“It is about working from the inside out”: Kate Leventhal of WorldBeing on working with governments to integrate mental health and well-being programming into schools

Jessica Kantor
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Jessica Kantor: Can you introduce yourself and tell me about the work that you do in youth mental health? What makes your approach distinctive?

Kate Leventhal: I'm Kate Leventhal, president of WorldBeing. We’re all about working from the inside out with kids. We feel there are so many things that are important for kids to be able to lead thriving lives, whether that's getting a good education, having good health, or getting a good job. Yet we often start at those surface levels, instead of inside. That's where we begin. We want every child to have support for their mental health and well-being, not just kids showing signs of distress. That’s where we begin to help kids to lead thriving lives.

At WorldBeing, we work for the most part with government education systems to integrate mental health and well-being programming into their standard offerings for kids, so that well-being support, education, and promotion becomes a guaranteed component of what kids will get in school. One way we're trying to make sure this is true, and to start from the inside out with every kid, is to take a system-wide approach to reach as many kids as possible where they're already at.

We work for the most part with middle school, sometimes younger, sometimes older, but middle school is a sweet spot for doing this kind of promotive mental health work. We have our largest work in India, Kenya, and Rwanda.

Jessica Kantor: What might others find surprising about your work?

Kate Leventhal: It's hard to answer that. It's an approach that resonates in the heart with a lot of people. What's often surprising to some people is that others feel it's an

important approach. Each one of us feels, in some way, that mental health and well-being is very important, yet it's always an overlooked piece of promotive work.

When we talk about mental health and well-being, people often think of therapy and trying to connect people with psychiatrists. It's often surprising for people to realize that this kind of foundational work is, first of all, mental health and well-being. Secondly, many of us believe this is crucial because it's overlooked. It's an under-the-radar thing.

We often speak to people in government systems, for example, who think we're going to say it's all about test scores and how we're going to raise them. But they'll say they think the system should center on what we're doing, although they don't know how to shift it.

Jessica Kantor: It seems a lot of people are aware that youth mental health is in crisis, but they don't know how to address it. Is that true?

Kate Leventhal: Absolutely. I've been in this field for 15 years. It's even different than when I started, because when I began, there was not even awareness that this was a very big issue that needed attention. Now there is so much more awareness that mental health is important. That's incredible. But we definitely have not gotten to the point where people know what to do about it. There's a feeling of almost helplessness on the part of some decision makers who say, "Well, I don't know how we're going to do this. It's too big of a crisis to crack."

We often talk about how youth mental health work, and in particular, prevention promotion, is right now about where girls' education was, as an issue, maybe 15 or 20 years ago. People suddenly decided it was an important problem, but didn't know what to do. So it's almost like there's a bit of a roadmap that we can follow. We can look at what people did beyond just making this an issue that people cared about, but also understand what works and what doesn't. How do we change policies and also practices on the ground? How do we get different actors working in concert? Not to say that everything is solved with girls' education, but we've made a huge amount of progress in the last 15 to 25 years. It started with that time of recognition. That's kind of where we are right now in this field.

Jessica Kantor: What contributed to that evolution to get to this point?

Kate Leventhal: It's a confluence of so many global trends. People like to call it the 'polycrisis'. There are so many issues and challenges. There was COVID, there's social media, there's climate change, there's unrest, there's inequities; the list just goes on. The real piece that has started to put it over the edge for me has been that people are really starting to feel it. They feel it in their own selves, their own bodies, and their own families. They realize that if it's so hard for them, facing their own struggles, what are other people going through? There is a visceral immediacy to it when I speak to people now that's not the same as when we used to talk about it as a problem for other people. People believe that this is a problem for every single human being on the planet right now. That's what is giving it traction.

Jessica Kantor: The Youth Mental Wellbeing Co-Lab has three focus areas: building young people's resilience, giving young people agency, and helping young people build a sense of community and belonging. What area do you think your work mainly focuses on?

