Michael:
Hello, I'm Michael Rendon, your host of Beyond the Bell, a podcast produced by Animas High School of Durango, Colorado.

Greg: And I'm your co-host, Greg Phillips. This podcast series asks the question, what must our education system do to best prepare the next generation of students, Gen Zers, to lead meaningful, fulfilling, impactful, purposeful, and satisfying lives? No small task.

We'll begin each episode speaking with a local high schooler, college student, or recent addition to the nine to five workforce to hear about their educational experience, their lives, and their visions and hopes for the future. Next, we'll talk with local experts about how we can ensure that education is meaningful, challenging, and engaging. We'll look at what's working and what isn't. So join us as we rethink education for a new generation, because we believe preparing for the future means more than just passing tests. It means empowering young people to thrive, lead and shape a better world.

Before we dig into today's topic, I first want to introduce you to Naima, who graduated in 2022 from Animas High School. Naima, welcome to Beyond the Bell.

Naima: Hi, thanks for having me.

Greg: So what have you been up to since you graduated?

Naima:
After I graduated, I went to Scripps College in Claremont, California. It's one of the many little parts of LA. And I'm just about to start my senior year in college.

Greg: What have you decided to major in?

Naima: I'm majoring in political science, or it's called politics as scripts, but political science.

Greg: What are you thinking about for the future with that?

Naima: It's an interesting field to be in at this time. Immediately post-grad, I'm actually applying to the Fulbright Fellowship to do English teaching abroad for a year. Some people might say, you know, that's not very in line with political science as a degree. But I see education as one of the most vital parts of creating a better world. Having an educated society means that we have people that are equipped to really face all the issues that we're facing in the world today.

There's just more and more challenges that we have to climb over. And then I'm also focusing for my senior thesis in college on environmental policy. If I can complete the Fulbright Fellowship, I'm hoping to go into some sort of environmental policy after that.

Greg: Fantastic. You read a lot about the Gen Z population, which you fit into. You'll see these blanket statements saying Gen Zers care about the climate, they care about social justice. But you also see things that say Gen Zers are really worried about the future and there's a level of hopelessness and a level of apathy. It sounds like you've kind of moved more towards wanting it to take action. Where did that come from? I mean, were you born that way?

Naima: I think I've had a couple really impactful experiences that have made me continue to believe that I can do work that is good. I think part of that had to do with my senior project that I did at Animas. I did it about climate change and why people believe or don't believe in climate

change, which is not the conversation I necessarily want to have now. I think we've moved beyond some of the things that I was addressing in that project, but it really got me to research this issue that I'm so passionate about and have to support my views against people asking me, what about this, this, and this.

And then also, right after this most recent election, I was in a Spanish class. It was a Spanish literature class. And I came into class the day after the election. And my professor was quite eccentric and very passionate and very political, even though that was not her field. And I kind of expected her to be very up in arms and have a lot to say.

And so when she did, and I was kind of surprised, and what she said was, you know, the people that are targeted now, the people that are having the biggest hardship now, we've been fighting and we'll just continue to fight. And the more people that see that our system is not working, the more support we'll get. And then she went on with class and that moment kind of reminded me that I'm not the first person to live on this earth. I'm not the first generation to face a lot of big issues.

And yes, I'm growing up in a time that's really hard, but people have already been doing this stuff. And I've had so many teachers and so many people in my life that have done really, really good work, even though it hasn't always seemed easy. And I think that has been, that's what I keep remembering whenever it seems to get hard.

Greg: Put your head down and get her done basically. When you think about the world that you're growing into and you're inheriting, what makes you the most nervous?

Naima: Yeah, exactly.

Some things that I think that I find myself looking at and being scared about are also the things that I want to go in and try to help. I'm obviously worried about how our current political system values education and how we're seeing a lot of funding and value being taken away from our education system. To create a society that can have progress and be successful, we have to be educated. And we have to want to learn and accept new information and act on that. And of course, also, I'm looking at our environment and how we're seeing huge floods in Texas and New Mexico that we don't have the bandwidth in our political state right now to even talk about how that is a huge issue. And that's something that I've seen for a long time ever since I started studying climate justice, is that there's not enough room on the table to put that on there. And so I think...

What I kind of see is the thing that I'm most nervous about is that we're getting too distracted and getting too angry at each other about the small things to actually pay attention to the big issues that we should be taking action towards.

