

## **Bluum Together: Episode 7- Developing a Culture of Collaboration in Rural Idaho**

**Mike Caldwell:** Greetings and good day podcast listeners. Thanks for joining us for another episode of *Bluum Together*. I am Mike Caldwell, your host, and today we are in the beautiful town of Soda Springs, ID. My alma mater! Joining me for this first segment is Sally Peterson and Shantel Allen, both kindergarten teachers here in Soda Springs at Thirkill Elementary. Sally, Shantel, thanks for joining me.

**Sally Peterson:** You're Welcome.

**Mike Caldwell:** You guys are professional podcasters, so this is just old hat for you guys. You've been around the block a few times, right? Just stopping for another podcast, right?

**Sally Peterson:** All in a day

**Mike Caldwell:** All in a day. Shantel says she has some great jokes to tell us later I think, right?

**Shantel Allen:** Yeah, definitely!

**Mike Caldwell:** First of all, here we are in Soda Springs. We're highlighting some different schools around the state that have popped out and really shown some great success in what they're doing specifically in reading. I'm happy to get the two of you today and talk about what you're doing here at Thirkill elementary, and specifically in reading instruction. Maybe if you could set the stage for us today, Sally. Start us off with a story or anything you would like to kind of set the stage for our conversation today.

**Sally Peterson:** Well, I'll just introduce myself first. My name is Sally Peterson, I've taught for a long time. This is my 24th year of teaching school. 16 of those years have been in kindergarten, the remainder have been in 2nd grade. I love being a kindergarten teacher because I see that I'm laying the foundation for the kids that come in. That's their first exposure to formal education. I want it to be fun, exciting, engaging, hands on. Teaching kindergarten is a labor of love. It takes a lot of time, a lot of patience, but it's also very rewarding when you hear your children talk positively about wanting to come to school. I had a student this year say to me, I overheard them lining up for recess, and one said, "we just go from one fun thing to another fun thing," and that touched my heart. Because that's what I aim for, is to have school be a fun learning experience for the kids. I came here from Salt Lake City, so it's been a big switch moving from a big city.

**Mike Caldwell:** Soda Springs is a little bit smaller than Salt Lake.

**Sally Peterson:** Its quite a bit smaller, it's taking some adjustment to get used to. It's giving me a new look at small towns. I've had the experience throughout my teaching career to teach in

traditional public schools and a charter school for 10 years, which also is a public school. Also, in a private school before coming here to Soda Springs and so it's been good. No matter where I go, kids are kids, and they're really the same in some ways.

**Mike Caldwell:** Yeah, absolutely. Shantel, what's your background and experience?

**Shantel Allen:** So, I've taught here for seven years in kindergarten. I taught in Blackfoot for a couple of years and then I taught for ICU's GED program for a couple of years.

**Mike Caldwell:** Yeah. I bet it's great having someone with Sally's experience to get some ideas and to learn from her experience. Sally, I would guess it's also nice to have someone with Shantel's energy and youth and what she brings to the table as well. You guys probably make a really good team.

**Sally Peterson:** We're a great team, you can say that again. I mean she's got the energy and the youthfulness, and I have the experience, so yeah. We're quite a team.

**Mike Caldwell:** Talk to us a little bit about some of the key metrics you are paying attention to, in order to get success? You know, you have to know where you're going and oftentimes that starts with the data, and that drives kind of what you're doing. What are some of those things that you guys look at as a team that help drive what you do?

**Sally Peterson:** I'm glad you brought that up first. Because first and foremost, children coming into the public school system, we have no background knowledge on where they're at. So, the kindergarten assessment that we do at the beginning of the school year is key. We gain so much valuable information about not just where they're at scholastically, but behaviorally. We need to form those relationships with the parents, the parents come with their child at that time. They need to see that we are trustworthy, and it gives the children a chance to get to know us one-on-one before school starts. Having the assessment time is very important, it gives us our baseline.

