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Episode 36: Supporting Mental Health in the Classroom

Becky Lewis: Welcome, listeners! Returning as my co-host this month is Sara Hutchinson. Sara, thank you for coming onto the show and helping us with this month's episodes.

Sara Hutchinson: Yeah, thank you, Becky. I'm really glad to be returning to the podcast today to discuss a topic that's really important to me and my work at the Department. As part of the West Virginia Tiered System of Support initiative, I'm really happy to discuss the importance of planning tiered mental health supports.

Becky Lewis: While mental health in general has become a hot topic across the country over the past several years, and I know from my own personal and professional experience in education, I've rapidly seen an increase from educators from elementary school all the way to high school that are trying to find ways to plan and implement mental health supports for all of the students in their classroom.

Our work here on the campaign for grade level reading is greatly impacted by our students' mental health, and we know this because recent research on mental health has showed what a huge impact mental health and having a healthy mental state has on our students' ability to develop strong literacy skills. I kind of touched upon this in episode 11 when I talked with Brittany Fike and an expert in education and mental health, Anna Rowe, and I know we're going to talk more about this as we progress through the episode.

So, to get us started with our topic today, I think it's important to go to those big pieces of work that you're doing at the Department, Sara, and that work on the West Virginia Tiered System of Support. So, to get us started, can you help familiarize us with what the West Virginia Tiered System of Support is?

Sara Hutchinson: Yeah, of course. So first of all, just for lingo, I'm going to refer to the West Virginia Tiered System of Support just simply as WVTSS. WVTSS is really a flexible framework that districts, and schools can use to make sure that all students get the support they need, not only in academics but also with behavior and mental health.

And these three domains have to be intertwined; they have to be woven together to be effective. And a great thing about this framework is that it's not just for elementary, it's not just middle or high school--it's for all students from preschool through twelfth grade.

Becky Lewis: Alright, thanks for that, and I know a little bit of background information that we'll get into the details as we progress through the episode. But from my former Title 1 experience, I'm very familiar with the phrase multi-tiered system of support, which is MTSS. So, can you clarify for me: is the WVTSS similar to MTSS?

Sara Hutchinson: Yes, I'm really glad you brought that up, and teaching is so full of acronyms--it's important to know what we're talking about. So, in short, WVTSS is West Virginia's name for our unique MTSS framework. So, to clarify, the other acronym you used: MTSS is the multi-tiered system of support, which is just implied that it's within the WVTSS system, and many states have adopted and developed their own multi-tiered system of support framework, and they may have given them different names themselves, and some states have chosen to put mental health and behavior together in one domain. But the West Virginia Department of Education made the distinction to emphasize the integration of all three: academics, behavior, and mental health separately, but then also uniformly together as critical to student success.

So MTSS and WVTSS both have the goal of helping schools identify those students that are struggling and to do so early and to intervene quickly. So, in a word, yes, they are very similar.

Becky Lewis: So, the WVTSS has been around for a little while, and I'm sure that most of our listeners are familiar with the green, the yellow and the red triangle that's used as part of intervention framework. However, those who are new to the topic, I just want to quickly describe that triangle so that they have a visual of what we're talking about and how that fits into the WVTSS.

So, green represents the universal tier of support, or tier one, and those universal supports-- they're kind of the foundation, and they're achieved through high-quality instruction and evidence-based instruction. And I think it's important to note here that the West Virginia Campaign for Grade-Level Reading prioritizes high-quality instruction as one of our four core component areas, meaning that

most of our professional development focuses on this concept of supporting teachers with implementing high-quality or research-based instruction into their classrooms at this tier one level.

The yellow of the triangle represents targeted tier support or what we call tier two, and red represents intensive tier or tier three. So, tier two and tier threes are available to students that need more support than is available in tier one. So that specific intensive instruction often happens in small groups in tier two, and then when students move to a tier three, it's more of an individual basis.

Sara Hutchinson: Yeah, thank you for explaining that. I do want to also add that traditionally, and what most of our listeners may have in mind, is a triangle that has three layers: that green, yellow and red. But they're split explicitly into thirds with green at the bottom, then yellow, and then red on the top.

