

FEBRUARY 22, 2021: COVID-19 RECOVERY
A CONVERSATION WITH THE HARTFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS SUPERINTENDENT

DEAN CESARINA THOMPSON:

So, we are so pleased to have Dr. Leslie Torres-Rodriguez with us, who is the superintendent of one of the largest urban school districts in Connecticut and she not only is a superintendent but she's a proud graduate of Hartford public schools. She was raised in Hartford. And she has served in the, as an education leader in greater Hartford for over 2 decades.

She earned a bachelor's degree in human development, and a master of social work at the University of Connecticut, and then went on to a doctor of educational leadership from Central Connecticut State University. She has a long list of accomplishments, and I said to Leslie, right before we started that I wasn't going to take the time from the main event to list them all. But I just wanted to highlight a couple. In addition, prior to embarking on her career as an educational leader, she also taught at Capital Community College. And she has also been selected as a featured woman of distinction by Hartford magazine as recently as December 2019. She is a fellow of the Broad Academy, which is the nation's most prominent professional development program for urban school system leaders. Closer to home, she co-chairs the mayor's cabinet for young children in Hartford, and she is a member of the governor's workforce council. So I can't thank you enough Leslie for joining us.

I know that we have some of our faculty, and some of our students with us who are just waiting to hear what you have to tell us about the impact of Covid 19, and what are some of the strategies that you've implemented and will continue to implement going forward. As Mary mentioned we are going to take about 40 minutes or so to have this conversation with Leslie and then there's about 20 minutes for the audience to put forth some questions for Dr Torres-Rodriguez to address.

So, let's just begin, Leslie. Can you give us some context, first of all about the Hartford public schools, and some of the challenges of Pre K through 12 education in an urban setting, like Hartford?

DR. LESLIE TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, and good afternoon to everyone and thank you for such wonderful and kind introduction and most importantly, thank you for having me. Yes, so context matters, especially since we're grounding this conversation in equity, it is important for us to understand first, the larger backdrop, which is the city context overall with a population in Hartford of 123,000 people and median household income is 34,000 dollars and a poverty rate of at least 30%. And more closely in Hartford public schools, we have over 17,000 students with 55% of our students that are Latino, 29% are black and when we think about who it is that we are serving and the level of need, we also have to take into account that 20% of our students are English learners. 20% are students with exceptionalities and 80% of our students are eligible for free and reduced lunch.

And so some of those demographics already begin to give you an understanding of concentrated levels of need that require additional resources, additional supports and broader interventions and broader partnerships if you will. The other important context is that we at Hartford public schools we operate within what I call an ecosystem of school choice as a result of a landmark desegregation case, the Sheff case.

And so, what that means for us is that out of the 39 schools that we operate, 18 of those are magnets. Which give us an opportunity in addition to have integrated school environments to draw students, welcome students and their families from over 65 towns. And those are some of the operational contextual pieces, but then there are the challenges they're additional challenges and opportunities in our urban context. And I'll just lift a few and hope that we can kind of dive deeper into these as we have a conversation.

And one, which is our challenge with chronic absenteeism that we named, given that we looked at the root causes and identified first of all that our challenge with chronic absenteeism was not specific to a grade level, right. We initially had major assumptions. That chronic absenteeism was a challenge for our older students, and we saw that across the entire continuum, it was a challenge, including at the lower level with among the highest chronic absenteeism rates happening for our kindergarten students and 1st grade students, which was clearly an indication for us that we had to, when thinking about chronic absenteeism or any other support structure or strategy that we needed to have a holistic approach to our work.

DEAN THOMPSON

Terrific and obviously, as we get more into the conversation, chronic absenteeism being one, but there's so many other structural as well as socio economic factors, right? That impact school children before the pandemic and now have been exacerbated so to speak. So, prior to the pandemic, you had been working at Hartford public schools to reduce chronic absenteeism. I actually heard you talk about this quite a while ago in a town hall type meeting that you had. Were you successful in making some progress?

DR. TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

So, I would say, yes, we were making progress and I'll talk about where we left off and I struggle even framing it that way but this is pre- Covid. So pre-Covid it was about a year ago actually, when we convened a panel to discuss, we had students and parents and community partners and teachers and administrators, and we delved into a presentation on our collective work on chronic absenteeism to discuss not only our success thus far but also continuing challenges, and at that time we were able to report a meaningful decrease in chronic absenteeism, compared to the same time the previous year. And so, at that point, a year ago, 41% of students who had been chronically absent the year before were no longer in that category. So that represented a drop a reduction of about 1600 fewer, chronically absent students out of almost 18,000 students.

