**Employee Wellness in Schools Podcast Transcript. Recorded Tuesday, October 6, 2020**

**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. I invite you to take a look at our website at csch.uconn.edu.

CSCH recently completed a survey of district and school leaders about how the pandemic has affected their priorities and concerns. Results indicate that their biggest worry is social and emotional wellness of both students and staff. That prompted us to talk to some experts to get their take on the issue of employee wellness and how best to support school staff.

Today I am here with Lisa Sanetti, Ravit Stein, and Taylor Koriakin. Lisa is a Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology in the UConn Neag School of Education, specifically in the school psychology program. Ravit is Director of Psychological and Behavioral Consultation Services at EASTCONN, which is the regional educational service center for Eastern Connecticut. Taylor is also at EASTCONN and works as an educational and behavioral consultant. She’s also a recent graduate of UConn’s doctoral program in school psychology. Welcome to all of you.

**Lisa Sanetti:** Happy to be here.

**Ravit Stein:** Thanks for having us.

**Helene**: So my first question is for all of you but Lisa, let’s start with you. What sparked your interest in focusing on employee wellness in your work with and in schools?

**Lisa**: Sure, so for years my team has worked to develop effective and feasible methods to support teachers’ implementation of evidence-based practices. And through this work, we saw that high levels of teacher stress was a barrier to high-quality implementation. When we delved into the research, we were surprised to see that there were plenty of surveys of teacher stress and assessment measures, but really few interventions or practices to address educator wellbeing.

**Helene**: And Ravit and Taylor, how about you?

**Ravit**: I think we’ve seen many of the things that Lisa’s seen in research play out in practice. In our consultation work in schools, we’ve found that responding to teacher stress and promoting wellness have been central to supporting good implementation. And in addition, the staff that we work with to support are some of our highest needs students so the stress and burnout can be an even greater concern than in the general ed environment.

**Taylor**: Yeah, just to piggyback off of what Ravit said, I was involved in some work related to employee wellness when I was a graduate student working with CSCH and now working in the field as a practitioner—and my first year of practice being in the wake of a global pandemic—staff wellness is definitely at the forefront. And I think it has been on the backburner as something that we know that we need to think about and consider in our work, but it hasn't necessarily been a priority or it's been kind of tacked on to other initiatives as an afterthought. So, in the wake of COVID, however, I think we have no choice, but to put it on the front burner and make it a priority. So, we're definitely seeing now that it's really a central part of our work.

**Helene**: and yeah we’re certainly seeing that in the media too—that now it’s at the forefront…Lisa, tell us a bit about what the research says about employee wellness in schools. Why is it so important, and what are the implications for students?

**Lisa**: Sure. So there’s extensive research on teacher stress. Less so on staff, paraeducator, or administrator stress. But what we know about teachers is that chronic teacher stress is associated with increased rates of physical and psychological health problems. Poor job performance—we know that stressed teachers are absent more often, they tend to have poorer relationships with their students, and that they can be less effective in delivering instruction and managing student behavior. Not surprisingly this translates to poorer student outcomes. And further, there’s emerging evidence that students in the classrooms of chronically stressed teachers actually show changes in their stress hormone, cortisol. So teachers’ stress may actually be impacting students’ physiology. And finally, multiple surveys show that chronic teacher stress is the primary factor associated with high rates of teachers leaving the profession for reasons other than retirement. So it’s a major cause of our current teacher shortage nationwide. Unfortunately, that means that students are more likely to have less experienced teachers.

**Helene**: So clearly this has been an important issue even before the pandemic. Taylor, can you share some examples of employee wellness concerns that you are observing **now** as we grapple with different education *environments as a result of the pandemic?*

**Taylor**: Yeah, absolutely. I think there are unfortunately no lack of employee wellness concerns. Everything from we’re seeing staff are like, concerned about physical safety of being in schools; managing work/life balance with their own kids; educational needs if they have children; increased workplace, demand of having to plan for effective online instruction and deal with if students have lost skills since schools closed last spring. And I also think that the pandemic has changed literally everything about how schools operate so, I think a lot of school staff are mourning the loss of what instruction used to look like. So to answer your question about what are some examples, I know that's a laundry list, but I think they largely boil down to two categories of different types of concerns.

So the first, being the stress and uncertainty that we're all experiencing, as a result of living through a pandemic and the trauma and stress associated with that. And on the other hand, we have this increased professional need, you know, we've seen so many changes in the profession and changes in student need as a result of the pandemic.

So, we're seeing kind of a double whammy in terms of people coping with their own internal response to living through this crazy, insane event along with facing greater demands professionally. So when I'm thinking about supporting staff wellness, I think we have to think about both sides of that and how to balance that when we're responding to staff needs.

**Helene**: Yes, that’s a lot for staff to handle… Lisa, can you summarize what education leaders need to know about *supporting* whole employee wellness? What should they be watching and doing?

**Lisa**: Sure, I think the first thing is really that education leaders at all levels—at the school, district, state and national levels—really have to accept that this epidemic of teacher stress impacts students and families and whole communities. It really affects all of us and really needs to be addressed systematically. And too often there's sort of a default to thinking: well, I'm stressed too. That's just part of the job. But, if really our goal is to deliver the best education of students, supporting the whole employee is really essential. The other thing to recognize is about a third of schools already have workplace, health and wellness promotion programs. The thing is, we know that most of those are sort of top down, one-size-fits-all approaches that generally are found to be ineffective or unsustainable. So again, we really want to be efficient and effective in addressing the whole employee.