Greg: So what can the education system do together with families and communities to change that? What do we need to do to be able to create a future where folks are willing to put the energy into, like you're talking about, finding solutions, working together, collaborating, communicating? How do we change this mess that we're in currently?

Naima: Well, I think it can be very overwhelming to see it as the one big thing. And so I think there's a lot of smaller pieces that it should be broken down into. One of the biggest things that I think that is easier to do than we might think is to support kids in being passionate about learning. I grew up in a family of three kids, and my older brother is very STEM focused, and he got his degree in mechanical engineering, and he's an engineer right now.

I'm interested more in the humanities and I'm interested in politics and all that kind of stuff. And my younger brother, I watched him struggle to go to school every day since first grade. And it was such a hard journey for him because the classroom wasn't necessarily built for him. He had so many amazing teachers throughout his education career. And when he got to Animas, I think he loved school the most he ever had.

And even when he had to take steps back and try online or try, you know, a different approach to learning or have one teacher sit down with him and help him every day, he kind of figured it out and now he's going to college. And I think one of the things that I've realized is that I loved school so much for a variety of reasons. But one of those was because I was able to succeed in the environment and not every kid can succeed in the same environment. And so I think

One thing that both people in schools and the community around schools can do is adapt to where students are coming from and help them succeed when they can't just sit at a desk.

Greg: More individualized attention, custom curriculum, working to meet the needs of the students and where they're at.

Naima: Yeah, and validating that maybe the way that you approach learning is not the same as someone else, but it's equally as valuable and should be incorporated into.

Greg: What do you think a successful adult life looks like for you?

Naima: You know, I've been trying to figure that out. I think with graduation looming, it's definitely a big question in my mind always. I see success in the ways that I see people around me living successful lives. I think one of the biggest things I look to is how my dad was a consultant for a long time. And then in my childhood, he made a switch and he's now working at Stillwater Music and he's a music teacher and absolutely loves what he does.

And I think the lesson that I take away from that is success comes from doing something that you really want to do and you believe is really good work. That's not always the easiest thing and that's not always the most accessible thing. But if you're doing something that you're so passionate about and you care so much about and you think is really important, you're going to put all your energy into something that you love. And I think that that is really what success looks like. And so coming from college, and I think a lot of people graduating don't necessarily know what that is yet. But I think when looking forward to how I want to be successful, I really want to find a way to love the thing that I do. And I think that success largely will come from that.

Greg: Naima, you give me hope for the future. I really enjoyed talking to you and I really appreciate you taking the time to share your perspectives on this. Wish you the best of luck.

Naima: Of course, thank you so much for having me. It's been great.

Michael:
In today's episode of Beyond the Bell, The Art of Teaching and Learning, we'll be taking a deep dive into the art of teaching and learning to answer questions such as, how do we make education meaningful, challenging, and engaging? And what's working and what isn't in education? To help us answer these questions and more, we're joined by two lifelong educators, Lori Fisher, humanities teacher and director of curriculum and instruction at Animas High School, and Dr. Jen Rider, director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Fort Lewis College. Welcome both of you to the show.

Jen & Lori: Thank you. Thank you.

Michael: Alright, so first question. What's one moment in your career when you realized you had to completely rethink how you approach teaching or learning?

Lori: I think for me, it would be the year that we came fully back from COVID because the year previous we had been doing this sort of hybrid model. And then we came back and it was the hardest year of teaching I've ever had. And I eventually realized that it was because relationships between students and teachers were broken. Like before there had always been this assumption of trust between the students in my room and myself. And so they would be willing to go with me a lot of places.

And coming back from COVID, I felt like that trust was gone. And so I had to really think about what I needed to do as a teacher to regain that trust so that we could then engage in the process of learning. But the trust had to come first.

Michael: And how did you gain the trust?

Lori: Yeah, yeah, that was hard. I mean, the short answer is I took a step back from academics and really focused on relationship building. I did a lot of work with individual students that were struggling to really work on repairing their relationships, not just with me, but sort of with the adult community in general, and then really thought about revamping some of my projects to help them build relationships with each other as well as with me in the classroom.

Michael: Jen, what about you? What's one moment in your career when you realized you had to completely rethink how you approach teaching or learning?

