

Betsy Kindall ([00:00](#)):

I'm Betsy Kindall.

Nicole Fairchild ([00:10](#)):

I'm Nicole Fairchild.

Stacy Moore ([00:11](#)):

I'm Stacy Moore.

Betsy Kindall ([00:12](#)):

This is Arkansas AWARE, a project to advance wellness and resiliency in education.

Betsy Kindall ([00:20](#)):

Welcome back, everybody. We are back in the studio today, and we have a special guest with us. So Nicole, Stacy, and I are happy to welcome Dr. Candra Brasel with us today. Candra has a long, extensive history with school mental health, and so we were at Jasper when we interviewed Alice Cooper. So we wanted to bring Candra and get her perspective and talk about the work that she's done, not just as an administrator and the work in schools, but also your research in mental health.

Betsy Kindall ([00:52](#)):

So tell us a little bit about where you've been in your career, because I know you've done a lot of different things.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([00:57](#)):

Yes, I have. So education is not the pathway that I thought that would take in life. When I went to school, it was for social work and counseling, and my whole goal was to be a school counselor. However, at the time I didn't want to be a teacher first. I didn't know the pathway to take. So my degree was in rehabilitation counseling, which brought me lots of different experiences that I'm so thankful for.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([01:21](#)):

But I wrote a grant right out of college to do social work in the schools, K12 in Jasper, and I loved the atmosphere. I loved helping the kids, and I fell in love with education. I wanted to see that side. So I went ahead and did the nontraditional route to become a teacher. I taught there for a few years, and then I had the opportunity when school-based mental health was first starting up to come work alongside Betsy and Stacy here at the co-op coordinating school-based mental health services. So I did that for a year. Then we were led to another place for a few years and then just returned back.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([01:54](#)):

During that time, I taught special ed part time and high school science, became a school counselor for several years at the elementary and the high school levels, and then went and began my career in administration. So I became a primary school principal for a few years and then went to central office as assistant superintendent and then superintendent.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([02:15](#)):

So mental health has always been a passion of mine. The trauma that we're seeing now and just the change over time, I'm finishing year 23 in education, and so just the changes that I've seen over time, the needs that we have now... When I decided to go ahead and start my dissertation work, I was living this mental health crisis, is what I refer to it as an elementary principal.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([02:43](#)):

I had babies K through 2, actually, preschool through second grade in my building. I saw it at the upper levels too, but when I was in the trenches every day with these babies that were coming in, I was just so blown away by the behaviors and the trauma and the experiences that these little ones were coming in with. We didn't know how to help them. I thought, "Gosh, I have a lot of experience," I felt like as a school counselor and coordinating school-based mental health services and working alongside some therapists, but I didn't even know what to do to help these kids.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([03:17](#)):

So I set out to try to figure out what can we do as administrators, as school counselors, when we feel so ill-equipped to help with mental health services. So as you're going through the dissertation process, you have to narrow your focus. That's what I learned. I can't solve all the problem, and I can't figure out where it's coming from, but the little piece that I chose to study was as a principal in Arkansas, how are we prepared? Is anyone else prepared to deal with this, because I'm thinking with my experiences, surely a lot of principals have no mental health or counseling experience. So I know that if I'm feeling ill-equipped, I assume that other people are and what can we do?

Dr. Candra Brasel ([03:57](#)):

So that's what I studied, Arkansas principal preparedness, to identify and assist students with mental health struggles.

Betsy Kindall ([04:04](#)):

Yeah. Were you surprised by the outcomes? Were you surprised by what you found?

Dr. Candra Brasel ([04:08](#)):

I wasn't surprised by the outcome because it was pretty much solidified what my theory was, is that we aren't prepared. We don't know what to do. Even school counselors, as the gatekeepers of mental health, typically in the schools, no, we just don't know what to do. What surprised me the most is the amount of response that I got. It was confirmation to me that I'm not in this alone and that everyone's really facing these challenges all over the state. Doesn't matter if you're in a high poverty or a low poverty school.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([04:41](#)):

The other part of that I discovered, and I knew but I didn't know, was the shortage of mental health workers that there are in the state, especially those that are trained to deal with childhood trauma in early childhood.

Betsy Kindall ([04:55](#)):

This may piggyback on that, but oftentimes in dissertation at the end, they talk about next steps, future direction.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([05:01](#)):

Yes.

Betsy Kindall ([05:02](#)):

So what did you pull away from your research on that piece?

