



# NCYOJ's School Responder Model Podcast Series

## SCHOOL RESPONDER MODEL OVERVIEW FEAT. JACQUI GREENE



### INTRODUCTION

In this discussion, Dr. Crystal Brandow from Policy Research Associates and the National Center for Youth Opportunity and Justice talks with Jacqui Greene, NCYOJ Senior Advisor, about school responder models. This is part of a podcast series focused on topics that can help schools and communities successfully implement school responder models. To hear other episodes in this series, please visit NCYOJ on SoundCloud.

*The text below represents a professional transcriptionist's understanding of the words spoken. No guarantee of complete accuracy is expressed or implied.*

#### **I Crystal Brandow:**

Hi, my name is Crystal Brandow. I'm a senior project associate. I'm here with Jacqui Greene. Jackie, do you want to introduce yourself before I get started?

#### **I Jacqui Greene:**

Sure. I am so happy to be here with everybody today. My name is Jacqui Greene. I worked here at Policy Research Associates for about three and a half years. And during that time, spent most of my time working on school responder model development and implementation in lots of different places across the country. So I have had the opportunity to work with folks in big school districts, in small school districts, in the Northeast, in the South, in Nevada, and focused on providing technical assistance to those folks to help them engage in our planning process and then in implementation process for school responder models. So it is my privilege really to be with you today to talk about it.

#### **I Crystal Brandow:**

Great. Thank you so much. Let's start with talking a little bit more about what a school responder model really is. Why would people develop this and how does it relate to the juvenile justice work that's done at NCYOJ?

#### **I Jacqui Greene:**

Sure. The school responder model was actually born out of juvenile justice reform work that started between 2000, 2010 under the Models for Change Juvenile Justice Reform Project that was funded by the MacArthur Foundation. And way back then, the mental health and juvenile justice action network focused on thinking about how to keep young people who have mental health conditions and are getting pulled into the juvenile justice system for reasons other than being super violent and dangerous, for keeping those young people out of the juvenile justice system. And the states that worked on that in the very first phase, one of the things they identified was schools, and the connection between kids getting in trouble in school and kids getting pulled into the juvenile justice system.

#### **I Jacqui Greene:**

That was really the birthplace of the school responder model, and we saw work in Ohio, in Summit County, and in Connecticut as a result of that work. After that, which is when I came to PRA and started doing this work, we worked in many other places across the country to replicate that model. And the reason why folks wanted to get into this work

was because we had seen this trend in our schools that more and more young people were getting suspended, expelled, and even arrested inside school for things that were relatively low level behaviors that maybe in the past had not led to suspension, expulsion, and juvenile justice system involvement.

**Jacqui Greene:**

So if you think about a couple of scenarios. In scenario one, we've got a young person who is struggling with his behaviors in school. Maybe he's disruptive in the classroom, maybe he's not responsive when teachers and administrators tell him that he needs to change his behavior. The behavior is not changing and maybe the behavior escalates and he is repeatedly suspended. Maybe it starts with in-school suspensions and then we moved to out of school suspensions. And eventually, we see that young person getting arrested. And we think about how much disruption has been caused in the classroom, how much that young person does not like school after getting in trouble so much inside the school building and how much the grownups in the school have been frustrated and not really able to do their jobs well, because they're spending so much time dealing with this young person's behavior.

**Jacqui Greene:**

So many negative outcomes, and ultimately, maybe this young person becomes involved in the juvenile justice system. And we know the outcomes for people who get pulled deep into the juvenile justice system usually aren't great. That's scenario one and it's a scenario we see a lot inside our schools, especially for certain kinds of students, which we can maybe talk about that.

**Crystal Brandow:**

Well, I was actually just going to ask that just then. Are there students that this is more likely, in your experience doing this work for as long as you have, in the different communities and states that you've worked in? Is this more likely the outcome for any group of students more than another?

**Jacqui Greene:**

For sure. And there's tons of research on that that tells us that there are lots of disparities in terms of the disproportionate, both exclusionary school discipline and arrest that's happening inside schools. We see students of color, both exclusionary school discipline and experiences of arrest; way disproportionate to their numbers that they represent in the overall school system. Usually at least twice as much. And we also see students with disabilities being suspended at higher rates than they represent in the overall population and being arrested. Again, at least double the rates than they represent in the actual school population. And if you happen to be a boy of color with a disability, you are at the most heightened risk for experiencing exclusionary school discipline and arrest, school-based arrests.

