**UConn CSCH Podcast Episode Transcript:**

**Restorative Justice and the School-Based Diversion Initiative**

Helene Marcy: Hello and Welcome to the CSCH Podcast. My name is Helene Marcy, Director of Programs & Communications at 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 we’re going to talk about restorative justice and specifically about an initiative in Connecticut directed by the Child Health and Development Institute, or CHDI, that works to both reduce juvenile justice involvement and improve school mental health outcomes. We have several guests that I want to introduce. First we have Kris Wraight, who is an expert in restorative justice and restorative practice trainings for schools and communities. We have two guests from CHDI. Jeana Bracey is Associate Vice President of School and Community Initiatives and also sits on our CSCH steering committee. Yecenia Casiano is a Senior Project Coordinator at CHDI and leads the School-Based Diversion Initiative, or SBDI, that we’ll be talking about. And finally, Beth Russell is an Associate Professor in UConn’s Department of Human Development and Family Sciences. She is the Co-Director of CSCH and Director of the Center for Applied Research in Human Development, and leads the SBDI evaluation. Welcome to you all.

Beth Russell: Thanks!

Krist Wraight: Thank you.

Yecencia Casiano: Thank you.

Helene: So let's start with the basics. Kris. What are restorative practices, and why are they considered a good thing?

Kris Wraight: Restorative practices come out of indigenous communities all over the country and world. And so while I’m I’m passionate about the practices, I wouldn't actually call myself an expert in them. What they are is a set of theories and tools that really center relationships and community at the heart of everything we do. Why is that important? I think that's important, because our humanness is what connects us, right. And so in any space, be it schools or workplaces, if we can start by centering relationships and community, it will help us to then work together to achieve whatever specific goals we’re there to do.

Helene: Can you talk about exactly how it works in practice?

Kris: So restorative practices is like, I said, as a you know, a set of theories and tools right? And it includes everything from: how do we facilitate circle processes that welcome every single individual's voice, be it students or staff, into the room. I know all of us can probably imagine and remember being in our classes, and we either may have been the quiet ones who never raised our hand. We also might remember the more extroverted students who always had their hands up. And the class tends to be sort of dominated by just a few people. So circles, initially, is just a beautiful magical process. It sort of interrupts those dynamics that happen and create a more inclusive classroom environment where everyone's voice is important. The other things we do. You know, we we practice a a number of of skills in the in the training, but we also just practice like talking about feelings. How do we name our feelings? How do we—How do we increase emotional intelligence with our students by modeling it as adults? And sometimes that is part of the early intervention, right? If a student is, is frequently showing up late to my class. How do I not just, you know, dole out detentions, but say, like “I'm frustrated because you're missing some of the lesson.” And then, like “I don't always have time to catch you up,” or “I'm concerned. I’m worried. I’m worried you're gonna get behind and not not be able to like stay up with the rest of the group.” So how do we talk about our feelings? How do we welcome students to talk about our feelings, so that again we're not just trying to create classroom and school environments that are conflict-free, because that's just unrealistic. Any setting that has a group of human beings, we're going to have conflicts. It's not about eliminating conflict and harm from our settings, while we, of course, want to minimize those things. It's about having the tools to manage those when they, when they crop up. The other piece of restorative practices is, of course, like: what do we do when behaviors are causing disruptions, or when harm has been done? And our punitive and exclusionary systems really cause a lot of additional harm unto themselves and don't create behavior change, whereas restorative practices gets a very, very poor--there's there's a lot of myths out there about restorative practices, and restorative justice. That it it lets students off the hook. It does not hold them accountable. That is a myth. There are many places doing restorative practices wrong. They really aren't actually implementing it with fidelity. And they're just trying to get their exclusionary numbers down. Their suspension numbers down. Their expulsion numbers down. True restorative practices when implemented with fidelity hold students and staff to a higher level of of accountability than punitive practices, because it says “What you did is wrong. And in this community, we expect you to fix it. So it doesn't just dole out a detention or a suspension. It says. What happened? What were you thinking at the time? What have you thought of themselves since? Who has been affected by your actions? And what are you going to do to make things right? That's actually radically different than our current punitive systems. They typically dole out a consequence, an arbitrary consequence. Don't actually ask the victim or the people harmed what they need. But just are, are a consequence doled out by the administration. And never actually ask that individual to make things right. Never ask people. What are you going to do to make things right? What are you going to do to fix this it? They oftentimes will ask, what are you going to do differently next time?

But what I always say to to teachers I'm working with is, why are we talking about next time when people still have something they need to fix right now? A harm that needs to be addressed and repaired, currently. So there are a variety of tools, but what's really central to restorative practices is, again: it's all about developing community, managing conflict intentions when they arise and they will. And when harm happens, centering the needs of the harmed in a way that require the person who caused the harm to make things better. The premises that we separate the deed from the doer. We reject the unacceptable behavior,

but still support that person. We like them. It's just that they what they did is the problem. This is what creates change. This is what allows people to actually change their behavior, grow and develop and stay integrated as a community member.

