

## **Bluum Together: Episode 4- From the Voices of Students with Rian, Olivia and Mason**

### **Intro:**

Welcome to *Bluum Together* – the podcast where we cultivate education leadership, innovation, and impact one conversation at a time. Join us as we learn from visionary leaders, share inspiring stories, and uncover strategies that drive meaningful change in K-12 education.

### **MIKE CALDWELL:**

Alright, good day podcast listeners and thank you for joining us on another episode of at *Bluum Together*. This is Mike Caldwell, your host and you are listening to another series on supporting mental health in schools, and today I have the pleasure of three wonderful students from Timberline High School. Rian, Oliva, and Mason are joining me. This is a treat for me because I get to interview students as part of this series. So, welcome. We'll do a quick round of introductions. Rian, starting with you.

### **RIAN:**

My name is Rian and I am a senior at Timberline and besides Wolf Connection I am part of the newspaper.

### **OLIVIA:**

Hi, my name is Olivia. I am a junior here at Timberline and I am in Wolf Connection, play softball, and love drawing.

### **MASON:**

Hi, my name is Mason and I am in Wolf Connection. I run track and field, and I like music.

### **MIKE CALDWELL:**

Awesome, and you guys are all part of the section program which is why I'm here. I've known your teacher for a long time and I think the Wolf Connection Program is a really cool program. As I understand, it is kind of a mentoring program for some of your underclassmen here at the school. One of you guys want to tell me about the connection program?

### **MASON:**

Our Wolf Connection Program is one of two leadership programs at Timberline High School. It's also a Student Council. Our mentoring program with sophomores is only one thing we do. We do a bunch of outside of school activities as well. Every other week, we'll go to the nearby elementary school. We have our elementary buddies that are in third grade that are awesome

and super fun to play with. Every other Tuesday, we go to the Boise Senior Center and talk with them. A lot of it is bringing the community closer. You just get a lot of experiences from a bunch of different people and it opens up a lot of different opportunities.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Cool. Rian, what would you add to that?

**RIAN:**

I'd also like to say it's a lot of self-improvement. There are a lot of good things we learn about managing our stress. Right now we are talking about conflict and a lot of healthy ways to handle conflict so that you can better your relationships with people and it doesn't have to crumble because of conflict which is really helpful for me right now.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Yeah, cool. Olivia, how did you get selected or were you forced against your will to be part of this program or, what's the selection process? Why are you involved in it?

**OLIVIA:**

There is different ways that you can get accepted into Wolf Connection. You can either be nominated by your peers or fill out a self-nomination. I nominated myself for the program because I heard about it through various presentations in my class and it just sounded like something I'd want to be a part of. Then, after that you fill out a form and it's a kind of preliminary elimination and if you get through that you have an interview process and from there, 32 students are in the program - 16 juniors and 16 seniors.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Right on, cool. I was watching a little bit of your class before you guys came in and you guys were talking about upcoming mentor group meetings that you guys have coming up on Tuesday. Is that accurate?

**RIAN:**

Next Thursday.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Next Thursday. Ok, next week. Tell me a little bit about those mentor groups. What does that look like?

**MASON:**

We usually just meet. Is it like fourth period?

**OLIVIA:**

Sometimes we come together.

**MASON:**

Sometimes we'll have an activity and it's two or three Wolf Connection students paired up with two or three, four to five kids. Four to five is their Sophomore Leadership Program and we kind of mentor them.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Is it kind of the JV team of the Wolf Connection?

**RIAN:**

Exactly, pretty much.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Up and comers?

**RIAN:**

Yeah. They'll get an idea of what Wolf Connection is all about. If they want to keep pursuing that, maybe they can make the varsity squad next year or the year after that.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Got you. Yeah. Awesome, that sounds cool. So everyone is not involved in the Fortified Program. You guys are kind of helping shape their leadership skills and capabilities of being a mentor?

