

## **Transcript for *Cultural Competence Standard for Professional Learning in Practice***

**Kimberly Audet (Kimberly):** Welcome to the Connecticut State Department of Education podcast series on professional learning. I am your host Kimberly Audet, Associate Education Consultant of the Talent Office. Today I am excited to have two guests with me to discuss the Cultural Competence standard for professional learning. I am joined by Dr. Tamika La Salle who supports districts in cultural competency and professional learning. She is an Assistant Professor in Educational Psychology at the University of Connecticut. I am also joined by the Director of Strategic Initiatives from Norwich Public Schools, Kaitlyn O’Leary, who is directly responsible for coordinating these efforts and ensuring that the district is committed to this focus on cultural competency.

Dr. La Salle, please tell our listeners a little bit about yourself and the support you provide for educators.

**Dr. Tamika La Salle (Dr. La Salle):** Hi, I am excited to be here. As previously stated, I am currently on the faculty at the University of Connecticut in Neag School of Education in the School Psychology Program. I am a professor of school psychology. My work focuses on the intersections between culture, school climate, and educational outcomes for all students. Relevant to this topic, I provide educators with support to examine the impact of culture within their own districts, schools, and communities; recognize barriers to implementing culturally responsive practices including biases, institutional norms, and expectations, to name a few; and I work collaboratively with school teams to identify relevant and effective practices to establish learning environments that are culturally responsive.

**Kimberly:** Kaitlyn, can you share why this work is important to Norwich Public Schools and how your district is committed to this focus?

**Kaitlyn O’Leary (Kaitlyn):** Sure. I began working in Norwich in the summer of 2013 and the focus on culturally responsive education was well underway. At that point, Norwich had two of its seven elementary schools identified as focus schools, meaning at least one subgroup population was performing at the bottom 10 percent in the state. We knew we needed to address the achievement gap, and to improve Tier I instruction across the board.

Our district recognized the need to take this on with a culturally responsive lens. The district’s ELA curriculum was completely revamped and new classroom libraries were purchased across the district. District leadership ensured materials and lessons were reflective of the faces and experiences of our students. We also knew that new materials were not enough.

We enlisted the help of Dr. La Salle in February 2014. She began the work with a Teacher Needs Assessment to really understand each school faculty’s needs and built workshops around those needs. For two and a half years, we continued to evolve this work meeting with whole school and content area teams. This year our focus is on the implementation of PBIS in three schools. We plan to analyze office discipline referral data by subgroup to ensure our work related to behavioral interventions continues to meet all students from all backgrounds.

**Kimberly:** Before we go more into Norwich’s story, I’d like to revisit the Cultural Competence Standard for Professional Learning. All together there are eight Connecticut Standards for Professional Learning. The Cultural Competence standard is “Professional learning that enhances both educator practice and outcomes for each and every student facilitates educators’ self-examination of their awareness, knowledge, skills, and actions that pertain to culture and how they can develop culturally-responsive strategies to enrich the educational experiences for all students.”

To learn more about this standard and the other seven, you can go to [sde.ct.gov](http://sde.ct.gov), from there go to the Talent Office, then select Professional Learning, and then click on Professional Learning Standards “At-a-Glance.” These documents provide further explanation of each standard. Dr. La Salle and Kaitlyn both serve on the cultural competence work group, which was the group that was instrumental in developing the “At-a-Glance” for Cultural Competence. The Cultural Competence “At-a-Glance” explains what it looks like in professional learning.

Dr. La Salle, before we go any further, could you expand on what we mean by culture. By the way, this definition is also included in the “At-a-Glance” for Cultural Competence.

**Dr. La Salle:** Culture, defined here, emphasizes the fact that culture is a multidimensional construct that represents the ways that groups of people, students, based on race, geography, socioeconomic status, beliefs, experience, or other unifying denominators assign meaning to, interact with, and adapt to contexts. Further, culture is not finite. It is ever evolving and is affected by individual’s development, experiences, and environments.

Simply stated, we are all cultural beings and each individual in the school including administrators, students, teachers and parents possess cultural characteristics that are similar to and different from others. The ways that student perceive, make sense of, and respond to their educational environments are reflective of a combination of cultural variables that range from easily identifiable variables such as language to others that may be less obvious such as socioeconomic status.

