



## Maintaining Successful Partnerships in Rural Communities with Joseph Wharff and Jamey Peterson

Claire Viscione:

Hello and welcome to In Session, a podcast where we speak with change makers working towards safe, supportive learning environments within their communities. Our guests include state and local education agencies and their partners, all grant recipients from the Department of Education, using their funding to advance school-based mental health services, support mental health service professionals, and establish trauma recovery and prevention programs.

On this episode of In Session, we talk to mental health service professional grant recipients about developing and maintaining successful partnerships in rural communities. Our guests include Joseph Wharff, Associate Director of the Office of Student Services at the Virginia Department of Education and State Coordinator of the Virginia Partnership for School Mental Health. Joseph is joined by Dr. Michael Lyons and Dr. Julia Taylor, co-directors, and Dr. Katy Zeanah, Project Manager of the Virginia Partnership for School Mental Health at the University of Virginia. We also welcome Jamie Peterson, Coordinated School Health Director for the Montana Office of Public Instruction. Jamie's joined by her colleagues, Brittany Carr, School Health Program Manager, and university partners, Dr. Kirsten Murray and Dr. Anna Elliot from the University of Montana and Montana State University. This episode is facilitated by Kris Scardamalia.

Kris Scardamalia:

Good morning and welcome to our podcast. My name is Kris Scardamalia, and I'm an Assistant Professor with the National Center for School Mental Health, and working with the NCSSE Center. So today we're going to be talking about partnerships and we have two groups on here to talk about their current work, their partnerships, and what that process has been for them. So this morning I want to first Jamie Peterson. If you could tell us a little about yourself and the folks that you have with you today.

Jamie Peterson:

Hi, yes. I'm Jamie Peterson, I'm the Coordinated School Health Director for the Montana Office of Public Instruction, and I have my colleagues, Brittany Carr, today. She's our Equal Health Program Program Manager, as well as Dr. Murray and Anna Elliot, who are with our university partners, the Montana State University and University of Montana. And we are with, what we call in Montana, our Rural Mental Health Pathways grant program.

Kris Scardamalia:

Thank you. We also have with us today Joseph Wharff and his team and colleagues. Joseph, if you would introduce yourself and your team and partners.

Joseph Wharff:

Well hi everyone. Joe Wharff, I am the Associate Director in the Office of Student Services at the Virginia Department of Education and kind of state coordinator for the Mental Health Development Grant that we have here. Our partners are with the University of Virginia. We have Dr. Mike Lyons with us who is coordinating the effort from UVA, as well as Dr. Julia Taylor with UVA as well. And also Katy Zeanah, who is our project coordinator from the University of Virginia. That's our team.

Kris Scardamalia:

Wonderful, thank you. So today our focus is partnerships, right? So talking about what richness do partnerships bring to our work, why might we want to engage in them, and what are maybe some things that you've had to think about as you develop and sustain these partnerships. So to start with, if you would, describe your most significant partnership or the partnership that you have here today. What does that partnership look like? And when you began your current project, was that a new partnership that you developed for the project or an existing partner that you brought into the work?

Joseph Wharff:

Well, certainly, I'll start. It's Joe Wharff again, with the Virginia Department of Education. When we received this grant back in 2019, we pretty quickly got University of Virginia on board for a number of reasons. First of all, obviously it's one of the top universities in Virginia academically as well as research wise, a lot of the things that they're doing are just pretty amazing work. Another factor that came into really grabbing UVA and as a partner was that they're kind of centrally located in the middle of Virginia. And when we did the data and we looked at a lot of the high need LEAs, University of Virginia was in a great location to be able to work with that. I think thirdly, they have great graduate programs. Our work is involved with the graduate programs and working in some of the high need LEAs and so the graduate programs and school counseling and school psychology fit the needs for us for this program.

