Helene Marcy**:** Hello and welcome to the CSCH podcast. My name is Helene Marcy, Program Manager for the UConn Collaboratory on School and Child Health, or CSCH. The CSCH mission is to facilitate innovative and impactful connections across research, policy and practice arenas relevant to school and child health. CSCH serves as a central resource to university and external partners engaged in efforts that inform healthy, safe, supportive, and engaging environments for all children. I invite you to take a look at our website at csch.uconn.edu.

Today I am here with Marlene Schwartz and Sandy Chafouleas. Sandy is Co-Director of the Collaboratory on School and Child Health and Marlene sits on the CSCH Steering Committee. We’re going to talk about a new tool that they have just developed to help K-12 schools. Sandy and Marlene, welcome. First, please introduce yourselves to our listeners and tell us about your role at UConn.

Sandra Chafouleas**:** Hi, my name is Sandy Chafouleas – I am a professor in the Neag School of Education, and as you noted, I also serve as the co-director of CSCH. CSCH was created as a space to bring together UConn researchers and their partners in work that acknowledges interconnections across health and learning in supporting our well-being. So when we were looking for an organizational framework for CSCH, it was readily apparent that the WSCC model provided a perfect fit. The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child – or WSCC – model acknowledges that there are many components that work together in supporting success – for children and their families as well as school staff.

Marlene Schwartz: So my name is Marlene Schwartz and I'm a professor here at the University of Connecticut in Human Development and Family Sciences and I'm a Director at the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. The Rudd Center is a group of faculty and research staff who have really sort of taken on the challenge of doing research to inform policies that will improve the environment so that kids and their families can be healthier. So we focus on a variety of areas—one is weight stigma and discrimination. Another is schools and how to make the school environment healthier, which we'll be talking about today. We also study food marketing and pricing initiatives such as taxing unhealthy foods so that it's easier for people to buy healthier products and less healthy products are not as inexpensive.

Helene Marcy: So tell us a bit of background of this new tool. Marlene—this tool that you and Sandy developed; it’s kind of an expansion of a tool that the Rudd Center created called the WellSAT. Please tell us about the WellSAT.

Marlene Schwartz: So back in 2006 there was a new federal requirement that all school districts that participated in the federal meal programs had to write something called a school Wellness Policy and these district policies were really designed to help schools focus on issues related to childhood obesity. So they were required to have a number of components such as nutrition education; setting standards for the foods that were sold outside of the meal programs; ensuring that they were following the federal rules for the meal programs; as well as promoting physical activity and engaging the whole community. So one of the requirements was that you couldn't just have one person write the policy; you were supposed to have a committee that had multiple stakeholders—from administration; teaching staff; students;

Parents; health staff—in the school district and they were all to come together and really think about how their district could best address these problems. So we thought this was really exciting that these policies were a new federal requirement and we had the idea that it would be nice to be able to score them in a quantitative way. And the reason we wanted to do that was twofold: we wanted school districts to be able to score their own policies to see how they compared to best practices, but we also wanted researchers to be able to score policies so that they could then look at what was happening in schools in terms of practices and also even child outcomes and see if the strength of the policy was associated with better outcomes. And we found that the field was really excited about the tool. It was used by a lot of people—both researchers, state government agencies as well as individual school districts—and so we updated the tool to a second version in 2015 because the federal law was changing in response to the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act. And then just this past year we updated it again. And each time that we've done the updates we've done a lot of research with our own users of the tool to get feedback from them and ways to improve it.

Helene Marcy: Sandy, you mentioned that the WSCC Model was a catalyst for the creation of CSCH. Can you tell us about trying to figure out how to expand the WellSAT that Marlene just told us about to cover all of the components in the WSCC model?

Sandra Chafouleas: Yeah, as Marlene noted the WellSAT was created in response to federal requirement around school wellness policy – which was really focused primarily on physical activity and nutrition spaces. So that gave us a really great start in building on that tremendous body of work to establish those items. But then we were challenged to figure out how to identify a short list—for all of those other domains within the model because there are ten— but thanks to an amazing team we dug deeply into each component. We consulted national guidelines, recommendations from primary organizations, and synthesis of the literature in each of those areas. And from those long lists of items, we then consulted with research and practice experts to help us narrow to the short list of items that you see within each component.

Helene Marcy: So tell us about any hurdles or surprises that you encountered in creating this new tool.

