SCHOOL STAFF MENTAL HEALTH LISTENING SESSIONS

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Introduction

The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) asked Miami University's Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs to conduct several listening sessions with local district administrators, student assistance program (SAP) coordinators, and external partners to learn what ODE might do to help districts improve staff mental health and safety across the state. Miami University asked Jeffrey L. Stec, J.D., of Citizens for Civic Renewal to facilitate the listening sessions and write this follow-up report.

CCR scheduled six, 90-minute listening sessions (one of which no one attended) with 30 registrants and 13 actual attendees. Included in the Zoom meeting invitation was a survey link that posed the two basic questions for the listening sessions:

1. What supports your mental health and well-being? If there is a need for more of that, how might we (ODE) help provide it?
2. What creates safety at school for students and staff? If there is a need for more of that, how might we (ODE) help provide that?

Twenty people responded to the survey, and these responses were placed on virtual sticky notes (organized by theme) in the Miro online boards that were used to gather all feedback. The survey responses on Miro were used to begin the Zoom dialog, but live participants were regularly asked for "what we missed" or "other ideas you have". Of course, many follow-up questions were used to deepen participant ideas:

1. Why would this help you?
2. Who might provide it?
3. What might this look like on the ground?
4. What are the components of this idea?
5. What would it take to make this happen?

Conversations were robust despite (or because of) the low numbers of participants. All comments were captured on virtual sticky notes in the Miro online project management tool so that participants could see their comments be "placed on the board" as they were spoken. As participants spoke, Mr. Stec added sticky notes and organized them into themes (roughly clustered and color-coordinated. These virtual "boards" can be viewed at

https://miro.com/app/board/uXjVOeUfgl8=/?invite_link_id=275256350447,

though they cannot be adjusted without permission. While some preparation would be required (e.g., putting a thematic title on each cluster of sticky notes, which Mr. Stec did not need to create this report), CCR could, as a future option, provide anyone with a link the ability to comment on any title or sticky note to continue to generate ideas within the existing Miro board. We could also create a new virtual board in whatever configuration ODE preferred.

The outline below represents every comment made during these six sessions, organized into themes. The italicized text in the text boxes is Mr. Stec's attempt to better explain the comments and capture the feeling of the conversation.

CRITICAL NOTE REGARDING PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK: From the first review of participant survey responses, it was clear that the conditions creating staff mental health were almost the same as those conditions which create a sense of school safety. This proved true throughout the Zoom conversations. Here are three example quotes from the *safety* portion of the survey that captures this overlap:

> "Lead the way to making more time for relationships. Stressed educators + stressed students = unhealthy school climate."

> "Laughter and lighthearted events. Right now, we are so consumed with meeting deadlines that we are missing moments of the 'now'."

> "Sense of belonging, inclusion movements and empathy."

There were a few additional ideas for generating a sense of safety other than the ideas listed in the main body of the report below.

1. Develop and communicate (and keep communicating) clear emergency plans
2. Districts/schools should be completely transparent about emergency challenges, plans, and specific incidents
3. Cameras should be everywhere
4. We need more staff members who are adept at safety assessments and interventions
   a. Author's note: safety assessments were seen as distinct from the many comments that focused on student behavioral (mental health) assessments and interventions
5. Use restorative discipline practices
   a. Author's note: a key component of restorative discipline is to heal relationships – part of the overlap outlined below; further, "proactive" circles were mentioned, which use the same methods as restorative discipline to build relationships before a discipline issue arises

Other than 1-5 above, the responses for creating school safety were the same as for creating staff mental health. The title below reflects this overlap.

Following one of the core recommendations from the participants, Mr. Stec suggests that, as a next step, ODE create a state-wide community of practice whose members would utilize design-thinking and collaborative meeting protocols to "experiment" with whatever ideas they find most interesting to create mental health and safety. By continuing to gather and learn together, these experiments would be true action research that would deepen ODE's understanding of these issues on the ground.

Finally, there is a conclusion section at the end of this report worth reviewing.