**Shantel Allen:** And then we can kind of track from there, week to week or month to month. Or however often we want to track, and we can start from day one and see their growth today even.

**Mike Caldwell:** Very cool, thank you for that. Once you've identified some of the areas that you know you're going to focus on, how do you set your goals for success, those goals I don't know if those are quarterly, or annually. What's your process for setting those goals and what are some of the goals that you guys have this year, specifically?

**Sally Peterson:** With kindergarten, you have to do a lot of assessing because they're growing so fast. That kind of tapers down. Having been a second-grade teacher, the testing and assessment might not be as frequent but when they're learning their alphabet letters, you need to be assessing at least every other week to see where they're at. We do use what's called the I-

station, which is a requirement throughout the state of Idaho. In addition to that, I-station gives us one point of reference. The assessments that Shantel and I do on a weekly or bi weekly basis, that's another way, and I like to look because that's the human connection that I have with the children. I can really see where they're at sometimes, especially in kindergarten. They come in and they might not have had experience with Chromebooks before an iPads. We have Chromebooks this year. They're not familiar with where the keys are and what to touch and so having them sit next to me with my book open, I'm color coding everything so I know what they knew when they came in in August. The next time I assess them, it's a different color. So, I can see if there's growth what's happening with that child. That to me is what I really rely on to track their progress.

**Mike Caldwell:** How do you know when you have achieved success? What are some of those indicators that you're looking at, to verify that you're on the right track with your students?

**Shantel Allen:** When we can see them start blending sounds into words and being able to dictate words that were saying. Sorry, I keep touching the table!

**Mike Caldwell:** That's okay.

**Shantel Allen:** And then seeing them be confident, that's a big one. Watching their confidence grow with what they know.

**Sally Peterson:** With the phonics first program, one of the key indicators that the children are understanding what we're teaching is through when we dictate consonant-vowel-consonant words. And to see if they are able to understand those sounds and put the letters down on the paper. That's one of those key indicators. Definitely by year's end we want the kids to be familiar with all the concepts of print of books, to be fluent in all the alphabet letters and the sounds that they make, to understand that reading is blending letters together, we look for that. We do that quite frequently during the week with what's called the 'blending board' in the phonics first program. That's our goal, that's the big rock by the end of kindergarten. We want the kids to be at the place where they are fluent and like I said, you're going to have a long range, a wide range of where the kids are at. Some are going to come away being able to read, you know, little books. Others, if they can just know their alphabet letters and sounds, that's where we want them to be by the end of the school year.

**Mike Caldwell:** Yeah. You guys have really shown a lot of success in terms of growth. I mean, one of the things that brought me here to Soda Springs was the growth that you had. I was looking in particular, 21/22, I think it was an upper 30% growth. That was all grade levels, not specifically to kindergarten, all grade levels in the school. You guys have had a lot of success in, we're taking your kids from wherever they are in the fall to bringing them along and showing a lot of growth by the end of the spring. What are you guys doing that's maybe unique or maybe it's not unique you're just doing it really well? Can you talk a little bit about, maybe, your secret sauce? And what is making you successful in bringing those kids along? You could talk school wide or specifically in kindergarten, however you want to approach that.

**Sally Peterson:** Ok, so the year that you are referring to, that was my first year back in kindergarten after having moved to Soda Springs. I'm not sure about Shantel's numbers, it was a little bit different that year because she was part day kindergarten and part day preschool. I had 54 kids between my two sessions that year. I have to say that having an aide, a dependable aid, is critical in a kindergarten classroom. Because they're young, things happen, they need to go be escorted, to the office, to the restroom. They need extra help. Having a good aid and a small class. I mean, I think that those numbers that you talked about the growth that we saw two years ago, the 21/22 school year even with those high numbers, we must be doing something right.

