

Dr. Georgene Warnock: I've talked to superintendents from all over the country, and I think we're all facing some of the same challenges that went from leading a school system to really having to be a defender of the very notion of public school.

Mindi Wisman: Hello and welcome to Working Well, a podcast series with a diverse group of educators from across the country discussing how to improve the wellbeing of the workforce. I'm Mindy Wisman with the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, or NCSSLE. In this episode, NCSSLE training specialist, Melanie Goodman, speaks with Dr. Georgene Warnock, superintendent of Terrell Independent School District in Terrell, Texas. They discussed the challenges of needing to be a defender of public education in the current climate, what she learned by substitute teaching during the pandemic, the importance of focusing on mental health and the importance of recognizing support staff. But they began their conversation talking about managing personal and professional stress.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: When I did my doctoral work, we had a cardiologist actually came to one of our doctoral classes to talk about our health and wellbeing, and in that gave just a really great definition of stress that I have kept with me all these years. That cardiologist described, stress is when you are responsible for something that is out of your control. That is so true. If I know I have an event that I have to speak at or something that I'm responsible for, there might be a pressure to get it done, but it's not the same kind of stress is bearing the responsibility for the individual behaviors academically, emotionally for those 5,200 children and all of the adults in our system. So I anticipated coming into the superintendency that idea of how do I maintain my emotional constancy and understanding that kind of mantra about I can't control, I can control how I respond to the things that happen within our system.

We can have a proactive system. So I think coming into the superintendency, that definition of stress and just knowing you're going to be responsible for a lot of things that are out of your control. And so what is the self-talk and then good habits of health that you put in place. Superintendents have often like your own physical health, emotional health that takes a backseat. I mean, you eat junky food on the fly, not taking good time to rest. All of those things that we know are important to mental health. So I mean, I think coming into the superintendency had that as an understanding,

Melanie Goodman: And then once you were in the job and COVID was upon you, those challenges, what were they like?

Dr. Georgene Warnock: We really tried to keep community and connection because, I mean, that's just another incredible part about our health. So in a place where everybody was going into isolation, we really worked with some intentionality about how we kept connection, even if it was a virtual connection with people. In some ways, I think some of our response in coming back from the time of isolation has been compounded by the fact that during that period, I actually probably did eat better, had more time for exercise because we were doing so many things at

home. I think in some ways, some of the challenge that we face, and this is nothing rooted in any kind of research, but just some of my, I wonder, is did we step off a treadmill for a little bit? And then coming back with the expectation that everything's back to normal, we're back at the same pace where after we had this kind of collective pause button. I mean, for some of our students, it was March of 2020 until August of 2021 that they were not in a school setting.

Melanie Goodman: Granted that there are regional cultural differences across the country, and that's a big factor among other things. From where you sit in your district outside Dallas, right about 30 miles or so outside Dallas. How do you and your fellow leaders see this moment right now? How are you handling this moment and the stresses of teaching and leadership?

Dr. Georgene Warnock: I think how we are facing this moment, and I'll just talk from my own experience. I think really the culture wars that we see being played out around school, it's already a tough job in the best of times and the worst of times. The idea that every child should have access to a high quality education and that we have high expectations for every child that comes through our doors to be able to reach their fullest potential is laudable and worthy. But the way that we're going about that in some ways has really brought about this disalignment between the values that called people to this profession and where we're currently sitting. So Doris Santoro wrote that, that that's really where, and I'm paraphrasing her, but what we're seeing is the demoralization of the profession and that demoralization happens when the values that called us to it, we can't live in our daily life in that same way.

I don't know very many teachers that felt called to come, be treated terribly in the press or cussed out by students or parents or that really are excited about digging deep into a lot of data. It's part of the work, but I don't think that's really what called teachers to be doing what they're doing. So I think it's fellow leaders where we're standing in this moment, but I've talked to superintendents from all over the country and I think we're all facing some of the same challenges in that went from leading a school system to really having to be a defender of the very notion of public school, a defender of the people that have given their lives sometimes to the extent of their own health or their families or with a salary that isn't comparable to the kind of requirements education certification in other fields. And so instead of just leading the work and leading the teaching and the learning and thinking about how we best serve the children in our care, it's become almost this defense. And I'm not sure that we'll go back to another way.

Melanie Goodman: You don't see it softening. You just see maybe it's getting more-

Dr. Georgene Warnock: Well, I believe that the pendulum always swings. It's just how far is it going to before we start to really address the root causes of issues that are making the professional a harder place to be than it was when I entered it 25 years ago.

