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NCYOJ's School Responder Model Podcast Series

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

INTRODUCTION

This is part of a podcast series from the National Center for Youth Opportunity and Justice (NCYOJ). This series focuses on topics that can help schools and communities successfully design and implement School Responder Models. This discussion, which centers around the impact of trauma, is moderated by NCYOJ's Dr. Crystal Brandow, and features special guests from Connecticut.

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Crystal Brandow:

Hi everyone, this is Crystal Brandow, senior project associate at Policy Research Associates and with the National Center for Youth Opportunity and Justice, or NCYOJ. Today we're here with a few experts talking about a very important topic related to school mental health, and that is the impact of trauma and how trauma can influence behaviors of youth in schools and how this plays into building a School Responder Model. We're here with a number of experts that I'm delighted to introduce. We're here with Dr. Jeff Vanderploeg, president and chief executive officer of the Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut and its parent organization, the Children's Fund of Connecticut. In this role he oversees policy, system development and practice support initiatives in CHDI's three focus areas of pediatric, primary care, children's behavioral health and early childhood initiatives. We're delighted to have Dr. Vanderploeg on the line. Thank you for being here, Jeff.

Jeff Vanderploeg:

Thank you, Crystal.

Crystal Brandow:

And we also have Joe O'Callaghan with us. Joe is the department chair of social work at Stamford Public Schools, his work includes supervising 39 social workers, developing mental health programs, and working in the development of a trauma informed school in Stamford, which we'll hear a little bit more about. Thanks for being here, Joe.

Joseph O'Callaghan:

Thanks for having me.

Crystal Brandow:

Lastly, we're also joined by another employee over at CHDI, Doctor Jeana Bracey. She is the associate vice president of school and community initiatives at the Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut. There, she oversees several school and community based programs, development activities, and has experience in school based mental health, juvenile justice diversion, health equity and program implementation and evaluation. Here at NCYOJ and at PRA we work very closely with CHDI and we're really happy to have this opportunity to talk with some experts about the topic of trauma and how this relates to the School Responder Model.

With that said, I'm going to dive right into the questions here. Jeff, how would you describe what trauma is? What is trauma? And I'll also ask you to explain from your point of view, what is a School Responder Model?

Jeff Vanderploeg:

Yeah, thank you, Crystal. Trauma is defined a lot of different ways. There's been a lot of discussion and interest in ACEs, for example, or Adverse Childhood Experiences. But one of the definitions that we turn to at CHDI is from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. And they put out a lot of great resources about trauma and effective interventions to address trauma. What they say is that it's a frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to a child's life or bodily integrity. The kinds of things that we're talking about when we describe trauma, those are ... the most common forms are physical, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, severe neglect, family and community violence, the sudden or violent death of a loved one, serious accidents or life threatening illnesses, painful medical procedures. Those are some of the more common examples.

When you broaden the definition of trauma to include other adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, then we're talking about things like emotional conflict or household disfunction, or even social determinants, like food and security or parental divorce, separation, parental alcohol or drug use. So, there's lots of different types of trauma and they all can have a significant impact on children's functioning.

Crystal Brandow:

Great, thank you so much. From your perspective, again, the School Responder Model is really a framework for engaging in a behavioral health response to student behaviors. What is your definition of a School Responder Model?

Jeff Vanderploeg:

When I think about School Responder Models, I really think about two key features. The first is it's a school level response with an impact first of all, on reducing unnecessary juvenile justice contact, including arrests and referrals to the juvenile court system. So, that's really the first key critical element. Adding to that, a lot of the School Responder Models that we have familiarity with also will focus on other forms of what's exclusionary discipline. That can mean arrest, but it also includes expulsion and out of school suspension. That's the first layer that we look at, SRMs or School Responder Models reduce unnecessary juvenile justice contact and exclusionary discipline.

The second critical component of an SRM from our perspective, is that it increases access to effective behavioral health responses as an alternative to the exclusionary discipline events we just described. That could include things like a behavioral health service, in our state in Connecticut, we rely a lot on the Mobile Crisis Response Network as an alternative to arrest or expulsion and as a way to stabilize the kinds of behaviors that might lead to arrest or expulsion. And an increase in things like restorative practices, which are alternative accountability and support models and a different tool in the tool box than arrest, expulsion, suspension.

Crystal Brandow:

Great, thank you so much for that. Hopefully our listeners can fully get some more depth of what the School Responder Model is, based on that description that you provided from your point of view, so thank you for sharing those very important points. Another piece to add here is really essential, if you don't mind bringing these two things together for us. So, how is an understanding of trauma relevant to implementing a School Responder Model, from your perspective?

