

## **Bluum Together: Episode 9- Summarizing the Science of Reading In Idaho with Ryan Cantrell**

**Mike Caldwell:**

All right. Greetings and good day podcast listeners. Thanks for joining us for another episode of *Bluum Together*. I am Mike Caldwell, your host and joining me today in the Bluum office is Ryan Cantrell from the Idaho State Department of Education. Welcome Ryan. Thanks for being here.

**Ryan Cantrell:**

I'm glad to be here.

**Mike Caldwell:**

So, this is our ninth episode that wraps up our whole series on the science of reading in Idaho schools. So appreciate you being part of this, this wrap up and kind of sharing what we've learned and giving you the opportunity to share some of the stuff that you guys are working on at the State Department of Ed. Before we get there, why don't you start with a brief intro of your background and leading into kind of what you're doing today and at the State Department and we'll go from there.

**Ryan Cantrell:**

Sounds good. My background is teaching special education. And so, my first love as a professional career was teaching special education to elementary students, specifically in the area of reading. And so, I got to work with a lot of those early readers who were struggling to learn how to read. And that's where I fell in love with teaching students how to read, specifically students who were struggling to learn and had gaps in their progress and holes in their abilities. I really love teaching students how to read, and that was really my first love.

I did that for seven years, and then got into building administration in a local charter school here in Idaho, and then moved into administration in a traditional LEA, spent some time at IDLA, like yourself, and then moved to the State Department of Education with Superintendent Critchfield when she got elected.

**Mike Caldwell:**

Awesome. Yeah. What made you decide to go to the dark side, leaving the classroom and joining the administrative ranks?

**Ryan Cantrell:**

Each time that I've made a switch in my role in my professional career, it's been because I really believe that I could do the most good for the most students in Idaho. And I love teaching reading to early readers, but I was reaching 30, 40, 50 kids at a time. And at some point I said to myself, I can reach 200 or 300 students at a time and I can better the lives of 200 or 300 families at a time if I switch over into this role. And then when I switched into the role of the superintendent, it was the same thing as I want to have a positive effect on our community and help our teachers get set up for success. And then again, when I moved to the State Department of Education for the same reason, just that deep belief that I can have a profound, positive impact on Idaho education when it's done the right way.

**Mike Caldwell:**

Absolutely. So, you missed the classroom. Do you ever get a chance to go back and teach or anything like that? How bad do you miss it?

**Ryan Cantrell:**

I do. I miss that light bulb moment with the student. When you have a student who gets it for the first time and they look at you like, holy smokes, I get it now. I got a lot of those light bulb moments in the classroom and that was the best part of my professional career by far was those light bulb moments. And I do miss getting to see that each day, no doubt.

**Mike Caldwell:**

Yeah, I was a math teacher, so not a reading teacher, a high school math teacher. And any time our teachers were out for a couple of periods or whatever, where I could step in for, you know, typically not a full day, but sometimes. But I was always the first one to raise my hand. Yes, I will go back in and teach. I might have to brush up a little bit on my pre-calc or my calc before I jump in there. But I love the opportunity to go back into the classroom. When you're an administrator for a while, you really miss it, especially when you get to go and watch other teachers teach and you're like, oh, that's a great technique. I want to bring that back. And you wish you were back in the classroom to practice some of those things.

So, I actually got an invitation yesterday from one of our teachers. We have an adulting 101 where I was before at Bishop Kelly High School. I always went in once a semester to do a lesson on something in the adulting 101 class. So I got the text not too long ago, it said, can you come back this semester? So, I'm going to go back next week. I get to go back to the classroom. I'm excited. That's fun. And I do a whole thing on home improvement. I'm kind of a home improvement guy, a DIY guy. It drives my wife crazy, but I'm always like, I can fix that, or I can figure it out. No matter what it is, I always think I can fix it.