Jen: Yeah, I appreciate Lori's answer. was thinking back over the last 20 years or so and what's been the big disruption or pivotal points in education. And don't want to be cliche in saying AI because COVID was also for me a huge shift in teaching. And I think as a college instructor, I think AI has been one of the biggest disruptions for faculty and students in terms of how we learn and why we learn in certain ways, especially given that AI is this technology that can do so much of the traditional outputs that we're required to do during a college course for us. AI can write a paper in about 30 seconds. AI can generate just about anything that students might need to do as an assessment. it's taken time to think about and process how do we make learning relevant for students, authentic? And this will come up, I'm sure, in other questions in this discussion. But how do we engage students in ways beyond some of these traditional forms of teaching that have typically worked for the last handful of decades?

Greg: Lori, this one's for you. High schoolers are notorious for asking, when will I ever use this? How do you create authentic connections between humanities content and students' lived experiences?

Lori: This is something I feel really passionate about. And the first step is to teach with passion. And so as a teacher, this requires adopting a mindset of curiosity and wonder about the world. Because my experience is that if you walk into a room and you're like, my goodness, this is so interesting and here's why, the students will follow you typically. But that has to be genuine and authentic on your part. And so you genuinely have to be interested and curious about almost everything because you never know what you're going to be asked to teach. So that's step one. And then the big thing for me is, as a teacher of humanities, we're teaching stories. And everybody loves stories. Little kids love stories. Adults love stories. We all love stories. And so we're constantly zooming out to see the big picture context, but then zooming into the level of these individual stories is where those connections really happen for my students. And so

always connecting how is this like something that's happened in your life or that you're experienced? And then how is this really different than what's happened in your life and your experience? And how can we imagine ourselves in these contexts? So trying to see the story in everything, whether that's data or literature or historical events, I think is an approach that has worked well for me.

Michael: Jen, this one's for you. Research shows that students learn better when they see purpose in their learning. How do you help college instructors move beyond just coverage to create meaningful learning experiences?

Jen: Yeah, we could talk for a whole hour about how to create meaning and relevance and purpose in learning. One of the frameworks that I often circle back to with faculty when we talk about how to create meaningful learning experiences is self-determination theory, which taps into intrinsic motivation within students and how to leverage intrinsic motivation for students to be engaged in the learning process and see meaning and purpose.

And self-determination theory has three elements to it. One is autonomy. So how can you let students own their learning process, let them find agency in learning so that we are not just feeding them knowledge. The second is competence, and it's a big one for first-year learners. How do we make students believe through growth mindset and support that they are competent and can be competent in the building of skills that we're asking them to do in the course we're teaching. And the third is relatedness. So how can we tap into their interests, their professional pathways, the stories like Lori said, like how do we get students related to both the content but also related to the learning community? Like how can we tap into each other and make learning social?

I think that I've seen a lot of success in targeting those three areas. are very specific strategies you can use. For example, in the college level at the beginning of the semester, asking students to contribute to final revisions of the syllabus and letting them have some agency in how the course is designed. So lots of specific examples, but I think that's a great framework to utilize.

Michael: I'm bought into self-determination theory. Do you see faculty using that or do you see there's a disconnect between what faculty think engages students versus what the research shows that engages students?

Jen: Yeah, I think the biggest gap that I see is introductory level STEM courses where faculty feel like there's a lot of content that needs to be memorized or learned before they move on to the next class. There's foundation building, which is a little bit less prevalent in the humanities. So I think that's the biggest maybe struggle that I've seen with faculty being able to have students embed agency in their learning. But the competence piece and the relatedness piece are still very easy to think about in terms of how we structure our course, how we design a specific learning experience day by day. So I don't know that there's a lot of disconnect with faculty. I think that they do see this as tangible.

Michael: How would you include agency for students if you're teaching a class where you need that foundation building? You kind of need to know this, this, this, this, and this. And how do you at the same time build an agency where, okay, you get to decide what we need to learn?

Jen: Not that I'm going to use a lot of frameworks because I don't love to be this like framework-y person where we always have to be the structured way in everything we do. You know, there's no step-by-step guide to perfect teaching and learning. But, you know, what

comes to mind for me is universal design for learning. You know, allowing students to express their learning in different forms of output, for example, can still meet a course outcome or a learning objective and still be that same goal of building foundational knowledge, but it gives students agency in how they're able to express what they've learned. So that's one quick example.

Greg: I'm going to play devil's advocate here. I'm looking back on my undergraduate and graduate school experience where there were a lot of classes that I took and I was a biology major, chemistry minor, and I had very little interest in some of these topics, you know, learning about immunology and how the immune system, you know, manages the blah. There were aspects of it all that just were laborious and yet I was motivated, needed to do well, wanted to do well.