I think also we've done some work with UVA in the past. I haven't, Dr. Taylor had worked with the Virginia Department of Education a little bit in the past, but really kind of new for us in this kind of capacity with this kind of work with the USED grant. I think some of the partnerships as well with our LEAs, some of our high need LEAs, we work with those in some capacity in different areas throughout the year and in different ways. But again, kind of a new thing here with the USED grant and working with our divisions that are high need.

Certainly that high need was defined by USED as we were doing this grant project. And so as we're going in, it's getting those mostly small LEAs engaged in this is a very important thing. So we needed to have LEAs and divisions that had strong leadership. We had LEAs that had the leadership that was willing to allow their school mental health professionals to be available for the kind of work that we're talking about. And we're also kind of engaged and would agree to kind of try to sustain this work, not just through the life of the grant, but after that grant.

Jamie Peterson:

Here in Montana, I have kind of inherited this grant, but it started out with the relationship with the University of Montana and Montana State University right from the beginning as I understand it, and I can kick that part to Dr. Murray or Dr. Elliot, but I can say that in Montana we do try to collaborate a lot with our university systems, and they really do help create a pipeline into our rural communities here in Montana. Most of Montana is rural, if not frontier. So we have definitely worked with them, worked with the Native Children's Trauma Center out of the University, the Safe School Center, as well as several others, just to try to make sure that we are addressing the whole child across the state, whole

community, whole child, whole school model. But I'll kick it to Dr. Murray or Dr. Elliot to expand on that since they were involved since the very beginning.

Kirsten Murray:

Sure, thanks Jamie. One thing that I've appreciated about our approach that is new and unique in terms of partnerships is that we have two universities partnering together on the grant. The Office of Public Instruction has been a longstanding partner for both universities, but typically in academic systems, universities tend to silo away from each other. And what's really wonderful about this is that both counseling departments came together to address the needs of the state. So the needs of the state became bigger than the silo of each university, and I feel really proud about that. Because of where Montana State is located and the University of Montana is located, we're able to cover a lot more land mass in the design of this grant and get more of our interns out across the state than we could as a solo operation. And that's been wonderfully successful so far.

Jamie Peterson:

And I think too, because of the way that our training structure is set up, where we bring the two cohorts from University of Montana and Montana State together periodically throughout the year, that's also building relationships with each other that is sustaining past the terms of their internship and their post-grad placement. And because isolation is a massive component to the mental health issues that we experience in Montana, it's creating these networks and these connections with each other that they can maintain as they go out and into the workforce.

Kris Scardamalia:

Thank you. Those are, it's really good kind of orientation to what these partnerships are. A little bit of a sense of why partner, which gets us into our next question. Thinking about in what ways have these partnerships enriched your work? So if you could imagine, what would it be like to do this project without partners and what have those partnerships really brought into the work?

Jamie Peterson:

I think it'd be really lonely, and I think there would be far less connection. So the Office of Public Instruction in Montana has a bigger view of the landscape of where the most high needs rural schools are and people to connect us with in those schools. Montana is a state that is rural and isolated and most things happen through relationship, and having many partners across the state just facilitates those connections and makes it a lot less lonely.

Joseph Wharff:

Joe Wharff again with Virginia Department of Education. I would just piggyback on that. I think through our partnership, UVA, we've been able to expand to five additional university partners that cover ... I mean Virginia is expansive and there's a lot of different kind of LEAs and different needs within State of Virginia. And so through those different partnerships and different parts of the state, we're able to actually look at this work through a different scope for each of those and to be able to do it as those divisions need as opposed to just having one's actual location.

Mike Lyons:

Yeah, this is Mike Lyons at UVA and I just wanted to piggyback off of what Dr. Murray was saying and Joe as well. I think part of what is a strength of these partnerships is a recognition that each partner comes

with a different perspective and a different set of skills. It's really valuable for when states and universities and communities are working on very challenging problems that really need diverse perspectives and diverse ideas and lots of different stakeholders at the table. And our experience has been that that really does enrich the way that we understand problems, the way that we problem solve, and the way that we implement supports. That ranges from having university faculty from across Virginia collaborating on problems alongside the departments of education and the LEAs to come up with solutions that alone nobody would've come up with themselves.

