



## Education Unscripted & Xplored Transcript

*Episode 6 | Systems & Leadership: Building Policies That Promote Educator Wellness*

**Kari Vogelgesang (00:07):**

Welcome back to Education Unscripted and Xplored with Kari and Mark, where we talk honestly about what's working, what's strained, and what's evolving across PK through 12 and higher education.

**Mark McDermott (00:19):**

We try to ground our conversations in research, leadership, practice, and the real systems educators are navigating every day, especially when the challenges are complex and deeply human.

**Kari Vogelgesang (00:30):**

Today's episode is focused on a topic that I personally have been exploring for quite a while now for nearly a decade. And it's something that I just really am super passionate about. We are going to be talking about educator wellness and the importance of creating systems that support the wellness for educators in each of our districts across here at the state of Iowa and really across the nation. But we're not framing this in a way that most people think about educator wellness. We're not talking about bubble baths or gratitude journals or asking educators just to be more resilient. We're really talking about systems and systemic wellness and educational systems.

**Mark McDermott (01:21):**

I was under the impression we were talking about bubble baths today.

**Kari Vogelgesang (01:24):**

We can a little bit.

**Mark McDermott (01:26):**

A little bit. More specifically, we want to talk a little bit about how policies, schedules, expectations, and then leadership decisions either reduce burnout or perhaps unintentionally fuel it.

**Kari Vogelgesang (01:40):**

And I am so honored that we have someone joining us today who I consider both a friend and a colleague. Her name is Courtney Cook. And Courtney has a very, very long and successful career in education. She's currently serving as the PK-12 principal in the Ruthven-Ayrshire. Is that how you say it, Courtney?

**Courtney Cook (02:01):**

Yeah. I'm

**Kari Vogelgesang (02:01):**

Sure.

**Courtney Cook (02:01):**

Yep. That's it.

**Kari Vogelgesang (02:02):**

You just told me that that's a name of a cow, apparently. I didn't know this. She has also served as the social emotional behavioral health coordinator for the Prairie Lakes Area Education Agency. And before that, she was a school counselor and an English teacher. I've worked with Courtney through both the Baker Teacher Leader Center and the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health. And I can tell you that she is one of the most dedicated, experienced, thoughtful, educational leaders that I've had the privilege of working with and learning from.

**Mark McDermott (02:34):**

Very excited to have you here, Courtney. Thank you for joining us. And just a quick reminder for everyone listening, as always, the views that are expressed here are our own and they are not necessarily those of the University of Iowa or the College of Education.

**Kari Vogelgesang (02:48):**

So here we go. Educator Wellness. I think let's start with maybe just talking a little bit about why this conversation matters so much and especially right now. So educator burnout, as we all know, most of us know who are listening to this is nothing new. This is something that we've been talking about even before COVID. It's something that the profession has been struggling with for quite a while, but I think as many other things since COVID, which an event that blew open lots of different cracks in our systems, we've been really talking a lot more about this and focusing more on what educator wellness is and why it matters so much in our school systems. Pro school districts, we're learning and hearing some of the same things. Chronic staffing shortages, increasing behavioral mental health needs, expanding compliance demands, and just educators being asked to do more with fewer people, less time, and thinner margins for air.

**Mark McDermott (03:55):**

I think a lot of times, and this is probably true in my own work sometimes, where leaders, probably well-intentioned leaders, try to respond by offering wellness tips and here's some suggestions and those sorts of things, but don't necessarily change the conditions. And obviously the educators notice that.

**Kari Vogelgesang (04:14):**

Yeah. I think that that's just a really important point, Mark, is that we can't always make it about the individual, just it's about you. You have to be more resilient. You have to do this. But it's about working together to create a system that allows people to be their best and do their best work. Okay. So let's maybe start with framing the issue from self-care, so personal self-care to system care.

**Mark McDermott (04:45):**

Courtney, like we said, very, very happy to have you here, both from the perspective of your experience and in all of the different areas. I think what's going to be great about this conversation is that you've experienced probably this issue from a lot of different angles and able to speak on it from a lot of different angles. And so because of that, and we certainly value that experience, we want to kind of start out with maybe the less positive part. We'll get to the more positive part, but from your vantage point, what do you see as areas where leaders maybe are getting things wrong about educator wellness and what are some things they could do to maybe improve?

