



## Community Alliances for Equity

Communities of Care

COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:

Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety

August 3, 2023



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### TRANSCRIPTION

**Dr. Kyser:**

Alright. So, we're gonna get...go ahead and get started. Good afternoon. Welcome, welcome everyone to the Region III Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center, or MAP Center, *Communities of Care Virtual Coffeehouse* series. This particular series is a space to virtually land, as we all work very hard to meet the needs of our students and families in the face of changes, continued changes impacting our daily routines, and response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. As we work to pursue our consistent stance on realizing educational equity, we want to use this as an opportunity to share what is going well, in addition to our struggles. To be clear, the Region III Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center *Communities of Care Virtual Coffeehouse* series is intended to center the perspectives of you all, of the participants. We encourage us all to come together in this virtual space, share our experiences, and use dialogue and conversation just as you would in your local coffeehouse.

**Dr. Kyser:**

This particular *Coffeehouse* is focused on intentionally centering educator mental health, wholeness, and safety. This virtual engagement experience aims to acknowledge the need for us to come together in a virtual community to discuss challenges, discover and be encouraged by what we've learned collectively, as well as work to meet the demands of teaching and learning as community members post COVID-19—or for some: still in COVID-19. This is an opportunity for us to learn and dialogue together. Please note that our conversation today will emphasize and center those that have

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COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:

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August 3, 2023



IUPUI  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

been historically and contemporarily marginalized, under-served, and disenfranchised, as is our charge in supporting public Pre-K through 12, LEA's, SEA's, and other responsible governmental entities. We're working to redress student civil rights violations in the areas of race, sex, national origin, and religion. So, to that end, please be ready to engage and take notes.

**Dr. Kyser:**

For those of you who may not be familiar with the Region III Equity Assistance Center, the MAP Center, we're one of four regional Equity Assistance Centers. We're funded by the U.S. Department of Education, under Title IV of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. We provide technical assistance and training to a very large region, which represents 13 states, over 7,000 districts, and 11.2 million students. Kristina is placing in the chat a little bit more information, should you want to know a little bit more about our Center.

**Dr. Kyser:**

I'm thrilled to join you. My name is Tiffany Kyser, she/her. I'm the Associate Director of Networks and Engagement...and Engagement and Partnerships with the MAP Center. And I'm joined by Kristina Johnson-Yates who will serve as a technical director and is our doc student. I'll hold space for Kristina to say hello.

**Kristina Johnson-Yates:** Hey everyone. Again, my name is Kristina Johnson-Yates. I'm a second-year Doctoral Research Assistant here with the Equity Center and I'll just be in the background. So, nice to meet you all.



## Community Alliances for Equity

Communities of Care

COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:

Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety

August 3, 2023



IUPUI  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

**Dr. Kyser:**

Thank you, Kristina. I'm also thrilled to introduce our conversation starters for today. They'll support us...specifically their role is supporting us in sharing their perspectives and insights to break the quote unquote virtual ice as we pepper in three reflective prompts throughout today's *Virtual Coffeehouse* session. I'm so thrilled that Dr. Sullivan, Dr. Weeks, Dr. Goodrum, and Dr. Johnson could join us. So, we'll start with Dr. Sullivan, and we'll follow in the order of Weeks, Goodrum, and Johnson.

**Dr. Sullivan:**

Hi everybody. I'm so glad to be here in conversation with you all today. I'm Amanda Sullivan. I am a Professor of School Psychology. I'm the Birkmaier Educational Leadership Professor at the University of Minnesota. I'm the mama of a soon-to-be fourth grader here in our public schools. And I've been, in my career, largely focused around issues of educational equity, particularly related to disability and accessibility, for the duration of my career. So, again, I'm really happy to be here with you.

**Dr. Kyser:**

Thank you, Dr. Sullivan. Dr. Weeks.

**Dr. Weeks:**

[Inaudible] everyone. I'm Mollie Weeks. I am a Lecturer and Instructor at the University of Minnesota. I'm Amanda's former advisee, and now I get to work with her, which is really wonderful. I do teach classes in School Psychology, but I also supervise a group of students for their practicum and their internship at a local school district. So, I kind of exist between worlds in education, both in the university setting and within a practice setting, working sort of with



## Community Alliances for Equity

Communities of Care

COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:

Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety

August 3, 2023



IUPUI  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

educators as we work to, to support our students in schools. So, yeah, my work and previous research has focused on different areas of equity and policy. And although I don't have a formal research line right now, I do get to delve into the practice role a little bit, which is very exciting.

**Dr. Kyser:**

Thank you, Dr. Weeks. Dr. Goodrum.

**Dr. Goodrum:**

Hi, I am Bobbie Goodrum. I am the Superintendent of Ferndale Public Schools, which is in Michigan. I've been an educator for 25 years, so including Superintendent. I've been the Assistant Superintendent of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Principal, Special Education Director, and a classroom teacher, so lots of different roles. I heard Dr. Sullivan talk about her upcoming senior. I, too, have actually two upcoming seniors, one from college and one from high school. So, shout out to the class of 2024. Super excited to be here and consider it an honor and privilege to be a member of this community.