Thank you for the opportunity to help your stakeholders discuss these critical issues.

Sincerely,

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Conditions Creating Strong Staff[1] Mental Health & Sense of Safety

1. Strong student mental health

POTENTIAL ODE INTERVENTIONS:

    a. Shift the overall educational paradigm to include "strong student mental health leads to better academic results, holistic student life success, and school safety".

        i. Build a state level movement

        ii. Help districts with messaging and data support for a local movement

        iii. Share the research that connects SEL to academic success

        iv. Help districts choose and implement an overall SEL strategy aligned with PBIS so all schools have the same language and basic formulas for SEL success (but still allowing school/teacher choice at ground-level)

    b. Measure the impact of teachers on student mental health

        i. Everyone is talking about mental health during the pandemic, but we went right back to solely academic measurements

        ii. Include SEL impact in teacher evaluations

        iii. Put more dollars into successful mental health interventions

        iv. **NOTE:** by measuring teacher success in student SEL growth, teachers can spend more classroom time on student mental health, thereby improving classroom culture and teacher mental health

> *Participants have a high level of frustration that despite years of growing student mental health issues and the traumatic impact of the pandemic, ODE, parents, and community leaders focus almost exclusively on academic testing to measure student success and teacher performance. (They are especially upset that ODE did little to help districts address the collective trauma of the pandemic upon returning to school in Fall 2021.) With such a narrow focus, teachers have no incentive to deviate from traditional academic lesson plans, state/district leaders have no incentive to put adequate resources into social/emotional learning, and parents/community don't know that they should be demanding such a shift from educational leaders.*
>
> *The solution is to "blow up the old model", a quote that captures participants' overall feeling about this issue. Practically, they ask that ODE not just shift its basic model and measures, but that it lead a statewide movement about prioritizing SEL to meet today's student and staff needs. This will also require that ODE support local districts in increasing their SEL work/budget by providing research and messaging guidance to build local support.*

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[1] For purposes of this report, "staff" includes all building professionals – teachers, counselors, administrators, etc. – unless otherwise noted.

c. **Provide more teacher training on SEL classroom interventions**
   i. Classroom examples of how SEL skills are integrated into academic lessons (e.g., journaling about emotions rather than Shakespeare; integration of more Tier 1 SEL skills into classroom)
   ii. Safe ways for students to share feelings and ask for help
   iii. Teaching student self-regulation
   iv. Teaching student social skills
   v. Supporting student peer-to-peer mental health support
   vi. Increasing teacher training in trauma informed care, especially regarding racism and inequity
   vii. Providing more consistency for students provided by staff
   viii. Balancing boundaries vs. intimacy between staff and students/families (and figure out how tech changes impacted staff-family boundaries, for good or bad)
   ix. Training on how to build strong teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships so that they are safe to approach about SEL issues
   x. Integrate proactive and restorative circles to build student connections
   xi. Integrate PAX "good behavior" games from early ages to help regulate emotions, time management – it frees up lots of time for teachers.

d. **Increase training and resources to effectively address extreme student behavior**
   i. A few students with extreme behavior are very disruptive to the whole school
   ii. Have a behavior specialist to support teachers
   iii. Less time on safety drills, more time on prevention of extreme behavior
   iv. Provide teachers and administrators with guidance in how to address extreme behavior – more funding, more options, more external partners, more training

e. **Increase effectiveness of social workers**
   i. Reduce case load
   ii. Encourage schools to hire a director of mental health
   iii. Be clear about what social workers can/cannot do – and focus their roles
   iv. Address the state-wide shortage of social workers and therapists

f. **More mental health services for students through external partners**, especially in urban districts (see 6.c. below – Overarching solutions)