**Courtney Cook (05:26):**

Well, I think for one thing is understanding what wellness is, what wellbeing is, what it's not. And actually, I hadn't planned on saying this, but Kari, as you were just describing, self-care and system care, I don't think a lot of people are aware. And certainly I wasn't until, I think it was while I was at Prairie Lakes AEA and I was at a conference somewhere learning, understanding the roots of self-care and how that term came to be and what really brought it about. And it was never meant to go at it alone. It really meant showing up for yourself and staying connected to others. And interestingly love, I love history and knowing everything about that. So the roots of self-care actually came out of the Civil Rights and Women's Health Movement, and it was used by Black women activists and community leaders as a form of resistance.

**(06:24):**

And it was really centered on collective wellbeing and community healing and radical survival. And Audre Lorde has an amazing books, lots of literature on it. And once I started understanding that, when people said it's systems work, it made so much more sense because it really connects to the community and connection piece of it that we know is so important and it's no longer a selfish act. We would see the stickers, self-care isn't selfish. Well, no, it shouldn't be because we need to be sure we're well together and in doing that, that gives us permission to listen to what we need and understand that others might need the same thing. So that's one thing we can do to get right. And then I think the rest of it makes more sense again. I see, and we've all been guilty of it, over-relying on the little individual solutions like the Jeans Day, which we don't really have in our building now.

**(07:28):**

Now we just have a modern approach to professional dress. And so today is a Wednesday. Yes, it's actually almost a holiday for me, but I'm in chance. There are some days that it just makes sense and we are going to trust our professionals to think about their role, their position, what's going on that day, and make the best decision of how they need to show up for themselves and their students that day. So

that was one thing we moved from that individual feel good moment to just a systems change, like rethinking, well, that's silly. It's also misinterpreting requests for time or when we hear the request like, "There's too much on my plate." And sometimes leaders will interpret that as educators wanting to do less.

**(08:16):**

And it's not that they want to really do less as a core, they want to do it well and they want to feel valued and heard. And so it's being vulnerable enough to listen and then have a conversation about it and try to figure out, "Well, how can we help?" And then there's a lot of solution finding and trialing, and we're going to get it wrong sometimes. And we might try something like, "Nope, that didn't help." But yeah, we're all in this together. And sometimes it's even recognizing we have our own growth. I've had to really work on releasing perfectionism and serving others to a fault. It's meant that I have to be willing to ask for help and also hold others accountable in that too. So if we recognize that burnout isn't a character flaw and it's a design flaw, then we can move together.

**Kari Vogelgesang (09:11):**

So I love so many pieces of what you just said, and I'm going to back up a little bit and focus on a couple things that you highlighted. So first of all, one thing when I'm, and I know we both have presented on this topic before Courtney and have done this work for quite a long time. And I still, when I go sometimes into schools or different organizations when we're talking about systemic wellness, people will immediately start talking about wellness and self-care at the individual level and what that means to them and how they understand that. And at the very beginning of this episode, I talked a little bit about this understanding of self-care as bubble baths, treating myself to a coffee, going out to dinner, shopping online or whatever. So those are things that really make us feel good really, really fast. And I'm not saying you shouldn't do those things.

**(10:07):**

I do those things, okay? I'm not trying to like, I do them, right? But it's really trying to get people to understand that it's even a system at the individual level

**(10:19):**

And it's hard work. It's not all relaxation and it's not all feel good all the time, but it's creating a system for yourself first that's centered around various dimensions of wellness. Now, SAMHSA defines them as eight dimensions, right? Yep. Includes your financial dimension of wellness, your spiritual, your emotional, your intellectual, what is it, your occupational, your physical dimension, all of these things make up an entire system of wellness. And if one of them is completely off balance, the rest of them will be affected. If you're experiencing a huge financial crisis, it's going to affect your sleep, your ability to exercise, potentially to eat healthy. It's going to affect the way you perform at your job, the way that you connect with socially with other people, so on and so forth. They're interconnected, right? And I think it's really important to get people to understand at the individual level that it's hard work to build a system that is going to allow you to not only maintain your health, but that is your self-care, is to keep thinking about that system and where you need to fine tune that system.