As educators, it is important to understand the complexity of culture and to recognize that culture includes race and ethnicity but also other factors including family values and norms; individual characteristics; geographical influences such as rural, suburban, urban; socioeconomic status including middle class, lower middle class, poor; school influences; community influences; and governmental influences. This list isn’t exhaustive; however, it highlights many of the cultural variables that have an immediate impact on students.

Perhaps the biggest take away here is that *all* students have culture and are cultural beings. Culture is not something that the minorities have only; we all are cultural beings and are affected by various cultural attributes in both similar and dissimilar ways. How else could we explain how individuals, or students, who come from seemingly similar backgrounds, end up having different outcomes. Variables such as family, schools, language, traditions must be considered. Understanding culture and its impact on education, increasing cultural competence, and being culturally responsive is a matter of importance for all districts and schools in the state including rural, suburban, and urban districts; districts that have student populations that are 99% White

and districts that have student populations that are 99% minority; districts with increasing immigrant populations; districts with students with disabilities, transient populations. All schools that have students should be concerned about creating equitable outcomes for all students, not regardless of, but because of the cultural similarities and differences that exist in schools and have an impact on educational outcomes.

**Kaitlyn:** From a school district perspective, you can see this in the culture of each school building. Yes, the district has a unifying mission and set of values, but each school building brings that vision to life in a different way. It's evident from the second you step into the building. All of the pieces that Dr. La Salle just mentioned have an impact on school culture. This year, Norwich Public Schools has revamped our Culture and Climate Team, with new members, representation from all schools, and a variety of positions including administration, teachers, support staff, and our Family Resource Center staff. We want to be sure that each school continues to have flexibility to have that distinctive school culture, we want to be respectful of the influences Dr. La Salle just mentioned that make each school unique, and we want to ensure the mission and vision of Norwich Public Schools is clear across the city.

**Kimberly:** As the two of you mentioned earlier, I would like you to share your experience taking the first steps to focus on cultural competence and professional learning in a district.

**Dr. La Salle:** The initial steps really focused on working collaboratively with teachers, support staff, and administrators to understand the community and schools within Norwich Public Schools. Who were the students and families? The teachers? The support staff? Administrators? What have been some of their successes? Challenges? We explored those across different groups of stakeholders including teachers, administrators, and parents. We also spent a great deal of time talking about what culture actually is, and, more importantly, how it has an impact on students' educational experiences in direct and indirect ways. This was an important focus because without understanding how critical of a component culture is, there would be no buy-in among teachers to acknowledge it, understand it, and, most importantly, address it.

**Kaitlyn:** As Director of Strategic Initiatives, I work closely on many strategies in the district that are funded through grant monies. Like many other districts, Norwich is funding so many essential initiatives, especially professional learning, through grant monies, since the local funds just can't be stretched as far as they're needed. Alliance funding has supported this work in Norwich for the past three years. It is clear that the State Department of Education recognizes this as a priority, and we are grateful as a district that we have access to these financial resources to support this very important work. During the initial stages of this work, as Dr. La Salle previously mentioned, training discussions focused on the impact of culture on students' educational experiences. Additionally, a work group was formed with representation from schools and disciplines across the district. This group identified key information that would be useful to colleagues across the district and developed a Cultural Competence District Handbook.

**Dr. La Salle:** In my experience districts have been able to fund this work in different ways including Alliance funding and equity efforts. The degree to which districts and schools prioritize identifying feasible means to fund this work is almost always related to the degree to

which districts and schools prioritize equity and culturally responsiveness. Cultural competency is directly related to, if not synonymous with, equity. A commitment to creating educational environments that are responsive to student needs means recognizing the intersections of culture and education and making concerted efforts to allocate resources to address equity and cultural competence. Cultural competence then is not limited to urban districts or minority students. Cultural competence and equity is something to be considered, examined, and addressed in all schools for all students from large urban districts to small rural towns.

Professional Learning for educators should focus on building awareness, examining biases, stereotypes, prejudices, and other prior experiences that have an impact on how one perceives, interprets, and responds to others, in this case, students. The process includes recognizing those blind spots. Everyone has biases or stereotypes to some degree. As individuals, we are not always able to stop our biases or stereotypes; however, developing cultural competence means recognizing that they exist, and, more importantly, actively choosing to not demonstrate behaviors that perpetuate such biases and stereotypes. It's about working on that space between your thoughts, such as biases, and your actions and intently choosing to demonstrate behaviors that instead promote equity and equality.

