

Bluum Together: Episode 3- Digging into Local Research with Dr. Megan Smith, Boise State University

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:

Greetings, good day podcast listeners. This is Mike Caldwell once again and you are listening to Bluum Together and today we are in Boise, Idaho at Boise State University and joining me today is Megan Smith, Associate Professor in the School of Public and Population Health. Megan, welcome.

MEGAN SMITH:

Thank you! It's great to be here with you today.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Thank you for being a part of this podcast. Share a little bit about your background, introduce yourself. I know a lot of people who may be listening might know you already, but give us a little bit of your background.

MEGAN SMITH:

I am a mom and I am also a faculty member here at Boise State. I am a teacher and also a researcher. I think my primary identity professionally is as a teacher. I've been teaching pretty much my entire adult life in one way or another. Whether it be in high school, I helped in summer camps for no reason at all other than I just liked being around kids. Then, I became a teacher right after grad school and did that for several years at a K-12, in a tiny, rural mountain town called Quincy (California) if anyone knows it and taught middle school math and science.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Not in Idaho. I know Idaho really well. I don't know that name.'

MEGAN SMITH:

Oh yes, sorry, yes! It's not in Idaho.

MIKE CALDWELL:

In California - we won't hold that against you though.

BOTH:

[laughing]

MEGAN SMITH:

I was going to say I always try to side-step that. It doesn't define me. But yeah, I worked at that school as a 7-12th teacher teaching math and science to middle school students and then in a 5-minute passing period transition to high school students. So, I always tell people from the visual it was like 'Hi, Ms. Smith to like [voice drop] Hey, Ms. Smith' every 5 minutes and just a really awesome career. I loved teaching. When I met my husband, we ended up moving across the country to West Virginia. At that time, I had enough teaching under my belt that I really knew what I wanted to study, which was how do we make schools the best possible places that can be for kids? And that's what I went into my PhD laser-focused on and did all my research on adolescent health, adolescent development and then those environmental factors that we call it which is basically what's going on in the community or in the school that is affecting young people.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Yeah, awesome. Good background. We have kind of similar ties with a smaller school. As I mentioned yesterday, one of my first teaching jobs was in Garden Valleys School District here in Idaho and similarly I was a math teacher and started the beginning of the day with *Pre-algebra* and ended with *Calculus*. So, every period was a different class. In fact, two of the six or seven classes that I taught were actually split. I remember in one class period having half Algebra I students and half Algebra II students in the same period.

MEGAN SMITH:

Wow, yeah!

MIKE CALDWELL:

But in a small school that's kind of what you did.

MEGAN SMITH:

It is what it is, yeah.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Clearly that was my first teaching job and I didn't know any better so I just thought that was how it was. But boy, in the small little school districts it's challenging. You learn a lot and there is a lot asked of you. I can relate. You're not too far away from teaching at this moment, you are still teaching - you're teaching big kids now.

MEGAN SMITH:

Yeah, I teach real big kids. Some of my students are older than me now which is an awesome experience. I teach at the undergraduate level. I teach things like *Research Methods and Collaborating for Change*. At the graduate level, I teach an *Adolescent Health and Development* course. I teach Applied statistics so I still get to teach math a little bit which is fun and I teach our *Community Engagement* courses. So, how do we get our folks really understanding the best ways to engage with the community and include them in the work?

MIKE CALDWELL:

Yeah, very cool. Well, I heard your name, we hadn't met until recently. I heard your name from several different people as I was going out. Having more conversations about what is happening in our state as it relates to supporting youth in their mental health in our schools which is our focus for this podcast series. I heard your name come up several times and I was able to connect with you and learn a little bit about the work that you are doing - it's really important work. So, let's go to that. Tell our listeners a little bit about the work you are currently doing with schools in Idaho.

MEGAN SMITH:

Sure. About three years ago I started what I guess you could call an initiative which is called *Communities for Youth*. The idea is to work on what we call *Upstream Prevention* for young people around youth mental health.

MIKE CALDWELL:

I'm just going to pause just right there.

MEGAN SMITH:

I know, so much jargon.

MIKE CALDWELL:

I've been in education forever, and those terms for Upstream and Downstream make sense to me but they were also somewhat new to me in thinking about them recently.

