



Episode 18: Statewide Site Assessment Implementation in Arkansas

#REMSontheAir Podcast Intro (Recorded): [00:00:00] Welcome to the #REMSontheAir Podcast, hosted by your partners at the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Supportive Schools and its Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center. If you're an old friend, you know us as the REMS TA Center, your national school safety center.

Join us as we chat about key topics in school and campus safety, security, and emergency management with experts and partners from the field.

Alison Curtis: Hello, welcome back to #REMSontheAir. This is Alison Curtis, and I am so pleased to be having this conversation today with Arkansas and the work that they're doing on site assessments. I am joined by Dr. Cheryl May, the Director of [00:01:00] the Criminal Justice Institute's Arkansas Center for School Safety, as well as Dr. Jeff Collum, Superintendent of Conway School District, and Jason Black, Deputy Superintendent of Conway School District. Welcome to you all.

Dr. Cheryl May: Hi.

Dr. Jeff Collum: Thank you.

Jason Black: Hey, excited to be here.

Alison Curtis: Dr. May, my first question for you is, can you talk about why it's so important for schools to conduct site assessments? And also, what's the value of site assessments being standardized across your state?

Dr. Cheryl May: Sure, absolutely. And appreciate the opportunity to be able to talk about what we've done. But before I do, let me just thank both Dr. Collum and Jason Black. Without them, we wouldn't have been able to do what we did, so I want to give my [00:02:00] heartfelt thank you to both of them. And of course, I want to thank you all for all the work that you all have done with respect to SITE ASSESS.

You know, those of us who work in school safety, so to speak, you, know, when we think about potential strategies, we think about it from more of a comprehensive approach. That there's really not one single thing that if everybody did that, then every school would end up being safe. In order to implement and to make our kids and our school staff as safe as they can be, you know, we've got to implement a wide variety of different strategies. And when we worked on the Arkansas School Safety Commission, both in 2018 and 2022, you know, we organized based, you know, on law enforcement and security, communications, mental [00:03:00] health and prevention, assessments, EOPs [emergency operations plans] and drills, and, lastly, physical securities.

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So, when it comes to comprehensive school safety assessments, that kind of combines both the assessment EOPs and drills and the physical securities. And it's obviously very important that these assessments include both the exterior and interior of the facilities. But also, I know they also include the climate, school climate, which is also critically important.

It's important for schools to be able to identify—become familiar with their physical surroundings and to look at it through a school safety prism or perspective and to be able to identify any [00:04:00] vulnerabilities that may exist and provide the opportunity to either eliminate or significantly diminish those vulnerabilities. With respect to why we chose to look at SITE ASSESS, we had very long discussions about a wide variety of different things over the years.

One of the things that most people know about me is I like to hear from a very, very wide, diverse group of individuals. Everybody comes to the table with their own unique perspectives, and the more that we can hear from those perspectives, the better we can come to a consensus and a general understanding of where we should be. And it was this large group of individuals that decided that, hey, you know, there are a variety of different tools [00:05:00] and resources available. There are a variety of individuals who can help with doing site safety assessments. But we felt that it was important that we actually set some standards to guide people on what they should be doing—and it was for every school district across the state—and actually be able to set what we called like a minimum set of standards of what we thought would be higher priority than other things.

And one example that I can give you of how this has already been useful: there was a \$50 million grant program that was developed by the governor, the previous governor and the current governor, of Arkansas. And it was important to be able to identify, [00:06:00] you know, what should we include as priorities. And so, there were priorities that were set. But one of the critical things that needed to be done is that all schools had to do a school safety—comprehensive school safety assessment to be able to demonstrate how they arrived at what were their critical priorities. So, everybody being on the same page, at least in terms of minimal standards, we thought was critically important in moving forward.

Jeff, from a superintendent who's been involved in this for a long time, do you have anything to add?

Dr. Jeff Collum: Yes, ma'am. And I want to send back to Dr. May just a huge thank you. I met Dr. May about 10 years ago or so, and she's been a leader [00:07:00] in the state of Arkansas with how to unfold this process and doing what's best for schools and school districts with site assessment. On our end, as far as looking at it from the school district standpoint, it's been extremely valuable to have a toolkit that practitioners can use. One, it's cost effective, also—free, which is incredible—which allows districts to take the tool, use it, train their staff on how to use it, and then gather critical data from parts of their campuses and around their district so

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that they have a baseline of information they can operate with to evaluate all of their campuses. And so, through the work with Dr. May and the Criminal Justice Institute over the years, really learning a lot about best practices and how to operate this toolkit to make sure that that's implemented from A to Z. Mr. Jason Black has been incredible as well along the way. He's done a lot of these trainings with me and [00:08:00] also on his own. We've learned a lot through this process.

