

Eric Neal:

(silence) Welcome to the State Support Team 11 podcast. I'm your host, Eric Neil. Today, we are joined by Nicole Kahler. Nicole is the school based mental health consultant at the Ohio Department of Education. Welcome, Nicole. How are you today?

Nicole Kahler:

Thank you. I'm doing well. How are you?

Eric Neal:

I'm good. It's great to have you. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and the work that you do at the Department of Education?

Nicole Kahler:

Sure. Thank you. I'm from the Cleveland area originally. I am a licensed social worker, so I have spent my whole career doing mental health in school, school-based therapy. Prior to coming to the department, I worked at a day treatment facility in Columbus, Ohio, where we really focused on trauma-informed practices and providing youth therapy. And then when I came to the department, I actually started as a school climate coordinator, working on PBIS and building that capacity within the state. But I moved over to the mental health role as a mental health consultant, so we're really focusing on the mental health initiatives throughout Ohio, some of the grants that the department has had building upon trauma-informed schools and just making sure that schools have all of the resources they might need to meet the needs of their students.

Eric Neal:

That's great. You mentioned your work with grants. What are some of the grants that have been awarded and how are they utilizing the funds?

Nicole Kahler:

One of the major grants we're focusing on right now is the Ohio School Wellness Initiative. So this was a grant that was awarded through the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund. And the Ohio Department of Education is collaborating with the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services to really support a continuum of care and develop partnerships with community providers. We are providing grant funds to Miami University Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs to develop, train and coach districts with a student assistance program that's aligned with the whole child framework and PBIS framework. So this model is something that SAMSA developed, and we're really focusing on Ohio-izing it. So really looking at the whole continuum of care for students from early identification and prevention services to interventions and guided supports. And so this project will really strengthen tier two and tier three supports within Ohio schools. And it also has a component where it focuses on staff and administrator wellness.

Nicole Kahler:

We currently have 80 schools in the state across 54 counties that are participating in our pilot program. And this is through September of this year, 2022, and then we'll open up all the resources and the programming to the remainder of the state. The other grant that we're focusing on right now is a \$2 million federal grant from the U.S. Department of Education to focus on increasing the number of

school-based mental health professionals, providing mental health services to students and families in eight of Ohio's Appalachian counties, Belmont, Guernsey, Harrison, Morgan, Muskingum, Noble, Stark and Tuscarawas. And we are halfway through year two of this five-year grant. After our first year of the grant, we were able to add eight mental health professionals to the region, which originally the ratio of mental health professionals to students was 1 in 500. And now it's currently 1 to 330. So that was a major win in our first year.

Eric Neal:

Well, definitely, I think with everything that everybody has been through in the past couple years, but specifically educators, any mental help for the people that are out there working in the environment or the students and families, I'm sure it's much appreciated. We've worked through it and we've found a way to keep on going, but it has been a pretty stressful time for everybody.

Nicole Kahler:

It definitely has. And we've heard that from educators as well, whenever we're working directly with the educators, with the superintendents, with the administrators, we're hearing that as students have come back into the schools, especially that they're looking for more support and guidance on how to help students who are struggling to be back in school, whether it's with anxiety and depression from the past few years or those externalizing behaviors. We're hearing more aggression. Just more anger in general.

Eric Neal:

Definitely. So what are some of the other mental health initiatives that you've been working on?

Nicole Kahler:

So my office is really focusing on some of the recommendations provided by the surgeon general's mental health advisory that he released in December of 2021, where he talked about how youth mental health concerns were rising pre-pandemic and now we're just at an all-time high. So there's a lot of interventions we need to put in place, if we want to see that level go down. And some of the recommendations are around putting in place positive and safe schools, that continuum of support that we're talking about with Ohio School Wellness Initiative, building the mental health workforce, providing mental health support to school personnel. So we're really looking at just building that comprehensive mental health program across Ohio schools, teaching about trauma-informed practices, providing resources and supports they need across the state.

Nicole Kahler:

We have some resources on our webpage around how schools can use their SRR funding to support mental health, to support prevention services, to integrate some of these things into their PBIS framework. The Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and the Department of Education collaborated together to do some listening sessions to really hear about what was happening in the field. And we worked with educators and educational agencies and associations to really hear what's going on ground level in terms of that increase of anxiety, depression, anger, and just the increased need for access to mental health services, access to mental health providers, increased education and knowledge around how teachers and administrators and staff can really help students who are experiencing those increased feelings, the anger, the depression, all of those things that I had previously discussed. So we're working on different resources that we can put out to support schools.

Eric Neal:

That's great. It's definitely going to be a huge help. Ohio is currently working on guidance for implementing multi-tiered systems of support or MTSS. Do you feel like that framework can help educators see how all of these pieces fit together and give them a better chance of integrating them into their other continuous improvement efforts?

Nicole Kahler:

Absolutely. I think when folks hear things like trauma-informed practices or any other framework, even PBIS, they might think it's something extra or added to do daily, but really what we want people to see is that it's a framework and it's how you really integrate it into your daily practices. And so we're encouraging make sure your tier one supports, your universal supports for students are really, really strong, because we know that there's a higher need right now for tier two and tier three services across schools based on the past few years. But if your universal supports aren't in place, if people aren't aware of them, it's really going to make it difficult for the teachers or for the mental health professionals to focus on tier two and tier three. So really looking at those tier one supports. How do you integrate trauma-informed practices into your framework? How do you enter the school every single day?

Nicole Kahler:

And one big piece about the trauma-informed practices that we're encouraging is instead of asking, "What's wrong with you?" on a daily basis, you're going to say, "What happened to you?" And that's true for staff too. It's not just for students. It's not just an approach for students. So looking at policies and practices to be aware of what students and staff have experienced and to really help promote their wellness and avoid any kind of retraumatization that they may have had prior to coming to school.

