

Bluum Together: Episode 8- A Rural Schools Approach to Reading Intervention

Mike Caldwell: All right, greetings and good day podcast listeners. Thanks for joining us for another episode of *Bluum Together*. I'm Mike Caldwell your host and today we are in beautiful Bancroft, Idaho at North Gem school district. Joining me this podcast is 4th grade teacher and Curriculum Director Sam Wadsworth. Sam, thanks for joining me.

Sam Wadsworth: Thank you.

Mike Caldwell: I snagged Sam from recess duty, is that right? Well not recess duty but it's recess so he has a short break with students. Just plugging him in here, so thanks for joining me for this podcast. Sam, we'd like to start with story in kind of setting the stage for our conversation so I'm going to turn it over to you to share a story. Whatever you'd like.

Sam Wadsworth: Ok. I left this North Gem some time ago and spent a couple of years teaching in Thirkill Elementary in Soda Springs. Then I had the opportunity to come back and when I came back, things were in disarray. They hadn't replaced me, they hadn't found someone to manage their curriculum, and so I started looking at the numbers and they were down and some things had slipped. So, I dusted off my copy of the national, oh what do they call it, the national board of reading panel? The national reading panel. I made it a poster and we sat down as a group and we talked about each item and figured out where we were in that and what we needed to do. We made a list of things you know, corrections, that needed to be made. One of the major things we found out was that we kind of stopped teaching phonics, you know, it's boring. What can you say! People are always looking for something more fun or more whatever, and they had fallen off the bandwagon. We had to retrain everybody, we got everybody back on board, and the numbers came right back up. But that's how we did it is we just itemized it. It took me about three years to get everything back online, but that meeting, and that day, led to this day.

Mike Caldwell: Well, thanks for sharing that story. I had the pleasure of joining you at 7:00 AM this morning to observe and listen in on your RTI meeting. It sounds like it's a monthly meeting?

Sam Wadsworth: It's it is a monthly meeting, yes.

Mike Caldwell: Yeah. So we'll get into the strategies that you put in place since you've been here and the work that you guys are doing. You have a lot to be proud of. Before we go into some of those things, will you elaborate a little bit on your background and your experience as a school teacher, and curriculum director, and all those types of things>

Sam Wadsworth: Yeah, it just kind of fell into place. I don't think a school district our size has anybody like me, I think. I think I'm unique.

Mike Caldwell: I would agree, in my short time getting to know you.

Sam Wadsworth: Right. I was, you know, first. I was just a brand new teacher came here and I had eight students, it was awesome, you know? They paid me for this! So I had a great time, but I spent a huge amount of time trying to figure out where these kids were. There just wasn't a tool available to figure out where they were. I had a Stiglitz reading inventory and I would record kids and do things like that and it was just totally ineffective, you know? In time, we adopted the AR program when we adopted intensive phonics, and our reading scores shot up. They just went, I mean, crazy! It was almost like a miracle, you know? I wouldn't have believed it. I was trained in whole language and I was all about Ken Goodman and immersing kids in language and there just there was a problem with whole language. There was number phonics and people just felt like we just don't need it anymore, and they were wrong, and we know that now. So, we started going to phonics and we started being a lot more successful. I think the thing that really changed the game for us, as far as reading instruction goes, was when we did an electronic ISEP and suddenly we had data. We had quality data, really good data. I saw immediately we can use this and so I sat down with the 2nd grade teacher, we pinned out our plan and we made it happen.

Mike Caldwell: Yeah, and you're seeing great success. I mean, we looked through some data today, but spring of 2023 North Gem, 86.8% of all the students are at grade level?

Sam Wadsworth: Correct.

Mike Caldwell: And you have a whole county accountability board in this main hall here on ISAT data and IRI data. You're looking at that and you're keeping that updated kind of on the month to month basis or whatever you can update, right? On the month to month basis and so obviously data is an important part of the work that you do and focusing on that. I saw that this morning in your IRI, or I'm sorry here, RTI meeting this morning. Talk about what are some of the goals that you guys have as a school district when it comes specifically to reading. Like, what is your goal here?

Sam Wadsworth: You know the goal used to be 80%, so now we need a new goal. We get to a point where we get high enough that it's not really about the instruction, it's not about the curriculum, it's not about the responding to intervention, it has more to do with the problems that the groups of children have. There are some students that are chronic, you know? They have cognitive issues. They're not going to go away but they can grow and so that's kind of where we focus there. We want everybody to grow, that's something we can do with everyone and then the numbers take care of themselves.

Mike Caldwell: Yeah. That's a good way to kind of put your focus around their growth. I think that's why that helps you really zero in on each student and where they're at and where they can go and really pushing that. So, what are some of the key metrics that you really pay attention to in achieving that growth goal and your you know overall school goals? What are some of those things that you really zero in on that make a difference in you achieving that?

