

Where You Are S3E2_V4

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SPEAKERS

Gail Markin, Michelle Horn, Vanessa Marie, Kim Weatherby



Kim Weatherby 00:04

There's links between staff wellbeing and student wellbeing and school success. So, we know that enhancing employee wellness improves staff performance, which can improve student learning and behavior, and staff wellbeing initiatives in our schools and workplaces contribute to a healthier school environment. So it means that everyone feels included in that healthy environment. And all of this contributes to student health and in turn to student achievement.



Vanessa Marie 00:38

Welcome back to another episode of Where You Are. I'm Michelle Horn. Stress levels and burnout for school professionals, including teachers, educational assistants, administration, and others, has been a significant and growing issue for quite some time. Before COVID-19, WorkSafeBC data shows mental disorder claims increased by 79% between 2017 and 2019, which is more than double the 30% increase across other occupations. And with the COVID-19 pandemic, stress levels and burnout have only increased. So coming together today to have a conversation that focuses on supporting the wellbeing of school professionals is exciting and timely. Co-hosting with me today is Gail Markin. Some of our listeners may remember that Gail co-hosted with me for an episode on promoting mental wellness in rural and remote school communities. If you want to listen to that podcast episode again, you could find it at kelymentalhealth.ca/podcast, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Gail is a counselor and a district teacher supporting social and emotional learning and coordinating healthy staff/healthy schools work in the Langley School District and has worked with our team at BC Children's on a variety of school-based initiatives. Gail, it's great to have you back on the podcast.



Gail Markin 01:51

So happy to be back, Michelle, and really, really excited to be focusing on teacher and school staff wellbeing. Such important work. So in the last couple of years, my work with schools and school districts around the province has made it abundantly clear how important it is for us to

be well, for our own health and success, but also because of the impact it has on the health and success of our students.

M

Michelle Horn 02:17

In this episode, today, we're going to be looking at exactly that. The importance of teacher and school staff wellbeing and how this is linked to the mental wellbeing of students. We'll also be looking at what school professionals can do to support their own wellbeing, support each other's wellbeing, and how everyone can engage at a systems level to keep mental well being a priority for school professionals, and in turn, the wellbeing of students. Let's listen to that conversation.

V

Vanessa Marie 02:49

So before we introduce our guests, Gail, I actually have a question for youâ€”not to put you on the spot. But we know that for many mental health and wellness topics, the language we use, and how we talk about things is really important. And recently, Gail, you shared with me some really interesting research that speaks to what language really resonates with people around staff wellbeing. So can you briefly speak to this before we jump into the conversation?

G

Gail Markin 03:10

Yeah, absolutely. Wellbeing is an amazing, kind of, topic. But it's sort of hard to define. There's so many definitions. And you know, I have favorites and others have favorites. One of the ones I really love is Martin Seligman's definition of wellbeing that talks about things like engagement, connection, positive feelings, all those wonderful thingsâ€”I can get kind of lost in that. But what we were kind of wondering when we started this work in education, is how is that gonna play out in the broader, sort of, public context? And so what they did is a really broad, general survey of the public. They knew that the research showed that this had great impact, but they weren't sure what the public would think about it. And so what they did is they asked some questions. And when they asked about whether staff and teacher wellbeing mattered to people, they weren't quite sure. And I think it was probably to do with the fact they weren't really quite sure what that meant. And so when they also asked the same kind of question, but framed it as, "is teacher stress and burnout important to you?", that's when they said, "yes, this actually really matters to me," particularly when it was connected to the students, which of course we know it is. So the language that you use matters. So by all means, use the wellbeing language. And we want people to understand that and get that sense of all the feel good stuff, but also frame it with the fact that we really want to prevent stress and burnout because that's having an impact.