**Jacqui Greene:**

So there are definitely kids who experienced these things at much higher rates than certain other kids. And I think as we think about that, it's important to understand that the kinds of offenses, because when we're moving kids into the justice system, it's because we're charging them with an offense that would have been a crime if they had been an adult, the kinds of offenses are usually the vast majority, when any school looks at their data, they're discretionary things like disruptive behavior that gets labeled as disorderly conduct, for example. Is it really a disruptive behavior we're seeing in school or is it a crime? When we charge kids with disorderly conduct, we're charging them with criminal behavior. We're saying your behavior would have been a crime if you had been an adult and it's on that basis that we're pulling you into the juvenile justice system.

**Jacqui Greene:**

So in scenario one, we are criminalizing that behavior. We're thinking of that behavior as a crime. In scenario two, which is more of a school responder model scenario, we're looking at a behavior, a disruptive behavior, a behavior that's not okay. So the school responder model is not saying we're going to excuse all the bad behavior in school because it's not a crime, but it's saying there might be an explanation for this bad behavior and let's look for the root cause and get to the explanation so we can get to a solution. And if that root cause is mental health, there are solutions because we know kids can get better. And especially when we're talking about kids with disabilities or racial and ethnic minorities, who often are also disproportionately not getting the kinds of treatment that they need in the mental health system. We might be talking about kids who have real needs, real unmet needs that are driving their behavior.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

So in scenario two, a school responder model scenario, instead of responding with the police, with out of school suspension, we're saying, "Okay, we're going to pause, and we're going to look for what might be the root cause of this behavior." We're going to do a screening. If you flag on the screening, we're going to get you connected with a clinician who can do an assessment. And we're going to have a really informed process to think about what interventions you need, so this behavior doesn't happen again.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

And it doesn't mean we're not going to hold you accountable. There are accountability mechanisms we can use in schools, and restorative practices are fantastic accountability mechanisms that can be used quickly and effectively inside the school. And you can do all of that without criminalizing the behavior. And if we get kids to these kinds of services and interventions that they need, then we are looking at the root cause of what's driving this disruptive behavior.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

I like to think about it sometimes and talk about it with people. If you think about we have somebody who's diabetic, the doctor does not prescribe for that diabetic person, "You should go take antibiotics," right?

**I Crystal Bradow:**

Right.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

But we do that all the time with kids and their disruptive behavior. Oh, you're doing something that's not okay in school, and it's causing all this disruption, and so we're going to send you to court. Well, going to court isn't doing anything to address that behavior. Going to court means maybe in a couple of months, you'll see a judge, maybe. Maybe your case will get diverted and nothing will happen, which happens a lot in the juvenile justice system. Or maybe you will get into court and see a judge, but that's going to be in a couple months. And then maybe we're going to put you on probation.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

I mean, how many of us wait two, three, four months to have some punishment for our child when they misbehave? My kids misbehave, I don't say, "Okay, let's talk about this in two months," right?

**I Crystal Bradow:**

Right.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

For kids, that's forever. So this idea that when we have a problem, we should prescribe a solution that addresses the problem. The diabetic needs their diabetes medicine, right? They don't need an antibiotic. The kid with disruptive behavior that is being caused by a mental health condition, needs help with that mental health condition.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

So the school responder model is all about identifying those needs, doing that in an objective way so our personal biases are not overlaid on that identification of need, and then getting kids to the programs and services they need so that they can get the supports they need to do well in school, stay in school. And everybody's happier in the end. The kids do better. They feel better about school. They haven't experienced all of this kind of negative stuff, getting suspended over and over again. Their feelings about being in school are more positive. And the grownups who work with them in school are happier, because kids are behaving better, they're having less problems in their classrooms. And lots of people who work in schools really want their kids to do the best they can and excel. And they get to see that more when they're working in a school responder model kind of framework.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

So there is undeniably in the research literature, a connection between getting pushed out of school through exclusionary school discipline, and becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. Research has shown that students are three times more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system the year after they've been suspended, than other students who look exactly the same as they do. So similarly situated students, controlling for all the things that the researchers want to control

for. That experience of out of school suspension is often the first step on a pathway into the juvenile justice system. Even if the arrest doesn't happen at the same time the suspension happens. It might be two different things that happen, but we know that out of school suspension is for sure one clear pathway into the juvenile justice system for some young people.