Sam Wadsworth: We used to do a screen test and things like that but with the with the I-station program they take care of all that for us. So, initially we just look at the overall reading score. If a child drops below the 40th percentile, and even they don't even have to drop below the 40th percentile, that's just kind of a number we picked out of the hat, if we are concerned about them in any way, we flag them. We put them on the reader board and so and we basically just use the I-station program. We get new data every single month, and the I-station program has some issues just because it's a computer problem, and a computer platform. We're dealing with tiny children and they do strange things and you noticed in our RTI meeting we talked a lot about personality issues. We do rely a lot on teacher judgment as well, but as far as data goes, metrics we use. We use the I-station, we also use AR for some background data, and that that can help us, but not always.

Mike Caldwell: Help some maybe less informed people that are not elementary age teachers, and talk about what is I-station. Break that down and AR, you know, kind of elaborate on what those things mean.

Sam Wadsworth: AR stands for accelerated reader.

Mike Caldwell: And that's a program?

Sam Wadsworth: It is. It is a computer platform. It doesn't teach anything, it's not part of the curriculum. What it does is it provides us the data. It tells us about how well children are reading, how much they're reading, at what quality, how much practice they're getting. It'll tell us how many words they've read, you know, all kinds of snippets of information that we can glean. So a lot of people think that it teaches comprehension, that's not true. That doesn't happen. We just get data from it and then we do the I-station, which is another computer platform and it's more of a diagnostic assessment. Every month the children are diagnosed as to where they are on various science of reading categories. In kindergarten it would look different than third grade depending on what skills we're working on, but it would give us month by month data which is incredible. If you can get the child to do it right, it's pretty accurate and we rely on it heavily.

Mike Caldwell: Yeah. You know, when I was observing your RTI meeting this morning you're going through grade by grade level by grade level and talking about individual students that are on your, what you call the board.

Sam Wadsworth: The reader board.

Mike Caldwell: The reader board is that what it's called. Students that are, you know, that are you know struggling in different areas and so kind of that your focus students. It wasn't unlike, I could imagine, a doctor or a group of doctors getting together to talk about a particular patient and what symptoms they're seeing and what different things they've tried to help with their symptoms. That's kind of what you're doing, right? You're taking each student and really looking

at what the data is telling you and what have we tried and then the teachers are sharing with each other like what's been successful for them. We're talking about different strategies and so that's got to be a big part of your success as kind of those types of conversations.

Sam Wadsworth: Well, it's the magic of small I guess, you know, we know these kids. Their children have children I taught in many cases. I've known some of them, many of them since they were born, so it's very personal and we do have a lot of knowledge about these kids that might not be available to someone in a much larger school.

Mike Caldwell: Sure, yeah. You have that third grader that the second-grade teacher probably had them the year before, and so on and so forth probably. Not always the case, but there's really that that knowledge that carries over about the student and what works and doesn't work.

Sam Wadsworth: Well there's this constant give and take of information, you know? Oh yeah, he did that when he was in my class. Or you know, his father did this. I mean, and we just have this background and it provides us with a solid platform. We can make much better decisions about what students need and what will help them.

Mike Caldwell: Beyond the RTI focus that you guys have here, and what you're doing to kind of zero in on those students, can you talk a little bit about what the other kind of school wide strategies you have for reading? Specifically whether it's curriculum or instruction strategies or things that you guys do that really lead to the success that you have. Could you elaborate on any of those?

Sam Wadsworth: Yeah. We've had to make some changes. We make changes all the time as we've gone. I've been here so long and it's just a jumble of, you know, different situations and things and reasons why we do things but we got away from the basal readers. We tried to get away from those and we still use them.

Mike Caldwell: What's a basal reader?

Sam Wadsworth: Oh, sorry.

Mike Caldwell: That's ok. Thank goodness in these conversations I was a high school principal so some of these terms are very new to me. I'm channeling probably the questions that our audience might have as well, like what is he talking about!

Sam Wadsworth: All right. Traditionally, we when we buy our reading program it comes with a teachers handbook and there'll be an entire language arts program in there. It'll be grammar and spelling, and comprehension skills, and fluency skills, and phonics skills. All those skills will be in one thing and you'll teach a story and there'll be a lesson on each one of those items. They tend to be shabby, you know? They're trying to sell a book, we're trying to teach kids to read and we kind of miss each other somewhere along the line. There's a lot of real problems with

them, they have too many activities. The activities sometimes are not very well done, somebody's just throwing them together and quite often done by people who don't have a lot of experience teaching. They're doctors who went and got their doctorate degrees and now they're writing curriculum.

Mike Caldwell: And never been in the classroom.

Sam Wadsworth: Or spent the minimum, you know, two or three years or whatever their state required. So sometimes what we used there's a lot of problems with it.

Mike Caldwell: So you got rid of those?