V

Vanessa Marie 04:38

Thanks so much, Gail. So with that, it's now my pleasure to introduce our guests today. Vanessa Marie is a district counselor and SOGI District Lead for the Sunshine Coast School District. Vanessa has experience counseling and teaching in a variety of roles from K-12 in rural and Indigenous contexts across BC. Vanessa is committed to staff professional development,

and mental health initiatives in particular, because she believes that supporting and caring for adults helps to create supportive and caring communities for everyone—students, staff, and parents. We're also joined by Kim Weatherby. Kim is a leader in school health promotion, whose work focuses on staff wellbeing. Kim is currently the lead for EdCan's Well At Work Advisors program. She explores ways to advance K-12 workplace wellbeing at school district, provincial, territorial, and pan-Canadian levels. With more than 15 years in school health promotion, Kim has led mental health work at the Joint Consortium for School Health, the BC Ministry of Education, and DASH BC. Welcome, Vanessa and Kim.

V Vanessa Marie 05:40
Thanks very much.

K Kim Weatherby 05:41
Thank you. It's nice to be here.

V Vanessa Marie 05:42
So Vanessa, the first question that we have is for you. As we've been talking about, we know stress and burnout are key challenges for school professionals. Can you tell us a bit about your experience and what you've noticed with colleagues?

V Vanessa Marie 05:54
I would say that, you know, in my own experience, I was a teacher, now I'm a counselor, the stresses are different, but they're nonetheless there. And part of that has to do with the fact that you're never really done. Like, you could always do more. So you're really on the hook to kind of set those boundaries around when work is done. And there's a lot of pressure to not be done, especially I think, early career teachers and counselors, this sort of—some of it's an internal pressure to want to do well, and you have this big learning curve, and some of it is sort of external pressures from teacher ed, or, or even in school cultures, to some extent around this, you know, needing to volunteer for extra things, not leaving at the bell, sort of these implicit expectations that sort of add pressure. You know, I did have a period of burnout a few years back when I was really just starting out as a counselor, and I was working in a very isolated community, and I was quite isolated, and my students had really high needs. And then if we add personal stresses in your life, because of course, life doesn't just have your work stress, the capacity to manage that stress was really limited for me. And I noticed that I, you know, started to have this real fatigue and not wanting to engage in my work as I would normally do.

G Gail Markin 07:20
Thanks, Vanessa. And so, Kim, picking up from what Vanessa said, can you talk about what some of the top causes are for stress and burnout for skilled professionals that's found in the

K

Kim Weatherby 07:32

The feelings of isolation that Vanessa spoke about really resonated with me, we really hear that that is an issue for so many people, you know, when you imagine the role of a typical teacher, 25 kids in a room for six or eight hours a day. And many other roles, too, you know, counselors feel alone, because there's only one. Principals, vice principals feel the same thing. So those, you know, if you're thinking in a regular office, we have colleagues to support us all day, who visibly support us and who are there beside us and see us struggling, whereas adults working in education, we often are the only one. So that's a big issue. We also hear a lot about communication. So in many forms, and it can be too many emails, it can also be things like the expectation, whether it's real, or whether we feel that pressure to always be available 24/7. Parent texts at 10 at night, you feel the need to respond. So that can be a pressure. And then we also see, and maybe it's a byproduct of some of the other issues, but we see issues around professional relationships. And that can that can vary depending on roles. We've heard in some roles like EAs and some of the other support roles, bus drivers, admin staff, we've heard a feeling that they're not respected. There's lots of things. It's complex, but those come up a lot.

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Vanessa Marie 08:57

Thanks so much, Kim. So we know that schools have a lot of different priorities. Can you make the case for us for why staff wellbeing is particularly important and should be a priority?