**I Crystal Brandow:**

And the school responder model is all about preventing that involvement with the juvenile justice system. And it sounds like what you're really pointing out too, a core piece of the model, is getting students the services that they need as quickly as possible. So not four months down the line is their connection to community mental health or whatever services may best fit the needs of that student, but as soon as possible.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Yeah, that's definitely true. One of the things I've encountered in many places where I've worked with people who've been doing school responder model work is that oftentimes people feel like the referral into the juvenile justice system is necessary because the kid needs help.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

And I've met so many people across the country who work in the juvenile justice system with really good intentions and do really good work, and want kids to get the help and the supports and the services that they need. And for really high-risk kids who've done serious and violent things, the juvenile justice system is the right place to get them those services, because they're dangerous. But that's not most of the kids. And it is certainly not most of the kids who get in trouble in school. Most of the offenses in school are the disorderly conducts or a simple affray, which is a fight where nobody got hurt.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

So the school responder model is about we should not put kids into the juvenile justice system when they don't meet this risk profile that is appropriate for the juvenile justice system. In order for them to get services, kids shouldn't have to get arrested to get services.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Oftentimes I find when I talk to people in lots of different parts of the country about the school responder model, it is this drive to get services, and they get nervous like, "Well, if we break this pathway from the school building to the juvenile justice intake system, then these kids aren't going to get help." The school responder model is all about building a different pathway to get them help. That's exactly what it's about. We talk about school justice pathways. The school responder model is an alternative to the school justice pathway, but it is all about building pathways to services for students outside of that justice system route.

**I Crystal Brandow:**

Yeah, and it's very different from what most of us recognize as the traditional model of discipline in schools, which we can talk a little bit more about and what a school responder model actually is. So these are all the great things that it can possibly do and transform school culture in this way and help to keep students in school and help them get the supports that they need, but can you tell our listeners what exactly this is?

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Sure. It's something that I think people... It's often foreign to people when they first hear about it, because it's not a program or a grant. And oftentimes, people really want a grant, but I have come to believe that the school responder model framework, and that's what I call it is a framework, is such a better way of making change that will last for students, because it is not meant to be a temporary one time "Oh, let's try this new thing while we have this grant and we'll have a new flavor of the day next year and we'll try something new next year depending on what the grant is next year."

**I Jacqui Greene:**

And the school responder model has really core components, but how those things get operationalized at the local level depends on what people have. Let me explain that. The first core component of the school responder model is bringing together across systems collaborative team to plan what exactly your school responder model will look like. And that is absolutely 100% critical. If you don't have the right team at the table to plan your model, you're not going to get a functioning school responder model.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

What's really important is that obviously you need the school and you need leadership from the school. And I think you also need some boots on the ground people at the school, like people who are doing school social work, if you have a school social worker or your school psychologist or teachers, folks who are day to day with students along with administration and leadership, kind of at the school level. You have to have those people.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

You have to have law enforcement because a lot of the conversation is about what will the role of law enforcement be and how we work with the young people when there are issues. So, it's really important to have law enforcement's voice at the table. Then it is so critical that you have community based service providers. This is the magic ingredient in the sauce is making sure that you have community based providers in these conversations from the beginning to plan what your school responder model is going to look like, because the school responder model is not intended to be school. You need to do this other thing by yourself.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

It is intended to be ... we all work in the same community already. Some of us work in the school, some of us work in law enforcement. Maybe we work in the school, maybe we don't. Some of us provide services in the community already, mental health services. Some of us know a lot about how those mental health services are funded. It is not the job of the school administrator to figure out the funding stream for mental health services in their community. And it's not the job for the mental health service provider to figure out the discipline structure in the school.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

So, each of these systems is probably working with the same kids and families in their own silo all the time. But, the magic of the school responder model is all of them coming around one table, making the time and the space to sit around a table and to plan how can we create an alternative pathway for the kids in our school who we know have big needs that are not being met. We know those needs aren't being met because they're getting in trouble all the time, right? They're getting in trouble all the time because they have an unmet need.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

The other really important two groups of people whose voice needs to be at that table are kids and families. So, when all the professionals sit around and make a plan, sometimes that plan is not a plan that kids and families want to use. What is really challenging about the school responder model is that we are talking about really difficult conversations, because we're talking about conversations with parents or caretakers, whoever that young person's caretaker might be, maybe it's grandma, maybe it's the foster care system. We're talking about conversations about kids who are getting in trouble in school. So, that's already a hard conversation because no parent likes to hear that their kid got in trouble in school, and conversations about we think there might be a mental health need, which are also difficult conversations.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