> *Teachers are overwhelmed with their students' social/emotional needs (especially the increase in extreme/explosive student behaviors, where just one student can sabotage the day of many professionals). Robust SEL and trauma informed care teacher training would help, but especially important is helping teachers build strong relationships with students and parents – which is time consuming. Hence, most participants doubted that they would have enough time for an easy integrations of SEL work into academic lesson plans (at least without the major paradigm/measurement shift discussed above). The other core recommendation is that teachers need extensive outside support from more effective social workers and extensive external experts to help manage their classroom SEL burdens (see 6.c. below for needed improvements in working with external partners).*

2. Strong school community

Participants all stressed that "relationships are the resource" – that high trust and vulnerability across the entire spectrum of school relationships are the foundation for staff (and student) mental health and well-being (see the work of Dr. Brene Brown). Participants said that with a close, connected community within and around them, staff mental health soars. This (including staff peer relationships – see below) was by far the most discussed and important condition for generating strong staff mental health and safety.

POTENTIAL ODE INTERVENTIONS:

a. **Create a sense of belonging across all stakeholders**
   i. Show how schools can create positive relationships amongst everyone – staff, students, family, community
   ii. Show how all stakeholders can feel like they are part of something bigger than any individual
      1. Idea: all stakeholders create a mission statement together
      2. Show schools/districts how to "brand" belonging and community to make it a school/district-wide/community movement
         a. Within current marketing/communication methods and budget
         b. With external partners
   iii. Show how schools can affirm everyone despite differences – that they "fit in"
   iv. Show how schools can build community by "taking a collective breath to process the trauma of the pandemic *together*"
      1. Draw attention to the lack of collective processing of the trauma by calling for a "day of reflection" state-wide, and provide a template
      2. Like we did in first year of the pandemic, show that we are all "foxhole friends", that it's difficult but we are in it together
      3. Generally, set aside time to share feelings, connect and build relationships around the trauma, which is what heals
      4. Discuss how disparate effects (inequalities) of the pandemic – will generate compassionate action and relationship building
      5. Create templates for how staff can process this in their normal workday
      6. Add trauma informed care training for staff, which benefits students *and* staff

Most expressed that this was a huge, missed opportunity – using the return to school in Fall 2021 to collectively process the trauma of the pandemic, rebuild relationships, and set a mutually supportive tone. Instead, students and staff abruptly re-entered "normal life" carrying their trauma with them, and this toxicity has embedded itself in daily school life (participants reported an increase in students "acting out" this year, making everyone feel less safe). The pandemic affected everyone, but a public school community can process something collectively. Looking at schools as a place to build community and process trauma is yet another way our educational paradigm needs to shift – it's not just about individual student test scores. Imagine how many ways collective trauma (or success) could be leveraged to bring people closer together.

3. Strong staff relationships/team

Peer-to-peer support has proven to be essential for addressing human trauma and improving mental health and safety: at Alcoholics Anonymous, in sober-living houses, in treating post-war PTSD, at teen centers, etc. Moreover, police have known for years that a sense of safety starts with belonging to a strong community. Individual teaching staff similarly benefit from strong peer relationships, especially in the high-trauma world of modern education during a pandemic. Yet participants spoke about how isolating teaching usually is, especially in the top-down management style prevalent in most schools and districts. Participants stressed the need for dramatic interventions on this front even more than they did for building community across all stakeholders – how teachers, staff, and admins can all support one another through their always-stressful days (during this 'storm').

POTENTIAL ODE INTERVENTIONS:

    a. **Show how to build strong staff relationships by creating…**
        i. Affection amongst staff; feeling of family vs. staff antagonism
        ii. Empathetic connection to ease staff suffering
        iii. Methods for staff to talk to about work and non-work

    b. **Show how to run a social committee and build staff connections**
        i. Host staff events
        ii. Teamwork training
        iii. Staff connectedness activities (especially vulnerability) at every meeting

Items in a. and b. above were mentioned several times, and the intended results seen as important, but little tangible ideas came from this discussion except in terms of developing social/fun events and activities for staff. However, there was some antipathy toward the value of staff socializing when time is already limited. Still, hope was held out for "small" things that could bring staff together if co-created by a staff team. Much more emphasis was placed on creating staff bonds through work collaborations (see d. below).