Jeff Vanderploeg:

We know from the research that children with behavioral health needs have much higher rates of experiencing arrest and exclusionary discipline. Many times behavioral health conditions and the kinds of diagnoses that you hear about, whether it's anxiety or depression or even things like ADHD, when you start to talk with these children and families around those kinds of presenting conditions, frequently you find out that there's an underlying trauma or series of traumas that these children have experienced. So, the underlying factors behind, take for example an Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, as a diagnosis that can be very useful, it can help you identify effective treatments. But one of the things that can happen is that if you don't address the underlying trauma that has occurred that may be contributing to those symptoms, then you might be just putting a band-aid on something. To really get long lasting effectiveness, you really need to address the underlying trauma: physical abuse or sexual abuse or neglect or things of that nature.

What we find is that children who have been exposed to trauma really experienced and tend to experience a lot of dysregulation in their emotions and in their behaviors. And there's good science now available showing that prolonged exposure to traumatic events can literally create changes in the structure and functioning of your brain. Two of the areas that are affected are the prefrontal cortex, which is related to judgment, decision making and impulsivity. And another are is the amygdala, which is related to emotional regulation and social-emotional development. So, there's a reason I'm saying all that.

If you think about the kinds of behaviors that would place a child at risk of being arrested or expelled, it's really emotion outbursts, behavioral outbursts. And frequently what you find is that children who have been exposed to trauma have a significantly reduced ability to regulate their emotions and their behaviors. So, in response to things that might happen in a classroom or in the hallway, they're going to act out perhaps more aggressively or in a much more pronounced way than other children. And that places them at risk of being arrested or expelled. So, I think it's really critical for schools to understand trauma and how it impacts behavior and emotional regulation and learning. Because it can give people within a school, a new frame and a new way of understanding what they're seeing, and maybe cause them to make different decisions about how to respond to those behaviors.

Crystal Brandow:

Great, thank you so much. And using that example of a student acting out in a hallway, what you're talking about is saying that might be an indicator that something is ... that the student is managing something, there may be a trauma history there, trauma exposure. And there may be a background and some reasoning for that behavior. With that in mind, how can teachers recognize trauma exposure and symptoms in students? So, that's an example you just gave, teachers may not, or other schools staff may not necessarily make the connection to that behavior and trauma. So, how are school staff advised to recognize this in students? Is there a way? Is it easy to do?

Joseph O'Callaghan:

Hi, it's Joe O'Callaghan. There are ways, it isn't easy at all. One of the major problems is that people who come to work in schools have little to no training in this area at all. So, when they walk into their first teaching job, especially in a place where there's a high level of kids who've been exposed to adverse childhood experiences and so on, they don't understand it. And what we see is, in the behaviors of the kids that are particularly difficult, they feel like out of control behaviors to staff members. They are out of control. Schools are organizations that necessarily have to control things because there's a lot of people in them, a lot of movement and all of that.

So, when kids, like the example of a kid in the hallway who's dysregulated for some reason, a school's response to that is to do two things. One is to control it so it stops, so people don't feel upset or anxious or fearful about whatever's going on. And then to spend a lot of time saying to the kid, "What are you doing? Why are you doing that? What's happening?" Which gets back to the prefrontal cortex part of this, that kids who are really in that dysregulated state aren't in a position to sit down and have a nice discussion about why they're behaving the way they're behaving. Because it has very little to do with their ability access logical thought.

So, schools are constantly in this place of, one, attempting to control things. Sometimes because that's necessary. And two, trying to understand things in a very sort of cognitive, talk therapy kind of way. What really needs to happen is, number one, school staff have to understand what trauma is to begin with. All of that, that Jeff just laid out is so essential. Because as I said, people don't know that. And what often happens is, when you begin to teach teachers and paraprofessionals and administrators and all those folks about trauma and its impact on children, light bulbs go off. They go, "Oh, that's why that's happening."

So, that's a really great first step to sort of understand why it's happening, but then of course what to do about it. So, I think for schools, such an important part of this is to not just understand it, but to really be thinking about how are we responding to it? The good news about that is of course the sort of trauma informed ways of responding are good for everybody. Even people who aren't experiencing trauma will benefit from teachers who are thinking about this more as they're responding, or staff members and so on.

Crystal Brandow:

Thank you so much, Joe. Jeff, do you have anything you'd like to add there?

Jeff Vanderploeg:

No, I think Joe's right on. Especially the point around being really hard work. And I think in schools where you have teachers who are not used to thinking about students and student behavior in this way, the big challenge is changing that frame of reference.

Joseph O'Callaghan:

Right.

Jeff Vanderploeg:

And maintaining it over time. Because teachers turn over and principals turn over. I know Joe, that's a constant issue that you have to address.

Joseph O'Callaghan:

Yeah. Jeff and I were just sort of talking about that before we went live here, that we're always taking, it feels like a couple of steps forward in raising awareness about traumatic stress and its impact on kids, helping teachers and administrators to think about these things differently, and then taking two or three steps backwards. Part of the backwards piece of that is when people get anxious, they do what they know. So, there's all this parallel process that's happening. Traumatized kids who are anxious and upset do what they know, which is maybe to misbehave, depending on the kid, to run out of the building or whatever they might do. So, staff, when those things happen and it raises their anxiety, they do what they know. Which is control it, stop it, yell at the kid, put the kid in timeout, suspend the kid, whatever it might be. And that parallel process plays out all the time.