They're difficult conversations, even if kids aren't getting in trouble, right? So, now I like to call this the double whammy. This is a really hard conversation, you know? We're getting in trouble in school. We might have a mental health issue. And the best way to know how to do that work effectively with kids and families is to ask them, right? How could we structure this in a way that you would want to use it? Because we could build the greatest school responder model, but if people won't use it, it really doesn't matter that you built it. So, it's really important. You have to have the cross systems team. The cross systems team has to include kids and families, schools, law enforcement, service providers.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

There may be other people in your community who it's important to include, and that may have everything to do with whose voice you need in support of your initiative. That varies from community to community. But, these folks at least need to be on that cross systems team. That's a really important first piece of work that sometimes people don't spend a lot of time thinking about, but if you don't do that well, you can't do the rest well. People often jump to the second piece of work, which is also really important, which is building what is your school responder model going to be? It's key that you have a screening process and that screening process connects to an assessment process. That assessment process connects to building a case plan for some kinds of services or supports for that young person.

**I Crystal Bradow:**

Right. You don't want to just screen for the sake of screening. That's really important to get that clinical follow through with an appropriate professional in the community.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Absolutely. And screening is something that people often don't really understand what that means. When I say screening, I'm talking about some kind of a mental health screening instrument that is a validated tool, not one that I made up in my office by myself. There are many validated screening tools readily available for folks, so there's no need to make it up on your own and they are quick and they do not have to be done by a clinician. In fact, many times, if students are old enough, they fill them out themselves.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

If you're working with a younger population, you're going to need somebody probably to help them with that, but for older kids, middle school and high school, there are lots of screening instruments that they can fill out themselves and there are some screening instruments that have been developed for schools that are made for teachers to fill out. So, you can research what screening instruments are out there and pick the one that works best for you. Some of them are really, really short. Some of them are a little bit longer. It just depends on what folks feel like will work in their setting.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

So, you pick a screening instrument, and then you have to pick a population of students to screen. This is where, what you said before, Crystal, about you don't want a screen just to screen, you want a screen because kids who flag on the screen, meaning the screening comes back and says, "Whoop, there might be an issue here." That's all that screening tells you. Screening does not diagnose somebody, you can't build a case plan off the results of a screening instrument, but a screening instrument will tell you, "Ooh, this student really should see the clinician for a more in-depth assessment."

**I Jacqui Greene:**

The challenge in building a school responder model here is to define the population of students you plan to screen. I've worked in places where they've been small alternative school settings where they know that pretty much every kid who comes in their door is a kid who, first of all, by definition, hasn't succeeded in the traditional public school system, that's how they ended up in their school. It's a relatively small school, and they make the decision we're going to screen everybody. We're going to do it in a systemic way. We're going to screen everybody.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

I've worked in other places where they've said, "Woof, we're a big public school, if we screen everybody, there is no way we are going to have the resources to connect everybody who flags on that screening instrument with an assessment. So we're going to narrow our pool of kids we screen." I've worked in a school where they decided they were only going to screen kids for whom they were calling the police, which is probably the most narrow form of the school responder model, right?

**I Crystal Bradow:**

Right.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Like we are defining this as an alternative to justice system referral, so when we're picking up the phone to call the justice system, we're going to screen those kids, and kids who flag are going to have this alternate pathway to services. Sometimes people talk about, well we're going to set some kind of triggers for ourselves about kids who are getting referred to the office or referred to the office a certain number of times for disciplinary referrals, we'll screen them.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Or truancy. I've worked in a lot of places where they wanted to use us for students who weren't coming to school very often, so when they hit a certain threshold of truancy, we'll screen those students. That decision is often driven largely by what are the resources that we're going to have to use once kids do flag, because we don't want to screen away and then have nothing to do.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

So we pick a screening instrument, we pick who we're going to screen, and then, and this is why you have to have your service providers at the table with you, you need to figure out how to get the kids who flag on the screening to a clinician just like you said. Different places do that in different ways, it depends kind of what the service system looks like in your community.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

It's critically important that the kids who flag on the screening get to a clinician who can do full assessment, which does take time and should take time, because off of that assessment is where we're going to think about what is the need? Is there any diagnosis? What should the plan be? Based on that full assessment, what should the plan be to provide the services and supports that the student needs?

