

Speaker 1: Dr. John Bowser is an evaluation consultant for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. He's with us today. Dr. Bowser's actually the lead evaluator for Safe Schools Healthy Students in Wisconsin. Thanks for joining us today, John.

John Bowser: Thank you.

Speaker 1: Absolutely. We have a first question for you, which is really about how you begin to understand what really impacts student safety, and promoting student mental health. We know, for example, that most schools and districts, they don't just do one thing, or one strategy, or one program to ensure that their students are safe and healthy. Usually there's a variety of different strategies and programs in place to support student mental health as well as their safety. I know this is certainly the case for Safe Schools Healthy Students. There's a variety of strategies in place at one time. As an evaluator, you have the lucky job of figuring out which of these programs or practices are actually making a difference. So, our listeners would love to hear a little bit about how you've approached this complicated issue of understanding which programs are having the biggest impact on student safety and wellness, as well as which might not be working quite as well.

John Bowser: Yeah, you're right, that especially with Safe Schools, there are multiple programs going on at the same time. I've been doing school based evaluation for about 10 years now, and this is really unique in that aspect. A lot of projects do actually fine tune things into maybe one or two programs, with accompanied outcomes. But for Safe Schools it's much different. For this project, what I've been doing is first trying to break it down item by item, as far as the individual programs, policies, and outcomes looked at. But we have to do so without losing the perspective that from the grantee side of things, this is really one large initiative that encapsulates the districts as a whole.

So when I look at first, item by item, I see the strategies and the programs really falling into a few categories. One are really the specific programs, like SBIRT, which is Screening, Brief Intervention, Referral to Treatment for alcohol and drug use. Something like that, I mean it has a pretty standard causal relationship that we're looking at. Have the programs been put into place, have they been done with fidelity, and then the accompanying outcomes that we're interested in, have they changed one way or another? Decrease in use, positive impact, null results, or maybe going the other way, can then have a negative impact.

Then we also have other programs that won't really manifest themselves in terms of a real impact for quite some time. In Wisconsin, we're putting an emphasis on the number of students in 4K who receive the Ages and Stages questionnaire to look at their developmental status. Now there, in terms of cohort effect and really the impact we want to see as the kids progress through their K12 education, the impact won't be seen until long after, say school is done. So, the positive impact we're interested in is are schools increasing the number of students who receive the Ages and Stages questionnaire? They

could, theoretically reach a ceiling for that, but we're looking at that type of impact.

Then also, there are more abstract ideas. For example, in one of our communities, Beloit, they are doing quite a bit of work in the idea of social marketing campaigns. There, those can touch any number of outcomes, and it could vary quite a bit by the population or by the individual person. Whereas the evaluation, a lot of times we'd like to fall back on the quantitative outcomes, the hard data, this really requires time to identify more qualitative outcomes, and discussions in terms of, is the impact felt on a variety of groups, and do they see it as a positive thing?

Then, taking into account these different types of individual initiatives, the goal from my perspective then is, we take these individual items, and we also really want to end up telling the story of Safe Schools Healthy Students for the state and the LEAs. This really requires bringing it back to SSHS, it's not simply a series of isolated programs, but rather it's a real cohesive initiative that encompasses the district and looks to make a positive impact on the entire district and community. Look at these individual items, and try to build up to the story is the best way to look at the impact.

Speaker 1:

Thank you. That's so helpful, and I'm glad that you just really spoke to the comprehensive aspect of Safe School Healthy Students. I think it's worth mentioning that for any school or district who's implementing a variety of different practices and programs at one time, that you want to have that kind of cohesive plan, an understanding. Some of your strategies have more of that short term impact with the really concrete outcome, whereas others, as you talked about, have maybe that longer term impact, or things that are harder to measure. So I think that's a great point. Can you tell us a little bit, you mentioned several of the interesting programs happening in Wisconsin as well as your role in evaluating them, but is there some other things that you can tell us about the local evaluation in Wisconsin right now? Perhaps if there's something really exciting going on that you think our listeners might be interested in hearing about.

John Bowser:

Yeah. I can't speak to the other states, but here in Wisconsin, we do have three very different communities involved. What's really exciting is to see how their differences in their approach, and in the setting of the community, how that really manifests itself, and how they go about their work, and the results that we're going to find here in the next months or coming years. I mentioned Beloit. They are really a smaller sized community. They're about 35-40,000 people, and what is unique about Beloit is they have a number of relatively highly publicized, at least here in Wisconsin, problems that you'd normally associate with larger cities, in terms of violence that exists in the community. So they've really placed a large emphasis on those social marketing campaigns, and that's been driven largely by the students as a way for them to get the messages out to the community about what are social norms, and what do they want their

community to be, because this is ... They're going to take the reins of the community, and they're try to push out what they want to see.

Then in Racine, they are the largest of our communities. Because of that, they have to rely more on these school-community partnerships, because unlike the other two communities, they're the only one that have multiple high schools. Their work relies on these community partnerships quite a bit, to allow for efforts that speak to differences that exist within the community. Having those intra-community differences, you know, don't happen quite as much in smaller communities.

Finally, we have the Menominee Indian School District. They are very unique in that they are a public school district entirely on tribal land in the Menominee nation, and they've placed a large emphasis on areas of trauma sensitivity. Now, they're not the only ones to do that, however, what they are doing is using their cultural backdrop to integrate those initiatives with the Seven Grandfather Teachings, which in general is used not just Menominee people, but it's North American indigenous teachings of human conduct towards others, and their general themes of wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth. By integrating this researched approach to school climate of trauma sensitivity, restorative practices, with their unique cultural lens, what it represents really is an effort that's maybe is better to expand beyond the school walls. This is taking place in the school, but it's integrated in the real fiber of the people, and this may allow for the impact to be understood by the entire Menominee nation in a way that may increase uptake and sustainability of the efforts.

Speaker 1: Wow. Thank you so much for taking the time to give us a highlight from each of your LEAs. It's really nice the way that it shows the different strategies that individual districts can take in addressing student mental health and student safety. We're so excited to hear about all the things going on in Wisconsin, and we thank you for your time joining us as a guest today on the podcast.

John Bowser: All right. Thank you.