**Mike Caldwell:** Absolutely and shout out to those aides. I mentioned my wife is a kindergarten aide, I think I mentioned that in a previous episode. Just hearing the work and the effort that you guys make and what she goes through to help kindergarteners, those are the unsung heroes oftentimes in our schools is those aides and how much they help in the classroom. Especially with higher numbers of students in the classroom and all the individualization that you have to do. Or in small groups that you have to do to really bring those students along, is I'm sure a major challenge in having an extra body that is in sync with what you're doing instructionally has to make it a huge difference. Do each of you have an aid in your kindergarten class? Do you share an aid? What does that look like here?

**Sally Peterson:** We each have an aid. They're different for the morning group versus the afternoon. One of the things that's a little bit unique to kindergarten also is the way that our day progresses. We start out as a whole group focusing on a literacy lesson, and then in my class I excuse the kids to go to their table where we do little bit of handwriting. It's a short ten minutes. Then we come back to the rug, do some phonemic awareness, which we have a really good phonemic awareness program. I just can't say enough good about that, we started it two years ago. Then after that, we do center rotations where the kids work in small groups. During that time, one of their centers is to come to teacher table where we give them the instruction and do assessments. So, they're moving around, they're doing a lot of fun and different things, rather than just sitting in one spot for a long period of time.

**Mike Caldwell:** Yeah. Can you elaborate a little bit on your phonics program? What makes it special or why you like it so much?

**Sally Peterson:** The phonics first program, the way that we teach the alphabet letters in kindergarten, it's called layer one. We introduced the letters it's one a week. Which is kind of slow for some of the kids when they come in already knowing their letters, but if you mix that up and you're teaching that one letter per week. At the same time as part of our Haggerty phonemic awareness lesson, we go through the whole deck of alphabet cards every day. It gives what each child needs, they're all gaining it in a different way. There's lots of exposure throughout the day. I don't know if Shantel wants to jump in here and talk about red words.

**Shantel Allen:** Sure. Our red words are just another word for our site words that we use. The nice thing about this phonics first program is they are up and moving and we're writing in sand, or shaving cream, or writing on bumpy paper, or tapping it on our arm, or writing it in the sky. There's lots of movement with what we're learning to help and connect that.

**Mike Caldwell:** Really using a lot of senses in how they're doing it.

**Shantel Allen:** It touches every kids different way of learning. Some kids learn by writing it, some learn by finding it, some learn by doing a movement or whatever.

**Mike Caldwell:** Is that part of the phonics program or is that something that you guys added a layer to?

**Shantel Allen:** It's part of the phonics program and then we kind of add to it. We'll do chalk or we'll do, you know, other kind of silly things that the kids enjoy, like the shaving cream.

**Sally Peterson:** Or magnetic letters, just to keep it fresh. You don't want the boredom to get in. They rotate around, so when we're learning a new red word, which we get to lesson nine I think, that's the lesson that we start teaching the red words. There are the high frequency words or sight words like Shantel said. The kids rotate around each table all at the same time. We don't sit down, they stand behind their chairs. We're not there for long enough to sit. One of the tables is air, right? So, I'll have the red word written up on the board and we put our pointer finger up in the air and we say the word. Then we write it out with our finger in the air while the others may be writing it with their doodle board or in the sand with magnetic letters with colored pencils. We do it three times. We read it and we underline it after we spell it out and write it. Then we quickly rotate to the next table. They go to six tables and it's done in less than ten minutes, but they're writing that word over and over again.

**Mike Caldwell:** A lot of practice. In that total time that you spend in reading instruction on a daily basis, what's the approximate time that you spend every day?

**Sally Peterson:** Well, the kids are with us for not quite three hours. I would say of that time, direct instruction, an hour of literacy. That would be through read alouds.

**Mike Caldwell:** That's when you're doing your rotations during that time?

**Sally Peterson:** Yes, and that would be part of it. It might be broken up with handwriting so that they don't get bored just sitting in one spot but overall, about an hour.