**I Jacqui Greene:**

That's the second piece. You build like what is your model going to look like. Again, it depends on what you have in place in your community already. We're not talking about building some new structure, we're talking about building a new pathway to the services that are in the community.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

The last piece is making it stick. What I like to always say to people, especially when I'm with a group of people who are planning, and there's usually in that group one or two people at least who are really enthusiastic about the work, and you just know. Those people are going to go do this because they believe in it, they care about it, they want to do it, they're going to do it.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Then I look at them when I say, "So what if you win the lottery next month, and you leave to go buy a house in The Bahamas and live a life of luxury. How is this going to live on?" What you don't want to do is build something that is attached to one person or a couple of people. I find often that when I talk with people who work in schools about getting their students' mental health services, that is exactly what they have.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

They say, "Well, we have a process. I know my friend, Sally, who works at community-based service provider X, she'll take my call. When I have a student who really has like intense needs, I call Sally and we get them in." That does work for a little while, until I leave my job, or Sally leaves her job, and now the students don't have a pathway anymore because that personal connection isn't there.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

We really encourage people. Once you build what your structure is going to be, to put it in a policy or procedure, write it down, have people sign it so it is a formal official thing. Maybe it's some kind of memorandum of understanding or memorandum of agreement between the school, and law enforcement, and service providers. In my ideal world, it would be that.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Sometimes people can't get to that and that's okay, but they still need to think about how can they get this in writing in a way that it's clear, that it is just the way we do business at our school now, and it connects to these service providers and law enforcement in this certain way. So that when people change seats and we find in doing this work especially in really stressed schools, people change seats all the time, that these things... the next person just inherits it. It's just the way we do business. You know, put it on paper and make it official.

**I Crystal Brandow:**

Yeah, and really have it institutionalized like you said, this is what we're doing now moving forward, so that even for a parent who may have two children three years apart, it wouldn't behoove anyone for one child to go through a school that adopted a school responder model, and then two years later, three years later, another child is back into the traditional model of school discipline. Actually, codifying into the culture of the school so that it moves forward and hopefully evolves, and those partnerships continue to grow with the key players you discussed, and then other organizations that may be relevant based on the community you need.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Yeah, absolutely.

**I Crystal Brandow:**

With that in mind, do you think that different places are going to inherently have different school responder model, also going to look different. Again, like I just mentioned, based on community need, there may be certain partners in one area that may not be relevant in another community. Because we're looking at the school responder model as a framework, it's not in itself a program that exists with steps one, two, three, and then you've done it, it's a framework for how to do this. Does this look different in various communities, and how so?

**I Jacqui Greene:**

It does. Let me give you two examples of two great school responder models, neither of which call themselves, by the way, a school responder model, they make their own names for their work. The first one I want to talk about is in Connecticut, and it's called the School-based Diversion Initiative. And so Connecticut was one of those first states when I talked about the Models for Change work way back when, that started this work, Connecticut was one of those states that started this work and they built what they call SBDI now.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

The folks at the Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut have been great partners with us here at PRA. They are really the Connecticut experts and have worked with over 40, I think, at this point in time, schools throughout the state of Connecticut to implement SBDI. What they have in Connecticut that they were able to build on was this incredibly robust mobile crisis and stabilization services for kids. When I talk about this in other places, people are always jealous of the great service that they have in Connecticut, because basically anybody actually, not just schools, but they've used this now in schools, anybody can call this number and get a mobile crisis team to come help a young person in Connecticut.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

And it's not limited to students who are at risk of maybe needing to be hospitalized, which is often what we find the standard is for mobile crisis response, but they have a broader net that they cast in terms of mobile response. They will come for lesser things than somebody's about to hurt themselves or somebody else. What they do in Connecticut is they provide tons of training to the grownups working in the school.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

While this is ultimately an effort to help students with mental health needs, the work in Connecticut is largely focused on the grownups and they provide lots of training to the staff in the school so that they become more aware of the role that mental health might be playing in their students' behaviors and they understand that they can call Mobile Crisis. That's what the schools do. They shift away from referring kids into the justice system and they call the Mobile Crisis System and Mobile Crisis can respond right to the school.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

I think they have a 45 minute window and are often there sooner. They're really lucky in Connecticut that it is a really robust system. They'll come to the school and they'll do an on the spot screening and then they actually can work with students for a period of weeks in terms of connecting them to a service provider. The school doesn't have to do any of that work. The school is calling Mobile Crisis and Mobile Crisis is coming and doing the screening and connecting kids to assessment and ultimately connecting kids to services. That is not on the school's plate at all.