Katy Zeanah:

Just to add onto that, this is Katy Zeanah, also at UVA. I think one of the things that has been really powerful with the work that we're doing is the interprofessional nature, because we are all, I'm a school psychologist by training and so I've been trained in the lens of school psychology. And when I am engaged in conversations with and learning from and with school counselors and school social workers and school nurses, they bring perspectives that I just don't have because of where I am and who I am and how I've been trained in my experiences.

And so I think that that has been something, you all were talking about the sort of loneliness that comes with being in a rural isolated setting. And that's true. I think both your physical location, whether you're a rural school and you're the only person, but also the professional isolation that comes when you are only working, you're the only school mental health provider, or you're the only psychologist and you don't have anybody else to bounce ideas off of. And that's been something that has been really meaningful for me to be a part of, but also that we've heard from our partners, that they have really appreciated as part of the work that we're doing.

Kris Scardamalia:

Thank you. And Jamie, you had come off mute at one point. Did you want to jump in?

Jamie Peterson:

Well, just starting this grant around the time of the beginning of COVID, I think it had its own unique challenges of course, which anybody could speak to. But really to have collaborative thought partners to think about new and innovative ways of how to address the issues that we wanted to address in the beginning, but now in light of a pandemic, I think we had to kind of pivot, and pivot again, and pivot again, just like everybody else in the country, in thinking about how can we create a sustainable model and have capacity across the state.

And so again, our partners were very innovative in the way that they were like, okay, we see these gaps and then we see these opportunities and how can we weave some of the partnerships that we already have, some of the other grant opportunities that we already have, such as Project AWARE, for instance, and really target our efforts to not only get the best placements for the students, but also to just amplify the work that we're doing and provide the supports to make the placements successful, such as the university partners identified that we needed more supports for our supervisors. And so they created a training specifically to strengthen the supervisory skills to make their placements of the counseling students more successful and long term. So I think just thinking, being very thoughtful about the process, how we move forward, especially in light of a pandemic which created, a whole unique set of challenges.

Kris Scardamalia:

And yes, didn't it, right? So this theme that seems to be emerging of breadth and depth, that partnerships really enrich the scope of what you can take on, how deeply you can go, how richly you can understand and problem solve. Thinking about that, what have been some of your greatest successes that come from your partnerships?

Kirsten Murray:

One that comes to mind for me starts with a problem and then how to address it. I think as we expanded out into some of our very rural placements, we started to uncover that not very many people besides the school counselor in a school knew what a school counselor did. And the professional identity of the school counselor and what their training was and what they were equipped to do, they often weren't being utilized in the way they were trained. So in some cases they weren't seen as a mental health resource. Not always, but sometimes. And so I think some of our biggest successes have been in the realm of professional advocacy and helping different systems understand what school counselors are prepared to do and how to best utilize them. And I don't think that's something we would've ever uncovered without the partnerships and then partners that would listen and shift and pivot and expand with us.

Anna Elliot:

And I think related to that, Kirsten, we also found that there's an assumption going in that maybe school counseling students didn't want to work in rural environments because we were finding that that's not where they were going. That our students were graduating from our program and staying pretty closely connected to Bozeman, Missoula, Helena, Billings, like the big cities in Montana. And what we actually found is that almost 100% of them wanted to work in rural communities once they finished their internships, they wanted to stay in rural communities, and it was actually other barriers that were preventing them from doing so. And so that was really great to find out that it wasn't a lack of interest, it wasn't a lack of connection, it wasn't a lack of commitment, it was these other sort of more bureaucratic logistical factors that were getting in the way of them doing that. And that, yeah, was really heartening and wonderful to discover.

