

Elizabeth: Our next guest on the podcast is Dr. Al Stein-Seroussi, who is a Senior Program Evaluator at the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Al and his team evaluate the Safe Schools/Healthy Students work going on in Nevada.

Hi, Al.

Dr. Al Stein: Hi, Elizabeth. Good to talk to you.

Elizabeth: Thanks for being on today.

Dr. Al Stein: You're welcome.

Elizabeth: The Safe Schools/Healthy Students framework has always emphasized having a very strong and comprehensive evaluation component to monitor the impact of different school programs and strategies to support student mental health and safety. However, we know that not all schools, districts, or states always have the opportunity to have an evaluation team or even collect data to monitor the impact of what they're doing.

So, we just love to hear a little bit from your perspective. Why is it important to even evaluate school mental health promotion or youth violence prevention programs?

Dr. Al Stein: Yeah, that's a really good question. I say there are couple of reasons. One has to do with basic accountability, and that is a lot of these programs are funded through public funds. One thing that evaluation does is it allows, through evaluation efforts, to collect data on processes and outputs and outcomes.

That lets us see that programs are operating the way that they're intended to operate and are operating the way that they're being funded to operate, so that the public can at least be assured the dollar that are going into these services are trying to achieve their goals, and so they can be rest assured in that. That's from an accountability perspective, and that's ... Accountability has been pretty important, especially over the last 20 or so years.

In my view, there's also just a larger perspective of why evaluation is important, and that's because through evaluation, which really involves the systematic collection and review of data, it's really through evaluation that you can really assess whether these efforts are working. We use evaluation to increase our knowledge about what works across all areas of human and social services, but in this case, you would need to evaluate in order to ensure that the programs that are being implemented for school mental health promotion and youth violence are actually achieving their goals.

You can only do that through evaluation efforts. So, I think it's very important because we want to make sure that what is being implemented in our schools

and in our communities really has a good chance of achieving its goals, and evaluation will tell you if it's doing that.

Elizabeth: Mm-hmm. Absolutely. What would you say is the risk for schools and districts who are operating programs and practices right now, but they say, "Eh, that evaluation stuff is either too difficult or we don't have the funding for it." I mean, what risk are they really at?

Dr. Al Stein: Yeah. The biggest risk that they're at is that they are ... They don't really know and they won't really know if they are ... if their efforts are contributing to their goals, and there are several risks sort of tied into that.

One is that we tend to do what's comfortable. We tend to implement things that were are comfortable implementing. The prevention field has a long history of doing certain kinds of efforts that are relatively easy to do, but that don't necessarily have a big impact, or in isolation, they don't have a big impact.

By not conducting evaluation and by not collecting data, we run the risk of just doing the same old thing that feels good, that makes us feel good as practitioners that we think might be having an effect, but we really have no way of knowing whether it has an effect. That's the first risk, is just we ... We just settle into our comfort zones.

But then beyond that, you, again, really run the risk of putting a lot of effort and time into certain kinds of programs and activities or policy enforcement, whatever that is, and not really knowing whether it is achieving its goals. I think anyone who is involved in running programs and is really sincere about their efforts, they do want to know whether they are achieving the goals that they want to achieve.

Elizabeth: Absolutely.

Dr. Al Stein: I would also say evaluation can be very expensive and costly, but it doesn't have to be. There are things that communities and schools can do in a much more limited fashion, but still systematically to help them see along the way whether they are implementing the way they had intended to implement and whether they're implementing in a way that is faithful to those models and whether they are approaching the kinds of outcomes that they want to see.

It doesn't have to be a rigorous, high powered, high cost evaluation, but they should be able to collect some basic data to keep their eye on what they're implementing, how they're implementing it, and whether it seems to be connected to a change in the outcomes that they would like to see. Doesn't have to be a huge effort but a little bit of an eye towards data collection and reviewing those data can go a long way in helping people understand whether their programs are working and whether they have to consider modifications along the way.

Elizabeth: Thanks. Those are excellent words of wisdom. Before we let you go, we just want to ask a little bit about the local evaluation in Nevada. Can you tell us something that's particularly exciting going on there in your state?

Dr. Al Stein: Well, in Nevada we are working with three different school districts. They are vastly different from one another, so that in itself is exciting as to have evaluation working in different locations that come to the table with different demographics, with different size populations.

One thing for me that is exciting, and this is from the evaluation perspective, not necessarily the programmatic perspective, is I love it when a community or a school district comes to me and says, "Al, can you give us a one-page summary with some data on it?" I've had that case in Nevada in a number of different occasions where the school districts themselves, they would like to see summaries of what their efforts are and to the extent to which they are moving towards achieving their goals. We have something we call a Traffic Light Report, which indicates whether they're moving in the desired directions or not.

When I have school districts come to me and say, "Could we have an updated summary of our Traffic Light Report?" that's exciting to me because that means that at the local level, the stakeholders there are interested in the data. They're interested in evaluation. They're interested in learning about whether their programs are achieving their goals, and they're interested in getting that message out to the public. So, from an evaluator perspective, that's just great because it means that people are interested and are using this information, and that's always exciting to see as an evaluator.

Elizabeth: Wow! Yeah. I couldn't agree more. That definitely shows that they love the data and they're looking for that updated information to know whether their efforts are truly meeting their goals.

Thank you so much for your wisdom today and your feedback and for sharing a little bit about what's going on with Safe Schools/Healthy Students evaluation in Nevada.

Dr. Al Stein: You're very welcome.