MEGAN SMITH:

Sure, sure.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Break that down a little bit. When we talk about *Upstream Support vs. Downstream Support*, what are we talking about there?

MEGAN SMITH:

Thanks, I really appreciate the question. When we think of Downstream what I mean is something that might help after a crisis. In the case of youth mental health, a young person

who begins to really struggle with their mental health, we might find a counselor or a crisis center. That would be a Downstream sort of approach. A crisis center can also be a kind of prevention approach because obviously it prevents the worst case scenario which is a young person taking their life due to mental health challenges. When we talk about Upstream, and I work really Upstream and we'll talk about it over the course of this time, but when we talk about Upstream we are talking about what we call *Risk and Protective Factors*. Risk factors are the types of things that may lead to mental health challenges. Things like experiencing family violence is a Risk factor. Things like attending a school that doesn't feel like it cares about you or your education is a Risk factor, right? The good news is we also have Protective factors. Most people are familiar with the idea that one trusted adult can be extremely protective. And what that means is when we look at kids who have a trusted adult vs. not a trusted adult and kind of most of the other things are similar, the kid with a trusted adult ends up with less mental health challenges. When we talk about Upstream Prevention, we are talking about what are the things in those *Risk and Protective* factors at the community level that are impacting youth mental health.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Yup, great. In a recent podcast, we talked about things like *PBIS*, *MTSS*, and oftentimes referred to the Three Tiers which are very common in Idaho when talking about response intervention - Level I, Level II, Level III. There is a parallel there with Upstream vs. Downstream. Thinking about that first level, the first tier of support for everyone and think about what we can do more Upstream to do more of the preventative that is going to impact everyone. As challenges arise for individual students, this kind of low support is more targeted to those. Is that kind of –

MEGAN SMITH:

Yeah, I actually appreciate you drawing that connection. You're bringing me back to my teaching days. Yes, it's a lot like that Tier 1 where we are trying to make the whole community or the whole school environment good so that everyone's boat rises if you will.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Absolutely, yeah. Ok, so I kind of derailed you going back doing a lot of the work on the Upstream focus.

MEGAN SMITH:

Stop me if I go too much into the weeds because I can be kind of a detail and I'll tell you all the parts. When I went to grad school in West Virginia, studying Adolescent Health and how to create great environments for them as I described, I went to West Virginia which is what most people describe as the epicenter of the Opioid Epidemic. Basically, opioid use is really high in many of the communities in West Virginia. I sort of had this moment where I was studying adolescent environments and how to make them great where I was also in a place where there was a real fire around substance abuse. By fortune or kismet, or whatever you like to call it, I

met a researcher who is currently working at West Virginia University on substance use prevention in schools and communities. That model is called the Icelandic Prevention Model. It's extremely successful in preventing substance use in young people. In Iceland, they've been using this model for over 20 years and you can see a consistent and persistent drop in substance youth in their youth and over the last five years it has just plateaued. It started at 42% of young people using it in their country which was a huge problem and now it's a 6% and sort of leveled off in the years which means not only did it work to decrease use but it's also holding it.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Wow.

MEGAN SMITH:

Yeah, wow, right? As you know when we are studying these things, we know substance use prevention is messy and hard, so is this other work. I got really excited about the Icelandic Prevention Model and got to work on it in West Virginia. It's now being used in 43 different countries. I've traveled to Mexico to help work in their government on using the Iceland Prevention Model etcetera. When I moved to Idaho five and a half years ago, I like to be really place-based, I like to be in the community. I like to serve the community I work in professionally and personally. And then...I also want to be near kids. You know, I just want to be working with young people and helping them make their experience great. I sort of took some time to listen to a lot of different folks. I worked with St. Lukes on a project they were doing with educational leaders through the state of Idaho. They were interested in making the relationships that they had with schools stronger and better. Part of that project was asking school leaders at multiple levels, what do you need? What would you like from a community partner? Overwhelming the response was 'Gosh, we need help with behavior and mental health.' I was seeing that way out in the data when you look at Idaho youth outcomes, the stuff that we do have, we can see that young people in our state struggle. They struggle probably more than the rest of the states in the nation. We are often leading in the Top 5 to 10 for depression outcomes, for suicide ideation and completion. For me, it became really obvious that what I wanted to do and what I could do to help whatever, however you say it in this space, was to bring that experience of a Prevention Model that was successful with substance use to our communities in Idaho and apply it to youth mental health which seemed to be a great problem and continues to be a great problem, unfortunately.