Julia Taylor:

This is Julia from the University of Virginia. I'll echo what our Montana colleagues just said. We've seen very similar results with our division partners here in Virginia in terms of understanding and better utilizing the roles of school mental health professionals. And I oversee the school counseling component and we've had so many students end up working in our high need school divisions and in more rural school divisions that we've ever seen before. And we're creating this great pipeline of supervisors, as well, through that process. And I wholeheartedly believe it's because of that partnership aspect and, again, understanding the roles and functions of school mental health professionals, particularly in that school counseling realm, in a light that they hadn't maybe understood or realized before that these students are taking 60 credit hours and are licensed and have the same credentials as everyone else. So it's been really positive for all parties involved.

Mike Lyons:

You know what I think is also really interesting, this is Mike Lyons at UVA. To piggyback off what Julia said is that I have noticed for myself personally that I have a better kind of understanding of various kind of training backgrounds, roles, of other folks. I mean Julia works just down the hall from me in school counseling and over the last few years we've really started to think more just internally, at UVA, how do

we train and capitalize on the various strengths that providers have as well as recognize the shared kinds of orientations that allied providers have. How do we expand capacity, advocacy, relevance, of the set of providers that we have? So for it to both see this kind of happening in the communities and the LEAs we're working with, but then also to experience it myself has been really, really neat.

Julia Taylor:

Thank you Mike for saying that. This is Julia again. I'll add one more piece to that. We spend a lot of times discussing ratios and nationwide what our school mental health providers' ratios are. And in rural divisions you often have a lower ratio. I mean it really is about building the capacity of the provider, because if you're not able to do the work that you are trained to do, if you keep adding providers in, it really doesn't impact the field or the profession or the student. We don't have the student outcomes that we desire. So that's been another area of improvement that we've seen as well.

Kris Scardamalia:

Other reflections on successes that have come, particularly from the partnerships, or things that you've been able to accomplish that it feels like you would not have been able to do on your own?

Jamie Peterson:

Well we have, through the Office of Public Instruction, this is Jamie Peterson, through the Office of Public Instruction we have the Montana Teacher Learning Hub and we have designed some courses to go along with this grant to build some sustainability in for this grant. And as we've moved forward, we've kind of identified some weaknesses within those that we want to polish up and we are working with our partners at the universities to identify someone who can bring in a different lens to really strengthen those courses. It builds sustainability for the program, but beyond that, also, once this grant is over, or people who don't make it the cut into the grant, they can still take those courses and get some insight into rural life, and if they're going to have a tribal placement, or just really give them the opportunity to properly prepare before they move into specifically a rural community. Because sometimes here in Montana, it's like the gas station, the restaurant and the church, and everything is all in one.

It's a very small community. Your grocery store is, you might be two hours plus away from other healthcare or a grocery store or anything like that. And so just if you take somebody from a true big city like Seattle or New York or even Missoula, Montana, and you place them in a very rural community where they're more isolated like that, I think it's really important to make sure that they have those supports before they get there so they really can anticipate and prepare themselves for what they're looking for. And with the support of the university partners, we're able to ensure that those courses are appropriate and at the level they need to really be at for those professionals who are moving into those communities.

Kris Scardamalia:

So in addition to breadth and depth, different perspectives, that seems to be another very common theme that as you expand your partnerships, your perspective and the wealth of information that you have to tap into also expands. So thinking about the forming of these partnerships, the maintenance, the future directions, and maybe the challenges that you've had to overcome informing or maintaining those, what advice would you have for other sites who are starting projects or looking to expand and develop partnerships?

Katy Zeanah:

This is Katy at UVA, and I will say one of the things that we have been trying to be really intentional about is emphasizing the partnership aspect of these relationships. So it's not just those of us at the university coming in and saying, "We know that this is a thing and so here's what we're going to do to fix it for you." Really trying to engage in listening and collaboration with our partners to have them tell us what they need, and what they want, and generate some ideas of how we can be helpful.

And so when we were getting started with the project, we had different listening sessions, coffee chats, with providers to hear about what was going on with them, and we've continued those throughout the life of the grant as we've added on new people and new universities and school districts. I think that that's been a really important piece is recognizing that the people that we want to work with have so much to offer and have so many great ideas and just sometimes need some help with making those things happen or getting those things put in place, but really engaging in that we're all on the same playing field and we all want to work toward this same goal, and so how can we work together to get there?

