



Episode 23 – **Recognizing Risk, Building Support: Schools’ Role in Addressing Youth Human Trafficking** Transcript

Taylor Teichman:

Hello listeners, and welcome to another episode of the I Will Be Your Voice Podcast for Student Success. I am Taylor Teichman, Youth Development Coordinator at the Center for Schools and Communities, and I will be your host for today's special episode. In today's episode, we're focusing on youth human trafficking and the development of a new screening toolkit designed specifically for educators to better support students who may be at risk. In my role, I work with our statewide education for children and youth experiencing homelessness program. Through this work, we support students who are experiencing housing instability, which can look like a student couch-surfing between friends or family members, or who may be unaccompanied after being kicked out or leaving home due to unsafe circumstances.

While each students' situation is unique, these conditions, we know, can increase vulnerability and reduce access to consistent support systems. There's been research consistently showing that housing instability is a significant risk factor for exploitation. We know that there's been one study from the Field Center for Children's Policy Practice and Research out of the University of Pennsylvania that found that approximately one in five youth experience homelessness have also experienced human trafficking. So findings like this highlight the urgent need for students to have tools that can help identify risk early and connect students to supports. With that in mind and with partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Education, here at the Center, we worked to develop a resource that could be used directly in school settings to support students' safety, stability and continued engagement in learning.

We also knew that through this process, it was important to partner with experts in the field of trafficking for this resource. And so we reached out to the Pennsylvania Coalition to Advance Respect, also known as PCAR, whose long-standing expertise in supporting survivors of sexual violence made them a key collaborator in shaping the trauma-informed resource that was created for schools. The result is the Youth Human Trafficking Toolkit for Educators, which is what we will also be diving a little bit deeper into today. This was designed for school-based mental health professionals, nurses, McKinney-Vento homeless liaisons, social workers and counselors to help recognize warning signs, understand risk factors and respond appropriately when a student may be at risk.

With that, I am very thrilled to also be here today with Zozan Küçükaydın, who is the Anti-Human Trafficking Services Coordinator at PCAR and who was integral to helping us develop the content throughout this toolkit. It's been such a pleasure working with you, Zozan, over the last, I want to say it's been at least two years, I guess, since from start to finish. And so, thank you so much for being here today and I'm wondering if you wouldn't mind sharing just a little bit more about yourself, your role at PCAR and some additional just how this collaborative project came to be?

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Yeah, of course. Hello, thanks again for having me. Again, my name is Zozan Küçükaydın. I'm the Anti-Human Trafficking Services Coordinator at PCAR, which is the Pennsylvania Coalition to Advance Respect. And if you don't know much about PCAR, we are a network of rape crisis centers serving survivors of sexual harassment, assault and abuse across all 67 counties in the Commonwealth.

And at PCAR, we work to support our partner rape crisis centers and advocates in this movement, and I specifically work to provide technical assistance and training to our partner centers, as well as other anti-trafficking advocates across the state. So I'm so glad we got to work with the Center for Schools and Communities to develop this screening tool. And I hope educators across the state will find this education and awareness around trafficking to be helpful as they work to support and potentially identify survivors.

Taylor Teichman:

Thanks so much. I think that's something that as you were talking a little bit more about the toolkit and how this was developed for educators, I think our organizations both did a really beautiful job of coming together to bridge some of the gaps in terms of awareness, breaking down some misconceptions around trafficking, exploitation and student homelessness. So it really kind of was just like a match made in heaven. Let's dive a little bit more into some of these conversations, these pieces, and a little bit more into the toolkit so our listeners can learn a little bit more about it if that sounds good.

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Absolutely.

Taylor Teichman:

Awesome. All right, so when people hear human trafficking, they often think about something extreme or far away. Just wondering, how does this toolkit help address those misconceptions, you think?

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Yeah, right. I mean, I think there have been great strides in recent years to raise awareness about trafficking and exploitation, but folks are still learning about the depth in which this shows

up in our communities. And so some might hear trafficking and think it's this transnational issue where victims are brought to and from other countries to be trafficked. And while that certainly does happen, I think we tend to not think about what this looks like on a local level, and most importantly, how this shows up in interpersonal relationships. And that it's not often stranger danger, rather the reality of someone exploiting someone else most often by building trust with the victim. And we know that most survivors say they knew their trafficker before being trafficked.

