

Bluum Together Podcast Episode 9-

It's all about relationships, Future Public Charter School

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 and Good Day podcast listeners. This is Mike Caldwell and you are listening to another episode of *Bluum Together*. Today we are in beautiful Garden City, Idaho at Future Public School. Joining me today is Amanda Cox, Executive Director for Future Public Schools and Heather Efaw, Principal of Future. Welcome Amanda and Heather.

AMANDA COX

Thanks for having us!

MIKE CALDWELL

I am excited to talk to you about what you're doing at Future to support students and how you are adding another perspective to our overall focus on mental health support in schools. It's great to get these different perspectives on what schools are doing and how they are approaching this. Maybe a short introduction - Amanda we'll go with you first and then Heather, kick it off with a story. Amanda?

AMANDA COX

Great. As you shared, I am Director here at Future. This is year six for us as a school and so much of our founding vision and why we exist is to be able to provide all kids and families with all of the support to be able to have the future of their choice. Personally, this is year 17-18 in education. I started as a teacher and had a role where I was supporting teachers and just felt a loss of connection with kids and families and had an opportunity to move back closer to my roots here in Idaho to be part of founding Future.

MIKE CALDWELL

What did you teach when you were in the classroom?

AMANDA COX

Third grade, which I think is the most magical grade to exist.

MIKE CALDWELL

That's your sweet spot? Third grade?

AMANDA COX

And then I taught Fifth grade in a middle school.

MIKE CALDWELL

Right on. Heather?

HEATHER EFAW

Hi, my name is Heather Efav and I am currently serving as the Principal at Future. This is my first year at Future and joined not quite as a founder, but early on in year two, when we were just working with Kindergarten through Fourth grade. Prior to joining Future, I worked in a couple of large districts. One here in Boise and then one down in Arizona where I first started teaching. Similar to Amanda, I also taught Third grade but started in First and Second grade. Then when I moved up to Boise, I started to really focus on literacy outcomes and focus on serving as a Reading Specialist.

MIKE CALDWELL

Right on. We are going to get in more about your school and what you're doing but first sometimes it is helpful to start with story to kind of set the stage or context of what we are talking about today. Amanda, do you have a story you want to share?

AMANDA COX

In thinking about the topics of a school system that is in pursuit of supporting all kids and families, there's a student that we have in one of our Lower Elementary grades and he came to us transitioned from another school where mom was feeling pretty defeated in terms of advocating for the needs of her child. When they came to us, we also had a head scratch of gosh, what do we do? There is a pretty significant need here. If we fast forward to now, five months into the school year and seeing how they systems that we've built and the team that we've recruited to serve here at Future have all worked together to surround this student and family inclusive of the classroom teacher, our school psychologist, our Special Education team, as well as other supports available through the state such as *SESTA*, and just seeing how every person has just been so critical in being a part of really understanding what are the unique needs of this child - what is most critical for them to be successful in this environment. This was one of those - at the beginning of the year - gosh, I know so much is possible. We have so many other stories of hope and this one felt like - I don't know what the way forward is. It just has

been so reaffirming that when the right systems and the right people are in place, there is still a lot of hope for our kids that have a lot going on at home, coming to us with different trauma that they've experienced in this life. This student we can now say is successfully here at school everyday and really thriving. So it has been exciting to see this student was, last month, nominated as our Principal's engineer just for his family, I think that was likely one of the first times that they were able to see this student be successful. I think that for our team to not only have belief for this child, but for other kids - we're all in this together. It was just an exciting moment to celebrate this kid and there are still hard days, but definitely it was one of those - Okay, there are pathways possible for all kids and how can we do our best as a team to make that happen.

MIKE CALDWELL

That's what it's all about. As educators, given a really difficult task, and sometimes more difficult than others. If you have the right team, the right systems in place you get success stories that you're talking about and that feeds you as an educator - this is why we're doing what we're doing is to make that difference. I love that. Let's talk a little bit about your school, the profile of the students that you serve, and a little bit about your staff. Share information about Future. Who is Future?