Marlene Schwartz: So one of the things that I guess we shouldn't have been too surprised about, but really has been a challenge is that the original WellSAT—because it was focused specifically on the school Wellness Policy—that policy tended to be sort of an individual policy that was usually named district Wellness Policy, it was fairly easy to find, and all of the information we needed was within that one document of that one policy. And when we started to expand the tool to cover so many of the other domains—all of the domains of the WSCC model—we realized that now we really need to look through all of the policies of a district. And I think the challenge was figuring out first—how to find all of the policies, but second—to really make it a manageable task to be able to get the answers to the questions for specific items when you could potentially have hundreds of pages of policies to work through. So what we've devised to make that task more manageable are keywords that you can search through the policy documents that will help you find the language that is relevant to the particular item that you're coding.

Helene Marcy: So along those lines, tell us how exactly the tool works in practice. Who should be using this tool and how does someone at a school, for instance, start using the tool?

Marlene Schwartz: So the way that the tool works is you have the district policies in front of you and you go through a series of items. And essentially each item will talk about a particular practice that one might find in written policies. So, for example, in the nutrition domain one of the items is “does the school allow food to be used as a reward in the classroom?” And so you look to see if that issue is addressed at all in the policy and then we have a coding system that goes from 0 to 1 to 2. And a 0 means that there's nothing written in the policy about the use of food as reward in the classroom. A 1 means that they talk about it but they do so in this sort of vague way that maybe suggests that “we recommend that teachers do not use food,” or “we recommend non-food rewards,” but it isn't clear that there's an actual policy that regulates that particular practice. And then a 2 means that there's language that is very clear, very specific, and you can know from reading that language whether or not there is a chance of this practice happening in the school. So if it says, for example, “the use of food in the classroom is prohibited,” that would be a 2.

Sandra Chafouleas: Helene – you also asked who should be using the tool. Really it’s best used by those individuals who are engaged with work in school district policy. So those folks might include district-level officials and boards of education or school wellness advisory board members. But because of the wide range of policies assessed by the WellSAT WSCC, it also could be useful to consult with people who hold roles and responsibilities related to specified domains in the model. So for example, a school safety team might be appropriate contacts when you’re looking at the social and emotional climate and behavioral supports domains.

Helene Marcy: Can you tell us what’s next? What are your future plans for the tool?

Marlene Schwartz: So this year we're really excited because we now have a partnership with the State Department of Education here in Connecticut to specifically test out the use of this tool in our state. So each year a certain number of school districts are up for what they call the triennial review, which means that someone goes into the school buildings and make sure that they're following all the rules for the federal food programs. And as you know from the name triennial review, it happens every three years. So the districts that are on the list for this year –we have taken a look at those and we are selecting 30 of them to use this tool and look at their policies and code them using our WellSAT WSCC. Then the exciting part is we're gonna then take a subset of those districts and reach out to them and share the results specifically and then do some interviews to try to learn more about the practices that are taking place in the school. One of the things that we've learned in our research just looking at the WellSAT is that a lot of times districts are doing many more things in practice than they have put in their written policy. People often worry that it's going to be the opposite—that they'll have something in the policy and it's not really happening—but we've really found the opposite. So what we want to do is help districts really identify the great practices that they're engaging in and then encourage them to sort of institutionalize those practices by putting them in their district policy. That way they can really make sure that as staff changes or, you know, sort of new strategies are developed that there's a way of knowing exactly what they do that can be updated over time and there's a record of that. So we're really looking forward to that project.

Helene Marcy: Tell us how listeners can keep up to date on the progress of the WellSAT WSCC and on your pilot work.

Sandra Chafouleas: Sure. The easiest way is to stay up to date is to go to the CSCH website and check out the contact us page. You can sign up for our newsletter or you can follow us @UConnCSCH.

Marlene Schwartz: So people who are interested in learning more about the Rudd Center work in general, we do have a website: uconnruddcenter.org and we also have a monthly newsletter that you can sign up for that has information about recent studies that we've done, often links to articles we've published and just some information about what's happening in the field in general and what sorts of topics have been covered in the news.

Helene Marcy: Thank you so much and thanks to you both for joining us today and telling about this important tool. We’re all looking forward to hearing about the results of that pilot testing in Connecticut and seeing how this all unfolds. Just a reminder to our listeners that that general CSCH website is csch.uconn.edu. Thank you Sandy and Marlene

Sandra Chafouleas: Thank you.

Marlene Schwartz: Thank you.