**I Crystal Brandow:**

Right. No burden to add to the list of things that school staff are already balancing and juggling.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Exactly. In fact, it ultimately becomes easier for the people inside the school because people inside schools can spend their whole day working on these. When there's a crisis, when a student has a crisis, it can take your whole day. Now they have somebody to call, a mental health professional to call who will come and work with that student. Then the other thing

they do through SBDI is really work with folks on developing a graduated response model for school discipline. Being very thoughtful and actually developing a grid in terms of what kinds of behaviors are going to trigger what kind of disciplinary response to work on reducing the use of exclusionary school discipline; thinking about other accountability mechanisms that you can have in place inside the school that stop short of pushing kids out of the classroom.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

That's SBDI. Again, they're really lucky that they have that robust Mobile Crisis and stabilization service for kids in Connecticut, but it is what they have. They did exactly what we encourage people to do is look at what resources you have and connect them. In the past, schools, the schools that do SBDI were not calling Mobile Crisis, even though they had Mobile Crisis. The magic of the school responder model is really connecting, in a very intentional way, schools to the existing mobile crisis system and the schools that do SBDI use it. They see their referrals to the justice system drop dramatically and their referrals to Mobile Crisis and stabilization increase dramatically. It is working for them with what they have. That's one look of a school responder model.

**Crystal Brandow:**

Like you said, it's not a matter of a grant. School responder model isn't getting a grant or getting a separate funding mechanism or anything just for this work, but leveraging what's already in community because there are mobile crisis units, there are community mental health providers, law enforcement, community action agencies, youth serving organizations, the list goes on. Making the most of those relationships.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Absolutely. In Connecticut, they're lucky and that their state funds that mobile crisis service. It's not coming out of the school district's budget. Right. Their state funds it, but what I always like to remind people is when we're talking about mental health services, those are health services. In any community, there is some capacity, at least for kids who have some form of health insurance, Medicaid, or private health insurance, so there's a whole other bigger conversation about truly uninsured kids and we do have those, especially in some pockets of our country, but in many communities, almost every kid has some kind of health insurance and mental health services are part of that service package.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Now, the school is not a mental health provider, so the school, absent in the world of special ed, there are some situations in which schools can charge Medicaid, but I'm not talking about that. I'm not talking about just special ed here. I'm talking about any student who has a mental health need, who may not be a special ed student, to connect them to services. Well, let's think about how do we use the mental health service system that already exists with insurance that already exists? Right. We're not talking about building a whole new budget for this.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Connecticut is one luck. A totally different luck was developed with folks in Schenectady, New York. Schenectady sits not far from where PRA sits in upstate New York. It's not a huge city, but it is a city with a lot of struggles. The kids in that school district have a lot of struggles. When we started working with them, usually we encourage people; look at what kinds of offenses your kids are getting pushed out of school for, and your kids are getting arrested for in school and pick the low hanging fruit. Pick the easier things, like the disorderly conduct, the simple [inaudible 00:35:09], the interrupting governmental operations is another charge we often see kids face based on behaviors in schools. Pick the easy ones, the low hanging fruit, and start there.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Well, when we went to Schenectady, they said to us, "That is an absolutely not where we want to start." They said, "We want to start with our kids who are facing longterm suspension." And in Schenectady, those are kids who are going to what they call a superintendent's hearing. So if they are facing a longterm suspension, they go to a superintendent's hearing. So now we're talking about kids who have done something, right? A lot of times, these are serious fights where maybe there were injuries, right? Or staff were hurt, or serious things. These were not the low hanging fruit that we usually encourage people to start with. But we said, "All right. What will work best in your community? Have at it, what are you going to build?"