And the research tells us that the one-size-fits-all approaches don't work primarily, because they're not aligned with the needs of school employees. So, just like with students, any sort of prevention or intervention effort needs to be aligned with the area of need. So, for example, a school district, adopting a yoga or meditation program is not going to address a stressor like, poor principal teacher communication. So we really need to be thinking about contributors to employee stress at the organizational level and individual levels and to recognize that those stressors are likely to vary from district to district and from school to school, even within a district. And so we really need to ask employees to identify what the contributors to their stress are in their setting.

That sounds really overwhelming, but there are some feasible approaches we can use in schools to identify and address those contributors to school employee stress and to improve employee well-being. The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, or NIOSH—generally not an agency that most educators are familiar with— has a total worker health model that provides a really great roadmap for taking care of the whole employee.

So, we've been working to adapt those processes for use in other fields to education. We've shown that we can pretty feasibly and efficiently identify and address the top contributors to educator stress.

So, supporting the whole employee does require effort and resources, but as a result, we found that leaders have happier and more effective employees who are more likely to stay in the fields.

**Helene**: So there are some potential models we can look to, to address whole employee wellness…Ravit and Taylor-- Can you describe some of the ways you’ve seen that schools have addressed employee wellness? And have supports changed as a result of the pandemic?

**Ravit:** You know,I think that we found that schools before the pandemic were largely not addressing staff wellness in a systematic way. I think that some schools are doing some staff recognition programs or shout-outs along with PBIS efforts or other whole school initiatives, but not having a larger framework or system for addressing staff wellness has been sort of an issue. And since the pandemic, I think the shift that we’ve seen is that stakeholders now know that staff wellness isn’t something we can take for granted. There’s been a real shift in awareness that to do right by kids we need to make sure that the staff are in a place to provide those supports and teaching and instruction.

**Taylor**: Yeah and jumping off of what Ravit shared, we’ve also taken this fall as an opportunity to pilot some staff wellness supports for our internal programs at EASTCONN. Like Ravit mentioned at the beginning, our programs service some of the highest need students in our region. So, staff wellness has always kind of been a need for those programs, even before the pandemic, and in building these frameworks and supports we're really lucky to have these relationships with CSCH and Dr. Sanetti to draw some resources and framework.

But we started off the year by providing some additional professional development training on generally framing the COVID-19 pandemic as a trauma and I think, interpreting this event, as a traumatic event can be a bit of a reframe for people in understanding how it has the potential to impact both us and our students.

And in that training we also provided an overview of self-care and set some time aside to set some small self-care goals. And the programs have also set up a structure where there are two set blocks a month to focus on staff wellness. One of those is intended to be focused on meeting with an accountability partner who checks in on your self-care goal that was set at the beginning of the year and also just kind of a sounding board to have support in talking through how the transition back to school is going and just generally having a person to lean on. And the second block is for a whole staff wellness activity, so something like a yoga session, or going for a walk or running a book club. So that's kind of where we're starting. And we're also thinking through some data sources and ways that we can keep a pulse on staff wellness throughout the year so we've been checking in with staff weekly, related to their wellness, by having them complete a brief Google form each week. That is kind of just again a pulse on how they're doing both professionally and personally. We also started a staff wellness committee at some of our programs, because we wanted to activate and tap into that staff voice and choice in terms of responding to their needs and what they're interested in. So that’s just a couple of things we are doing. We’re just starting to scratch the surface and there’s a lot more we can do at the systems level in terms of problem solving things that are barriers to wellness but it’s definitely a start for one month into the school year.

**Helene**: It sounds like you’re being very proactive with supports for staff wellness and I hope this pilot has good results…So I have one last question for all of you and that is, where do we go from here? What should districts and schools be thinking about with regard to employee wellness moving forward? Lisa?

**Lisa**: sure, I mean I think one of the most important things is figuring out how we can make any employee wellness initiative sustainable. So districts and schools don’t need one more thing to do but educators are already focused on school climate and I found in talking with leaders that if we can expand our conceptualization of school climate to really include employee wellness, that’s one way of fitting this initiative into already existing efforts. And available evidence suggests that addressing employee wellness will contribute to the overall school climate. So, I think that that's an important way of thinking about how we can fit this and make it doable for schools and districts.

Ravit: I so echo what Lisa is saying, that it really needs to be a self-care imperative and a wellness imperative, and not an add-on. I think that, aligned with that, we really need to see some protected time some space in the day in the week, where PLCs and other professional learning opportunities for staff to really dig into wellness and recognize what would be helpful for them in terms of not pouring from an empty cup and being able to apply a broad view of wellness in the educational environment.

Taylor: Yeah, I totally agree with a broad view of wellness. I think it's all about supporting that balance that we mentioned before—we want to support self care, but also problem solve at the systems level to see what is contributing to workplace stressors. And also looking at if we're giving staff the skills and support to do their job well. We like to say in our work, that no amount of bubble baths or self care is going to make up for having a stressful or toxic work environment or not having the skills and support you need to do your job well. Like Lisa said earlier, yoga sessions or a mindfulness session isn't going to make up for poor communication practices, or other things that the system level. So self care is really important but I think sometimes when we think about staff wellness or the resources that I'm seeing in the field, we're seeing staff wellness as only self care. So not that it's not important, but we also need to expand again to a broader view to looking at the systems level overall and are our systems supportive of staff wellness.

**Helene:** These are great ideas. It’s been quite the year for school staff and, as you all have said, I hope we see schools sustainingtheir employee wellness efforts post-pandemic. Thank you all so much for joining us today and talking about this important topic.

**Ravit**: Thanks for having us.

**Lisa**: Thanks.

**Taylor**: Thank you.

**Helene**: We will add links about how to follow Lisa, Ravit, and Taylor’s work in the podcast description. And a reminder to our listeners that you can find information about all of our affiliates at the CSCH website, csch.uconn.edu. You can also follow us on social media @UConnCSCH. Thanks for listening