Helene: Wow. Thank you for that explanation. So Jeana there’s an idea that restorative practices might be especially good to use right now. Can you talk about that?

Jeana Bracey: So yes. Restorative practices are definitely a great tool right now. Given the ongoing mental health crisis we're experiencing across the nation. So throughout the COVID-19 pandemic we have seen increasing numbers of youth experiencing trauma and behavioral health challenges. And the impact of this is something we will definitely contend with among our youth indefinitely through at least the next several years. So this shows up in our schools with children experiencing symptoms of anxiety, depression, difficulty with peers and social relationships, and even difficult interactions with school staff. I mean, they're also dealing with their own challenges through this mental health crisis. So this often plays out through either avoidance or difficulty fully engaging in the learning environment, or more often through conflict. So when conflict arises is really, when we see that escalation into incidents that might introduce exclusionary school discipline in the form of suspensions, expulsions, or arrests. And we know from our national research that children with behavioral health challenges and youth of color, or with disabilities, are all more likely to come in contact with the juvenile justice system. And that often has them then resulting in poor outcomes across many areas of their lives.

Helene: So, Yecenia, because of that contact that kids have with the juvenile justice system, CHDI developed the Connecticut School-Based Diversion Initiative. Tell us about how it started and how it works.

Yecenia Casiano: Sure. Yeah. So the Connecticut school-based Diversion Initiative, SBDI model was co-developed in 2008 by CHDI and the Court Support Services Division, CSSD, of the Judicial Branch, and the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, with funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. It was piloted in 3 schools in 2009, and the model was successful. And since then it was included as part of Governor Malloy’s Second Chance Society Legislation in 2015. Currently, SBDI is state-funded and overseen by the State Department of Education, the Court Support Services Division, as well as the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction services. And DCF also serves on our Advisory Board as well. And the Child Health and Development, of course, serves as the SBDI coordinating center. The School-Based Diversion Initiative promotes outcomes for both schools and students, and instead of arresting and suspending children with behavioral problem, SBDI support students and connects them to community-based behavioral health services. The goal of SBDI is to reduce the number of youth who come into contact with law enforcement and juvenile justice system, and we want to build knowledge and skills among school staff to recognize and manage behavioral health crises in the schools and link the youth who are at risk to juvenile justice involvement, to appropriate community-based services and support. We do this through a few core components, which are workforce development, where we train school staff as well as school resource officers and police officers to recognize trauma and mental health concerns and manage behavioral health crises in the schools. We also do it through school policy development. We help schools implement restorative practices as we've heard Kris talk today about and develop a graduated response model of discipline intervention. And we also do a lot of collaboration where SBDI has facilitated collaboration with law enforcement as well as community health providers such as mobile crisis, having schools utilize these resources and services instead of the police.

Helene: Jeana, how important are those restorative practices within SBDI. How are they contributing to the goals of the program?

Jeana: Yes, that's a great question. And I’ll be honest. Restorative practices was not a primary component of our School-based Diversion Initiative when we first developed it back in 2008. We knew about restorative justice across legal and justice systems, but it wasn't really widely used in school-based settings, at least here in Connecticut at that time. So, as our model grew and and evolved, restorative practices have become a primary component of our model. And that really contributes to the overall success of SBDI. Since 2010 we've seen an average decrease in court referrals by about 27%, and we've seen an increase in mobile crisis referrals –again to help students with those disciplinary challenges and connect them to care—by about 34% among our participating schools. So restorative practices in the context of SBDI really give school staff concrete tools to intervene. They—it helps them de-escalate behavioral incidents. It helps them effectively respond in moments of crisis, but it also helps build a preventative component in by building effective relationships both among students and also between students and staff as kind of a united school community, really. And so in SBDI we provide schools with trainings, which Kris does a fantastic job with. We have excellent re— evaluations every time she comes in and does trainings for us. But also in work group activities. So it's—how do you actually put those training principles into practice? And that's where we really see the impact in SBDI. So we work with schools to build restorative practices into their discipline policies. We really want it to become a standard practice or way of operating when it comes to supportive school discipline and positive school climate. So we want teachers and school staff asking, you know what happened, not what's wrong with you, but what happened? Which is a key restorative principle. We want them using proactive community building circles. We want them to that that to be a standard part of how they intervene, how they communicate with each other. And we also want that that to be a tool that they can use instead of again those exclusionary options—sending students to the to the office, or involving the police officers. We want them to have tools at their disposal to be able to de-escalate that conflict, de-escalate the crisis to really improve communication, and collaboration, and do it in a supportive way that builds community.

Helene: that's terrific. Beth, as I mentioned at the outset, you’re evaluating the program through your role in the Center for Applied Research in Human Development. How exactly will do the evaluation?