MIKE CADWELL:

You learned about the big problem and got really involved and invested in it. So, now what? You've been at it for five plus years. What are you doing specifically with schools and which schools do you want to share a bit about? Specifically which school districts you're working with and maybe some of the stuff you're doing.

MEGAN SMITH:

Sure. First I'll say we haven't really been doing this work for five years because it took me a while to identify where I could best fit in Idaho. I spent about a year, year and a half just trying to sit on every youth health coalition, every mental health coalition, every iterative process. Anything that I could publicly access and I worked with State Department of Ed to pay attention to their board. At the time, it was under Ybarra and Studebaker and sat on a bunch of their programs and committees to just think about where we really are. Then, unfortunately, I mentioned that project with Luke's, right after we worked on that project we went into COVID. Obviously, that changed a lot of the dynamics but, silver lining if there is one, there was a grant opportunity, and one of the goals of the grant specifically called out youth mental health. I thought here's our moment - we can do this. We already have these partnerships brewing, we know what we want to do which is get Upstream Prevention going for youth mental health. It was about three years ago that we started. We'll get into the weeds a little bit but part of the Icelandic Prevention Approach is the importance of using data and using data from young people themselves in the real time. A survey is often the best approach. We also often in some schools use focus groups because they're not ready for a survey yet, but a survey is the best. That is where we started. We had a lot of schools sign up and say yes. But then the tumult of COVID-19 and all that we ended up narrowing down working with only Marsing and Boise School District. That very first iteration. We are in Marsing and Boise at many schools not just in the district but a couple of charters and a couple of private schools in the area of Boise as well. Then we also just started up in Blaine County and all of their schools. We've also done work around focus groups and listening sessions in communities up in Coeur d' Alene, in Twin, in Mountain Home. We've met with Nampa folks and West Ada folks. I think the idea is to help people see there is a way we can all work on this. One of the things that we heard in those listening sessions that we heard the first year, was parents, and I am putting this in quotes here, no matter what side you're on, I believe deeply that parents and adults in the community don't want young people struggling. In some ways that's really nice because it's a shared goal, it's a shared something to bring us together in a time where we feel like there might not be a lot to bring us together. That is a true deep goal for most people that I talk to. Those listening sessions were great because parents from all different backgrounds etcetera would say 'We want to be doing something about this. Obviously we don't want our kids to be struggling in any way, mental health or otherwise. But what am I supposed to do? I am not a mental health care provider.' We hear the same things from schools and school leaders. Obviously, this is a big deal. It impacts our academic mission, it impacts what we want to do with young people. It impacts how they can grow and what our community looks like. A lot of school professionals are also like, 'But I am not a mental health care provider. What am I supposed to do in this space?' I think the beauty of what we do and what we are slowly bringing community by community if you will, and man there are a lot of communities in Idaho. But there is this sense that actually if we all come together we actually coordinate and it's a bit like a puzzle. We each have the right piece, we just need to do it together. Right now, we are all trying to do the puzzle

ourselves with one piece. You can't do it that way, no matter how hard you work, unfortunately.

MIKE CADWELL:

Yeah, absolutely. We all have a role to play and that's both at the school level with parents and students themselves, the faculty and staff and community around that school. I apply that also at the macro-level and statewide. Oftentimes, we're all kind of doing these individual kinds of things, but we need more cohesion in our approach in how we can work together as opposed to these separate initiatives that don't always work well together. I hear you. Along the same lines, I mentioned to you, it was interesting to hear that the focus of mental and behavioral health was a clear priority when you first arrived COVID hit. Then really, observations as a school principal at the time, it just accelerated those issues. We spent a good year and a half, almost two years saying social isolation was the name of the game. That's what we were told to do and we spent a lot of time doing that. Quickly for us as a school, not surprisingly, we quickly saw how it was taking a toll on students' mental health. In the spring of '21 for us, we spent a lot of time in the school figuring out how we can mitigate the impact and help students through this while we are trying to keep them healthy. Our big focus for us, also on the Upstream Focus, was to make sure we zero-in on the sense of belonging within our school, that every student feels like they belong. A big push for us was this center around making sure everyone feels noticed, named, and known. That was kind of our mantra if you will for the entire year and then some. We did our own research as well and partnership with Springtide Research and data is really important like you said. For us, we did our initial survey when we kind of pushed this initiative. One of the questions as an example is adults acknowledge my presence at the school. We want that to be 100% agree or strongly agree. We had about 4% at the beginning of that particular question say either disagree or strongly disagree. 4% may be small, but that's 4%. Those are students that say they don't feel that adults acknowledge their presence. There's a long list of questions that we kind of asked in that same vein. It helped us zero-in on the need to make sure that as adults we are getting out and noticing students, we know their names, so let's talk about strategies. How do we remember all these students' names if we don't have them in class and as an administrator it's a challenge when you have almost 1,000 students, but how do we do that?

