



Claire Viscione:

Hello and welcome to In Session, a podcast where we speak with change makers working towards safe, supportive learning environments within their communities. Our guests include state and local education agencies and their partners. All great recipients from the Department of Education, using their funding to advance school-based mental health services, support mental health service professionals, and establish trauma recovery and prevention programs.

Claire Viscione:

I'm Claire, and this is Annie at the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. And we produce In Session. On this week's episode, we're excited to have a discussion about workforce development. We'll be hearing from Dr. Michelle Warren, Nationally Certified School Psychologist at Osage County in her local cooperative in Oklahoma. And Christine Judson, Senior Professional and Human Resources from Chicago Public Schools in Illinois, both mental health school professionals grant recipients. The conversation is guided by Rob Mayo, Technical Assistance Specialists at the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. Let's get into the conversation.

Rob Mayo:

Let's start off today by having each of our distinguished panelists. Tell us briefly about yourself, your role and what led you to this great work. And we're going to start off with Michelle.

Michelle Warren:

My name's Michelle Warren. I work for an educational cooperative in Osage, Oklahoma. We have 14 rural member school districts that participate in our cooperative, and we provide a variety of services to them. Those services or anything from instructional coaching to special education to mental health services, which is my team. And these are services that the school districts wouldn't have the capacity to get on their own.

Rob Mayo:

Thank you. Christine?

Christine Judson:

Thank you. I'm Christine Judson. I work with Chicago Public Schools, and I serve as the federal project director for our mental health professionals demonstration grant. Our grant is focused on designing school nurse pipelines for consistent care. So in my day job of director of talent acquisitions, I support all 513 schools in Chicago, ensuring that they're fully staffed with outstanding educators, from support staff

to general education teachers and beyond. So our nurses are a part of our related service provider team. And over the last several years we've had a focus on growing not only the number of nurses that we have in our district, but also the impact that they have with students going beyond ice packs and band-aids and a focus on medical health and really focusing in on how they can provide supports to students in mental health as well.

Rob Mayo:

Thank you. Let's go ahead and dive into our first question. Please tell us about your respective workforce development training and coaching models. What professions they target and what your model entails.

Michelle Warren:

So my team has school psychologists, school counselors and social workers. And our mental health service professional grant is targeting training and retaining school-based mental health providers, particularly in rural Oklahoma. So we have a field experiences for graduate students. In all three of those roles are professional supervision. I make sure that we have appropriate supervisors for all of those roles. So I fill in as the school psychologist trainer. I either contract or coordinate with appropriate supervisors for the other roles because I am not a counselor or a social worker.

Michelle Warren:

And then we have monthly team meetings where we provide didactic training of some sort provided by staff that I have or we bring people in depending on the topic. And then within that training we also focus on increasing collaboration across the three roles. So we use a structured peer group supervision model to have a framework for them to collaborate, problem solve with all of those three roles because that's what we do out in the schools. And then additionally we meet as a team to help protect the integrity of each role. So our school site team meets, our counseling team meets and our social work team meets.

Rob Mayo:

Excellent. Thank you. And Michelle, can you tell us a little more or unpack what you mean by role integrity?

Michelle Warren:

So if we were to do a Venn diagram of all three of those roles there's a lot of overlap, but they each have particular things that they perform. School psychologists, for example, we do evaluation for special education. We are trained in system level implementation and program evaluation. Our school social workers are more equipped to connect with the community and pull resources in and provide support and connections to families that way, in a way that I, as a school psychologist, am not as skilled at. And then our school counselors are providing lots of tier one social emotional supports in the classrooms. And then supporting our tier two and tier three students in really accessing school and making sure that their mental health needs are supported. So in attempt to not make them all like me, I make sure that they have support from folks that are trained in their specific role.

Rob Mayo:

Great. Thank you. Christine?

Christine Judson:

So if I were going to summarize the aims of our grant is to get more nurses into Chicago public schools, is to help ensure that those nurses are as highly trained, as highly certified as possible. And to make sure that they have robust mental, behavioral health professional development so that we're really serving the whole child, the whole school community. So Illinois is unique, in that we do have new nurses, registered nurses and licensed practical nurses in our school provide direct daily care to students. We also have registered nurses that need additional credential from our state board of education, to certified school nurse so that nurses can participate in the IEP or the individualized education plan process for students with diverse needs. And what we've found over time is that there's a lot of registered nurses who are interested in pediatrics, who want to work in a school setting and who are really skilled in working with students.