**(11:40):**

And then I think it's easier when you talk about that system level care on an individual basis for them to understand the importance of a system within a school system and how we all have to connect these things together in order for our teachers to be able to do their very best work.

**Courtney Cook (12:02):**

Absolutely.

**Kari Vogelgesang (12:03):**

Yeah. So I think that also leads us to this next piece that I want to talk about again, kind of still staying with how systems shape educator wellbeing and focus more on like workload, time and the just one more thing. We're just going to add one more thing, right? Can you talk to us a little bit as a leader in an education system right now, talk to us about workload and the many initiatives and maybe even like well-intentioned initiatives that you've explored that have worked really, really well or that are not working.

**Courtney Cook (12:43):**

Yeah. So because this is one that literally we were reflecting on yesterday with some consultants with the Department of Ed that visit us on a monthly basis and have been providing us a lot of support. And the previous year, so last year, our building leadership team engaged in a book study on the four disciplines of execution. And if you're not familiar with 4DX, it's really getting to a one, maybe two wildly important goals and recognizing there's a whirlwind over here, but you can't focus all your energy on all the things. And then there's a lot more to it. And so we've been trying to hone that in, like what is really the most important and allowing ourselves to let the other things kind of work out. More or the story yesterday I realized, oh gosh, I got sucked in by the whirlwind and suddenly so many things were super important.

**(13:42):**

Again, because we have our SA action plan, we're one of the comprehensive state literacy development grant recipients. So we have all that CLSD work and reports. We were stronger connections, so that's wrapping up. And we have all these things and we have been having some intentional work around our culture and just all the things. And yeah, I added too much to the plate. But what then we did do realistically as looking at, okay, we said we'd have all this done by April, was giving myself permission to say, no, those didn't get done and it's okay. And it's not even, we're going to add them to next quarter, maybe we can simply abort those things. It might circle back next year, and that actually reminds me with the CLSD grant, a few of us were at the Plain Talk Literacy Conference a few weeks ago, and now I can't even remember which speaker it was, but mentioned how underappreciative we are of the power to abort.

**(14:48):**

And just because we started something doesn't mean we have to continue until we've all are exhausted. And on the other side of that, I've wanted to lean into de- implementation, but part of that is recognizing, oh wait, it's clearly not working. Let's either pivot or just aboard and now we know what's more important. So I would say that helps us with the workload. And then I'm trying to picture myself as a filter of a buffer. I get asked a lot for more transparency or more communication and sometimes people don't know what they're asking for. I'm like, "Do you?" Even not that I literally cannot share with you everything,

**(15:41):**

But it wouldn't serve you well. And so I have to think through what will benefit them and what will overwhelm them just enough so that they understand the why and know if I'm in my office, I'm not just doom scrolling or passing the time. And if you want to ask what I'm doing, that's okay. But if I were to send out an email summary of everything that we were working on or every decision, then it would be

really overwhelming and too much. So I think that's another not to do is not feel like you have to do everything and not feel like you have to share everything, if that makes sense.

**Mark McDermott (16:26):**

I want to get back to the policy in a second. And I think especially we want to talk about schedules and things like that,

**(16:32):**

But this is, we talked a little bit earlier about Chase and Squirrels, and I'm going to go chase one over here because this, as you're talking, Courtney, and as we're going through this, my world is much more working with pre-service teachers, right? I have the privilege. I love it. I get to work with students who want to be teachers. One of the things we have added in the last couple of semesters really has been an intentional module on teacher wellness. As I'm listening to this conversation, you and Kari are giving me lots of things to think about because I think we have approached it very much from this like, "Here's some strategies and some tips and things like that." But I think we can do a better job with that. My question though is, I worry a little bit in some ways about approaching this or sort of broaching this topic with the pre-service, I call them kids, pre-service kids, because you're sort of like, "Oh, you better get ready.