Melanie Goodman: So despite it being a harder place because of the kind of onslaught in all this disruption and all this chaos, there's been some kind of breakthroughs in terms of experimentation and innovation and trying some new things. I'm curious about what you're doing, or you see others doing that you think holds real promise.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: I started substituting out of need last year in our district because we came back with these rose colored glasses that 21, 22 was going to be like, oh, we're going to be back to normal. Everything's going to be kind of how it was. And came to a crashing realization that that was not the case. That we were dealing with a lot of emotional dysregulation from our students and our staff. That coupled with chronic absenteeism, children and parents out of a routine of coming to school, coupled with the very real fears that parents have about schools being a safe place. I mean, schools, shopping malls, movie theaters, churches being safe spaces. I mean, all of those layers here. So I started substituting because we quickly came to the realization this was not going to be like it was before the pandemic, and we didn't have the people coming to help in ways that they had before.

We might've had a really robust substitute pool, now. That's gone. In doing that it really gave me almost some undercover boss insights into what things were, and were not working in our school system, what we're asking people to do without the kind of scaffold and supports that they need. This year in Texas, 28% of teachers that were hired were not certified, having been adults coming in to do a really hard job that haven't had the training certification to be able to do it well without a lot of support. One thing that we are going to be doing this next year is moving to a four-day school week. During the pandemic, we shifted to a four and a half day week. It still wasn't enough. Looking at the hiring shortage that we are facing, we have opted to move to a four-day instructional week for next year.

Melanie Goodman: So that decision was largely driven because of the teacher pool or lack thereof.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: 100%. That was our driver.

Melanie Goodman: It wasn't that students were asking for a four-day work necessarily.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: No, no. And what's kind of been funny is some of our students, they want to be in school five days. About 20% of our community is rural. I've heard Dr. Warnock, if I'm at home, I'm going to have to do a lot more chores on Fridays. Being at home is going to be harder work than if I'm here at school.

Melanie Goodman: Yeah, we've heard that as well from young people. They have to babysit their siblings.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: Siblings, yes. Or I get to be with my friends, or I get to play sports. Those social aspects I'm going to miss out on that day. But no, it's 100% driven to help us

retain and recruit staff. 92% of our staff, when we surveyed, said they would be more likely to stay here if we had a four-day week. Some of our friends that we've been studying who've gone to that have seen an increase in their student attendance, an increase in teacher attendance, because you have that day to make your doctor's appointments. If I'm feeling like, oh, I really need a mental health day, well, if I know I have that coming every Friday, that can be a-

Melanie Goodman: So that's what it is. It's Monday through Thursday for everybody.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: Yeah, everybody. Yeah. We'll attend Monday through Thursday. We've gotten a grant, so we can provide free childcare for our elementary students on Friday, and we have intervention. So we'll be running intervention services on Friday. We'll be busing students. They'll have the opportunity to have breakfast and lunch every Friday. The social emotional supports that schools provide will still be there in place. But our staff will be required to be present one Friday a month for meetings, professional development. Our buildings will be open. I mean, teachers are workers. Teachers stay late. They are up at the buildings on Saturdays, and what we're hearing from teachers is, oh, what a relief to think I could come in from nine to one on Friday with no one here. I could get a lot of work done and still have a weekend with my family. That's really the driver for us. I'm excited to see what that's going to look like.

Melanie Goodman: So that actually starts this coming year that you're going into the new year. Are there downsides academically, or are teachers having to crush things into the four days? Is it calling out all kinds of things that need to be reconsidered, too?

Dr. Georgene Warnock: Yeah, so our board of trustees adopted this calendar in January, and so our curriculum and instruction team started then immediately-

Melanie Goodman: Figuring it out.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: ... modifying how do we need to restructure curriculum? We've extended the school day, so it'll be a longer school day because in Texas we're required to have a certain number of instructional minutes, 75,600 minutes. You can have those however you want for now. There's some legislation floating that may change that going forward. So we've been able to expand our school day, which I believe is going to be helpful for some of our families that might've needed afterschool care that now won't, because that day's a little bit longer. We're going to have more activity and recess time embedded, especially for our younger students that have more movement in the school day. Those things are just-

Melanie Goodman: It's like you're kind of bringing back some of that maybe. Is that something that's coming back? The movement, the recess?

Dr. Georgene Warnock: Yes. And another thing that we are going to be really focused on communicating messages. I mean, we aren't people's homes, but all of the research that we're

seeing about what sleep means for mental health, for wellbeing, that's something that I have been incredibly attuned to, personally.

Yes. And my own health journey, I had gone to waking up in the middle of the night every night with my mind racing, had gone to my doctor. Something has to give. I don't know what to do. I take melatonin, I have the earplugs, I have a sleep mask. I turn off all the screens, all the things. And so it had some underlying sleep issues that now it made such a huge difference in my life getting that under control. And we just know that the incidence of mental health challenges for kids skyrocket percentage wise when you look at students who sleep four to seven hours a night versus students who are sleeping eight plus hours.