Kate Leventhal: All of the above. I find it difficult to even imagine that there are organizations working in the mental health and well-being space who would say that they only work on one of those, and not the other two. I can understand having a focus, but you really can't work on resilience without increasing voice and agency, and you can't do it without increasing connection. You also can't work on voice and agency without having resilience. These constructs are so intertwined, and that's what is so complex about the work. But it also is exciting. So many of us think of mental health work as focusing on the downward spiral and the need to see a therapist.

But these areas can all come together. Working on one of them supports another one, and another, and you get an upward spiral. We talk about this a lot in our trainings. We cannot just stop a downward spiral, but we can also create upward spirals for people and support that. By focusing on one thing and then the next, that's what you get. We focus on all those things for youth.

Jessica Kantor: How do you collaborate with other organizations working on youth mental health, and in what capacity?

Kate Leventhal: Almost everything we do is some sort of collaboration, but it's almost never with another group that's fully focused on promotive mental health for youth—there still just aren't enough of us yet. 99% of what we do is working with governments. That's a partnership and collaboration right there. It's a government that bought into the idea that this is important, but it needs technical support on how to actually support kids with their mental health and well-being through the schools.

We also had a number of partnerships in the past with organizations who have an interest in adding this promotive, preventive mental health work into their own offerings. Whether that's a group doing parenting work and feels this could help, or self-help groups, it's incredible how universally applicable it is to have good mental health and well-being. It amplifies pretty much any other effort you are doing.

We frequently get asked if groups can add this approach into what they do. Pretty much across the board, studies have shown that it makes things better, not just on mental health outcomes, but on many other outcomes too. We do a lot of partnerships that way. For example, our work in Kenya and Rwanda is fully in partnership with other organizations. We work with Basic Needs in Kenya, and we work with Wellspring Foundation for Education in Rwanda. With both of those, the idea is similar. They had missions and offerings that were synergistic, but not exactly what we were doing.

For example, Basic Needs had much more of a community mental health model, more about connecting with diagnose-and-treat services and that kind of thing. They didn't have a youth promotion program for mental health. We combined our expertise to make

that happen in Kenya. Wellspring Foundation for Education is all about education, and yet they didn't have anything that supported well-being and mental health for kids in schools. We also combined our expertise in those different areas to make this a reality in Rwanda.

Jessica Kantor: Can you share an example to illustrate the impact of your work?

Kate Leventhal: It's hard to choose. Mental health and well-being can be an end in and of itself, but it can also be a means for many other aspects of a thriving life.

One example I love has a lot to do with identity, gender norms, and also the internalized aspects of how we can work to untangle this. A boy in Rwanda was very much out of his grade level. He kept getting held back over and over again. He was 18 in a class with 12-year-olds, which was weighing very much on him. He wondered how he was supposed to attend and also get out and provide [for himself]. He wondered how he was going to get through it all, and felt very alone and isolated. An 18-year-old and a 12-year-old are in very different developmental stages.

He was having a lot of difficulties, not wanting to come to school, not wanting to do his work, and displaying lots of anger when showing up, as so many of us would if that was the situation for us. That was contributing to a downward spiral of a feeling of loneliness and hopelessness. If you're not showing up for school, if you're not able to give it your all, this is just going to continue. You're never going to get out of there. You're never going to complete it.

Our flagship program, Youth First, is essentially one hour a week for middle school kids. This student was in middle school, even though he was quite old for that. It’s led by teachers and students do it with their classmates. It's an inside-out approach. It's about who I am, and what kind of strengths do I have? What are my emotions? How do I feel about them? How do I talk about them with people? What kinds of experiences am I having that other people are having, or not? What kind of goals, wants, and needs do I have in my life? How can I work towards them? How can we work together towards them? How can I work on conflicts or difficulties I'm having with other people and be assertive about my needs? Many different things.