And that was in a year of not only us, of course, identifying additional resources internally an additional, what we call student engagement specialists of family and community supports, but

also partnering with our community base providers. And so I list that because chronic absenteeism is an indicator of many, many things one, of course, which connects to what's happening in the classroom, right? Some of our students are not engaging with either the instruction, the interaction that's happening between the teacher, the content, or the learning environment.

But chronic absenteeism is also indicative of other external factors to your point earlier. Whether it is, there are health inequities, there are income inequities or access to home insecurity and so there are many elements that are in play. So we did see improvements yet we're getting at those deeper root causes that posed additional challenges for us.

DEAN THOMPSON

So, of course, then the pandemic happened, and probably impacted the good work that you had begun. So, with that in mind, and all of the other effects that we've seen from the pandemic, how did you operate the district over the past year?

DR. TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

Yeah, how did we and how are we still operating it? I would add only because we're still in the in, in dealing with the pandemic and I would lift there was an intentional and explicit approach to doing it equitably. We had an equity lens that we applied as not only we planned, but also as we executed. We know that, as you said, the pandemic has disproportionately affected our low income and our people of color and so we see it across health, economic, and also education indicators, and as we are just talking about chronic absenteeism, we see the highest rates among our historically marginalized students, which, for us are low income students, our English learners, our students with exceptionalities, and our students with unstable housing.

And so we applied an equity lens in how we developed our planning and how we execute. And by that, I mean, we, I always talk about equity in what we do, what we provide, what we design but I also talk about equity in the how? And that is an approach to make sure that we co create with those that are going to be impacted by our decisions, or the strategies that we implement, and so that meant seeking ongoing feedback from staff and families rounding our decisions and the voices of those that were directly impacted and that from surveys to ongoing town halls up to Q and A sessions to weekly communications and developing plans and operating procedures, that address, not only the physical safety, but also the social and the emotional health and wellness of students and staff.

DEAN THOMPSON

Terrific, thank you. And so, speaking of that, I think we just heard some exciting news, I think, for teachers recently today, or yesterday from the governor. Right? So, I was going to ask you about if you heard about vaccinating teachers and staff, and I think we know the answer to that. But so how do you think that will roll out in Hartford public schools? And when do you think then you'd be back to in person school full time?

DR. TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, so we actually, last Friday they did announce, and this is pre- the notice today of vaccines, we did announce that we were shifting back to what we call our yellow status. And that is returning the students whose families had elected to learn in person. They were in hybrid, given the external health conditions back in November. They were too high for us to stay with us every single day in person instruction and so we shifted hybrid but we're shifting back. Given that the local health metrics confirm that the cases and the positivity rates have been declining and are also projected to continue that downward trends. So we are already expecting on March 1st, some students to come back on a daily basis. That does not include the students whose families elected to learn remotely. I think that one is a more intentional approach given that that's a larger number, about 9000 students that we still have to return.

But if I had it, if I could wave a wand and vision out, if you will, how we would roll out vaccines, and we have actually started conversations even pre- today's announcement with some local health providers, and our local health department. So that we can make the process as seamless, as efficient as possible for our staff. So that we can continue to increase the amount of students that we have in school every day.

DEAN THOMPSON

Terrific. So I know that the Hartford public schools has been granted federal relief funding. How will you use that funding to address some of the learning loss and trauma that students have experienced this past year?

DR. TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

Yeah, we are still in the strategic planning process and we know that we're going to need a bold plan to support not only our students and our staff, but also families over the next 3 years, and, you know, I know I say 3 years because the, this specific funding is earmarked through September of 2023. However, I do believe that it is not just a 3 year plan that we need, and, you know, I believe that we cannot return back to status quo or how, you know, we were doing things before, because we know that that also wasn't working for all students. Right? That also was not leading to equitable outcomes for all of our students and so we have to think of a way that we will support the whole student across academic, social, emotional and health needs and we need to also do the same for staff. Because we're now going to require or ask staff to meet a level, a deeper level of need for many of our students. And so that means that we also have to invest in the capacity of our staff and so that will require additional support. And when I reflect on what the priorities that the state department of education has identified for the funds, those priorities align very well to our strategic priorities. Academic supports to address learning loss. Family and community partnerships, safety and social emotional development, and then remote learning or support for staff and support for the digital divide.