So, I'm going to talk a little bit about that with the kids. Going back to reading, we've spent a lot of time having conversations around the state with leaders and people in the schools on what's happening in Idaho with reading and instructional reading and the science of reading in particular. And it's been a fascinating journey that I've had over the last few months having those conversations. Let's start with Idaho. What's your perspective on how Idaho is doing in this area? Oftentimes, Idaho gets, you know, we feel like we're failing in everything or the last and everything. And it doesn't seem to be the case in reading.

**Ryan Cantrell:**

I agree with you. In fact, I would suggest that Idaho really is one of the leaders in early literacy. I know that in years past, we've certainly had our shortcomings. One of them is failing to recognize some of our needs for our students with dyslexia or characteristics of a dyslexia. That's an example. But one of the things that Idaho has done really well for more than the last two decades is an emphasis in early literacy. Idaho, believe it or not, is one of the few states that actually has a statewide measure for early literacy.

And I didn't realize that really before I got to the State Department and I started looking, what are other states doing? And the answer is, not a lot. We are one of the few states with our Idaho reading indicator where we actually have state statute that requires K-3 early literacy assessment. Many states do not. And so because Idaho has been measuring that for a number of years, we've been talking about it. And it's certainly been a significant emphasis since Governor Little got into office is, how are we going to improve our early literacy scores and ensure that each student is learning?

**Mike Caldwell:**

Yeah, that's awesome. And then with the dyslexia training, that's a fairly new requirement. Can you talk a little bit about what that looks like in Idaho?

**Ryan Cantrell:**

Yeah, specifically the dyslexia law that passed requires students to be screened to see if they have characteristics of dyslexia. And then if they do, to also go through a diagnostic tool to find out, okay, what is going on with this student? What are their needs? How can we meet their needs? And so it's brought some attention and more importantly, some training to all of our Idaho educators that are working with those students. Here's what the characteristics of dyslexia look like. And just as importantly, or perhaps more importantly, here's what you can do about it. And that's going to be one of our major areas of emphasis here in the next year at the State Department is that second piece. Now, what do you do about it? How do you work with that student? How do you help ensure that they experience gains throughout the year?

**Mike Caldwell:**

Awesome. Yeah. It's good to hear. It's always refreshing too when we have these conversations like, you know, Idaho is actually really doing some real strong things in these areas. And I think it's important for people to know that. So you're fairly new under the new administration at the state department. Can you talk a little bit about kind of what your focus is with the new administration and or what is the department focused on? What are some of those big things that you guys are kind of getting after right now?

**Ryan Cantrell:**

Yeah. So in my role, I get to work with seven departments and those seven departments are particularly focused on what happens within the four walls of the school. So we're talking federal programs, special education, content, curriculum, et cetera. And my focus is how do we find out what works in Idaho education and then build out on that? How do we highlight and spotlight what we know works in education, both nationally and in Idaho and get that into more schools.

And so that's one of the things I've appreciated most about your podcast is we're looking at what is working across Idaho and how do we spotlight that and how do we talk about the things that are working and then replicate it. That's one of the things we struggle with in education. We tend to recreate the wheel. Having been in doing this for almost two decades, I see us recreating the wheel regularly as opposed to asking the question, Oh my goodness, you got amazing results. What did you do? What did you do over there to get that?

**Mike Caldwell:**

Absolutely. Yeah. I'm a big fan of the book Switch. And that's kind of like one of the core tenets in that book is focus on what's, you have a big issue that you're trying to solve. Try to find those things that are working well and figure out how to replicate or scale those things. And it's been a fun journey on this podcast. You know, we're only in our first series on the science of reading and we'll talk a little bit about where we're going from here. But it's been fun to go out into schools, talk to leaders that are seeing some success and identifying what they're doing and looking for those common threads. Which I think was pretty interesting, but at the same time, maybe not so surprising.

And I know you and I talked about kind of some of the areas of focus that you're doing at the State Department. And that was before I started the podcast series. And then as I was going through and hearing these, it's like, OK, these are all very well aligned. And it was just, really interesting and affirming to hear that. Here's some of the things that we did find. We went out

to Bonneville School District over in Eastern Idaho. We talked to a couple of different charter schools; Mosaics Charter School, Sage International in Middleton, Thirkill Elementary in Soda Springs, and North Gem.