So, we have to try and build in systems, which is really hard in schools because of the nature of the way schools operate, where people can have time to sit down and talk about what's going on. One of the problems is, we spend so much time talking about the kid. What's wrong with Johnny? You know, the sort of pathologizing of Johnny, or with the juvenile justice piece or the criminalizing of Johnny, instead of spending time talking about what's happening with this kid and our own reactions to it and behavior around it. And that's problematic, because if we don't at some point say, "Well, how are you responding to this child? Did you aggravate the situation by your response?" And so on, which happens all the time. If we're not able to discuss that people, aren't going to grow and change.

Crystal Brandow:

Yeah, thank you both so much for that. Thank you. In understanding trauma, how can this depth of understanding what trauma is and how it can impact the students in a school, how can this shift the context of a School Responder Model, or have an impact on implementing a School Responder Model, in your opinion?

Jeff Vanderploeg:

There's a lot of ways that this can happen. I think it starts for us, in our work in Connecticut where we're implemented a School Responder Model that we refer to here locally as a School Based Diversion Initiative. A big part of the work that we do is around training and support. Ongoing learning for teachers, for social workers, for school resource officers, for administrators. So, the people who are responding in the moment to a challenging behavior and the folks who have to make a decision about what to do about it after that incident has cooled down, in terms of some kind of disciplinary response or some other supportive response.

So, a big part of the work for us is presenting information to teachers in a way that's relatable to them. I probably wouldn't talk about a prefrontal cortex and an amygdala with a set of teachers for very long. But it is helpful I think for them to understand that trauma does have a real impact on the brain on behavior and on learning, and starting to change their frame of reference around how they explain what they're seeing. What Joe was talking about earlier relates to how folks explain what's happening. And he made reference to what is a pretty common phrasing in the trauma world around the difference between what is wrong with this student and what happened to this student. Asking those questions, those two questions: the first, "What's wrong with this student?" I think lends itself pretty well to a punitive approach of responding to difficult behaviors. Whereas the question of, "What's happened to this student?" Is going to lead you to ask different questions and to make different causal attributions about what you're seeing.

Joseph O'Callaghan:

And-

Jeff Vanderploeg:

Go ahead.

Joseph O'Callaghan:

I just think the other piece of that from a trauma perspective is to ask what's happening to this student? Because even if they're not longer in danger, no one's hurting them, they're experiencing, sort of post-traumatic stress is something that goes on even when you're no longer in any kind of danger. So, kids are often re-experiencing their traumatic stress over and over again, so that's what's happening to them piece is an important part of it as well.

Jeana Bracey:

And I would add in the context of the School Responder Model, once you have that shift in thinking and you really set that foundation about thinking that way in terms of what's happened to the child or the student, then really putting that into policy and practice to really sustain that in a way that's operational for a school. So, the School Responder Model as something that's on paper, so an actual flowchart that shows what the decision making process is for them to walk through. Once you've identified a need, how do you then treat that, who's involved, who's helping to make those decisions, who should be informed, how is information being shared? And what are the options for handling that situation, is really important in a School Responder Model.

Crystal Brandow:

Thank you so much for adding that, Jeana. We're going to shift and talk a little bit more about the School Responder Model. We mentioned it briefly a little bit earlier and Jeff explained some key pieces of the School Responder Model. I want to dive in a little bit deeper and ask you all to describe the formal steps in a School Responder Model process and connect in this conversation on trauma and how trauma impacts each of these steps.

Jeff Vanderploeg:

Yeah, I'll start. The first step in a School Responder Model is forming a cross system collaborative team. When you have an understanding about trauma and its impact on students, it I think leads you to make different decisions about who you include at the table for supporting the implementation of a School Responder Model. I think you have to think about teachers and administrators and school resource officers and other school personnel as being part of that process. But another thing to think about is if one of the more common trauma exposures that students may experience is something like community violence, then one of the things that schools might want to consider is how they can get community members who really have a finger on the pulse of what's happening in the neighborhood, to be part of your team. Because they may be able to explain to you that there's really been a lot of tension in our community over the last few weeks related to various events that are occurring. And that can be tremendously helpful for a school for putting into context what they're seeing.

Maybe they don't know that the student who's been acting up in the math class for the last couple of days just lost a cousin to gun violence two weeks ago. They may know that, but they may not know that. So, I think one of the first steps is, who's part of your team? Who's coming in from the community to be part of your process? And being inclusive of community members and people who really have an expert level understanding of trauma can be really important pieces of that approach.