I just powered through it. Now, I didn't love it, but looking back on it, would it have been better if I had agency? I learned how to learn. I learned how to problem solve. I learned how to struggle and get through it to the other side. What's the problem with that?

Lori : This is a real tension in education of sometimes we do things that are not fun and they're just hard. And sometimes learning is not fun. And I feel like there's been this kind of cultural shift to think that it all has to be fun and engaging all the time. And one of the things that I try to do in my classes is really identify for my students like this is gonna be hard and this is not gonna be a fun part. This part is gonna be tedious and it's going to be difficult.

And you will find satisfaction at the end. And really trying to parse that difference between satisfaction and fun for me has been powerful. When you try to force this inherent engagement that's just not there, they can sense the inauthenticity of it. And I think that there is a place for automaticity of recall of facts and of knowledge. And that is never going to be fun. They've done all these studies on critical thinking and unless you have the ability to recall things without having to look it up all the time and reconstruct your knowledge all the time, your critical thinking is actually weaker, right? And so we need this foundation. But bringing students into that and into that process, I find, and like articulating for them, here's why we're doing this so that we can get to this stuff that is more rewarding, helps. But I also think we need to acknowledge that it's not always going to be fun and that that's okay.

Greg: That makes me think back to one particular professor I had, chemistry professor, that was talking about the way gases behave in a vacuum. And he brought in a shopping cart full of tennis balls and just started chucking them around the room. And this was big lecture room with 400 kids. The balls were just bouncing all over the place. Here I am 50 years later remembering it. So I see that. There's a place where making it entertaining and fun and engaging makes a difference. This is a good segue.

There's research suggesting that optimal learning happens in a quote unquote zone of proximal development. It's not too easy, it's not too hard. In a diverse classroom, how do you find that sweet spot for 20 plus different students simultaneously?

Lori: I'd be a millionaire and a highly successful educational consultant if I had the answer to this. But I have three things that sort of play into this. And one is student voice and choice. And what that looks like varies immensely based on what you're trying to teach and what you want the outcomes to be. It could be student choice in a specific subtopic of what they want to specialize in within the larger topic. It could be student choice and what the project outcome is that they're developing and what that looks like. It could be student choice even within the writing process of how do I map out my ideas? Do I do it visually? Do I do it through talking through it with a partner? Do I do it in a bullet point format? So building that in whenever

possible is really important. I also have a general rule for myself that I plan kind of to the middle high. And then I have extensions for students that want to go beyond that, that I've thought through and have kind of ready to go and then scaffolds and supports for students that are not at that level. So this is kind of just classic lesson planning of where I want students to be and I know some of them won't be, so what do I need to provide them to get them to that point? And then the last one that Animas really makes possible because of our sort of smaller class loads is a ton of individual feedback and conferencing, especially around things like writing and more technical skills.

The more I can sit down with students one-on-one and put their writing in front of me and give them the feedback that's directly applicable to where they are, the more they're gonna grow in that skill. And so those are kind of the three pieces. Two of them are a little more structural and then one of them is like really about that individualized piece.

Michael: What role should failure play in education and how to help students and educators become more comfortable with it? And I'll give you an example. And when I ran the environmental center years ago at the college, student would come in with this, I want to put on this big event with thousands of people and we'll, you know, blah, blah, blah. And I'm like, when is this going to happen? next week. You know, and you just knew it was going to bomb, but I'd let them and then have a conversation afterwards. Okay. What worked, what didn't work, but that was more a work environment.

What about in the classroom? Is it okay to let students fail and when do you do that and how do you think about that?

Lori: I mean, my short answer is yes. And in fact, it depends on how we define failure though, because there's a high stakes piece with grades where things get a little funky around some of the economic incentives with, well, if I fail this class with the grade, then that has huge implications for my future opportunities. Putting that aside a little bit, I think it's possible to create structures within a classroom for productive failure where students have the opportunity to revisit and reflect. And I think that's the biggest piece with failure is like, if they just fail at something, whatever it is, and move on, they're not gonna learn anything from that. And so in our classrooms, especially with projects, we really try to structure it so that after every single project, there's this reflective component where we come together as a group and talk about it. And I get feedback from my students as well.

I've had projects that failed because of the way I planned them and I've learned from that. But then also they reflect individually on what they did and what they could have done better and how it could have gone better. And I think building that into a cyclical where that's just expected that you take this mindset at the end of every academic task, that's huge. And in our senior TPOL, which is a Socratic seminar about their educational experiences at the end of their senior year. One of the questions we ask is basically this question. And a lot of them have told us over the last two years that we should have let them fail more, which has been really interesting feedback to get that they needed more failure and less handholding.