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Kim Weatherby 09:07

So there's two big areas that we can think of. First, there's links between staff wellbeing, and student wellbeing and and school success. So research confirms what we intuitively know, we know that enhancing employee wellness improves staff performance, which can improve student learning and behavior. And staff wellbeing initiatives in our schools and workplaces contribute to a healthier school environment. So it means that everyone feels included in that healthy environment. And school staff who are engaged in improving their own wellness are more likely to model healthy behaviors and promote student wellness activities. And all of this contributes to student health and in turn to student achievement. And it's important to remember that we're just not talking about teachers but everyone who's, you know, in that world, touching the lives of kids who makes a difference. Bus drivers, educational assistants, custodians, school office staff, all of those people contribute to that healthy environment and the learning environment for students. The other big reason that this is important is that teacher and staff stress and burnout is costly to the system, it results in time off work, including long term disability and turnover. And it also results in presenteeism, which is, is really us going to work unwell, where we can be, you know, 50 to 70%, as productive as normal. And in some jobs like principal and superintendent, the whole job becomes undesirable. We really see in BC that less people want to be superintendent, less people want to be principals.

G

Gail Markin 10:42

One of the things that always strikes me with these impacts is that weâ€”people talk about

sometimes, like work, and then life. And I'm always surprised when that happens. Because you know, really, we actually spend about a third of our life at work. And so this is our life, right? There's no sort of separate work, and then here's the rest of my life. So I think that's another big impact that people need to understand that this is our lives, right? We have that right, and also the responsibility to be well in our workplace, because it does matter.

G Gail Markin 10:45

You're listening to Where You Are. I'm Michelle Horn. You can find all the resources in today's episode on our podcast page, keltymentalhealth.ca/podcast. If you're looking for more resources on staff wellbeing, how it's linked to student wellness, and other resources for school professionals on supporting students' mental health, check out the school professionals section on the Kelty Centre website at keltymentalhealth.ca/school-professionals.

G Gail Markin 12:01

So I want to move us into sort of the action in the three areas that I think are so important to addressing staff well being. And that's the individual, the collective, and the system. So just introducing those three parts and sort of digging into them more, about what that looks like. So for sure, as an individual, we're responsible for our own self-care, we have to take care of ourselves. And those are those traditional health things that we talk about and we know are good for us: exercise, eating well, that we get sleep, all those beautiful things that make us well. And also we're starting to realize and talk more about some of the social-emotional things that are also our individual responsibility. So all those beautiful skills that we teach our students around self awareness, how to manage our emotions. And then the second one, of course, is the collective. And this is all that beautiful stuff around connection, belonging, how we lift each other up and support each other at work, you know, how do we support each other to be well, and how that's a responsibility of the collective, of the group, of the team. And then the third part, and I think this is the one that we're sometimes a little bit more afraid of, and that's the systems change work. And the system has a huge impact on our wellbeing as a group and as individuals, because there are things in the system that can really support our wellbeing, or they completely get in the way of our wellbeing. So I think we need to look at all three areas. So I'm going to ask you, Vanessa, first, can you give us some examples of how you manage stress and burnout at the individual level to support your own well being?

V Vanessa Marie 13:41

I really find that it helps me to make sure that I exercise regularly. So that's a really big part of my life. And I've had to make it a priority and figure out how it fits in my schedule every week. And weather and all of that, especially this time of year to try to fit in, you know, running and biking and swimming because all of those things really, if I do them on a regular basis, make a really big difference in how I can manage my stress. So that's a big part. I also have a really consistent bedtime. That doesn't mean that I never don't get enough sleep or things like that. But it's the consistency I think that matters. I also have a need to practice some creativity and that doesn't have to be every day, but it's something that, when it's lacking, I'm like, oh, I need to do some writing or I need to do some painting. And then it's also—“I was listening as you were talking about our responsibility to do those practices that we're teaching our students,

you know, around mindfulness and and those habits and I didn't learn those as a child, right? This is something that's relatively new. So I'm also learning that as I go along and learning what that looks like for me and what works for me. And I think recently, self compassion has been a really big practice for me and it's something that I'm just watching the language that I'm using when I'm talking to myself around mistakes or around productivity or around needing a break and rest and just trying to be really gentle. And I've noticed a real shift around that. But it's a practice, it's that habit that needs to sort of be established. So that so that when things do hit the fan, because inevitably they do, that there's some systems in place that support me. And I would say the final thing is, I know that the next piece is that connection with others. But for me, it's really making an intention around connecting with my loved ones. And really asking for time, with close friends, or my partner to really build that in is also part of the individual, I think, to making sure that I'm getting that connection.