**(17:26):**

This is like the hardest job in the world and there's no way you can do it without having all these strategies." And some of them kind of come to this conversation with like, "I've heard this is horrible." So I'm always sort of wondering this balance, like how do you balance the messaging even of, "It is tough. We're not going to sugarcoat this. This is a challenge profession." Right. This is a profession, but at the same time, I bet a lot of jobs are tough the first couple of years and I bet a lot of jobs require wellness strategies and systems and all. So maybe just a little bit there, talk about how do we approach this from a perspective of, yes, we're going to acknowledge the challenge and the difficulties, but at the same time, we're going to make sure we focus on the fact that folks are working on this and they're trying to figure out ways to help you.

**(18:18):**

Does that make sense? Absolutely.

**Courtney Cook (18:20):**

Yeah. Yeah, I think it does. And I think it's important to be honest and transparent, but yeah, we don't have to scare them. I would say one, maybe cautionary talent, don't get sucked into the social media world of, I'm trying to say this in a way that doesn't sound judgmental, but it's very easy for any profession out there to be woe is me. We have it the hardest. And occasionally I'll bring the realness to work and just remind them, I happen to have a couple, I have a sister in education like me and I have a couple sisters in healthcare and guess what? They also sometimes have to stay late if they didn't get all done. One of my sisters is in administration now, but she was a nurse and sometimes on the weekend, if they're short nurses, she has to go in and cover the floor.

**(19:21):**

And the same with my sister who's a pharmacist. And so it's that, we're not alone. And then also saying, yes, it will be challenging, but you're not alone. And that would be an important interview question to ask.

**(19:36):**

And when you're interviewing, ask if you can visit some classrooms, ask if you can walk around and get a sense of the tone. Of course, you might be there on a bad day, but you might be able to get a sense of, is this a district where I will be supportive and they're at least paying attention to it or am I going to be left to figure it out on my own? We are in a teacher shortage and right now you have choices. You don't have to go anymore to the first offer you have. And that's also self-care. I'm so glad you brought the eight dimensions as you're reflecting on that, give it an honest effort and give it some time, but sometimes you're in the right position and not the right location, or maybe it's the right location and not the right position. But yeah, I would just encourage them, don't let that scare you from all the amazing things that will come out of your career and passion and really listen to what your values are.

**(20:39):**

So if your values are making that difference or the ripples of influence, then you're in a great profession to do that.

**Kari Vogelgesang (20:51):**

Yeah. I agree with everything you said, Courtney. One thing that I tell people when I'm in schools and talking to teachers is you can't self-care your way out of a toxic work environment. So you can't do that, that's impossible. And that's not just in our profession, like you said, that's in any profession. If you really love teaching, if the teaching piece is what you love, it could be that you just need to start exploring other options in other environments and other areas. And that's okay. I mean, sometimes it's a bummer if you really want to live close to your mom and dad or a certain family member, if your spouse has a job in that area, maybe you can go to a town that's close to you or something. But I always say that to people so that they're not just completely throwing ... What is that saying?

**(21:46):**

I'm having a moment, the baby out with the bath water.

**Courtney Cook (21:50):**

I think that's something like that. I don't think I've ever used it, but I've definitely heard like a great aunt use it or something. And I don't

**Kari Vogelgesang (21:58):**

Know why that came to mind because I've never liked it either. I've always thought it was so

**Courtney Cook (22:03):**

Bizarre. Very grim.

**Kari Vogelgesang (22:05):**

Just what the heck is that? Well, it's

**Courtney Cook (22:06):**

Kind of like the babies in the river analogy that I use a lot. I'm like, why are we throwing, why are we allowing the babies in the river? And then

**Kari Vogelgesang (22:13):**

Talking

**Courtney Cook (22:13):**

About-

**Mark McDermott (22:13):**

I don't know much about parenting, but I do know I should not throw the baby

**Kari Vogelgesang (22:18):**

Out. And the community members are just standing downstream watching this. Anyway, okay, off, not the squirrel moment. Speaking of squirrels.

**Mark McDermott (22:26):**

Yeah.

**Courtney Cook (22:27):**

The laughter is important. There you go. That is important part of recovering from burnout.