So those are 4 areas that aligned to the priorities that we had identified before our approach in this early design phase, is that we're going to be working to ensure that there is equity for the students most affected. Right? We know right now that pre Covid, our students with exceptionalities, our English learners, our students with unstable housing, students that reside

in communities with higher deeper concentration of needs, would need additional support. And so, as we think about the additional funding, those are some very specific design parameters and conditions that we have to keep in mind. And then is thinking about how do we identify opportunities for our partnerships, partnerships that extend the current partnerships that we have? Because we know that we can't do this work in isolation in the schools.

DEAN THOMPSON

And I completely agree with you. So you are talking to someone who is very much convinced about the holistic approach that you were talking about, and for our College of Education, Nursing and Health Professions, I would love for us to partner with you, through the university and Hartford public schools and really look at how do we holistically address the needs of students, because it isn't just our future teachers right? It's also our future health professionals who can partner together to look at some of the things that you talked about the, the social emotional needs. The other health needs that maybe are as a result of the pandemic, or maybe they're just exacerbated by something else. And so, wouldn't it be wonderful to have teachers in the classrooms that could sort of look at all that and address it? You know, what might be, I know that we have some of our education students, and perhaps some of our other students with us this evening. How might you envision different instructional strategies from what is going on now that would promote that kind of holistic approach in education, and you can dream. I know that you can't make this happen tomorrow, but what might be some things for us on the education side to think about?

DR. TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

I will start with a broader brush and that is for higher ed in general, is higher ed studies have to instill equity throughout, whether it is for a nursing student, for an education student or a business student, right? Making sure that it is not, that equity is embedded throughout curricula culture and policy, so that it is not this standalone once in a session or a semester, right? Because if we are to serve communities well, then we have to collectively lean in, what I call lean in to the community to better understand their context, their needs their history and that starts by leaning in and listening and understanding, deepening the level of engagement and partnership with community, and their organizations, if you will, to create deeper partnerships.

And so now you bring that into the classroom. So culturally responsive instruction, and that can entail extending to the community, extending to the local partners to ensure the students see themselves as part of their community and their broader community as well. And if, if I could immediately have in the next 4 to 8 weeks a plan, it would be to have our higher ed partners work alongside of us in developing our summer programming, for example. We know that we have what I call the initial phase phase 1, which is going to be Spring through summer, so that we can re engage and specifically for our high schoolers, get our high schoolers back on track. So that they can stay in terms of their, their credits and so that they can also have those skills that are necessary to succeed throughout high school that they might have either forgotten or lost, or not been exposed to during this academic year.

And so I wanted to provide holistic, but also very specific opportunities that exist for partnerships. We know we will need peer mentors. We know we're going to need tutors and what a better way to be able to partner with you all, for example, across your departments for support for our students.

DEAN THOMPSON

Terrific. Beyond, and of course, we will do all that we can to try and help you in that effort because we really do believe in connecting with our community and making sure that our students are ready for their careers in whatever that might be. Beyond the university setting, I've heard you talk about the community effort and how this is more than just the teachers or more than just the families. What are the entities in the community do you think we could partner with the Hartford public schools and really help to mitigate the challenges that you've talked about? And to foster academic recovery, but ultimately to make sure that all of our young children and youth thrive?

DR. TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

So that is the key word right? Thrive ability, because ultimately, I do share in in your vision that we ultimately want one, our young people to thrive as adults. Right? So what happens in the classroom is just one piece of that complex puzzle. And so there has to be a holistic approach because of all of those ecological elements and influences that we talked about.

And so, I think, for example, how much we are going to have to rely on and deepen partnerships with agencies, partners that provide mental health supports for example, not only for our students. But also, for our families, we know that we are going to have to engage in deeper partnerships with our community based organizations that provide enrichment opportunities for our students during summertime. For example, we plan for not only academic enrichment, but we know that students, young people, from a developmental approach, need to experience positive and healthy peer relationships, positive youth development opportunities, opportunities to explore career and college readiness. And so those are opportunities for different providers and partners to shoulder up as we call it in Hartford public schools to support our young people.

