

## **Bluum Together: Episode 6- Going “All-In” with a Community School Approach**

### **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 welcome back to another episode of *Bluum Together*. I am Mike Caldwell, your host, and we are excited to bring in another perspective to our conversation about Mental Health Support in our schools. And today I am in beautiful Marsing, Idaho in the Marsing School District. Joining me today is a group of podcast rookies, right? All of you? By the end of this episode, they are going to be pros. But joining me is Superintendent Mr. Norm Stewart and then Becky Barkell, Hub Coordinator. We are going to learn about the Hub. And then Ken Price, a 21st Century Early Childhood Education Director. Welcome, all of you.

### **ALL**

[In unison] Thank you.

### **MIKE CALDWELL**

I’m excited to be here as part of this effort in learning about your work in Marsing. I had the pleasure of getting a brief tour with Norm recently and was quite impressed. Hopefully, we can capture some of the great things that are happening. First, a brief introduction. We’ll start with you Norm as the superintendent. How long have you been here, what is your role here, and then we’ll go to Becky and then Ken.

### **NORM STEWART**

Thank you. I’ve been with the district, this is my 12th year with the Marsing School District and 11th as superintendent. My whole foundation of my whole experience has been in small schools and really love working in Marsing. It’s one of those situations where in a small school, you get to know the families and the community overall. It’s been really beneficial to what we’ve been able to put together here.

### **MIKE CALDWELL**

Absolutely, yeah. Your community should be very proud with what you put together. We are going to share that with the rest of the world today. Becky?

**BECKY BARKELL**

Hi, I am Becky Barkell. I am the Marsing School Hub Coordinator. I coordinate all the services that we bring into the Hub. We try to create a one-stop-shop if you will of services in the school. So being a rural school, we didn't have a lot of services available locally. Our aspect is to try and change that and bring services in for our students.

**MIKE CALDWELL**

Yes, we are going to talk a little bit about that and share more detail on what that looks like. Ken? Tell me what you do here. How long have you been in the district?

**KEN PRICE**

I've been here for 19 years. I started out as the 21st Century Community Learning Coordinator, which is the after school program. Then, that's morphed into being the Director of the Early Learning Center here and helping out writing grants for the hub and other projects in the district.

**MIKE CALDWELL**

Right on. Let's start with what is a Community School in the Hub as you call it? It's a pretty interesting geometric shape here - I used to be a geometry teacher. I'm not sure...is it a dodecagon? How many different sides does this place have? Do you guys know? First quiz of the day.

**NORM STEWART**

Ooo. I'm going to fail this quiz. I was a P.E. teacher.

**BECKY BARKELL**

How many classrooms do we have?

**KEN PRICE**

We have 12 classrooms.

**MIKE CALDWELL**

OK, a dodecagon. OK.

**NORM STEWART**

Nailed it, yes.

**MIKE CALDWELL**

So if you haven't been out in Marsing and you're listening - one, just a really cool building that is pretty unique to other buildings that you'll find in the education landscape. This is the Hub of the Community School here in Marsing, but a lot of people maybe don't know what a Community School is. So, who wants to take that?

### **KEN PRICE**

Community Schools really for us are more of a Community Resource Center. Marsing itself, definitely a rural, agricultural based community. The community doesn't really have a lot of resources overall, especially when we first started the work. The first food pantry closed, the Senior Center closed. For our families to be able to access services, they would have to go to some local communities - closets of which is Homedale that's 10 miles away. But when you are talking about 10 miles, there's only one direction - it's 20 miles. For some of our families they are traveling, and the price of gas, it becomes difficult for them to be able to seek services. What our Hub is is it's a Community Resource Center involving partners providing a situation where we can provide services that will reduce barriers that can negatively impact our students and their families. Trying to bring in as many resources to our students and help their families, because if their families are suffering then so are our students. If they can't focus on their education because they are hungry and there's food insecurities then that's not doing them justice. It's really a facility where the school district, the community, and partners come together, providing resources for our students to help reduce barriers.