He was part of a year-long program with his class in Rwanda. The reflections he shared with us towards the end was that he didn't know other people were also going through hard times. With all these little kids who he thought he couldn't relate to, he now felt he had their support and that they had his back, that nobody was making fun of him, so he was not angry about this [anymore]. It was a very difficult situation for him, but he had these goals. He was going to work with his teachers because he felt they were there for him now. That was also very difficult for him. He had felt that the teachers were not people he could go to [with his problems]. He thought they were gatekeepers who were telling him he was not doing well enough. That relationship really shifted. It was a lot about finding his connections with people, finding strengths that he did have inside, and using them to feel that he had a way forward that he didn’t have before.

That's just one impact example. We have many impact examples with girls in India, in particular, about how they use the work to find a strong foundation within themselves to navigate and handle challenges that are gendered in many ways. For example, many issues are about early marriage and how to talk to people about that, and how to get support from others and feel like you're not alone. It is about working from the inside out—peer community building and making change together.

Jessica Kantor: What are some things you've tried that didn't work, but you learned a lesson from it?

Kate Leventhal: One of our big pivots recently is about systems change and working with the government. The work we do is generally with education departments. There's been quite a bit of work and scholarship that's come out of health interventions that were successfully transitioned into health departments, for example, but less about education interventions that are successfully transitioned.

When we started out on this journey to work with government systems and change them towards supporting mental health and well-being for kids, a lot of the examples and strategies we looked at were from the health sector. There's a bit of a difference between these complex interventions we work on and health interventions that perhaps do not have quite as many moving parts.

A lot of frameworks we used initially were to create an intervention that was simple and aligned enough with what the government was able to take on so that we could just hand it over to them. The goal was to get an agreement they liked so they could take on the program themselves. That has happened maybe for more people in the health sector than it has for us. I can understand if there's a specific medical treatment that governments could scale and do themselves, but that's not how our preventive, promotive interventions are going to work within government systems.

We have mainly found instead that governments appreciate that we know how to do this, and want us to build something together with them that fits all the different parameters and constraints in the school system, and will touch every child that goes through. Since this means millions of people, and since they have very complex processes already in place, they need to design programs that can fit into their very specific structures and needs. They need us to build something specific together with them. In other words, they're glad we have the expertise, but they're not going to just adopt a program wholesale.

We've heard that again and again. That's an area in which we thought we were doing the right thing by building a program that would be easy for anyone to take on. Then we found out that government education departments were not willing to just sign on the dotted line and take it.

Jessica Kantor: Aside from funding, have you faced a challenge that you haven't yet been able to overcome?

Kate Leventhal: There's so many. We wouldn't still be in business if there weren't still challenges to overcome, for example, this new flavor of how to work with governments, that's not just, “Here, government. Here it is on a silver platter.” That's tough. A lot of challenges come with that. A lot of it is understanding many aspects of a very complex government system, and with multiple governments at once.

Being creative alongside government partners about how to make this work specifically for them is very hard. It requires a level of expertise locally that's very different than if you just have a program and give it over to them [to run]. For example, do we have people who can navigate government relationships, and the technical expertise to go toe-to-toe with government without having a big power dynamic issue, so that we can still remain true to our commitment to be evidence-based, foreground youth voices and participation, and have cultural sensitivity? Having the technical expertise to co-create something with a government which has a ton of power, but not necessarily the technical know-how, and a ton of bureaucracy, is a gigantic challenge, and it comes with challenges every day, every step of the way, to try to navigate.

Jessica Kantor: Any other lessons or insights you've learned in your work that might help others?

Kate Leventhal: One thing I often come back to is that it just all starts inside. I cannot stress that enough. People have often asked us, “Wait, I don't understand. Do you work with individuals or do you work with systems? I'm lost.” The answer is, it's all one [thing]. What are systems made of? They're made of individuals. They're made of people who, if you start from the inside with them, with what is most important to them as a living, breathing human being, you almost always are going to find a commonality of, “I'm just working for the good of people.”

That's all I want. If we can start there, that's the avenue for change within systems. It's not just about getting an MOU signed. Yes, that’s important, but you have to start on the inside with people, and you have to start with, “Okay, I believe what you believe, and I can support you with that, and you can support me, and we can change this together.” That's really what it's all about. So many of us are just trying to do good and help others, and yet we feel we can't for whatever reason, that there's some blockage or challenge in the system, so even if you’re part of the system, you’re stuck.