**MASON:**

It's also kind of also if they have any struggle - going into high school the first year is hard and we try and help them with that. We've had a year as a sophomore in high school and we know what that's all about. It can be tough academically, socially, and athletically. You know, many aspects. If they need any assistance or they just need to talk about stuff - someone they can rely on - a friend - they are to us, we are to them.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Yeah, cool. Have you guys talked about the Iceberg analogy? Kind of lowering the waterline, Ok, so we are going to lower the waterline here. Ok, we're going to get real. Part of the podcast, I really wanted to capture what it's like to be a teenager today. Thinking beyond the superficial -

I'm on track or I'm in the newspaper - that's stuff everybody kind of already knows or sees of you. I'm really curious, there is such a big focus rightfully so, on the mental health of students and staff for that matter. It's a big deal, it's a really important topic in today's societies and in our schools. I'd like to hear from you – what is it like to be a teenager in 2024? What is it like? I'll just keep it open like that.

**RIAN:**

It's a little disconnecting with the phone which kinda sucks and I mean I had a conversation about it during one of our Senior Visits that was really eye-opening. Someone brought up those classes that really enforce the No Phones Rule, I would say at Wolf Connection, we all put our own phones up, they are super engaging and better. I want to say it in my own words so well. Someone else in our class said, 'If we were in elementary school, and we had free time, none of us would have gotten on our phones. We would have all found someone to talk to.' That was just an incredible way to put it. It was just super eye-opening and it's like no one talks to each other anymore and it's really disappointing. When classes are so engaged and together, it's amazing to be in.

**OLIVIA:**

I mean for me I've only had two classes where I've had that experience. Obviously, Wolf Connection and then my freshman year, I had a math class with Mrs. Bozniak - I love her so much. In classes where you can build that community-feeling and that family, it really does make such a big difference and I feel like that is something so lacking. Not only in classes, but in the social sphere in general, I feel like people feel so disconnected from their friends and student population in general. I know for myself that I felt that at times, so I think that that's something big that I've noticed.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Anything you'd add there, Mason?

**MASON:**

The first thing that came to mind when you asked that question was stressful. You know, high school is stressful for anybody at any point in time, I'm pretty sure. Keeping it close to the phone's stuff, I think that adds a bunch of extra stress. Like, 'Oh you know, social media, technology, and all that stuff.' I always say I wished I lived in the '70s or '80s as a teenager. Just looking back at movies that look so fun. [Phones] just bring an extra layer of stress, disconnections - it's just different. It's kind of weird. I don't know.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

You guys are perfectly aligned to what I was just talking to a professor at Boise State who does research on this and does a lot of data gathering in schools. What she was sharing, the voices of the students from the surveys, was two main things that she was seeing. That is: a high predominance of social isolation and a high predominance of high stress. You guys kind of all hit on that. It was interesting. Rian, you went right to the phones and came around from that creating that social isolation which is interesting because in so many ways, the phone is seen as a way to stay connected to people. Why is it that cell phones or that device is creating that social isolation? How is that happening?

**RIAN:**

Because face-to-face is so much better. Even a text I could say something and you have no idea how I meant it. I have no idea how they are going to take. I mean, you could just start so much.

**MASON:**

I think you are right. Face-to-face is better but it is harder. It's really, really easy on a phone just to send a text because you don't have the fear of having to see a reaction to it, what you're going to say. It takes out all the expressions and everything. It's just so much easier just to send a little text or something like that and that is why we prefer to say online.

**OLIVIA:**

We also talked about it when we were handling conflict about how we should not do it over technology. Like I said, it's just a way to cower behind a phone. I don't know...it's just cowardly. I don't know.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Do you see the relation, or is there a relation in your mind between the social isolation and the stress?

**MASON:**

Yeah, I think it kind of goes on itself. Like you can't get more and more, you can't dig your hole deeper and deeper. When you are socially isolated, it makes it harder the longer you go without that social connection. A lot harder to get yourself out of that hole.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Yeah. Olivia?