G Gail Markin 15:45

I love that Vanessa, and you know, it's interesting, when you're talking, I just, I feel good! Oh, you're talking about these feel good practices, I can actually feel them going on. So there you go!

V Vanessa Marie 15:58

I have two more actually, I forgot. I'm going to add them if that's okay.

G Gail Markin 16:02

Yeah!

V Vanessa Marie 16:03

At the individual level, but also in the professional context, is this professional consultation. So making sure, and I think that's still really important that we have the peer consultation, you know, talking with colleagues. Our district also has a clinical consultants that we can access. So that's also part of that individual wellness. And then of course, personal counseling, so that I can also continue to work on these things and grow. And I think a large part of the habits that I have today is partly because I've been engaged in personal counseling.

G Gail Markin 16:33

Love it, lots of wonderful strategies to move off of for sure. And to practice and keep going and all those things.

V Vanessa Marie 16:42

It's like a full time job! I don't know how I do anything else!

G Gail Markin 16:49

You pick and choose, though, right? I think that's the other thing about the individual practices is that we don't have to be doing all of them all of the time. But we have a whole toolkit because we can pick the one that we need for right now. And yeah.

V Vanessa Marie 17:04

And that mindfulness is paying attention to what it is we might need, right?

G Gail Markin 17:08

Oh, yes. I love that, too. So thanks for that, Vanessa. And then I think the other question is around that—“all these individual practices are wonderful. And you alluded to this as well, is that, what are some of the collective actions that we can take? Can you share some of those examples of some of the collective action that you've taken in your workplace?

V Vanessa Marie 17:32

Having those relationships with colleagues makes a really big difference. So whether it's, you know, making time to make sure that you go to the staff room and have a little connection over lunch, rather than working at your desk. And sometimes that's necessary. And that might be what you need is that quiet, but those connections with your colleagues where you're having a conversation about something that isn't maybe related to school, or maybe it is, and organizing things like walks after school. At our school, we've had, there's some trails, but they weren't very well marked. And so they, you know, staff got together and said, let's go for a walk and figure out some loops so that we can teach other staff how to take their kids out on walks. And just making sure, you know, in the counseling team we are the only counselor in our school, but we have a team across the district, and we have a group chat, for example, where people might send a question, or they might send a little funny meme, or just a happy Friday, something like that, that little points of connection. And again, I would say that the consistency of those makes a difference. Just making time to collaborate around things that are meaningful for us. So I think that's true for teachers or for counselors, or anyone working, in that if you have an opportunity to collaborate around something that's important to you, and meaningful, that that sort of brings energy in. It inspires you and it relieves stress to be working towards something hopeful.

G Gail Markin 18:55

I love that. And I love when you say those little moments of connection, right? It doesn't have to be these big events. It can be, but it's just that, again, kind of noticing and paying attention to those small moments. So thank you for that. Kim, we've mentioned now and we talked a little bit about both taking action at the individual and the collective levels and how important that

is. But we also want to highlight the importance of action to support school wellbeing more broadly within the school system. So do you have one or two examples of some systems level change going on in BC that you could talk to us about?

K

Kim Weatherby 19:36

One of the things that that we think in our work and one of the things that we have seen is that systemic action is most effective when it is in response to what employees actually want. So we've seen lots of cases of, we're going to give yoga classes for everyone. That is really great, if that's what people want. But if it's not, it's not successful, and people feel a bit jaded. They feel like, ugh, they don't really care. Which is not the case. So well-intentioned things that don't respond to a real need are probably not worth doing. It's kind of two kinds of systemic action. So one is more active things like, we've seen districts that have focused on things like communication, as I mentioned before, you know, when is it okay to communicate? When can we disconnect? Other strategies might be, I guess, enabling actions, like supporting groups of staff to do things like—so, for example, Vanessa spoke about some of the small things that you can do, or sometimes some school districts have said, each school get \$500,000 to go do the wellbeing activities that are meaningful to them. And it can be special events, it can be whatever they want it to be, but it's things that actually speak to them. If you're listening well to your employees, then you're going to find out specific problems that they're experiencing, that you can probably solve if you're really listening well. Enabling enactions to support employees to do what they want to do around wellness, and then more systemic things, broader things where you're bringing in policies or changes.