So not an exhaustive list. And I know you recently had a conversation, which we didn't get to, I wanted to, with West Ada, another larger school district. The things that I heard as a common thread in what those schools had in common, started with leadership. That was number one, in that from the top down, it was a priority. I'm talking specifically about reading instruction and their strategies around that, is that the leader believed it was important, had a plan, and it was evident in all the conversations that was a common thread. The second thing was common, I mean, every podcast we, I don't know how many times we use the word data in our conversations, but it was a common thread throughout. That makes me so happy to hear that. Concrete focus on data.

But I think very closely connected with that, or integrally connected with that, was the idea of PLCs and the practice of PLCs, I should say. In combination with the data, that it wasn't just looking at the data and nodding your head saying, yeah, ok, we're on the right track. It was the systematic use and evaluation of that data and then spending time evaluating it and taking action on what they were seeing. So those are the three big things. And there's maybe some other things, but how does that resonate with what you're working on and maybe what you already know from your own experiences?

**Ryan Cantrell:**

Absolutely. I'll start with a common agreement that you and I have, and I agree with everything you just said, but one, the main common agreement is I honestly genuinely believe the use and the practice of true professional learning communities. And I'm not just talking about PLC's that some schools engage in where, yeah, we get together and we kind of look at it. I'm talking about deeply diving in and asking the four major questions of PLC, which is: what do we want students to know and be able to do? How are we going to know if they're doing it? What are we as adults going to do differently if they're not able to do it? And then that fourth question, which is what are we going to do for the students who've already done it? I honestly believe that true PLC implementation is the key to success for Idaho schools. And there are some schools that are knocking it out of the park right now.

And they're the schools you just mentioned, the schools that are on your podcast. Those schools who are not currently engaged in that PLC process, I think that's one of our areas that has the greatest amount of opportunity for growth. And so I was with a school district, and in my first year or so, it was clear that we had a lot of room to grow in our district. When I took

over as superintendent in that district, I got a call in like my first month of the job and it was a reporter and they said, hey, did you know that two of your schools are identified for comprehensive school improvement, CSI? I said, well, I did not know that. I mean, it wasn't a surprise to me because I knew we had a lot of work to do, but that means that two of the three schools that oversaw were in the lowest 5% of achievement in the state of Idaho. And so I asked myself that question, what is it going to take to be great?

I did a tour throughout Idaho. I literally pulled up the data and I started looking at IRI data and ISAT data. And I asked the question, who are schools that look like us in remote areas with similar student populations, but they're knocking it out of the park? And I just started knocking on doors. And I went to these districts. I went to Genesee. I went to Horseshoe Bend Elementary. I went up into Riggins. I went anywhere that would take me. I would go to their school and ask the question, hey, your IRI scores are incredible. Can you please show me what you're doing? Your ISAT scores are abnormally high for a school of your size and of your stat. What are you doing? And I found a lot of those same commonalities.

And this was 10 years ago. And it was, is there stable leadership that buys into this process and is leading from the front? Are they using a form of the PLC process? Do they have a strong response to intervention? And then I looked at some other things. I looked at how much time are they dedicating to ELA. How much time are they dedicating to math? How much time are they dedicating to their interventions? And I also asked a question, what curriculum are you using? But I'll tell you what I found. There were no commonalities in the curriculum, which told me there was no, I didn't find any either in the conversations I had. It was, how are you using what you have and are you going through the PLC process to ask the right questions? And it had much less to do with which curriculum you're using. Choose a research-based curriculum that's based in the science of reading and has good foundations and then use it well. And what you do after that is actually seems to be what matters most.

**Mike Caldwell:**

Right. And you did this kind of on your own. You're just like, you know what, I want to make some improvements in our, make some significant improvements in our district. I like the question you asked, what is it going to take to be great? And then you just kind of went on your own research field study. Yup. Yup. Good for you.