MEGAN SMITH:

You can do it.

MIKE CALDWELL:

You can do it. Then you put in different strategies like how do you put those things in place with things like working in the lunch line as kids come through and you're ringing them up for their lunch, you get to know those student's names. Little things that you can do to know them by name and notice them, and then over time get to know them as a person. What did you learn? You did the surveys, started to gather data from these different schools, so what have you

learned? If you could be the voice of the students that you are hearing from, what do you think they are saying through your surveys?

MEGAN SMITH:

That is a really interesting question and I wrote notes on so much of the goodness that you said and we'll touch back on that. But as far as what we've learned, and I can only speak of the Boise area because some of the other areas are a little bit smaller, but I'll talk about themes. In the Boise area, what we learned pretty obviously when we ran, what we do is we take the data and we summarize it and immediately bring it back to the school leaders and sort of say 'Hey, this is what we are seeing in the data. Do you have questions on this. Do you want us to go a little deeper since you mentioned you had that 4% who you mentioned weren't feeling that belonging or feeling that people acknowledge them. We can dig into that specific group and see if there is something different going on for these particular kids which is really cool in real time tool for educational leaders. But as far as what we learned from the survey, we saw really clearly that the two main drivers of both mental health challenge, so depressive systems is how we measure that, and ideations, so thinking about suicide, the two leading factors were social isolation, and we'll talk a little bit about what that means because I think that in the scope of the pandemic, that can be misinterpreted. Then also stress, high levels of stress. Those were the two major factors. Now, there were several factors but those are the ones that made up most of the difference.

MIKE CALDWELL:

And you said those two are social iso –

MEGAN SMITH:

Social isolation and high levels of stress.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Stress.

MEGAN SMITH:

When we're talking about social isolation, I think some people think that because of the pandemic and other ideas about that, that we immediately get the idea in our head of a loner in the school, someone who keeps to themselves, etcetera. But you can be the most popular quote on quote popular kid at school and feel social isolation because what this is about is not having genuine, deep, authentic, real relationships, right? If we keep using our stereotypes, maybe the quarterback of the football team, no one would consider him to be socially isolated, but because if he doesn't have real, deep relationships where he can share himself, then he is socially isolated too. I like to say that because people will be like 'Oh, good. My kid is fine' right? What we found is actually that high levels of kids were lacking real, deep connection in their lives in this area and that that was driving mental health and ideation. Similarly stress, when I

say that in every community meaning we don't collect this data for ourselves. It doesn't do me any good. What it does is that it allows me to use the tools and the skills that I have in communicating about and making sense of the data and sharing it back with the community. I don't know everything about a community. The school leaders know a lot more that I do about their school, about their kids, same with the parents. It's the coming together of us again going back to the metaphor. I have here is what the data says and crunch it whatever way you like. Then there are parents who have the real, on the ground information. When we talk about stress in community meetings, we talk about 'Oh yeah, stress is a buzzword. Of Course stress is involved.' What does that even mean, right? I think what's cool about what we do is we don't stop at just stress driving it. What we did next, especially in Boise last year, was we talked to 66 kids after that in focus group settings and asked them 'Hey, so it looks like stress is a big deal. What is stressing you out?' This is where you can tell, I wish people could see us right now, you can tell we are getting closer to the kids, right?

MIKE CALDWELL:

Yeah.