Sam Wadsworth: We got rid of them, yeah. We still use them K-3, or no, K-2. We recently switched K-3 out, now we go to a literature-based program. We found a Louisiana Believes program written by teachers in the state of Louisiana, it was free, thank you.

Mike Caldwell: It's always nice.

Sam Wadsworth: Yeah, that's always nice. Now we read novels, we're about to start the *Lightning Thief* in the 4th grade. We'll teach all of our reading lessons right out of the novel so it's more realistic and more engaging. We just seem to do a lot better, there's writing connected with it which helps us in the ISAT and it's just a better program, a better way to teach reading, I think.

Mike Caldwell: Earlier you mentioned going back to phonics, away from the whole language, what does that look like on a day-to-day basis here at North Gem from an instructional standpoint, using phonics and decoding and encoding. All those types of things that are important.

Sam Wadsworth: We want those kids to read by the 2nd grade, that's their job. The teachers understand that your job is to create readers, you know, we want to teach math too.

Mike Caldwell: As a former math teacher that's nice to hear that there's still some math instruction here, right? Ok, thanks.

Sam Wadsworth: Your primary purpose is to create readers and so we do that primarily through phonics. You saw today that not everybody responds well to phonics for one reason or another, and there are very specific problems you're going to see when you go through. Fluency is one of those things and so you just have to adjust. We spend a lot of time working on that and when we started doing this, I thought I planned on having a wide variety of reading difficulties that we would deal with, we don't. We pretty much have one, and it's fluency. We do have issues with comprehension, but comprehension is a tough one. If you're going to teach a canned system, you know, comprehension is 100% background knowledge. If the child doesn't know anything

about the story you're reading or whatever passage you give them, you know you're going to get a skewed score. You're not going to get a true score and so it can bounce around and cause some issues. I'm really confused about how they measure comprehension actually, but we see issues with comprehension pretty regular and quite often it's just that the test itself is timed. There are the children are slow and sometimes they get frustrated, you know? They're just things technologies like that write it's inhuman, and so yeah, it treats them that way.

Mike Caldwell: I noticed this morning there was quite a bit of conversation around text fluency that came up over and over as an issue. Part of it that you guys discussed was the challenge with the timed test part of it where this particular student just takes longer. They can read the words but it's just not in the time that they're given in that test. How frequent are you seeing that as an issue?

Sam Wadsworth: We have 42 students that we test currently and at the beginning of the year we had 17 students that were having some sort of problem. We'll work with them and we will drop them off by the end of the year, we'll have probably have five or six maybe as many as eight. Those that once again, are those chronic kids who have cognitive issues or sometimes have a chronic emotional issue, you know, that that's keeping them from thriving but, those the kids that don't have stumbling blocks we test them right out.

Mike Caldwell: What are some of the instructional strategies that you guys use here? Specifically for that when you target on text fluency, what are you guys doing to try to improve that aspect of reading? What are some of those strategies?

Sam Wadsworth: Well, there are strategies but basically it all comes down to the same thing, it's repeated readings. You're going to have to do repeating reading and there are different ways to do that. One of the things we talked about this morning is we had a child that's not listening to herself read and she's reading nonsense. So, the strategy that was suggested was we'll get some shooting headphones.

Mike Caldwell: Shooting headphones?

Sam Wadsworth: You know, you would use in a firing range to shoot a gun. That makes sense and so they tend to be pretty effective about drowning out the noise. They can hear nothing but their voice and it just echoes in their head as they read and we encourage them to pay attention to what they're reading, pay attention to the punctuation. It helps them to make corrections immediately and so they don't get to the end of the page and have no clue what's right going on. You can do things like echo reading where you read the sentence then they read the sentence. As they get better you can read the paragraph, they read the paragraph and or the page and they read the page. Umm, I've even given kids a book or a passage and said you know I want you to go out into the school and find three people to read this to. Some kids hate it and then some kids love it, just anything you can do to get them to reread it. Fluency starts to come along and then of course, you always need to have opportunities where you sit down with the child and give them feedback, that needs to happen pretty regularly.

Mike Caldwell: What you're just describing, so if text fluency is a common challenge and not just here at North Gem, I see that in IRI data across the board. But what you're talking about is a strategy that is not something that you have to have a teaching credential to do, right? That's reading and listening to the child read and then reading. You know them, that's a great opportunity for parents at home and in a perfect partnership that's happening because you only have so much time here in school. You still have to teach some math every once in a while, and some other things, so it's not always about just reading. You have to have recess and lunch and those types of things, so that might be something. Also, hopefully we have some parents listening that hopefully encouraging them to do that. I know you guys do that and all schools are always pushing to bring books home and having those parents really being active partner in the learning process.

Sam Wadsworth: Correct.