**OLIVIA:**

And I feel like when you feel more isolated you feel more disconnected. It's hard to reach out to people for help as well when you don't feel like you have that support group that will be there for you when you need anything. It makes you feel not only more alone but more stressed out because you just feel like you have to take it all on yourself.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Yeah, so maybe one last comment on the cell phones or open up for comments and then moving on. What do you see...I hear from you in those classes that there are really high expectations to put the phone away and make a difference for you. What do you see as maybe suggestions for those school administrators that are listening right now? What would you say that they could help students today in their mental wellness as it relates to technology?

**OLIVIA:**

I feel like you walk into class and a teacher says put your phone in the phone caddy and everyone kind of rolls their eyes because it's not the first thing you want to do but I feel like eventually once you start breaking down the walls, your teachers force you to ask your neighbor 'How was your weekend? How was your snow day?' Things like that they really make a difference and even this year, I made it a goal for myself to talk to people more in classes and try and make more friends in my classes. I feel like I've noticed a big difference doing that. I feel like not only forcing kids to keep away their phones but also incentivizing those conversations between neighbors could really make a big difference.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Rian, what would you add?

**RIAN:**

It's exactly what Olivia said. I would think that I have two classes where I actively don't get on my phone. One of them, Wolf Connection, I leave my phone in the caddy. In the other one, in my bag. The two teachers have in common that they are so passionate about their classes that they're just like...I don't even want to be on my phone at all. I want to see what they are teaching, I want to be there with them. Incentives to talk to your neighbor are incredible. I love icebreakers. I'm an icebreaker fan.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

You are? Yeah? Switch gears - it's not really completely switching gears - but to kind of add to the conversation, often times we're talking about the importance of the sense of belonging in schools and how important it is that every student, really everyone, having that sense that they belong where they are, they belong in their school and so on and so forth. I want to start with a

general question, what does that mean to you when you hear the word belonging? What does that mean to you and is that important to you?

**MASON:**

I feel like when I hear belonging at least in the school scenario, I feel like you fit in. I feel like that's hard a lot of the time because I, myself that's another goal I've made through Wolf Connection too, is kind of to stop seeking validation of other people. It really doesn't matter. It's something I feel like you have to fight for to belong in your ideal spot in your school and it's tough because there are so many people in a school. For me, it's like I need to be significant, I need to stand out but there's like thousands of kids at my school that's really tough to do.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

You went right to when you think of belonging, you think I have to fit in. What I think of when I hear that is, well that probably adds a lot of stress is this constant need or desire to fit in and how do I look and who do I hang out with and all those types of things. I would imagine that adds to the stress that we were talking about earlier.

**MASON:**

Yeah, for sure.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Yeah, Olivia?

**OLIVIA:**

I feel like because of that constant reminder, 'Oh, I need to fit in, I need to act a certain kind of way,' you find yourself comparing yourself a lot to others and I feel like that's another way that social media comes in a causes harm because you see your friends posting and them hanging out all the time. You're like 'Oh, I just kind of hung out alone this weekend,' which isn't an inherently bad thing, but sometimes it can feel that way. You have some many different things going on around you that you kind of want to emulate, but you just aren't.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Go ahead Mason.

**MASON:**

I noticed too that I fight to find that way to fit in. Like I take harder classes, or I move up in sports. It just gets more and more competitive, and I find myself comparing myself to these kids who are top of the class because they are in these higher-level classes. They're top of the class,

they're these really athletic, smart kids and I'm just like oh, I am going to compare myself to them and I'm like oh, they're better than me...I need to do this. I'm stressing out because I'm not reaching that goal, not reaching that standard I set for myself which is just really silly but that's something that goes on in your head. It's really stressful as I said earlier.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

What do you think has the greatest impact on helping students feel like they belong within a school? What are some of those contributing factors?

**MASON:**

I feel like the easiest way to feel a sense of belonging – in Wolf Connection, it doesn't matter what clique or how popular you are – I feel a sense of belonging there. That can carry over to a club, but not everyone has that. There's a lot of people... it's sad to look at the halls at lunch. There are just people sitting alone, just in the hallways sitting on the ground. I'm like, damn... they don't have any friends or anyone to go to.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

What is it about that class that fosters that?

**MASON:**

About Wolf Connection?

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Yeah.