**Mike Caldwell:** You say 3 hours?

**Sally Peterson:** A little less than three hours.

**Mike Caldwell:** Are they halftime kindergarten?

**Sally Peterson:** Yes, we're part time.

**Mike Caldwell:** Gotcha, ok. I didn't realize that.

**Sally Peterson:** Yeah, I'd love to put the plug in at the end, for full day. I taught full day kindergarten for ten years. This is a hard one for me because kindergarten is not required. It wasn't a required grade in Utah and it's not here in Idaho either, yet we have a lot of standards that we are expected to teach. It's like, how can it be not a requirement and yet we've got to teach all these things to get kids ready for first grade? It's a lot. It's not the kindergarten that you and I had, maybe you did but its changed a lot. With the full day kindergarten, you just get to slow everything down, you can have more fun. I mean, with such a little bit of time we really don't have time to teach science concepts, the social studies, the art lessons, you know? If we were full day, we could do that. So absolutely, I want to put the plug in.

**Mike Caldwell:** You kind of jumped ahead to one of my next questions which is, what is the greatest area of opportunity for continued improvement? It seems like, if you're talking about a really big shift or change it seems like that makes sense as a really good step. Do you understand or know why you are not full-time care? Similar to a lot of schools that are in Idaho?

**Sally Peterson:** We are severely limited on our space. We are just like busting at the seams at our school. We already have a portable, but we've had our computer teacher, our PE teacher, our music teacher, they've all lost their rooms. They move around throughout the school with a cart because we needed classrooms space.

**Mike Caldwell:** So, you have an afternoon group and a morning group? You have two subsets of kindergarteners that you see, which probably adds to the exhaustion by the end of the day.

**Sally Peterson:** It does. It can be a good thing or not, right?

**Mike Caldwell:** Absolutely. Well to wrap up a little bit on this part of the conversation, you're in a rural school here in Idaho. What do you see as some of the unique challenges that you face as a small rural school here and some of the hurdles that you've had to overcome to get where you are?

**Shantel Allen:** Well, we kind of talked about this. Space, and I mean, that's probably a lot to do with funding too. We're crammed in here. Then sometimes when you're a rural school, you don't have all the resources that a big school has.

**Sally Peterson:** That's a huge one, yeah.

**Mike Caldwell:** Are there any things specifically that you think, or you know, larger schools are getting that you're just like if we only have that? things

**Sally Peterson:** Like a behavioral specialist. You know, we have a really diverse population here in Soda Springs. We have some children that need a place where they could go and chill out and have discussions about behavior with somebody that's knowledgeable. We do have a great psychologist here in our school, she's new this year, but we could use more help. Substitutes are really, really, hard to find right now. In a small community, you just have what you have and work with it.

**Mike Caldwell:** Yeah. So it's more of the human resources that are kind of top of the list. What about advantages? So, do you see any advantages being in a smaller rural school?

**Shantel Allen:** Our community is a huge advantage.

**Mike Caldwell:** In what way?

**Shantel Allen:** They do like a cereal drop for example. Every Thirkill student goes home with a box of cereal over Christmas break so they're not hungry, it's awesome. We did our veteran's day program just last week and that's a huge turnout by the community to come and watch that. Every school comes to it, so the kids can see their big brothers and sisters too which is fun.

**Sally Peterson:** Our music teacher is wonderful, she works really hard. She comes in with her cart once a week to each classroom. She taught the kids all the words to the star-spangled banner, which for kindergarten, that's quite the song with the words to learn. Those little kids last Thursday, just their voices, were so beautiful you just got goosebumps listening to them singing the star-spangled banner. Like Shantel said, the community comes out in force to support our schools. Having one elementary, one middle school, and one high school here in Soda, that's different. I mean, in Pocatello or Idaho Falls you've got many of each. We also have a car dealership here that does a trunk or treat, and all the kids know that they can go there at Halloween time. The community is very supportive. I think there's a lot that goes on behind the scenes of these little kids that need winter wear, or school supplies, that supplies are given. Clothing is given to our psychologist here for those kids that need the extra help. So, we're grateful to have that here in Soda.