**Kari Vogelgesang (22:34):**

But one other thing that I wanted to say about this, because I always, I go into elementary orientation, Mark, and I do a lecture on educator wellness. And I agree with you. I always say that this actually can be the most amazing job and experience that you will ever have. It's life changing, and I don't regret a single second of it. I always tell them that. And I always say that in the early 2000s when I graduated, that people always warned me of the teacher's lounge, be careful, how much time you spend in there, how much the conversations that happen in there and how it impacts the way you're thinking about your job and your career. I now say that teacher talk on TikTok or on Instagram, that's the new teacher lounge to me. But the difference is it can be. It can be. It can be also a place of really great support as well.

**(23:35):**

And that's what I say. The difference is that you actually have control of your algorithm. You have control over the things that you watch, that you like, that you spend time on and engaging with, and it adjusts from there. So just be careful about that. It's not a bad tool, but you actually have a little control over what is fed to you.

**Mark McDermott (23:56):**

Yeah. Yeah. Well, we'll get back, I think, maybe to the pause thing, Kari's got a question come up here about schedules. I liked the way, Kari, you had written this as we were sort of planning what to do that policy matters because if this is what Kari had written, if everything is a priority, nothing is, right? Which sounds kind of simple, but is I think very profound. And so this was where leadership comes in and you have to ask yourself, what can I pause? What can be paused in general? What can be streamlined? What no longer is serving our students or staff? You talked about that a little bit, but obviously that leadership skill event. And then Kari, I think the idea of schedules move a little

**Kari Vogelgesang (24:33):**

Bit. Yeah. I think that feeds into schedules a little bit. This is

**Mark McDermott (24:36):**

Something,

**Kari Vogelgesang (24:37):**

I don't know if you have been talking about this in your district a lot lately or not, Courtney, but this is something that's been popping up in our intake forms in both the BTLC and Scanlan Center and districts asking questions about whether or not we have really sound research on what type of schedules in school districts work best for teachers, parents, and students. And as I know you are aware of, people are playing around with four day school weeks and elementary students coming in at like 7:30 and then dismissing at 2:30, whereas the high schoolers and secondary students, middle schoolers coming in like at nine and dismissing at four, we do that here in Iowa City. We have different schedules for elementary and secondary kiddos. This has just become a hot topic lately. I mean, it's always been to some degree, I remember, but it's really starting to fire up again.

**(25:35):**

And I'm wondering if you have some thoughts on this as it relates to educator wellness, which of course feeds in student wellness and community wellness.

**Courtney Cook (25:44):**

Yeah. It's interesting because I remember, I don't know what project I'd probably been researching or why, but when I taught in Colorado Springs, Juden decades ago, but it was becoming a hot topic there. And I remember having to research on like, is it actually effective or not? Does it actually save? Because a lot of those rural districts were looking at saving on transportation and electrical costs and then whether or not it helped or did not help student engagement. So at that time, it had nothing to do with wellbeing or teacher shortage. It wasn't the way they were getting teachers. It was just very systems oriented about money. And now of course that's shifted. And so I used to think like, no way now I've gone through like, well, maybe it wouldn't be so bad because I mean, where I could see it maybe is like the professional development and making sure people understand that no, actually the teachers are not fully getting off the fifth day most of the time.

**(26:51):**

There's going to be stuff going on. One specific thing I'd heard from districts is they've learned like, "Don't do Friday, do Monday." Because the start of the week, they're more likely to engage. If you do have professional development on a Friday, people are checking out, it's just that mental at the end. So I know I've heard that feedback on it. And then so we get out early every Wednesday for an hour PD and then I think we have eight or nine full day professional development days throughout the year. And so it would be nice just for consistency. There's no more of that. We'd have to figure that out. But then when you really come down to it, it's the same hours, it's how you use them. And it could be a personal thing just like what you value. Do you value the dress code or do you value being a singleton and getting to be creative? Or do you value only teaching one or two preps the full entire day? So you have to think about that and how you learn and work. But at the end of the day in your contract, it's the same amount of days or hours or minutes, and we're still teaching the curriculum and it's just figuring out how you use your time.