Melanie Goodman: So what are maybe other things that you consider it's well intended, but nevertheless, all the mindfulness work that's being put out there for teachers is also putting the responsibility on teachers to take care of the problem when it's a larger, more systemic issue. And so we were tasked with really trying to think about what are some systems level things that can happen in a school that address the overall wellbeing of the entire climate.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: Some of the things that we've done. And I think we're still evaluating the success of those efforts. I couldn't say, yes, this is a silver bullet. I don't know that there's one 100% solution rather 101% solutions, but we have doubled our counseling services and added LPCs and social workers that are really just focused on the mental health of students have embedded at middle and high school a different mindfulness program or really social emotional skill building. I just talked to superintendents group from across the country that I went and met with last week or two weeks ago. One school had taken those SEL lessons that were being done at the high school. The high school kids were like, these are really kind of childish. They don't really connect with me as an adolescent. So they took a team of students and teachers over the summer and brought out those lessons and had the kids work to revamp them in partnership with the teachers.

So that's something that we're talking about. Is that something that would be worthwhile? We have these guidance lessons that we really work to personalize that with our students and teachers here, getting some mental health resources in place. I have a superintendent's advisory council, and every time I go meet with them, when I ask what's going well, the number one thing that the kids tell me is that we have the mental health center at the high school, and there's the LPC and the social worker, and they know that they can go in there for just a checkout for a minute if they need to just have a safe space to breathe. So every single time I meet with the kids and ask What's going well, that's something that they share.

Melanie Goodman: Oh, interesting. And so prior, this didn't exist at the school. I mean, any kind of mental health services were community-based outside the school.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: We had our guidance counselors, but what guidance counselors are tasked with is different, and it's big. We've also started a partnership with Children's to have telehealth counseling. So we not only have that LPC, who's there, we also have an option to refer students for counseling services through Children's, which that is something also that we've put in place since the pandemic. And also medical health through children's, where our nurses can telehealth in with a doctor. So our parents have that as a resource if kids have a strep throat or eye infection or something, we can help them take care of that right there from the school.

Melanie Goodman: Oh, I see. Right in the school setting itself, tie into those resources.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: Another thing, we have a recruiting and retention team that we've hired. It's like a team of one and a half, but some of the things that they're doing are conducting state interviews. So going out and talking to our staff about what would make you stay in this profession, in this district. And one of the things that we've heard from our staff, and it goes with students too, is just really missing some of the connectivity that we had pre-pandemic, where we used to have the group going out to see a movie or go to dinner or do some social things just outside of the work that all kind of shut off for a period.

Melanie Goodman: You mean informally that they would just self-initiate, not like you were organizing outings or whatever, social connection.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: Making some connection. And so we started thinking, well, how can we be intentional about creating that? So, setting up a trivia night. So we've had 10 teams of staff sign up.

Melanie Goodman: And this is on their own time.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: On their own time. We've had people start kickball leagues at their schools as some of that idea of connection, and how do we provide that if I've just moved to this area and I don't know people, and how do we help build some of that? That's something that we've been responding to in organizing some things like that. We have a fitness center. The past year, we've added group fitness classes for our staff at no charge. And again-

Melanie Goodman: It's well utilized?

Dr. Georgene Warnock: Yeah, we have our fitness center memberships. Every staff member gets a free membership, and then their spouses can join for \$10 a year.

Melanie Goodman: Wow. So when you say fitness center, are you talking at the school, or there's a fitness center in the community that you're connected to?

Dr. Georgene Warnock: It's in our community center, but the school district owns and operates it.

Melanie Goodman: Oh, okay.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: So it's a standalone building, and we run all kinds of programming for the community there. But we have a gym there that's open for seniors in our community and then our staff. And then we added group fitness classes just as another way to help people take care of themselves.

Melanie Goodman: And it's nice their spouse can be included in those instances.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: And that's not something that we would've been probably doing pre-pandemic.

Melanie Goodman: One of the things that came up in a prior interview I did is the whole kind of issue of teacher burnout and some of what you've said about new teachers coming in and veteran teachers feeling like, yikes, I can't take a day off because there's this other teacher here, and I can't trust that it's going to be okay. And some of the issues that we talked about in that prior conversation had to do with the structural institutional aspects that control the school day, 40 minute classes, or single subject focus, grade by age level. And so this particular researcher feels like that goes against optimal learning. We know that antithetical to how we learn, or certainly how young people learn. So I wondered how you see or are able to provide any kind of teacher autonomy and empowerment around those kinds of changes within the school day.

And you said at the beginning, it has a lot to do with people bringing their whole self to the school and who they are and their passion and their interests and feeling like they have some agency in the work. So I just wondered what's your perspective on that?