**Mike Caldwell:** It sounds like you still have a great community, the community I remember as well when I grew up here, so thank you for that. Well, Sally, Shantel, thank you so much for what you do. Kudos to you guys and to all the teachers here at Thirkill. You have a lot to be proud of, obviously more work to be done always, right? Congratulations on the work that you've accomplished, and I appreciate you guys joining us on this podcast today. Thank you.

**Sally Peterson:** Thank you for having us!

**Mike Caldwell:** All right. Well, joining me now here Thirkill as an extension from my conversation with Sally and Chantelle is Whitney Berger. She's Thirkill's Title Intervention Specialist and also the leader in me program coordinator and then Rod Worthington who is the

principal here at Thirkill. Whitney, Rod, thanks for joining me and us for this great episode here at Thirkill Elementary.

**Rod Worthington:** It's our pleasure, or my pleasure anyway.

**Whitney Berger:** It's mine as well.

**Rod Worthington:** Whitney's pretty happy over there...

**Mike Caldwell:** Like Shantel and Sally, you guys are also professional podcasters. This is old hat to you guys.

**Rod Worthington:** Oh like Sally said, it's just like another day at Thirkill!

**Mike Caldwell:** No big deal.

**Rod Worthington:** No big deal.

**Mike Caldwell:** What about you Whitney? Have you done a podcast before?

**Whitney Berger:** I've not! I'm excited!

**Mike Caldwell:** Well good. You're professional already, so good work. Whitney, you are the Title Interventionist I had the pleasure of poking into one of your PLC's meetings earlier today as we were getting a tour of the school. Talk to us a little bit before we go into the PLC's about your intervention process and strategies and what you do when you see those students that are starting to slide a little bit. When you need to jump in and provide some additional support, can you just give us a global perspective of what you guys do here at the Thirkill?

**Whitney Berger:** In the fall we look closely at our IRI data, and we then further assist students using the phonics first assessment so that we can really pinpoint their skill needs and deficits. So then we take those kids with the highest needs and we group them based upon their abilities. It's really exciting because we get to really see what they need, and we are able to start our instruction right there and pace it to what they need. It's really exciting to see these kids grow because a lot of times they're struggling in the regular classroom. You know, they're not where the others are but then they're grouped with kids at their similar abilities and so we just work with them and we get to see so much growth, it's exciting.

**Mike Caldwell:** Do you consider yourself kind of a data nerd? I mean, do you get geeked out on the on the data? Is that you or is that someone else? Usually every school has one. Is that you?

**Whitney Berger:** I wouldn't say I'm a data nerd, but I definitely spend a fair amount of time looking at the data. I'm more excited about learning about the science of reading that I've been learning in the past two years.



**Mike Caldwell:** When you look in the data, what are some of the things that really stand out to you that you're looking for? That maybe are really driving some key decisions, what are some things that you zero in on?

**Whitney Berger:** We're looking at those kids, you know, where all the kids are. Seeing how many that we have that are high and then really focusing on those that are struggling and seeing the ones that are continually testing low. Then figuring out why are they testing low what skills are they needing and how can we support them.

**Mike Caldwell:** Let's take a little bit of a data for dummies approach here. A lot of people, our listeners, maybe not in elementary schools, and like I was a high school teacher and principal so I didn't spend a lot of time on IRI, right? There's a lot there in terms of the different strands that are tested or assessed in the IRI. You have all the different subgroups, can you talk a little bit about what the IRI consists of and some of the things that you're looking at?

**Whitney Berger:** Yes. The IRI is the Idaho Reading Indicator, and it is delivered via the program of I-station. Depending on the grade level, it looks a little different which skills are assessed. You can see the kids letter sound knowledge, spelling, vocabulary comprehension, those are the ones that are standing out to me right now. Again, it depends on the student's grade level and their skill level to which sub tests are being given each month. Then we're able as teachers and interventionist to look closer at that data and to really look and see if it's spelling that they're struggling with or they're doing pretty good at spelling and fluency, but their comprehension is really struggling. We can look closer at those different strands and focus on their needs.

