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Betsy Kindall:

I am Betsy Kindall.

Nicole Fairchild:

I'm Nicole Fairchild.

Stacey Moore:

And I'm Stacey Moore.

Betsy Kindall:

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

Welcome back, everybody. We're back in the studio today, and we have some amazing guests with us from the Greenbrier Public School. So we're going to let you ladies introduce yourselves in just a minute, but we're going to talk about what Greenbrier has been up to as far as their school-based mental health. You guys, I know do Youth Mental Health First Aid, as well as you're part of the Resilient Schools Collaborative. And I think you also had a team at Thrive, so you really are hitting the ground running when it comes to mental health. And we want to hear what you've been up to. So if you would introduce yourselves and let our listeners know who we're talking to.

Kelli Martin:

Okay. I'm Kelli Martin, and I'm Deputy Superintendent here in our school district. I serve other roles as federal programs coordinators and really accountability over all of our student systems, whether that be academics, behavior, and mental health, other programs on our homeless liaison and several other duties as assigned.

Betsy Kindall:

Welcome.

Kelli Martin:

Thank you.

Tricia Benish:

And I'm Dr. Tricia Benish. I am Director of Mental Health and Behavior Services for Greenbrier School District. I'm a licensed psychologist. I actually specialize in pediatrics, but I work with all the age groups now. And so, I coordinate our school-based mental health program, and some other really exciting things that we have going on in the district.

Betsy Kindall:

That's awesome.

Well, we are so happy to have you with us today. So, start out by telling us a little bit about how you got started. Most of our listeners are school district personnel. And so, if they're thinking about implementing some unique things within their school districts, talk a little bit about what you have going on and how that got started.

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Kelli Martin:

I can jump in from the district perspective and really our community perspective. Even pre-pandemic, we had already identified needs of students of all ages when it came to mental health and behavior support that was needed. So again, talking pre-pandemic, our school board and our district-level leadership had already started the discussion about creating a position that Dr. Benish fills now, and we didn't really know at the time what that looked like. We knew what our student needs were, we knew what our strengths at that time were was school-based mental health, but we also knew that we had some gaps to fill, and just an increase, somewhat because of our enrollment continually increasing, which is a great thing, but then just the different things that kids are facing, and families are facing.

And so we really created the job description and just thought, "Okay, let's just see who we can get and what we can get and find the best person to help us lead this." Prior to creating this position for mental health and behavior services, that really fell underneath our Special Ed director, which was fine at the time, but students, with and without IEPs, need very much tiered support in other areas.

So it was fine that it fell under that department at the time, but with a growing need, we just needed to put our resources in personnel with those expertise. And someone great, a greater being above, sent us Dr. Tricia to lead the charge, and the timeline of that was pretty interesting because we were interviewing, and going through the process, and then this thing had called COVID hit. And again, to me, it was just a godsend at the time, because we had no idea what was about to occur with student mental health, and honestly even adult mental health, surviving through a pandemic.

Tricia Benish:

So when they asked me for an interview, I thought it was about coordinating school-based mental health, and then it just turned into so much more, so I do coordinate our school-based mental health program.

We contract with an outside agency, and we're working on expanding that department now, and we've been able to hire our first school-employed licensed clinical mental health professionals. So we're really excited about implementing those services this year and all the related services that she can be involved in.

And then I also manage specialized behavior supports for students in our district. So I oversee a lot of our PBIS implementation in the district, and all of these things are so intertwined. So we're talking about school climate, PBIS, mental health, social-emotional learning, and so all of these are just wonderful things that I'm so excited about working in the district on. And we've made a lot of great progress, and we have some exciting programs in the works right now.

Kelli Martin:

I think it might help too if Dr. Benish shared some of her background prior to being in Greenbrier as far as her degrees and work and her career prior to entering a school district.

Tricia Benish:

Well, most people don't know that I started out actually as a middle school art teachers.

Betsy Kindall:

I never knew that.

Tricia Benish:

And that was my beginning.

I taught in two very different locations, one very affluent, and then one not so blessed, but I recognize that in both of those settings, you have mental-health struggles across the board, mental health problems do not discriminate. And so I wanted to know how to help students better and in a more professional way to treat them. And so I went back to school to get my master's and PhD in school psychology. That's what my master's program is and my PhD.