Mike Caldwell: Yeah. So what do you see as the greatest area of opportunity? Like things that you're working on right now or maybe where you really want to improve or grow as a school or even as a teacher.

Sam Wadsworth: Wow, areas of opportunity. There are always so many opportunities more than I can manage in a day, you know? I don't know, you've kind of got me on that one. Are we talking about just reading or are we talking about the school in general?

Mike Caldwell: It's specifically for reading, like where you see maybe an area of weakness that you say well we need to get better at X or we need more maybe professional development on this or we need to spend more time doing whatever.

Sam Wadsworth: I think probably the greatest challenge that we have right now is that our teachers aren't, we're getting teachers that aren't trained. God bless them, you know? We need them, we want them, but they haven't been trained and so they don't know what they need to know. We're having to, and you saw some of that today in RTI, our newest teacher who is wonderful and we're happy with her but she's being, what does she call it... she was drinking from a fire hose. That's what she called it. So, she just needs a lot of information and there's a lot to know.

Mike Caldwell: There's a lot, yeah, absolutely. I thought just kudos to you and your team. I think every school has younger teachers and or teachers that are just frustrated because it's so daunting of what you're trying to do. But, to have someone like you that is so reassuring to them in that moment and you know, saying things like I've been there, you're fine. Then other teachers adding like, giving them some ideas of advice and things like that. When you're bringing those teachers together and talking about these really difficult things, obviously there's going to be some frustration because it's really hard work. I just thought it was really cool how you were very reassuring to this young teacher on how to stay positive and know that that's all part of the process.

Sam Wadsworth: Right. We call it a practice, we're practicing, you know? You're teaching as a practice, no different than a doctor or a lawyer. You learn as you go and you know you go college, they teach you a great deal and then you come back and wonder if you shouldn't go back.

Mike Caldwell: Yeah well, you're a very small rural school here in Southeast Idaho. What do you see as some of the advantages and disadvantages of being in a small school like this?

Sam Wadsworth: You know, the vantage we've kind of mentioned is the relationships, powerful relationships. You can't just let a child slip beneath through the cracks because that's so and so's kid, you know? You need that person because you know them and you have a wide variety, it's like a web. We'd like to talk about community all the time but in a tiny little rural school, like this it's more like a tribe, you know what I mean? We're all related in some way or another, we're connected and in interpersonal ways and so there's probably a disadvantage of sometimes there can be a niche. You know, that kid's the funny kid. His job is to make jokes, my job is to sit back and relax. That's the smart kid, he answers all the questions. So, diversity can be a bit of an issue, just a diversity of ideas and things. They all have the exact same culture, the exact same values, the exact same. It's hard for them sometimes to understand why would somebody feel this way or why would this happen in a book. You know, they don't know what a subway is. We just bought a subway like gosh it's not a store, you know? It's a train and it goes underground and you pay to ride it. Things like that, I've had kids that have never been in McDonald's, never been on a vacation, or if they do they just go camping you know right down the road here. That's another issue that we deal with, not always, but often. They're often very afraid to leave, terrified of college things like that. There's something about being small, I don't know. Others look down if they think you went to a small school. You couldn't possibly have had the opportunities I've had, you couldn't be as smart as me. But, I'm thinking of my first class. Those kids became a doctor and others are very successful businessman and another one is an electrical systems engineer. I talked to him recently and he just came back from Holland and Bali, he's doing all these amazing things. He was one of my little 3rd graders of that class of eight and some of those kids that I taught that first year, their kids are in the class that I have this year, you know?

Mike Caldwell: So cool, yeah. That's pretty neat to be in it that long and to teach students of your previous students and then also see those visual students grow into great adults.

Sam Wadsworth: Yeah, they do grow up.

Mike Caldwell: That's awesome. Well to close out, any other comments or thoughts on this topic and any questions that I didn't ask that you'd like to share about your school and what you're doing here?

Sam Wadsworth: I don't think that we're doing anything crazy, you know, we're just caring and I think maybe that's the greatest power of the small schools. It's love, it really is. I know you're not supposed to say that, it's not professional.

Mike Caldwell: Why? Who told you that?

Sam Wadsworth: I don't know. But if you're told that a male teacher says you love the kids people get scared, you know? It's just that's what it is and we just sit down and say look this is what we have, this is the information we have, what are we going to do about it. Are we just going to look the other way? Are we going to make it happen? That's just it, we're professionals. We take the hard cases, we make it happen. That's why we're here.

Mike Caldwell: Absolutely and you're seeing the results. I got to see kind of the under the hood of how you guys work together and I was really impressed and thankful that I was able to observe that. I'm super thankful that you've joined me for this podcast and shared your story. This will go out to the rest of the world and hopefully they'll learn from you so thanks, Sam. Good work and congratulations to all the success you guys have had and the good work that your teachers are doing. Thank you.

Sam Wadsworth: Thank you.