And especially when we're talking about youth survivors, we want to keep in mind that, knowing that familial trafficking is very prevalent in our communities. And just for listeners to be aware, human trafficking is when one person exploits another person into commercial sex, like exchanging sex acts for things of value like money, food, a place to stay, or they might be coerced into forced labor. And traffickers will often do this through force, fraud or coercion. And this doesn't mean that we now have to be hypervigilant or create more fear about this issue, but ultimately what we can do is look out for those in our lives, be a safe and a trusted adult and speak up when we notice or suspect any situation of harm or abuse.

Taylor Teichman:

If you could reframe one misconception educators may have about trafficking based off of what you just shared, what would that be or what are some of those other misconceptions?

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Yeah, so sometimes sex or labor trafficking might be overlooked in general because it can sometimes be misdiagnosed as domestic violence or sexual abuse. Or in school environments, you might notice one or two red flags like a student not coming into school or maybe they're often late. And in psychology, we call this the fundamental attribution error where you might see something that someone is doing, like for example, someone coming into class late, and you might attribute traits to that person like, "Oh, they're just lazy," or, "They don't care about school." When in reality, it could be a number of reasons you might see this, including potential abuse or trafficking. Again, this is kind of a hidden reality because we know, well, we might not know abuse is occurring when students are still coming to school or engaging in extracurricular activities, or they might just seem just fine on the surface level.

That's why it's so important that we build trust and create safe spaces for students so that maybe they will feel comfortable opening up about something that might be going on. But also, I think if folks had the opportunity to learn more about what trafficking and abuse really looks like by listening to survivor stories, taking trainings and reading up on indicators of trafficking of youth, we can come to a more in-depth understanding of what trafficking can look like. And we know it's difficult to generalize trafficking and exploitation because each lived experience is so unique. But again, staying up to date on certain indicators, taking the time to check in with youth if we ask certain questions, and then ultimately we can better identify potential survivors and get them connected to the appropriate resources.

Taylor Teichman:

Yeah. And I feel like that's where we saw so much of that overlap with our students experiencing that homelessness and housing instability, and also that being, as you said, that hidden experience.

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Right.

Taylor Teichman:

And like you said, I really appreciate how you said we created this resource and we are bringing awareness to this, not as that fear factor place at all, but from that place of within a school setting, students can feel safe, can feel like they belong, and we have those safe adults within our school settings like our homeless liaisons, social workers. And so this is again, a resource where we're really hoping that we can just provide that extra support both to school staff and to, of course, the students who may be having these lived experiences. And how can we make sure that they're still able to be that student, that kid, that young adult coming to school and loving to be in school with their friends? And you started to talk about some indicators already, but just wondering if there are some other key indicators that you can share for our listeners for young people who may be experiencing trafficking?

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Yeah, of course. Some key indicators, I mean, of course, a history of homelessness or housing instability. We know, again, that one-fifth of homeless youth are survivors of human trafficking. And we also know that due to systemic inequalities, BIPOC, LGBTQ+ and system-involved youth face increased risks of experiencing homelessness and human trafficking. And of course, we can look at behavioral indicators like changes in school participation or if we notice emotional distress, more anxiety, any signs of depression or hyper vigilance. Maybe you notice they are increasingly isolating themselves from friends or they might have unexplained injuries. Or maybe you notice any signs of neglect. But again, there's a whole list of indicators listed in the screening toolkit and the recommended resources for continued learning also go into depth about what these indicators might look like.

Taylor Teichman:

Yeah, that's one of the components of the toolkit that I think is extremely useful, is that we did include in there, some recommended resources and additional learning opportunities. We have a fact sheet as also a standalone piece to the toolkit that folks can pull out to see and read some of those key indicators. There's a glossary in there.

Zozan Küçükaydın:

[Inaudible 00:12:10] yeah. And especially the fact sheet is great for any school staff. Even if you are not one to provide the screening itself, that fact sheet is helpful for anyone.

Taylor Teichman:

Yeah. Are there any particular trainings or first step resources or preparations that you recommend maybe educators start with before they use the toolkit?

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Yeah, I mean, I would say really any human trafficking introduction trainings where you can learn the definitions and the signs. And of course, I always recommend finding trainings or interviews by a survivor so that you can learn just how each lived experience is unique. And when we learn directly from survivors, it can give us a better understanding of how to go about talking about this issue or working with a potential survivor in the most trauma-informed and survivor-centered way.

And we would also recommend refreshing ourselves with things like mandated reporting trainings and always staying updated on school policies and procedures. And especially what constitutes abuse, because in today's world with AI being used to facilitate abuse online, we want to try to stay updated on the harms that youth face in today's world and when it's appropriate to make a report.