**Mark McDermott (28:14):**

One other thing, Courtney, kind of related to that, longtime listeners of this podcast will, they have a great sense of how exciting my life is. I won a previous podcast droned on about my excitement related

to science education and I will now admit out loud on this podcast, my role now involves a lot of compliance work and I've actually kind of grown to enjoy parts of it, which is interesting, but it also can be fatiguing. And one of the things that I think we're probably seeing a bit of, and we start to talk a little bit about both like even here, that we have a lot of aspects of our teacher ed program that are requirements that are placed on us or that we are required to adhere to. Part of my job is to help make sure we're doing that. But in doing that, I have to ask others to also comply with the requirements and the standards and those sorts of things.

**(29:12):**

And I know that happens in the K-12 world as well. So as educators are navigating shifting mandates, documentation requirements that seem to increase accountability pressures that seem to be increasing, all those sorts of things, maybe talk a little bit about that. If you, as a leader, how do you handle, in some ways, hopefully supporting your teachers, but also maybe shielding them from some of that and some of the aspects there.

**Courtney Cook (29:43):**

Yeah. And this is one I don't know if I have a great answer on beyond taking that honest reflection of like, why are we doing this, and do we still need to do this? Is it one of the policies like we've always done it that way? And could it be done better for example, I don't know how many districts still have policies on lesson plans turned in at this time every week. And occasionally we float back to that if we have one educator just missing the mark,

**(30:23):**

But then we have the moment of like, oh, this is why we've said no, to require that of everyone every single week, am I going to actually be able to? I don't have the capacity to look through all those. I am one person. And so if I need to build it back in for one individual person as a part of an improvement plan, great. But it's being realistic about those that we have local control over and are we going to make meaning out of it? Kind of like assessments in students or screeners. Am I actually going to use the data? Well, I mean, some are required for state compliance, but then we add more and more onto it. So getting back to, okay, what is the minimum? And then what are we actually going to leverage and apply? So that would probably be similar to pretty much any policy is asking, why is it in the place?

**(31:25):**

Does it need to be in place and is it helping the system? Sort of like a return on investment type of thing. Are we getting out of it what it was set to do? And there will be some that are needed, obviously, like mandatory reporting. Yes, you must follow this. With ethical considerations and all the complaints coming to the BOE sharing, yes, it would be best practice to do this every time, whatever it might be with contact logs or documentation, not putting yourself in vulnerable positions, but then we also have to recognize life and have that flexibility making the right decision at the right time given the set of circumstances. So I would say for most of the policies, I think you have to go into it with some flexibility and that might buffer the overload a little bit. Yeah.

**Kari Vogelgesang (32:28):**

Yeah. I like that. I've always found that when we do this black and white kind of policy approach that it's not beneficial. It ends up not being beneficial to anybody because there always has to be some flexibility and nuance to different situations in order to keep a system really healthy and avoid moral injury for sure. Okay. Let's shift a little bit. Let's talk about what's working well and what are you most excited about moving forward? When you think about the world of education and building systems to support

educators, which in turn, of course, support students and parents, what do you see working really, really well and what's exciting you as we press on and move into the future?

**Courtney Cook (33:25):**

Yeah. I think it helps that I've had a few individuals from this state ask me recently yesterday and then, I don't know, it was probably actually now a month or two ago when we were doing our IDEA DA thing and they'd asked like, "Oh wow, this is improved. What are you doing?" And so often I'm like, "Well, what are we doing?" I don't know. Now it's just become who we are. It's not a doing anymore. It's a being. But now that I've reflect on, there are a few things and our few are just simple random things that have just been implemented more so honestly as my own system. So when I think about my eight dimensions, I've discovered my spirituality is really mostly all through music.

