounds of the students, their families, and the community. Much of the curricula developed for young children have been designed with the hidden or explicit purpose of inculcating the linguistic, literate and cultural practices of the dominant White middle-class cultural norms. Between the 1960’s and 1970’s, the purpose of many educational initiatives was to eradicate the “culture of poverty” or “cultural deprivation” by replacing it with the cultural practices and norms of the dominant culture. The goal was to address the achievement gap by providing children with those learning experiences to which they were “deprived” in their homes (Paris, 2012). Today, we see residue of this mindset within paternalistic educational efforts that have similar aims to improve students’ lives by modeling mainstream societal standards (Whitman, 2008).

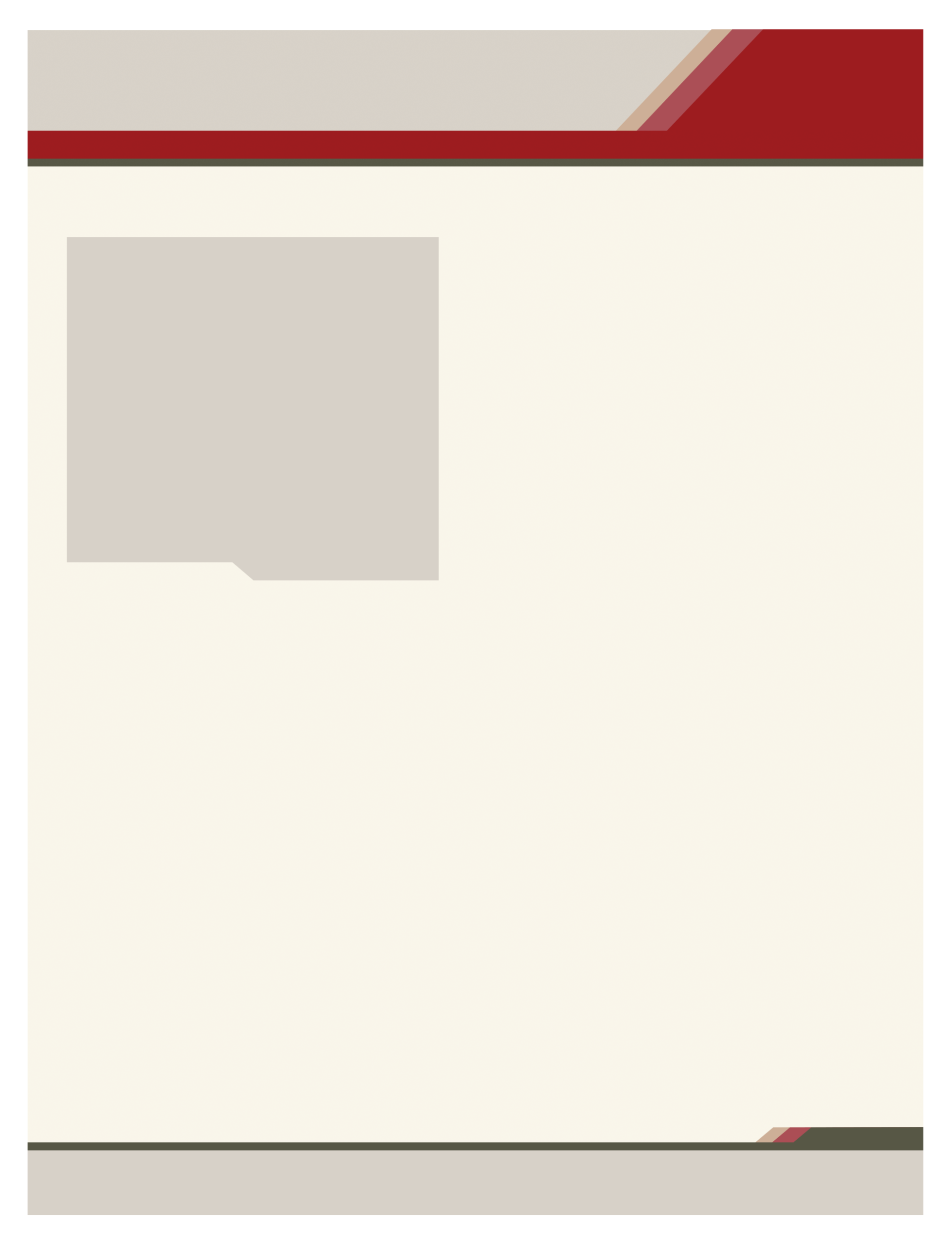




**Common Core State Standards and State/District/School Core Programs**

In 2010, forty-six states, including the District of Columbia, adopted a nationally established set of learnings known as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). At their best, national standards provide the advantages of creating shared expectations of students’ performance, focus and depth in curriculum content, efficiency (as states can create common materials and professional development), and finally, quality assessments that can be delivered electronically to promote baseline achievement (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011).