Taylor Teichman:

Yeah, I feel like with AI and social media, that piece is ever-changing. And as you mentioned, school policies and procedures, I think that's a piece and I think we might get into talking about that a little bit more a little bit later. But I think that's a piece where our school staff can be really tapped into those school policies and procedures and really utilizing this toolkit in a very wraparound team approach kind of way. And I think as part of our hopes and goals with this toolkit as it starts to get into the hands of schools, that school districts are really implementing it into their policies and procedures, really.

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Yep, and creating a protocol around just what it looks like to support a potential trafficking survivor as well.

Taylor Teichman:

Yeah. Are there any other features in the toolkit that you would like to uplift here in our conversation together that you think would be helpful for educators?

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Yeah. In the toolkit, we have definitions of different forms of trafficking and exploitation. We have a list of trafficking indicators specific to youth experiences and what educators might be more likely to potentially identify. And then we have a detailed explanation on what to do when trafficking is suspected, whether that's a teacher identifying certain red flags and deciding to connect the student with a counselor for further screening. Or if you're a social worker, homeless liaison who is preparing to connect with a potential survivor, there's a detailed list of

instructions on how to go about asking questions, all the steps to take before conducting a screening, and how to go about reporting abuse in a way that keeps students feeling safe.

Taylor Teichman:

I particularly love that portion of the toolkit and those tips. And then the screening questionnaire, I think is so beneficial and so helpful and a good starting place. With that being said, how can our homeless liaisons, school counselors, social workers, any school staff really, how can they be working together and using this toolkit to ensure that potential student survivors are connected to their resources and support that they need?

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Yeah, I mean, once it is suspected that a student may be a trafficking survivor, we want to again, center the support needs for the student. That can be anything from providing additional support during the reporting process to connecting the student with the school counselor, social worker or homeless liaison for ongoing check-ins and identifying support needs. And folks can work together to coordinate needed services for that student, like connecting them to the local rape crisis center for free counseling, or even just connecting to an advocate to get a better idea of what services might be helpful for the student in their situation. And the more that we can work together to coordinate and build this safety net for the student, the less likely they are to have to navigate these systems alone. And ultimately, they will feel adequately supported throughout their healing journey.

Taylor Teichman:

I love that. And it kind of reminds me of almost a spiderweb of that connection from school to community and really having those wraparound supports. And this is kind of twofold to the question I already asked, but I'm wondering, how can folks also use the screening tool to have safe and effective conversations with students rather than simply going through the checklist or the questions? I know the screening tool, we've provided some recommended language and places to start, but how do you envision this really being used in the moment for a homeless liaison, say?

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Yeah. Of course, we don't want to go through these questions as if it's a checklist. And this is something that the National Survivor Network has a great resource on, where they highlight the need to shift away from only looking at red flags to incorporating the practice of treating the person in front of you as a whole, not just a checklist. So when we're conducting these screenings, it also goes into detail on how we can rephrase questions, depending on what we already know about that student. Or how we can strike up conversation rather than it feeling like an interview.

And most importantly, how we can respond and work to fill their support needs in a holistic way. And so within the Youth Human Trafficking Screening Toolkit, there are detailed instructions before getting to the questions that go over some general tips on how to ask questions, how to

build rapport with the student and how to build trust. And also how to document appropriately after identifying a situation of trafficking or abuse and how to do all of this in a trauma-informed way. And again, keeping the student feeling emotionally safe and supported.

Taylor Teichman:

Yeah. And I feel like that's where, too, that collaborativeness of working through this, say again, it's a homeless liaison who may notice some of those indicators as red flags, but then maybe if the homeless liaison is also not wearing the social worker hat, but pulling in the social worker to also work through this screening tool, especially the screening tool and those questions are going to look different for a student in fifth grade versus a student who's in 11th grade. So keeping that in mind.

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Yeah, and using language, age-appropriate language. All of those tips are detailed within the toolkit, so it can help reframe some of those.

Taylor Teichman:

And that kind of leads into, I think this next question, which I think some folks who may have this toolkit and think, "Oh, how do I get it right?" So what does getting it right look like when a school successfully supports a student survivor?

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Yeah, I think even just one little thing that we can do from the get-go that will make all the difference is making sure you do a warm handoff. If you're an educator and you notice certain signs, or if you have concerns and you want to connect the student with a counselor or a homeless liaison, making sure that you are with that student throughout the process and taking the time to reassure the student would make them feel supported. Of course, we don't want them to think that they're in trouble or anything. So saying things like, "We just want to have a chat about how you're doing and how we can help you." And in the most general sense, it is always good to be a trusted adult in their life. So the more that you do to let them know that you're there to be a support for them, the more likely they'll feel comfortable speaking up about something that might be going on.

