

CLAS (Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services) Tips for Schools

Authored by Dr. Cindy Crusto on behalf of the CONNECTing Children and Families to Care initiative, funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), in conjunction with Connecticut's Children's Behavioral Health Plan

Purpose of the CLAS Tips Sheet

This document overviews the National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS Standards) in Health and Health Care, discusses their relevance and applications to schools, and encourages their use in Connecticut schools.

National Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) Standards

In 2000, the [Office of Minority Health](#) (OMH) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services created the first version of the National Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) Standards designed to eliminate health disparities, advance health equity, and improve the quality of health care. These CLAS standards focused on racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups and the critical role of culturally and linguistically appropriate services-- services that are respectful of and responsive to the cultural and linguistic needs of all individuals and employed by all members of an organization at every point of contact--in addressing racial and ethnic disparities in physical health and physical health care.

In 2013, the OMH updated the standards (enhanced CLAS Standards) to ensure that they were relevant and aligned with current thinking in the cultural competence field. The result was a comprehensive series of 15 guidelines that inform, guide, and facilitate practices related to culturally and linguistically appropriate health services. The enhanced standards move beyond race, ethnicity, and language diversity to include many cultural groups. Additionally, these standards move beyond physical health to include physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being. Thus, the standards apply to any public or private institution addressing individual, family, or community health, health care, or well-being and not just health care delivery facilities like hospitals (Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health, 2013).

Relevance and Applications of the CLAS Standards to Schools

Although the national CLAS standards are not routinely applied by professionals to elementary and secondary schools, they are highly relevant to educational settings. First, adoption of the CLAS Standards would support the U.S. Department of Education's mission, which is to "promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access." Unfortunately, equal educational opportunity and access for every individual remains unrealized. While U.S. public schools have grown more diverse, segregation by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status continues (Nowicki, 2022). Unfortunately, this de facto segregation translates into racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities in educational outcomes such as the likelihood of enrolling in advanced courses (Groundwater, Becker, Jiang, Gitter, Nuland & Ewaida, 2022) and high school completion (Bushnell, 2021). To better ensure that the educational system achieves its mission,

national education laws such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 support the commitment to equal opportunity for all students. In sum, adoption of the CLAS standards can support public schools in meeting their legislative, regulatory, and accreditation requirements.

Second, free public primary and secondary schools serve 49 million children and their families of which 22 million are White and 27 million are non-White. Because of the benefits associated with a comprehensive approach to education (i.e., full integration of social, emotional, and academic development) (Aspen Institute, n.d.), schools should broadly apply the standards to meet the health and academic learning of an extraordinary diverse student body. If schools are to live up to their mission, they must address the unique cultural and linguistic backgrounds and needs of these students to ensure equal access to educational opportunities.

Third, the CLAS standards address communication and language assistance and support. There are five million multilingual or English learner (EL) students in US public schools (Irwin, et al., 2021) and schools are legally required to help them become literate in English. Unfortunately, these multilingual/EL students may be at risk of being underserved. For example, one state found that their public schools routinely failed to meet state regulations for educating students learning English (Scott, 2021). The lack of adequate language resources for English learners contributes to the well-documented racial and ethnic disparities in educational outcomes. Schools need to ensure that multilingual students obtain the proper EL services, particularly because as these students achieve English proficiency and exit out of EL services, many perform on par with their English-speaking counterparts (de la Torre, Blanchard, Allensworth, & Freire, 2019). Adoption of the CLAS Standards would support adherence to national and state legislation related to multilingual learners. Additionally, the CLAS Standards could help establish an accountability mechanism within the school system to ensure students' language needs are met, thereby supporting students in meeting their full potential and reducing disparities in educational outcomes.

Fourth, the CLAS standards also apply to recruiting, promoting, and supporting a diverse governance, leadership, and workforce. Overall, public school boards, principals, and teachers are much less racially and ethnically diverse than the students they serve (Pew Research Center, 2021; Spiegelman, 2020). The CLAS Standards would address the need for governance, leadership, and the workforce (e.g., teachers, principals, administrators, counselors, front office staff, sanitation professionals) to better reflect the diversity of students.

Fifth, with respect to behavioral health services provided in school settings, the process of adapting the National CLAS Standards to schools should recognize that children and families from diverse cultural backgrounds may have differing values, beliefs, and practices as they relate to mental health than the school system with whom they interact. These differences include the definition of mental health, including emotional and spiritual health; the perception of illnesses and diseases and their causes; healing and well-being; help-seeking behaviors and attitudes toward the U.S. health care system and its providers; and lived experiences of bias and discrimination when accessing and using services. An understanding of these different

belief systems and how they affect the families of the children in our schools is critically important for creating an inclusive, supportive school environment.

For the reasons described above schools should apply the CLAS standards to their academic, social, and health-related functions.

Description of CLAS Standards

The standards are comprised of a principal standard and 14 remaining standards that fall into three thematic areas: 1) Governance, Leadership, and Workforce 2) Communication and Language Assistance and 3) Engagement, Continuous Improvement, and Accountability.

The first CLAS Standard is the Principal Standard: Provide effective, equitable, understandable, and respectful quality care and services. For schools, this care and services can refer to mental health care, but schools also provide a host of other academic, health, care and support services to students and their families. Schools are encouraged to assess the ways in which the standards described below can be applied to all areas of their mission.

Governance, Leadership, and Workforce: This theme emphasizes the importance of the implementation of CLAS as a systemic responsibility, requiring the investment, support, and training of all individuals at all levels within an organization. Within the scope of these standards, schools would focus their efforts on their boards, leadership such as principals and district administrators, and workforce including teachers, counselors, nurses, front office staff, and sanitation professionals. Schools would ensure that they recruit, hire, and retain diverse professionals and school personnel and support all personnel to engage in CLAS through training. Additionally, schools would provide system supports and resources such as funding to implement the standards. Governance also relates to critically reviewing policies and procedures that may result in inequities.