And then I specialized in pediatrics through a fellowship program at UAMS in Children's Hospital. And then I worked as a behavior specialist for nine years, and when that ended, I went on to do some private-practice work, and then doing psychological assessments and therapy with students of all ages. And during that time, I specialized a lot in the treatment of students, or children and families, who have experienced extreme trauma. And then I heard about this physician opening and I came here and just love being in the schools.

Nicole Fairchild:

Wow.

Betsy Kindall:

Back to your roots for sure.

So I also know that you guys are doing some unique things as far as programming goes. So tell us a little bit about your mentoring programs as well as the work you're doing around your...

I know you have also protected time for SEL integration, and those two things I really want to talk about, because I think for any district across the state, if you could give some ideas about that program, that's something that somebody could really walk away with of, "Oh my gosh, we could really do that."

So could you tell us a little bit about those two things?

Kelli Martin:

I can jump in on the mentoring program.

When that application came out, we had experienced some traumatic events at our high school and I immediately sent it on to Dr. Benish, the application, and Travis Barrentine, our high school principal. At the time, we had several different student groups we were attempting to provide different types of tiered intervention for and tiered support, and one group at the time was our senior athletes that clearly needed some extra mental-health support during season, but also the idea of after their high school season as a senior.

So, for example, if you're a volleyball player, and have been a great athlete at Greenbrier High School, and you may or may not be going on and playing college. When volleyball season is over, we had identified just that gap of, "Okay, who am I beyond an excellent Greenbrier High school athlete as I'm moving into adulthood?" And so again, with other traumatic events that we had went through at our high school, we decided to be creative with a master of schedule, and make sure we had a protected time for those athletes when season was over.

Instead of just putting them in another class that they may or may not need to graduate, we put them in their own physical education class. And we do have some other students in there as well, but we're trying to keep them connected as athletes, as they move through this idea of, "Okay, I'm transitioning to

adulthood soon, and I may not be going to college to play ball, or may not be going to college at all." And so that's where the Resiliency grant came in so that we could treat this as a service-learning project for the athletes to see beyond themselves as you enter the real world. It's not just about me and being a high school student, and so how can I start now giving back to my community and making more connections?

And so each of our schools have a student intervention team, each of our seven schools, four of those seven are elementary schools. And because of those intervention teams, we already know which of our elementary students are also at risk, whether it be for behavior, just making good choices at school, it could be academics. They may just need a mentor, which is where the mentoring program comes from. And so we are pairing our senior athletes with individual students at the elementary level, and so they go several times a week to the actual elementary campus to be their buddy, or their mentor, for whatever given reason.

Betsy Kindall:

I love that project, and I think any school across Arkansas can really pick up a mentoring, an idea like that and implement it. I know my daughter at her high school, she's in college now in her twenties, but she was a mentor in high school and it really impacted her in such a positive way. And I know it's also meant to impact those littles too, but it impacted her in such a positive way that it really opened my eyes to what a great thing it is to pair up folks like that, to pair up kids like that.

And then to piggyback on what you said, we also have some districts that are doing mentoring with elderly, and that's also a really nice piece that any school across the state can look at what your needs are and think about those mentoring programs. So thank you so much, that's a great, great project.

Kelli Martin:

It was great. And as it started last spring, actually, teenagers will tell you the truth a lot of times. So we had a growth mindset with the program on how to improve it moving through the spring semester, but for sure starting this year. And they really left us with ideas on materials they would like to have to take to the elementary schools to use just on scheduling, having a more clear expectations of what they should do when they get there. And so it's very much a collaboration between our high school leaders, including one of our main counselors there at the high school who coordinates with the four elementary assistant principals to make sure the kids know who they're seeing, a little bit of why they're seeing them and what they're going to do when they get there. So the grant funds assisted in purchasing some of those materials.

At the high school students also this year, they use Marcus Buckingham's Strengths assessment, the Standout 2.0. So we've done that with probably the majority of our staff across the district through the years. And so they started the semester with Mr. Barrentine leading that with them. So they could, again, discover something about themselves beyond their athletic ability. What other strengths do you have? And therefore the people around you expect what out of you based on your strengths?

So just the identity piece, again, and trying to build their opportunities for success once they leave the high school. We're also going to very quickly, actually part of the team for the Resiliency Schools, we'll do be doing some site visits. One comes up, I think two weeks from now, to some Castle Collaborative School districts. Awesome. We've done a lot of work around Castle, Dr. Benish can get into that as well, but very aware of their different programs and initiatives. And so we have just been researching which districts around the country have went through the collaborative process with Castle, and we're taking a

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team this month, and possibly next month, to some of those school districts just to see the work going on there and try to find ideas to bring back as well.