I think the lessons I've learned through this process are: You have to have a tool that is practical for school employees to use. You have to have something that is easy to explain. And the more technology-friendly it is, which this app certainly is, the higher success rate you're going to have of people being able to pick it up, use their phone, use an iPad—whatever it may be—and go around and do these site assessments. And so, thank Dr. May for her work on this. And it's been a pleasure to learn a lot about this system and working with the REMS data center. Alison, you and your team, the work that you guys have done to be able to help make some of the merge features come to life have been truly valuable in making this toolkit a success. So, I've enjoyed it, and I think it's a great thing for our school districts.

Alison Curtis: Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure to hear how the use of SITE ASSESS has been [00:09:00] going in the state of Arkansas. And it did really help us determine how to change and update the application to really meet the needs of schools and school districts in the field.

We were super excited to learn about your use of it and so—and that you created a customized site assessment template for Arkansas schools within SITE ASSESS. And so, I just wanted to get a bit of information from you. You know, what led to your decision to use SITE ASSESS and also to deliver trainings on using SITE ASSESS across the state?

Dr. Jeff Collum: Yeah, so I'll start, and any of you guys can join in. I think as we looked at the customization part of the app, I think was incredible. The way that you guys began with all the different categories within the system: you know, an [00:10:00] internal/external evaluation section, and then you've also got demographic data about the district. You included security policies. You really covered the full gamut of what you're going to want to look at in a school district to make an effective evaluation and effective assessment. And so, what—you guys laid the groundwork for a great baseline of here's all of the information that you need to think about.

And if you begin to unpack the toolkit, probably around 1300, 1400 questions, which at first glance can be pretty overwhelming. And I think we began to work to get the Arkansas template—we began to work, Mr. Black and I began to work on: how do we take that information and pare it down to what we think is truly—it's all important, every bit of that information is important—but is there anything in here that we might be able to pull out that

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could seem redundant? Or that could seem like, “Hey, we can cover it in this section; we might not have to cover it in the next section.” And so, we took that information and pared it down from [00:11:00] 1400 or so questions, and I think now we’ve got a pretty solid toolkit that supplies about 700, 800 questions that if you cover those, that subset of questions, and you’re going around and evaluating a campus, I thoroughly believe you’ve done a great site assessment on any campus at any size.

The other thing we had to consider is the size of a school district. The amount of time that it takes to do even one campus had to be efficient. And so, if you get into training folks and telling them this may take a week, that’s too much, that’s too long. But if you tell them this could take a day, or less, and if you get your team together, you might even possibly be able to get this done within a couple of hours. Now you’re being effective and efficient, and people looked at that throughout the trainings. And that’s something Mr. Black can speak to as well. We begin to see that the more effective and efficient we could make this operation as we’re doing it, the better off you’re going to get at chances of getting these things done and getting them done well.

And so that was my experience. Really kind of started from a final effect of, [00:12:00] hey, let’s cover all of these things, but as we narrow it down, what are the most important factors that you want to put in a site assessment report so that it—when it lands on the superintendent’s desk and ultimately goes to your school board, you’re making financial decisions on what we need to do in our school district and how we need to allocate funds and resources to address these vulnerabilities and make improvements in the school system. And so, Mr. Black may want to speak to that as well.

Jason Black: Yeah, I’ll kick off by saying my thank-yous as well to Alison. It’s exciting to be able to finally put a face with a name. I know we visit a lot. Dr. May for the opportunity to work with Dr. Collum, and Dr. Collum bringing me in to do the safety work.

I’ll echo what they’re saying. All of those things are vital. The biggest piece is our educators are swamped. We all know that. Your leadership at the schools, having the ability to go out and do these assessments and try to make them more streamlined, following along with what Dr. Collum said. Time and resources are always a big piece of [00:13:00] what we have to look at when we’re going into schools and we’re telling them, “Hey, we need to get this done.”

