**UConn CSCH Podcast Episode**

**The Connecticut WSCC Partnership - the first year in East Hartford**

Helene Marcy: Helene, hello and welcome to the CSCH podcast. My name is Helene Marcy, Director of Programs and Communications at the UConn Collaboratory on School and Child health, or CSCH. The CSCH mission is to facilitate innovative and impactful connections across research, policy and practice arenas to advance equity in school and child health. CSCH is committed to anti-racist work that prioritizes inclusion, reduces disparities and creates systemic change. I invite you to take a look at our website at csch.uconn.edu.

Today, I'm here with Tracy Stefano and Kate Williamson. Tracy is the K-12 Supervisor of Health and Physical Education at East Hartford Public Schools, and Kate is an assistant research professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at UConn. We're going to introduce and talk about a project called the Connecticut WSCC partnership, and we'll talk about all that's happened in its first year. Welcome to you both.

Kate Williamson: Thank you so much, Helene for having us.

Tracy Stefano: Thank you. Helene, it's a pleasure to be here today.

Helene Marcy: Kate, first, can you give us some background? What is the CT WSCC partnership, and how did it come to be?

Kate Williamson: Yes, absolutely. First, let me start by defining that WSCC acronym. So “whisk” or W S C C, or stands for the whole school, whole community, whole child model. It's the CDC’s integrated model of health and learning, And really the WSCC model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the policies and practices that impact whole child development in schools, which we consider to be across different developmental pathways, academic, social, emotional, physical and behavioral development. Now that we've got WSCC defined, the Connecticut WSCC partnership is a UConn project that seeks to leverage the WSCC model to strengthen policies and practices in Connecticut schools to promote better outcomes for all students. It was founded in 2023, when we were awarded five years of funding from the CDC’s Division of Adolescent and School Health. The partnership is a collaborative effort between the Collaboratory on School and Child Health, or CSCH, and the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health. It really builds on years of prior collaborative work between CSCH and Rudd, and that work has been driven by several forces over the years, most notably school wellness policy regulations and the release of the WSCC model in 2014 and more recently, the greater focus on the whole child as we continue to navigate the post pandemic landscape.

Helene Marcy: Thanks. Can you tell us more about the day-to-day work of the Partnership and what you do?

Kate Williamson: So with the CDC funding, we deliver statewide professional development and technical assistance to strengthen the integration and coordination of whole child school policies and practices. The CDC also required us, as a part of this project, to identify a priority school district, so this is a district that we could partner with for in depth training and ongoing support over the whole five years of the grant. And our district is the East Hartford Public Schools. Our team members, in particular, Co-Principal Investigators, Sandy Chafouleas And Marlene Schwartz, already knew the leaders in East Hartford from collaboration on a previous whole child policy assessment project, and we knew their dedication and expertise would be a great fit for this project, and we were and are thrilled to be partnering with them.

Helene Marcy: Tracy, tell us how the CT WSCC partnership aligned with the work that you were already doing in East Hartford.

Tracy Stefano: Since 2016 East Hartford had begun to really lay a solid foundation. We had a framework and structure in place, but it wasn't quite as effective as it could be. For example, we had two committees, the District Wellness committee and the District Health Council. Many of us were serving on both, and it became clear we were duplicating efforts, so we decided to merge the two. The impact from merging the two groups really made our work more meaningful and relevant. Yes, we were required to meet, but more importantly, we really wanted to collaborate to meet the growing needs of our families and students. Our Executive Council brought together a very diverse group. We had members of the Board of Education staff, employees from the town and other community partners. This collaboration highlighted the need for better coordination across all levels, district, town departments and community partners.

During the pandemic, we actually shifted our focus and launched health and wellness teams at each school. Each school team had a wellness team champion from the district team to support them. This was crucial, because while schools had some similar needs, each school also faced unique challenges. This localized approach allowed each of our schools to align their work, not only with the district's Pride in Five Strategic Plan, but also with their individual school’s strategic plan, the WSCC partnership has really been a powerful force in enhancing the work that East Hartford Public Schools has already been engaged in. This partnership with UConn has really shown the power of collaboration and coordination. By leveraging our existing framework, engaging with community partners and listening to the unique needs of each school, we're continuing to build a system that's both sustainable and impactful. Here's a great analogy I like to use: the lamp was already plugged in, but the UConn partnership really gave it extra voltage.