G

Gail Markin 21:15

Thanks, Kim, I also have another question for you around the systems level changes. Who has a role to play in making changes at that level? And, you know, how can different school professionals be involved?

K

Kim Weatherby 21:31

I think everybody has a role. And I kind of see it in two ways. We can, you know, thinking of the Gandhi quote of "Be the change you want in the world", we all can be role modeling how we treat each other, how we want to interact, you know, both to our peers and our supervisors. So we can be the role models for that. And that can bring about change. And also nudging the system along, we're all pushing a little bit with our, you know, our sphere of influence. And within your district, there's easy ways to do that. So when you have meetings, you can say, let's do a check in at the beginning of the meeting, or let's do a small mindfulness practice, or let's schedule it so everyone can participate. Or another thing too, sometimes staff meetings don't include hourly workers. So you can have a conversation about how equitable and fair is that? And how does that make them feel? So, you know, not everything will come quickly, we just have to keep nudging along.

G

Gail Markin 22:28

I really agree with you, Kim. One of the things that I think about systems change around

I really agree with you, Kim. One of the things that I think about systems change around wellbeing is that there are small things that we can do within a system that have huge impact—or even large impact, doesn't have to be huge. And yet, there are also the those long term sort of, "gonna take some time" systems changes that I also think we we shouldn't be afraid of. Small changes could be systems changes as well. And some will take more time. But both can happen. And we need to start talking about them. Do you have any tips or resources for other districts, school communities, people that are kind of getting started in this work, or people that are, have started maybe, but are wanting to kind of enhance what they're already doing?

K

Kim Weatherby 23:15

I have a few resources. We have EdCan's Well At Work website, which is a national site that's got lots of inspiring articles, some by Gail, that talk about various aspects of workplace wellbeing. And then we also have a BC site that has more work that's been done in in BC. And another place that you might not think about is the website Workplace Strategies For Mental Health. And that's geared to all workplaces. And it's got a lot of really good resources, both for organizations, for people who have staff, so "people leaders", as I call them. And then for employees. And some of the resources they have help you have discussions about difficult issues like workload, and you know, how you might rethink your workload. And then the last place that I would say, it's not a "go look at" resource, it's a participate resource. So Well At Work has a BC staff wellbeing Community of Practice, and we meet four or six times a year. And it's anybody who's interested. It's free. You just, it's an hour long, and we have conversations about what people are doing and what they're looking to do, so.

V

Vanessa Marie 24:27

Great. Thank you, Kim. And we'll make sure that we put a link to all of those resources that you just mentioned on our podcast episode page, so folks can easily access those. So Vanessa, just going back to you for a second. Is there anything else that you'd like to see implemented to support staff wellbeing that isn't being done yet in your school district or perhaps that you've seen being done somewhere else?

V

Vanessa Marie 24:48

Well, I think our district, although we've been working at it for a couple of years, we haven't exhausted this. We're just at the beginning of the journey. So what I see is, you know, we've started with these grants and schools are engaged in all these different wellness activities, like were mentioned yoga classes at some, massage therapists, lunches, and what we're looking at next is, is how do we take that a step further? How do we engage in a district-wide conversation? Do we want to offer a dinner series or a webinar series? How do we want to increase the profile further in terms of creating that change at the systems level? And, of course, that systems level change then trickles down into the sites and individuals as well.

V

Vanessa Marie 25:31

Great. Thanks so much. And, Gail, I know that you've done a ton of work in this area. Is there

anything you wanted to add?