Jeana Bracey:

I think from there, then involving the family as well, is a next step that you really go on from there. You want to, in addition to the community you're really involving the family, you're involving the student themselves, thinking about what their role is in that, and using their strengths and their knowledge about their own situation to really help inform what's going to work well for this particular situation. And I think you do that on a larger scale in terms of, in our example often involving family advocacy organization or family advocates and support people who have experience in sitting in PPT meetings, sitting in those types of meetings to support families in that process. They can provide support in mediation and in those kinds of conferencing as well. But also then again on the individual level, so you're looking specifically at each individual circumstance.

Joseph O'Callaghan:

I think also when you have community members and families connected in that way, it really helps to mitigate some of the hostility that often exists between schools and families particularly, and families where there's challenges. Usually in those

situations, those families, their interactions with school folks is somebody calling up saying, "Your kid did something." As opposed to having people be really members of a team where they've got some stake in the outcome and also some ability to not just have it be given to them, but have a say in what happens.

Jeff Vanderploeg:

One thing I'd add to that, it's really interesting in some of the schools that we've worked with in Connecticut, but also in other states across the country, there often is a real interest in having family members and even young people, students themselves, as part of a disciplinary team or a council, to help make decisions. What's really interesting about that is you really see a full range of people's perspectives come out, and having them part of that conversation is really important. But it's also frequently surprising to school personnel. We've heard a lot of examples where they talk about getting students involved on a disciplinary council of some kind, and the suggested disciplinary actions the students come up with are significantly more harsh than what they as administrators might suggest. So, it's a really important way to get people on the same page about what an appropriate response to behavior is all about and what works best in getting people on the same page.

You also get the other side of the coin, you get people who think that the school is much too harsh already and that people need to lighten up. So, I think it's really important to get a broad, diverse set of perspectives together and really support this work.

Jeana Bracey:

I think Jeff, you're kind of alluding to the inherent tension between sort of that punitive approach versus the accountability approach. I think often in this case, people want to ... the main goal is always to reduce the negative behaviors, right? And decrease the problematic behaviors that are happening. But how do you do that in a supportive way and in a way that also holds students accountable when there has been a challenging behavior that has had an impact on others? And that's where often the restorative practices approach comes in. I know we'll talk more about that, but thinking again, about sort of how to balance that need to respond to a situation or an incident, but also be accountable, but also supportive. So, sometimes you do see a difference in that approach from a student perspective or a family perspective and administrative perspective.

Joseph O'Callaghan:

I think the other thing is, this can also help schools to be more creative about how they're responding to things. I think one of the things people need to think about is what is our goal here? If our goal is to punish the child, then okay, throw them out. That's a punishment. But not for every kid. Turns out not every kid feels punished by not having to show up at school. But if the goal is, which I think it probably is ultimately, to change behavior, then we have to think is excluding, in all the ways you can exclude someone, going to change behavior? And it's pretty clear that that's not. If a kid does something one time wrong and gets suspended and is tortured by being suspended, that'll probably change his or her behavior. But if it's a kid with chronic behavior problems and all kinds of psycho social stressors and so on, we know it's not. So, thinking about some other way to respond is important.

I think the other part is that one of the things we know about traumatized folks is it often disrupts their ability to make good attachments. And teaching and learning, schooling, is all about relationships. Nobody ever says, "That teacher was so great at teaching me math." They say, "That teacher was so great at caring about me and I learned all the math." So, it's when we have good, solid relationships with people, that the really positive outcomes happen in school. So, saying, "Get out, get out, get out," is going to have the opposite effect. Especially for people who have difficulty attaching.

Crystal Brandow:

Thank you so much. Is there anything else that either of you would like to add about the formal steps in the SRM process in trauma?

Jeff Vanderploeg:

Yeah, there's, as we know Crystal, there's several steps in the school responder. Everything we just talked about relates to the first couple of steps. And it's really important because it sets the context for the work. But another thing to think about is how do you determine a population of focus for a School Responder Model? And there's a couple of ways of thinking about that. I would say on one hand, that a School Responder Model is a universal approach, in that when you're changing the way that you relate to student misbehavior and the kinds of responses you're making, it really applies to every student in the school. When you make changes to your culture and climate, that impacts and affects every child and student in the school.

So, to a large degree, implementing a School Responder Model is a universal approach and it helps everyone. But I think it's also important to note that the students who are most likely to show up in the office for misbehavior or to come into contact with the school resource officer for something that's happened in the hallway or the cafeteria, those are more likely to be students who have had a trauma exposure in their background, children with behavioral health conditions, children with other kinds of disabilities, such as a learning disability or things of that nature. And also importantly, black and brown students. And the research is very, very clear on all of those populations having much higher prevalence of exclusionary discipline. So, an understanding of trauma is critically important to making sure that you are selecting the right kinds of interventions for the population of students who are most likely to be at risk for exclusionary discipline.