MEGAN SMITH:

One of the most amazing things is when you talk to young people, they are just so grateful to be listened to. So much of their life is listening to advice or listening to what they should be learning or doing. One of the coolest things about a focus group is that my job is to just listen.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Yes.

MEGAN SMITH:

It's cool when you see kids about five minutes in, ten minutes in and they're like 'Oh, this one woman is really just listening.' Then you can see something click and they just share.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Yeah.

MEGAN SMITH:

You're getting me really excited because on Friday of this week, I have a podcast scheduled where I'm talking to students.

MEGAN SMITH:

Yay!

MIKE CALDWELL:

So we'll be talking –

MEGAN SMITH:

That's my favorite part of my job. We do all sorts of things but really my favorite part is to talk to students, because again, they don't have all the answers. They're young, but they are in it so they know what's true and real for them and it's really cool. But anyway, I'm excited about talking to kids. The point is that for most of the young people that we talk to here in this area around stress, it was what I call (not their words, I don't use their cool words) what I call this hustle or grind culture. Young people are watching the adults in their world work all the time. Work to the wall and also be economically stressed in most cases. They are seeing this, yes you have to work hard and have your phone in front of you all the time because what if work comes through and also...we're kinda struggling. Young people are seeing that in the context of all these other messages around, make sure you get to the best college you can. By the way, to get to the best college you can, you have to be excellent in all your classes and also you have to be excellent in extra curricular activities and also you have to be a good volunteer and also we want you to be this amazing person in your community. I think –

MIKE CALDWELL:

Don't forget to have your social media followers, you have to have some many etcetera and so forth.

MEGAN SMITH:

Yes, correct!

MIKE CALDWELL:

It's the social pressures as well. Yes, keep going.

MEGAN SMITH:

They're just...I think they're just swamped. They are getting these messages. I mean we talked to like 7th graders who are stressed about college. I think I am going to make an assumption - our age group, you know adults in our lives told us about college and it was with good intention. I still think it is with good intention. I just think there are a lot of factors that sort of have changed in the environments of our young people. Instead of getting the message from their teachers at school or a supportive parental voice - it's like all the time, I better be the best at all things. Like you said, now there is a shining light on young people. This social media, this camera so to speak that is always on them and we already know psychologically young people have this imaginary audience so we are very self-conscious. That's totally normal developmentally - that's just what it is. Young people already feel that young people are watching them and everyone's judging them and now we literally have a thing that watches and judges them. I think when you combine all that together, that is creating high levels of stress for our young people.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Yeah.

MEGAN SMITH:

We need to think about, again one of the great things I do is invite adults back into that conversation. There is a lot of value in peer-to-peer support and you will never hear me knock it. I love peer-to-peer support. I love when young people learn to be great to their other peers - awesome. I think what I see lately is a lot of effort being pushed towards that peer-to-peer support or effort being pushed to social media is the devil. Let's admit there are some definite downsides and negatives too. But what I don't hear is this is my role in the problem and this is how I am going to make it different for young people.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Yes.

MEGAN SMITH:

We forget that young people are in an environment that was created by adults. We need to step into the picture and change the things we don't like. We can't be like kids are being mean to each other I guess we'll teach them to be nicer to each other and cope with each other without us stepping in and being nice to each other as well. One of the interesting things in one of the meetings with our kids (I won't tell you where cause I don't want to out the community). There is a thing on our survey that says kids in our community are not nice to each other. It was really high in the community and it felt like everyone was that 'What?' When we talked to kids, they said well, honestly it's really the adults. Even when they show up in the pick-up line, they are saying nasty things to other kids at our school and things like that. That was a hard talk to have with the adult community especially like 'Hey, I'm Megan from Boise State. This is what your kids are saying.' It was a very powerful call to action. I think I saw a lot of the adults in the audience saying 'Oh, we own this. This is us.' That's what we want. We want to be able to invite anyone who wants to be part of helping create the best possible environment for kids. We want to invite them in, show them some possibility, and let them choose this is how I am going to do it. In Boise, for instance, we are really trying to go all in on this social connection thing. How do we increase connection to self, to other peers, and to trusted and safe adults for all the kids in our community?

MIKE CALDWELL:

Yes, absolutely.

