**UConn CSCH Podcast Episode Transcript:**

**Supporting Teacher Well-Being using a *Total Worker Health*® Approach**

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 to advance equity in school and child health. CSCH is committed to anti-racist work that prioritizes inclusion, reduces disparities, and creates systemic change. I invite you to take a look at our website at csch.uconn.edu.

Today I’m here with three CSCH affiliates: Lisa Sanetti, Jenn Cavallari, and Alicia Dugan. Lisa is a Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology in the UConn Neag School of Education, specifically in the school psychology program and is a founding member of the CSCH steering committee. Jenn Cavallari is an Associate Professor in the Department of Public Health Sciences in the UConn School of Medicine and Alicia Dugan is Assistant Professor in the UConn School of Medicine’s Department of Medicine, in the Division of Occupational and Environmental Medicine.

Together they’ve just received federal funding to do a five-year study focused on improving the mental well-being of school teachers. Today we’re going to talk both about that project itself as well as the team approach that these three researchers have been taking to address school employee wellness. Welcome to all of you.

Lisa Sanetti: Hi. Thanks for having us.

Jenn Cavallari: Hello and thank you for the invitation.

Alicia Dugan: Thanks, Helene. It's great to be here.

Helene: So my first question is one that I’ll ask each of you but let’s start with you, Lisa. You’ve been on our podcast before, but for those who don’t know, tell us a bit about your work and how you became interested in teacher well-being and this research project in particular.

Lisa: Sure, so I've engaged in applied research in schools for over 20 years, focused mostly on how to support teachers’ use of effective practices. But over time, educator well-being just became the elephant in the room: a major factor, negatively influencing everything in schools, but not being addressed. I feel really lucky to have found an interdisciplinary team who could bring occupational expertise so that we hopefully can make progress toward improving teacher well-being.

Helene: Thanks. And Jenn, tell us about your work and how you were drawn into the project.

Jenn: Yes, thanks. So I've been working in the fields of occupational health and safety for over 20 years, mostly with blue collar, male-dominated work forces. And this is not uncommon in our field because it's been focused mainly on male industrial workers, and how their exposures at work are linked to both cardiovascular effects as well as cancer and a bunch of other respiratory health effects as well. But there is a real need to advance occupational health for women, as well as to focus beyond physical health to also include mental health. And with funding from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, or NIOSH, our Total Teacher Health project focuses on improving the mental well-being of educators and hits on both of these interests.

Helene: And Alicia. How about you?

Alicia: So in the Total Teacher Health project, we're going to be using an approach called the Healthy Workplace Participatory Program. We call it the HWPP for short. And the HWPP engages workers in identifying workforce needs and designing interventions to address those needs. And I've used the HWPP for many years, in many sectors, mainly to improve the health of public safety workers. And I have been interested in using it with a new occupational group, a new demographic group that was vulnerable in a different way. And educators have always interested me as a worker population, partly because I have a lot of teachers that are in my life.

Helene: We’ve talked a bit about this before in a previous podcast episode, but Lisa—give us an idea about the landscape: how have school employees been faring both before the pandemic and now?

Lisa: Sure, um, educators happen and continue to be some of the most stressed employees in our country and statistics show that stress is the number one reason that teachers leave the field of education before retirement. And frankly the pandemic has only made this worse. In the 2021-22 school year that we're in, for the first time perhaps ever, we've seen schools have to pivot to remote learning, not due to COVID illness, but due to teacher shortages. And then so for the first time teachers stress may finally be getting—beginning to receive the attention it deserves on a nationwide scale.

Helene: So in order to address teacher stress, you three looked at the Total Worker Health**®** approach and the HWPP program that Jenn and Alicia mentioned earlier. Jenn, what can you tell us about the approach and program and why you looked to those in particular?

Jenn: Yes, so the Total Worker Health**®** approach actually comes to us from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, or NIOSH, which is part of the CDC and who provided funding for the Total Teacher Health study. So, two key concepts in Total Worker Health**®** are well-being—that idea that it's both physical and mental health that are important, as well as integration, which means embracing a systems-level approach to workplace changes. Importantly, Total Worker Health**®** recognizes that while changes at the individual level can be impactful, it’s changes to the work or the workplace that should be prioritized. So, I should note that the Total Teacher Health project is actually one project within our larger center grant for the Center for the Promotion of Health in the New England Workplace or CPHNEW, which is a Total Worker Health**®** Center of Excellence. It's actually been for over 15 years that CPHNEW has been developing and refining a way to achieve a Total Worker Health**®** approach, and this is through that Healthy Workplace Participatory Program or HWPP that Alicia mentioned earlier. So, what's nice about the HWPP: it's highly participatory. Worker teams are used to identify problems, craft solutions and initiate workplace changes that support well-being. We know that workers are the experts in their own job, and they're also the experts in their well-being. And so the HWPP leverages workers’ knowledge to achieve change. So we’ve actually used the HWPP in a variety of different work groups: corrections and nursing home staff, just to name a few. And it's been used to address stress specifically. Importantly, the approach balances those individual interventions with real workplace changes and how work is done to make it less stressful.