Michael: And why do you think students need more failure?

Lori: I did not expect to hear this from them. I think it's because when you learn from failure, it feels really good. And it builds that sense of yourself and your self-efficacy that I can do this and I can learn from it and then I can do it better. And I'll just give the example of a student who we had two years ago who came to me at the start of the year and was like, I'm gonna throw a three-day music festival. And I laughed because this student has a history of these grandiose project ideas that then never quite get done.

And I was like, cool, how about a one day concert? And he was like, no, I've got this. And I think I yelled budget at him every time I passed him in the hallway for four months, but he did it. He had learned from his past failures and he did a budget and he incorporated as a nonprofit and he got sponsors and he had his own bank account that he had to deal with like tax reporting on. And he had to figure out how to write contracts for all of the bands he was hiring. And all of these past failures, I think, led him to be able to do this big really cool thing.

Michael: Jen, how do you think about failure?

I think failure can be good and productive as long as it doesn't play into students building their academic identities. As long as it doesn't have a negative impact where they see failure as, I'm not meant to be here, I'm not good enough or smart enough to be able to succeed in this discipline or this course or whatever it may be.

I really appreciate Lori's comment about reflection because I think that is a huge piece of agency, right? Students understanding what did I do to contribute to or what did I not do to contribute to this failure? And so one thing that came to mind for me is Sandra McGuire. She was a chemistry professor at Cornell and she wrote a great book called Teach Students How to Learn. And this kind of goes back to Greg's comment about the more traditional content heavy STEM classes. She used metacognitive strategies in intro level and upper level as well, chemistry courses. her data is fascinating to me because she shows data around students and their first exam, and she uses very traditional teaching and assessment structures. The first exam where they may have gotten an F.

And then she teaches them, she has them reflect on that and teaches them these metacognitive strategies, which she says is just a really fancy word for learning or study strategies, study skills. And she teaches them these study skills and then her data shows improvement. Students are getting A's and B's or all A's on every exam after that. And she builds in a lot of growth mindset, a lot of support in helping students understand that.

It is not just innate intelligence. This is using skills and strategies and tools, and you will be able to succeed. So I think failure can be productive if it's wrapped with a lot of support and a lot of tools that we provide for students to get them to success.

Lori: I totally agree with that, Jen. And then I also think that there's a educator attitude that plays here where I've had students who really, really struggled with writing or reading or the sort of basic skills of my class. And if you as the educator have this attitude of, know you can do this and I know you can get better and we just need to figure out what works for you and what strategies work for you, that goes a long way. So many of them have had negative experiences and potentially been undermined by past experiences with educators or with family members or with whatever where they have felt like people didn't believe in them. And I think that belief that if you try, you can do this is like foundational in a classroom.

Greg: You've both been talking about coping mechanisms and learning how to fail and how to come out on the other side of that with a positive attitude. How has the conversation around mental health and student anxiety changed how you think about academic challenge?

Lori: I don't know if it's changed how I think about academic challenge that much. I think I'm much more aware of student mental health issues and they are frankly much more open about it. The number of students who are like, I'm leaving early to go see my counselor today now, you know, versus when I started teaching almost 20 years ago. I feel like it's really healthy,

honestly, that they can say that and that that's part of their lives and not a big deal and not something to be ashamed of.

The anxiety thing is something that we have definitely seen. And I think the biggest thing for me is in talking with some of my friends that are mental health professionals, realizing that you don't get less anxious by avoidance. That's just going to feed the anxiety cycle. And so figuring out how to get that student to engage and to not just avoid. And then there's this virtual cycle, right, where confidence comes from competence and then they kind of feed into one another that as you see you can do the things, you become more confident in your ability to do the things. So I see my job not as like a counselor, but to try to get students to enter that cycle and to try to see this is where you are showing competence. Let's build on that. Let's keep you in this process and not disengaging from it because of your emotions and mental health. What do we need to do to keep you engaged in building that cycle of competence and confidence?