### **MIKE CALDWELL**

Before being here I heard that, but was having a hard time conceptualizing - what are those services? What does that look like? Becky, as the Hub Coordinator, can you talk about specifically what are those services that are provided here at the Hub?

### **BECKY BARKELL**

The services that we have here at the Hub are - I run a clothing and food pantry. Families can come once a week [for] every service that we have here. The food and clothing are totally free. We partner with Idaho Food Bank to bring in food. All the clothing are community-based donations. Families can access it once a month at no charge. We also have three Early Learning preschools that Marsing didn't have previous to this time. We brought in outside counseling, so we have counseling on-site so students no longer have to travel or take off part of a day or a whole day just to see a counselor. We also have a school based nurse now. We have a Nurse Practitioner. She can see students and she does have the ability to diagnose and write prescriptions if needed. We've given an office space to our County Sheriff, our police force. They are presence on-site and we feel like that actually deters negative behaviors because if

you see a Sheriff's truck out there, you're likely going to behave a little better. That is the main thing that we have here.

**MIKE CALDWELL**

Quite extensive in terms of offerings to support the community. Did you pull this model off somewhere else? Where did this come from? Is this something that was created originally to Marsing or how would you describe that?

**KEN PRICE**

I have to give credit to Norm for his vision. Coming from Oregon, he knew more about Community Schools than anybody here in Marsing. When we passed the bond to 2017 and this building became available, they had this vision of this is where the community school is going to be. To be honest, I just thought how in the world is he going to fill up that space up? Because it's a big building - a former middle school - with a food pantry, and a preschool and mental health facilities. I was like how is that all going to happen? We just started taking one step at a time and Norm started driving the boat and we just kind of fell in blind and things just started to fall in place and here we are.

**MIKE CALDWELL**

Someone that might be listening might be thinking, well that sounds really expensive. The cost to do that for a community is probably something we cannot do. When we look at your numbers, the cost of what cost to run and also what you brought in as a community is quite impressive. Your return of investment for the community is quite impressive. Can one of you guys speak to the finances and how that's been?

**KEN PRICE**

Everything that we offer here focuses on our partnerships and focuses on grants. It does take time in regard to writing grants and making sure that we have sustainability. But if we are looking at the times that it takes to operate our Hub, the District Office would still be located in this building. We still had all the main utilities and everything would be in this building. The only thing that wouldn't be would be our custodial services for our preschools. As we were doing calculations, looking at what that would cost, we went through and those costs were right around \$11,000 a year to provide the Custodial Services. Since we originated in late 2019 to date, when you're calculating grants that have been written and received, donation calculations on volunteer hours, we brought in more than 3.8 million dollars to this community that would not have been here without the Hub being in operation.

**MIKE CALDWELL**

Might have peaked out on my comment on decagon, on the math part. I'm trying to do the return on investment at \$11,000 a year 3. what?

**KEN PRICE**

3.8

**MIKE CALDWELL**

Yeah, it's a pretty good return. We'll just round up to say it's a pretty good return. Why was this effort initiated? You have a great thing going now. You've been around for four years or so in place. What was the catalyst to make this happen?

**KEN PRICE**

It really comes from the organization that there is a lack of services within the Marsing community. In trying to look at what was needed, we did a needs assessment to try and understand. As we were having this objective and this goal to establish this facility, we were really trying to assess what it is that the community needs. We serve our patrons every spring, do a parent satisfaction survey. We incorporated the year before we opened a needs assessment that we created into that survey. The things that came to light were Childhood Education, Food and Clothing Pantry, Mental Health and Primary Care. Those were the things that we were really focused on. If you're looking within the community and the lack of resources, we were striving for how we can better provide and bring in those partners that can help contribute so that the services that are here are readily accessible. There is a small Terry Reilly Clinic within the community, but the county is very big. Being able to try and make sure we can expand whatever opportunities are there for those families and when we were looking at being questioned about why'd you start doing this, especially for our kids, you're a school, you're supposed to be in education and we are, we want to make sure that our students and the school report card and what it is rated on, how do students do in Student Achievement, how do they do on Attendance, Graduation Rates, College and Career Readiness - all of those things can be negatively impacted by barriers that come up, such as the food insecurities and mental health. If those services aren't provided in the community, how can we as a school district incorporate them through partnerships that don't cost the school district so that we can allow our school teachers to teach within their classrooms and focus on the kids. How can we bring in those resources that the community doesn't offer and have them in a central site? The fact that we were in a position to have a facility for this, we were very fortunate and we've been able to capitalize - rather than tearing down this building to build, repurpose it and focus on the needs of our kids and their families. That's really the reason why this originated.