Jeana Bracey:

And I would add, the flip side of that too, thinking about determining your population is also thinking about determining which of your staff you're going to engage in this work as well. So, when you're rolling out a School Responder Model, it really is a whole school approach. So, you do engage all of your staff in this work, but there are oftentimes where you can identify certain staff who tend to have higher levels of discipline referrals come from their classrooms or have more difficulty establishing relationships with certain groups of students. You may have certain teachers or staff who have been more veteran staff, who sometimes we hear that they might be resistant to change or think, "Oh, this is just a new fad, this is just this year's project that we're supposed to implement, it's not going to stick around so I'm just going to wait it out." So, thinking about which staff and faculty and supporters that you need to engage in this as well, is also really important.

Jeff Vanderploeg:

Another important step in the SRM process is structuring an initial response when something does happen. Oftentimes the decision about accountability for behavior might be minutes or even hours or perhaps even days after the incident occurred. But I think it's really important to think about what you do right now in the moment. One of the things that we do in our school based diversion model here in Connecticut, is that we offer training on classroom behavior management skills. Because oftentimes, the teacher in the classroom is going to be the first person who has to respond to a situation that occurs.

I was thinking here about Bruce Perry's work in trauma. And he talks about a model of regulate, relate and reason, what he refers to as the three R's. And that's, I think a lot of what we do in the classroom behavior management training model is talking about starting with regulating the emotion and then making, relying on that relationship, tapping into the relational element of working with that student. And you really can't do the third R of reasoning until you've done those first two. A lot of times, and Joe was talking about this earlier, I think adults have a tendency to jump in there and want to immediately reason. And with a traumatized student or a student who's emotionally dysregulated, they are not ready to reason. They need to regulate first, they need somebody to relate to them, and then they can reason. So, having an initial response is really important.

Sometimes it needs to be somebody other than that particular classroom teacher. What's helpful in our work in Connecticut is, we will work with schools to identify a group of people who really understand this work well, who can respond in the moment to a behavioral incident. That might be your school resource officer, it could be a really great social worker who's in your building, maybe it is an assistant principal. But I think identifying those people who can really effectively manage things in the moment is critical.

If you have the resource available in your state or in your community, bringing in a community based behavioral health provider might also be an option. I know here in Connecticut, we've got a Mobile Crisis Team that's available to every city and town in the state. And a lot of the schools that we work with on the SBDI project will tap into the Mobile Crisis Team in their community and have them come in and support them and stabilize a really hot situation. So, that's another critically important step, is how do you respond right now in the moment? And then once you've stabilized the situation, then kind of move into what do we do now?

Crystal Brandow:

Wonderful, thank you so much. I'll just add a note here that we're talking about the formal steps in the School Responder Model and just wanted to point out that the School Responder Model is indeed a framework and there aren't inherently steps to follow in order. What we just heard Jeff, Jeana and Joe talk about can be done concurrently or in any order. It's not beginning with step one and ending with step five say, and then you've done it. These things are iterative, they happen

as the work goes. And it really just sets a framework for how to do this work to transform school culture and climate and create safer environments for students and for school staff. So, thank you so much for sharing all of that on some of these pieces of the School Responder Model.

In the description of this podcast, you'll be able to see a link where you could go to for more information on School Responder Model and the different elements involved in creating one. And you'll also see a link to CHDI's website, so you can see some of the great work that they've done and what they've alluded to in this podcast.

Moving on, I just wanted to ask another question here about what you all do in Connecticut specifically. Like I said, we'll share the link to your website so people can go on and learn some more. But it would be great to hear it from you all, Jeff and Jeana, about what you're doing at CHDI and the trauma informed perspective that you've infused into your School Based Diversion Initiative, or SBDI, the School Responder Model that you all have.

Jeana Bracey:

Yeah, we'd love to share some information about SBDI. We've been doing that work here in Connecticut over 10 years now, implementing the School Based Diversion Initiative and really have over time kind of evolved our trauma informed approach and the way that we approach this work in terms of diverting youth from the juvenile justice system and really supporting the behavioral health needs that are identified. One of the things that Jeff started with in describing the steps of our School Responder Model is around that collaborative team. And that is really kind of the foundation of where this work starts in the school building, is identifying who your champions are, who your decision makers are, and who are really going to be kind of your boots on the ground to get this work implemented in a school.

We definitely want that to be kind of a cross collaborative team that really engages lots of different roles in the school. So, we identify one lead champion, in Connecticut we refer to them as a leader in residence, who actually is kind of responsible for not only kind of generating buy in and kind of guiding the support and uptake of this work in their school, but also kind of doing some of the logistical pieces of scheduling things and just keeping things on track as our liaison to us here at CHDI. But in addition to that person, and often that person might be a social worker, it might be a school psychologist, it might be a special education teacher, sometimes it's an administrator. But again, it's somebody who has some familiarity with the referral process in a school and also has some level of decision making ability, so that they can kind of put these principles into action in their school.