DEAN THOMPSON

Terrific, well, that was a wonderful conversation. I want to leave enough time for our students and the rest of our audience to ask you some questions, which I'm sure would be into more conversations and ideas being generated. So, Mary, do you have questions already ready to go.

MARY DILEO

I think we should ask the audience and just a reminder for everyone down at the bottom of your screen in the lower right is a chat button. If you have questions, please feel free to enter them there. And I will relay them to the dean and the superintendent.

DEAN THOMPSON

I can't imagine that none of our students have questions for you.

MARY DILEO

Oh, Here's one. okay. Here we go. What are some solutions or supports you suggest for teachers with students who are chronically absent?

DR TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

Yeah, so internally and I appreciate that question because here in Hartford public schools, we have a holistic approach, and oftentimes when some of us don't really understand the entire dynamic that contributes to a student being chronically absent or quick to think that it's something in the classroom, there's something that's a barrier in the classroom. And that might be the case, but many times, it is something that is beyond the classroom, or that is in addition to what's going on in the classroom. And so teachers can, of course, outreach to the home. But there are opportunities for other school providers to support and allowing expanding the understanding of familial dynamics. Right? That might be a play that sometimes teachers don't know because of oftentimes our student support staff are the front line staff that are aware of additional support and needs that a family might have and so a message and a strategy is to not go at it alone, for the teacher to reach out to colleagues. Because often times there are root causes that are at play.

The other piece one, that we tend to overlook, and that is engage in outreach for positive opportunities. There's think of what a parent would feel or caregiver would feel to receive an outreach from school with positive messaging. Right that it's not waiting until there's a challenge or concern to do the outreach.

MARY DILEO

Great, thank you. I did receive another comment, which actually came to me privately. It's from one of our participants who said her son is in 2nd grade at Noah Webster, micro society magnet school. And she just wants to say, thank you so much for all your work during this challenging year. I also want to praise the principle, assistant principal, specialist, admins and of course, the teachers so just a nice shout out to the staff at Noah Webster.

DR. TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

Absolutely, and I would extend that yes to Noah Webster and beyond given that as you all can imagine, having to reimagine essentially every operation in a school that is what has happened this year, not once not twice multiple times and it still will require that we reimagine before the year is over as well, so significant gratitude, deep gratitude for everyone involved.

MARY DILEO

Thank you Dr. Torres-Rodriguez, another question. This is, what potential barriers might exist for community partnerships for volunteers who want to offer support to Hartford public schools, what would be necessary for example, background checks, need for alternative facilities for programming, et cetera?

DR TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

That's a great question in terms of, so we do have a policy that requires background checks for all of our community partnerships, partners, and volunteers. In terms of spacing. You know, as I am forever optimistic, and hopeful that by the summer, we will be able to leverage our facilities, our schools, the idea is that our summer program will expand to not only serve the typical grades which are K through 3rd. It ideally would be a K-12 summer program, which would require us to utilize multiple schools, if not all of our schools and so that actually was not possible in the last couple of years, because we had to have a regionalized approach within our own district to maximize our resources. But knowing that we are, that there are still safety concerns, we might need to if you will spread out throughout the entire system across all of our schools. And so, for our community partners with earlier in the spring, I will have what I call an all call meeting and that's when I invite all of our partners to one, understand the current status, and the current thinking and plan for the summer. And so we'll be able to speak about the facilities and space that will be available. And the needs that we would have from our community partners.

MARY DILEO

Wonderful Thank you so much. I have a question from a health professions student, and she was wondering how you will prioritize health when going back to classroom settings?

DR TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

And so we have very specific mitigations that are in place and so we envision and we plan to continue with the mitigations. Right? The masking, the distancing wherever possible, the disinfecting, the cohorting students still to the extent possible. We have to think about accommodations for staff, for example, say we're able to vaccinate all staff. Which, by the way, we're not mandating, but say we're able to vaccinate the, the majority of our staff. We still have to take into consideration any accommodations that staff may still require. And so that's always a priority, right? If there's any specific accommodation that is necessary to support staff in carrying out their work. And then we have to think about our parents and any specific health related concerns, or needs that children and youth might have. We are in the process of finalizing a survey that we're going to send out to our families at the end of this week because, as I mentioned earlier, we still have about 9000 students that are still learning remotely and have been learned remotely for a year. And so we really want to hear from our families, what concerns they might have or needs, especially as it relates to health and safety needs.