**MIKE CALDWELL**

I think it's really cool that within this building you have Early Childhood Education and then Adult Learning - you have the gamut. Can you talk a little bit more about the Early Childhood Education program that you have here and what that looks like?

**KEN PRICE**

Sure. We started out in 2019. The Idaho Association for the Young Children offered a grant to two districts in Idaho to start planning an Early Learning Center in their district. Of course, Norm had a vision of wanting to have an Early Learning Center. We started that process, we started planning the Early Learning Center. I knew nothing about the preschools at the time. But, we just went forward in faith and we learned and we took direction from people who do know what's going on. We got funding for Husky Pups, which is our community-based preschool that is located in the Hub along with the Headstart and the cost of the developmentally challenged preschool for our kids that have some challenges with early learning. The Early Learning Centers have been a great success here in Marsing because there is no other licensed child care center in Marsing. It filled that gap at Headstart because they provide Early Learning services for those who are lower income level. We needed some facility to fill the need for the families who are not qualified for Headstart. It's been a great service for our families to get their children ready for Kindergarten so that they can succeed right off the bat in Kindergarten.

**MIKE CALDWELL**

It's pretty important. I'm glad you guys are doing that. It's pretty impressive and I saw that you guys have basically three different rooms dedicated to Early Childhood Education here, plus the Adult Learning. Very impressive. Becky, can you talk a little bit about the partnerships that you have here? Norm showed me a list and that would probably be an entire episode by itself going through all the partners. Maybe just zero-in on some key partners that have helped get this established and that you would like to recognize.

**BECKY BARKELL**

Like you say, there are so many on our list and it gets longer every year. The main ones that contribute to my side of it would be the Idaho Food Bank; ILEDA which is a community based action center; and then we also have Blue Cross Foundation of Idaho, they have recently contributed quite a bit; and then United Way, who I would like to thank mostly due to the funding that they give me makes it possible for me to be here. We've gotten funding for the last three years to pay for my salary, so that ensures that I can continue the work that I do. I was partnered with Micron, with Idaho Power, there's just so many. It's hard to even...like I said the County Sheriff helps - Marsing Sheriff's Club, City of Marsing, Insight Counseling, Southwest District Health. They are really based on providing for our school nurse that we have now. BSU, they have also helped with the nursing program also. We have nursing students from BSU that

come out twice a year and provide services to us - they intern here. Then we also have - we have two semesters so we have two different groups that come out each year. We also have a professor of Nursing at BSU. He comes out and gets his clinical hours here so he donates a day to Marsing's schools once a week. It's just a wonderful conglomeration. It's been all made possible due to all those generous donors we have.

**MIKE CALDWELL**

In developing and maintaining those partnerships, I would imagine, a lot of work. Is that your role as the Hub Coordinator primarily or is that a team effort? How does that work?

**BECKY BARKELL**

I think it's pretty much a team effort. There three of us, we split the duties. I try to take as much of it as I can. Norm being superintendent and many other duties -

**NORM STEWART**

Oh, superintendents don't do anything. Let's be honest.

**ALL**

[laughing]

**BECKY BARKELL**

He just looks pretty. Ken, he's amazing with his grant writing. I mean he's made a lot of this possible. He gives credit everywhere else, but I need to give credit where credit is due because if it wasn't for Ken, I might not be sitting here talking with you.

**MIKE CALDWELL**

Awesome. Our whole conversation on this whole series that we're doing is supporting Youth Mental Health. I don't think it's a stretch to say that this Community Hub that you're doing has a direct impact on the mental health of our youth or mental health specifically of the youth at Marsing. Can one of you speak to making that connection?