**I Jacqui Greene:**

And they are very lucky in that. They have a bunch of services right through their school district, right in their school district. So they had a social worker in the school who was able to really focus on this project. And they've also been very focused on implementing restorative practices in their school district. So they had this alternative accountability mechanism that they were already starting to build. And what they created was, when kids get a notice and their parents get a notice that they have to go to a superintendent's hearing about a longterm suspension, they have an opportunity for what's called their diversion program. So again, they don't call it a school responder model, they call it their diversion program.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

And what it is, is you agree to do the screening and to engage in some kind of services based on what the screening and assessment reveal you need. And we will reduce the length of your out of school suspension. So instead of having this crazy longterm suspension, you're going to get back in school sooner, and we're going to make sure that you get connected to evidence-based services. And they were very focused on looking only at evidence-based services that were in their community, and that's what they've done.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

And they have had tremendous success with it. So good thing they ignored us about focusing on the low hanging fruit, because they have really reduced the number of kids who are facing longterm suspensions in their school district after implementing this. Now they're finding that lots of those kids have mental health needs, and they have been lucky enough to be in the position where they've been able to find services, either through the school district or through connections with service providers, that they've been able to provide or find services for the students who need them. More students than they first expected.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

But I guess when you have that narrow population of kids who are getting into really serious trouble, maybe it's not as surprising that there are more intense mental health needs among that population than you would expect among the general population of just generally kids who get in trouble. Right? So yeah, they built a totally different school responder model. So if you were to just kind of walk off the street and look at SBDI in Connecticut and look at the diversion program in Schenectady, you wouldn't think that they have anything to do with each other. But they do in that they started, they both started with this cross systems team, they started talking about how do we build a pathway to mental health services, which kids do we want to focus on?

**I Jacqui Greene:**

In Connecticut, they take a more broad preventative approach, and are not focusing just on kids who are getting in high-level trouble as they are in Schenectady. So they have different populations of focus, and they have different ways of getting them services. Connecticut's looking at their mobile crisis, Schenectady is looking at their providers in the community and providers right in their school district to provide those services. But they are both school responder models, and both of them have really embedded this work in just the way they do business.

**I Crystal Bradow:**

Yeah, definitely both very great programs. And again, the fact that they have different names just really emphasizes that the school responder model is a framework that any school can take, any district can take on and modify it for use in their own community, with what resources they have available. And it doesn't have to be the school responder model. Again, there's no right or wrong way to do it. It's just covering those core components and making sure the students get the services that they need, even though again, in one area may look completely different of how that happens than it does in another.

**I Crystal Bradow:**

So even though this is great work, especially in Connecticut and in Schenectady, there have to be challenges to doing this. There are challenges to doing this. So what are some of the barriers that you're aware of that schools have faced implementing their own school responder models?

**I Jacqui Greene:**

There definitely can be barriers. I think some of them are around that failure to build the right cross systems team in the first place. So sometimes, the school is still sitting around the table talking to itself about how to build a school responder model, and that doesn't work. You have to have the cross systems players available and chatting and building it, building it all together.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

So I think staying inside that school bubble, which schools are very used to, because when you think about how schools do, do services, when you think about how the special ed system works, usually when schools are having special ed meetings to think about what kinds of services they're going to put in IEPs for kids in special ed, they're not talking to outside service providers. That is an internal conversation with the people in the school district and a family.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

And so if you keep that same bubble around your school responder model work, you're not going to build a school responder model. You're going to maybe enhance what the school is doing, but I don't think that's a school responder model, because they're not connecting to the other services that are in the community. So I think that that's one big barrier.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

I've actually seen sometimes community pushback against a school responder model. We have become, as a culture I think, so used to suspension as the solution in our schools, that sometimes when schools say, "We're not going to do that, or we're not going to always do that, we're going to move away from the zero tolerance policies," sometimes the community pushes back and says, "But that's not fair to my kid, what if my kid gets hurt? I want accountability." And so sometimes there has to be some work around building the community support for taking an alternative approach.

**I Crystal Bradow:**

Yeah. And to that comment, the role that restorative practices can play in school responder models to introduce the community to different approaches to accountability, that zero tolerance policies are not the only option, they're not the best option by any means. So being able to even educate the community on those pieces, I imagine could be a barrier like you're saying.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Absolutely, I think that's really true. And then another thing we've seen... I think two other things I would point to as barriers. One is what I like to call initiative overload. A lot of times, schools that will raise their hand or communities that will raise their hand to do this work are the same schools and communities that raised their hand to do all kinds of work. And so the people who are working inside those systems just get overwhelmed by how many new things we're always trying to do. What's the flavor of the day? And it can be too much. You can get to a point where people are just so burnt out of doing the new thing that they just can't do it anymore. That I think could be a real barrier to doing anything new, school responder model or anything else really.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Then the last thing I'll say is leadership and turnover. So, if there isn't a leader who really believes, at least a leader inside the school, usually, although sometimes it can be a leader in law enforcement. They've built an amazing school diversion program in the city of Philadelphia that's completely led by the police department. It's not a traditional school responder model and that there's not a sole focus on mental health needs and creating new mental health pathways. But it is an alternative to the school justice pathway and has been incredibly effective at reducing the school based arrest in the city of Philadelphia totally led by the police department.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