**Dr. Kyser:**

Thank you so much, Dr. Goodrum. And Dr. Johnson, last but certainly not least.

**Dr. Johnson:**

Thank you so much. Greetings to everyone. My name is Cynthia Johnson, better known as Mama J. And I am the Executive Director of Inclusion, Engagement, and Belonging in Lawrence Public Schools in Lawrence, Kansas. So happy to kick off my 36th year of education. The work that we do was so important because it brings

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Communities of Care

COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:

Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety

August 3, 2023



IUPUI  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

light to the lives of our children, our families in our communities. And that is the work that I celebrate every single day. I also serve as a consultant and, and working with school districts throughout the United States. It is a work that didn't start off as a work, and has never been a work for me. It is a purpose, it is a passion, it's what we do. So, thank you so much for allowing me to be a part of this community today.

**Dr. Kyser:**

Thank you. Thank you, Dr. Johnson. Close captioning has been enabled for those that might prefer to perceive text in addition to the option of auditory as well. Thank you all for our conversation starters, for being here today. A little bit of netiquette before we dive into our conversation. One of our goals here at the MAP Center is to engage participants in well-defined, content-rich technical assistance, such that knowledge and expertise are shared in a way that results in transformative systemic change, as well as personal reflection and growth. To this end, we aim to make this unique learning available on our website via recording and transcription. Additionally, sharing photos of today's conversation on our social media platforms. We encourage all participants to consider this disclaimer as they share and engage today.

**Dr. Kyser:**

So, a little bit about our interaction. We ask that participants are very interactive in this, this live virtual session, in real time. We ask that you mute your microphone when not speaking auditorily or, or engaging auditorily just to keep sound limited. We also ask participants to unmute their video when it is time to take our photo.

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**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

And if you prefer not to be videoed, feel free to mute your camera as well. Should you have any tech barriers, of course, Kristina is our resident technical director. Don't hesitate to private chat Kristina with any needs that you may have.

**Kristina Johnson-Yates:** And before we jump into our conversation: we'll be taking group pictures and posting them on our social media platforms after the session. If you would not like to be included in the photos, please mute your video at the time of the group shot. We will definitely queue you before that happens. And with that, I will turn it back over to Dr. Kyser.

**Dr. Kyser:** Thank you, Kristina. And we are going to jump right into our first question. Just to get the conversation going, I'm going to pose this first to Dr. Goodrum: as we think about intentionally centering educator mental health, wholeness, and safety, for you, Dr. Goodrum, what are some crucial considerations you would offer in balancing educator mental health and educator responsibility to create healthy and inclusive learning environments for students? A secondary question, too, is how may this balance shift, given that there's such a high demand on classroom educators, building educators, and teachers specifically, but often a lack in shifts in the system itself?

**Dr. Goodrum:** Okay. Thank you. Thank you for that. There are so many things that we have to consider. This is a very timely conversation. The first thing as we look, and I know that this is, is, is not exhaustive of just

**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

COVID-19 recovery. But because we like to say that we're out of the pandemic, I'm not sure that I want to say we're out of the pandemic yet. But what we all experienced starting in 2020, the, the first thing that we have to remember is that we all experienced it. So, even though teachers have a responsibility, lots of people have jobs, lots of people have careers. And they're still expected to fulfill their responsibilities. But each of us also was greatly impacted. I think that this is one thing that we can say that nobody came through unscathed. So, we have to...we cannot ignore the fact that everyone has experienced something that if it was not traumatic, it had some significant impact on their lives. So, we have to remember that.

**Dr. Goodrum:**

And specifically, as it relates to education and educators, the nature of our jobs has changed since the pandemic. During the pandemic, as we recover from the pandemic, the nature of our jobs, our customers, let's say, or the people that we serve. The students, the families, our communities have changed. When we think about the way the world shifted in that amount of time, one and a half years, two years, three years is a quarter of a life, half of the lifetime for our young people. So, it made an enormous impact on their brain development and the way that they operate in the world. So basically, in a blink of an eye, for us adults, our whole world shifted, for those of us in education. It cannot be ignored.

**Dr. Goodrum:**

And, and very often, as we talk about the shifts in, in demand and a lack of shifts in educational systems, unfortunately, educational systems have not...have been very slow, I will say, to react to it. Or



**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

they have reacted to it, I'll say, the best way they, they know how, which is, you know, additional funding from, so, so, for mental health services and things of that nature. But not really any game plan or any consideration of the fact that we are, those of us who are practicing educators, are educators and are not mental health specialists. So, thank you for all these monies that you have provided, but without any specific game plan on the exact right tools that are going to work both for our learning communities, the, the students within them, the families and the educators. Lots of people are just grasping at straws. It's the blind, leading the blind, as far as how do you even provide the support?