**NORM STEWART**

I can definitely speak towards that and we've been very fortunate to have a grant called Project Aware. That has provided some different resources for our entire district. It's PBIS district wide and Sources of Strength district wide. They also provide -

**MIKE CALDWELL**

Can I pause for a second here. Some people listening might not know what PBIS is. We talked about it in previous episodes, or even Sources of Strength. Can you talk a little bit about what those programs are?

### **NORM STEWART**

PBIS has allowed us to have training to come into each of our buildings and invite support staff. We have a group that is in charge of each of the buildings and established that program working with kids trying to provide more positive interventions to our students whether if that's academic or behavioral and trying to provide incentives for them to improve. For Sources of Strength, that's a student-led group really trying to focus on suicide prevention and trying to help our students who may be struggling with depression. I can talk more about that here in a second. It also provides funding for an outside counseling agency to come in and provide counseling here at the Hub. That's beneficial to us for students who'd be more of a high need - what we would call a Tier Three Intervention - that needs specialized intervention. If we have families that would need to access that for our students, in a normal situation, they would have to access those in another community. For those students, they may miss a half day or a full day of school for them to access those services. The fact that we can provide a counselor on-site here from an outside counseling agency, that student is really only missing one class period. That student can get the services that they need to address their mental health needs and then be able to go back to class. Parents don't have to miss work - everything is accessible right here. We also have access through telehealth if that is a better format for some of our students who need that. We'll say that we have a need for even another counselor. We have students even on a waitlist because the demand is so high but there is a counselor shortage. So trying to be able to find qualified people to come in and work with our needy students has been a challenge. For us, as mentioned as part of our nursing project, which was funded through the BlueCross of Idaho Foundation for Health, it was to show, because before our nurse was the secretary. If you need a band aid, if you need anything, go see the secretary in the schools. To try and provide for us to have a school nurse, there was pilot funding for that. Along with that, we needed to provide data. We did a student survey of all middle and high school students and within that survey, you were able to look at a broad spectrum of [students] that were addressed with not only mental and emotional health, but also substance exposure for our substance abuse and those kinds of things. Then once all that data came in, that was in Spring of 2022, we brought that data before the community and did a community meeting and broke down that data. The two points that we really were focused on was mental health from that standpoint that survey showed that for our middle and high school students, in Spring of 2022, 66% of all of our students were suffering from moderate to severe depression. The other part that was disturbing was that the perception was that only 31% of our students were nice to each other and is there a correlation there? Possible. We launched a campaign to focus on



kindness but that also brought to light that definitely there is a continued need for mental health interventions. We launched a campaign we were able to, we re-surveyed in Spring of 2023. I am happy to say that those numbers did go down. Those numbers came down to only 30% of our middle and high school students came through that they were suffering from moderate to severe depression. That's great because that's over half that we cut it, but still 30% of our kids are suffering. Unfortunately, the other part that definitely signifies that we have work that we have to continue to work on is the perception of kids that being nice to each other went down to only 27%. We have efforts that we are trying to work on through our Source of Strength, through PBIS in trying to help those students who need those interventions in trying to help. It really highlighted the need for that mental health and I am really thankful for our partnerships that we can be able to provide on-site mental health counseling. Now that Project Aware grant is a five year grant and we are in year four of five. Now we are also in a position where we need to look at sustainability. That comes down to Ken and trying to write more grants. With that model it is a challenge and trying to make sure that you are continuing to provide the services that you have and still maintaining those partnerships through Becky and making sure that we are maintaining, trying to expand. It is the sustainability part that we are continuing to look at, but it all focuses around students' needs and that mental health side is definitely a highlight of what we are trying to focus on.

#### **MIKE CALDWELL**

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for that broader overview and the connection back to mental health. Ken, does it get any easier overtime to write the grant and to build the support for what you're doing or does it get more challenging?