And WVTSS has shifted our representational graphic a little bit to an overlapping triangle that has an oversized, large green triangle, and then you see the yellow and red triangles overlapping. And I know that's kind of complex to just think about it. But what the reason for this is, is that we really want to emphasize that all students always are receiving tier one universal supports regardless of if they're in tier two or tier three. And the earlier image with the broken into thirds, it appears that tier one stops as kids move up into tiers and get additional supports. We just wanted to make sure that that was very clear in how we represent the work.

Becky Lewis: Well, and another kind of misrepresentation is thinking that our students are divided into threes, and we know that's not the case when we're talking about these tiers. It shouldn't be a third of our kids are going to need tier two, and a third are going to need tier three, even though that's what the triangle kind of suggests just visually.

Sara Hutchinson: Right.

Becky Lewis: So, I can definitely see how the earlier representation could unintentionally lead educators to believe that tier one stops when tier two starts. It's important to ensure that all students have access to grade level content and grade level material in tier one. And, in episodes 23 and 24, Christy Schwartz and I talked about this in the context of learning recovery, and in those episodes, we

discussed that student comprehension depends largely on background knowledge and vocabulary and is most quickly improved by making sure that all students are engaged in reading and studying grade level text and content.

Sara Hutchinson: Yeah, and that's a really good example to clarify what that tiered system looks like with the academic domain and what's kind of the new thing to consider is thinking about that same type of tiered system in not only academics, but also in behavior and mental health. And this is another reason why we shifted that graphic as well, because you might have a student that has their needs met in tier one for academics in that green area, but they might need tier two and tier three for mental health or behavior support. So, they might be in multiple tiers for multiple domains at once. Every student is really unique in what they do need, and we need to be flexible with how we meet those needs.

Of course, we want to integrate all the areas as much as we can because it's easy to see how they're deeply connected and dependent upon each other, and we don't want to think about any one of the domains in isolation, but we really need to have a deep understanding of each one in order to bring them together. I really want to emphasize that before we go in-depth about mental health in this episode.

Becky Lewis: I think that's a great point. So, starting to think about mental health, where do we start? Do we want to start with helping our listeners understand what mental health is?

Sara Hutchinson: Yeah, I think that's a great place to start, and mental health I feel just from the work that I've done so far with this initiative, it really kind of carries an unnecessary negative connotation. If it comes up, people immediately may think that it's a bad thing, because I think it's so easily associated with the term mental illness and it's really not. I mean we all have mental health-- everybody does-- and it falls along a range of good to bad and it can change on a daily basis. The CDC refers to it kind of as a continuum, so the way we define it within our work and the West Virginia Tiered System of Support is the emotional, psychological and social well-being that affects how people think, feel and act.

The CDC actually described mentally healthy children, which is great and refreshing to actually again see that positive side as having a positive quality of life and students can function well at home and school and in their community.

So, I like to think about it really like we do physical health and when I refer to physical health, we probably all instinctively know that that's going to fall along a range, and it's impacted by lots of different factors, including our physical activity, our diet, and so forth. And mental health is similar in that it moves along that continuum, and it's impacted by its own unique factors.

Becky Lewis: Right, and like you mentioned, those physical health factors. There are those mental health factors that negatively contribute to our mental health, and here are a few--it's not an exhaustive list by any means, but these are just some of the things that impact our mental health. It can be impacted by genetics, hormones, medical illness, grief, trauma, abuse, neglect, substance abuse and social interactions. And these factors can occur both at school and away from school. The negative factors can contribute to a mental health disorder which the CDC defines as serious changes in the way a child typically learns or behaves or handles their emotions, which causes distress and problems getting through the day. And I can imagine with just that distress happening, and, in those problems, this could also lead to attendance issues.