    c. **Show how to better appreciate and acknowledge staff**
        i. What this looks like
            1. From leaders, co-workers, students, families, community
            2. Can be formal or organic/informal
            3. Without a livable wage, other types of appreciation don't matter (i.e., token gifts don't matter if staff can't buy their family Christmas presents)
            4. What leaders DO to show appreciation is more important than gifts
            5. Great relationships and connections show appreciation more than gifts
            6. Collaboration shows appreciation for staff skills

       7. Offering good food, surprise gifts

       8. Being equitable with all staff members

  ii. Specific ideas

       1. Help elementary parents make staff feel welcomed – ideas include

          a. Food trucks, sidewalk massages via business partnerships

          b. Building relationships between parents and staff

       2. Change the cap on staff gifts so they get better gifts

Participants discussed the importance of staff being appreciated, especially by parents. Several cited how the community and parents "rallied" around teachers during the Spring and Fall of 2020, and that this support has fallen by the wayside during the 2021-22 school year – and it has dramatically affected staff morale. In other words, while more traditional appreciation would be nice (gifts, awards, etc.), true appreciation comes from the strong relationships provided by a supportive community. This could come in the form of more parents showing up for teacher conferences, more robust PTA participation, fundraising, and engagement of staff ("What can we parents do to support you teachers?"). Increased parent and community volunteerism in response to teacher/staff requests would demonstrate support – and create a true community – better than simple appreciation gifts.

d. Encourage more staff collaboration and cooperation

Participants saw this as the best way to generate peer-to-peer support among staff. With deep collaboration, teachers feel connected to and supported by each other, their administrators, and all ancillary staff. Collaborating across staff lines to co-create plans (metaphorically "weathering the storm" together) is the best way to generate empathy, mutual support, and a sense of belonging. But because ODE is top-down, districts often become the same way, with superintendents using meetings to give principals assignments, and principals using meetings to tell teachers and staff the next program du jour – with nary a collaborative dialog in sight. Participants asked that meeting time become not only collaborative, but reflective, a time to learn and grow together as they solve problems together. They also asked that building plans be co-created through a collaborative process lead by their principal.

  i. Includes

       1. Sharing ideas (this alone ends isolation)

       2. Sharing a sense of accomplishment

       3. Ability to express concerns

       4. Being heard and validated by administration

       5. To see how I make a difference

       6. To co-create solutions from the bottom-up

7. To regularly participate in collaborative dialog
8. Leadership and students that trust and respect staff
9. Staff that respects each other
   ii. Why collaboration helps build staff mental health
      1. Truly shows we are "in it together"
      2. Participation shows more appreciation than gifts
      3. Great relationships provide staff satisfaction
      4. Collaboration shows respect for staff
      5. Collaboration allows people to make a difference
      6. Leads to sense of autonomy, purpose, and mastery, which provides the deepest job satisfaction (per Daniel Pink books)

   iii. **Paradigm problem: decisions are made top-down** within the Ohio school improvement process, which limits contributions from and collaboration with ground-level staff, which reduces job satisfaction and blocks relationship building.

   Therefore, potential ODE solutions …

   1. **Help districts shift to design thinking model**, which will change the culture and create staff satisfaction because it will increase collaboration with staff, value their contributions, and let them guide the change on the ground

   2. **Help districts run more collaborative meetings**
      a. Use a shared agenda anyone can add to
      b. Let faculty lead and direct conversation
      c. Include reflection/connection time at every meeting
      d. Bring snacks
      e. Make it conversational vs. top down
      f. Use collaborative leadership style rather than authoritarian
      g. Use staff meetings less for "normal work stuff" and more for reflection, peer-to-peer professional development, co-learning, relationship building
      h. Build professional development into calendar and examine how we use it