Jen: I feel the same way, Lori. I don't actually see a big compromise. I don't see mental health compromising academic challenge. What I see it doing for us as learning designers is figuring out how do we build in more flexibility and how do we make sure that we meet the needs of students who do have mental health challenges. At the higher ed level, it's connecting them with resources that exist around campus because they may not know that they're available to them. So getting the supports that they need outside of class so that they can show up and be present and be their best selves in class. It's building in flexibility. I think it's difficult because a lot of faculty even don't struggle with mental health. They don't have mental health challenges. so to have true empathy for what students are going through can be, I think, a disconnect and can be difficult. Being present, asking them to share as much as they're willing to share about what would be a successful learning environment for them or how to communicate with you in terms of what they need. But I do agree. mean, it's real easy to say, can't come to class today, but then what, right? How do we then help students engage with the content and make sure that they're finding alternative pathways to learning? I don't know how true this is at the high school level, but at the college level, students really suffer from loneliness. It's their first time away from home. They may not go to college with any friends. They are building new networks, and it's intimidating. This, think, last year was the first year that we had students that did not deal with COVID in high school. So for the last four years, we've been watching students who did a lot of their high school online. And so it was particularly difficult to and kind of overwhelming to build those connections. so creating structures in class and kind of seeing your role of an instructor differently where you're helping students build their learning community and their social community through simple things like asking them to find a study time with somebody or whatnot. But playing that role, I think, is really crucial.

Greg: We've got all kinds of screens in front of us now, and we've got all sorts of applications and strategies for how we can use technology to learn. Let's talk about smartphones and AI. Are these tools enemies of deep learning, or can they become allies? Lori.

Lori: I have strong opinions about this and I have really different answers depending on which technology we're talking about. I see phones as like absolute enemy. I don't see them as learning tools. I don't see them as positives in the classroom. I see them as a box that is literally engineered to demand attention, which is your most limited resource. They're like cigarettes for the mind is what my husband and I like to say. I think 20 years in the future, we're going to look back at what we've done with our students today and our children and be like, what were we thinking? Just chucking them into the hands of adolescents and seeing what happens. So yeah, if I could be the dictator for a minute, just say nobody gets a smartphone until they're at least 16 and maybe older.

AI is more complicated, I think. And I think of AI primarily as an efficiency tool. It's meant to multiply your impact and your productivity and work.

This is great once you have the skills and sort of the discernment of what the work is, but often with high school and I think with college students as well, this is used as a shortcut to the development of those skills. There are places where I've decided there are skills I don't value anymore. So if you want to use AI to generate your citations, great. I care that you understand why we cite and I care that you know that you have to cite.

Do I care that you know where the comma or the period goes or what needs to be italicized? Absolutely not. I don't care. Let AI do that for you. That's a tedious task. We also use it senior year to find and winnow resources. So, Elicit is a really great AI research tool that will summarize abstracts so that you can go through them more quickly and it will show you how articles are related so you can see if you're sort of going down the right path to answer your research question. That's great. The embedded AI in Google, which I'm trying to teach my students to do, it'll link you to peer-reviewed research.

This is a really efficient way of finding research that's relevant to your topic. Where I take a really strong stance is that AI should not be doing your thinking for you and that writing is thinking. And so you should never be using it to generate writing. You should never be using it to generate thinking because my learning outcomes are that I want you to learn those skills. And so you have to be really clear of what are your learning outcomes for this class? And is AI short-cutting their ability to do those themselves in the name of efficiency? Or is AI a tool that is allowing them to get better at those learning outcomes?

Jen: I have so many opinions on this and I guess I'll start with I love technology. I geek out on it. I love exploring new tools. I actually taught a class in the spring, an honors class that was focused on technology and humanity, the relationship between technology and humanity. It ended up being a lot of doom and gloom.

And we talked about that. It was dark when we think about the biases and the algorithmic control over our lives and the addiction and all of the time we spend on our phones and the superficial connections and all of these things and the misinformation and media. mean, there are so many risks with technology. If you've read anything on AI, you know that it comes with a boatload of risk.

That being said, when I was thinking about this question, the first thing that came to mind to me is digital literacy. There is so much that we are missing around teaching students critical digital literacy skills and even developing them within ourselves as instructors and educators. know, cell phones aren't a big issue really at the college level from what I've seen. Students aren't often on their phones. Yeah, they're sitting out and yeah, they might, you know respond to a message, but from my experience, they have pretty good self-control. AI has flipped education upside down in higher ed. My last two years, I think, have been really thinking about and helping faculty navigate what does learning look like now that AI can do it for you and for the students, right? AI can produce so much of what we ask students to produce to demonstrate their learning.