Dr. Candra Brasel ([05:06](#)):

That we need more trained therapists in the state, those who are highly trained so that they can then train our teams at the school level to help to identify and assist these students. The training piece, and then just the coaching and support. The real life, every day, that's what we need. The future steps is that someone else might replicate the study to see about school counselors. Is that true, that school counselors in their training aren't even equipped?

Betsy Kindall ([05:35](#)):

Seeing... Equipped.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([05:35](#)):

Yeah. Equipped. Feeling equipped, and then down to teachers and other personnel.

Betsy Kindall ([05:40](#)):

So in your population, did you focus mainly on administrators? Did you have some school counselors in there?

Dr. Candra Brasel ([05:45](#)):

Yes. I did not.

Betsy Kindall ([05:46](#)):

Okay.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([05:47](#)):

For my research, I just surveyed Arkansas public school principals.

Betsy Kindall ([05:52](#)):

But as the school counseling group, we've seen that with our requests. With the change in legislation where counselors have to spend more of their time providing direct services, we got a lot of requests, because I feel like that some of our counselors were ready for that. They were ready to do the work they were trained for. But we had a big group that felt like, "We haven't done this work in a while and we're really not ready to provide this level of service to kids." We had some requests as our aware team to give them a refresher with skills and tools to put in their toolbox to get through that process.

Nicole Fairchild ([06:26](#)):

I'm curious with your experience and your experience and the insights you've had, what was the thing that made you say, "I don't know what to do today." Given all that you had at your disposal and the tools you had, what was it about those experiences where you thought, "I'm not equipped yet? I don't have what I need in that moment."

Dr. Candra Brasel ([06:45](#)):

I guess just the severity of the mental health issues that I was seeing. It wasn't like we could sit down and try to talk through a problem of the de-escalation, you know? I had some training on that, and still every tool that I was pulling out of my toolbox, these students were becoming so aggressive, just little, at early age. When you have teachers that are coming to work every day not knowing if they're going to be injured, that's not okay. Neither is it okay for these babies to have so much trauma that they're feeling like they have to fight.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([07:15](#)):

So that's where I just felt, "What do I do? How do I protect my staff from feeling like they have to come and be exposed every day to typical violence or possible violence? How can I help these kids?" Because that's not innate to want to do that.

Nicole Fairchild ([07:32](#)):

No. So it was the severity, but it sounds like it was also structural, it was bigger than just one intervention is going to work.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([07:40](#)):

Right.

Nicole Fairchild ([07:40](#)):

Then de-escalation didn't seem to do what you'd hoped it would do.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([07:43](#)):

It did not, not in the amount of training that I had. I had had some conscious discipline. I had had CPI. I'd had some just different strategies that everything I knew to take, I was trying to take just to support my staff and my kids, and I just felt like I still wasn't making a difference. I wanted to help the families with kids and get them the services that they need, and I just didn't even know where to take them or to point them to services outside of the school either.

Betsy Kindall ([08:12](#)):

So you're in a pretty awesome position where you've come through a lot, you've had a lot of experience, you've seen things from multiple angles and perspectives. So as a superintendent now, how does that transfer? What is your hope? What is your drive? Your priorities, how does that shift based on your research and where you've been, what you want for your school and your school district?

Dr. Candra Brasel ([08:33](#)):

Well, I feel like definitely we need to approach this as preventative. What can we do from the early ages to put some supports in place and some interventions? Early intervention, I feel like, is the key. That's something definitely that I found in my study. How can we put these positive behavioral supports and interventions and give families some resources so that we can prevent ever getting to the severity that we are reaching right now? It's just really climbing. The teacher pipeline is short right now and it's becoming shorter every day. I just worry about the profession and the difference that we're trying to make for kids if we can't get some help.

Betsy Kindall ([09:12](#)):

Yeah. If these severity of needs, if it's that big, then it's not just, "Let's do the prevention in the school." It sounds to me like it's going to be community wide prevention.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([09:21](#)):

Yes.

Betsy Kindall ([09:22](#)):

Bigger efforts, because the severity is deeper than, "I'm just going to do this little magic tool right here, and then it's going to help things."

Dr. Candra Brasel ([09:29](#)):

Right? Yes. Definitely a community approach, knowing what resources and having those at our disposal so that we can recommend some different services to families, And more mental health training for even the providers for early childhood training and things like that.

Stacy Moore ([09:48](#)):

So I've got a question, but I don't know quite how to phrase it and I might mess it up, but having been in the classroom and even having been at the school level, what you would've hoped your superintendent could have passed down to you, and now you're in this position where we look and we're like, "Oh, they can make change happen," which we're still... Trauma is trauma and we can't go home with them and we can't all bring them home, but as a superintendent now, do you feel like you have access to more resources, that you have programs at your disposal? Or what do you try to pass down that you might have wished that you had had? Do you feel like your hands are tied, or do you feel like you have some resources there?

