Executive Summary

Retreat, Recharge and Refocus: A Qualitative Study about Wellness Spaces on New Mexico PK-12 Campuses

Introduction

Across the U.S., the practice of designating physical space in school settings to support students' mental, social, and emotional well-being, known as wellness centers, rooms, or spaces, is on the rise. Wellness spaces, simply put, are places for students to go and take a break when feeling overwhelmed during the school day. These spaces are noted to be a trauma-informed care approach and an integral part of a school's multi-layered or multi-tiered support system. The growing interest in these spaces may be due to them being viewed as a viable approach to mitigating the potential negative impact of mental health challenges on student school success.

School staff in different states are implementing wellness centers or rooms as a strategy to attend to the climb in student mental health issues, both pre and post-pandemic. New Mexico is no exception because of the awareness that youth in our state are at higher risk for alcohol, drug, and tobacco use as compared to youth across the United States, according to results of the 2019 New Mexico Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey. Our youth are also more likely to experience feelings of sadness or hopelessness. These realities have been exacerbated in the past three years, given the experience of a worldwide pandemic.

"We need to think about the needs of the student, [how] these needs have changed, and how we are meeting unmet needs of our students." ~ NM Superintendent and Special Education Teacher

SEL4NM has taken notice of this "mini-explosion" of wellness spaces in NM and around the U.S. The leadership team, given their stance as a strong collaboration of practitioners, experts, educators, and thoughtful community leaders who recognize the importance of supporting healthy child development in various settings, including PK-12 schools, wanted to learn more about wellness spaces. SEL4NM believes that with a broader understanding of wellness spaces, educational leaders, administrators, and staff, along with those who work for the betterment of child and adolescent academic, social and emotional wellbeing, will gain a richer understanding of the purpose, operation, benefits and challenges to establishing and maintaining wellness spaces.

Goal

As public policy will be determined and community discussions of wellness spaces have accelerated, SEL4NM hopes to contribute positively to understanding wellness spaces as a strategy for intervention and how the principles of social-emotional learning can support the desired outcomes. The intention of this research project was to be able to (1) share content knowledge and expertise with policy leaders in New Mexico and beyond as they contemplate statewide policy changes and public investments and (2) create a shareable deliverable for local leaders throughout the Mountain West. The insights generated from this work will provide a promising strategy that we have seen implemented in New Mexico and in other states across the US that can be replicable in other communities and can place the role of wellness spaces in the context of larger youth social and emotional development initiatives.

Process

This research study aimed to explore the use of wellness spaces throughout school settings in various locations across New Mexico. A qualitative research approach was used to uncover meaning and valuable knowledge from those implementing wellness spaces in their schools. Four SEL4NM researchers collected data via semi-structured interviews. A total of 29 interviews on 21 wellness spaces were conducted in the following areas of New Mexico – Farmington, Cuba, Taos, Pojoaque, Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Alamogordo, and Las Cruces. Data was collected on wellness spaces located at elementary, middle, and high schools in both public district schools and charter schools. The researchers considered participants, given their knowledge of schools with wellness spaces and/or individuals who were part of developing a wellness space at their school. Participants ranged from state-level staff to students who have had some role in implementing the wellness space at schools.

Participant Locations

Results

The data gathered was via interview questions constructed to explore the following – the purpose of a school's wellness space, the implementation, and operation of their space; the strengths of having a wellness space and challenges the school staff may have experienced during implementation or may be experiencing with the current operation. Therefore, the findings are categorized into these four areas: purpose, implementation and operation, strengths, and challenges. A summary of each category is provided:

- **Purpose** - 100% of schools revealed the purpose of their space as either a prevention or intervention strategy, some both. Participants shared that social-emotional learning (SEL), restorative and trauma-informed practices, and sensory rooms all influenced the initiation of their spaces. Ultimately the purpose of wellness spaces was a response to student mental health needs and the anticipated stress from the pandemic.
- **Implementation and Operation** - Principals, counselors, social workers, teachers, students, district administrators, and community partners were found to be key in all phases of implementation and operation. Once the idea of having a wellness space came about, key stakeholders went to work securing funding from various sources, finding a physical location and design, and filling the space with materials and resources conducive to the purpose. The next step was organizing the space's supervision and selecting a referral process for use, followed by communicating the purpose and training staff and students on using the wellness space.
- **Strengths** - Three main strengths identified were an increase in social-emotional capacity, positive effects on climate and culture, and reduction in behaviors that can be disruptive to student academic success. SEL, student sense of belonging, and a reduction in office referrals and suspensions were specifically mentioned as outcomes of wellness spaces. A bonus has been the opportunities for student leadership and advocacy.
- **Challenges** - Understanding how a wellness space is a strategy to meet student needs or the primary purpose of the space; concerns about misuse of the space were identified challenges. Misunderstandings can have a direct impact on how often the space is used. Other challenges identified were the physical location of the space and funding. Schools can struggle to secure a location for their space. Some would like additional funding for improvements or to know funding will continue to be available, especially for additional staff for oversight and supervision.

"A class that had lost students to suicide rallied about 250 students at the school board meeting to bring attention to student mental health and support for the wellness room." ~ NM Teacher

Recommendations

The hope of the research team was to understand the implementation of wellness spaces in New Mexico to share with those interested in increasing student access to wellness spaces as a viable strategy for mental, social, and emotional well-being. This section outlines the SEL4NM researchers' interpretation of the data and recommendations for an array of New Mexico stakeholders – policy leaders, educational leaders, organizations that support educational efforts, and all school community members, including principals, teachers, ancillary staff, students, and more.

1. ***Deliberation of Purpose and Establishment*** - identify and include key stakeholders in assessing need, determining the purpose, and identifying outcomes of the wellness space. Also, consider the following:

a. Creating a feedback loop through surveys, open discussions, etc., to identify needs, understanding of, and potential barriers to inform effectiveness and prioritize efforts
b. Elevating student involvement via student advisory committees
c. Determining benefits of establishing staff wellness space in addition to student space
d. Training staff, students, families, etc., on the purpose and use of wellness space

2. ***Continuum of Implementation*** - contemplate different ways, or entry points, in implementing a wellness space. Wellness efforts should be part of a layered system of support designed to meet students' social-emotional needs
   a. Utilize New Mexico's Multi-layered System of Support (MLSS) framework
   b. Prioritize spaces as a universal, layer 1 intervention
3. ***Operation and Funding*** - consideration of location, materials, resources, access, staffing, procedures, and funding sources can be guided by the following:
   a. Provide options for access, such as spaces in different locations on a school campus, like calm corners in each classroom, spaces in hallways, and spaces for staff, in addition to a centralized room or area
      i. Establish a referral process and communicate with the school community
   b. Use purposeful design to balance stimulation and research-based materials and resources that cultivate SEL
   c. Evaluate available staffing resources such as college interns, community partners, etc. Train those who oversee spaces on all levels of student care, e.g., SEL and QPR
   d. Access multiple funding sources such as federal funds, school operational funds, grants, community partnerships, and fundraising

Conclusion

SEL4NM envisions a world where all schools and youth-serving organizations are centers of safe, caring, and supportive activity where youth and adults are empathetic, resilient, civically engaged and culturally aware, and responsive, developing the skills to solve problems, manage emotions and form positive relationships with others. Through this research project, SEL4NM has increased knowledge of wellness spaces and found them to foster opportunities to build invaluable life skills and the essential building blocks of emotional intelligence - self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-direction. SEL4NM will continue to assist those interested in exploring wellness spaces as a way to support social and emotional learning in New Mexico.

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