For example, there was a teacher who had been attending the cultural competency trainings in the district. He approached me about an activity that he facilitated in his class for Mother's Day. He said that he asked students to create a Mother's Day card for their moms knowing that he had a student in his class that was not living with her mom, instead she was living with her aunt. So after the students began, he walked over and told the student individually that she could make a card for her aunt instead since he knew she did not live with her mom. This example does represent some level of awareness about the diversity that exists among student families and is a step towards cultural competence. However, moving forward, instead of singling out one student best practices would be to facilitate the activity and ask students to make a card for a special woman or person in their life. This act is inclusive and also includes students who might not have traditional families, even if the teacher is not aware of it.

These instructional nuances, though seemingly minute, have a significant impact on student perceptions, how they view themselves in relation to others, and how they engage in school.

**Kimberly:** Part of what we explain throughout the professional learning standards is that professional learning expands beyond the school and district and can be part of the larger community. Has this influenced your work at all?

**Dr. La Salle:** Yes, definitely. Working towards cultural competence, equity, equality requires a long-term commitment. Just like any meaningful educational change, nothing happens overnight. As I said earlier, the time, resources, and effort committed to supporting the development of cultural competence among educators is almost always directly correlated to the value placed on equity and equality.

**Kaitlyn:** As I touched on at the beginning of this conversation, our district has really begun to expand this work in a few different ways. Norwich now has funding through UConn to bring PBIS training to three of our schools and will be analyzing school climate and discipline data to

examine the degree to which our educational practices and behavior interventions are culturally responsive. Additionally, our Culture and Climate Team has a renewed focus this year. The work will focus on looking at social emotional learning across the district, addressing attendance, and engaging families in designing a philosophy of culture and climate. Regarding expanding this work beyond the district and into the community, I sit on a community-wide committee called “Engaging City Leaders for Juvenile Justice Reform.” We have representation from our school district, UCFS, which is our local health center, the health district, youth and family services, the police department, and the mayor. During those meetings, we work to build community-wide supports for students and their families to improve attendance and behaviors that present both in and out of schools. We’ve secured funds for a city wide attendance campaign, extended opportunities for young people to become connected with mentors, and are building opportunities for positive youth development activities during the out of school time.

**Dr. La Salle:** A lifelong commitment to action that supports equity in the school community includes choosing opportunities to engage in professional development to expand your knowledge. Knowing about your student population, community connections, and engaging in data-based decision making using school data ranging from academic data, school climate data, discipline data, and teacher data.

**Kaitlyn:** This work absolutely needs to be an ongoing commitment for any school district. Not only is ongoing professional learning critical, we also need to consider staff turnover. This year particularly, Norwich has several new administrators and teachers who have been engaged in conversations on our work to date. Each year, we consider how we will get new staff up to speed on their knowledge of the community and understand ways to support students and families in their learning.

There is still a lot of work to do. We are one district who has identified a need, and this past two and a half years, almost three years now, has really been eye opening. It’s great to hear conversations about cultural competence and our work with Dr. La Salle come up in committee work across the district. That’s what it’s really all about - embedding this work into all that we do, recognizing our own biases, blind spots, and growth areas, and doing something about it. We continue to go back to the data, to assess needs but also track our progress, and constantly re-evaluate our needs. I’m happy to say that our two focus schools have left that designation behind this year. This doesn’t mean we’re there yet, but we are making progress. It’s messy work. The progress is slow and steady. But we are finding the right stakeholders to bring table, and we are making gains.

**Kimberly:** Thank you, Kaitlyn and Dr. La Salle, for sharing your journey. For a district that is considering integrating this in their system, do you have any last words of advice?

**Dr. La Salle:** I would just reiterate what we talked about earlier in terms of making intentional decisions about the resources that we need to support the needs within the district. As Kaitlyn mentioned earlier, using the Cultural Competency Handbook is a great place to start because it allows districts to examine the strengths and the weaknesses within the district and use that to begin to decide upon the areas of growth that are needed.

**Kimberly:** Well, thank you both for joining me. And if any of you listeners have any additional questions about this topic, you can contact the Talent Office at 860-713-6820. See you next time on the CSDE professional learning podcast.