MARY DILEO

Yes, thank you. Dr. Torres-Rodriguez we have another question. This is from Jessica. If you have any advice on how to approach these topics with the child's parents. Jessica, I'm assuming you might mean, perhaps topics related to absenteeism and so forth, but she's asking any advice on how to approach these topics with the child's parents when there is concern is sometimes these are not easy or well received topics?

DR. TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

Yeah, that is such a great question. And I think, you know, that's why earlier I referenced making sure that we do outreach early on or with positive news. Right because it's really about relationships and we know the research tells us that students learn best when they feel safe. And they think there is a relationship especially not only with their peers, but also with the adult right? So, that relationship extends to the family, it extends to the caregiver and so that step one, try to establish that positive relationship early on. The other piece is framing the conversation as to what the impact of the absence is. Of course trying to understand the why behind it. Because it might be that there's a family that needs additional support. One of the key takeaways and "aha" moments for us when we looked at our data, we did a deep dive. And we saw that our kindergarten or 1st grade students had 20 to 25 percent chronic absenteeism rate. That said, that spoke volumes because that to us tells us that this is not an issue of a child, this is a very different issue as compared to, like a 10th grader, for example, right? When a 5 year old is chronically absent, we know that there are other elements that the family needs support with, that there is a family that might be either in crisis, or that the family might not necessarily understand the impact of chronic absenteeism at such a young age.

And so an advice would be to really understand how absence and disengagement can impact a student, you can have that conversation with a parent and say you know for a student that is in first second or third grade, if they're chronically absent, their projected chance of transitioning to high school on time has already decreased by 30% when a student is chronically absent. In middle school, their chance already of graduating high school on time also decreases and so trying to have that conversation with a caregiver from the lens of what really is at stake here for the student.

MARY DILEO

Excellent. Thank you. And I have 2 similar questions from staff and faculty, so I'll try to combine them both together. One was asking how we can involve students from across our colleges and majors in your work this summer. Our students are always looking for internships. Do you have a structure in mind and then from one of our faculty, is there an opportunity for University of Hartford to partner with Hartford public schools on a mentor mentee relationship?

DR. LESLIE TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

So those are 2 related questions. I'm excited to hear that as a question. So, yes, and yes, and yes, so I do, we are in the process internally thinking about having actually a mentor, a mentoring tutorial component as one of our pillars of our summer program and so that as soon as we're able to formalize our application to the state actually, for the fund, the additional funding, that actually is going to be a pillar of the work and so we are going to have to outreach to our college students to help us with that. And then we hope to have that thread into next year and beyond. I'm so that it is not just a one time opportunity that we're able to allow, not only our college students, but also our K-12 students build relationships and see themselves right as future college students in our local higher ed institutions.

MARY DILEO

Okay, thank you. Thanks so much Dr, Torres Rodriguez. The next question I'm happy to say is from our president. Greg Woodward who's on the call so thank you so much for joining us Greg. His comment is Leslie thanks for being with us. This evening the pandemic has only highlighted the struggles to succeed in school for certain populations. Is this a moment in time to move the needle on some ongoing inequities in our society beyond just getting back to normal?

DR. TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

Most definitely and so thank you so much President Woodward for joining. Yes, this is the opportunity, you know, when I think about reimagining, I think of it from multiple angles. One reimagining how instruction happens. Because we have heard from students that while there are challenges with remote learning, our students tell us that they can access some of the content outside of the other school time of the school day. Right? So, we know that we have to then think about how do we redefine what that experience can look like, we know that having opportunities for our teachers to collaborate. I mean, the research tells us adult learning theory, reminds us that adults learn best when they do that in collaboration with their peers. And they do that in a way that is contextualized and so an opportunity exists for us to re-imagine the way in which we build capacity, support teachers and create time for that to happen. There's opportunity for us to re- imagine the day, the school day in the school year. Does it have to be 10 months of the year? Can it be 10 months but with different increments? Do we have to think about interventions? There as well to have what I call boot camps for lack of a better word for students that are not mastering a specific skill. They don't necessarily have to all go to summer school at the same time. We can create separate opportunity for students to master learning.