So, my job is to go in and visit with principals and say, “Hey, how can we be as efficient as we can be and streamline this process to where we do get the priorities that we need while also not overwhelming.” And I think that SITE ASSESS has done a really good job of giving us a broad framework and then us identifying things that are particularly of interest to each campus or our district in this case.

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So, it's been good, and I'd say that, you know, to answer the question on why is this so important for our schools to conduct these? I'll echo what Dr. May said. We had a grant come down through the state, and we were able to move real time and get that done and get the grant because we had our priorities already set. I didn't have to go out and visit with a lot of principals or our maintenance men or different people to get all this work done. A lot of it had already been done. So, all I had to do is put the pieces together to send the grant in. So, it makes us much more efficient. [00:14:00] makes us much more proactive when those opportunities come down.

Dr. Cheryl May: And if I may also add to that, we ask our schools to do so, so much. And as Mr. Black said, it can be tremendously overwhelming, not only in terms of time but also cost. And so, you know, when you look at the differences between rural schools and more urban schools, those costs can be even more prohibitive of them being able to implement very critical school safety strategy.

So, the fact that SITE ASSESS was as comprehensive as it was and that it could be user friendly, it put it on an iPhone and—or any kind of phone—and an iPad and move around and do what you need to do [00:15:00] to do the assessment. But I also want to emphasize how important it is that it's free and that it's still going to be able to—you know, as they do it themselves, they're going to learn more about how safe their schools actually are.

You know, they could have somebody else come in and do it, but we advocate that they do it on their own because, like we said—Dr. Collum and I said earlier—them being—becoming more and more familiar with the school safety perspective on their campuses is critically important. I think Dr. Collum would agree that from a superintendent perspective, it allows them to be able to make what can be very, very difficult funding decisions.

Alison Curtis: Thank you for that. And we were so happy to be [00:16:00] able to post the customized site assessment template that you all created in Arkansas to our site for download from our Tool Box. So that is available for anyone to use and import into their version of SITE ASSESS on their mobile devices.

I wanted to get back to kind of the purpose of site assessments. And you all have talked a little bit about how the data can be used, but I wanted to, you know, get more thoughts on that. How can schools and school districts use site assessment data to enhance school safety and emergency operations plans?

Dr. Jeff Collum: I'll start and just, again, kind of let others echo. As you've—as I've gone through the trainings with a number of different employees around the state, probably at this point hundreds of various type of employees, what I'm seeing [00:17:00] is the value they gain from

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being able to take the app and go back and explore their campuses with a different perspective in mind.

Comments have been made like, “I’ve walked in this door a hundred times, and I’ve never really thought about this area from a safety perspective.” And so, when you’re using this toolkit, again, it’s customizable. They can pull out their phone. They’re taking pictures of their campus, and they’re going through, and they’re answering these questions that really alert them to, I’ve never really thought about is this door unlocked or is there a camera in this corner? Or what’s behind that bush over there? And so, the practicality of walking around a campus and having a different view of that campus that they may have stepped foot on a hundred times I think has been an eye-opening experience that added value.

And then back to the data collection part of this. If I’m looking at it, again, from a superintendent’s perspective, if a team goes out and does an evaluation Year 1, now I’m going to be looking for what [00:18:00] did we do to set goals to make sure that we addressed those safety concerns? What are the vulnerabilities? Where are we most vulnerable, and how do we set priorities around those vulnerabilities? And then my next step is, OK, again, how do we allocate funds and resources to address those top priorities? And then we work through that list. And so having the SITE ASSESS toolkit really addresses every part of that journey to make sure that you’re improving your campuses and really your overall district.

So, Conway’s got 10,000 students. We’ve got 16 campuses. It could take weeks if we didn’t have a tool like this to be able to go around and do these site assessments. Mr. Black’s been working with our SROs [School Resource Officers], our administrators, our staff. And we’re already lining out a plan to make sure that we’ve got all of these done within the required timeline.

But without a toolkit like this, you’re essentially flying blind, and you’re just having to kind of create your own template as you go. And so that’s the value, again, that I see as a [00:19:00] superintendent. We’ve got a standardized set of questions and really a goal that we can set from answering those questions as we look at the safety things in our district.

Alison Curtis: Dr. May, are there expectations for schools and school districts in Arkansas to conduct site assessments?

Dr. Cheryl May: Yeah, they’re actually required to do them. We came out with a series of best practices after our 2018 Arkansas School Safety Commission work. And one of those recommendations was, in best practices, was that schools should conduct comprehensive school safety assessments every 3 years.