**Ryan Cantrell:**

And then after I was done knocking on doors in Idaho, I went out of Idaho. I went into Oregon, I went into Colorado, I went into Utah and asked the same question, what are you doing to achieve these scores? And whether it was inside Idaho or outside Idaho, the answer was very

similar. It was strong, dedicated leadership that led from the front. It was the PLC process that led to strong interventions and a significant focus on student achievement.

**Mike Caldwell:**

Yeah. You know, and part of the process that I got to go to, I mean, go through similar to you is, is just going out into schools and almost approaching it like a researcher, you know, and just really diving in and, and trying to understand what is going on in here and, and got to participate. I got to be kind of a fly on the wall and participate at North Gem school district in their case six RTI meeting. It just happens I was there to do the podcast at the same time they had their meeting, the same day they had their meeting. And I don't know if you've ever been to North Gem. It is a tiny, tiny school. I think the school itself is like 120 years old or something like that. It's old.

They're very small, very remote, very rural. But man, inside of those walls, the depth of conversation that they were having and really zeroing in on every particular student that was struggling and centering around that particular student and looking at their data and discussing strategies that they were going to try over the next week or two before they had a chance to retest and all those types of things, it was really a fun, really cool part a process to be part of and to listen in on. And it's really cool to see that in Idaho, because no one would ever know that in Bancroft, Idaho, that that's happening. But I got to witness it, and I feel really honored and privileged to see it. And I just think whether you're in a small school district like North Gem or Bonneville or West Ada, I think there's a lot of commonalities in terms of practices that work. And I think that's what we're zeroing in on, is regardless of size, there's some things that fundamentally make a difference.

**Ryan Cantrell:**

I agree 100%. I've been in districts with 150 students in the district, like the ones you just mentioned, and they're knocking it out of the park because they're focused on the right things. And then I've also been privileged in the last couple of months to walk into some of our biggest districts like Bonneville and West Ada, who are some of our largest districts, and they're seeing similar results. And it's because there's that focus on student achievement and that focus on data. And I would suggest that there's an element here that we haven't directly addressed yet, but it's still equally important, which is, do we as the adults have the humility to ask the question, what do we need to do differently?

That was one of the things we had to address in the district that I was in is, we're going to stop blaming the students, we're going to stop blaming the parents, we're going to stop blaming circumstances we can't control, and we're going to ask the question, what can we as the

educators and what can we as the adults do to change our behavior to ensure that our students succeed? That is a commonality that I see in almost all of our highly successful schools through Idaho is the adults have the humility to ask the question, what do we need to be doing differently?

**Mike Caldwell:**

Yeah. And that's a tough one to get to because you're right. It challenges sometimes what you know to be effective or true. And when it's not working for a particular student, it's easy to say, well, that student has to change or it's this or that or whatever else. Yeah, I think that's an important question to ask and it does take a lot of humility to get there.

**Ryan Cantrell:**

It does. I think that comes back to that leadership piece is if your leader has the humility to ask that question first and to model that, I think it has a trickle-down effect throughout your schools.

**Mike Caldwell:**

Yeah, absolutely. Do you see any other maybe common threads that we haven't talked about? So, we talked about leadership, focus on data, PLCs. We mentioned the RTI kind of as, you know, that's a big part of it, but that's certainly a common thread is having a good RTI process. And for our listeners that maybe are not familiar, we're talking about response to intervention. So those are those practices or strategies that we implement when we see a student that's struggling and not achieving the success that we want them to do. What else would you add to that maybe that's also a common thread of good practice?

**Ryan Cantrell:**

There are two things that I would add to that I've seen as a commonality. One is part of that third question of the PLC process, which is what are we going to do when they're not learning? And one of the things that successful schools tend to do is they tend to look at their schedule and ask the question, are we providing enough time to our core instruction? For ELA, it's going to need to be around 60 or 90 minutes for most schools. Same thing for math. Are we providing enough intervention time? So successful schools tend to look at their schedule and ask the question, does our schedule need to look differently to ensure that all students are learning?