**Dr. Goodrum:**

Would you want to acknowledge the need and, and, and to try to provide some, some sort of support? But at the...it, it's like we're just saying, "But we have to keep going. We have to get those scores up." And so, we have legal obligations, most of us, in, in, in states for funding, et cetera. We have to reach certain benchmarks. However, especially those of us who are educational administrators, are in positions where we have the ability to try to give relief when possible, we have to try to provide some degree of support, and at least acknowledge. We must acknowledge and try to plan intentionally with the, with the knowledge that this is a significant situation and has had a real impact on, on everyone. It's something that can't be ignored.

**Dr. Kyser:**

Thank you, Dr. Goodrum. To mirror back some things, and then I'll open it up to the rest of our conversation starters, and then we'll





## Community Alliances for Equity

Communities of Care

COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:

Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety

August 3, 2023



IUPUI  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

open up to the virtual room. When, when sort of thinking through crucial considerations in balancing educator mental health, but also educator responsibilities, I, I received that we should understand that we're all...we were all, and continue to be, impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic. That everyone was impacted. What I infer from that too, Dr. Goodrum, was that although everyone was impacted there are, of course, particular groups that our school communities have historically struggled to adequately serve, that have experienced disenfranchisement from systems. So, as we think about all of us being impacted, and educators thinking about the balance of their mental health and their responsibilities: one, understanding we're all impacted; and two, understanding that the pernicious inequities that were always present are even further exacerbated.

**Dr. Kyser:**

The second thing that I received is that the nature of the work of educators has shifted. So, back into that balance of...the secondary question of the balancing between teacher demand and educational shifts. And maybe the system not shifting as quickly as the demands on educators. Is really...I, I think what I pulled is noticing that, as an educator noticing that. Surfacing that within your school community. Having conversations about the requirements of educators—yet perhaps the lack of requirements of the system itself, and really noticing that. Having conversations about that.

**Dr. Kyser:**

You underscored, “We cannot ignore these shifts.” And we have to be very thoughtful as we receive funds, either at the state, federal, or

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## Community Alliances for Equity

Communities of Care

COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:

Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety

August 3, 2023



IUPUI  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

local level. How do we...I'm, I'm mirroring back, but also inferring, how do we center those in our communities that perhaps are more of the, as Mia Mingus calls "Oracles," that have experienced the most severe adversity in, in the face of both inequitable systems that were longstanding, and the COVID-19 impact on systems. So how do we center the assets in our communities, i.e., students that have historically, and parents and families that have historically, not been served: how are they centered in decision-making as we receive influx of, of, of funds? So those are some of the things that I heard, Dr. Goodrum, inferred, that I wanted to mirror back. Did I get you all right, Dr. Goodrum? Did I miss anything before I open it up?

**Dr. Goodrum:**

No, absolutely. And...you did, you did wonderfully. Thank you, Dr. Kyser. But, but to your point, also, remembering as we're speaking specifically about educators, that the educators who come from those communities that have been marginalized. So, when we look at the fact that we have a, a disproportionate number of, say, educators from communities that have been marginalized, who are further marginalized and impacted by the pandemic, and trying to keep and increase the numbers of people from underrepresented populations in the teaching field. But the pandemic so disproportionately affected, or so much greatly affected those educators. It's making it even harder for us to: a. support them, retain them, and recruit educators from communities that have been marginalized to come and work with our children who also have been, you know, marginalized historically.

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A PROJECT OF 

**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

**Dr. Kyser:**

I appreciate that, specifically on recruitment, retention of educators with, with difference, educators of Color at the intersections, educators with disabilities, LGBTQ educators, etc. Thank you for that. That segues nicely into Dr. Johnson's question. Before we move to that question though, I want to open up the virtual space, both to the conversation starters and participants, if there's any questions, any loving critique, anything to add. Give you some think time. And feel free to unmute and share out as you see fit.

**Dr. Sullivan:**

So, I really appreciated Bobbie's comments and as she alluded to: we need systems, and really intentional systems, to rise to these challenges. One thing we talk a lot about here is just thinking about...as we're thinking about building or really redesigning systems, we need to do so with prioritizing the benefit to the most marginalized. Because in doing so, we'll not just to address those disparities: but everybody benefits when we do that. If we, if we address the people who've been most harmed by...whether we're talking about the virus itself because of all of the physiological issues with Long COVID, or if we think about like the widespread social economic impacts: we know empirically, we also know from people's lived experiences, like the effects have been so much more greatly felt among communities of the global majority. LGBTQIA folks. Those folks who are already economically marginalized.

**Dr. Sullivan:**

And so, if we, if we build those systems, we think about the systems, like, how do we rectify all these harms? That's what we're most likely to see benefit, not just for those folks, but to the system as a whole.



## Community Alliances for Equity

Communities of Care

COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:

Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety

August 3, 2023



IUPUI

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

And as I think about kind of these questions and where we started, I really keep coming back to this...the, the understanding that wellness and mental health are contextual. They're features of systems, byproducts of them. So, they don't exist at the individual level. They're not characteristics of the individual. But in a lot of ways that wellness can flow downstream.