Betsy Kindall:

I think that's fantastic, and I just want to commend you on the fact that sometimes it's so hard to be off campus, and away from your district, and out of those classrooms, but I think that there has to be a priority placed on doing that, because we have to grow and we grow through learning and having those experiences. And I think, unfortunately, many times educators sometimes get in a rut and they think, why fix something that they think may not even be broken? But I think the reason is because times are changing, our kids are changing, and we have to change what we do to meet the needs of the changing needs of our students. And I think you guys are doing an excellent job of that. So good work.

Kelli Martin:

It's a different viewpoint for sure. I say it almost every week, had we not found a Dr. Benish to help this work, and it's not all about one person by any means, but I'll just say there is definitely value in putting your resources in finding such a person to fill this position.

I feel like we would be making very good educated guesses, but to have someone with her background and experience has been so beneficial and brought another perspective to us as well, even though we feel like we do have some knowledge about the topic. So I'll let her jump in on some of your other topics, but as soon as she did come to the district, she found out about our student-intervention teams that I mentioned to you. So I think one of the biggest growth pieces for us as a district over the last two to three years is using what we already feel like was a strong-tiered intervention system for academics. But, now what do we do with that for behavior?

Betsy Kindall:

Absolutely.

Kelli Martin:

And so she attends our student-intervention team meetings that are every Tuesday. So we rotate out several of our specialists, and she has really done a lot of great things with that. And that's really where Thrive comes in too, I believe, are we really truly implementing the positive behavior interventions to the greatest extent possible?

Betsy Kindall:

And I want to just, again, commend you on that. And for any districts or educators out there listening and thinking, "Oh my gosh, how do we find that Dr. Benish?"

Well, those champions are out there, and I can tell you some of the best programs we have across the state, the common denominator is a champion. And sometimes you have to hire that champion, but sometimes the champion is within. It might be the school counselor, it might be the principal, and sometimes it's the superintendent, or it might be that one teacher, that person that believes in the wellbeing of that whole child, and understands what it takes to meet the needs of that whole child, not just academically, but emotionally and socially as well.

So, Dr. Benish!

Tricia Benish:

Yes! And I love what you're saying. Thank you so much. You make me feel so good and wanted in the district. I think it's about having teams that you feel comfortable working on and that you know have the support too. I couldn't make this happen without the support of all the different teams that I work with in the district, and that certainly not without the support of our administrative team. That is so important not just to have the bottom up but also the top down. And when you meet in the middle, and you all have the same agenda, and the same goal in mind, and you know that your students come first and these programs that we're putting in place are for them, then I think you're going to have a lot of progress.

And looking at the whole child in terms not just of academics, but also what's their mental health like, and are the barriers in place for them, each specific child, in terms of attendance, or their home life, or their traumatic experiences that they have faced? And so I think that's one of the things that we do a good job of here is really digging deep, and not just glossing over some of those issues that our students are facing.

When I came on board here, one of the first initiatives that we jumped into was our school-based mental health program and the Youth Mental Health First Aid program. We have a goal in the district of training all of our staff here, who encounter students on a daily basis, so not just teacher, we're including paras, and maintenance workers, and bus drivers, and custodians, and we're training everyone in Youth Mental Health First Aid, which is a program in learning to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental health difficulties in our students.

And at the end of last year, we were about at 90% of all of our staff trained here. We have five trainers now. Our newest one is our school-based mental health professional that we hired, and we are doing monthly trainings in order to reach our goal. So it really can take a big commitment from the district, because there's a lot more involved than just offering a training, the logistics, and the covering the classes, and the financial fees, but I think that's something that's really important to our district, and important to spread that awareness, and also to decrease the stigma so that we are able to have these conversations that are so important about our students.

Kelli Martin:

And from the district perspective, that's a given at this point. We're going to use professional-development funds to ensure substitutes where needed to make sure everybody is Youth Mental Health First Aid trained. It's a priority. Our school board set when we had that first opportunity to figure out how great that was. So it's a non-negotiable, which I don't mean that in a negative way. It's a non-negotiable and everybody knows that's just what we're going to do. Everybody needs that. And regardless of what position that you're in.

To piggyback off of that, we also have a Safe Talk trainer. Our high school principal, Travis Barrentine, sought out Safe Talk training, which is also appropriate for teenagers. And so he is a trainer for that and has trained, I believe, a little over 100 students at Greenbrier High School, and several staff members as well.