The team that then helps them with that, I mentioned social workers, psychologists, those are critical elements of their team, as well as school resource officer, really having them engaged and involved so everybody's on the same page with where the goals are going for this particular initiative and making sure that we're on the same page. When we started this work, early on the goal was we started kind of very clearly thinking about diverting arrest. And very quickly realized, well, we can't just talk about diverting arrest because often then that just pushes it off into suspension and expulsion. So, thinking about how to look at this holistically, as we've been talking throughout this podcast so far, in terms of exclusionary discipline.

So, thinking about who's engaged in that work? Who are making those decisions about referrals? And who are the support people that have access to the resources and know what's available to help students when those needs are identified? Again, that's kind of one of the ways that we really start this work in the School Based Diversion Initiative, and identifying that as an ongoing work group, that then processes how are these changes happening over time? So, what kinds of things are working well? Looking at data on a monthly basis, that's a really critical component of this as well. So, it's not just kind of anecdotally, "Oh, I things are going okay." Or, "This is going awful, it's not working at all." Really kind of taking a data-informed approach so that they're really being concrete about what steps are they taking and what changes do they expect to see? And how are those outcomes happening on a month-to-month basis as they're rolling this out over a school year?

I think, to add to that in terms of other team members or other key components, particularly for us here in Connecticut, it's really about the behavioral health response. So, thinking about what are those primary services and supports that are available to schools? Either in house, that they have their own capacity in the school. Or what are those referral sources in the community that they can be linked to, to really provide additional supports and services? For us in Connecticut, Jeff had mentioned our Mobile Crisis Program, that's a key component. Where we do rely on them pretty heavily at times, to come into the school, de-escalate a situation or just help to kind of process better some warning signs that might be happening.

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So, it might not be a full blown crisis when we call them in, but it might be staff are concerned, they're seeing warning signs. Or maybe a low level incident has happened and they want to prevent additional challenges from occurring. That's a great way to get another set of eyes on the kid, get them linked in to a system of screening and support and assessment and referral to additional services that might be needed. So, that's a key component of it as well, and really thinking about who are those other behavioral health providers that can lend support from that connection point?

Crystal Brandow:

Thank you so much for that, Jeana. Shifting to the actual, the school perspective itself. Joe, a question specifically for you, how does a Trauma Informed School Responder Model approach align with different efforts that schools may be implementing as part of multi-tiered systems of support? So, one of the things we do here at NCYOJ is emphasize that the School Responder Model or a School Responder Model can be integrated into existing efforts. MTSS, PBIS, that there is no need to have staff feel burdened or have a sense of initiative fatigue implementing a School Responder Model as a separate thing that the school has to do. But instead, it folds very nicely into other efforts that are already existing in schools. Joe, can you share from your perspective how this aligns with MTSS and how this works with multi-tiered systems of support?

Joseph O'Callaghan:

Sure. So, as we are developing our multi-tiered system, obviously there's lots of different kinds of supports kids need in school. So, we're developing systems around reading and math and all of that. And then in addition, the behavior piece has been critically important for us, how is it that we can respond to kids in all those different levels? So, in a tier system, in tier one, in tier two, tier three? So, the School Responder Model and things like it are easily connected to that, when we've done the work of trying to put in the tier system that's helpful. For example, tier one, all of our schools are thinking about universal precautions and universal responses to how kids are supposed to be in the school and so on and so forth. And then tier two and tier three, developing more intensive systems.

Of course, the responder model is going to be linked in more closely with those kids in the tier two and tier three supports. So, I think as you said, it easily dovetails with what we're trying to do. Because if a tier two support is that you're getting some counseling support from a social worker or something like that, how can we be in a place of preventing all of the issues that might come up where a kid ends up somebody wanting to suspect him, expel him, arrest him? What can that look like? Which also then goes back to the tier one issues. Because one of the things we know with traumatized kids, is what does it mean to walk down a hallway with 500, 700, 1,000 other kids? If you're a person who's dysregulated anyway and you're hypervigilant. So, if we know that, how can we put in those tier one supports for everybody that we make a system where the hallway feels safe?

I've been in plenty of schools in my life where the hallway didn't feel particularly safe. Not because something specific was happening, but just because it felt kind of out of control. So, if I'm working with a kid and know that this is what he needs in my tier two or tier three support and I can then have that also affect tier one by thinking with the powers that be about what is it we're going to do, to make hallway a better place to be? As an example. That can really be a real kind of helpful thing for the whole school. And I think when you have a School Responder Model like this, those kinds of things are going to come up. Because if the School Responder Model is put in place, someone's going to say, "What was the hallway like before this all kind of happened? And how can we prevent that?"

Instead of saying it's just about the kid and what the kid did, we can think about the larger institution and what's happened in the whole place and how to respond to that differently. I'm not sure I completely answered your question, but there you go.