G

Gail Markin 25:37

I guess I would just add to what Vanessa said there, and I think I learned this from you, Kim. Get your leaders on board. And Vanessa, you probably, I mean, you have that already. So that's beautiful. I think it was your superintendent that got the project started. But that's really, really important. First of all, staff wellbeing knows no hierarchy. So this is for absolutely everyone. But embedding it in the structures of your district is really, really valuable. So in your strategic plan, with your leaders on board, opens up possibilities around systems change that are also really, really important. So get everyone involved, for sure, but set up some of those structures. So it becomes embedded in just what you do. So—and the other one, I guess I would just add is human resources! Like this is this is the work they do. And they've done some beautiful work. But a lot of this is also kind of new territory, or new ways of looking at what they were already doing. So those are really, really valuable people to have on board and working with you. I watched that happen on the Sunshine Coast as well. And we're doing that in Langley. And it's such valuable information and key people to get involved.

V

Vanessa Marie 26:55

Thank you, Gail, and our listeners can't see this. But everyone was smiling and nodding their heads vigorously while you were talking. So great suggestions. That kind of brings us to the end of our questions. Something that we like to do at the very end of all of our episodes is ask both of our guests for your final words of wisdom or golden nuggets, or that piece that you want people to really remember. So Kim, we'll start with you. What are your final words of wisdom?

K

Kim Weatherby 27:21

It's really important to communicate along the way. So we do things to make change, but we also have to talk about them because people are really busy. And you can do truly amazing work. And everyone's got their head down and working. And they don't really notice that you've made the change. And as Vanessa pointed out, this is a long road, to change your system is like three to five years, even if you're doing it in a very intentional way. So you need to not only do the work, but talk about it all the time. So newsletters, however you want to communicate, you need to say, hey, we gave everyone money to do things and here's what they did. So you need to keep reminding them. And I also want to mention Gail's comments on building things in structures. When you build things into structures, then you can hold your leaders accountable. So if something's in a strategic plan, people need to do something. It also means that if the leader who's very passionate about staff wellbeing leaves, then you have a legacy piece from that leader, and the next person will not be able to take that out of the structure. So you this is your long term legacy piece. And I guess the last thing is like, be the change you want to see in the world. So be that colleague who reaches out to people and start that movement in your own workplace

V

Vanessa Marie 28:39

Thanks. Kim. Vanessa. do you have any final words of wisdom?

V Vanessa Marie 28:42

My takeaway would be that it is that consistency. It's, you know, similar to the individual habits that keep us well. It's the consistency of the work that we're doing. You know, small things often, that can make that difference. And you know, not like a one off, we're going to cancel the staff meeting for your wellness today. But those consistent changes, ongoing conversations around wellness, and just having regular meetings or conversations or activities around it, keeping it, you know, on the forefront because it's in that consistency that we are shifting the culture and we're shifting it from a culture that maybe says we need to be selfless. And we're not supposed to take care of ourselves, to one in which we believe that our wellness is really important and that it affects not only us and the health of our system, but also the health of our kids and the future generation.

M Michelle Horn 29:33

Thank you so much, Vanessa and Kim, for these final words of wisdom, which I think really underscore again, the importance of focusing on school staff wellbeing which is so important for their wellness but also for the well being of the students they teach. Well, that brings us to the end of our episode today. Thank you so much for joining Gail and I on this episode.

V Vanessa Marie 29:53

You're welcome. It was a pleasure.

K Kim Weatherby 29:54

Yes, thank you.

G Gail Markin 29:55

Thanks, everyone!

V Vanessa Marie 30:01

A big thanks to Gail Markin for co-hosting this episode with me today. And thank you to all of our listeners. Where You Are is brought to you by the BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre. Our show is produced and edited by Emily Morantz, with audio engineering by Sam Seguin. Audio production by JAR Audio. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a rating on Apple Podcasts or wherever you might be listening now. Are you looking for more great episodes Where You Are? Find us wherever you listen to podcasts and, of course, at keltymentalhealth.ca/podcast. We hope you'll make us a go to resource to promote mental health and wellness from where you are to here you want to be.