Sara Hutchinson: Yeah, definitely, and that's really important for us to keep in mind as of as one of those other areas that we really focus on within the Campaign. And I actually ran across a meta-analysis, a big study, from the Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health that came out this past year. And it really explained that anxiety is a key risk factor for absences related to mental health. And obviously, if a child is experiencing anxiety, that's going to lead to headaches and stomach aches or other physical symptoms that can then lead to an absence. And this report did show some evidence that showed a correlation between these two, but it really just flagged it as an area for future research. There's a lot that we don't know still.

Becky Lewis: Right, and we definitely want to intervene early so that those factors don't negatively affect our students to the point that they don't want to come to school, or they don't feel comfortable going to school. A 2013 CDC report referenced in our show notes shared that one in five public school children show signs of mental health disorder, so in a typical classroom of 20, that's at least four that are potentially at risk.

Sara Hutchinson: Yeah, and that's just so many of our students--even if you think about that across an entire school. So, you know with what you just said, like, that's one in five that will show signs. And as an educator, knowing the signs that that may be really important for us to dig into whether it's through training or through conversation ourselves because this is going to be our key into knowing who needs that support.

And Hanover Research actually broke apart the signs of mental illness into three different categories: early elementary, late elementary, and middle and high. Looking here at a few of the early elementary signs, I see some of the behaviors that I used to see in the classroom, and those, you know, are things like excessive fear and worrying, and excessive intrusion on other people's space, frequent temper tantrums, and difficulty separating from their parents. And then as the students get older, those signs actually shift in relation to that child maturity. It really breaks my heart to think of how many students in my own classrooms demonstrated some of these and other signs described, and, at that point, I may not have seen or known that connection and what to do to support them.

Becky Lewis: I think of similar situations in my own classrooms, and then I kind of wonder what do you think a supportive tiered system of mental health would look like in a school?

Sara Hutchinson: That's a really great question, and it's something that I've been trying to really clarify for myself. Again, I'm not an expert in this line, but I am leaning on the experts in the field. I stumbled upon a really great description of what that system looks like and it's through NPR, and, what they described, is that the most effective plans are going to first educate everyone that's around that student about those signs: the parents, the teachers, any other school staff, maybe people from the cafeteria, custodial staff. And also work with those people to really make sure that they're all putting a hand in creating a safe and caring environment. That's critical. Obviously then, if those individuals also know those early warning signs, then they can be ready to ask for help for that student.

And when these signs are noticed, those individuals need to be able to go to the specialist staff, such as counselors or nurses and psychologists who really then offer that tiered support for the student. Those school specialists could then determine if outside help was needed for the child, and, unfortunately, this

doesn't always happen, and many students with mental health disorders don't get the help that they need. In this same article, NPR referred to this as a silent epidemic that resulted from a lack of training and staffing in our schools.

Becky Lewis: And from the same article, it listed all of those staggering statistics that we mentioned earlier, like the one in five students, which is 20% of the students in our classroom that's affected and has a mental health disorder, but what I found really interesting among the statistics was that NPR said that 80% of those students who displayed those mental health disorders are not going to receive any type of treatment, such as therapy or counseling or medication, and that's just a huge number.

And it really makes me appreciate the action steps that we are taking through the West Virginia Tiered System of Support in creating a safe and caring environment, knowing and identifying the early warning signs, and contacting the specialist staff if those warning signs appear.

I also love that these are very clear steps that can help guide schools and give them a direction with their own professional learning efforts. So, would you include anything else in a teacher's responsibility for a tiered one system of support?

Sara Hutchinson: Yeah, I have two things--two big things that come to mind that I would add to those three that you just mentioned with the creating the environment, knowing the warning signs and knowing who to contact. And the first of those that come to mind is the importance of self-care for the educators themselves. And I've heard and seen this really powerful quote that "self-care isn't selfish," and that's something that I don't think, I know myself, and other educators maybe initially believe, and it feels that you're taking time away from what could be put into your students, but you really need that to be more present for your students when you're in the classroom. And if we are more present, we can be there for our students when they demonstrate any of those early warning signs, and we won't miss them, and we can react or not react-- we can actually act calmly instead of reacting to any of those behaviors that they may demonstrate.

