

Elizabeth: Up next, we have Dr. Jim O’Neill, who is the lead evaluator for Safe Schools Healthy Students in the state of Michigan. Welcome to the podcast, Jim.

Dr. Jim O’Neill: Thanks so much, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth: We're so happy to have you here with us, and our question for you is really about advice. If there were other evaluators out there, or really even school based professionals or administrators, who are looking to evaluate their programs in schools that promote mental health for students and also prevent youth violence, what lessons learned would you share with them?

Dr. Jim O’Neill: I would think I would go off the lead of Safe Schools Healthy Students grant, and they really focused a lot on sustainability. A lot of the lessons learned for evaluation were based on making sure that whatever was in place could be sustainable. A couple of those are, first and foremost, and we had a lot of success with this in Michigan, was to try to find individuals in the schools, in the district, that actually carry forward this work beyond the life of the grant. We thought about that from up front, from year one.

For example, there are a lot of folks who do evaluation work. They do data collection in the schools. They do analysis of data, interpretation of results. For example, quality assurance folks and school improvement folks, who are part of that process in the schools naturally, are the folks you want to bring in as early as possible to understand how prevention works and how to evaluate those kinds of programs, and especially mental health, as well.

What we did in all of our school districts was to identify those individuals and get them to be part of the community management team, which is the local effort, as you know, the local group that managed the SSHS grant, and from that point, really got buy-in, and helped them understand how you can connect with what they do naturally, with the evaluation efforts for SSHS. From that, we had a lot of good examples around being able to sustain data collection, analysis of results, interpretation of results, and also presentation of those results to the CMT members, or the group members, as part of the district or community. That was extremely helpful.

Elizabeth: That's great to hear about, and I'm glad that you touched on sustainability, because I don't think it's always obvious to people to start with thinking about sustainability, even in year one. I'm curious, because you mentioned these outstanding data teams in schools and districts. I work with a number of them myself, and districts here in the mid-Atlantic, and I agree with you. They often are really a powerhouse for being able to take on some of this work. Can you give us example of maybe working with a data team in a school or district that you think will contribute to the sustainability of the evaluation there in Michigan?

Dr. Jim O'Neill:

Yeah, definitely, especially for element five, which is part of a larger effort for the state of Michigan, and I'm going to touch on that in another lesson learned, was the state of Michigan right now is at a point where they're starting to grow infrastructure and systems change within schools around restorative practices and positive behavioral interventions and supports in those districts and schools. Those folks are on the ground every day making sure that, not only are things implemented correctly, but evaluated correctly.

For one example, within a particular school district for SSHS, they have people who provide that support in the local school district, but they're also supported by a state team. They will actually get mentoring beyond the life of this grant, but they are in those schools every day, all day, making sure that whatever evaluation needs are required for PBIS and restorative practices, they're happening in those schools.

For example, in terms of fidelity of implementation, they have a system set up whereby in each school, they have to evaluate how much of PBIS was implemented in that school, based on what was expected from systems change approach, and then more specifically, PBIS. They have a very specific instrument that they implement, and they help the teams in those schools understand how to do it right, so to speak. They'll have certain expectations, based on implementation, and then they evaluate whether those things happen or not on a monthly basis.

What we found in the schools that really do it well, build those relationships before you even need them. If you're an evaluator, or you're a professional, and schools know this, I think most leaders in schools know this, you really have to approach evaluation just like you approach anything else in the school. Build relationships, make sure people understand what's going on, and offer to them what they need, in addition to what you might need, in the future.

I know that's high level, but an example is, we had one district with SSHS in Michigan where they're actually closing, and they're transitioning, and they're merging with another district.

Elizabeth:

Wow.