And of course, continuing to check in with the student periodically to ensure their educational needs and other support needs are met would be really helpful and would ultimately create a foundation for this process. Again, some of the most important things here that folks want to keep in mind is we want to avoid re-traumatization. So don't probe for unnecessary information or do anything that could heighten the tension the student might be feeling in a moment of potential disclosure. And we want to make sure the student remains connected to supportive adults and again, that they feel respected and heard. And of course, we want to ensure services are properly coordinated for the student based on what they tell us are their potential needs.

Taylor Teichman:

I'm doing a lot of head nodding, but since I know folks can't see us, as Zozan is talking, I'm like, "Yes," and I'm nodding my head yes. Curious, after engaging with this toolkit, what is one thing you hope every educator does differently tomorrow?

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Yeah, I mean, I think once you have engaged with this toolkit, I would say share the resource with your administration and encourage the use of the fact sheet for all faculty and staff. And connect with school counselors, homeless liaisons and social workers to begin that coordination and talk about what a good protocol could look like. And I will add that another feature of the toolkit, we have a list of webinars from the National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments that provide frameworks for building protocols as well as other helpful information on the realities of trafficking and exploitation and how to support youth survivors. That would be another suggestion we have for folks, is to review these webinars and other resources to learn indicators and trauma-informed practices when supporting potential survivors.

And I want to also put out there that we know and feel like you need to know everything about this topic, but truly, a lot of the practices around supporting survivors are things you all already know how to do. If you're a homeless liaison, you already know how to work with the student and ensure they have the resources they need to be in school for the day or to continue coming to school. So we know what that support can look like. And you don't need to know exactly how to use this tool before starting, but we just wanted this to encompass all the best practices and we encourage you to lean on resources and support from colleagues if you're in a situation where you need to conduct a screening or report potential abuse or trafficking. So again, this is really just a helpful guide that can make intervention as safe and supportive as possible.

Taylor Teichman:

I love that, thank you. I feel like, yeah, thank you for uplifting that our school folks are already doing this in a lot of ways, in a lot of already trauma-informed and trauma sensitive ways. And we know that schools have their in-service days, those professional learning days. And so, even incorporating this toolkit and some human trafficking trainings into those places is a way that you can really reach all of those school personnel for that, again, that team approach. The toolkit was officially released in 2025, so it is still fresh and new. We would really love, as schools start to incorporate this toolkit into their policies or practices, we would love to hear from those using the toolkit, what's worked well, recommendations.

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Questions.

Taylor Teichman:

Yeah, questions, just so that we can learn more together and to really hear from everyone how this is impacting those students who may be experiencing those dual experiences of trafficking and housing instability. So we're saying this is a living, breathing document in a lot of ways and a living, breathing practice that we really are hoping folks use and let us know how it's working.

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Right, exactly. And of course, within this podcast, we won't be able to go through all the ins and outs of trafficking and how to support survivors, but that's why this toolkit exists. That's why we have a whole list of webinars and continued learning material, so that you can just continue staying up to date on what this can look like and how to support potential survivors.

Taylor Teichman:

Yeah. And we do have the toolkit available on the Center for Schools and Communities website, that is at ecyehpennsylvania.center-school.org. We'll also make sure we put that in the notes. But then, Zozan, are there some... I know PCAR has their website and just are there any other ways that listeners can get involved and learn more?

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Of course, of course. Yeah, so of course we encourage folks to visit the Center for Schools and Communities Resources page to access the toolkit and fact sheet. We also encourage folks to visit PCAR's website at pcar.org, to connect with your local rape crisis center, build partnerships and see what services are available to youth survivors. And to learn more about trafficking and exploitation among youth, we recommend accessing national resources like the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the Polaris Project and the National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments. They are a wealth of knowledge and they have lots of resources that go in depth into best practices around this.

Taylor Teichman:

Well, thank you so much. I feel like as we've worked on this together, even in our conversation today, but over this whole project, I feel I just continue to learn from you, from PCAR, from our students, our survivors. And so I just want to say thank you. It's been a really special journey.

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Yeah, thank you so much. I'm so glad that we could partner on this really needed resource. I mean, there's a huge gap in this area, so I'm really glad that we could even just be one piece of that puzzle.

Taylor Teichman:

Agreed, thank you.

Zozan Küçükaydın:

Thank you.

Taylor Teichman:

Thanks all, for listening. We'll see you again soon.