**Dr. Sullivan:**

And we've been in this system that is so deeply unwell for so long, that now we're in this place where we can hopefully try to envision alternatives. Because we saw in kind of like the barest form, in the last few years, of all the ways things aren't working and who's really being harmed. But if we can think about like really building as far upstream as possible so that we're not putting the onus on individuals to create that wellness. I think that's a really important point.

**Dr. Sullivan:**

The other thing I wanted to note is that I don't...I think sometimes when people talk about educator mental health, and then the responsibilities, they're treated as these opposing things. As if one doesn't feed the other. And as if we invest, for instance, in educator mental health, we are taking steps to support our students better. And if we create these healthy, inclusive learning environments, there's a benefit to, to educators because of the power of the principles and values and practices that healthy inclusive environments are based on. And so, to me, just a critical thing is, like, understanding how connected everything is. And how much...I think that, that lends itself to a lot of hope for me because there's so

**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

much power in, like, if we can affect one thing, then we can affect these others, too.

**Dr. Kyser:**

Thank you. Thank you, Dr. Sullivan. To mirror back, and I feel like your point really got at that sub question on the screen: how may this be balanced with the shifts in teacher demand, but lack of shifts in educational systems? That you were really getting at the implications of the system, and pushing back on the lack of shifts and sort of unapologetically suggesting. A few things that I heard: one was in the redesign, so i.e., not reform but redesign, those intersectionally closest to issues of harm should be centered in decision-making. One.

**Dr. Kyser:**

Two, I heard Dr. Sullivan say, wellness and health are deeply contextual. And so, as you're thinking about educator health and wellness, to Dr. Goodrum's point, are you thinking about wellness in terms of a set of behaviors that might be coded in particular expectations or value sets that are racialized, that are gendered, that are situated in class, etc.? For example: is someone's behavior of being happy indicated by them smiling? Is that gendered in terms of are those that are cis-males expected to not be as overt and explicit versus cis-females? Is it racialized? And that if people show that they are feeling a particular way that signals to you they're not well, then somehow they're not collaborative? They're not a team player?

**Dr. Kyser:**

They're...certain teachers may not be allowed to express justifiable concern, not only about what their experience as an educator, but

**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

perhaps what students who share minoritized identities may be experiencing as well. So, these are...I think that's a second valuable point that Dr. Sullivan raised up, that wellness and health are deeply contextualized. And who gets to decide, in my school community, what health and wellness looks like, sounds like, and feels like?

**Dr. Kyser:**

And then third: educator, mental health and educator responsibilities to create safe, inclusive, equitable environments are not in opposition to each other. So, thank you, Dr. Sullivan, for lifting up those three sort of points to push unapologetically towards shifts in systems. This segues nicely into Dr. Johnson, the question that I want to lift up for you. It's almost like we, we planned this. We didn't, really. I, I was so glad the conversation led that way. Dr. Johnson, what does wholeness and safety, for you, feel, look, and sound like when considering educator positionality?

**Dr. Johnson:**

Thank you Dr. Kyser for this question. And you're exactly right; it has been set up so beautifully in just the opening few minutes. I think one of the things that we need to do before we go into the question is look at some of the words and break some of the words down within that question. I want to begin with the word wholeness. And wholeness, really, we're looking at what does it mean to be complete, not broken, not torn apart, not damaged. And then you look at the word safety. And what that word safety implies and means is that, that you...that you are feeling protected. And how this relates to positionality is the fact that all of us bring something different in our walk, in our lives. Whether it's race, whether it's

**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

gender, whether it's sexual orientation, age, social class, religion, all the different social identities that we take...all of these different identities and we bring them together.

**Dr. Johnson:**

Meaning that I bring who I am to the table. Dr. Kyser, you bring who you are to the table. Dr. Goodrum, you bring who you are to the table. And one of the things that I feel like has really been just magnified, if you will, since COVID, are the topics of the positionality, and how that has even become more important within our classrooms, within our districts, within our overall schools. And when we take this into account, then we truly can move towards wholeness. We truly can move to the, to, to the...really area and focus of feeling safe and feeling secure. So, for me, what does wholeness and safety feel, look, and sound like?

**Dr. Johnson:**

That means bringing your authentic self to your space every single day. You can't be anybody else. You cannot teach like anyone else. You cannot plan your lessons like anyone else. You cannot engage in conversations like anyone else. You bring who you are. And I believe that post-COVID, and I'm, very, in the same frame of mind as Dr. Goodrum: I don't think we're "post" yet. I know that the CDC has called all the rules and guidelines, and we have closed all of those things out. But there are things that we are facing every single day. And because of this, this impacts what is happening in classrooms.

**Dr. Johnson:**

But what is, it is met hand in hand, and we're moving forward together. That positionality means that I can be whole, and I can



move toward wholeness, and I can be safe in my space. But what I have to offer. And this allows you to bring who you are to your lessons, to your relationships within your classrooms. Your relationships with your families. This strength is who you are. It, it, it's also strengthens that engagement that is taking place within that classroom. I believe that the intentionality of the mental health and the wholeness, and safety, this is exactly where we have to focus on as we continue to move forward.