Beth Russell: So we pull data from some of the state partners that you've heard mentioned today. We pull data from the State Department of Education about exclusionary practices that they capture information on—those are expulsions, suspensions, and so on. We also pull data from Court Support Services Division of the Department of Justice to look at ongoing involvement in the justice system, and we pull mobile crisis mental health data from CHDI, our partners in this project. Within each of those datasets we look for indications that SBDI has reduced juvenile justice involvement, improved school outcomes and improved mental health service provision at each of the participating schools. But we also complete interviews with the leaders and residents at site to hear about the program from the school staff that implement it on the ground. It's from those interviews that we get a sense of how the restorative practices are implemented, how working groups are formed, maintained, and how sustainability is attended to at each participating site. we're eager to include those lived experiences from the sites themselves, and to document the obstacles that might come up, and the strategies used to overcome them and to capture the successes and careful planning done to ensure the sustainability of SBDI. It's our goal that over time we'll be able to talk to more and more stakeholders involved in this complicated network of agencies and stakeholders, so that we are accurately helping identify the areas of strength that the program has established over its long lifetime, but also help continually improve their practices as we scale up and outward across the State.

Helene: And a follow-up, Beth. How do you make sure the collaboration works. How do you make sure that everyone is doing good team science, as to say at CSCH?

Beth: Well, as as evaluators our UConn team is very careful to make sure that the information we collect is valuable to CHDI. Time and energy are precious, and at the Center for Applied Research we are deliberate about crafting evaluation products that are helpful and meaningful for our partners. A big part of that is getting CHDI’s feedback every step of the way, and maintaining intentionally positive and efficient lines of communication. I'm especially careful to communicate clearly, cheerfully and quickly. But even more importantly, I'm committed to listening and to asking questions, so that I'm a good partner who can join with CHDI and the rest of the communities we intersect with, to build partnerships among equals with respect and care. So some of those same values from restorative practices inform the way we center relationships for evaluation work.

Helene: So pivoting a bit and thinking about the school staff that might be listening, Kris, tell us how a school can assess their readiness to train in or implement restorative practices. What are some key components schools need to have in place to help them be successful?

Kris Wraight: Well, when I train any school I work with, I, you know, I really talk to them about the short term and long term work that restorative practices calls us to do. And and what I mean by that, and so when you talk about readiness, in some ways the structure of schools that currently exist—the very tight sort of inflexible schedules, some of the specific components of union contracts—there's a number of barriers to implementation of restorative practices at its sort of highest level, and with the most fidelity, integrity. And so I I think you know, if we, if we were to analyze readiness based on sort of like do restorative practices fit neatly within the current structure that is public education, we could easily decide and come to the conclusion that schools aren't ready for this practice, and that it doesn't actually currently fit there. But so I think what's more important than than that in terms of readiness, is just: Is there a desire amongst staff to strengthen the relationships with students? And to strengthen the relationship amongst one another? I think not only are students really hurting, our country as a whole is really hurting. Teachers are really hurting. Families are really hurting. And so oftentimes particularly to to staff and teachers, this can feel like another thing they have to do. This can feel like another thing on their plate. There are already so many incredible pressures put on educators around mandated testing, enormous class sizes. Few to any teacher certification programs actually equip teachers to really give them incredible skills and practice at working with behavior issues or mental health issues. So I think the readiness has to just be in in the desire, right, the desire to do things differently than we are currently doing them. The desire to do things differently in a way that, like centers all of our humanity before we seek to, like, get to the academic goals. And so, in the short term I tell educators like this won't be perfect. You won't be able to perfectly implement this like every step of the way. It's about looking for the little avenues to, you know, strengthen the relationships not just between yourself and each student, but the students themselves. How, at the very beginning of the year, are you making sure students all know one another's names, and know one another's pronouns. How are you looking for windows to build relationships and do collaborative learning, using, utilizing circles that isn't just the sort of top down educator lecturing at children, but actually increases participation. In the short term, we look for those ways to implement, and in the long term we really do have to like and completely re-envision public education. So it’s—it is challenging, and I guess the other piece of readiness is anytime schools want to implement this with their students, I ask that that there really be like an analysis and an examination, and a willingness for administrators to also implement it with their staff. This can't just be something we're doing with students. The adults need to be doing it with one another as well.

Helene: Well, thank you. This is such a promising initiative and that inclusion of restorative practices as a key element can –as you said—give children and adults such great lifelong skills and help us all to value each other. Thank you all so much for joining us today to talk about SBDI.

Yecenia: Thank you.

Beth: Thank you.

Kris: Thank you.

Helene:We will add links to the SBDI initiative, CHDI and to Kris Wraight’s website in the podcast description. And a reminder to our listeners that you can find all our podcast episodes at the CSCH website, csch.uconn.edu. You can also follow us on social media @UConnCSCH. Thanks for listening.