MEGAN SMITH:

That's big! That's huge! I think if you sit with it for a second, you can figure out this is how I can contribute. For instance, I can host a monthly dinner with my kid and three of their friends and I can just check in on them. Or, when I go to soccer practice to pick up my daughter I can say to

another child on the team 'Hey, how was it?' You know, 'Courtney, what's going on?' If we all start doing it and we're going to see increases.

MIKE CALDWELL:

So much of it starts with understanding the specific challenges that our youth are facing within our community. The two things you mentioned - social isolation, high stress - are probably, I would bet, consistent with what school you're in with our youth today. I think that is very consistent when I was a high school principal with some of the things we saw as well. Then you figure out what we can do in listening to kids and getting their ideas and input, and they always have input if you ask.

MEGAN SMITH:

[laughing]

MIKE CALDWELL:

And then you start strategizing and building some things to that end. What we did, several things as a school, is we actually blocked out two blocks of time during the week, 40 minutes per block and we created a thing called *Community Time*.

MEGAN SMITH:

That's amazing.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Essentially what it was was every student got a choice of about 60 different interest topics - kind of like electives that covered the gamut. We gave the same list to all of the adults in our building and then based on that kind of made a match. Put kids in these small groups for a quarter at a time, so it wasn't a long time, with adults that also had similar interests. For example, I had a small group that I led that was focused on backpacking.

MEGAN SMITH:

That's so cool!

MIKE CALDWELL:

We were all just interested in the outdoors and backpacking. That was our interest and we had kids from all different grade levels, but they all had that common interest to know each other through a common interest. That was one of our strategies that we came up with through our focus on believing and getting to that *Every Student is Named and Known* and that was a big push for us. It starts with understanding what the problem is, where the issues lie, and getting students involved and getting your whole community allied around it. But there are ways and there are solutions out there where you can make a difference. I love that kind of stuff, it's so cool.

MEGAN SMITH:

[chuckling]

MIKE CALDWELL:

We could talk all day. If I was an education leader out there listening right now, what can I do? What recommendations do you have for our listeners out there that are maybe leading a school or have some sort of influence on what's happening. Or, maybe they're just a community member, a board member of a school or whatever - what recommendations do you have on what they can do?

MEGAN SMITH:

There is a lot to do and you gave examples of the more proximal actual actions you can do. I think if we could think about what could help us all sort of move forward. One of those things is bringing us back to the community and sharing accountability, shared understanding. I think that's one of the things *Communities for Youth* tries to do which is we try to help facilitate those important conversations across parents and children, across parents and school leaders, across parents and parents in the community and provide that middle space if you will to actually hear and listen to each other and process that back. That has to do with the *Upstream Prevention Model* which I'll mention again soon. The second thing I would say is that we need to be collecting data. When I first started saying that around this date, people would say 'We have tons of data, what are you talking about?' And I'd say, 'Tell me. How are you using this data. What is the data? Where is it being collected?' Unfortunately, in the state of Idaho particularly for young people, we just don't have it. We used to participate as a state in what we call the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* but even that, you'll get the data back two years later typically and it's at the state-level so it might tell you that 30% of the kids are struggling in the state. It's really hard as a building principal or even a district leader to use that information. I think one of the great things we offer and that I think is really important in this space is to collect the data for your school or for your district so you can make really, really reasoned decisions. The information we collect, the surveys we've created have been created with Idaho leaders in the state both educational leaders, State Department of Ed. We've had teachers talk to us about items, parents, things like that and we're always sort of growing and customizing it to the school because we want survey experience to be very different from in the base. We want it to be super usable. We turn the data around two weeks after we collect. That means you get the data in real-time. If you see for instance that a certain group is struggling, those are the kids at your school that day. It's not two years later, they haven't graduated already. Really powerful that the data can help us navigate where we want to go and then also this key thing that's necessary is to check our work. Things can feel very good or we can feel very excited about something or we're used to doing a thing and the data allows us to say we tried some stuff we thought would help. Did it help? Did it work? I know on the surface that might feel scary but once you get into it I love working with Idaho educational leaders. Jim Foudy, Adam

Johnson up in Blaine and Norm Steward in Marsing There are leaders who are just galvanized almost by knowing what's going on and as soon as we identify a red flag area, their like 'Oh, I have 15 ideas for this and I am going to hold a meeting with my teachers about x,y, and z and that's really cool and exciting. That's why I think us coming together is so helpful because educational leaders don't always have time to collect data, make a valid measurement tool, and they don't have all the time to crunch numbers in their office. I'll have to do that.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Right, right.