   3. **Create MORE state-wide communities of practice**
      a. Why?
         i. Celebrates what people are already doing
         ii. Deepens the collective conversation
         iii. Capitalize on collective knowledge so that everyone builds the model (the power is already with us somewhere)

           iv. Helps staff become part of a larger movement and connect with like minded people, which benefits their mental health while they figure out how to improve their mental health

           v. Learning expands – we can more safely call on other districts (growth becomes non-threatening)

    b. Subjects to cover

        i. Creating staff mental health

        ii. Design thinking in schools

        iii. Running collaborative meetings and collaborative leadership

        iv. Building staff relationships

        v. Topics generated by conversations with staff

4. **Create a best-practices portal**

    a. How to get people to access the portal?

        i. Use surveys to ask what will get them to use the portal.

        ii. Show how this will directly help reduce daily staff problems

        iii. Social media

        iv. Email announcements (e.g., idea of the week; recognition; most "liked" idea of the year; monetary incentives)

        v. Recognition of participation in Student Assistance Program (SAP) and other programs/awards

        vi. Offer a main solution to a problem (a template to follow), but with options to tailor for their situation

            1. Too many choices hinders action

            2. Maybe use a decision matrix

The main barrier to staff collaboration identified by participants is the top-down management style used by ODE, districts, and schools: programming decisions are made at the top and implemented in a cascade of command-and-control management. The antidote to this model is design thinking, where "the top" asks key strategic questions that get discussed by ground-level staff, who then do "action research" to test their ideas. The results of these real-time "experiments" are shared and used to adjust everyone's ideas before another round of action research. Over time, full program designs emerge – but based on real-time, ground-level experience rather dictates from people far removed from implementation. This method leads not only to more staff collaboration, but also better programs "owned" by staff (people support what they co-create). ODE could embrace this model for its own decision-making as well as train districts/schools in design thinking for their own planning purposes. (A key corollary is to train leaders in running collaborative meetings.) Moreover, by continuing to expand its community of practice work and establishing an online resources portal, ODE would support the cultural shift to design thinking and the bottom-up culture it embodies.

4. Strong direct supports to staff mental health practice
   a. Exercise
   b. Balance, peace
   c. Pet therapy
   d. A "family-first" movement to encourage staff to take time with family

5. Positive physical vibe in school building
   a. Soft music and scents in schools
   b. Being near each other

> *These ideas were barely mentioned, except that they should be small parts of an overall strategic plan for staff mental health (see 6.a. below).*

6. Overarching solutions

POTENTIAL ODE INTERVENTIONS

   a. **Show how to create a comprehensive strategic plan for staff mental health and safety**
      i. Create a wellness team
      ii. Create a framework
      iii. Identify the challenges
      iv. Identify what staff wants
      v. Integrate internal and external processes
      vi. Integrate external partners
      vii. Integrate other state agencies

> *This might be the single most important suggestion from these listening sessions: for ODE to provide districts with a strategic planning process for how to systematically address staff mental health and safety. No longer can this be an afterthought addressed by ad hoc supports like free massages, gym memberships, and staff appreciation events; the issue goes far deeper and needs comprehensive and systemic interventions and supports just like we have for student mental health and safety.*

   b. **Create a state-wide community of practice around strategic staff wellness work and school safety work**
      i. How to create a strategic plan for staff wellness and school safety
      ii. How to connect staff to more external mental health supports around this issue
      iii. Identify the stressors and appropriate responses
      iv. How to utilize external resources

> *Participants would like to see an ODE hosted community of practice around staff wellness, especially in the context of building a strategic plan for staff wellness. The ability for statewide sharing of practices would help move things forward more quickly. Especially important is collective learning on how to efficiently utilize external resources.*

c. ODE to help districts better utilize external partners for every issue discussed above