Dr. Jim O'Neill:

We would not have been able to get all the data during that transition period without those relationships. As you might suspect, when a district closes, and it's transitioning to another district, there's a lot of morale that's very low. Folks are starting to move onto other things. But if you have those relationships, especially with a core group of folks who were in the building, we were able to make sure that the data we needed, and the interpretation, and the communications around data and evaluation results, still got communicated. Data still got collected. It was one of those situations where it just boiled down to relationships, and making sure that people understood what's going on, and they trusted you, and they knew that it was good work, and it helped students.

Elizabeth: Absolutely. That's definitely a win, and what a great example. We wish all of them well, as they move on to their new districts and schools. But there you are, you still have the data. That's definitely a success.

Dr. Jim O'Neill: It is.

Elizabeth: I want to learn a little bit more about Michigan before we let you go. Could you just share with us, what's been most rewarding for you as you're in this role of leading the Safe Schools Healthy Students evaluation in Michigan?

Dr. Jim O'Neill: I think probably one of the big things that really I think is a moment of pride for the whole state is ... Just a little bit of history, there's at least three different federal grants that the State of Michigan is getting currently. Through the leadership of [Shawn Canneralli 00:06:56], who's the project manager for this grant and others, they were able to combine these three grants and create momentum to move the state forward in terms of how we look at prevention, how we look at health promotion, how we look at all the different elements of the SSHS grant. As I mentioned, mental health, violence prevention, particularly, but all the other elements, as well, early childhood education, substance abuse prevention, family community engagement. Seeing that happen and being part of that as an evaluator helped me understand that there's a bigger horizon here.

Historically, I've been working with the state of Michigan as a consultant for 15 years, and this is the first time I've ever really seen this engagement at the state level. When you see that, and you want to be part of that, the question is, as an evaluator, how do you help promote that? There were a few efforts, in particular, that I think we're going to move forward after the life of these three grants that coalesce to create this larger state level systems approach.

One of them is, we have a state level survey called the MiPHY. It's not unlike the YRBS, which is a Youth Risk Behavior Survey. We have a Michigan version of that, and there's a lot of activity and discussion around how does that look moving forward, in terms of right now, it's offered free to all schools in the state. We provide reports, and administration support, and training around that survey. Schools can take it. They get reports automatically generated, based on a web system, but then the question becomes, what do you do with those results?

That's where our last grant ended, but where this coalescence of these three grants said we need to move this forward. How do we help folks interpret these results? How do we help folks generate buy-in within the school district, within the larger state, in terms of understanding the risk needs of students? That's been one example of how, as an evaluator, being part of that conversation to help advance something that we know is sustainable, but needs a little bit more pushing forward in terms of helping the state, the districts, and school level, in terms of how to use those results to make difference in kids.

Elizabeth: Absolutely. It's so great to hear about this bigger horizon that's happening there in Michigan and impressive that you've been there for 15 years working with them and just now seeing this real true engagement at the state level. What do you think has really contributed to that state level engagement, that all of these new funds are coming in, and some of these goals are starting to coalesce?

Dr. Jim O'Neill: Yeah, I think a big part of it is who's in place. We have a leadership team with the Michigan Department of Education and also the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. Both of those organizations, by the way, those agencies are morphing, they're reorganizing, and they have been for the past two years. It's never a dull moment in terms of what's on the horizon. But I think a part of it is the structures that are going to be created to make sure that health promotion, mental health promotion, violence prevention, are at the forefront, in terms of these initiatives that are going to happen at the state level.

The state superintendent is fully on board with this concept, much based upon the doggedness, persistence of [Shawn Canneralli 00:10:49], Kim Kovalchick, and others at the state who have really helped to keep this on the radar. I think a lot of it is structure, and I think we're going to see eventually the development of a process that allows us to move forward. It's yet to be unseen, frankly, because of the reorg at the state level, but I think there's definitely good news in the horizon.

Elizabeth: Great. Listen Jim, thank you so much for spending some time with us today and telling us a little bit about some words of wisdom for evaluators and also a sneak peek into what's going on with the Safe Schools Healthy Students evaluation in Michigan. Thanks for joining us.

Dr. Jim O'Neill: You're welcome, my pleasure.