AMANDA COX

I shared a little bit about our founding mission and vision. One to be a proof point of what's possible for all kids. It's been a priority in the founding that we are truly diverse by design - that all families see themselves as welcomed and part of our community here. Currently, we have just around 400 students and families here with us. We are Title I, so we have a large population of our families that qualify for free and reduced lunch. We have a large multi-lingual population, primarily the Bantu community and we have a large refugee relation from Iraq, Syria. We have a large population of our kids that receive support through our Special Education program or have additional support through 504s. Also, racially and ethnically diverse I think speaks to our intention of families feeling welcome here. That's more of whose here at Future. Another founding priority of ours is the belief of our relationships and those being very sacred and knowing in terms of psychology, when all humans, adults and kids feel safe, they feel welcome - we're better positioned to learn and grow. It's been an important part of our culture that families and kids and our staff feel welcome and that this is a place that they can see themselves growing. Building a strong culture was a priority, it continues to be a priority for our team.

MIKE CALDWELL

Heather, you call your students engineers?

HEATHER EFAW

Yeah.

MIKE CALDWELL

What's that about?

HEATHER EFAW

I would say it's a much less than the traditional sense of STEM in thinking about our kids as being engineers and more about thinking of our students as engineers of the community and having a deep understanding of themselves, of others, of the issues that are important in our community. Really thinking about them being the change we want to see someday and ultimately having that future of their choice and how they will be contributing members of society.

MIKE CALDWELL

You guys are K-5 or K-6?

AMANDA COX

K-6.

MIKE CALDWELL

K-6. Awesome. Tell me a little bit about your team Heather. We're going to jump into your systems - you're the Principal, Amanda's the Executive Director. Before you jump into the teachers, who works with you on the system. Who are the core pieces of supporting the system that you guys have in place?

HEATHER EFAW

When I think about the core systems we have in place, I think about three main teams that we have here at Future. First, we have what we call the Future Way team and that team consists of our school leaders - so myself and Amanda, Lauren Tassos, and Kevin, as well as teacher leaders from across the building.

MIKE CALDWELL

And what is Kevin's role?

HEATHER EFAW

Kevin is our Special Education Director here at Future. In conjunction with our school leadership team, our Teacher Leaders, we come together each week and really think about the most important topics and things that are not only impacting our students but also our team members in thinking about the overall feel of the building and making sure that we are working collective towards our vision where all engineers have a future of their choice. That it's a place where team members feel like they can thrive and grow professionally - that's our Future Way team. We also have an Engineer Support Team. This is the first place that when teachers are working with students who have a variety of needs, when they feel stuck in what they are able to give individually as a teacher or in double teams, they may referrals. We meet weekly and in addition to myself and Amanda we also have our school Social Worker, Counselor that is a part of that process. Sometimes we have Kevin come into those conversations depending on what the unique situation is and of course our families I think first and foremost, we really believe that families are a child's first advocate and teacher. They're a part of that process and what we try to do in those meetings is really focus on individual students and what we are seeing as far as their academic needs - social, emotional, and behavioral needs. We work to come up with a projection forward - four to six to eight weeks. What is our vision of some growth and success could look like and then work backwards from there to think through what are the right interventions and supports that we should put in place. That is really focused on individual engineers and I said three teams, but I would say another key piece in this is Grade Level Teams and we have a culture of looking at overall academic achievement and growth as a system for our more summative data points - beginning, middle, and end of the year. Those meetings are also happening weekly. When we see a child is not growing or achieving at the high levels that we want to see, we also work backwards to see what might be impacting them and do we have the right plans in place to support the whole child and not just what they need in literacy, math, and other subject areas but all of the components. Our Grade Level Teams are a big piece of the system. Finally, we have our Multidisciplinary Team which consists of Amanda, Kevin, our school psychologist and then our school social worker and counselor. Amanda runs that team so at that point, I turn it over to her and the rest of the team to get more in the nitty-gritty, but she could explain a little bit more about that team.

AMANDA COX

The MD Team is essentially an extension of the Engineer Support Team. When we've come to the round table, we've determined we need either more data or evidence, we'd like to try this intervention. After we've done so, we've seen the growth or the outcome we'd expect, this is our leveled up Tier 3, now we're at the table to determine how do we provide even more for the student. I'd also add that none of these teams existed in year one of Future. These have all been developed much in part to Heather joining Team Future and I think it's one thing to have a grand idea. 'This is what our school will be and here is the vision.' Having a really systematic

approach and being able to implement in a strategic way took us a few years to get there and has really made an incredible impact and difference in being able to serve kids versus saying 'There is a need. What do we do,' and trying to throw things at the wall. Just want to add this has been in development over the last six years to really codify and make this more into a robust systematic part of our organization.