**Mike Caldwell:** Rod, as the principal is that something that you spend much time on, is looking at that data? Or is that left up to Whitney and the teachers. How much involvement are you having on the data side of things?

**Rod Worthington:** I would say that I look at the data a lot. I guess the 'Mr. data' can be manipulated any way that we want it to be manipulated. We have to be really careful with that data. With my vision on that, is that we make sure, and these ladies do an amazing job. All our teachers do an amazing job in looking at that and saying ok we can make that data look any way we want but what's the impact on the student. So, when we see that impact and we see that light bulb click on and those aha moments, that's where the magic happens.

**Mike Caldwell:** I'm curious on the manipulation. When you say that many might think, "well it's black and white, the data says X or Y or whatever else," what do you mean by that? Elaborate a little bit.

**Rod Worthington:** First we have, I mean, I'm surrounded by teachers and they know that those students are going to be different every single day when they walk through those doors. When they walk through those doors and they walk into those classrooms, what they're coming in with is certainly something that these teachers get to work with every day, they get to work

with that. When I say manipulation, I'm saying it's a, you know, they're teaching the skills. Data is a monthly thing, a weekly thing, a daily thing.

**Mike Caldwell:** Its ever changing and that's kind of, what you're saying. How the teachers and intervention specialists and everybody on teams working with the students. It's kind of an evolving moving number really.

**Rod Worthington:** Absolutely. Looking at that data we have to understand that it's the number, it's just a number. But it helps us with that process of teaching that little person, you know, like our kindergarten teacher said, reading is a truly a process. It's amazing.

**Mike Caldwell:** Absolutely. Speaking of process, one of the consistent things that I'm hearing from these highlight schools, yours being one of them, that across the board is a focus on the data but also this culture of collaboration and PLC's and how important that is. Rod, I was talking to you as you were giving me a tour today, it was third grade collaboration or PLC time. Whitney, I popped into a meeting that you were leading with that team and you guys have it built into your day so the teachers aren't having to stick around after school or come in before school to do that. It's built in as part of their day, which is exceptional in my book because that's not always the case. You've made collaboration and PLC time a priority. Talk to me a little bit about those PLC's, how important they are and what you guys do during those weekly meetings with your teachers. Whitney?

**Whitney Berger:** Our PLC meetings are extremely important. We're super grateful that it's built into our schedule and we talk about all the needs that we have. We spend, especially at the beginning of the year, the time talking about the data and looking at those scores and the student needs and how we're going to best support them. We meet weekly with each grade level and so we spend time talking about curriculum. What's working, what do we need to change, sharing out ideas of what's working for each teacher in class, and we also talk about our behavior, student needs, upcoming events planning. All of those things that we need to know, we do a lot of supporting of our new teachers within these grade level meetings as well.

**Mike Caldwell:** And Whitney, do you lead each of the grade level PLC's?

**Whitney Berger:** Yes, I do.

**Mike Caldwell:** So, then you also have that vertical lens of each grade level. Not just within each grade, but you have those conversations with kindergarten teachers and 1st and 2nd and so on and so forth. That kind of gives you a more vertical lens on how important is that in your success overall as a school to have that consistency between the grades.

**Whitney Berger:** It is important because I'm able to see how things transition from one grade to another to see what the needs are. I share what I learn in one meeting with the teachers in the next, and then I also take the information that I'm gathering and then sometimes our staff

meetings are based upon what I've learned there and what we need to spend more time together on.

**Mike Caldwell:** Yeah. So, that seems to be really a fundamental part of your culture here of the school is that collaboration time and working together on that is not always easy. It's rarely easy to establish that. Has that been in place a long time here at the school?

**Whitney Berger:** It has been. We put that in place probably 13 years ago.

**Mike Caldwell:** Has it been fairly consistent over that time? Has it evolved?

**Whitney Berger:** It's been pretty consistent. We could do better with our kindergarten, it's harder to find a time in the day with them. We increased our time from 30 to 40 last year and have kept that this year as well.