And the other one, the other big big opportunity is around student centered learning. That having students engage with the content with the environment in ways that are based in actual problems that they can be solving as they're learning and then that extends, of course, into the career piece. Right? What is the college and the career readiness opportunity that exists? And so are we going to solve all of that? Are we going to have the blueprint for next fall? No. However, I think the conversation and the planning does have to happen now, because we can, we can seize the moment, right to not only think it through but to involve our students, our partners, our talents, and certainly our educators in redesigning what education can look like, sound like and feel like in years to come.

DEAN THOMPSON

Great questions too. Thank you. President Woodward for being with us.

MARY DILEO

Okay, here's a question that reads as a follow up. How can you support students who are dealing with things they are having at home for example, if you're reaching out to parents and getting no response, how do you work with the student or other staff to create the support without or with the limited parent support?

DR. TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

Yeah and those are real challenges and we would start with creating a support system at the school level. You know, we have our staff since the school year began, we've done over 3600 home visits. So, home visits entail a group of adults from the school, and in some cases community partners, going out to the home, and trying to understand the context in, which is presenting perhaps a barrier for the student to come to school or to sign up remotely. And so I would start there engaging the supports that are in the school and then from there is making sure that we connect the family to other support. We have found that, you know, some of our families, for example, that were not logging on initially it's because there was housing insecurity. And students wanted to, they did want to be able to log in yet, you know, they didn't have a safe space for them to log in and connect. As, and neither did their siblings, if you will. Right? And so each situation is different, but I would say, rely on the support, the team of supports that are in place at the school. Oftentimes there are community partners already that are in that school. We, we are fortunate in Hartford public schools to have what we call a community school approach, which we also are hoping to expand next year. But every school, every single school in Hartford public schools has partnerships and so I always remind teachers to not go it alone, to reach out for additional supports.

MARY DILEO

Thank you so much, another question. Do you have any advice on how first year teachers who will be teaching in the fall can approach bridging the learning gaps caused by a year of remote learning and other Covid dynamics. Any advice for first year teachers?

DR. LESLIE TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

Oh, wow. So welcome! And wow, are you coming in at a time that presents yes challenges but opportunities, to President Woodward's question earlier. I would say, you know, so every school district is required, especially urban school districts, is going to need to have a plan, right to accelerate or mitigate learning loss or the gaps, and so obviously making sure that you are well versed in that plan. But also making sure that you dig into your self-advocacy. I know that as a first year teacher, that might be a challenge given that you're probably going to have to navigate so many new structures and ways of work. But don't forget the advocacy piece. And to make sure that you have colleagues that are supporting you, and we create structures for our first year teachers and second year teachers to have them be part of a peer system of support. The notion of mitigating loss does not rest on the shoulders of one teacher, one staff member, one principle alone, this has to be a system wide, schoolwide, community wide strategy and commitment.

MARY DILEO

Thank you another question, which came into me directly and this is related to the previous question on the topic of many students being behind either because they've missed school, or they've struggled with virtual learning. How does this impact long term education? How do we have entire classes of students catch up?

DR. TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

Yes, that is the elephant when we think about problems of practice, right? Making sure, because the question talks about equity, right? And outcomes for all. And I would say that it's a combination of things. One is ensuring that those students that had the biggest need, the largest levels of needs are prioritized and let me just give you an example. When we think about our students with exceptionalities, you know, we have to remember that for many of those students, the services that they would be accessing in school one, are not the same remotely, right? So, we have to first begin with that, making sure that we catch up on the service delivery that we were not able to provide to students because either they weren't here, their families elected for them to learn remotely. The other piece is to not let go of the expectation making sure that, while we provide the supports not only to students and our staff, that we maintain the high expectation that our students can achieve at high levels, that's also very important. Especially when we take an equity stance right. To not lower expectations because of whatever background our students bring forth into the classroom.

MARY DILEO

Thank you and this is a related question, and I think this must be from one of our students, will these supports that you've talked about for summer Bootcamp include special education students? I have a few students that have fallen behind due to being at home, and not getting the same help they did when we were in person.

DR TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

So, absolutely, absolutely. And just so that, you know, I'm explicit, before we learned about the relief funding, we had already begun thinking through potential summer program designs and we had prioritized, we had already said, well, we know that the federal government requires that we provide summer program for students with the highest levels of needs, and we know that we'd have to have an added layer of support for students that were not able to access. Especially our students with exceptionalities and our English learners and so, yes, we always program in the summer for what we call extended year services. And so this year we'll be also entailing extended year supports for students with special needs and supports.