Anna Elliot:

And I think the word I would put to that is cultural humility. I think that especially when universities are getting involved with community agencies, there can be an assumption or a past experience of universities coming in from a pretty colonial patronizing perspective. And so I think the big thing that we have learned and emphasized and really infused into our training with the students is not assuming that what a community needs or what a school needs, and that you're coming in with that lens and that lens is valuable, but it's only one. And just the value of coming in and coming from a place of curiosity and openness and being tuned in to what your assumptions are is critical.

Kirsten Murray:

Anna, that reminds me of the rural life orientation work that we've done here. And it connects to Katy, what you were saying earlier. What struck me about what Katy was saying is that face to face, on the ground, time to have rapport. And so for every cohort of students that has moved through this grant, we partner with a rural community and have a liaison there that the grant team gets to know really well. And then we take this group of 10 students and go stay in this rural community for three days. It's a really nice opportunity for the students to practice, and for me to practice, being curious, learning from our partners, being in their systems. And to be honest, when we wrote this into the grant, I thought, "Oh okay, I'll do it." That has been the shining bright spot for me, that rural life experience with our cohort of students. I look forward to it every year and I want to figure out a way to keep doing it.

Mike Lyons:

I agree with what everyone has just said about partnerships. This is Mike Lyons at UVA, and I think it's so important to come in with a shared kind of understanding, as well as appreciation, for values of the communities and other partners that you're serving. What's challenging is that there's very relatively limited kind of resources to incentivize that kind of partnership, despite of lots of recognition that is very valuable and we can get farther together than alone. And I think that has been one of the things I've appreciated significantly about the work that we've been able to do and the kind of mechanism that we have is that it allows for space for that kind of relationship building and ability to slowly develop those partnerships.

Kris Scardamalia:

One of the themes that has come up a few times talking about the unique needs of rural communities, and in particular linking that to thinking about cultural humility. So we talk about culture, we don't always think about rural, but that is absolutely an aspect that we should attend to. I am curious from the Virginia team, just knowing in Virginia there are big cities, but then there's also a lot of rural areas. I'm curious to hear any reflections that you might have or echoes that you see in your work, working in or around or with rural communities.

Julia Taylor:

This is Julia from the University of Virginia. I echo some of the things that Anna and Kristen said related to being able to go in there and just understand their needs. Clearly we are not Montana, so things are a little bit different here in terms of the culture in our rural communities. But they have limited resources often, and limited access, particularly to mental health providers. And sometimes in schools we know statistically of the 20% of students that have significant mental health needs, 80% of those don't receive services and the majority that do, do so inside of that school setting. So understanding their needs, being able to make this an authentic partnership where we're not assuming what they need, figuring out what that is through this partnership and being able to deliver and help build capacity, I think has been a really important aspect of our partnership.

We also have rural areas that are traditionally rural where they're not connected to a city, but then we also have rural areas that do have this close access to, and closer proximity to, some more city-like structures. And we have some rural areas that are technically statistically rural, but they are just located within a city environment, that we work with. So they're all unique and they're all different and they're all spread out through the state of Virginia. So trying to determine those needs, and working with our other university partners, I think, has been helpful in, again, determining the need and helping building the capacity of the mental health providers.

Mike Lyons:

I think that's absolutely true. This is Mike Lyons also at UVA. On the one hand, the rural communities that we are working with do have significant needs and significant kind of interest in supporting students' development. But also I think those communities have lots of unique strengths that other communities, larger communities, don't have. The close connections and close relationships that the schools have with community providers, that they have with parents and families, is unlike what you would see in other larger communities. And an ability to move more flexibly and move kind of resources around more flexibly, those that they have. So I think that is an important, while it's important to recognize the barriers and limitations that rural communities face, I think we've also been able to see a lot of the strengths and capitalize on those strengths when thinking about how to support student development.