#### Dr. Johnson:

Because when you have those times, when people come to the table, not just come...you already have a seat at the table, you're an educator, you already have a seat. But hear my voice. But hear my voice loud and clear from the perspective that I am bringing, and that I bring every single day. That's what wholeness and safety means to me. And this is what it looks like, and sounds like, within our classrooms.

#### Dr. Kyser:

Thank you, Dr. Johnson. I want to mirror back some things. Also, Kristina placed a definition of positionality in the chat. This isn't the definition. There are multiple definitions. But wanted to make sure that that was available and perceivable to everyone in the virtual space as well. It states that positionality are the multiple and unique experiences that situate each of us. I would build onto that that it positions us in unique ways based off of our own identities, but also our perceived identities. So, how are we positioned in unique experiences in contrast to others?

**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

**Dr. Kyser:**

So, for example, I identify as a woman, a cis-woman. I identify as...racially as Black, and ethnically as multiethnic. I identify as queer in terms of my sexual orientation. And as a former middle school language arts teacher, in a grade level meeting or in a case conference as an inclusion teacher, there were certain identities that were positioned in different ways. And so, if I were in a grade level team meeting, and I was suggesting to my department head, who traditionally was male, and a lot of the AVID leads, and a lot of the administrative, or on the trajectory to be assistant principals, or principals were disproportionately male when I taught, me speaking up about data trends, looking at longitudinal data, may have been positioned in my shares, may have been positioned uniquely because my positionality was that that was heavily gendered and also racialized in terms of what I was lifting up to contribute to sort of shift some practices.

**Dr. Kyser:**

And so, because my gender and race were positioned in that way where it felt I experienced, to answer this question, that my thoughts were more inferior than those that came from male bodies and white bodies or non-Black bodies, that took away my experiences, to Dr. Johnson's point of feeling whole. Of being seen as whole, sounding whole. People received me through a body that they experienced that was raced, that was gendered. And for some, perhaps a little too gender non-conforming, right? And so, there may have been experiences in that way.

**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

**Dr. Kyser:**

In contrast, I also identify as an athlete. When they, when my middle school administrators were looking for a track coach, a girl's track coach, my gender and my race, as well as being an athlete, were then positioned as superior than my peers. And you would think that would make me feel more whole, but knowing the raced nature of athletics in our country and in our school communities, I was more sought after to do things, as an educator, like coach, or be a dean and disciplinarian, than I was to be an administrator on a, on a track for academics or for operations. And so that creates this compounding experience that I think Dr. Johnson, you lifted up when you said wholeness is quote, "Not torn apart," end quote. Safety is protection.

**Dr. Kyser:**

So how did my administrators maybe miss the mark? How did my peers miss the mark? And then you often...your third point, is you have to show up as your full self. And that in and of itself is pushing back against how you may position, be positioned, and really realizing your own agency and self-determination and your experience as an educator. So, I just wanted to share that, want to decenter myself and open up the virtual space. I'm going to stop sharing, too, so that we're all perceivable, if there's anything to build on that before we move to our final question.

**Kristina Johnson-Yates:** The question I placed in the chat, Dr. Kyser, is, what if you do not feel safe bringing your whole self to work? I'm just thinking of the real threats that a lot of people face based on salient and non-salient

**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

parts of their identity. And so, bringing your whole self to work becomes a big ask for people who, safety is a real concern.

**Dr. Kyser:**

Absolutely. Tierney, you want to, I saw, I saw you pop up real quick on that one, but I wanna, I don't wanna put you on the spot or any conversation starters. Great, and fair, and necessary question, I think, Kristina. I want to open up to the virtual room.

**Dr. Weeks:**

Yeah, no, I appreciate that question and this is something that we definitely grappled with. I think somewhat in our early conversations related to this talk, particularly between Dr. Sullivan and myself coming from Minnesota in particular, right. We absolutely have issues and challenges with the educational policies that we have in our state. And it is a qualitatively different experience than being in states that are sort of shifting their policies towards, you know, actively racist policies. Policies that specifically exclude children with disabilities or, you know, children who are transgender, gender nonconforming, gender non-binary. And what does that mean for us to be in a space where we might not be experiencing those same policy shifts to then provide recommendations to others who are in a different space?

**Dr. Weeks:**

And one of the things that we kind of came back to in, you know, those conversations is like what does resistance look like, you know, in other places? And that is obviously a personal risk when it comes to resisting harmful policies and practices because that can put somebody in personal danger for their livelihood and their occupation

**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

and their life. I don't have a lot of really great, like, recommendations for that. But thinking about, you know, finding spaces, I think, for that resistance can be a powerful act in and of itself.

