**UConn CSCH Podcast Episode: Pandemic funding and social-emotional supports in Connecticut Schools**

Helene Marcy: 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 school and child health. CSCH is committed to social responsiveness and creating change. I invite you to take a look at our website at csch.uconn.edu.

Today, I'm here with Morgaen Donaldson, Sandra Chafouleas, Michael Strambler and T. Lee Morgan. Morgaen Donaldson is Associate Dean for Research in the UConn Neag School of Education, Professor in Educational Leadership and Director of the Center for Education Policy Analysis, Research and Evaluation. Sandy is also in the Neag school as Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology, and is Co-Director of CSCH. Michael is Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Yale University and Director of Child Wellbeing and Education Research at the Consultation Center at Yale and Lee is currently Senior Learning and Evaluation Officer at the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving and was previously on the Educational Leadership faculty at Sacred Heart University. Today we're going to talk about a recent research project that looked at how Connecticut school districts first proposed to use government funding for social emotional supports, and then what they actually did. Welcome to all of you.

Sandy Chafouleas: Thanks for having us.

Mike Strambler: Thank you. Glad to be here.

Lee Morgan: Yes. Thank you for having us today.

Helene Marcy: So Morgaen, this project was completed in response to a call made by a collaboration called CCERC. Can you give us some background on CCERC and talk about its mission before we dive into the research?

Morgaen Donaldson: Sure. So CCERC, or C C E R C, stands for the Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration, and CCERC was founded in 2021 through an agreement between the Connecticut State Department of Education, or CSDE, and the University of Connecticut as a research practice partnership that focused on analyzing the effects of and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. CSDE initially set aside $3 million of its recovery funding from the federal government to study the impacts of the pandemic and the effects of recovery initiatives in Connecticut schools. This project that we're talking about today came out of that initial funding. In 2023 CSDE allocated an additional $3 million to continue this work. So the way that it works is that CSDE identifies pressing problems in the state schools, provides the funds to UConn to set up the projects, and then UConn disburses the funds to principal investigators at UConn and other universities and colleges within Connecticut. So you see here today, this is an example of this sort of inner institutional teamwork that CCERC promotes. To date, CCERC has funded 19 studies, an initial group focused on the pandemic's effects, and a second group that has investigated broader topics like virtual reality in high schools, reading instruction and social media and cell phone use among adolescents. And all of our studies are conducted in Connecticut.

Helene Marcy: Now, as you said, CCERC as a whole has tackled different research projects, but this one specifically looked at how schools proposed to use ARP ESSER funding for social emotional supports. Why this topic?

Morgaen Donaldson: so ARP ESSER, which stands for American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief, was the third and last installment of federal relief funds to states to address the pandemic's impact on students and aid in their recovery. CSDE has prioritized students’ mental health and well-being, in its direct efforts to address the effects of the pandemic. There's a belief at the CSDE that schools must address students mental health needs before making substantial growth in academic areas. So to date, more than a third of CCERC projects have deliberately examined students and/or teachers’ socio emotional, health and wellness, and this topic has emerged in all of the projects. I believe that's because this has become such a major concern for districts and schools over the past five years.

Helene Marcy: Sandy, can you tell us more about the purpose and background of this particular project? What did it include?

Sandy Chafouleas: So, Morgaen told us that, there was this money that was given federally to states to figure out how to support what's happening as a result of the COVID pandemic. And the State doesn't just take all the money they are supposed to give it to the district, so districts were given the opportunity to create a plan as to how they were going to spend the amount that was allocated to their particular district. And the SDE had identified five different priority areas so you had to spend a certain amount in learning, which makes sense, but then the other priorities, you had some flexibility to identify what was needed in your district. And social, emotional and mental health of students and staff is one of those key areas. So that's what our project really focused on. And so the question was, okay, we wanted to know what kinds of planned supports did districts propose going into the pandemic and coming out of the pandemic? Wwhat did they actually do? What were the results of doing whatever they chose to do in the social, emotional and mental health space? And what's happening around what key groups think about the effectiveness of what was done? And so we divided the project into three spaces, and we're going to each talk about different aspects of it, but I'll give a quick overview. The first part of the project involved analyzing what districts proposed they were going to do in those ARP ESSER plans, how they were going to what they were going to do, and how much money they were going to allocate toward social, emotional and mental health supports of students and staff. The second part was a district leader survey. So we wanted to get the perceptions of the leaders around what it was they did, and what they what they found. And then we did, detailed case studies which identified conversations with multiple people within a district around these same kind of topics. So let me just dive into the plans and how we did that. So as I said, districts had to propose a plan, and file it with SDE. So we retrieved those plans in March of 2023—the first version that they had provided. We coded for the strength and the comprehensiveness of that plan, and then we looked at how much budget they were allocating. I'll pass to Mike to tell us a little bit more about the survey.