That’s where so many of us are coming from, and how we do systems change. We work with those in the government, do well-being trainings for them on the same exact things as the boy in Rwanda that helped him feel he has strength, knows what his goals are, and can make change with the help of peers. That’s just as important for somebody in a government position who wants to make a change to the system as it is for a child in a school. It's all these same things from the inside of a person, or inside of a system. It all starts there. We can't be shy to go there with each other.

Jessica Kantor: How do you incorporate youth voices in shaping your work?

Kate Leventhal: They're always at the center. We're not just doing this for them, we want them to tell us what to do, what's working and what's not. No matter where we're working, it always starts with youth voices, and it always continues with youth voices. As an example, we just started work in a state in India called Meghalaya. We were brought in essentially in partnership with the government there. They're doing a large empowerment initiative to improve well-being for kids, which is wonderful. We're supporting how to do that, and what the technical aspects of that are for schools.

At first, the government just wanted us to come to their workshops, but we told them that we needed to talk to kids first and understand what life is like for them. We needed the kids to tell us what well-being feels like to them, so that we could support their [aspirations]. There are some developmentally appropriate ways to get at that, but we're not interested in supporting someone's concept of wellness that doesn't come from the kids themselves. We want to help them feel they are shining lights. We start with that.

We did a study. Now we're starting to feel that we can work with the government to make sure that they're supporting kids in this way. After we've developed a program, we always have kids weighing in to say, yes or no, they like this or didn't like that. We love to bring kids to speak with government officials. It's so powerful. We also love to bring government to the schools to hear from the kids directly while they're there.

We've had some government officials come to schools thinking that the kids were going to respond to them in one way, and they left wondering what we did with them because the kids have so many demands and opinions. It's true that so much about what we're about is helping kids find their voice, and feel confident in their voices. That can be difficult in some areas where we work because it's tied up with things like gender norms or age hierarchies, where kids are probably not inclined to speak up that much to a government official visiting a classroom, yet that's the transformation we see.

I've been to schools that haven't had any well-being programming, and kids are really timid, particularly in India, and particularly girls. You ask a question and they're not raising their hands. They sit there quietly, kind of shyly. But when I visit schools that have had Youth First, it's a different story. I always love to ask kids what their strengths are. They'll just jump out of their seats to be picked. They'll list, for example, a love of learning, a zest for life, kindness, curiosity, bravery. You cannot stop them. The contrast is stark. When government officials go there and see how different kids are, sometimes they ask what we've given these kids. It's a very different situation.

We've had kids who now feel confident to advocate for what they want. There are many stories about kids who didn't even have access to clean water at their school, and they took this up with their school management to figure out how they can get it, and how to make that happen. [Youth First] was the impetus for them to get clean water by taking the issue into their own hands.

All of this is to say that we center youth voices in the development of what we do, why we're doing it, with well-being studies, and in getting feedback about whether we are on the right track. But also in the programming itself, it's about giving kids a voice, and

showing they will be listened to. Sometimes we think we can just teach kids how to advocate, but we need to also show them what it feels like to be listened to.

That is so much of the program and the work as well. I shouldn't say “the program” because now there's multiple programs, depending on which government we're talking about. So much of the work is that we are all teachers and students to each other. We all need to be able to listen to one another. It's not just students who need to listen to the teacher, it's vice versa as well. That transforms school environments, how much kids feel their voices are heard and how confident they feel speaking up in other venues as well, because they've felt heard in one place where previously they hadn't been.

Jessica Kantor: That's lovely. Thank you for sharing.

Jessica Kantor is an independent journalist specializing in health, human rights, and social impact. Her work can be found in Fast Company, Healthcare Quarterly, Innately Science, and others, and she has been a Solutions Insights Lab interviewer since 2023. Additionally, she provides communications strategy to nonprofits and INGOs who are working on the Sustainable Development Goals. She is a living kidney donor based in Los Angeles.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*