Helene Marcy: So tell us what Year One looked like in East Hartford.

Tracy Stefano: Year One was an exciting and pivotal time for us. The launch of WSCC coincided with the appointment of our new superintendent, Thomas Anderson. Superintendent, Anderson has been a tremendous supporter of whole child initiatives. He truly understands the connection between health and academic achievement, and he gave us the time and space we really needed to engage district leadership in the work. His support was crucial, and it allowed us to be thoughtful and intentional in our rollout. We knew it was critical to get buy in from the top down, so we started by providing an overview of the grant, the importance of WSCC and our goals for Year One. This was presented to the executive leadership team, as well as all building principals. In order to ensure that our district leadership understood the WSCC framework, we incorporated the WSCC knowledge- building into professional development workshops for the district leadership team. This step was key in creating a shared understanding of the initiative and its relevance to our district work. I'm really fortunate that I have an incredible district WSCC Executive Council. We meet monthly, and with the guidance and support from Kate, we've really built our own understanding of the framework and how it aligns with the work that we're already doing. This really helped ensure a strong foundation for the initiative. As part of the process, each member of our executive council assessed one of the WSCC components that aligned best with their area of expertise. In total, we focused on six out of 10 WSCC components. And here's really what we did. We were able to assess how we were as a district in each of these six components; we compiled data; we examined trends and elicited feedback. From there, we conducted a SWOT analysis to identify our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and tensions, and we used that information to develop goal statements and create action plans for implementation in Year Two of the grant. This was such a collaborative effort, the process gave everyone a voice and allowed them to contribute their expertise. This approach not only strengthened our district level efforts, but also set the stage for schools to follow a similar process.

Helene Marcy: Kate, tell us about the school teams. What work do you do with them?

Kate Williamson: We began working with school teams in East Hartford in January of Year One, as part of that thoughtful rollout that Tracy described. And really the school team process paralleled the process used by the Executive Council of the district WSCC team. So in January, school principals attended a professional development session on the WSCC model, and subsequently they worked to establish a WSCC team roster with diverse voices and expertise from across their school community. As Tracy mentioned earlier, these teams and the structure for these teams was already in existence in East Hartford, so this was really just about strengthening what was already in place.

From there, those teams participated in two professional development sessions with us and completed follow up activities in between those sessions. And we encompassed a number of things in those sessions, and that those activities as well. We talked about building WSCC knowledge. We assessed their current WSCC practices. We had them gather information and input from across their community. We had them identify future directions to pursue, based on their assessment results and the information they gathered. And finally, they drafted measurable goals and action plans for implementation and Year Two.

Helene Marcy: What's an example of something someone has included in one of those action plans?

Kate Williamson: How much time do we have Helene? Because I could talk about East Hartford all day.

[Laughter]

Okay, I'll keep it to just two examples, but know that it's not easy for me to choose which two to highlight in East Hartford.

One example that comes to mind is at Langford Elementary school. So they have a goal and an action plan to increase opportunities for physical activity for students, opportunities both inside the classroom focused on movement breaks and instructional strategies that are physically engaging, as well as outside the classroom and thinking about recess time, structure to recess and recess equipment.

Another example that comes to mind is at Norris Elementary School, like many of the schools in East Hartford, they identified social and emotional climate as an area of focus, and they have a goal and action plan this year that's focused on introducing a new universal social and emotional learning curriculum into the school. Importantly, in these two schools that I just highlighted, and in all the schools in East Hartford, we at UCon— we just provided the tools and the process the steps for developing these action plans. But each school identified their own areas of focus based on their own needs in their own setting, right? So everyone is pursuing different goals that are relevant to their own community. And that's the beauty of the WSCC model. It's contextually flexible, so that each school addresses the needs in their community.

Helene Marcy: That's great that it can be tailored to schools in that way, a process anyone can use. What are you most looking forward to now that Year Two of the project is underway? Tracy, let's start with you.