Kris Scardamalia:

Thank you. So at this time I'd like just to invite any final reflections, things that you maybe have wanted to talk about but we haven't gotten to, or things that you think are just really interesting for folks to know about how your partnerships have developed, maintained, and what you're thinking about in the future.

Kirsten Murray:

This is Kirsten Murray from Montana and one thing that I'd like to figure out with our team is how do we build capacity of getting more students out to more rural communities? So right now we're doing 10



students a year and we have internship sites calling us and saying, "Send us another next year." And we're trying to spread our placements out so we get more connections with more rural partners and they get more help, but we don't have enough students to get to everyone that wants them. And it would be really nice if we could get to a place where we have that.

Joseph Wharff:

Joe with VDOE. I think we need to look at the work that we're doing broader than just the five years within the grant. And so we created a lot of things, we've done a lot of great collaboration. We've been able to take things that we've already, resources that we've produced and things that we're doing within this grant, and then expanding it already throughout the Commonwealth. So to be able to look at that, to be able to look at the sustaining part of it, but also be able to look at, listen, this is something that should be a way of work from now on. This is not just something that's going to end here after five years. And so UVA has done a great job with doing that, and we continue to try to figure out ways to partner in different areas and to be able to get funding and things like that to be able to continue this work and expand it throughout the Commonwealth.

Kris Scardamalia:

And I love that point about how partnerships can not just enrich the current work but really improve sustainability. That these are things that live on beyond the end of the grant and that can be very enriching and that come from those partnerships. I think that's wonderful.

Anna Elliot:

Actually, something that has just recently come up and was initiated by one of our students at Montana State is also looking at the legislative side of things. Because as I mentioned, some of the barriers that students are finding in being able to stay in the rural communities is not interest or desire on the part of the school or the student, but funding and prioritization of mental health in Montana by the larger forces. And so we're actually putting together a training right now with all of our students and community members related to how mental health professionals can get involved with legislation and advocacy work in a more concrete active way. Because I think there's a lot of interest, but people don't know how to kind of jump into that realm. And so that's something that we're looking at too because I would say then the biggest barrier is larger forces believing in the importance and prioritization of mental health in the schools.

Jamie Peterson:

And along those lines too, this is Jamie with the Office of Public Instruction, we have started working towards creating a workforce development taskforce under our Student Wellness Advisory Committee. And our hope is that we can pull together all of the people, both internally and externally in the state, maybe not all the people, but a cohort of people that can address the issues and gaps that we have in workforce development and make some recommendations and help create a strategic plan that we could potentially get in front of the legislature. We know that there's going to be a lot of questions around workforce development, school safety, so we're trying to preemptively think about, okay, what are going to ask and how can we provide what they're going to ask for before they actually ask for it and kind of provide some guidance from the people who work in the field, such as our university partners and the Montana School Counselors Association and the Department of Labor and Industry and our CTE program. Just a wide variety of stakeholders.

Because it's important to not only think about the pipeline from the university system, but also the education system and teaching kids when they're in elementary and high school that this is a career field that you can go into, you can impact people's lives, you can fulfill your passion. And so we're trying to think proactively and get ahead of the curve, but it's one of those things that it just, it's really hard to pull everybody together and get that ball rolling just because it's summer in Montana, it's hard to find people who are available. But that's kind of our hope is to think proactively regarding the legislature and provide that to our superintendent, as well as leadership throughout the state, so that we can hopefully move the dial a little bit.

Kris Scardamalia:

Well, this has been a wonderful conversation. I really appreciate everybody's time today. I'm really interested just listening to the work that you're doing and problems that you've been resolving. So we really appreciate your time.

Annie Knowles:

In session is brought to you by the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, or NCSSE, at the American Institutes for Research. This podcast is funded by the U.S. Department of Education. If you'd like to learn more about NCSSE, visit [safesupportivelearning.ed.gov](https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov). For all questions or feedback, you can email us at [NCSSE@air.org](mailto:NCSSE@air.org). Thanks for listening.

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