Christine Judson:

But that extra learning around educational pedagogy, understanding not just nursing practice but educational practice. And especially, the laws around special education, really requires that nurses have that graduate level training. So several years ago we began a pilot program helping our registered nurses earn that graduate level certificate. And this grant has helped us to scale that program to two additional universities and to send more than 40 nurses over the last three years through that credentialing program. So now they're a better integrated part of our behavioral health team at schools. They can fully participate in the IEP writing, planning, and monitoring process so that our students with special needs are getting the highest quality and highest-level services from nurses who understand that full level of support that students really need.

Rob Mayo:

Excellent, excellent. And a quick follow up question just to make it clear for our listeners here. What really were the gaps or needs you were trying to address through these initiatives relative to your regional or local context and populations serve? Put another way, what's the big, big vision and end goal, ideally on the backside of the grant, Michelle?

Michelle Warren:

So our end goal is to keep people, Oklahoma education pay is near the bottom of the list. And if you cross state lines in any direction, you can increase your salary by quite a bit without a huge increase in cost in living. So we've got lots of competition. If we look at the national recommendations for school psychology and school counseling, Oklahoma doesn't meet either one of the national student to staff ratio, school psychology. And we struggle to collect adequate data on that because of reporting issues. But school psychologists are supposed to be one to 500 according to our national organization. And on average we're one to about 3,500 across the state. And lots of places don't have access to them at all.

Michelle Warren:

So they're using differently trained individuals to fill that role, which is muddying the water a little bit. So for us it's maintaining people. So if we can get them in graduate school and give them good field-based experience. And show them the benefits of working in the schools and the impact that you can have, hopefully we maintain them here. And we really like it when they have a connection to Oklahoma because then they have a reason to stay.

Rob Mayo:

Thank you. Christine?

Christine Judson:

So before this grant came into play, we really had a division in labor for our nurses. There were those nurses that were doing that direct care for students and then there were nurses who did a lot of paperwork. A lot of administration supported our diverse learners and all of the legal compliance aspects. And our core belief as a district is that when we provide more staff to students, they're going to have a better experience. And those staff are as well trained as possible and have all of the skills that they can reach within their certification lane. Then there's going to be a little less individual work for each person and the quality of services will go up. So our goal is to up skill, if you will, all of our health service nurses into certified school nurses so that every nurse can do the kind of care that's needed.

Christine Judson:

And we have a full-time nurse in every school every day. We're already on track for that pre pandemic. But certainly, COVID has made a lot of changes to the healthcare system and the needs around student health in our school-based settings. So we're pretty proud that we're still on track towards having a full-time nurse in every school every day. And our nurses are well versed in some of those foundational practices for students who have come out of the pandemic and come out of remote learning with really significant mental health concerns. There's a lot of anxiety, there's a lot of depression, there's a lot of isolation for students post pandemic. And nurses now have that fluency to go between mental health and physical health and provide those wraparound supports.

Rob Mayo:

Excellent. And one point that's very, very impressive about just your whole design. I don't want folks to miss that piece of nurses being essential partners within a site level behavioral health teams as opposed to on the sidelines. Is that something that's always been built into the behavioral health teams or an innovation, if you will?

Christine Judson:

So that's really a gap that this grant has helped us fill. There was a time when nurses might be assigned on a rotating basis and covering three or four or five schools. They might see the students that they're responsible for working with once a week or once every other week just to drop in and provide care before they moved on. It really was an itinerant model. So this grant is helping us refashion our nursing core into core school-based team members where they are a consistent part of the school faculty and they're engaging with the counselors, the psychologists, the social workers, the general education and the special education teachers on a regular basis.

Christine Judson:

So that students who have chronic health conditions or emergent health concerns really do have that whole team around them and can get, as we say here in Chicago, the whole school, whole child's approach to an education. We want to provide those wraparound supports and services. And this grant has helped us reframe our nursing core to function a bit more like the counselor who is assigned to a school and is a core part of the fabric of that school community.