MIKE CALDWELL

So as you think about your universal model of support - multi-system of support - you described really well the different teams that are part of that. What would you expand in terms of that model or what you have in place here beyond the teams that really make it work? You mentioned some of the data meetings, referrals. How would you describe your system in how it's supposed to work? I know systems don't always work as they are theoretically planned and there is always some fine-tuning that you have to do along the way.

AMANDA COX

I think in the same way as we look at academic instruction in the classroom, knowing what is our end goal. Kids need to learn. With this system, knowing that all kids need support to be able to thrive and be learners here at school and also similarly when we look at the classroom which is just Tier 1, what is the curriculum all kids are getting? When we don't see kids responding to that and making the growth, then we get an extra dose, they may go to a reading group. We look at the behavioral, emotional, and also the academic needs of our kids in the same way here - the supports, the curricula, and all the people on our team are doing to make sure all kids in our community are getting this first dose. Some of this is just very logistical, operational - having a meeting matrix, when are these meetings happening, who needs to be there, and getting very specific and concrete about the ways in which not just families, but our teams access this support so that it is clear to everyone. That is probably honestly the thing that has made the most difference in the desire of our team. 'We want to help our kids. We are having all these meetings throughout the week,' and just have so many different plans in place. Being able to distill down the momentum part of it has really been able to build trust in the systems, families, kids, teachers, seeing the impact in being able to use the system for the benefit of kids has had a big impact.

HEATHER EFAW

I would add a couple of different things, but similar in what Amanda was sharing. The big piece in making our system work is the community partnerships and the access that we have to outside resources and agencies. When we think about our role as educators, we really are uniquely positioned to provide an excellent education around excellent Literacy, Math, and other content areas and making sure kids leave here having a vigorous education. What that

has meant for us by staying in our lane has meant that we needed to rely on others in our community who are uniquely positioned to meet some of those needs that are not something that I think that our school is meant to provide. I think about our partnerships with the Idaho Food Bank, the Boys and Girls Club, Giraffe Laugh, Garden City, the mayor here. Being able to provide a dental clinic for our kids, vaccination, all of those outside services that some of our families may not be able to access outside in the community. We've been really able to bridge the gap between school and home and take those to Future so that they are accessible to everyone. This is a completely different route, but I think logistically, one thing that has really accelerated the team approach and just the growth and momentum that we are seeing with our kids is that we have a monthly Professional Development Day with all of our teachers. I think what that does is it gives people and all of us time to have some time to slow down, reflect on what's working well, work on the PD Initiatives that we said last summer was going to be really important to us. I think most importantly, we have an opportunity to build and maintain those relationships that Amanda shared about. I think by giving our teachers and team members that time, it really allows everyone to show up as their best selves. We implement Ruler, which is a curriculum that is focused on feelings. We talk about how important it is that not only our kids have a certain experience here at Future, but all kids and team members. Each year our team goes through a process that is led by our school social worker and one of our teacher leaders to determine how we want to feel at work. Greater than that, I think it's taking it to the next level to say what are the specific actions that we're all going to take individually, collectively, so that we are making sure that we are making out that team charter and then periodically throughout the year on these PD Days, we are able to take a step back and just assess where we are at, what changes if anything needs to be made. When I think about our system working well, those are just a couple of other ways we've been able to - nothing revolutionary, but I think things that have made a very big difference for our team members and engineers.

MIKE CALDWELL

I'm glad you pointed out the PD Day that you have today that I am interrupting and taking care of your staff. You talked about these different meetings you have and the intense work that happens in those meetings. I know as a former principal how challenging and emotional that can be because it's such difficult work. If you don't take the time to take care of your team in giving them that time and space, you can really burn out really quickly and you need that time to step off from the treadmill a bit and catch your breath and rejuvenate. Tell me about this Ruler - is that a curriculum, is that a program that you're using with your students, is that more focused on staff - I am not familiar with that.

AMANDA COX

It's actually both. I may get the name of it wrong. It's out of the Yale Center for Social and Emotional Intelligence. Mark Brackett, it came out of his research. He has a book *Permission to Feel* which I believe was three or four years ago, we did a full staff meeting. We offered a book club for our parents to participate in as well. I would say it's less of a curriculum and more of a toolbox. It's reciprocal for both students in the school and also the staff. The implementation of it is one to two years of your staff going through it to then be able to do it with students. Creating, as Heather mentioned, a charter - how do we want to feel, actualize that. When conflict comes up, here is a framework for working through that. The mood meter is a tool that is used. What are different feelings? What do they mean? How do we affirm the validity of those for others? It's been a tool that we were grateful to have a couple of team members who led that work for us. I would say it is just a very integrated part of who we are and what we do here at Future.