Mike Strambler: Thanks, Sandy. So as Sandy mentioned, part of this project involved administering a district survey to school leaders. We invited every school district within Connecticut to complete the survey. So we asked about a few different things with regard to what districts did between 2021 and 2024. One of the first things we wanted to know was what they planned to do to provide social emotional supports for students and teachers, and then what they actually did. And this was of course across elementary, middle schools and high schools. Then we also wanted to know what kind of student groups they tended to focus on to provide these supports, and how they gave attention to any group differences among these student groups. And then finally, we asked questions about how teachers and other district staff were supported during this time.

Helene Marcy: And Lee, can you give a brief overview of the case studies?

Lee Morgan: Yes, thank you. So with the case study, Dr Latoya Haynes-Thoby and myself looked at several different areas, so we wanted to build on the work that was already done. What we did is we went though a process of identifying several districts, looking at their alliance district categorization, their spending priority in their ESSER plan, and then also wanted to focus on those who had limited inclusion in other studies with this project. With that we were able to identify a list of about 15 districts, and we were able to interview leaders from three of those districts. We really honed in on some areas of focus, and with that, just really, we wanted to understand the school context. And then after that, we went into what was the student implementation? So, what are the supports? What are changes in supports specifically due to COVID-19? Some of the factors behind that implemented changes and, you know, just reflectiion on what could have been better. We asked them about programming, and aske them to discuss some of those things that they were doing. And also looking specifically at the educator support. Then we looked at that family and parent engagement, and what were the successes and challenges? And then with the focus of the project, looking at equity. What changes were made to promote equitable outcomes, including addressing the needs of traditionally marginalized students, And then finally, we wanted to have a understanding of what successes that they've had with their implementation of funds.

Helene Marcy: Thanks. So let's talk about those results. Sandy, let's start with you. What did districts plan to do?

Sandy Chafouleas: sure. So I think the really exciting part is that the vast majority of districts did submit a plan. You know, over 90% saying hey we’re going to use funds. And about three quarters of them, so that's the even more exciting part to me, said, Yeah, we're going to use some of those funds to support social, emotional and mental health of students and staff. So it's definitely a pressing issue. It was a pressing issue when people submitted their plans of something that they wanted to attend to and they knew they needed to attend to. When we looked at the total dollars that were planned again to be spent in social, emotional and behavioral health, it's an average of about 16% of those funds per district. The even more exciting part about the findings is that the vast majority, almost all of the proposed strategies, were aligned with what at the time, were the evidence-based recommendations provided by the US Department of Education. Very diverse. I mean, I think we counted over 460 individual kinds of strategies that these districts planned to use. But when we code what they were, the alignment was really nice.

Helene Marcy: And Mike tell us about the survey results. What did districts actually do?

Mike Strambler: Well, the first thing to note about the survey results is that we had a low response rate, only 15% of school districts responded to the survey. I suspect this is because school districts, as people, well know, were very overwhelmed and continue to be overwhelmed in the aftermath of COVID 19. Following COVID, they were still dealing with issues such as learning loss, low attendance and increase in disciplinary problems within school districts, Nonetheless, we still believe these findings are valuable. In terms of supports for students, we heard from leaders that the provision of individual level services to students and universal school-based services were the most common approaches they used. Iin terms of the universal school-based services, those are approaches that are intended for all students within a school or school district, and they tend to be social emotional in nature. And that's another finding from this survey, is that most of these were social emotional learning programs. So these are the types of programs that target the development of skills that are interpersonal and intra personal in nature. So they focus on things like helping students have a better understanding of their own emotions and the emotions of others. We learned that the biggest gap that was given attention was towards students in special education, and I suspect that this had to do with the fact that during COVID, this was a challenging group of students to reach, and so they wanted to direct resources to focusing on them. For teachers, leaders reported that they directed most of their attention to hiring teachers and providing professional development for them.

Helene Marcy: And what was the greatest challenge for districts?

Mike Strambler: So leaders at these districts reported that it was very challenging to find the time to engage in this kind of social and emotional programming for both of these groups of individuals within their schools, the students and the teachers. And it was hard to find the staff and the time with staff to provide the necessary professional development.