**MASON:**

Wolf Connection, we've just spent so much time together and it's unlike any other class as Olivia said. We just spend so much time connecting and it's such a hard thing to explain. We've spent so much time trusting each other that we've built that sense of belonging. It's a focus for the class.

**OLIVIA:**

The whole name of the class is Wolf Connection so obviously through the class, we are going to try and form connections, form relationships with each other and I feel like a big part of that was formed through the retreat. I'm not saying that your seventh period Math class should go on a retreat. I'm saying that by building those...we literally spent 24/7 with each other, so spending more time together, having more conversations with each other, I feel like can really help foster that sense of belonging within students.

**RIAN:**

Yeah, it was incredible. I actually love everyone in that class. It was a trust fall. It was amazing.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Yeah, very cool. So what about those schools that don't have a Wolf Connection program or the students not chosen to be in the Wolf Connection program or something similar in their schools, can you pull out certain elements within any class to that one in particular or any class where you felt like - it doesn't have to be a class either, it can be a team or a club - what are some of those things that you find really make a difference in allowing you to feel that sense of belonging?

**RIAN:**

I would say, like I'm in newspaper and I love it. It's a little family there and we are a big team. We have a common goal which is helpful. In Wolf Connection we have a common goal which is bettering ourselves and our world. What's the motto?

**OLIVIA:**

'Change Yourself, Change Your World.'

**RIAN:**

Yeah, that's it. I think a common goal is super helpful and a loving environment because even Gonser and the people who do newspaper are just great and good people to be around – they foster that environment.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Anything you guys would add?

**MASON:**

You have to kind of work towards it, too. You're going to get out what you put in and that's one thing our teacher told us in Wolf Connection. 'Oh, you don't participate in this, you're not going to get anything out of it.' If you are trying to find these connections, it can help for people to reach out to you but if you really want to find that sense of belonging, then you're going to have to work for it a little bit yourself. That can be hard for a lot of people, as we talked earlier, social interactions, that can be really scary for a lot of people.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

In what ways do you feel both noticed and also known here at your school? Specifically by adults.

**RIAN:**

Wolf Connection. One time I was getting lunch from the cafeteria and we all have key chains and I was getting lunch and it was hanging out of my bag, like one of the lady's in the cafeteria was like, 'It's nice to see leaders getting lunch so people feel comfortable getting lunch,' and I was like oh, ok thanks.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

So you feel noticed because of this program that you are a part of?

**RIAN:**

Yeah.

**OLIVIA:**

I feel like to a lot of my teachers I kind of get put into the 'Smart Box' which is actually for a long time I kind of struggled with because being smart isn't a bad thing, but I felt like I was being put in a box and I'm not just smart. All my teachers thought I was a lot less rounded than I actually am. I feel like I can be social. I like being social. I feel like that was a big thing for me – my teachers just see me as a pet. I feel like sometimes that reflects onto the students as well.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

So you are noticed as the smart girl in the class and you want to be noticed for not just that but other things.

**MASON:**

I noticed that Olivia was the smart girl in the class. I've had multiple classes with her. She went to junior high with me. It wasn't even until recently when on social media you posted that picture of the trout. I was like wow, that's really impressive. She drew this image of a rainbow trout or something and I was like I had no clue you had this artistic ability. That's just evidence to show that you are only going to be viewed as this superficial smart girl or this athletic guy or whatever.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

What advice would you have again for anybody that is listening out there and could be a teacher, a school administrator, or whoever, right? From the voice of students, what are some things that you would suggest and say...if I was on a committee saying we really need to make

sure every student belongs, these are some things that adults can do to help foster that, what would be those things?

**RIAN:**

I don't know. I would just say a loving environment. It's really great when a teacher cares.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Unpack that. What does that mean, though? What are the ingredients for a teacher that cares?

**RIAN:**

Passionate. Totally just a passionate teacher. If they love what they do, it's an awesome thing.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Okay.

**RIAN:**

That's my favorite thing from it.