Communication and Language Assistance: This theme ensures that organizations comply with federal, local, and state requirements that people who are Limited English Proficient should have meaningful access to federally conducted and federally funded programs and activities. Three CLAS Standards comprise this theme and center on offering communication and language assistance (e.g., interpretation services) during all encounters with students and their families. To inform students and families about communication and language assistance services staff need to know how to access them, and if the staff provides the service themselves, staff need to be certified interpreters.

Engagement, Continuous Improvement, and Accountability: This set of Standards focuses on the supports necessary for adoption, implementation, and maintenance of culturally and linguistically appropriate policies and services regardless of one's role within an organization or practice. Schools should collect, analyze, and report on CLAS-related assessments at the individual school staff (CLAS-related knowledge, assessment of cultural and linguistic competence), organizational (e.g., readiness to change, degree to which CLAS Standards are

being implemented and how well they are being implemented; curriculum audit for cultural and linguistic relevance and appropriateness), and community levels (community assessment of what services are available to students and the degree to which those services are culturally and linguistically appropriate). With respect to care and service provision schools should collect and maintain demographic data to help with service provision (e.g., which languages interpreters are needed to serve students and families) but also to understand potential differential educational, health, or other outcomes based on cultural group. This set of standards also indicates that organizations should establish conflict and resolution processes and that schools should partner with communities in this work and report progress to the broader community outside of the school building.

For additional specific guidance from the National Latino Behavioral Health Association see [here](#).

CLAS Standards and Connecticut Schools

In academic year 2021-2022, 51.4 percent of Connecticut public school students were students of color, and these students have greater educational needs than five years ago. For example, 16.7 percent were students with disabilities and 8.8 percent of students were English learners). We continue to see racial and ethnic educational achievement gaps, such as white students graduating from high school at higher rates than students of color. Additionally, college enrollment and college graduation rates decreased for the class of 2021. Furthermore, teachers of color represent about eight percent of the teaching workforce (Connecticut State Department of Education, n.d.).

To address the challenge of preparing students academically, socially, emotionally, and vocationally in school and beyond, the Connecticut State Board of Education put forth a Comprehensive Plan for Education 2023-2028 (Connecticut State Board of Education and Connecticut State Department of Education, n.d.). The CLAS Standards are particularly relevant to two of the four strategic priorities described in the plan: ensuring equitable access to education, regardless of sociodemographic background and ensuring a safe and healthy learning environment. The plan highlights the need for culturally responsive learning environments where parents can engage with schools as equal partners and students can achieve their learning goals, but barriers remain to achieving this vision. Additionally, the plan sets out to increase the diversity of the state's educational workforce and close the racial equity gap.

Summary

The 2013 enhanced National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) in Health and Health Care provide a comprehensive series of 15 guidelines that inform, guide, and facilitate practices related to culturally and linguistically appropriate health services. The goal of the standards is to improve the quality of care and eliminate disparities in care and outcomes based on cultural or linguistic groups. Although the national CLAS standards are not routinely applied to elementary and secondary schools, they are relevant to educational settings

given the diversity of cultural groups served, the large number of multilingual and English learner students, the continued disparities in educational and other outcomes that continue, and need for school governance, leadership, and workforce (e.g., teachers) to better reflect the population of students served.

References

- Aspen Institute (n.d.). What is social, emotional, and academic development?
<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/national-commission-on-social-emotional-and-academic-development/social-emotional-academic-development/>
- Bushnell, L. (2021). Educational disparities among racial and ethnic minority youth in the United States. *Ballard Brief*, 2021(2), 9.
- Connecticut State Board of Education and Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). *Every student prepared for learning, life, and work beyond school: The comprehensive plan for education 2023–2028*. Connecticut State Department of Education, https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Board/The_Comprehensive_Plan_for_Education_2023-28.pdf
- Connecticut State Department of Education (n.d.). *The condition of education in Connecticut: 2021-2022*. <https://edsight.ct.gov/relatedreports/Condition%20of%20Education%202021-22.pdf>
- de la Torre, M., Blanchard, A., Allensworth, E.M., & Freire, S. (2019). English Learners in CPS: A new perspective. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.
- DHHS OMH. (2013, March 1). National Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services Standards. Retrieved from Think Cultural Health: <https://thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/clas/standard>
- Groundwater, S., Becker, B., Jiang, F., Gitter, J., Nuland, L., & Ewaida, M. (2022). *2022 State of diversity, equity, and inclusion in public schools report*. Hanover Research.
- Irwin, V., Zhang, J., Wang, X., Hein, S., Wang, K., Roberts, A., York, C., Barmer, A., Bullock Mann, F., Dilig, R., & Parker, S. (2021). Report on the condition of education 2021 (NCES 2021-144). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2021144>.
- Nowicki, J. M. (2022). *K-12 Education: Student population has significantly diversified, but many schools remain divided along racial, ethnic, and economic lines*. Report to the chairman, Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives. GAO-22-104737. *US Government Accountability Office*.
- Pew Research Center. (2021, December 14). *U.S. public school teachers much less racially diverse than students*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/12/10/americas-public-school-teachers-are-far-less-racially-and-ethnically-diverse-than-their-students/>
- Scott, A. (2021). English learners in New Jersey: Exposing inequities and expanding opportunities in the wake of the pandemic. *Education Law Center*.
- Spiegelman, M. (2020). Race and ethnicity of public school teachers and their students. Data Point. NCES 2020-103. *National Center for Education Statistics*.