Helene Marcy: Lee, tell us more about what you found through the case studies.

Lee Morgan: One of the things I'd like to echo with Mike's findings with the survey that we also found with the case studies, is the difficulty of finding people to engage. And part of that for us is that we noticed that when we were doing the interviews: people were interested, but a lot of the people who had been hired or had completed the original plans were actually no longer in place. Many districts were being intentional in saying, We have this dollars for this amount of time so we can hire you for this amount of time. But this is not going to be a long-term position. Unfortunately, that did make it so that some of that institutional knowledge of what happened during that time was no longer there. But we do feel like with the three districts that we were able to interview with—one being more suburban, one being more urban and one being more rural—that we did get a flavor for what was going on around the state. So with that, what we found is that first, you know, that support for students. The districts moved very quickly to implement a more comprehensive support. One of the key things that some of the districts were doing were hiring mental health professionals, including social workers, to support both the students, staff, families, and then they also prioritized how can they continue those supports, even after the funding ended. I think one of the big changes that we see is that, instead of the responsibility for social emotional learning to be on a specific group of people—many times mental health professionals in the school—that all staff were involved in supporting social emotional learning. So they did put a hyper focus on staff well-being, and regular check in and really trying to work with staff that were navigating not just what was happening in the classroom, both virtually or physically, but then what was happening in their own families, and how can they accommodate the staff and support them. And again, this holistic model is what they talked about putting in place. So a lot of reflective practices and a lot of community building.

One of the challenges that we look at when we think about this shift—is what I would call it—to this more holistic support through social emotional learning, is that after the pandemic, there was what we call this sense of mindset regression, as in going back to business as normal. And instead of having that strong focus on social emotional learning as that foundation for learning, going back strictly to this idea of academics. So the educators did express that as a sense of loss.

Helene Marcy: Yeah. So given those findings and what the staff talked about, what do you think needs to happen next, whether that's a priority or a policy to consider, or something that districts need to think about?

Lee Morgan: I think that institutionalizing social emotional supports in schools. So that long-term policy commitment and embedding, I think from both in the state and district funding structures. I think number two is addressing educator well-being systemically. So those comprehensive wellness programs and professional development. I think that a lot of things that came to the surface is that educators—as we've always known—don't just come into the classroom or come into the building and leave everything behind. They come in as whole people. And how do we support our educators so that they can support the students in their school? The last thing I'll highlight is that data-driven decision making for that long term SEL effectiveness. That implementing the continuous evaluation, not just the supports, but how we're doing things. And then specifically addressing the equity gaps, thinking about how the SELs outcomes are going for those who've been traditionally underrepresented, traditionally marginalized within schools.

Helene Marcy: Mike, do you have more to add? What are some main takeaways that you would see for policymakers and organizations?

Mike Strambler: Yeah, I think the takeaways is, to build off of what Lee just said. So one of the takeaways has to do with sustaining the workforce. That's a really important one. We saw that over half of the districts used their funding to increase the workforce capacity. So it's important to consider what happens after they lose that funding and the sustainability of that workforce capacity. So policy makers should consider how to provide additional financial supports for these districts that use those funding for increasing staff, because not all school districts will be able to absorb those costs into their district budgets. Lee also spoke about the importance of teacher support and taking systemic approaches to accomplishing that.School leaders reported that teachers really struggled during the pandemic and afterwards. And providing the kinds of supports that Lee just mentioned are essential to maintaining the well-being of the teaching staff, especially now, when we're seeing diminishing teacher workforce. Providing high quality SEL training for teachers is another policy recommendation. There's a lot of variability in SEL programming, as well as types of SEL approaches in general. And so for students to benefit from SEL programs, we first need to have adequate buy-in, first of all at school districts, adequate training of the staff to implement these approaches and ensure fidelity of implementation. Now, all of that takes a good deal of supports, professional development and so on, in order to accomplish that and so an important policy recommendation would be to invest in considering these system-wide approaches to ensuring the high quality training and implementation of SEL approaches, especially the evidence-based approaches.

Just like it's important for training staff to do that, it's important for with regard to student outcomes as well. And supporting them during a time where they are struggling socially and emotionally. We have pretty good evidence at this point that high quality social emotional learning benefits students in a range of outcomes ranging from academic to social emotional outcomes to mental health outcomes. So it's important to consider, again, evidence-based approaches that are a good fit for one school and addressing the specific problems that their student population is facing.