So I think it comes down to teaching them these digital literacy skills, particularly because we know from the data that employers are looking for people who have AI literacy, who are able to use AI for efficiency, for deeper thinking, for better outputs, higher quality, more creativity. And so I think it goes back to how we, kind of hit the nail on the head with course outcomes. And we talk about that a lot with faculty. What are your skills, essential skills that you're asking students to build and making sure that AI is not replacing them but enhancing them?

Lori: Yeah, and I think so much of this for me comes down to this idea of a capitalist economy. We have this emphasis on efficiency all the time, but learning is not always efficient. And it shouldn't be, and that's okay. And so we're really sort of fighting against this economic model that really drives everything. So we're talking about getting them ready for employers. Well, what about just getting them ready to think carefully and deeply? And that might not be efficient and maybe that's okay. And so I feel like in some ways in education, we are sort of pushing back against some of these societal forces that are often unquestioned of like, yes, of course it's better to be efficient at everything. And well, maybe not actually. Maybe it's not always better.

Michael: Okay, here we go. Speed interviewing. So each of you, I want a quick one sentence response to some questions. Here we go. We're going to start with Lori and then we'll go to Jen after that. So Lori, speed around. First question, what's one educational trend that you wish would disappear?

Lori: fear of giving students consequences.

Michael: Good one. Jen, what about you? What's one educational trend you wish would disappear?

Jen: Discussion boards. think they tend to be a default mechanism for students engaging outside of class, but I don't think there's a whole lot of engagement that actually happens. I had them as a learner in multiple graduate programs and I hated them.

Michael: How come?

Jen: There was not engagement and connection and building off of each other's idea like a Socratic seminar. It was really just, okay, find the one that I can respond to and get a response out and check it off the box. Right, check the box out.

Michael: All right, next one sentence answer. Lori, what's one innovation or approach that you think deserves more attention?

Lori: I mean, I gotta go with project-based learning, but project-based learning with a capital P where the project drives the curriculum.

Michael: Jen, what about you? What's one innovation or approach you think deserves more attention?

Jen: Ungrading. And for those who may not know what that is, that is removing grades from the learning process.

Michael:
Again, why?

Jen: Because. But we need a whole hour podcast for this one. Grades are problematic. Grades sort students. They send messages to students about their ability rather than their effort. They can often be subjective. Most often than not, they are subjective. They measure in many situations in more traditional learning environments. They don't measure growth. They measure arrival at a specific endpoint. For some students might mean they put in zero effort. And for some students, they spent hours and they grew a lot and then they still didn't get to where they

needed to be. And so a lot of that is missed, it's overlooked. And so ungrading brings in student reflection, it brings in feedback and really has a stronger emphasis on feedback in the learning process and it reduces anxiety for students.

Michael: Well, and one thing we talk about in sociology, I've never had a job where in the interview somebody asked me what my GPA is.

Okay, our next question, again, one sentence response. Lori, complete this sentence. Traditional education gets this wrong.

Lori: Strict boundaries between disciplines and subjects.

Michael: Jen, what about you? Traditional education gets this wrong.

Jen: How it measures learning.

Michael: Okay, and then the flip side of that, traditional education gets this right.

Lori: Students need to know things and we need to know if they know things.

Michael: Jen, traditional education gets this right.

Collaboration, I see collaboration within a school, like teams, co-curricular planning time. At a district level, I see opportunities where collaboration is built in locally, state levels.

Michael: Beautiful. In another podcast of Beyond the Bell, we do a whole show on professional development, but I'm curious, how do both of you prepare students for jobs that don't exist yet while still building foundational knowledge and skills? mean, a lot of the jobs that are of the future, we don't even know what they are. So what do we do to prepare in the classroom?

Lori: The hot take is that I don't really think about preparing them for jobs. I see my job as preparing them to be good humans more than preparing them for a role in the economy. And that if I prepare them to be good humans, they'll be able to figure that out. And so if I can build them with skills that they need to learn things themselves, if I can build them with resilience and confidence in their own ability to do hard things, then they will be able to tackle those challenges themselves.

But I think that the myopic focus on jobs and economic success is a problem in education.

Michael: Greg, you have a counter argument?

Greg: Well, not a counter argument. I think your colleagues actually wouldn't disagree with you. We've spoken with folks, both Animas and The Fort, that are involved with career development and career counseling. And they essentially say the same thing, that preparing people for jobs means helping them develop their soft skills and their self-awareness, and that that's ultimately what employers are looking for. I don't think you'd get any argument.