Dr. Candra Brasel ([10:29](#)):

Well, I feel like somewhat they're tied because I still don't have the answers. However, I have tried some things that we felt like we were starting to see in students who weren't quite to that severity point, just some structures in our building, setting expectations, and teaching those behaviors and those expectations and repeating that. Something that I feel like, and we've had this discussion as administrative team, we expect our students to come in and know how to act and know what to do without anyone teaching them. They don't. We have got to take that time and build it into our schedule and say, "Okay, when you're walking in the hallway, this is what it looks like." We might have to practice that and model that several times. There needs to be visuals of that and there needs to be that for every place, in the cafeteria.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([11:15](#)):

Parents don't understand that sometimes because they say, "Well, they know how to act. They should already know that. You shouldn't have to teach that. You need to be teaching the academics." But until you get the social emotional part, as you know, down, academics aren't going to be as successful.

Stacy Moore ([11:28](#)):

I love that you say that. I was in a PBIS meeting this week and it all came back to that. It came back to our expectations and we can't just teach them in August and expect that the students know, and then with COVID and the change in dynamics and those types of things. I think as a society, as teachers, as parents, sometimes we want to be like, "Oh, that's not going to make a big difference," but we forget that those simple practices make a big difference.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([11:55](#)):

They do. We did what we called an expectation rotation. So we even involved our custodial staff, help them, tell them in the bathroom what you want them to do with the paper towels and all of that. We did on the playground, on the school bus, in the cafeteria, and so that way, everywhere that they were going to go in school, they knew. It was modeled. We had to do it again after Christmas. Sometimes we had to do it again after spring break, because this time of year, things can get a little crazy and the structure seems to change a little bit toward the end of the year. So we had to do that again.

Stacy Moore ([12:28](#)):

You had mentioned social emotional learning. Has there been anything that has been happening or that you've seen or that you would like to incorporate with that to help some of those, like you said, preventative? We do see a lot of emotion regulation and emotional issues, and that's sometimes where we get that aggressive behavior. Have you seen any of that you like or that works or that you've seen?

Dr. Candra Brasel ([12:50](#)):

Well, yeah. I think the state is putting forth some good effort with the guide for life and things like that. I know that one of our schools applied for a grant to get some new social emotional curriculum. I'm not as familiar with it to know how it's working, but we're always looking to see. It went from when I first became a school counselor and was teaching, we focused on character words. "Let's talk about character words of the month and all of that," to, "We're going into deep social, emotional behaviors." Then what does respect really mean? What does that look like in all these places?

Dr. Candra Brasel ([13:26](#)):

So, anyway, what we did is we identify essential standards for learning. So now we need to identify essential behaviors. I did with my staff what are the top three things that are driving you crazy that we are seeing universally? Because we can't fix it all right now, so let's target two or three things that are really, really pressing. So that's what we started working on to build our PBIS stuff. So that's something that I'm hoping that we can get into our schools now.

Betsy Kindall ([13:55](#)):

Yeah. We've talked about students and we've touched on social emotional, but talk to us a little bit about how you've seen a difference in the staff in your time as an administrator, especially during the pandemic, and then coming back, what sticks out to you?

Dr. Candra Brasel ([14:12](#)):

Well, I think just as humans through the pandemic, we've learned the importance of one another in community. I think a lot of times, we took for granted our jobs and the kids being able to come to school and learn, and the parents having that teacher support. So I think we've all learned to appreciate one another a little more that way. I feel like there are a lot of kids in Arkansas that we're still looking for, that are unidentified, that have fallen off the radar, so to speak.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([14:42](#)):

We've not had that as much in our district, but a lot of people that thought that they might like online learning, so to speak, when they were forced and everyone had to do that, we learned real quick that it's really not what it's cracked up to be. It looks different at a graduate level in college than it does trying to teach kids how to read digitally and through a computer Zoom or something.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([15:03](#)):

So I feel like we've learned that too, that really that face to face and being able to read emotion and have that so important, that body language that you lose. Even if they can hear the phonological pieces of the word, you don't know what's going on at home. We have students, of course, in every school in our state that we worry about safety, we worry about food and all of those things. So I know that the pandemic has just reinforced all of those needs.

Stacy Moore ([15:31](#)):

I can ask a controversial question.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([15:33](#)):

Oh gosh.

Betsy Kindall ([15:35](#)):

Oh boy.