No matter the source for classroom content used to teach a particular skill or concept, the Common Core State Standards remain central. The work of developing lessons that are aligned to the Standards and creating a balanced scope and sequence that maximizes teaching time is clearly an ***intentional*** process. Working with intentionality can also provide teachers with agency, or the ability to shape what they do. This is particularly noteworthy because teachers often feel that today’s educational climate is too regimented, punitive, and allows little room for personal input. As teachers become removed from the task of planning, they often lose their ability to discern how the curriculum can be adapted and implemented to the children in their class. This is especially problematic when working with minority children. Most curricula have not been specifically designed or tested to meet minority children’s needs or incorporate their culture (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Gonzalez, 1993; Peck & Serrano, 2002; Milosovic, 2007; Moore, 2000; Ndura, 2004; Wright, 2002). Therefore, teachers need be diligent in their efforts to ensure that the curricula they deliver take into account the background knowledge and experiences of ***all*** of the children in their classroom.



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However, as a reaction to these deficit views, researchers in the 1970’s and 1980’s began to recognize that rather than being “culturally deprived”, children of minority backgrounds had experiences seen as valuable for growing up in their particular sociocultural contexts but often left unrecognized as beneficial for academic learning. Efforts in more recent times have focused on helping educators recognize home and cultural practices as resources available for integration into curriculum and teaching. The work of Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005) defines funds of knowledge as “the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p.72). Educators can and should use this concept to develop teaching experiences for children in a variety of content areas (Johnson, Baker, & Breuer, 2007; Marshall & Toohey, 2010; Riojas-Cortez, 2008; Sandoval-Taylor, 2005; Souto-Manning, 2010). These attempts are not only critical to ensure equity in students’ participation and engagement in school but are also necessary to help children make explicit connections between the knowledge learned in school and that acquired outside of school.