Crystal Brandow:

I would add, one component of the School Responder Model that really aligns with that approach, with the multi-tiered approach, is the restorative practices component. So, we've talked about that a little bit. But really thinking, I mean, that's really on a continuum as well. And the goal there is to restore relationships and create positive relationships, so when there is a challenging situation, that you have a foundation that you've already built of strong relationships. And you can go back to that and say, "What went wrong and how can we fix it? How can we restore it as right as possible?" So, starting from very basic things like affective statements and affective questions. That again, are things that are appropriate for all students and staff as well. So, we're not just talking about students, but for the whole environment, all the way up to those

more formal practices like circles and mediation and conferencing that bring in that problem solving approach, but in a way that really aligns to the trauma informed approach. And also across the multi-tiered systems of support.

Joseph O'Callaghan:

And I think that raises a really important component that I've been really advocating for a couple years now, is that we can't have a system in schools, particularly a trauma informed system or a diversionary system or anything like that, that's just about the kids. It has to be about the adults as well. So, if you're going to implement a restorative circle example, as an example, where a teacher is going to have to come and involved in that, that's going to require a teacher to be vulnerable in some way or another. So, we have to spend a lot of time working with our staff to get them to a place where they're able to do that. Because as I was saying earlier, when people get out of their teaching preparation programs, their knowledge about behavior management is pretty small. And typically what they do is whatever their mother did or their father.

So, "If mom's a yeller," or whatever, "I'm a yeller." That kind of thing. But I think what we're asking them to do in these models that we're discussing, is to be different with the kid. So, rather than be just in control and just the authority and just the boss or whatever, we're asking staff to be willing to sit down and be in relationship, which is a harder thing to do. Especially with someone to drives you crazy. And if you've got a kid in your class or multiple kids in your class that really challenge you, it's a hard thing to sit with them and be in relationship with them. Because really what you desire, even if you're not able to say it, is for them to get away from you.

So, it's pretty understandable why people want to push kids out. Because one of the problems I think teachers experience is, they feel really incompetent. Because, "I can't teach because I've got this kid who runs around the room or curses me out," or whatever the kid does. So, teachers feel like failures. Whether they're able to really articulate that, I think that's true of what goes on for teachers. So, when you feel like a failure, you don't respond always your best way. So, this whole way of being really requires a kind of different way of being vulnerable, honest, and relational with kids.

So, we have to change some of the way we respond to the adults so that we can give people permission to say, with other adults, "This is really hard for me." And have that not be an evaluative measure for how they do as a teacher. But, "It's hard for me to have this kid in my room." Because once they can do that, then we can talk about it and have some honest discussion about, "Okay, what's hard? How do we do it? How can we be different about it?" And people then feel support.

Crystal Brandow:

That was a really great way of explaining one of the core principles of the restorative practice model, is around the social discipline window, right? So, the goal is to do things with, the students and the staff to do things with and together. Not overly punitive, where you're doing things to them, and not overly permissive, where you're doing things for them. But really kind of that sweet spot of balancing that so you're actually doing it together. And that does take a lot of vulnerability, and it also takes a lot of support and acknowledgement on the administration's behalf, to build that in. We talk about policy and we talk about standardizing this into, structuring this into a policy, that really making sure that there's structures and supports there to support staff as well. And that reminder that a trauma informed approach really is about everyone. It's not about those few students who have been identified as having the most serious needs, it's really about everybody.

Jeff Vanderploeg:

One last thing I would add about the relationship between an SRM and how it fits into a multi-tiered system of supports, if you're doing a School Responder Model the right way and following all the steps, one of the things that you introduce into this process is an ability to screen and refer to treatment, or even to provide treatment within the school. As you have these deeper conversations and relationships with students in your school and you're not just looking to remove a student from a situation as a way to just calm things down, but you're going to find that you're uncovering different needs than you may have expected. And making sure that schools have the tools that they need to really uncover what those needs are and then knowing what to do with it once they've uncovered those needs is really important.

Jeff Vanderploeg:

So, that's why having a standardizing screening measure as part of this SRM model, there is a direct relationship between that and what you would need to have a full MTSS in your school as well. So, that's a really clear connecting part. There's good trauma measures out there, the Child Trauma Screen is one of them, it's available on our CHDI website for free, it can be downloaded

and used by schools. And then having effective trauma informed interventions available. Sometimes those are things that are being delivered in the school. I know in Joe's schools there's a number of clinicians now who have been trained in what's called CBITS, Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools, and its elementary school version, which is called Bounce Back.

So, that is a great resource. Because as you have these deeper conversations and relationships, you find out that there's trauma exposure and symptoms going on, you can make a referral right to your CBITS or your Bounce Back team in your school. Sometimes the need is more significant than that, and having a relationship with a community based behavioral health partner is critical so that you can make a referral to an outside agency who can take on a level of support with students that exceeds what's available within your own school building. So, that's another way that SRM fits in with the multi-tiered system of supports.

Crystal Brandow:

Thank you, I'm so delighted that you added the piece on screening. That's so important, the screening and the referral is really essential to a successful School Responder Model and really something that helps students get the services and supports that they need in the community. And ties back to the earlier conversation on identifying what's available in the community and having that cross-collaborative team that can include those community supports. Thank you so much for adding that piece.