And so that's a common theme that I found in our highly successful schools throughout Idaho. The second one that doesn't get talked about a lot, but I think you're going to start to address in your podcast here pretty soon is there's typically a very healthy school culture. And by that, I mean the foundation, the capstone of the school is a healthy school culture. It's one where the



teachers believe that they are the positive influence in that student's life in the school setting and that we call it collective teacher efficacy. And what that means is teachers believe that they are the linchpin in that child's education along with the parent. They at school, they are the linchpin and they are the difference maker in that child's education within the four walls of the school. And so that culture of we're going to do whatever it takes to ensure that every student has the opportunity to learn. And we're going to measure it to ensure that truly each student is making growth each year.

**Mike Caldwell:**

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, school culture is critical. I think anything you try to do in a school, when you're trying to do it in an unhealthy school culture, is either impossible or feels impossible. When you get the culture right, everything else can start to fall into place. It all still takes effort, but you have to be intentional on your culture. It just doesn't happen. Or it does happen, whether you like it or not, but positive school culture just doesn't happen on its own. It takes collective effort.

And so, yeah, so our next series that we're going to focus on from January to March is similar to kind of the focus that we did with reading is identify what's happening in Idaho in terms of school culture and support for students and overall wellness and all the things wrapped up into it. What's happening in Idaho that other schools should know about? Other school leaders should know about what's working well, basically, in Idaho in that regard. So I'm excited to kick that off once we get back from the new year. Going back to some of the work that you're doing in each of these areas, leadership, for example. We're not all blessed with the best leadership abilities right out of the gates, you know, and we have a lot of leaders across the state of Idaho. What is the state doing to support leadership development in Idaho schools? Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Ryan Cantrell:**

Absolutely. And that is a significant priority for both Superintendent Critchfield and myself is how do we help develop strong leaders in Idaho. I have a personal belief that leaders are not born, they're developed. And it's a choice that people choose to develop themselves as leaders. And that is a significant priority for us. And so we have revamped the Idaho Superintendent Network, the Idaho Principal Network, all of our trainings, including our just-in-time trainings, to really ask the question, how do we help these school leaders in Idaho that know how to build the cultures of their school and the cultures of their districts to set the stage for them to be able to use the PLC process successfully?

How do we build the culture in schools so that kids want to come to school and they're able to retain their teachers, which we know is a significant piece to improving student achievement. Veteran teachers that know how to teach the science of reading and teach mathematics well. And so school culture plays into that just in every aspect. And so really designing our leadership development at the State Department around those principles and specifically talking with folks about them and diving into that.

**Mike Caldwell:**

Yeah. And it's really a continuous process. Leadership development is not something you just go and you get a certificate and you're done. It's a continuous process. It's a lifetime, I think, commitment to always get better. And there's always opportunities to get better as a leader. At Bluum, we do communities of practice with our school leaders that are involved. And it's open to other school leaders as well. But there's a lot of power also in bringing school leaders together, especially that are in kind of the same peer groups working at the school level or superintendent level, like you mentioned, kind of the different subgroups. Because there's a lot of power in learning from each other as well. So I like the way you're approaching it with the different communities of practice, it sounds like.

**Ryan Cantrell:**

Absolutely. And I will say that during those trainings, typically the best conversations and the best learning happens at the tables. When we say turn and talk with each other about what you've seen work well in your school or where have you run into a buzzsaw on this situation? Tell your peer about it. And I, as a participant in those, uh, three or four years ago and now leading them, I can see that the best conversations happen in those peer to peer conversations.

**Mike Caldwell:**

Yeah, absolutely. It can be a lonely job at the leadership level. And when you have an opportunity to talk to other people that are going through similar things and learning from them, sometimes it's the littlest thing that just kind of is a light bulb moment for you as a leader. It's like, oh, I haven't tried that, or I thought it was just me, or I thought I was just dealing with that. And to have a peer group that you can commiserate with and learn from makes a huge difference. And we need really strong leaders in our state, just like every other state does. We're hungry for great leaders and will continue to be. So, what about data or PLC's? Are you guys doing anything in that in that area that you want to talk about?