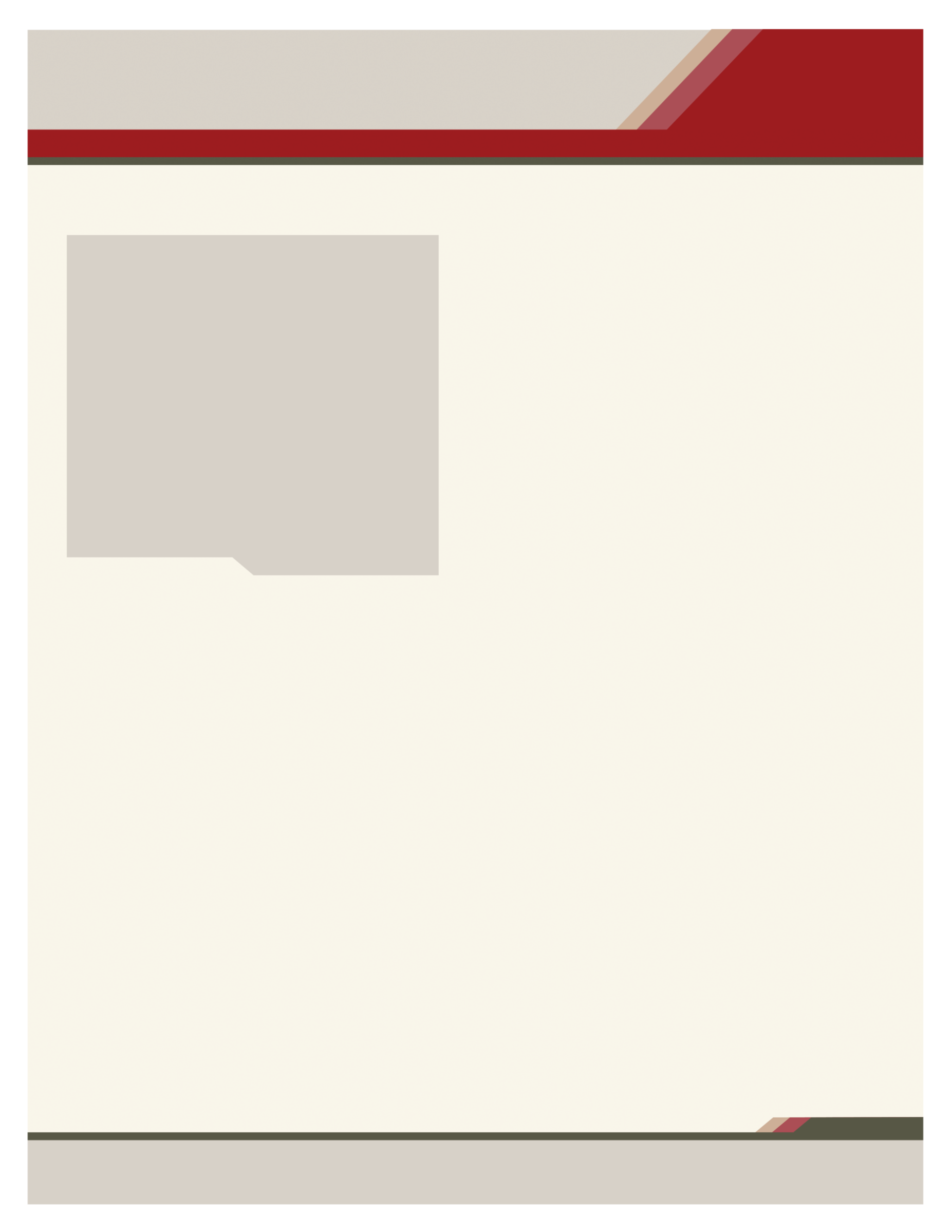
**Generative Curriculum**

The most comprehensive and complex aspect of curriculum development is the ***generative curriculum***. A generative curriculum provides opportunity for the students and/or the community to have input into their paths of learning as well as the ways in which they demonstrate their learning. Lessons designed at this level encompass the other three levels while also engaging the learner as an active partner in the learning process. It is important to remember that knowledge is contextual and must begin with what is recognizable to the learner. Therefore, it is critical for the teacher to honor what is familiar and known by both incorporating it in lesson planning and including student opportunities for choice in exploring and demonstrating learning that connects to national, state, and district learning expectations.

Formulation of lessons based on the generative curriculum increase student engagement, promote learning beyond the classroom, and capitalize on the inherent curiosity children have of the world around them. They promote self-efficacy and support the development of positive racial/ethnic identity by demonstrating that both the teacher and classmates see value in what is culturally relevant and valued by the individual learners and/or the community (Agnello, 2007; Ball & Pence, 2001; Cordiero & Fisher, 1994; Kornfeld & Goodman, 1998; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

**Using Effective Curricula to Close the Achievement Gap**

The chronic nature of the ongoing achievement gap underscores FirstSchool’s greatest challenge – to move teachers and leaders from a mindset of accepting underperformance as inevitable for poor and minority children to *a commitment that makes explicit the responsibility of education professionals to broaden their repertoires and hone their skills to create schools and classrooms in which all children maximize their potential.* While FirstSchool recognizes that there are children who lag behind academically and socially, the use of content at the levels of funds of knowledge and the generative curriculum enables students to more rapidly close their learning gaps. Connecting new learning to prior knowledge is a key factor in the learning process (Adams & Bertram, 1980; Garner, 2008; Rumelhart, 1980). So, the more teachers can use student knowledge, interest, values, and experiences, the more they increase the odds that students will reach the intended curricular goals. Therefore, moving into these more sophisticated and nuanced realms of curricula is a critical step to ensuring the success of minority children.



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To be knowledgeable about curriculum, teachers must continuously engage in an ongoing, deep, and reflective process that includes unpacking the standards for each content area, crafting the standards into lessons that take into account the learning needs, interests, and culture of their students, delivering those lessons, assessing and monitoring student learning, and reflecting upon the outcomes to see how they can improve. This continuous cycle of inquiry, reflection, and improvement must routinely occur for teachers to become masterful. A great deal of time must be invested before one can authentically interpret content standards in terms of the children one is teaching, recognize how one content area intersects and overlaps with other content areas, and deliver it in a manner that enables children to make connections and meaning in their individual lives.

Leaders play a critical role when they offer guidance to their staff, set aside time for improving the quality of the content delivered in classrooms, and foster relationships and develop reciprocal partnerships with community members to gain insights and knowledge about the cultural values, norms, etc. of their students. Teachers accomplish this best when they work together and engage in ongoing discussions about curricular matters. By taking into account the different operational levels, grade level teams can develop solid curricular plans that authentically meet the needs of all students, especially African American, Latino, and low income children who may be otherwise overlooked within more traditional curricular practices.