We have much less understanding about the drivers of academic and non-academic outcomes in students. And so it's also important to be able to collect data to assess the effectiveness of these programs and what might be driving that effectiveness. The last policy recommendation is to provide supports for districts and potentially the entire state, to use measures of social emotional outcomes and implementation procedures. So the State of Connecticut has already been moving in that direction with providing the DESSA tools that assess social, emotional and other outcomes in students. And so moving more in that direction and providing the necessary tools for understanding the effectiveness of SEL approaches and the drivers of that are, essential for supporting the teachers and students within these districts.

Helene Marcy: And Sandy, what message would you have for school districts moving forward?

Sandra Chafouleas: Hey, look, we've covered so many different messages. So let me just focus on two key points, I think, that you heard very clearly from both Mike and Lee and their review of what we've done in this project. The super cool thing is that all three parts of this big project really hone in on the idea of workforce, workforce, workforce. We're worried about the fact that as these ARP ESSER funds are going away, what's going to happen to all those staff that have been hired to help do what has been identified as a critical piece to the whole student experience in schools. So we need to figure out how we're going to be able to sustain at least the minimum of what districts are saying that they need in a workforce. The other key piece on workforce is around sustaining or keeping the people that we have hired, and making sure that our educators, everyone from the cafeteria worker up to the principal, are well themselves. So paying attention to a diverse array of needs and requests and directions that we can do in employee wellness to make sure that we keep everybody there and we keep them well. I think those are really key pieces. And then the second kind of big piece that I would focus on is this idea that we're all saying that we know it's important. We're saying it, the leaders are saying it, the data were saying it to us: that social, emotional training and teaching and learning is needed in schools. So how can we do that? Or how can we figure out how to capitalize on ways that it can be integrated throughout the school day? We're worried, is what we found in the in some of the case studies, that some of the reversion back to traditional models that emphasize academics may be happening. So how can we maintain the idea that we need integration of the work throughout the day? It doesn't have to be an all or none approach or an either/or, it should be a whole child approach in ways that make it very accessible to everyone again, from the school librarian to the school nurse to the mental health specialist and the teacher who can bring social, emotional wellness and learning and strategies into the school environment. Let's put it all together. Instead of thinking of as one or the other. It should be integrated. So those are my main messages. But we have to make sure at the end of it all that the workforce is there to help us be able to have these great ideas and keep them in place.

Morgaen Donaldson: Can I add something? I think, to sort of draw some connections between our different projects in CCERC is really important. So I, in addition to being a Co-director of CCERC, am the PI on a project on teachers’ and leaders’ experiences in the pandemic up to the current moment. And one of the things we did was survey teachers, and principals to a lesser extent, in six diverse districts in Connecticut. And so we had a survey of over 1500 teachers, and we were very concerned to see that teachers are reporting high levels of stress, high levels of anxiety, and low levels of support. This was in the last year, year and a half. So I think my main takeaway is: the effects of pandemic don't just disappear in five years. These impacts are continuing, and we can't just pretend they're going away. So I just wanted to say that and make that connection between this project and other projects in CCERC .

Helene Marcy: Well, speaking of that, Morgaen, can you tell us what's up next in terms of CCERC projects and priorities, and also where people can find out more about this research and other projects?

Morgaen Donaldson: Absolutely. So I'll start with the second part. So interested people could find more about this project—you can find this report, as well as other CCERC reports and information about all the CCERC projects—on the website, which is housed by the Connecticut State Department of Education. And it's at portal.ct.gov, and you can search for it there. CCERC has several new studies that are underway or launching soon. The most recent ones are focused on artificial intelligence in schools. Another one on how legislative mandates from the state assembly are affecting teaching and learning in Connecticut schools. And a final one on academic growth in the middle school years. We're also launching a very exciting initiative called the district research partnership. And this is an exciting project that provides small grants to about 10 pairs of Connecticut researchers and Connecticut school districts. And these partnerships, investigate a pressing problem in the district over the course of a year. So we think this is going to provide a lot of support to districts and findings that may be relevant to other districts in Connecticut and beyond, as well as having some tangible benefits for students.

Helene Marcy: Well, let's hope that policymakers and school districts can continue to take that whole child balanced approach and both fund that workforce and integrate social emotional learning into their instruction. Thank you all so much for talking with me today about CCERC and about this important research.

Morgaen Donaldson: Thank you.

Mike Strambler: Thank you.

Lee Morgan: Thank you.

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