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And so, what we did was the next legislative session, which was held in 2021, we ended up passing two bills. They're Acts [00:20:00] 620 and 648, if I'm not mistaken. And those bills primarily focus on those comprehensive assessments, which does include a culture and climate survey being done every 3 years. And they have to have their initial one done by August 1st of 2024, which is right around the corner because, as Dr. Collum mentioned, you know, it can take a little bit of time to get these done.

So being able to have SITE ASSESS in place early enough that it can provide some assistance in this process and then our new governor, Governor Sanders, passed a sweeping educational reform package called LEARNS. And the S on LEARNS is [00:21:00] safety. So, she made school safety an important part of her educational package, and these comprehensive assessments are also required in here as well. So, while we did our initial work, it was reemphasized again by our current governor in the—in the LEARNS act, which passed earlier this year in 2023.

Alison Curtis: Thank you, Dr. May, and this question is for any of our guests today. We'd love to hear a little bit more about your efforts around training site assessment teams, whether they've been done locally or statewide, on using SITE ASSESS, and specifically, you know, who are you inviting to those trainings? And which roles do you encourage to be on a site assessment team?

Dr. Cheryl May: Let me let me start if I can, Dr. Collum. You [00:22:00] OK with that? Good deal. Because I'm going to embarrass you a little bit. When Dr. Collum and I first started working on this years ago, he was the superintendent at the Benton School District, and then he decided to abandon us and left the state and went to Texas for a while. He still did some training for us, but when we started looking seriously at SITE ASSESS, I relied very, very heavily upon his background because he has a very strong school safety background. And what we basically discussed was, you know: This seems like a great program. There's so many very positive things about it. But how do we generate some interest in it? And so, what we agreed on, and at the time the class was 6 hours, we thought actually getting them [00:23:00] in the classroom, talking to them about the advantages. And I think he mentioned this a little earlier, but, you know, if you looked at it in its entirety, it can almost be overwhelming. And where do you get started?

So, we were the first ones in the country to actually start doing a class on how to use SITE ASSESS. And I think one of the very, very unique features that Dr. Collum incorporated into this 6-hour class was that we would actually go to a facility and that he would do a walkthrough with all the students and let them actually get practical experience in using the app and entering the information in the app. So, Dr. Collum, I'm going to turn it over to you.

Dr. Jeff Collum: Thank you, Dr. May, and it's good to be back in the great state of Arkansas and to be able to work with Dr. May again.

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So, what, Alison, [00:24:00] what happened in kind of this journey and learning about the app, and how do you create effective use of campus employees' time, we saw that you're going to have to develop teams. And every campus and every district has different names and acronyms and things that they use. We came up with just "campus emergency response teams." And as we would talk about these, we would say, "Take these teams and sit down and divide and conquer." And the value of the training that I saw was when we would do the walk-arounds, you could divide them up into teams that could get their phones and literally just walk through the portions of the building and then develop, you know, a report.

And so, I think that was extremely valuable. And this—at first it was primarily, I would say, assistant principals, school resource officers, maybe counselors, at a lot of the trainings. The last couple of years, I have seen school board members, superintendents. I've seen other city officials begin to join in. I've seen a lot more law enforcement and fire [00:25:00] department response. So, what it's garnered is an interest that almost anyone can do it if you're somewhat proficient in technology. And it's important to have as many folks in the room as possible when you're doing these evaluations.

And so that was the value along the way that we picked up is, "Hey, get the right folks in the room, teach them how to use the app, and then we do the walkthrough and really get them comfortable with how to get a finished product." Before they leave for the day, I would always give them a test. And the test was: You've got to be able to show me a final report. You actually have to be able to email or print and give me a final report that you've collected during the day with pictures and comments and high-proficient use of the app. And I'll say that 99 percent of the time, all attendees could walk out the door, and by the end of the day, they had it. Well, that's a pretty good success rate if you're looking at any new program or new operation.

Occasionally, you'd have glitches maybe with technology or internet accessibility, but very little issues [00:26:00] with the use of the app. I think the merge feature was probably the biggest component that once we got that part included, you're going to begin to pick up efficiency with your teams going out and doing these assessments. I would like to hear Mr. Black's perspective on it too. He's been critical in getting the infrastructure stood up in our district to make sure that we can do it efficiently with 16 campuses. So, Mr. Black's done a good job of that.