Rob Mayo:

Great. Thanks for sharing those points. And then you've touched on some aspects of this, but sustainability wise, what specific strategies or even quality wise, what specific strategies have you employed with your respective grants as far as really improving and when the spirit of continuous

quality improvement. Tell us a little bit about some aspects and components of your grant or your approach to workforce development that others might not be aware of or might learn from, Michelle?

Michelle Warren:

We have had the opportunity to employ are graduate students full-time in some cases. So our school psychology interns were employed full-time and we were able to obtain emergency certification for them so they could be paid as certified staff and paying the teacher retirement. I have a couple of school counselors that are doing the same. They're employed and emergency certified as school counselors while they're working on their graduate work in school counseling or social work. Then having the ability to have a full-time job while they're working on their graduate coursework is significant for continuing to support their families. And then for our younger school psychology students, the partnership that we have with our university, they have graduate assistantships and those are through us. So part of the grant funds, tuition reimbursement and their payment as an assistant in addition to getting us some support from the faculty within the university to help support their training on site.

Rob Mayo:

Excellent. And Michelle, I happen to know that you all have a very... In my mind, unique standards grounded or driven approach to tracking your internships monthly activities and experiential learning. Can you tell us a little bit about the tool you use and how you arrived at taking that approach?

Michelle Warren:

Absolutely. So again, wanting to stay true to what each role is intended to do in the schools. We model their experiences based off their national standards for their role. So the National Association of School Psychologists, the American School Counseling Association, and then the National Association for School Social Work, they all have ethical standards of practice. So we have our staff and students track what their activity is and what domain of practice that fits in for their specific role. One, it helps them become very familiar with what their standards are and what they should be doing to be fulfilling a full whole picture of the role that they can play.

Michelle Warren:

But two, it also assists us to know, oh we are really missing experiences in domain seven for the school psychologists. So what opportunities do we have to make sure that those students get that? And the benefit of having multiple school districts is we've got multiple communities that we're working with. They have multiple issues and things that they need to address. So you have lots of different opportunities to make sure that we plug those experiences in for a well-rounded opportunity. And in the same time we also get to teach the school districts who haven't had these people before, what those people actually do. Instead of trying to undo a perception of what a school counselor does in a larger school district that has had them, we get to teach them along the way.

Rob Mayo:

Absolutely. All goes back to rolling integrity and multi-way learning. And I also know... Speaking about sustainability that you have meet infographics that in a clear and concise fashion depict services delivered by your graduate internships. Can you tell us a little more about how you arrived at developing those periodically and how you use those in the way of strategic communication or showing folks the return on investment for engaging in this initiative?

Michelle Warren:

OCIC's funding is all discretionary grant. We don't have students, so we're not on the state's funding formula. So the funding that comes in tests flexes and changes depending on what we've written, what we've been awarded. But these are roles that the schools would benefit from maintaining. So in order to show return on their investment, we need to educate and show the superintendents what they're getting from the people that we have in their building because as our grants end, our hope is that they find a way to continue to employ these individuals in their schools.

Michelle Warren:

So while we look at the domains of practice by role, that was not the method of communication that worked best for the superintendents. They needed it broken down in a way that would make sense to them as far as the service that we provided to their students and their staff. So for what I track for the superintendents, it's more based on activity. So the number of students that we impacted, the number of teachers that we met with, the number of evaluations that we completed, really looking at how that benefited their students and staff. Because they don't give a hoot about what domain we focused on relative to the role because that's not the lens that look from.

Rob Mayo:

Good stuff. Good stuff. Thanks so much for sharing. Christine, likewise, tell us a little more, dig a little deeper too the specific components of your initiative and down to some strategies that have their eye towards sustainability beyond the life of the grant.

Christine Judson:

Absolutely. In terms of workforce development, the first part of that is getting the workforce in the door, right? We have a need to bring more qualified folks into schools, into direct service with students. And having a grant like this provides some of that internal capacity to really focus in on an area that traditionally hasn't had a lot of state support or school district focus. So we brought in a nurse recruiter through this grant who not only is doing the good work day by day of meeting nurses, interviewing them and bringing them into the district, but also building out materials so that at the end of this grant or after this grant finishes, we still have the standard operating procedures, the protocols, the hiring practices in many cases, the advertisements, the job descriptions. All of those durable materials that go into building hiring plan and a recruitment plan for staff have been created through the generosity of this grant and will last beyond this grant coming to an end.