And we know that teaching has a high burnout rate and, as a result, we lose a whole lot of talented teachers to other occupations. And, from personal experience, I know when I first started teaching, I did not take care of myself the

way that I should have, and I definitely experience pretty serious burnout. And looking back now, I really wish that I had prioritized my well-being, and there's some things that I think now that would have really helped me to do that like leaving work at school which is easier said than done for the evenings and for the weekends. I'm saying no more often and focusing my time on the things that really mattered for the students. And sometimes I think I wasn't very clear for that. And I know now that there was so much that I took on on my own that the students could have even been more involved with that would have enriched their learning and it would allow me to be more peaceful and more present with my students when I was with them.

I really urge teachers to really take care and take note of the feelings of physical and emotional exhaustion or even anxiety that they may have about going to work and just assess for themselves what they really need to do and what's missing that will help them feel like they have that self-care element, and it's not going to be the same for everybody, so we all have to really look inward to see what we're missing.

Becky Lewis: I think you're absolutely right, and that's so crucial for teachers to understand that it's not selfish because we are in a field where we're trying to take care of everyone else--we're trying to teach our students, and one of the best ways we can teach our students is through modeling. So, if we're modeling self-care if our students are seeing that, then in turn it's just going to be even more powerful for them as we help them with the supports that they need to be able to regulate their own mental health. And, you know, as educators or just adults, if we're in that state of dysregulation it can kind of throw everything off. So, if we are in that state of dysregulation, Sara, how can we support students with developing their own self-regulation skills?

Sara Hutchinson: Right, I feel like it's not even really possible for us to do because they'll be hearing one thing and seeing another. Our students are always learning from us, whether we're actually in a lesson or not. I think it's really critical for us to be reflective of how we're acting and how we are in front of our students. So hopefully our teachers that are listening are able to dig into additional resources, and I hope that we'll be able to go into this a little bit more in depth in our next episode, which leads me to the second thing that I wanted to mention that I

would include within that universal support for mental health and that's social-emotional learning, also known as SEL, for all students and staff as well. According to CASEL, which is an organization that works a lot with SEL, they define it as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, both feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions. Obviously very critical stuff.

SEL and self-care really hinge on modeling the skills that we really want our students to develop, and I'm really excited that we're going to be able to dig deeper into what social-emotional learning is and what it looks like in the classroom in our next episode.

Becky Lewis: Me too. I think that's going to be very beneficial not only to ourselves, but to the educators that listen to our podcast. In the next episode, we are going to sit down like you said, with a fellow West Virginia educator to talk about how their school implements social and emotional learning to support all students, but before we close out this episode, Sara, I want to ask you, what is one tip or piece of advice that you could provide our listeners about supporting mental health in the classroom?

Sara Hutchinson: It's a great question and in response to that I think I would say that I would really encourage our listeners to really talk with their colleagues and their school leadership and those mental health specialists at their school to really plan what the supports are going to look like at each tier. It's really critical that everyone be on the same page, and that everyone is clear what everyone's role in the process. We really worked today to define what those roles are for the classroom teacher, but it's really important for the classroom teacher to also know what role an administrator is going to play and what role that mental health specialist is going to play and where it goes from there. So, with that in mind, I really want to remind everyone that WVTSS is that flexible framework that really allows schools to address a range of mental health needs, but it also supports the academics and behavior in a really strategic way. When all of the school staff really work together as a team and understand their roles, we can empower our students to take any path that they want.

So, before we do go, though, I do want to add one thing that if listeners want to learn anymore about WVTSS and how to build this system for their school they can check out our website that's also in the show notes at wvde.us/wvtss.

Becky Lewis: For links to all the resources discussed in this episode and for additional information, please visit our website at wvde.us/leadersofliteracy. Click on podcast and click on the show notes for episode 36.

Want to learn more about being a leader of literacy? Be sure to like and subscribe to the podcast so you don't miss a single installment. In the next episode, Sara and I are continuing our conversation on supporting mental health in the classroom. We'll be joined by two West Virginia educators who are going to share how they are working with their schools and their classroom teachers to support mental health. You won't want to miss it. Thanks for listening.