**Ryan Cantrell:**

Yes, I would suggest that is one of my top three priorities in the state of Idaho, is to find schools that are ready to embark on that leadership journey and that PLC journey. We have a number

of schools already doing it really well, a number of districts already doing it well. Bonneville's a great example. West Ada is a great example, but you also have smaller schools that are doing it really well. The school that I came from, Bruno Grandview, is a great example of that. But there are some schools that have not started that journey yet. And so one of my greatest priorities is to find those schools and reach out to them and say, we would love to help you in that journey.

Will you allow me to help you take the first few steps? We're happy to guide you in that process and help mentor you and pair you up with schools in your region, in your area that look like you, that can help you in that journey. And so that is a significant priority for us. I really believe that over the next few years, we have three areas to capitalize and grow in Idaho education. And one is improving classroom instruction. That's always a goal of any education leaders. How do we help improve classroom instruction? And that can include professional development directly to our teachers. It can be helping school districts choose the right curriculum. It can be any of those things.

The second one is helping schools use frequent formative assessment, and that comes, in my opinion, through the PLC process. That's a significant linchpin in the PLC process. And then that third one, which is one that we rely on our partners greatly for, such as ISBA, which is the Idaho School Boards Association, and the IASA, the Idaho Association of School Administrators, is how do we help train boards to be data literate? And by data literate, I mean know what the data says and know what to ask your superintendent and your charter administrators during the board meeting, frequently looking at data and asking the question is what we are doing as a district or a charter working and how do we know? And that's a data literate board. And I really believe if we can hit those three areas, those three prongs strong over the next three years, we will see a significant impact.

**Mike Caldwell:**

Yeah. Couldn't agree with you more. And I think, I think it also helps to have that kind of laser focus. It's like, there's a lot that you could potentially try to go after over the next three or four years and to zero in on these are the three things. And I think those three things, I think nail it. Absolutely. That absolutely will make a difference. So kudos to you on being laser focused on what your priorities are and then getting after a strategy to get there. Good for you. What do you think some of the barriers are for schools to implement PLCs? Because it seems, I have my own theories, but what are you seeing or hearing as in terms of like, why wouldn't a school embrace PLCs?

**Ryan Cantrell:**

Because it's long, arduous and difficult. I mean, anything that is done well is usually really hard and anything that has a lasting sustainability takes time. And we know that to be true, whether it's in our work life or our personal life. And I'm telling you it's hard work and it takes time and it takes effort and blood, sweat, and tears to get a strong PLC community set up that can outlast the great leader that gets it moving in the right direction.

I think that's one of the major barriers is in education and in life, we're looking for that shiny object, that silver bullet, that quick fix, that easy thing. And I think we're as guilty in that in education as anyone is anywhere. And I think that that's one of the greatest hindrances to not really embracing this multi-year difficult process is we're looking for the quick fix sometimes.

**Mike Caldwell:**

Yeah. Well said. Well, Ryan, thank you. Anything I didn't ask that you'd want to talk about and share?

**Ryan Cantrell:**

No, I just appreciate you looking for the bright spots in Idaho education. When you start looking for the right stuff, you're finding it. We have amazing things going on throughout this state. Our teachers are doing wonderful work with our students. Our administrators are doing great work. We have so many things to talk about that are positive in Idaho education that I just really appreciate you highlighting them here.

**Mike Caldwell:**

Absolutely. And looking forward to, like I said, the next series on school culture and behavior and mental wellness and all those types of things that are wrapped into it. I think there's also a lot of things that we will highlight that are working well, but also like anything, a lot of work that still needs to be done.

And so, looking forward to having those conversations when we get back in the spring. Well, thank you, Ryan. Appreciate your time. And thank you listeners for staying with us on this series. Stay tuned when we come back in January for a focus on school culture and mental wellness in our schools. So, with that, we'll sign out.