Jason Black: Yeah, I think perspective—when you start talking about school board, superintendents, administrators, teachers, SROs—everybody's perspective is a little bit different. And then you take that, and you can take it further and say each campus principal or each facility is going to be a little bit different.

I think the cool thing about this is when we talked about the data and different things you're looking for, Alison, on some of your questions is we can really tailor it to the audience. So, if I'm talking to a group of school board members and superintendents, what I may talk to them

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about is the safety grant like Dr. May was hitting on. We have a safety grant. If you have a good process to go in through site assessments and identify and [00:27:00] prioritize your needs, you can apply that to funding. And that really goes a long way with school board members because they can go back and ask their superintendents, “Hey, how are we prioritizing? I heard about this cool app called SITE ASSESS. Are we utilizing this to develop a plan to come back and get funding for safety?” If you’re thinking about a principal and you’re thinking about data, if you’ve got four or five principals from a similar district or the same district, like ours, you may find that, hey, there’s a theme here starting to come about with signage on the front of our buildings or at the roadways or maybe camera systems.

And when you go in to make those purchases or go about that initiative, there’s more power in numbers. So, when you present to the superintendent of the school board, “Hey, several of our principals have concerns about this item or that item,” there’s power in that when you can take a look at it. By the way, if you can replicate the report that it generates for other things that we do, I would love it because you look like you’ve spent 3 [00:28:00] days putting a report together.

We’ll keep that a secret. Hopefully not too many school board members see this, but you can generate, by that SITE ASSESS app, a great report that’s professional, that you can put out for your patrons to see. And it’s a really good clean product. So, kudos to you all on that.

Dr. Jeff Collum: If I may, I’d like to share a quick success story. So, there was a couple of board members that attended a training, Dr. May, and from that training, they were engaged in a decision for their district that was about a million-dollar decision. And so, Mr. Black and I had visited with them. They were trying to come down the line on what do we do. And we went back to the site assessment. We talked through some of the priorities of their district, and they felt good. We were able to help talk them through a recommendation. But basically, they made a decision based on how they prioritize those needs in the district from the site assessment trainings.

And so, I thought that was incredible value, as well is—Now you’re seeing the practicality to a school [00:29:00] board and a superintendent who ultimately are going to have to make those decisions. It was a million-dollar decision. And those are countless across maybe the state of Arkansas, where—should we focus more, for example, should we focus more on fencing or doors or security cameras or whatever it may be? Well, it depends. It depends on where it fell in the priority list. It depends on what the vulnerabilities are of that campus and that facility. But that toolkit helps you really kind of unpack that and then have a clean presentation, like Mr. Black was saying. You got a clean presentation. I can go to the board with and go, “Here’s what we saw. Here’s why we’re making this recommendation.” Then you can also come in and link grant funding to it, so an incredible toolkit that’s very useful.

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Dr. Cheryl May: And the only thing that I would add to this from part of the—a little bit earlier—is that, you know, we didn't really tailor this class to any particular individual within a school district only because there's [00:30:00] so much diversity between school districts in our state, and particularly when it comes to the smaller and more rural school districts. We didn't want to say, "Well, you know, you had to have these individuals" because what the roles and responsibilities of those individuals are can vary significantly from school district to school district.

Jason Black: Hey, you're right, Dr. May. I was at a smaller school district, and the amount of resources we have here in Conway, tremendously different. So, it's just going about finding the right people and right—it's applicable to all.

Dr. Jeff Collum: And, Alison, if I can add to that, too, I think what we learned during the training as well, there's a lot of value in bringing the team in, no matter how large or small the school district. If you've got a morning, or if you've got a—whatever time slot you can, bring the team together and just talk through the app, walk through what it looks like, give them a little time just to play with it a little bit, [00:31:00] and just kind of work through some of the questions. The more comfortable they get before they go out and do an onsite assessment, it really speeds up that process.

It's like, my 10-year-old can pick up the app and just figure it out in seconds. Well, adults, it may take us a little bit longer. So, what we would see is, get the adults comfortable with the technology and then the process itself. It's not that complicated, and it would help speed up time.