**OLIVIA:**

Bouncing off of what Rian said, I was going to say, let your students be themselves. Have a couple seconds before class just let them finish their conversations and observe them. What are they like? The side of them you see in their essays isn't going to be the side of them you see with their friends. I feel like you can be a lot better teacher when you understand your students more.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Getting to know them.

**OLIVIA:**

Mhm.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Do you have anything else to add in terms of if you were talking to your school administration or teachers or someone else. What are some things you would love to see in a school that would really help on the overall mental health and wellbeing of students in your school?

**RIAN:**

I've had a few teachers have one-on-one checkups where they are like how is your mental health? That's the first time that's ever happened to me with a teacher and I was like 'Oh'.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Someone just asking?

**RIAN:**

Yeah, someone just straight up asking how is your mental health, that exact question. Not beating around the bush and just saying it. That was cool.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

One way...just the question. Yeah, cool.

**MASON:**

Reflection, even just asking that question, if my teacher asked me that, I'd be like 'Oh, I'm fine or whatever.' If you even get the thought process of being 'Oh, I'm saying I'm fine but I am not actually that fine.' What am I not that fine? What can I do to maybe change? Why do I feel this certain way? Whatever.

**OLIVIA:**

For me I would just say having assignments or having portions of assignments that are dedicated to introducing not only check-ups but skills on how you can help yourself mentally and get in a better position because I feel like a lot of the times it's a lot easier to admit something is wrong but it's a lot harder to actually implement the things to fix that. I think that's one of the great things about Wolf Connection. We are in a unit now about what are the things in your life you need to change and what are the things that you see? I think that on a smaller scale and applying that and saying oh, here are some mindfulness activities you can do. Let's do one in class on Monday, we have free time. Stuff like that that I think doesn't get a lot of attention as far as actually doing.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Maybe to summarize or to wind this down, anything in general, and what we haven't talked about is peer-to-peer, what adults can do and things like that. Maybe we'll come back. What about peer-to-peer, what would you wish your fellow students would do to help each other in this area?

**MASON:**

I think a smile goes a long way. I don't know if it's just oh, I'll follow someone on Instagram but I'll see them in the hallway every single day, I'll be on my phone, I'll notice them down the hall, so I'm just going to stay on my phone because I feel like we are not going to make eye-contact it's going to be awkward, whatever. If you just give a smile, you acknowledge they're there. That right there can give some sense of belonging. That's a goal I've been trying to make and it's tough because I'll look up, I'll smile, people will still be down on their phones. And I'll be like darn, that's embarrassing. No one else saw it. It's just in your end. Just acknowledging other people, you don't even have to know them, just smile. That's one thing as a leader I've been trying to do too is I've been told just their first impression of me was I was scary to talk to. I was like aw, that sucks. I don't want to be someone scary to talk to. I tried to open myself up more, give myself a more friendly facade.

**RIAN:**

Aura?

**MASON:**

Sure. I think a smile, positive attitude, and observational learning, you'll just see something and they'll be like, if that person can smile, they're a leader at this school. I can do it too.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Influence others to do the same.

**MASON:**

Mhm. Do the same and maybe open up to a conversation a little bit further down the road.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Anything else you guys want to add to that?

**OLIVIA:**

I think being good examples for each other. Like a smile is a good example for someone else. But even with your friends - peer pressure is another thing that kind of sucks. Not kind of sucks but fully sucks. I think a lot of people fall victim to it so I think just being a good person, showing those good qualities to other people actually spreads so much.

**MIKE CALDWELL:**

Alright, Mason, Olivia, Rian, we appreciate your input and conversation in this podcast. Can't wait to share it with the rest of the world.

**MASON:**

Thank you for having us on.

**RIAN AND OLIVIA:**

Thank you so much.

**Outro:**

Thank you for joining us to explore education leadership, innovation, and impact here on *Bluum Together*. We encourage you to continue these dialogues in your work communities, classrooms, and organizations. Be sure to visit [Bluum.org/together](https://bluum.org/together) where you can discover more episodes. Or you can click [Join the Conversation](#) if you'd like to be a guest. Until next time, keep learning, keep bluuming, and keep making an impact one conversation at a time.