Eric Neal:

Yeah, definitely. I've noticed that we've had access to a lot of different trainings and philosophies and strategies to address, what. MTSS, I guess, would be that right side of the pyramid, that climate culture side of the pyramid. And I just love how you have that idea of how are you connecting it to that work so that it doesn't feel siloed or like one more thing to people who already feel overwhelmed, but you're able to give those strategies in context to say, "Yeah, this is how this goes," in your universal delivery of these services. "This is where trauma-informed practices fit," or restorative practices, or social and emotional wellness and learning and things like that. I think when we get that framework really in place and a lot of people understand it and are doing their work that way, it can only help get the most out of these strategies that are out there.

Nicole Kahler:

Absolutely. And it won't be effective if it is siloed. It's not sustainable that way.

Eric Neal:

Absolutely. So you said you've been working on a student and staff wellness toolkit. What's in that toolkit and how can educators access it?

Nicole Kahler:

Yeah, so based on national data, and then some of the state-level data and listening sessions that we had, the Department of Education, the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and Public

Safety worked collaboratively to develop this toolkit to assist educators, families, communities in responding to all the challenges that we've heard amplified by the COVID pandemic. So it's really a collection of resources and recommendations organized by audience type in order to address current wellness challenges. So the audiences are teachers, administrators, students, and families, and communities. And we wanted this to be a really user-friendly resource, allowing quick access to needed resources. So it can be found on our webpage, education.ohio.gov, if you search supporting student wellness toolkit. And, again, it's meant to be really user friendly. For example, if you look at the teacher audience, some of the examples on there are behavior management in the classroom, regulating emotions. And under each topic, there's something really quick that somebody can click on who says in the moment, "I'm really struggling with this today."

Nicole Kahler:

And so it might take you to a quick video on a strategy or a quick script to use or something like that. It also offers some more in depth resources. If folks have time. One of the pieces we heard was that "We don't have time to sit through a two and a half hour professional development on this topic, but we want to know more." So we also included some of those longer resources, whether it's a lengthier article or some links to additional professional development opportunities, if they want to learn more about that topic.

Eric Neal:

That's great. I think that's really helpful to support these teams that are out doing that work to have something like that, where all of these resources are just housed in one place and easily accessible, so that you're not having to go dig and find out and research and do all of those things. I think that is definitely going to be a big help.

Nicole Kahler:

Absolutely.

Eric Neal:

When we spoke before the podcast, you mentioned that there was going to be a free mental health conference coming up on June 28th and 29th. What can we look forward to at the conference and how do you register for that?

Nicole Kahler:

Yes. We're very excited for this conference. The title is Stronger Together: Children's Mental Health and Resiliency Virtual Conference for educators, administrators, staff who work within schools, mental health professionals. And one thing we took away from some of the listening sessions when we were working in listening with the educators was that the wellness toolkit would be helpful as a quick resource, but we're really looking at long-term implementation strategies, sustainable system change to help with supporting students' mental health and mental wellness. So this conference will have sessions for teachers, administrators, community partners to learn about the best practices and resources for implementation of mental health and resiliency supports for children. This is directly from people who are implementing this programming across Ohio schools. Most of the sessions include some form of school or school district, an ESC potentially, with a community partner, so that you can hear how they're working together to provide services.

Nicole Kahler:

Some of them are direct strategies for supporting students in their classrooms. And really the goal is to provide information around funding sources, using data in decision making, how to engage with parents and caregivers, and how to leverage partnerships to provide tiered interventions and supports for all children in Ohio. So like you mentioned, the conference is June 28th and 29th. It is two half days. It's 8:30 to 1:00 each day. We currently have a save-the-date posted on our website. So again, education.ohio.gov. If you use the search bar to type stronger together, you can register for free there. Again, it's all virtual, so you can pop in, pop out. The sessions will be recorded and you can access it for two weeks after the conference. So we're really looking forward to it. We encourage everybody to register and learn a little bit more about the best practices that are happening across Ohio.

Eric Neal:

That sounds like it's going to be very helpful and you can't beat the price free is good.

Nicole Kahler:

Absolutely. We wanted it to be accessible to everybody.

Eric Neal:

That's great. So if people would like to know more about you and the work that you do, where should they go?

Nicole Kahler:

So my email is [nicole.kahler, K-A-H-L-E-R @education.ohio.gov](mailto:nicole.kahler@education.ohio.gov). You can always email me if you have questions around specific initiatives, or if you're looking for some technical assistance with your school or your district with mental health and wellness needs or trauma-informed practices. If you go to our webpage, education.ohio.gov, our search bar is really phenomenal. You can type in mental health, trauma-informed schools, SRR guidance, and you can see all the different resources that we have available. Again, the whole child framework will be up there. And oftentimes if you search one, the others will pop up on the side so that you can find out more information. Our website is a great place to start, but, again, I'm more than happy to follow up with anybody via email.

Eric Neal:

That's great. So thanks again for joining us, Nicole. It's been a real pleasure.

Nicole Kahler:

Thank you for having me. I really appreciate anybody who takes the time to listen to this and really focus on promoting student and staff mental wellness throughout Ohio schools. So thank you.

Eric Neal:

You're welcome. That wraps up this episode of the State Support Team 11 podcast. If you'd like to know more about us and the work that we do here at SST1 1, go to our website, sst11.org, give us a call at 614-753-4694. Or hit us up on Twitter. We're [@SSTRegion11](https://twitter.com/SSTRegion11). If you'd like to give a hold of me, I'm at E-R-I-C dot N-E-A-L at [escoco dot O-R-G](mailto:escoco@ohio.gov). Until next time, I'm Eric Neal. Thanks for listening.