Alison Curtis: Thank you all for so much insight and wisdom. The report is something that we spent some time enhancing, especially the graphics and the design and formatting of it, so I'm glad to hear that it's so helpful in its final state to share with leadership and the school board as Mr. Black mentioned. I also wanted to kind of get back to [00:32:00] what Dr. Collum just said. That was a great tip, and I wanted to see if you had any more tips for school districts that are, you know, considering using SITE ASSESS and creating a custom site assessment file within the app. Any tips for others?

Dr. Jeff Collum: Yeah, so I think, first of all, if you haven't been to a SITE ASSESS training, you need to go. That would be number one. And get familiar with the toolkit and hear this information and walk through it. And then I think taking the time on the front end to sit down with your teams and unpack what the plan is. And then divide and conquer because initially when we started rolling it out, again, it seemed a little overwhelming because it was like that this could take days upon days. But if I give this section to an employee and another section to another employee, and they can go out and just kind of laser focus on that area, and then come back and share, I'm really [00:33:00] picking up the amount of time—or reducing the amount of

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time, it's going to take us to get these reports done. And then, I think, make sure you're thinking of all the different people, like Dr. May said. It wasn't targeted to one specific person or group of employees, so I think it's extremely important to remember that you've got a broad representation of people that are on these teams that do these evaluations.

One example that came up over and over again is cybersecurity is kind of a new safety area that we've got to focus on in schools. With ransomware and all the different areas that are going on. So, you've got to make sure you've got technology people sitting in the room that understand where your servers are located, phishing scams—they speak a different language than most of us do. So, you've got to make sure you've got those people sitting in the room. And then the value of our custodians being a part of the team and knowing where the broken door locks are and knowing where the windows that are broken and knowing just the different parts and “Hey, don't forget to go look at this part of the [00:34:00] building.” And so, develop those teams, make sure the team is comfortable with the use of the app, and then, I think, when you're done making sure, you also allow for a little bit of talk time at the end of the day to express: Here's what went well. Here's what didn't go well.

We brought a group of administrators together last year. I think over 65 administrators. We did about a half-day training or so with Mr. Black and his team. And I will say within that group, probably within about an hour or two, I think everybody in the room felt pretty comfortable with what they had, what the toolkit consisted of, and then what the charge was to get this work done.

And so, now the biggest challenge is this. So now you start having substitutes that come on campus. You may have personnel who have changed during the course of different seasons of hiring. And so, you've got to make sure you've got a system within your district to train and refresh and make sure that everybody understands, “Hey, don't forget SITE ASSESS is part of what we do. It's just part of our culture.” And so, I think integrating that into your school system where it's almost just [00:35:00] part of what you do in trainings every summer or in the fall or whenever you do it, I think is incredibly valuable.

Dr. Cheryl May: And the only thing that I would add to that would be, you know, when we first started talking about the merge feature—and that there were folks in different, you know, assigned to different parts of the building or different buildings, and then trying to merge them—is that one of the things that was told to me (and I completely agree with this) is the fact that it's important to come back and to talk about those things and not just merge them, so that everybody understands. Even though, you know, it saves a lot of time to merge it, you still have to sit down and talk about those vulnerabilities or those potential issues that you're seeing in the building.

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Dr. Jeff Collum: And, Alison, I think what will be incredible is—so we’re kind of in a baseline moment right now where we’re setting what the [00:36:00] first couple of years will look like. I think what will be incredible as we move towards the next cycle is, let’s say that a superintendent 5 years, 7 years, or even 10 years down the road comes in, or if I’m still here in 10 years or 15 or however long, you’ve got now a subset of data where they can come in and look and see: Here’s what this district has already done. Here’s what they addressed. Here’s where they didn’t address it. What an extremely valuable set of data to look at and go, man, these guys have done all this work. We don’t need to go back and recreate all this. So, I think that’s the other thing is you’re adding archive knowledge to a system, to people in a district, so that anyone who walks in can go, “No, you’ve got a report. Here’s what we’ve been working on for 3 years.” I think that’s incredible.

Alison Curtis: I agree. When we designed SITE ASSESS, we knew that it would be, you know, powerful across time, across buildings. But it will be so [00:37:00] interesting to see what that looks like, and as time goes on, across the field, and really what the true impact of it will be.

My last question for you, and it is—it’s a big question. What do you think are the biggest challenges right now facing schools regarding site assessments and conducting them? And what strategies have you all been using to help address those challenges?