**(34:15):**

Whether I'm performing, listening, whatever it is, music and just joy and fun. This is partly to me, but it's also science. It just helps people set the mood. So the beginning of the day, end of the day, my first two of my last two bells are fun. We pick random songs and sometimes they're fit on a theme, sometimes they're very random and it just sets the tone. And then a fun bell when our high schoolers go to the other district after lunch. So I mean, it's a very simple thing, but I mean, there's nothing like starting a day with Pump Up the Jam going or like Monday was Thunderstruck. We have very random. Be careful if you ask the kindergarten class what Bell is, because you might end up with Herm the Worm. But

**(35:03)**

It's a little thing. It takes time, but it's consistent. And now it's like, I guess my trademark, I don't know, but it's very fun, but you can't do it the whole day when you have elementary, middle school, and high school all in one day. Can't do that. But then we have some simple ones. It's structures in place. I'd say for our faculty meetings, we do this. For our admin meetings, we have an inclusive welcome at the start that usually has either something to do with the theme of the meeting or just a connection piece and then an intentional closure at the end. That comes from my castle roots when I was a fellow with them, but that consistency is important. Obviously there are some days where I'm not in the hallways and not in the classrooms as much as I hoped I would be. I've been intentionally getting it back, so it's like plugging into my calendar now, AM walkabout, PM walkabout.

**(35:59):**

It might have to get shifted, but I've learned if it's not in my Google calendar, it's not getting done or done well. But when I go, similar to when we ask our educators or paras at recess what active supervision is and that intentional greeting at the door is, if I am walking about in the hallways and popping into classrooms, it's intentional and I'm just not there observing and trying to catch them. And they know that too. And honestly, I think with all of our observations from the state over the years, and we've had a lot of PD where we've shifted to a coaching model. So Ms. Jen Alexander is one of my favorite humans in the world and amazing at professional development. And that's actually one of our wellbeing, I'd say tips too, as she's helped us support students, it's supported ourselves. Our classes are now used to like, I can come in, four people come in.

**(36:56):**

I mean, yesterday, I think they didn't recognize name tags before. I did have a couple students at the high school ask like, "What? Are they the CIA or something?" I'm like, "No, they're not. We're just here taking notes." And so they get used to that and then they know it's meaningful. So when it shows up on a survey, they want the leadership presence. Sometimes, and this is more like from the beginning, leaders get it wrong because I've heard them say, "Well, I walked around four times today, but no one

saw me because they were teaching." Well, you could do that a little bit differently then. Oh, actually probably the last one, because I'm talking a lot and that's just me. One of the more recent ones, I debated this for a couple years and just wasn't sure if I could get the funding right. You've probably seen them at the SAI exhibitors, Alpaca.

**(37:47):**

Are you familiar with the Alpaca surveys? Yeah. Yeah. So we started that, we're piloting it this semester, started in January and it has been helpful information for sure and having the dashboard. And for us, it was that validation because now in my third year, it feels like it's better. I started first year kind of, we were in a rough place in this building, but we have grown so much and I thought we were doing well and that was validation. When that first survey came back in January, it said 90% positive wellbeing and culture, I was like, "Oh, Okay."

**Kari Vogelgesang (38:25):**

So Courtney, for the people listening, can you tell them about the Alpaca survey?

Courtney Cook **(38:29):**

**Courtney Cook (38:31):**

Alpaca? Yeah. So best practice would be that we do it every two to three weeks. February, I don't know if you're from Iowa or not, you probably know that we had a lot of snow and weather events in February. So February was patchy. We didn't get any surveys done there, but end of January we did one and then two in March. And what happens is I put the link in the weekly update, send a reminder email, got the QR code in the lounge and just remind them, "Hey, it's time to check our Pulse," because they call it the Pulse dashboard and they just hop on and it's very quick, very simple. They just select, almost kind of reminds me of the ruler app if you've used that. So they just select words that connect with how they're feeling or how they're doing, how it feels at work.

**(39:20):**

So it might be committed, but it might be drained, it might be overwhelmed, which when we took the first one in March, I prepped them like, "I recognize. I mean, I'm tired." We are probably going to get more of those words, but then there is feeling heard and I can't even think of the other words right now, but then it gives you a percentage of positive versus negative kind of words like connotations to flush out. But then after they select those few words, they're able to select from options. And it's like these little bubbles pop on their phone and they just tap what helps

**(40:01):**

And what they need or what could help. And so sometimes it is something like, or they can put in their own caption like, "I've seen healthy snack options or random food days, but it also has, they've recognized their meeting goals and feel proud of themselves." And so most of the feedback has been what we hope for, them recognizing this is tough work, but I'm seeing the results and recognizing that. And then we feel good and we want to do more. I can see my students achieving and I don't feel alone. And so then also then this is probably the best part for the leadership is it provides you with three to four activities or actions to do in the next week or two or to consider that would address those needs. So is it more staff to staff connection or is it more leadership communication transparency?