> *Lack of time was cited as a barrier to almost all potential staff mental health and safety efforts. Consequently, participants kept returning to the idea of getting external support – for which it is also hard to find time! Hence the idea arose that ODE might train both schools and external partners in how they should engage each other to find the best fit and implement most efficiently.*

    i. Types of supports
1. Direct mental health supports for individual staff members
   a. Therapeutic services
   b. Yoga, exercise
   c. Mindfulness training
   d. Wellness challenges
2. Staff support with classroom student mental health
3. Direct-to-individual-student mental health supports
   a. High school student mentors for younger students
   b. After school clubs
4. Any service that saves staff time and/or gives them a break and thereby improves mental health
   a. Keep teachers focused on teaching and student relationships
   b. Offer some choice to teachers on what they add to their laser-like focus

    ii. Help get these services utilized
1. [One agency director said that she couldn't get schools to use her FREE services.]
2. Create state-wide services to make local adoption easier
   a. State vetting of potential partners
   b. Prove real-life, classroom benefit
3. Show schools that it's important to relieve teachers of non-teaching work by bringing in external partners
4. Show teachers that these services will save them time
5. Help teachers/schools and agencies systematically and efficiently engage each other
   a. First understand the barriers to using external partners; then develop solutions to those barriers
   b. Train external partners in how to approach schools, ask what the school needs, LISTEN, and adjust accordingly
      i. Train them in the language educators use
      ii. Create a state-wide community of practice for external providers – how their service fits into a school's strategic plan, how to work with a system
   c. Train schools in how to interview agencies so they can get the right service

        d.   Offer a primer in how to address the politics of using extensive external supports in schools

        e.   How to engage administrators and teachers in an efficient process for matching services to needs

        f.   Offer teachers choice and a role in the process – help them know how to evaluate their student needs and link them to the right service

        g.   Set aside time way ahead of the need arising

6.   How to roll-out a new partnership with high fidelity

        a.   Lots of professional development

        b.   Slow steps

        c.   Choice and tailoring by teacher

iii.   State-wide efforts regarding external partnerships

1.   Statewide partnerships

2.   Local/free service

3.   How to create local partnerships

iv.   ODE sponsored communities of practice for utilizing external partners

CONCLUSION

Participants had a high level of passion and interest in these subjects and were very grateful that ODE asked about how to address them. They strongly believe that staff mental health and school safety should be a strategic priority for ODE, as each are linked to student mental health and student academic success. **Consequently, staff request ODE's help in creating their own (bottom-up, design-thinking-based) strategic plans to address staff mental health and school safety – which should no longer be a side-note to academic planning due to the dense nexus between mental health, safety, and academic success.**

Importantly, ODE was encouraged to continue the process of working with ground-level district staff to design supports and interventions for staff mental health and safety. Fittingly, ODE could continue this work by embodying many of the ideas that they believe will improve mental health and safety (design thinking, communities of practice, etc.).

Taking a step back from the details above, a few overarching themes emerge:

1. Student and staff mental health and safety are deeply connected.
2. Relationships and a sense of belonging are *the* key resource for addressing these challenges. (The author wants to note that this concept has been thoroughly discussed in the books of Peter Block and John McKnight, among others.) Relationships are at the center of the following participant suggestions:
   a. Increased staff collaboration and design thinking.
   b. Great student-staff.

  c. Relationships with parents/community lead to staff feeling appreciated, a key component to their mental health under extreme success.

  d. Restorative discipline.

  e. Deeper relationships between external partners and district/building staff,which will allow for more efficient, effective, and wide-spread use of external partners in alleviating staff burdens and freeing up time for mental rejuvenation and relationship building.

  f. Communities of practice are successful largely because of the relationships that get built, plus those same relationships support a sense of belonging and mental health.

3. Bottom-up planning and ground-level leadership/collaboration is key to staff mental health and will also improve work on mental health, academics, etc.

4. Time – staff needs it to both recharge and work on relationship building and team collaboration.

5. External supports are critical because staff doubts that they can find time for new things without them.

6. The academic testing paradigm and the top-down nature of ODE is a barrier to progress with many of the key ideas discussed herein.

There is a lot for ODE to build on here, from high-level paradigm-shifts to small supports in daily practice. The key is how ODE goes about this work; by embodying these suggestions in developing appropriate supports, ODE will generate better ideas that are widely utilized.