Christine Judson:

So that's one way we've built in sustainability on the front side of hiring more staff. On the other end of the workforce development is that professional development. And while we have some really outstanding partners that we've worked with because of the pandemic, we really framed our focus on mental health on two interventions, Youth Mental Health First Aid from the National Council for Mental Wellbeing and the Trauma Responsive Educational Practices Project out of the University of Chicago. And with the support of this grant, we now have trained instructors or trained facilitators for both of those interventions. So that we can continue to offer that professional development in house, not just this year and next year but for many years to come because we've built the capacity with our leaders and with our nurses in the field to take this professional development, and then continue to teach it to the new staff we bring on year after year.

Rob Mayo:

That is great. That is great. Thank you so much. Our next question focuses on pearls of wisdom. What advice you would offer to other districts, small, medium or large, urban, suburban or rural that have yet to embark upon us or maybe thinking about embarking upon approaches similar to yours. What are some key things that you would want to share with them in a retrospective way or lessons learned? If I knew then what I know now, what would those things be related to your journey thus far, Michelle?

Michelle Warren:

So I wasn't in on the front end of this grant. I got to come in and pick up where somebody else left off. I think for us, grants started out specific to school psychologist in a partnership with Oklahoma State University. Our schools had more need than just what a school psychologist could provide. So expanding it to school counselors and social workers has increased our opportunity to provide service to our school districts, which from the superintendent's point of view is what they care about and how we maintain our employees for our organization. So my encouragement would be to look at how, even if you started out with one thought and idea how... What you find along the way should drive and continue to- and change based on the data that you collect.

Rob Mayo:

Great. Thank you. And Christine, any pearls of wisdom or advice you would offer to another district that is thinking about embarking upon building the capacities and increasing the pipeline of school nurses and building them into site-based teams focused on supporting students?

Christine Judson:

Well, if you can avoid having a global pandemic at the same time you have a labor market shortage of healthcare professionals. That's a great, great choice. I really think that there's silver linings to all of those clouds and what we focused on in the grant is even as our initial plan when completely sideways, thanks to COVID. There are ways that we can find those bright spots and capitalize on a lot of the external shifts that are happening.

Christine Judson:

So while healthcare professionals were over tapped in healthcare settings and hospital settings, there became an opportunity for our school district to entice nurses to come work in schools and use that to our advantage. They didn't have night shifts, they didn't have weekend shifts, they weren't working holidays, they didn't have to quarantine from their families every time they came home from work if they worked in the school district instead and provided support to us during remote learning. Although, we cannot compete with emergency room bonuses and hourly pay, we could provide that better quality of life. And helping nurses see through the changes and into the benefits of being in a school-based setting really helped us as we continued to hire over 300 nurses in the life of this grant so far, well above our initial target of 120 over five years.

Christine Judson:

The other component that I would offer to a school district that's starting to build one of these graduate level programs for existing staff is to really focus in on helping those staff move through the process from expressing interest in participating in a program all the way to that first day of classes. We hosted multiple interest sessions, a lot of staff raised their hands, said they wanted to go back to school, they wanted to get a certificate, especially if it was fully paid for. And then we saw quite a bit of attrition in

the application and enrollment and the process to actually get back to school. We're working with adults who are busy, they have a full-time job, many of them have family commitments. Going back to school sounds like a great idea until the rubber meets the road and they actually need to go to class.

Christine Judson:

And so, thinking ahead through that process and being prepared to overcome some of those barriers, be really upfront and realistic with staff about what the expected commitment is in going back to school. And then having a program manager who can support staff in getting all the way into the beginning of that program is something we're really focused on in the next few years of the grant. So we don't experience a ton of interest upfront and lower enrollment numbers than our target.