Of course staff members are also getting Youth Mental Health First Aid, but that has been quite impactful to hear him and Dr. Benish speak about the students are the ones who are going to hear issues going on with others, whether they're their friends are not, probably even sooner than the adults are. So it's all about connecting the individual to the right resources. It's not that you have to have the answers, you

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don't have to have the right resources available, just get them connected to somebody that can help. And we've had just excellent feedback on providing that as well.

Tricia Benish:

We really think that building the capacity of our own staff to do this work is so important. We also have trained teams in each building to do crisis assessments, so the threat to self, threat to others, never falls on just a counselor or just one person, it's always a team approach.

And we did trainings just about a month ago to update our teams in that approach, so everyone knows what their responsibility and their role is on that team. And then we created a collaboration so that it never ends at that point, but we're identifying additional services that can support that student. We're making mental health referrals, we're putting positive behavioral interventions in place, and we're pulling in every related service to support that student whenever we have these crisis situations.

Betsy Kindall:

I am wondering, practically speaking, how did you guys create protected time to do that?

Kelli Martin:

Generally speaking, each school that's going to be our administrator, but one administrator would be the lead on that. All the counselors and/or one counselor, depending on how many we have, would obviously be on that team and one of our school resource officers, when appropriate, that's not always appropriate, or if there's another faculty member that's appropriate.

Dr. Benish also is always going to have input on that as well. So, as far as protecting time, you don't know when the time will have to be protected. Who knows when that's going to happen? They just know it's going to be priority, that it takes place. As far as the training goes, it just goes back to it's a district priority. And so in-house training, when we call those teams together, it's just going to happen just to review.

Betsy Kindall:

I love that it's not an option, it's just going to happen.

Kelli Martin:

It's just going to happen. Everybody wants it to happen.

Betsy Kindall:

Absolutely. But I think it takes... That says a lot about the level of commitment that your school district, district wide, all the way up to your school board.

So for those of you out there listening, if you're wondering how to get it done, that's how you get it done.

Kelli Martin:

And our people want to, especially when you're in the schools and you just see the student needs day-by-day, they want to help. We have great people, all schools have great people. We think we have the best in the schools and everywhere, and they want the answers on how to help kids. So that's the

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lens as to how this is looked at, I feel like, for those that are involved, because my hope is that people know we're going to provide the support where necessary, whatever resources that might be.

So whether it's time for the training, whether it's using our PD money for the subs like we to, or PD money to go do the other visits, or to [inaudible 00:22:19]. That's going to happen. I want to go back to what you said earlier. Even if you can't find a Dr. Benish, but you have someone who has that mission in their heart, then you pour your resources into that person.

Betsy Kindall:

That's right. That is absolutely right.

Kelli Martin:

They can learn the answers as they go, you just got to have someone who wants to take that on and a team that wants to take that on.

It's also huge. Dr. Benish and Ms. Huffmaster have trained FBA teams at every school. So that's not falling on just one or two people either. It's very much a team approach to really get the evidence-based behavior interventions in place.

Betsy Kindall:

I love that.

And everything you're saying really is a very progressive approach, because the Safe Schools Commission recommendation, the recommendation is that you train every person that comes in contact with students. What you're saying about the FBA teams with Thrive, we're training folks to be able to do some of that behavior work. So I feel like you're a step or two ahead of some of these other districts. So, again, thank you so much for sharing all of that information.

And for those of you out there listening, I think the key is it can be done and, yes, it does take a champion many times, but look within to see who that champion might be, or if there's a possibility to hire somebody to take on that role. Also, just some of the programs that you talked about. What I also found super interesting, and for those of you out there listening, is you guys use and seek out your resources. You mentioned a number of different grants that you access to do those. I know you guys also get an AWARE mini grant every year.

Kelli Martin:

We write a lot of grants!

Betsy Kindall:

You do. Absolutely. You do. So I hear that a lot, especially small, rural schools, when they say "We don't have the money." It doesn't take much, the AWARE mini grant is two pages long. So there are funds out there and available to do some of these projects, but you have to be resourceful and seek them out, find those champions, and to dig in to do that work.

And you guys have given us, today, an amazing example of what that can look like. So thank you so much for joining us. We sure appreciate it.

Nicole Fairchild:



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Thank you guys for your time. We appreciate you.

Betsy Kindall:

Thank you.

Tricia Benish:

Thank you for having us.

Betsy Kindall:

Thank you!