Dr. Cheryl May: I think the biggest strategies our schools are faced with is getting them done by August 1st of 2024. And, you know, we’re trying to get as many of these SITE ASSESS classes out there. I think we’ve got two or three of them, Dr. Collum and Mr. Black, scheduled over the next couple of months, and then we’ll offer another [00:38:00] set again before August 1st. But our challenge is to try to be able to provide our school districts with enough resources that they can actually achieve that goal.

Dr. Jeff Collum: I would echo that. And I think just add, Alison: time and training. There’s so many things that we have to squeeze into a small frame of time in schools. This has got to be at the top of the list. Legally, it’s there, but I think practically we’ve got to make sure that we provide time during the school year and for our folks to get accustomed to what they’re expected to do.

Once that’s done, and I really think I’ve seen over the last several years, once you’ve had the training and you’re comfortable with it, it’s pretty practical. But it’s the restart of new people, the restart of a new school year, just remembering, you know, I haven’t looked at it in a while, so those kind of pieces. But I think that would be the biggest challenge is time and training.

Jason Black: And I’d echo both those things and say [00:39:00] that this is the major portion, 75–80% of the work. I think on the front end you have 10% of getting the right people in the room. If you’re a superintendent or you’re in leadership in a district or you’re a board member,

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making sure that that leadership group is visiting, they're bringing the right people in the room despite the size of the district. What are your resources? How do you get the right people in the room? And then starting the work, you know. It's tough, and it's overwhelming when you look at it. You see 700, 800 questions and that's us reducing probably half of them and trying to prioritize. It's still overwhelming. But once you get in there with a good team and you prioritize it and you get after it, it's worthwhile. And you get a sense of purpose and that, hey, there's really nothing more important than this work to make sure my staff and my students are safe while they're conducting the business.

Alison Curtis: Those are some great thoughts and ideas. We really [00:40:00] appreciate you taking the time talking to us today. I've loved learning about what you all are doing in Arkansas, not just today, but over the past couple of years. And I hope that all the schools in Arkansas know how they—lucky they are to have you all there doing this important work.

I wanted to give you all an opportunity to just share any closing remarks you may have. Any last-minute thoughts or ideas that you wanted to impart before we close out this conversation?

Dr. Cheryl May: Alison, I just want to make sure that you all know that we genuinely appreciate everything that you all at the REMS [TA] Center have done for decades when it comes to school safety. I've been a very strong advocate and will continue to do so. And SITE ASSESS is just one very good example of the impact that you guys can have in [00:41:00] schools all across our country.

Dr. Jeff Collum: Alison, again, I'll echo that. And having been a superintendent in Texas, they do some incredible things for school safety. But I came up through the era where I had a notebook about this thick. There was about 300 questions. And it was a pen and pencil, and it took a lot of time, so when Dr. May introduced me to this tool, I thought, "Wow, we are about to speed up the game. This is going to make our lives a lot better." And so, thank you, Dr. May, for being a leader in the state and, I would say, in the nation on this and other school safety initiatives. And, Alison, you guys have been so flexible and generous and responsive. When Mr. Black and I call with a question or a comment, you go, "Hey, give us a little time; we're going to figure it out." So, you guys have been incredible. And I appreciate just the support on the journey. And my heart has been this, and I know it's probably everyone on this Zoom call's heart. If there's one [00:42:00] thing we can do to make schools more safe, I'm in. Whatever that is, I want to do all that I can in my career to help schools be more safe. And so, I was very impressed by this initiative. I appreciate the drive that you guys have put forth to make it happen. So, thanks for having us.

Jason Black: Absolutely. I hope a lot of people are able to see this podcast and reach out to us. Thank you again, Dr. May. Thank you, Alison. Thank you, Dr. C. It's been a good time.

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It's been neat to see this come full circle. I remember a few years ago, Dr. Collum asking me to come out and help with some of the training and then to be on the phone with you, Alison, at REMS, and then to have the podcast going on. Pretty neat. Hope we continue to work like this and get some things done.

Alison Curtis: Well, lots of thank-yous, and one last thank-you from me. I really appreciate your kind words. Dr. May, you have been a wonderful partner over the years.

Dr. Cheryl May: Thank you.

Alison Curtis: And we look forward to continued partnership together because, at the end of the day, we all have the same mission.

Dr. Cheryl May: Right. It's all about our [00:43:00] kids, isn't it?

Dr. Jeff Collum: Absolutely.

Alison Curtis: All right. Thank you all so, so much.