Another question just to close out today's conversation, and I can't thank the three of you enough for your time. Really to drill down into how this actually works and what it actually looks like in a school, just to highlight that this isn't all theoretical, that it actually does happen and really emphasize how this can be successful. I'll ask Joe, if you could please share a success story that you might be aware of from Stamford Public Schools, and any outcomes that you're really proud of that you saw happen in that school.

Joseph O'Callaghan:

Sure. Jeff and I were sort of talking about this before we started, about how successful we feel. Part of my problem is I'm looking at this from a system perspective. So, sometimes it's hard to think things are changing and developing. But with that said, they are. Just a student example, I know a young man who we have in one of our high schools who's been very difficult for several years, lots of behavior problems, which primarily have been around not going to class and fighting. So, he was being suspended all the time for that kind of stuff, which is ironic because not going to class, he's self-suspending. He cut the middle man out. Anyway, but with a lot of work with the school administration and some of the other folks in the school, really helping people think about what else can we do here to provide some support? Back to the question what is it that we're trying to accomplish? Are we trying to get him to go to class? Well, sending him home with an official stamp isn't going to do it.

So, number one, we evaluated him and screened him and found out all kinds of things about his life that the school didn't know. And then were able to provide supports to him. So, both in school and out of school. The out of school part of the mental health support that he got was in the school-based health center, which of course is in the school, even though not operated by the school. So, he was able to ... He was in a CBITS group, he got therapy in the school-based health center, he also saw the psychiatrist. But then also, we have relationships, back to the relationships with community providers. One of the community providers we have was the [inaudible 00:51:50] Foundation and they have a program called Family Advocates. So, the kid was given a family advocate, which was then able ... that person was then able to really work with mom and the family and community partners to wrap this kid up and give him lots and lots of support.

So, the upshot of that is he began to go to class more often. I wouldn't say that he immediately went to all his classes, but he began to feel, I think, like he was part of it, as opposed to just the problem. And I think that was really, really helpful to him.

Crystal Brandow:

Thank you so much for sharing that. As we wrap up today's discussion, is there anything else the three of you would like to share about the impact of trauma on youth and the School Responder Model?

Jeff Vanderploeg:

I guess I would say that I would encourage any school who's listening to this podcast to really take a shot at doing this work. Because it's important and we know that it works. We have been going back 10-plus years now, as Jeana mentioned, we've been working with policy research associates for a long time, starting from the beginning of our development of the School-Based Diversion Initiative. We've been in over 50 schools now and we've seen really great results. We've

seen on average around a 35% to 40% reduction in juvenile court referrals for schools that have done our SBDI work, and somewhere in the neighborhood of a 50% to 60% increase in referrals to behavioral health services and supports. That's impacted a lot of students. So, I would encourage people who are listening to this, to do the work. It can be difficult, it can be challenging. But we've found that the schools that stick with it for a while find it to be really helpful and it's really helped improve things in the classroom and in the school and helped improve students' lives.

Joseph O'Callaghan:

I would say the other thing, to piggyback on what Jeff was saying about doing the work, especially for school people one of the challenges is there are obviously so many distractions. "We've got to do math, we don't have time for this," or that kind of thing. But we all know that if we can't get kids in seats in classrooms ready to learn, who cares how good a math teacher I am? So, that's a really important part to be thinking about how do we develop our skillset so that we can have kids feel connected? And I think there needs to be people in positions where this is their responsibility so that it continues. Because, as Jeana was talking about before, the wait out approach is very classic thing schools do. "Oh, this is the new thing, it'll go away." And it will go away, if there's nobody in charge of it. So, that's just a really important piece.

Jeana Bracey:

The only thing I would add is just not to be discouraged by some of those big numbers. So, success isn't only these big decreases in court referrals and big increases in referrals to behavioral health services. I mean, those clearly are ultimate goals that you really want to strive for, but start small and think about some of the really small changes that you can make on a daily basis that are going to be really significant. And that's in the relationships, that's in improving the relationships, that's in de-escalating one situation at a time, it's what you prevented and what you diverted, which sometimes are hard to count. Right? So, it's not that you can actually quantify that sometimes, but it's creating that more positive environment that is going to eventually lead you to those bigger picture outcomes that you will see over time.

Crystal Brandow:

Thank you so much. Again, this is a podcast from the National Center for Youth Opportunity and Justice, and we are pleased to have had this conversation with these three experts in trauma and working with students with behavioral health needs. We'd like to thank you for listening to this conversation, it's one of several that we're posting to help the schools that we're working with succeed in their own School Responder Models. So, Jeff, Jeana, Joe, can't thank you enough for your time. It was a wonderful conversation and thank you so much for sharing your expertise.

Jeff Vanderploeg:

Thank you.

Joseph O'Callaghan:

Thank you.

Jeana Bracey:

Thank you, Crystal.

CONCLUSION

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