MIKE CALDWELL

I love that. If someone was interested in learning more about that, would they search Ruler or they just call you?

AMANDA COX

They can search for Ruler and it is out of Yale. Again, the Center for Social and Emotional Intelligence and Mark Brackett work. They've packaged it and it's evolved even over the last few years. They have some really great resources.

MIKE CALDWELL

I love that. I think that is a good takeaway for our listeners. As a school leader, looking for ways not just to support students, but also how you support your staff. I love that. You mentioned community partnerships and I know that is a big part of what you guys do here. The Boys and Girls Club is a big part of that. Can you talk a little bit more about what that partnership looks like given you have adjacent properties and how that relationship works.

AMANDA COX

Sure. I think so much about being able to actualize our vision is ensuring families have access and accessibility in being able to be a part of the Future community. One of those ways is knowing that we have a diverse group of families, some with one working parent, two working parents, other kids that are with guardians. So having the partnership with the club offers both morning before school care and then after school care for those families to know regardless if they are driving in from Nampa to work early to downtown Boise that they're children will be safe, they have a place to have fun, they are going to have a meal before school. Same thing for

after school. Having the joint use of our buildings is also a big win when their building largely sits empty during the day and our building is largely empty in afternoons or summer. Together, that partnership was rooted in that we can serve more families in our community together and be really smart about our communities and how we're operating those. I think for families to also know that there is wrap-around care. As Heather shared earlier, there is this fine balance between being an educator and wanting to do all for everyone, but also knowing we are best positioned to have kids on the pathway and future of their choice by ensuring they have a really excellent experience as a learner and that they are prepared and that we are not best positioned to offer things outside of that, but that we are being smart about who we are partnering with. The club is really a critical part of us being able to do what we do here and have families have futures of choice. There are also a lot of incredible resources through this state. YES program is one that we refer to a lot of families to which offers a lot of out-of-school mental health support, support for kids that might have an extra layer of support here at school. Families that qualify for that have an extra layer of adult support outside of school. I think for us knowing and being very transparent about this is what we are best at, this is what we may not be best or even able to support you with but here are some resources and can share with you.

MIKE CALDWELL

I love that. We've had several conversations around this topic, this series that we are doing. The theme of partnerships and strategic partnerships have really resonated. The work that you do, that we do as educators is so complicated and difficult and sometimes we feel like it's all on us to figure it out and do it within the walls of the school. The reality is it is so challenging that you really do need those partners to be successful. Like you are doing, identifying who those partners are and what they bring to the table to offset where you leave off and where others can pick up. It makes a lot of sense and I am feeling hearing that in a lot of the conversations that I am having, so good work. Good stuff. Before we transition to sharing what are current challenges, I want to make sure we don't leave any of the big rocks on the table, anything that you want to share that you feel like this is something really works well for us that we haven't talked about or this is something that we have really learned over the last several years that makes a difference that we haven't touched on? I am not leading that in any direction, but I want to make sure there is an opportunity to zero-in on that one thing - I feel like we do this really well and I want to share that out.

HEATHER EFAW

We already touched on this but I think that relationships are sacred. Having been in education now for year 16, I've never been in a building where I think people are more connected. That trickles down and its impact on engineers' experience every single day. It's something that

when visitors come to Future, you can really feel and see. I think that is something I've learned so much from Amanda and her leadership and not underestimating how important it is to be intentional and think about how you're cultivating, growing, building those relationships. One thing that we do every year to kick off the school year is to retreat. That is away from the building, one to two days. I think that is something that if you asked me five years ago, I would have never carved out two days of the precious time that we have for our staff for professional development, but now having seen the impact of those experiences at the retreat not only on our team members, but students, I can't imagine starting this school year in any other way. I would say the other thing that I feel is unique about Future which relates to all of these systems is I think school values really live in them - Bravery, Honor, Wander, Joy, Craftsmanship. Those are things that if you are here in the building and talk with 95% of our students, they are able to name in specific ways. I think it really goes back to relationships and the feel of school and yes we are pushing towards these rigorous academic outcomes but at the end of the day, I think everyone feels like they belong here at Future - it's a place where they can learn, and grow, and do their best work. That's why I feel really proud to be a part of team Future.