MEGAN SMITH:

Together we can be unstoppable or synergistic whatever you want to call it.

MIKE CALDWELL:

We just finished an entire series on the *Science of Reading in Idaho Schools* and one of the predominant themes through that, we went out and talked to schools that were really doing well in that space. One of the key themes was they looked at data consistently on their reading scores and were developing actions around that data. Well, that also applies to the mental health support for our students.

MEGAN SMITH:

Correct.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Absolutely. We don't know where our students are. As a school leader, I want to know how many of our students, or what percentage of our students feel noticed in my school. Feel like there's adults in this building that know their name and that there are adults in this building that really know who they are and care enough to ask questions about who they are. I want to know that information and once I know that there is some action that needs to be developed around that. We almost surveyed maybe too much in our school. Every year, parents, students, faculty staff, not just on mental health but a lot of things. But we've always developed our annual objectives around that data. It was always focused on where we are right now and what we need to do to focus for next year. I think that's sage advice, absolutely. Get the data. I know a lot of our schools are doing that but that's really important.

MEGAN SMITH:

Similar to how we started to work on that *Upstream Prevention* part, to be thinking about how each of us uniquely contributes to the *Risk and Protective Factors* for young people in this school. How do we look at a Risk Factors and reduce them together and how do we look at our Protective Factors and raise them up. I know what I'm saying, trust me I used to be a K-12 teacher and I understand how many things are put on education teachers, leaders, etcetera.

You all are amazing, you're doing amazing work still - good job, you. There's so much hoisted upon the shoulders of those folks that I really like to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with them and help be that additional support, that usable support. I'm not there to shake my finger or to make a bunch of work for someone because I've been in it, I know what it looks like. There's no way I want to create busy work for people. Everything is about how we support the school and being the center of the hub of a community and then we do the wrap-around work. We call the community in and help them process the data and help them see their role in how to make it better for young people.

MIKE CALDWELL:

So if I have a school out there listening right now and a leader says 'I really want to talk to Megan,' can they reach out to you? What would you suggest?

MEGAN SMITH:

Oh, yeah. I always tell people I will talk to anyone, anytime about this anywhere. My daughter who is 10 is sick of hearing me talk about it with people. They can email me. I encourage folks to visit our website which is www.communitiesforouryouth.org. That gives you some more detail about the process and what we do and how to get a hold of us. I think that's probably the first step.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Cool, yeah. With your permission, may we leave your email in our –

MEGAN SMITH: 39:32

Sure. Mlsmith@boisestate.edu

MIKE CALDWELL:

Great. Well, Megan as we wrap up, any final comments or thoughts on this topic. I know we could probably talk for days or at least hours or more on this. But, anything?

MEGAN SMITH:

There was something we talked about briefly yesterday when we were processing this. Which is this mental health crises, first of all has been brewing for many, many years. It hasn't just started in the pandemic, it certainly got exacerbated. It didn't start there. It's been a long problem and it's going to take a long, big solution. We can't speaker out of it, we can't program our way out of it. I think what happens to a lot of people, because it's so big, either people want to sit and talk about how sad it is which doesn't lay to action. Or, it's just too big, and too sad, and too scary and people turn away from it. What I hope people hear in this or feel in this or connect to, which is there is a ton of hope and we actually can do this together. I've seen it work in other communities. I know we can do it here in Idaho. I just think when I talk to Idahoains, people are really interested in moving their communities to be better for kids. We

can do it. Like, we can start today. I could show you what we need to do in Boise and we can start today. And we can only start by having folks engage with us.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Absolutely. We're going to be talking to some schools and some school leaders that are seeing some success in this and we are going to share that information and some of those details so I'm excited to do that.

MEGAN SMITH:

Awesome, awesome.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Well, thanks once again to you Megan for being our guest today and sharing your expertise and experience. And thank you to all our listeners for tuning in to today's episode. Today is episode #3 of our podcast series focused on supporting mental health for our youth. Until next time, this is your host Mike Caldwell signing off and thanks again Megan.

MEGAN SMITH:

It's been a pleasure. Thank you.

Outro: *Inviting music*