Jen: Yeah, I don't think it's much different at the college level either. I mean, we hear a lot, right, this is the common saying is I'm preparing my students for the real world. And we dig into that. What does that mean? Right. And how important is it as a first year student to be preparing them for the real world versus preparing them to be successful in their four years of college? Because as an incoming first year student, they really need support with that. And so there's some tension there between those things. But I jotted down really similar thoughts to

this question that there are transferable skills that are somewhat universal, like leading meetings, that in many different professions students are going to need to show leadership skills, developing strategy, thinking critically in new situations. So how can we develop those skills? And then your conversation got me thinking about there was an article that came out last year with a pretty high statistic around how many Gen Z students have gotten fired in the last single digit years, within the last few years, I recall, because they showed a lack of professionalism. I see that at the college level. Students may be showing up inappropriately dressed or not using body language that shows that they are paying attention and engaged. Just some of these really simple things that demonstrate professionalism in their careers post-college. So I think helping students develop those, because where else do they get it?

Lori: Yeah, I agree. And knowing when to adapt. There are times when it's fine to be very casual. And we have presentations of learning and transitional presentations of learning where we require students to come dressed in business dress. And we require very specific sort of professional communication from them in those situations. And so trying to let them know, hey, for this kind of context this is what is expected of you and let's make it very explicit in terms of body language and speech patterns and dress and all of that kind of stuff. I completely agree, Jen.

Michael: Well, I'm going to ask a question that's pretty broad, I think you two would be the best to answer this. So both of you are somewhat leaders in your field as far as teaching the teachers. So what advice would you give to new teachers about making education meaningful?

Jen: The advice I would give to new teachers would be to spend as much time as possible thinking and rethinking about and revising your course outcomes. Because those are the core of your course. And those are an opportunity, in my opinion, to build in culturally responsiveness in the language that you use in those course outcomes. Those are a way to build in language that helps students maybe see relevance. So I think having your course outcomes be something that you are invested in and that you use as your North Star throughout the whole course that you align everything with. I can't emphasize enough to spend a lot of time on getting those right and making sure that they are exactly what you want them to be.

Michael: Lori, what about you? What advice would you give to new teachers about making education meaningful?

Lori: Part of my answer is very similar to what Jen said. And one of the things I always tell my student teachers is you need to teach and plan in such a way that any time a student asks, why are we doing this or why are we learning this, you have an answer. Because if you haven't thought it through, then they certainly aren't going to be convinced by your teaching. And then the second, teach with passion. You have to be interested in what you're teaching. And so you need to get good at getting interested in lots of things. And then relationships are huge. At the secondary level, adolescents want to be adults. They want to be seen as adults. so positive adult relationships are so meaningful at this point in their development that the more you can build that, the more learning can happen in your classroom.

Greg: Help me complete this thought. The art of teaching and learning is really about. Jen.

Jen: Relationships, care, and curiosity.

Lori: Instilling the curiosity and skills so that students can build a more hopeful future.

Greg: You know, I have to say both of you are such experts and thoughtful, knowledgeable folks. think you're really both assets to your institutions and to our community.

Lori: Thanks, Greg.

Jen: Thank you.

Michael: Lori and Jen, thank you so much for your time. been a pleasure.

Lori: Thank you. This was fun.

Jen: Thank you.

Michael: Greg, the American College Health Association recently surveyed over 33,000 college students collecting all sorts of data about students' health-related habits and behaviors, and the numbers are pretty sobering. They found that one in five students is dealing with serious psychological distress, and nearly eight out of 10 students said they've experienced moderate to high stress levels just in the past month alone.

As well, the CDC just released data showing that even though we've seen some improvements in teen mental health, 40 % of high school students still report feeling persistently sad or hopeless.

Greg: Michael, I think we've gotten really good at focusing on academic rigor and college prep, which is important. But are we actually preparing our students for the emotional ups and downs they're going to face, not just in school, but in life? Well, that's exactly what we're going to dive into next week when we sit down with Colin Smith and Dr. Mark Fallon-Syr.

Colin spent 40 years working with adolescents, first as a teacher and a counselor at Colorado Timberline Academy, then as a college counselor at Fort Lewis College. And Dr. Fallon-Syr brings over 37 years of experience as a child and adolescent psychiatrist right here in our community.

Michael: So join us next time for Know Thyself, how schools foster well-being and emotional growth, which just might be one of the most important conversations we have.