Tracy Stefano: I have to say, I couldn't agree more with Kate. There are so many incredible things happening in East Hartford, and I'm so proud of the work our schools and district have accomplished so far. One of the things I'm really excited about seeing this year is the district and school teams’ action plans come to life. During Year One these teams put so much thought and effort into developing their plans. Their ideas were innovative and aligned with the unique needs of their schools. Ensuring WSCC becomes a lasting part of our district's work is a priority for us in Year Two. We're working on embedding WSCC into our district systems and structures in meaningful ways. For example, WSCC work is now scheduled into our yearly meeting calendar, ensuring regular check ins and progress updates. We're also aligning it with our strategic planning process to integrate with schools seamlessly, with district and school level strategies. Year Two, I have to say, is all about action and integration, taking what we've built and making it a permanent, thriving part of our district culture. I can't wait to see the positive impact on our students, families and community.

Helene Marcy: And Kate, how about you?

Kate Williamson: I echo everything Tracy said. We are so excited about this continued partnership. You know, the educators, the administrators, the district leaders in East Hartford are incredibly knowledgeable, resourceful, collaborative, and ultimately dedicated to their students and their families. As we approach the midpoint of Year Two, we're already seeing their accomplishments start to come to life, and to think that we have another three and a half four years working together on this project, it's just so exciting to see what East Hartford is going to accomplish in that time.

Helene Marcy: Tracy, for others who might be looking to strengthen implementation of the WSCC model in their districts, what advice would you give about first steps?

Tracy Stefano: For districts looking to implement or strengthen the WSCC model? I would say the first and most critical step is securing buy-in from district leadership. Leadership buy-in is so crucial. Leadership sets the tone for the entire district. When they prioritize WSCC, it signals to everyone else that this work matters and should be integrated into the district's overarching goals. Beyond leadership, buy-in the right people need to be at the table. This includes decision makers and individuals with diverse expertise, such as educators, health professionals, community partners and family representatives. Having a range of perspectives really ensures that the WSCC model is implemented in a way that meets the needs of all students and families.

Collaboration is so important and really key to the success of what you're trying to do. When you bring together people with different skills and experiences, you're able to address the many facets of students, wellness and success more comprehensively. WSCC isn't just an initiative. It's not a curriculum or program. It's a system and structure. It's a framework for strategic planning that takes into account every aspect of a child's educational experience. I do want to really emphasize the importance of patience and persistence. Building a sustainable WSCC model takes time, but with strong leadership, the right team and a clear framework, it absolutely is achievable, and the impact on students and families makes it all worthwhile.

Helene Marcy: Kate, did you have anything you wanted to add to that?

Kate Williamson: Absolutely, you know, building on what Tracy said in the district, WSCC is not another thing, right? It's not sitting over there in another silo, another box to check off. The WSCC model really provides an organizing framework to help school leaders and district leaders think about the work that they're doing every day to support the whole child. And so one really concrete thing that individual leaders listening to this podcast might be able to do? Go online, pull up that WSCC model image, whether it's on the CDC’s website or our website, and take a look at that and map out your current initiatives and your current school teams. Almost like a concept map in social studies, right? We have found that doing that with school leaders is a great starting point to get those wheels turning, to understand the WSCC model, understand how your different supports and services interact and integrate with one another, and get those wheels turning about opportunities to strengthen your policies and practices and how to maybe reduce duplication and inefficiencies and really, again, strengthen that integration. So pull up that WSCC model and draw your concept map.

Helene Marcy: And where can people learn more about the partnership?

Kate Williamson: So everyone can learn more about the CT WSCC partnership on our website, [www.ctwscc.org](http://www.ctwscc.org), which, again, I'll spell out, ‘cause I know that's an unfamiliar acronym to some. So that is c t w s c c dot org. On our website, you'll find a variety of free tools and resources that you can use in your setting. We also post information about trainings and announcements when new tools or resources are released. For example, a little bit of a teaser: in this upcoming Year Two of the project, later in the winter, we anticipate releasing an on-demand webinar series on evidence informed practices across WSCC domains, and we'll be posting details about our third WSCC Academy, which is a day of free in person training for school teams in Connecticut, which we anticipate holding this spring.

Helene Marcy: Thank you so much for talking with me today about the project. It sounds like you've done a lot of work in a short amount of time, and we look forward to seeing what else the team can do to foster whole child wellness. Thanks to you both.

Tracy Stefano: Thank you, Kate and Helene.

Kate Williamson: Thank you so much, Helene.

Helene Marcy: We'll add links to the CT WSCC Partnership website in the podcast description. You can find all our podcast episodes in your favorite podcast app by searching for UConn CSCH or by visiting the CSCH website. csch.uconn.edu. You can also follow us on social media at UConnCSCH. Thanks for listening.