**Mike Caldwell:** Of your PLC time?

**Whitney Berger:** Yes.

**Mike Caldwell:** So, you meet weekly 40 minutes. Gotcha, ok. Speaking of culture, I've been really impressed just walking around the school, a lot of consistency. It seems like buy in, a lot of culture related things. I have no doubt that culture and academic success are tied hand in hand. What are some things that you guys are doing from a culture standpoint beyond the PLC's and the collaboration and those types of things. If we step away a little bit from curriculum and instruction to more broadly culture and what you guys believe. How do you act as a school, can you talk a little bit about that Rod?

**Rod Worthington:** First, we're a leader in me school. That leader in me school is based off the *Seven Habits for Highly Effective People* from Doctor Stephen R. Covey. Through that, we have started this program.

**Whitney Berger:** About eight years ago.

**Rod Worthington:** Ok, eight years ago. It's been a process and like everything is, but once you walk through the doors there's a definite, and I think sometimes we take this for granted, but when you walk in there is definitely a culture of leadership. We funneled down from school wide goals, you've seen that as you walk by the classrooms.

**Mike Caldwell:** Yep, absolutely.

**Rod Worthington:** We have big wildly important goals, we start out with our school wide goals. It funnels right down to the classroom goals and right down to the student goals. We're constantly tracking those goals and it's another data point. The other part of this is also there's mission statements. Our school has a mission statement, our classrooms have a mission

statement, it's what they believe. Then it goes right down to that student and there's a leadership atmosphere in that every student has an opportunity to serve in their classroom. It's been a joy to me and it's been fun to be part of that. We're one of, I don't know how many lighthouse schools there are in the state of Idaho, one of five or less.

**Mike Caldwell:** In the state of Idaho?

**Rod Worthington:** In the state of Idaho.

**Mike Caldwell:** And the leader in me website, it's I think it's leaderinme.org if I'm not mistaken or something.

**Rod Worthington:** .com

**Mike Caldwell:** I was looking at that recently and it looks like a great program built on really solid foundations of Stephen Covey's work with the *Seven Habits* as I was looking. We talked a little bit about how each month you focus on a different habit.

**Rod Worthington:** Yeah. Whitney you can jump in here, we started out in September with be proactive. Begin within the mind is October and now we're on putting first things first. Everything is based, even on our staff meetings we focus on the leader in me and the habits. It helps develop that with the teachers and it's a great reminder to well, put first things first.

**Mike Caldwell:** Yeah. I ask maybe two different questions on the impact of that program in your school. One is I hear frequently that one of the biggest challenges in school is behavior and especially since COVID. How much has the leader in me program curbed some of that, or has it? I'm sure you still have behavior issues, every school does. You're not going to get away from that, I'm sure. And if you don't, you have something really special to share. Talk to me a little bit about, and Whitney coming from you or Rod, behavior and how the leader in me program is helping in that regard. Then I have a secondary question related to the leader in me program.

**Whitney Berger:** We are using the leader in me to help our students understand their part, their role, and how they can deal with their struggles. Yes, we definitely still have our fair share of behaviors and our leader in me website has become a lot more robust in recent years. We've been diving into more of the resources that are available on there that help specifically speak to behavior and reframing also how we as educators think about students who are struggling. Because some of them are really challenging but as we're reframing our minds to think about, "ok, why is the student acting this way. There is a reason behind this behavior," and if we can try to understand that reason and help to fill that need, we can help to lessen these behaviors. Those are some of the resources we have on there. One of them that we have been growing our use in, is with our restorative practices. We're growing our skills as students are coming with a lot more challenges, so the leader in me program and website is really giving us skills and ideas and resources to try.