**Dr. Kyser:**

Thank you, Dr. Weeks. If I were to mirror back: personal decision. So, it's an individual decision in some ways, maybe a communal decision about what... Kristina, to your point, how someone is choosing to, or not choosing, to risk certain parts, opening up certain parts of who they, who they are to their school community. The second thing is community itself. So, I heard Dr. Weeks talk a lot about space, finding your space, finding those that you can build coalitions of understanding within your school community as well. Did I get you, Dr. Weeks? I'll keep it open. I think there are some other folks thinking about the question.

**Dr. Goodrum:**

Yeah, I would like, I would like to add, just if I could, just in listening to, to Dr. Weeks specifically, about the act of being oneself, being an act of resistance. Because that is something that even prior to the, the pandemic, one of, one of the biggest things that I've always rallied against in the interests of our children specifically, has been against respectability politics, and the way that plays out as educators, for ourselves and our own identities, our personal and our social identities, but also for our children in the way that our, our scholars, the way that we perceive them. In the way that our respectability politics play into who they feel that they can be, how they feel that they can show up. So just as far as those of us who are in a position, because it's not a judgment, if you feel like you're not in

**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

a position. It is so very important, critically important that educators who are in the position, people who are in the position, to show up as themselves and to be boldly and authentically themselves.

**Dr. Goodrum:**

Yesterday, just quickly had a student intern who was in our HR department, a, a college student, who in their slide about me, that was the thing they said, “Boldly...boldly and unapologetically herself.” Even speaking simple things, my hair, the fact that right now I have braids, but it's usually in an afro. Just that in itself was such a big thing for her as a student who is, you know, a young Black woman, you know, in college, seeing someone in a professional setting who looks like her, but also who did not turn themselves down.

**Dr. Goodrum:**

So, for our educators, again, that wholeness, that positionality, knowing that as you state, our identities cause people to prioritize our wholeness, or to decenter it, to, to ignore it. To...it's easy for them to, for some people, it is easy for some people to, based on the societal norms, look at certain types of educators and pass more judgment on them, not really recognizing how they exist in the world and what is on their shoulders in addition to their jobs. In addition to, you know, the way they show up at work, just the way that we are in the community. And the impact of everything that is going on in the world, particularly on educators who are members of marginalized populations. Who are, every day, fighting with so much outside of the pandemic, just based on the sociopolitical climate that we're in.

**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

**Dr. Goodrum:**

So, for us in our district, a thing that we're doing intentionally, the wholeness and the safety to try to emphasize that, it's just to talk about joy. To talk about the joy of our students. To talk about the joy of our, our teachers. That is our theme for this year: Joy Matters at Ferndale Schools. And it's an acronym, it stands for Jubilance Opportunity and You. Like, you matter. It's just, you know, it's a piece, a trendy little cute thing. But it is something that we're trying to impress upon everybody as we do our work. That we, we believe, we believe that everybody has a right to feel whole and safe as they are a learner, or as they are an educator in our community.

**Dr. Kyser:**

Thank you, Dr. Goodrum. I heard from your perspective as a superintendent, the power, again, threading through Dr. Johnson's point, Dr. Sullivan's point, Dr. Weeks's point about shifts to the system. About having a personal decision or collective decision about what the school community, maybe is at a point to be responsive to as it pertains to safety. Being one's whole self is a radical act. Being unapologetically oneself also engenders others, to your point, Dr. Goodrum, to be seen, heard, perceived, valued, to matter, and to have joy. So, shifting the gaze away from pathologizing certain groups as holding harm inherently, and really shifting the gaze to systems. So, I appreciate that, that's an initiative from the top down as a superintendent, Dr. Goodrum.

**Dr. Kyser:**

And I think that segues nicely into the next question with Dr. Sullivan and Dr. Weeks, which is really about how do we move into the system with some of these conversations around wholeness. So, I



will pose this final question and any final thoughts and considerations before Kristina and I close us out for our, our, our sort of *Virtual Coffeehouse* conversation for today. Dr. Sullivan and Dr. Weeks: in what ways would you encourage agency or district leaders, so either at the state agency or at the school district, to prioritize educator mental health services? A secondary question: how might this offer healthy critique of the types of demands leaders place on educators as a function of budgeting, funding, productivity, and the post-COVID-19 recovery era, and that, those efforts?

#### Dr. Weeks:

So, I've been thinking about this question for, you know, since we had our earlier talks and conversations. And then Dr. Sullivan mentioned something earlier in our conversation that added on to what I was going to say. But one thing I, I think about when I observe, like how, like, systems function within schools, particularly within the pandemic. The roles and responsibilities of educators didn't decrease at all. It was sort of just layer, and layer, and layer of additional considerations and paperwork, and types of support that is like really sort of draining on systems when there isn't another, sort of like, bolster to flexibility or compensation to sort of make up for the additional like work and demands.

#### Dr. Weeks:

And so, you know, originally, in thinking about this question, you know, I wanted for district leaders to sort of consider like, how do we reallocate resources to maybe balance some of those different demands out? How do we think about, you know, the active ingredients of our school and prioritize the types of policies and

**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

practices that make the biggest impact for students and the biggest impact for marginalized students in schools?