Rob Mayo:

Great points. Great points. Thank you. And as we head towards the end of our podcast today, just wanted to ask, are there any other lessons learned or are there any accomplishments to date that you are especially proud of or surprised by, given the context that you just talked about, Michelle?

Michelle Warren:

So I think for us a lot of it is the varied opportunities that we're able to provide. So we are blending funds and blending experiences through the grants that we have. Not only do we have our mental health service provider grant, but we also have a state grant for hiring school counselors and other mental health providers. And we also have a school-based prevention grant. So because of the different opportunities and the different grant activities, we are getting to offer our graduate students a very wide variety of experiences. My school psych who completed their internship with us last year, we have hired her as a full-time employee for this year. And she is also working on our prevention grant. So she's getting some opportunity and experience that way and can seek certification as a prevention specialist, should she choose to do that.

Michelle Warren:

It offers more opportunity for a well-rounded experience. And continues to show them that even though we all come from different lenses, we're all working towards the same goals. Prevention speaks a different language, but it's all about getting on the front end. Eliminating the need to be a firefighter as we address three issues by building that structure and framework on the front side. So for me it's been the opportunity for a well-rounded experience in really small schools that would not have that opportunity otherwise.

Rob Mayo:

Congrats. Congrats on your progress to date and being nimble throughout the life of the grant so far. So Christine, any other lessons learned or accomplishments that you're particularly proud of or surprised by? Again, given the context over the last two years.

Christine Judson:

I really like what Michelle said there about having different lenses, same goals. Because of this grant, we had a university that opened a program so they could partner with us. And now that program is actually serving certify nurses statewide. And so, this little seed of an idea here now has this statewide impact because we were able to demonstrate for the larger educational community in Illinois how important this work is. And as one good idea leads to more good ideas. This graduate level training program

through the mental health service professionals grant has led us to collaborate with our union to create a similar undergraduate training program. So that our entry level nurses can earn a bachelor's degree and their registered nurse credential. So we've really rallied various community stakeholders around this vision of having the highest skilled nurses to serve all of our students every day. And this grant not only had the direct impact for nurses and students, it's now created this ripple effect more broadly in our district and even more broadly statewide to continue this work for years to come.

Rob Mayo:

Great. That's excellent. And congrats to you as well. And as we close today's podcast, was there anything that you heard today from the other guests that really piqued your interests or something that you might take away or think about employing or integrating into your program, thinking pie in the sky either towards the end of the grant or after the grant. So anything that really piqued your interest that you particularly impressed by the other panelists to date, Michelle?

Michelle Warren:

So Christine, one props to you that's huge to have made the impact that you've made at the state level. My previous work was at larger school districts, nowhere near Chicago, but much bigger than where I work now. And school nurses were an integral part of many of our... especially, for our special education students. But I really like the lens and the spin that you're putting on with your training to focus on the mental health piece of that things. Because the kid that goes to the nurse 47 times a day may not be for a physical healthcare need and they are the person that is making the connection with that kid. And having your nurses be knowledgeable to know what to look for and then how to report and how to connect them with services as significant. So that's fantastic.

Christine Judson:

I loved the way Michelle described Venn diagram of social workers and counselors and school psychologists. Along with the idea that there's an infographic or something that could be shared out to help everyone better understand the role of these mental health professionals as a part of a larger team. Especially, being in a school district engaged in this work every day, we know deeply what these professionals do and how they serve students and what belongs to which professional. But really decoding that, demystifying it for our school communities, for parents, especially for students, can make a huge difference in making those services more accessible and helping our students and families get the care that they need. So please send them on over so I can make copies and edit for our school district and start getting that into the hands of principles and families.

Michelle Warren:

I'd be happy to share those, but for real... Like what we do doesn't come close to a individual school in Chicago. So it's all relative.

Rob Mayo:

It's relative, but we've also found that there's lessons to be learned by or from smaller regions and locales which say, necessity is the mother of invention. And you all come up with some things because you have to. And we found that larger, or medium and larger sized districts have found them to be very novel, if you will, innovative because given their resources of layers, if you will, they may or may not have ever come up with those. With that being said, I'd like to thank you both so much for sharing with

the field today. And we definitely look forward to hearing about your accomplishments to come. So everyone, have a great rest of your day.

Speaker 1:

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