MARY DILEO

Thank you I have another question that came in to me directly. This is a really good one. How do you think we can improve in making sure that our students' mental health along with physical health is a top priority? I know that mental health is a struggle for many students at University of Hartford.

DR TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

That is real and it's a worry that I that I carry with me. So, one way that we are thinking about it is to make sure that we integrate to the extent possible social and emotional support activities throughout academic experience. Right? So that it doesn't feel like it's this separate approach to meeting the needs of the whole child and that entails different levels. So, for example, at a basic level, and by that, I mean, at from a perspective that most students can benefit from it is, we can have what we call circles, right? This is how we start the day, for example, in a way that creates community in a safe environment for students suggest express when they're ready,

how they're showing up, if you will, to school, to the summer program, for example. Also we're going to have to invest in additional staff, we know that we're going to have to invest in additional social workers and additional clinical partnerships to provide those clinical supports for students. And we know that mental health can also be addressed to some degree, not for everyone, but to some degree with physical activity, mindfulness activity, and so to create opportunities for students to also experience those through, not only physical education, but through art through music, right? There are experiential opportunities that we can create in programs for students' mental health support.

MARY DILEO

Thank you so much. I have another question, and I do want to be conscious of the time Dean Thompson. So, perhaps we can wrap up after this. This next question let's see, question is, I suspect the support you give for non teaching staff is apparent to students, that administrators and teachers are not privileged over other social workers in the school. What strategies are you using to ensure students see equity in this regard?

DR TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

In terms of, let me just check my understanding, in terms of the professional learning and supports that we offer to all staff?

MARY DILEO

Yeah, I could read this again. I suspect the support you give for non teaching staff is apparent to students, that administrators and teachers are not privileged over other essential workers in the school. What strategies are you using to ensure students see equity in this regard?

DR TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

Well, I think that is a great question and this prompted me to think about well, how can we do that better to make sure that we communicate that we not only have the responsibility, but that we are committed to making sure that we support all staff, not only as specific as it relates to Covid, not only as it relates to safety and their needs, but also to make sure that they have not only the skills but the capacity and the disposition to do their work at their best, right? We, we know that we're in the business of teaching and learning and I always say that that applies to all levels of learners, including the adult learners and I consider every staff member in Hartford public schools as a learner and so we do have a responsibility to make sure that they continue to serve and to thrive and to achieve their highest potential. That is the same approach that we have for our students.

MARY DILEO

Thank you so much Dr. Torres-Rodriguez, I believe that is the last question that I received. Ces if you would like to wrap up for us.

DEAN THOMPSON

Sure. And I'm actually going to wrap up with a question that I see in the chat from one of our education faculty, and she asks how can the University of Hartford partner with you? I know

we've talked about this, but what you just mentioned about providing activity such as art and music to mitigate the mental health implications of stress, and I can't help but think of President Woodward is with us who's a composer, so I'm sure that he would appreciate the question about how can we at the University of Hartford help you in that regard or do you have plans for integrating? I don't know what has happened in with budgeting pre Covid, but, you know, the arts are typically the first things to go. Right? So what are some plans that you may have that perhaps we can help you with?

DR TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

So, I will say that for the summer, I mean, we have opportunities to co create given that this summer is going to require that we begin to create spaces for students to, to find joy quickly and so that is the first order. Yes. We're going to develop a strategy to begin mitigating, but I really am looking to find joy and I need help from our partners to help us help our students find joy and then begin to build their relationships again with, with not only with their peers, but their community, and you all at UHart are, you are part of this community and so we look forward to the opportunity to co create it for the short term, and then for the longer term.

DEAN THOMPSON

Terrific, well, I think that that's a call to all of us, at least in this call, and we would love to continue the conversation. So we will definitely be in touch all of us at the college and the university as well. I want to thank you so much Leslie for taking the time out of your busy schedule to be with us. I know that all of us have appreciated what you have to say. And I think it stimulated a lot of thinking and generated hopefully, some ways that we can continue to partner with you.

DR TORRES-RODRIGUEZ

Thank you for having me and thank you for the wonderful questions. You know, I learn every time I lean into these conversations. I myself walk out with so much so much more learning and so I appreciate all of you for informing my thinking and for allowing me to learn alongside with all of you.

DEAN THOMPSON

Well, thank you so much, have a good evening everyone. Thank you for coming.