

Speaker 1: Our final guest on the podcast today is Dr. Eleni Rodis. We're very fortunate to have her with us. She leads the Safe Schools/Healthy Students evaluation in Connecticut. She is also the acting director of research for the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services as well as a research associate at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. Welcome to the podcast, Eleni.

Eleni Rodis: Thank you very much.

Speaker 1: We're very excited to have you here, and we're hoping you can tell us a little bit about any evaluation findings that surprised you or even were particularly important to understanding the impact of Safe Schools/Healthy Students' efforts.

Eleni Rodis: Sure. For me personally, one thing is that I haven't previously worked with school systems before. Everything was pretty new to me, so I had a steep learning curve. But I think a couple of the important findings ... One thing is that there really hasn't been a standardized, accepted, and widely used tool to track behavioral health services for children in Connecticut through the schools. Even though there was awareness of this, and certainly different schools, different districts have been keeping track to some extent, at least some of them, there still is not a system in place to collect that across the board and in a standardized fashion.

One of the big drives through Safe Schools was to come up with a system that would work and test it out at the three LEAs that were involved. The work of the no-cost extension year will be to disseminate this information, and we have a little more clarity on this now, even in the last couple weeks, that we'll be able to do that. There has been a subcommittee meeting over the last year or two, trying to look into these issues and design some materials and test out some data platforms. In the coming year, the plan is to disseminate that more widely throughout Connecticut.

Speaker 1: That certainly sounds like a really important change. I know in many local communities and states across the country, there really isn't always a systematic tool or system to track school mental health services. I mean, that's certainly very innovative and exciting to hear that you've been able to achieve that. I'm curious, the system that you've tested out and you're using, what kinds of things do you collect? I mean, are you looking at the services provided or what the number of sessions or the number of students served, what kind of information are you looking at?

Eleni Rodis: Well, each of the three LEAs kind of chose their own ... the details of what would go in there. But we knew it's required to at least know how many students received any kind of services and if there were referrals made to any

outside community agencies, whether they actually got those services. And that, just even those basics were very challenging to set up and really collect. But there has been really good development on that over the years of the grant.

But also, I think the district that set up the more detailed data collection really has been able to use it much more effectively. For them, they have ... Of course, only certain people have access to this information, so the social workers, the counselors, the nurse in the schools, the administrators can look at this data. But for each client, it's actually connected to their PowerSchool page and it's a separate behavioral health page. It has the dates and the times in addition to what kind of service they were accessing and in addition to who provided that service and how long it was and whether there was follow up. That school has been able to look for patterns of usage, which I think is really important, especially because they can also identify who are the kids who are getting tons of different services? Is there a pattern over time? For instance, is it always during math class or is it on Mondays or whatever it is. It's really been a wealth of information.

We're going to share that information more widely to the other districts in Connecticut. The Department of Public Health and the Department of Education are going to be carrying the bulk of this dissemination work to try and make ... Trying to encourage, let's say, the districts across the state and for more of them to use this kind of tracking because each district can make its own decisions about what they do or don't do in this area but we're hoping that if they're provided some existing tools and if the current LEAs who are using these tools can talk to them and share their experiences, that they'll be more likely to do that.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's great. One of the things about evaluation that's always fun is sometimes you turn over rocks and you don't know what's going to be there.

Eleni Rodis: Yeah.

Speaker 1: I'm just wondering if there's anything surprising that's come up in the evaluation process in Connecticut or any kind of increased recognition that evaluation has started to point people toward, if there's any of those kinds of examples you could speak to?

Eleni Rodis: I think, again, one of the surprising things for me was just how clear and how strong some of the disparities are in terms of race, ethnicity, and LGBTQ status in Connecticut although there has been definitely a lot of attention paid to those, especially over the last few years, in terms of minority population students receiving much more disciplinary actions. The achievement gap has been very much a focus of attention for many years but seeing the disparities in terms of the application of disciplinary action was pretty shocking to me.

But we have seen also, just over the course of Safe Schools/Healthy Students, some real improvements in the disciplinary area, an overall reduction in suspensions and expulsions especially in the districts where Safe Schools/Healthy Students has been in the action. I think that there's been a coming-together of various initiatives and people from different agencies coming together who have all been looking at this kind of separately. Safe Schools/Healthy Students has provided an opportunity to bring people together and to kinda focus those efforts a little more. Something that maybe wasn't really on the radar when we first started Safe Schools but in the last year or two, came to the forefront, are restorative justice practices. I think that has really helped reduce the number of these punitive disciplinary actions, and that's gratifying to see.

Speaker 1: Yeah, it absolutely has to be. It sounds like a lot of really important outcomes for the safety of students there as well as their mental health. It's just exciting to hear that even though you knew that some of those disparities existed in Connecticut, it sounds like you've really had the opportunity through Safe Schools to galvanize some collaboration and some interventions around that. It's exciting to hear about, that evaluation has been part of that process in kind of uncovering those outcomes. You touched on a couple of aspects that are rewarding about the local evaluation in Connecticut there, but can you tell us about maybe the most rewarding aspect of your local evaluation in Connecticut, for you?

Eleni Rodis: For me personally, I think it was the opportunity to, at least occasionally, go into the schools and see what they're doing in reality, not virtual reality or just hearing about it on paper and especially being ... I was able to go to kindergarten classes, several of those, and see what they're doing with intentional play and social/emotional learning and actually, for some older kids, also boys town classrooms.

I really loved doing that. That was nice for me and I hope to ... Now that we have another year, maybe I'll be able to make another trip and see how things are going in the schools again 'cause that was great. They really restructured their elementary schools entirely based on Safe Schools/Healthy Students and they're in the no-cost extension year. At least a couple of the LEAs are planning to try to apply some things to first grade now that kindergarten classrooms are all set. That's another really rewarding thing.

Speaker 1: That sounds wonderful, to be part of the reality and the action, and I think especially as an evaluator. I know they appreciate having you there in those classrooms too and seeing you. But it's just a great example of just how involved you are as an evaluator. It's great to hear about that. Well, anyhow, thank you so much for joining the podcast today and for sharing some of your words of wisdom and experiences from the Safe Schools/Healthy Students evaluation in Connecticut.

Eleni Rodis: Thank you so much for the opportunity. I enjoyed it.