**(41:04):**

And then they send you these alpaca packs that you don't have to curate on your own. I get five a month. And first I was like, I shared these with people when I told them we were rolling this out, they're random things. And the first one wasn't like, I don't know, I like the stuff in it, but the second one, there's a power bank once. And so they open them during the staff meeting and they did of course, I don't know what it's called, like the unboxing, but there's another haul.

**Kari Vogelgesang (41:29):**

The haul. Oh,

**Courtney Cook (41:30):**

Look at my haul.

**Kari Vogelgesang (41:30):**

They all pack a haul.

**Courtney Cook (41:32):**

Yeah, and so that's fun. And then they have the share outs. And so they can recognize someone else and it allows me to print postcards and it's anonymous, but then I put them in the mailboxes. So they hear from their staff member an intentional recognition and appreciation. And so it's providing that connection. It's providing me both quantitative and qualitative data. And I know that it's actually working. So I think I'm going to keep it going. But yeah, when I shared it out, I intentionally shared with them why I was leveraging some grant money for this is so often we put the grant money directly to the students and I recognize that this was a moment to intentionally invest in my staff and my faculty and that went a long way with them. And it was true. I wasn't like fluffing or anything. I was just honest.

**(42:24):**

That's my decision making. So yeah, I say small, consistent practices and then making use of data.

**Kari Vogelgesang (42:33):**

I really appreciate that, Courtney. I know that that's one thing. I was on a call yesterday with a group of other universities and really kept trying to keep bringing us back to this point of, that's great. We want to teach teachers how to teach some of these social, emotional, behavioral health skills and strategies, but we have to back up. If we don't focus on the teachers first and make sure that they have a really good understanding of X, Y, and Z, that they're using it in their lives fluently, if we're not focusing on their health and their wellbeing, the likelihood that they're going to be able to teach students these skills and strategies consistently and model them is next to nothing. So I love that you were able to use some of those funds and some of that money to directly go to support, to provide a tool that's supporting your staff and their wellbeing.

**(43:35):**

As we kind of come to a close here, I'm just going to kind of wrap up some of the stuff that we talked about and that I think is really important to highlight and come back to here at the end, which is, I think if anybody is really serious about thinking about or enacting policies

**(43:53):**

Or rules or a system that supports educator wellness, we have to stop treating it as just this side initiative, this add-on, but start to think of it as the center of what we're doing, treating it as a design

principle. And I'm hearing that this means policy coherence, realistic expectations, leadership modeling, and just an ongoing system review that wellness isn't just about a program, it's a way of building schools and communities.

**Mark McDermott (44:23):**

Yeah. I just want to, on my end to wrap up, Courtney, thank you for being here with us. We absolutely appreciate that and your expertise, but bigger than that, thank you for what you're doing as an educator. I try very hard when I'm speaking with different groups of educators to just very sincerely say thank you. And I mean that today, I think everything you talked about, like Kari just said, it's building systems that are validating the human beings who are working in your schools, which is ultimately going to have an impact on the students in your schools, but sometimes we forget that the teachers need to be reminded how much we care about them and how much we want their wellbeing to be facilitated and fostered. So thank you for doing that and every day. My pleasure. Yeah, I appreciate you being here.

**Kari Vogelgesang (45:10):**

Yeah. Thank you, Courtney, for coming on. We really appreciate you taking the time. I know how hectic your schedule is, so thank you. And we hope you'll join us, all of you who are listening for our next episode. And as always, if there are topics you'd like us to explore or questions you want us to unpack, please reach out to us at [btlc@uiowa.edu](mailto:btlc@uiowa.edu) or [scsmh-main@uiowa.edu](mailto:scsmh-main@uiowa.edu). And until then and as always, we're forever cheering you on.