MIKE CALDWELL

I'm not going to get this quote right but it's something like the future eats strategy for lunch and breakfast. What you are really talking about is culture - the relationships, the values that you have, the feelings that you get when you walk in the door, that's your future. I agree with you - you can really sense that when you walk in. If you don't have that right, the strategies become difficult or even impossible to achieve. What about your challenges? What are some of the things that as you look forward, you are really trying to grow and improve and remedy as you look down the road.

AMANDA COX

I think the most immediate response to that is that the need is so wide and deep. I think particularly when we look at the impact of the pandemic, and I know technically, scientifically we can say we're out of the pandemic, but are still seeing an incredible impact on not only mindsets around schooling but also continued illness. Now that we are moving into year four from the pandemic beginning, kids that we home and experienced a different isolation in their very formative, developmental years before coming to school, haven't done any research studies but we are definitely seeing some really significant trends in needs. Not just of our Lower Elementary kids but across the board. I think that is something on our mind in how we continue to do more for our kids and our school community with limited resources. We don't really know what the answer is but just being able to name this is hard, the need is great, that certainly feels like a challenge in just making sure they're connected to the resources to best

help them and that we are continuing to build the systems and stability and resources here at school to support families.

MIKE CALDWELL

I feel that what you just shared is also a common theme that I'm hearing as it just feels sometimes daunting with the work that's in front of you. I guess it's job security - there's work that is always going to be needed by great people like you because there is a lot of work to still be done but it can feel overwhelming. I hear that.

AMANDA COX

We talk a lot about doing simple things well. I think that's a mindset that helps keep us grounded in what is most important, what is most in front of us and just releasing the pressure of yes, there are 1,000 things in front of us that do feel urgent and important but what's the next right thing? Being able to release some of that psychological pressure not just for ourselves, but I think in the same way having positive staff relationships is reciprocal to kids. I think the leadership both Heather and I model and the rest of the administrative team when we are able to model that things are okay, what's the next great thing Do Simple Well to our teachers as well and I think they are being tasks and asked to not only teacher at a rigorous high level, but also their the ones that are being confronted with all of the other needs in front of them with 25 kids each day. That is a mindset I try to hold each day for our team.

MIKE CALDWELL

I think that's really good advice packing it that way - Do Simple Well. To me that resonates back to what Heather was talking about in terms of relationships. It's something simple but you have to do it well and do it consistently. That kind of help feeds everything else. Anything else you'd like to add - any looming challenges that keep you up at night, Heather?

AMANDA COX

The last couple of weeks we've had the opportunity, I had the opportunity to take a team of teachers over to Bremerton, Washington to visit a charter school. We just had one of our Sixth grade teachers go down to Houston to learn from an excellent school system. I think one thing that is every looming and always on our mind is the money constraints and you talk to other folks in other places about per-pupil funding and it's makes sense why they have a layer of instructional coaching, of full-time psyche, of full-time social worker, a school counselor and we found a way to make that happen here at Future for right now. I think it's something we're always thinking about. How do we find the resources that we know make the biggest difference for our team and for our kids? I know it's not more money that we need but we have a pretty clear vision and theory of what needs to be in place and the dollars just don't match that when

we're thinking about truly supporting all kids and doing that really well. I think that's just something that we're always thinking about - how can we be creative in how we allocate resources and how can we be thinking about the next opportunity to seek more so that we are able to meet the needs of our diverse student population.

MIKE CALDWELL

Well said. I like the fact that you are sending teachers and going yourself to other site visits to go see other schools. I know as a former principal doing that, just getting yourself out of your own silo, and seeing what other people are doing and how they are doing it and you can take away really big things, but sometimes it's the smallest things that you walk away with - like 'I never thought about approaching x in that way' and it can make a big difference. It's also rejuvenating and refreshing to get out of school and see what other people are doing and commiserate on common challenges but also maybe share some ideas and how to solve some of them. Good stuff. This has been a great conversation. I appreciate you guys being a part of our series. This is going to be a great listen for those people that are tuning in and trying to figure out how to solve some of these challenges. You guys are doing some good stuff here. Any closing thoughts or comments before we close out?

HEATHER EFAW

Appreciate the opportunity to share and we always say here at Future, feedback is such a gift and also welcoming visitors here to check out what we are doing but also to help us to better and get. Our doors are always open, we love learning from other schools and we hope that we've been able to share something that can help someone else - love partnering with others as well.

MIKE CALDWELL

Cool.

HEATHER EFAW

Nothing else. Thank you.

MIKE CALDWELL

Thank you guys so much and thank you to our listeners for joining for today's episode and 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.