#### **KEN PRICE**

It's an adventure. If I start to think of it as a job and a burden, then it gets even more harder and difficult. I try to get in the mindset of there is an opportunity for me to be of service. That's easy for a community here like in Marsing. It's a small community, people know each other. I'm from Boise. It was interesting for me to work in a small town like this and to see how things operate because it's a little different. Opportunities seem to present themselves at the right time, for the right reason, for the need that we are looking for at the time. If we go through the process of establishing these partnerships and looking for grants, luckily for me, with the 21st Century Community Learning Center grant that I started out here in Marsing with the Idaho Department of Education, part of my mandate was to sustain my program. Again, it's a five year grant and we have to find partnerships and other grants outside of that 21st Century Grant to keep things running. I already had a mindset of I'm looking for money, I'm walking down the sidewalk, I'm looking for \$20 bills, we apply for everything. No grant opportunity is too small for us to apply for because if I have that mindset, then I'm always ready to take advantage of it.

\$1,000 grant. \$1,000 here, \$1,000 here. Pretty soon, you're talking about some real money. What we found is that money attracts money, partnerships attract other partnerships. When we start making those connections, we start talking to other people and they're like 'Hey, tell me more about what you're doing out there, maybe I can help' or 'I know this person here that has done something that might be able to help you out.' As we just keep moving forward, momentum is a big deal. Once we keep that momentum going, then it just becomes routine.

**MIKE CALDWELL**

There's some jobs that's created there also, right? More opportunity means a little more job security that is still needed here and there is still more work that needs to be done.

**KEN PRICE**

Personally, I am highly motivated to find money because that is how I fund my job. It's not all service oriented. It's a little selfish interest as well.

**MIKE CALDWELL**

Well, you obviously do a heck of a job with it. Kudos to you. Becky, back to you. We talked about the connection to your mental health and oftentimes we talk about those connections we go right to the Midstream approaches of providing counseling programs and things like that for kids that are needing some support. In these conversations, we've also talked about the Upstream kind of focus on what we can do to prevent or to provide the basic needs for students to help them remain healthy or stay healthy. What you're doing so much of is really a lot of that Upstream is providing some real basic needs not just for the kids, but for the families in the community. Wouldn't you say that that is also a huge contributor to the support of student's mental health here?

**BECKY BARKELL**

Oh, for sure. I've seen it first hand. I have the food pantry but I also have another support system from the Idaho Food Bank. They have what they call Weekend Backpacks and I deliver those every week. It's funny that the little kids they see me coming, and they know I'm in the hallway. Or when they see me on a different day, they'll be like 'Hey, don't forget me.' And I'll be like 'Oh, I won't forget you.' Oh they'll smile, they'll see me out in school and say 'Hey, you're the lady who brings me food.' Or when they come to the pantry, they're able to shop for clothes when they take them to the other side. I'm just like 'Pick out a few things' and they're like 'I can have these things.' I'm like 'Yes!' Just the smiles and the hugs, I mean it's so worth it. And the families that I help, I've told all the time that sometimes we wouldn't make it if the schools didn't have these resources for them. Just to know that, what most people take for granted everyday - opening the refrigerator or having things to have or opening the pantry and

not having bare shelves - just those basic needs, the fact that we can provide that for these families and make that difference, make them smile and make them want to get up and come to school everyday, it just makes it even easier to do what we're doing.

### **MIKE CALDWELL**

You take away a huge worry of security and clothing and warmth by providing clothing and food and all the things that are really just basic needs so that they can focus on education and social life and all the things that we want for our kids to focus on. That's great. To round this out, say I'm an education leader listening to this conversation. Maybe, I'm even a legislator or another superintendent in another district, what would your words of advice or words of wisdom be for those listeners that maybe want to learn more about this or how they can bring something like this to their community?