But usually, I think it's leadership inside the school and it has to be there. It might be there and then the person might leave. So turnover has been, I think, a huge barrier into shaping and creating school responder model work because the work is, it evolves over time and we have to be really careful in school responder model world, not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good. If there is a place where we can start, if there are steps we can take to move towards what ultimately we want our school responder model in our ideal world to be, we should take those steps. And sometimes, especially as I said, in high stress schools, there's so much turnover at the staff level, at the leadership level that we can never gain momentum and start anything because there's just been so much turnover.

**I Crystal Brandow:**

Yeah. Those are all great points that I'm sure a lot of schools will be able to understand how they can keep those barriers in mind going into it like the turnover and not feel defeated or feel at a loss if these things do come up to know that they are indeed not uncommon and that there are ways to work around them. So, there are definitely pathways to success with a school responder model. And based on your experience, what do you think some of those keys to success are?

**I Jacqui Greene:**

Sure. When we think about initiative overload, one of the things that I've seen schools that have done school responder model work well do is to connect school responder model with whatever else they're doing already. So for example, there are a lot of schools that are doing mental health first aid or a lot of schools that do PBIS or multi tiered systems of support. And adopting a school responder model, not as "Hey, and we're also going to do this other new thing." But as "Oh, here's how this fits in to our multi tiered system of support." or "Here's how this builds on our mental health first aid work." or "Here's how we can fit this into our PBIS framework," is much more effective than "Hey, we're starting this whole new thing." Right? So, how do we make this part and parcel of the work we're already doing? If people think about it in that way, I think they have a lot more success.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

I also think, and this can be hard at first, but it is important to engage people who have veto power, even if they aren't a believer at the beginning. So, maybe that's the principal, maybe that's law enforcement representative. There may be somebody who at the end of the day can say... has the power enough in that community to say "We are not doing this." Or just by not buying into it can tank something. And it's really important to invite those people to the table. And I have found that when you sit down with folks across systems and have a real conversation about like, "What are the goals of our school responder model? What do we want the outcome to be here?" You can often get people from very divergent viewpoints to agree.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

We want our school safer. We want less disruptive behavior. We want students to succeed. We want kids to graduate. If you can keep that kind of core focus and bring in people who have veto power and might not be a big believer, they might actually become a believer over time. At the very least, maybe they don't veto your work at the end of the day, and maybe at the most, they actually become a strong voice in support of your work. So I think that is a real key to success. And I think it's also critically important that the local teams figure out what will work locally.

**I Jacqui Greene:**

SPDI is not going to work in Lyon County, Nevada where we worked, which is super rural. They call it frontier. It's so rural part of Nevada where they don't have mental health services. So they have to do tons of telehealth and other things besides clinical services to support their kids like connecting them to sports teams. And it's okay. That is part of their school responder model. They use community health workers. They don't have clinicians in Lyon County to speak of. So giving the flexibility and the space for local teams to create the way it will work for them is also I think a huge key to success.

**I Crystal Brandow:**

That's wonderful. I think we've covered a lot here in this conversation. School responder models are definitely an opportunity, again, that any school can start where they are and work with this and [inaudible 00:48:10] I love how you said that it's not part of the initiative overload inherently, that it can be woven into all of these things that many schools are already doing. Is there anything else you want to add about school responder models that we didn't get to touch on today?

**I Jacqui Greene:**

I think I would just close by saying that this work can be a life changing for students and it can be a life changing for staff. And well, folks are doing so much, especially folks who work in schools do so much every day and they're asked to do so much more every day, but if people are thinking about going down this road, it can bear such fruit and it can be really meaningful life changing stuff for the people who work in schools and for the kids who are at schools. So I hope they'll think about doing that.

**| Crystal Brandow:**

Yeah. I think that's a great point. And with that, we'll wrap up today's conversation. Again, this is Crystal Brandow at Policy Research Associates with Jacqui Greene, Senior Advisor for the National Center for Youth Opportunity and Justice.

### CONCLUSION

We thank our listeners for tuning in today. Please visit our school responder model virtual toolbox at [srm.policyresearchinc.org](http://srm.policyresearchinc.org) for more information about this framework.