**Dr. Weeks:**

You know, thinking about, you know, prevention of sort of different issues of like mental health and promoting wellbeing as opposed to intervention. And then Dr. Sullivan talked about sort of the different systems that we exist in, and I felt like I had, like, a little bit of a revelation about, you know, what are the different things that would help me feel, like, more empowered and healthy in my own practice? And that is if there were greater sort of like systems advocacy around changing those problematic policies that are not only at the school level, but at the state and the federal level as well.

**Dr. Weeks:**

If I think and reflect on my own work about spaces where I feel the least healthy, it's when I feel like there are constraints from legislation that prevent me from, I feel like, doing the best thing for students because of ways that legislation functions within my state. And I think that those are going to be concerns that are felt, you know, throughout the country moving forward. And so, for, you know, district leaders to sort of be examples of, you know, how there can be greater, you know, push towards changing those policies and practices, I think would be something that, you know, would help sort of create a, a healthier space for a school to even be in.

**Dr. Sullivan:**

And I would just add thinking about how our district leaders and others listening to educators about what their needs are, about what the barriers are, and then working to address them through

**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

sustainable, effective, efficient systems. Because I think about creating these, this, a healthy, professional environment where educators feel valued, safe, respected, cared for is part of supporting mental health. So less about self-care, and more about how we're caring for each other, and how the leadership is creating a context for wellness. To get back to Mollie's comments, it's like, so what does that look like relative to state or district LEA policies, procedures, expectations? What are they doing to create support for folks to be well? And not necessarily just pushing out resources for folks who are in crisis and who have really like high-intensity needs. But thinking about what are the prevention systems that can be put into place for just again, general well-being?

**Dr. Sullivan:**

What are the different group supports, and then the individual supports. Because I imagine it's similar in a lot of district settings to how it is in the university: we get pushed out a lot of individual, like, "You need to take better care of yourself. Here's all the ways you do it." It's like, but if you're in a system, if you're in an employment context that is creating so much of that unwellness, you can't self-care yourself out of that, right? Because that context is still what it is. And so, I would constantly go back to leaders and ask how are they listening to these folks and thinking about mental health from a perspective, not around that pathology, and again, the crisis points; but like, how are we actually creating this environment where people can work, where their wholeness and safety are honored, where they feel valued and respected?

**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

**Dr. Sullivan:**

Because if you think about like, why is teacher demands so out of sync? Do folks feel valued and respected and again, safe? Especially when we think about the, there's such a need for more educators from marginalized backgrounds. But, and so many people go into schools to create the safety they didn't have as students, but they need safety as educators, too. And so, what are we doing there to make that happen? How are resources being leveraged to make that happen in a way that, again, is really accessible? Because like, I think about the ways I've interacted with my daughter's district and like, looking at the infrastructure they have there, and the work I do with other districts where there's a lot of great pieces—but they're really hard to access. And they don't get at that, kind of, system-wide, like, prevention-type need either. And so, I would just keep going back to that, is how are we listening? And how are we creating, again, these prevention systems that really focused on building wellness as opposed to just trying to fix problems after the fact.

**Dr. Kyser:**

Thank you, Dr. Weeks and, and Dr. Sullivan, I have some thoughts to recap but again, I'm going to briefly share and just hold space for any additional comments, loving critiques, anything to build on, or just any remarks of the comments Dr. Weeks and Dr. Sullivan shared.

**Dr. Johnson:**

Thank you for the opportunity to be able to add just another level to what has been shared. I think that one of the things that we have learned from COVID is that we cannot go back to what we did before



## Community Alliances for Equity

Communities of Care

COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:

Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety

August 3, 2023



IUPUI  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

COVID. And one of the things that when we came back and we opened up the doors and students came back, and teachers came back: the easiest thing was for us to do was to fall back into what we had always done. Well, we found out through COVID and the pandemic and how it impacted this entire world, we found out the things that didn't work. So, we have to come together and agree to have organized abandonment of those different policies and systems that do not work.

### Dr. Johnson:

One of the ways that I truly believe that educators feel whole and safe is by having a voice. And having...saying what is going on. That teachers are the experts. They are the ones that do the work every single day. Even though I am a teacher, I'm in a different role in this particular district. So, I have to go back, either I go back into the classroom, or I have to go back and talk to those teachers and say, "What is going on? What do you need?" Even, even with all the monies, Dr. Goodrum talked about earlier. All those monies that we received, until we have a system and a plan, they're just monies. And if they're not used purposefully, they become wasted. And we don't ever want that to happen. But we do this, we, we bring things together by putting teacher voices at the center. Student voice is also very important, but that teacher voice has got to be at that center. As it impacts all of our students. So, both of those voices are important.

### Dr. Kyser:

Thank you for that. If I were to mirror back the shares: Dr. Weeks reminded us that there are constraints at multiple levels of our system. And Dr. Weeks spoke at the federal and state constraints.