**Mike Caldwell:** Well, this segment of the conversation is a really good tee up for our next entire segment of our podcast series. This has been focused, you know, from October to December on the science of reading in Idaho schools. Our next segment from January to March is really going to be focusing on school culture, behavior, and school climate. This is a good kind of teaser for some of that as well. Going back to both the leader in me program and then tying it into what you're doing academically as a school, what would you say are some of the key things where they merge together? You have the culture and the goal setting and the different focus areas per month and different things that you're doing in that regard and then you have this effort that's happening you know in the classroom with reading and math and everything else. Where do they really tie together in making the difference?

**Whitney Berger:** One that stands out is our goal setting. Like Mr. Worthington said, each student has an individual goal for reading and for math. We also have a classical and a school goal, but we do a lot of supporting the students to make those goals. Helping them understand what their goal is, why it's important, how they can make it, and then encouraging along the way. Then we also do a lot of celebrating when we made those goals with the individual, the class, and as a school. Something that we've added this year, is a monthly habit assembly and so we get excited. It's just a quick assembly and we get excited to talk about the monthly habit but also we have someone from each class sharing out about how they are being a leader. Soulfully, that's inspiring. Our students to want to be noticed for their good behaviors.

**Mike Caldwell:** Absolutely, yeah. It seems like you're doing a lot of things proactively to bring all those all those things together. Goal setting, I mean, that is so foundational to success in anything you do. If you can start to learn how to do that at such a young age it's going to tie into everything else that they do, academics and beyond, so great stuff. Anything you would add there, Rod?

**Rod Worthington:** I just appreciate I'll tell you, the successes come from, and I shared this with you earlier, is first we have excellent teachers. Very impactful. Class size makes a difference, it does. Then having the right curriculum and the right resources in order to make that all happen. With all of that, I would say that we have some foundational programs like the leader in me program that helps drive our school culture with our teachers, our students, our community. It's huge. Our parents receive, just a side note which I really like what we've changed this year, is they have habit helps that are sent home. So, they're bringing families together and then that brings the community together and with all of that it's not just our school. We're really teaching the whole child and with everything involved with that, I really just look forward to seeing these little people become really great big leaders.

**Mike Caldwell:** Yep, absolutely. Well, you guys have a lot to be proud of. You're doing some great work here, it's been fun to walk around the school as a Soda Springs alum. I didn't get to go to Thirkill. I started in Soda Springs in 4th grade over at Hooper Elementary which is no longer running as a school, unfortunately. It's great for me to come back here 30 years after graduation or so and see the great work that's happening in my own community here, so it's good stuff. Kudos to you guys. Any parting thoughts or closing comments that you guys would

like to add? Maybe anything I didn't ask that you'd like to share that you're doing, or that you're proud of here.

**Whitney Berger:** One thing that I'm excited about is how much that I've learned in the past two years about the science of reading and understanding those strands better. I feel so much more prepared to teach students how to read in ways that they actually learn to read. So our school has engaged in multiple trainings with our phonics first and some other things and one through the state that have helped us better understand how to help our students read to meet the needs of students with characteristics of dyslexia. I just I feel like we're much better prepared.

**Mike Caldwell:** Have you guys had your dyslexia training yet?

**Whitney Berger:** Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

**Mike Caldwell:** What about you, Rod. Any closing comments or anything that you'd like to share that I didn't ask?

**Rod Worthington:** I just I would like to thank, you know, we say sometimes we don't have enough but I will say that our literacy money that the state legislature and our good governor has set aside and made a priority. I appreciate Superintendent Critchfield in maintaining that because then what it does, is it allows us to bring the resources, the time, money, and people in play. Then we can move the business forward and it's really a great thing as a principal. I'm grateful for our legislature and in doing that. We always want more, but we're grateful, I'm grateful, for what we have.

**Mike Caldwell:** Yeah, absolutely. There's always more that any school should, would, need and want and understandably so because it's a very challenging task that we as educators are faced with. That, you guys do every day so I certainly respect that. Again, thank you to the team here for your efforts and for participating in this episode of *Bluum Together*. Thanks to all of our listeners that are listening today and also to all of our listeners that have followed us along in this series focusing on the science of reading in Idaho schools. With that, we will close out and we'll see you next time.