Stacy Moore ([15:36](#)):

I say it is. It's not controversial. I don't know what the right word is for it, but a lot of our discussions have been around mental health of teachers and the lack of reaching out on their behalf. COVID has been hard, and like you referred to, we've realized how important our teachers are as parents because we've had to be teachers and we're like, "Oh, you can have this back. Please come back. We need you." Like you said, that pipeline is... We feel like there's not as many coming in, people are trying to exit.

Stacy Moore ([16:06](#)):

Anything that you've noticed with mental health with teachers and how we can support them? Not only that, we've tried to figure out and problem solve how can we get them support and how can we get them to accept support?

Dr. Candra Brasel ([16:18](#)):

Well, I don't know if you guys are even aware of what we're doing in our district with teacher and employee mental health, but I'm actually using some of my COVID money, the CRF funds, to support our staff in that, because it has taken a toll on them. We are offering services. We have a therapist on campus one day a week on all of our campuses that it's just for employees. We already have student support, but these employees we're able to sign up anonymously. They have a place that's designated that they can go to. We are having no trouble keeping those slots full. In fact, I actually talked to the therapist today and she was asking about continuing over spring break. Do we want to do that, and over the summer, because the people are really expressing the need for that. So I think that's so awesome that we're able to provide that support.

Stacy Moore ([17:06](#)):

That is awesome.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([17:06](#)):

I wish there was a way that we could do that long term for our staff, because until this opportunity, I don't know that they would've reached out on their own, but because it was an anonymous survey, if you want to sign up, and we did it where other people don't really know as much, they're taking advantage of it.

Stacy Moore ([17:20](#)):

Well, I think that you're doing it exactly where they are, and I think that's what makes a difference because we've talked about their EAP and that if you work in a school district, you and your family and anybody in your household, you do have access to free mental health services, but you have to seek that out. It's not something that's right there. I think what you're doing is saying, "Okay, we're going to bring it to you, make it convenient for you, and take care of you right where you spend most of your time," which is at work. I think that's awesome.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([17:48](#)):

17 years ago, it takes me back in time, because when we were first going out there with school based mental health and we would say, "We have this service for your students," and over and over, you would hear from teachers, "What about us?"

Stacy Moore ([17:57](#)):

Yes.

Betsy Kindall ([17:58](#)):

Absolutely.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([17:58](#)):

They would say it jokingly, but not.

Betsy Kindall ([18:01](#)):

But not.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([18:02](#)):

So that's what you're providing.

Betsy Kindall ([18:04](#)):

That's right.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([18:04](#)):

Yes. We're fortunate to have this opportunity now and I hope it continues to grow, but that also brings me back to something else in my study, and then just the stigma that is related to mental health. I think we've come a long way with that, but it's still there. I think for a lot of people, just feeling that they have to do it anonymously because there's such a stigma attached to mental health, and the same for students, the resistance to sometimes allow your child to get mental health services because of that. It's still a real thing. Hopefully some of those barriers are going to be broken through through this opportunity. I don't know. We'll see.

Nicole Fairchild ([18:40](#)):

When we do mental health first aid, we usually ask about stigma. "Scale of one to 10, how is it?" It's funny because lately what I'm hearing is, "Well, which generation?" Because the students, the kids, are all about it. They're fine. They'll be like, "I want a therapist too. Can I talk to somebody?" It's the adults that are maybe still working toward that and struggling some.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([19:04](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. That's definitely what I'm seeing, but just the history of mental health and where it came from to where it is today. I know it's better, but...

Betsy Kindall ([19:13](#)):

Well, just look at all of us at the table, in our careers, how much it's changed. I tell people this all the time, but years ago when we first started working together it was like a sales pitch. Still, it was a sales pitch about mental health and getting our kids into mental health. We didn't even speak about teachers or families so much. It was just, "Let's get our kids some help," and it was a sales pitch. It's not a sales pitch no more.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([19:36](#)):

No.

Nicole Fairchild ([19:36](#)):

Right.

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Stacy Moore ([19:37](#)):

Yeah.

Betsy Kindall ([19:38](#)):

Well, thank you so much for sharing with us today.

Dr. Candra Brasel ([19:40](#)):

Oh, you're welcome.

Betsy Kindall ([19:40](#)):

We sure have enjoyed having you here. If you guys are interested, Candra is the superintendent. Dr. Brasel is the superintendent of Jasper public schools, and we interviewed Alice Cooper the last two episodes and Candra. If you ever have a chance to stop by and check out Jasper, it's an amazing place. It's an awesome school climate and you can feel it when you walk in the doors. So thanks for being with us today. We hope you tune in next time.