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**Community Alliances for Equity**  
Communities of Care  
COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:  
Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety  
August 3, 2023

So there creates a contextual reality that we need to pay attention to, this threaded throughout all the comments, and that understanding that district leaders have an opportunity to model examples of negotiating the often very layered and complex ways that federal and state legislation and policies impact educators. But in this case, educational leaders, cabinets, superintendents and boards: it provides an opportunity to one school community about how to interpret, how to provide support that is practical, that is accessible, that is transparent to your school community. So, I really appreciated that Dr. Weeks.

**Dr. Kyser:**

Dr. Sullivan talked about this idea of, and Dr. Johnson, both, of centering educators. And that thinking through how we inform a better, more transparent, responsive, professional environment. Working environment is a function of educator mental health. It is a function of understanding that one's workplace environment must be well, and that that wellness should be defined and disclosed from those that historically have not been well as employees in the school community.

**Dr. Kyser:**

And then finally, in addition to that, I heard Dr. Johnson saying unequivocally that we must let go as educational leaders. So, you may have been a former teacher, and it is not okay to rest on your laurels as a former classroom teacher if you're now in a different role as an educator that's administrative, you still have to acknowledge there is, there is a need for what Dr. Johnson called "organized abandonment." That you have to stay open enough, decenter

yourself and your perspectives. And center those that are in the experiences of the classroom to decision-make towards wellness. And when you center those in the classroom, I would go back to Dr. Sullivan's point, that those classroom teachers should also be privileged that come from more historically marginalized intersectional experiences of oppression and harm in those decision-making. Not exclusively, but centering those intersectionally closest to issues of harm, would do the entire school community a greater service.

#### Dr. Kyser:

So, engaging in that work is not demoting folks that have one or more majority identity. It is to say that in the pursuit of transformation towards equity, that centering those who have the expertise of what, how the system functions, better informs the system of making decisions and, in the case of Dr. Sullivan, a professional context that is well. So, I hope that I got everyone accurately. Again, appreciate those shares.

#### Dr. Kyser:

To close up, we want to provide a special thank you to our Doctoral Research Assistant, AQ, who provided some behind the scenes support. And so, a big thanks to AQ. We also want to thank our fantastic conversation starters: Dr. Sullivan, who's also our MAP Center Equity Fellow from Minnesota, Dr. Weeks, Dr. Goodrum, and Dr. Johnson. Thank you for your labor and all the time you spent in preparing for today, and your passion throughout the duration of today. We also want to share with you a reminder that there are an array of resources on our website for supports related to centering





## Community Alliances for Equity

Communities of Care

COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:

Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety

August 3, 2023



IUPUI  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

educator mental health, wholeness, and safety. Kristina is placing that link in the chat as we speak.

**Dr. Kyser:**

We also would encourage you to explore our special issues at the MAP Center's *Equity Dispatch* designed to highlight critical issues related to educator health and wellness. You'll see that *Dispatch* on your screen, you'll see two actually: *Attending to the Mental Health of Educators and Students: The Root Causes Of Thriving*, as well as *Centering BodyMindSpirit in Equitable Education: Towards Pedagogies of Wholeness*, in addition to *Equity by Design* brief and another *Virtual Coffeehouse*, *Fortifying Ourselves in the Work: Critical Consciousness For Early Career Teachers*. So if you have a new group of educators who are just joining the profession, or seasoned professionals that are transitioning into the field of education, that might be a *Coffeehouse* to check out.

**Dr. Kyser:**

Finally, we are asking if you're not currently following us on social media, to please follow us on Facebook and Instagram. We would love to say connected to you. We would love to keep the conversation going for today. Also, we are an organization of continuous improvement. We would love to know what you really enjoyed about today, as well as areas that we can improve. Feel, feel free to take five to seven minutes after this session to complete the post-session questionnaire. Kristina will follow up via an email to each of you as a reminder. And we would ask you to complete those, hopefully if you can, with your busy schedules by tomorrow, close of business. We really value your input. Your input matters to us, and

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## Community Alliances for Equity

Communities of Care

COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:

Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety

August 3, 2023



IUPUI  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

we use that to make changes to our events and how we consider what you all are asking us to do, want to be responsive to those needs.

**Dr. Kyser:**

And then finally, thank you. Thank you to each of you, I want to provide a virtual cheers. Would offer you to attend our final *Community Alliance for Equity* series, It's on August 17th. It's entitled *COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse: Intentionally Centering Parents and Caregivers In Equity Work*. It will be led by Dr. Daniel Hamlin, our Equity Fellow out of Oklahoma. And so, with that, thank you so much. A virtual cheers to each of you, again, to our conversation starters for being with us today. And thank you so much for your time. And with that, I'll close our session. So, have a great rest of your day, everyone.

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## ***Community Alliances for Equity***

Communities of Care

COVID-19 Recovery Virtual Coffeehouse:

Intentionally Centering Educator Mental Health, Wholeness, & Safety

August 3, 2023



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