### **KEN PRICE**

If anyone has questions, we're always happy to be able to try to answer them. We've had a number of groups come out and tour our facility and every Community School looks different. We happen to be a rural community. There are Community Schools in more urban areas, so for us, we don't have resources or very many resources in our community. Our model is trying to bring those resources here. If you are in a larger community where those resources are already established, maybe the role is to help families make a link or a connection with those groups. Everyone is going to look different. For us, what I would relay to people is, find out as far as if you are wanting to explore Community Schools, there are organizations and school districts who are already doing the model and all of us are willing to promote this throughout the state. This is a model that I personally believe could benefit students throughout the state and their families and help them be successful. Just to encourage those administrators or those legislators that here is something that you don't have to start with and we are fortunate that we have a facility. We were able to do it on a much grander scale. American Falls, Randy Jensen superintendent there has done a fantastic job in the same position. They had a facility they could repurpose that. But in another school district, it may start in the closet. Just start somewhere and really try to address the needs of your community, know your community. What is the greatest need within that area? Is it food insecurities? Is it mental health? What is that? To really help those administrators understand the community, you have your perceived needs and then there's the real needs. Identify what those needs are, start somewhere. Start small, it doesn't have to be grand but as long as you start somewhere and you can make an impact on the kids' lives to help them be more successful.

### **MIKE CALDWELL**

Absolutely. I would just reiterate what you said and just say if you're really interested in learning more, it's worth a site visit. I learned a little bit through conversations about what you're doing here, but when you come and actually see it and talk to great people like you that are running it, it adds a whole other perspective to what you're doing and just really feel the impact. It's really cool. I mentioned that one of the reasons that you were able to do this is when you passed a bond in 2017 to build a new school, it freed up this building and through freeing this up, you were able to turn it into this amazing hub. This circle of life where the community fed you and said we're going to support your bond and in turn you're kind of feeding the community back and bringing them together through this approach and it's a real beautiful thing. I'm glad you mentioned that there are other schools that are doing this. The American Falls District is another one if you're on the eastern side of the State of Idaho and maybe want to see something closer, that's a great one. Hopefully Randy is OK with us sending people his way for visits. Absolutely. The timing is also really nice because the United Way and the partners associated with them just received a pretty significant federal grant to build out more community centers across the state of Idaho. What an opportunity to learn more about this from the people like you doing it and doing it really well.

#### **NORM STEWART**

And there are, as far as the state of Idaho, I believe we're up to 41 Community Schools in the state of Idaho. But, of the 115 school districts, it's only in 25 of those school districts. There is a lot of room for expansion and growth. We are definitely willing to help anyone who is even interested and even talking about exploring it.

#### **MIKE CALDWELL**

Absolutely. With that, any other comments that you guys would like to leave with our listeners before we close this out?

#### **KEN PRICE**

Yeah, I'd just like to add to what Norm was saying that any school in Idaho can start a Community School Center. My advice would be to start where you are, find an empty spot or a classroom in your school. Start with a food pantry. Explore the opportunity of starting a small preschool and just access what your needs are in even the neighborhood - what families are looking for and then identify a strong leader who is willing to take some risks and be committed and see the thing through like Norma has done here in Marsing. Things just start to fall into place.

#### **MIKE CALDWELL**

Absolutely.

**NORMAN STEWART**

I think that really you need to have the buy-in of the leadership and for people who are willing to take the chance and to have a great staff that is also willing to put in the extra work. I do know as far as it's the money thing that scares people off. That sustainability of what's going to happen if we do start it - how are we going to sustain it? As Ken said earlier, it's incredible to think about, but money does bring money. They see that you are doing positive things or contacting us and wanting to partner. We have grants where we are being contacted - you should really apply for this grant or this grant because people know the work that we are trying to provide for our students and for our community. Have faith in willing to take that chance and explore. There's a lot of support out there. The Idaho Community Schools Coalition is there for a resource as well. Be willing to take a chance - the kids are worth it.

**MIKE CALDWELL**

Absolutely. Well said. I think that nails it right there. The kids are worth it - absolutely. Kudos to you guys and the great work that you're doing here. I hope others that are listening will peek in and take a look at what you guys are doing and see how that might apply to their own communities. With that, we'll close out and thank you again to our guests Norm, Becky, and Ken, you guys have been wonderful. And to the Marsing community for allowing us to peak in and learn about what you're doing. Until next time, thanks to our listeners and listening in our episode on supporting mental health for our youth. We'll see you next time.

**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.