Dr. Georgene Warnock: I totally agree. I said the standards based movement is going to be the best of times and the worst of times, we are operating in a system that was designed for the industrial age. When we are living in an information age, kids at high school should be taking leadership, one, two, three, four, communication, one, two, three, four, collaboration... I mean, problem-solving and critical thinking skills instead of discreet subject areas, how those things are integrated and that you're working to solve a problem in the world that's bigger than yourself or our community. I think that the way that we assess the stakes for that, at least in Texas, the accountability stakes are very high. So every school, every district gets an A, B, C, D or F, and that is based largely on performance, on standardized testing. And that system really drives a lot of what is command and control, compliance focused, versus what is autonomous and creative.

And I really want us to be as a district that these are the standards that the state has said we must teach, but that you have autonomy and creativity in your classroom as to how you choose to teach. And then we're looking at then what are the great ideas that bubble out of that. I think that when you have the space to really design in your classroom, that's the fun part of teaching. That's why we got into it.

Melanie Goodman: So where there's any room in terms of the how maybe of what the lessons that are required to be taught, teachers have agency in your school district. They're encouraged.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: I hope that they feel that they have-

Melanie Goodman: You hope they feel that way.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: And that's something we just keep working on. I mean, the standards are very clear in social studies. Students must understand the causes of the great depression. But wow, as a teacher, I should get to think about how I teach that in the most creative, meaningful way for students in this classroom. And I will say with the caveat that it's a best practice that we know is going to lead to student outcomes, not something that would qualify as malpractice, or we're just going to be coloring pictures of dinosaurs all day or-

Melanie Goodman: Or rainbows. There isn't a lot of actual research that exists. Right? It's kind of a new area. It's embedded in a lot of other SEL. It's embedded in a lot of practice as it's kind of a standalone thing for staff, workforce. We're not talking about individuals at this point. There just isn't a lot yet. It's kind of a burgeoning area of study, which is great. So what we did notice, while there wasn't a lot that looked at wellbeing systemically, culturally, in a school. There was next to nothing that addressed support staff and para-educators. There's a lot written and a lot of opinion pieces, et cetera, from experts about teachers and what teachers need. And we just talked about one aspect of it being agency and autonomy. What are you able to do in this vein in terms of the whole other level of staff that make the whole thing run? Or how has that popped up for you in terms of what needs these other personnel have and how you might or are addressing their needs?

Dr. Georgene Warnock: Yeah. Our para-educators and our auxiliary employees, because the salary is low, we have got to do better. We have what's allowable within the confines of our budget. We've got to figure out as a nation that not only did teachers deserve a much higher rate of pay, but all the people that support and make that happen. And I think that there's a lot of value, maybe even more so than for teachers. The para-educator in the classroom feeling less valued because of the dollar amount there. I think that's a concern. I think how we work to include our para-educators, we try to do all side-by-side training with our teachers. That you are just as critical in the classroom as the teacher is, and want you to have the same training, so that you are able to be your best side-by-side educator. I think we need to be doing a much better job in investing in training and support, setting up cadres and listening to our para-educator voice in the same way that we do listening to teachers.

We have started again, and this is fueled by I need some grow your own programs, where we're bringing in university partners with how we can help support in cohorts some of our para-staff that want to continue going to school. We're doing launching a tuition reimbursement program. We're actually going



to start this next year paying our student teachers and paying para-educators that want to go into teaching, but they can't afford to leave their job. Student teaching is a pretty archaic construct. When I was going through that, okay, I'm in college, I do my student teaching as a semester. I go home. I live with mom and dad, or mom and dad are helping supplement my schooling or housing. Then I do my student teaching. It's not paid at all. And then I get a job a few months later, and now the economy, the cost of living people can't sit out for six months without a check.

So us thinking about how do we tell our paras, we value you, we want you to stay here. We're going to hold you harmless in your salary while you're working on this degree to become a teacher because we support your dreams, we support your goals. So I think all of that is important to supporting that frontline support staff. In Texas, our state leadership association, has really done an amazing job. I heard their leader talked about superintendents reach out with addiction, struggles with drug and alcohol, sleep, suicidal ideation, just from the stress of the job, really thinking about nutrition and exercise and sleep, healthy relationships. Just those things in themselves of intentional focus on that could just be so helpful for all of us.

Melanie Goodman: And as you said earlier, with the intentionality around that, right? That the system is making that a priority.

Dr. Georgene Warnock: Yeah, absolutely. And that's important.

Mindi Wisman: Working Well is brought to you by the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments at the American Institutes for Research. This podcast is funded by the U.S. Department of Education. If you'd like to learn more about NCSSLE, visit [safesupportivelearning.ed.gov](http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov). For all questions or feedback, you can email us at [ncssle@air.org](mailto:ncssle@air.org). Thanks for listening. Please note, the contents of this podcast do not necessarily represent the policy or views of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does it imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education.