Helene: So you initially piloted the program in some New England elementary schools. Alicia tell us about the pilot project and what you found.

Alicia: Right, so our study showed that nearly all teachers met criteria for burnout and rated their jobs as highly stressful. And we found that the majority of teachers’ stressors originated from the workplace, for example, rather than their personal life and it suggested that a Total Worker Health**®** approach, which emphasizes organizational change, is more promising than more conventional initiatives, which primarily intervene at the individual teacher level. And, relatedly we found that workplace stressors varied from school to school, even within district, suggesting that a school level focus is important to understand what's going on in that very local context where teachers are working.

Helene: And so I understand that the goal of this larger project is to expand that pilot considerably and as I mentioned in the intro it’s a five-year study. Jenn, tell us about how this larger project expands and enhances the pilot project.

Jenn: Yes, so with additional funding and time, we'll be able to expand the number of districts and schools that we'll be working with. In total we’ll work with three school districts, including six elementary schools. Overall there are three objectives we're hoping to accomplish. First, is to further document which factors in schools influence teacher well-being. That's using a prospective cohort study. The second is to further adapt what we've taken from the HWPP and include it in a Total Teacher Health Tool Kit so that we can have a useful tool that schools can use to make meaningful workplace changes that improve teacher well-being. And third is to build the evidence that the Total Teacher Health Toolkit can successfully reduce teacher stress and improve their well-being.

Helene: So as I mentioned in the intro, we’d also like to talk about how this team works together. One of the goals of CSCH is to foster a team science approach among collaborators and we try to promote interdisciplinary research. Jenn, tell us about how the team was put together and tell us about the different disciplines involved because I understand that there are more people on the team than just you three.

Jenn: Yes, of course. So long ago I was given the advice to team up with people you enjoy working with and that, along with a shared interest on the need and importance for improving teacher mental health, is how Alicia and Lisa and I came together. From there we reached out to colleagues to really fill the gaps in our expertise—specifically in statistics and stress and survey design. And then we have a broad range of students from programs in education, public health as well as psychology here at UConn that are also involved in our project. And we would not have a project if it weren't for our community partners, including the teacher unions (CEA and AFT), as well as the school districts themselves. Complex problems like educator stress need to be looked at from different angles and this team brings those different perspectives and expertise all with the common goal of reducing teacher stress.

In terms of my team science approach it's much like my research approach: structured, but with participatory engagement. As a foundation, we make it clear who’s working on which part of the project, what needs to be done, and how it contributes to our larger goal. We meet on a regular schedule, once a month as a complete team—and this includes all the students, and all our study staff and researchers—as well as weekly as a core team of Lisa, Alicia, myself and our project manager, Matt Brennan. We sometimes pull in whoever else we may need, depending on the topic covered during that weekly team meeting as well as their expertise. So given that our teams span across numerous campuses, we meet on Zoom. And ahead of the meeting we always set an agenda that includes all the items that we'll be discussing, along with any discussions that need to occur or decisions that need to be made. During the meeting. I'm very mindful of making sure everyone's voice is heard. We start with a check-in with each participant and we ask that team members share when it comes to the time to cover the part of the project that they're working on. Creating an atmosphere where we can all share ideas as well as concerns means that we all get to learn from each other and for me that's the best part of team science.

Helene: Thanks. It sounds like you’re a highly functioning team and those check-ins and making room for idea sharing are so important. Alicia, what are the outcomes the group is hoping for from this project?

Alicia: So, our intent with this project is to reduce stress and improve mental well-being for teachers by identifying organizational risk factors that are specific to teachers. And using this participatory Total Worker Health**®** approach, we hope that our new streamlined Total Teacher Health Toolkit is going to effectively protect and promote teacher well-being, mental well-being, and also transforming existing approaches by targeting organizational root causes and prioritizing primary prevention.

Helene: As Lisa said earlier, teacher stress was a huge problem even before the pandemic and since then it’s only grown worse so it’s welcome and terrific news that not only are there promising approaches to reducing teacher stress but that there is substantial funding for this important research. We’ll add links to the work of all three researchers in the podcast description. Lisa, Jenn, and Alicia, thank you so much for joining us today to talk about this project.

Lisa: Thank you for taking the time to talk with us.

Jenn: Oh, I really appreciate the opportunity.

Alicia: Thank you for the opportunity to share our work with you today.

Helene: 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.