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.

Today I'm with Asia, a 2025 Animas High School graduate. Welcome to Beyond the Bell.

Asia: Thank you for having me. very excited to be here.

Greg: I'm so glad. So tell me a little bit about yourself. You graduated just this past spring. And what's on your agenda this summer?

Asia: Graduating was amazing. I loved the whole experience and just everything around it was great. Right now I'm just working and getting prepared for college. There's a lot of packing going on, a lot of spending money, which is not fun, but you know what? We need it. And I'll be going to CMU in the fall for pre-nursing. So I'm very excited for that.

Greg: And CMU, just for those that don't know, that's Colorado Mesa University. You came to Animas as a sophomore, correct? I did. You transferred from DHS? Yeah, what went into that decision?

Asia: Yes, yes it is.

Yes. There was a lot, I would say. I started at DHS originally because a lot more of my friends were going there. My brother went there and I was like, okay, I feel like I can do this and I don't want to have to make a bunch of new friends at a different school. I just want to follow through. So I followed through and then I began struggling pretty much immediately. My grades started slipping. Friendships kind of went up and down and I was just struggling a lot and ended up failing some of my classes and it really just dropped a bunch of confidence in my GPA and just a lot happened. And so then after freshman year, I decided that I needed to make a change for myself and for my future. So then I switched over to Animas.

Greg: What do you think it was for you personally that your freshman year, I'm assuming you were a good student and never had issues at school before. What was going on during your freshman year?

Asia: So I just got my first job that year and I was really trying to do really good at that. And that's something hard to do when you're just starting out in high school and then you get a job. So that was really stressful. And I was working about 25 hours a week on top of schoolwork. And I started playing sports in that time a little bit too, basketball. And so trying to balance all of that was a lot. And then I was struggling with a little bit of home stuff too that was kind of impacting that along with loss of friendships and my grades slipping, kind of the last straw for

me was just seeing my GPA at the end of the year. It was a 1.7 and just seeing how low it was considering in the beginning of the year, it was like a 3.0. It really just made me realize that if I want to continue to have the future I've always wanted, and if I want to continue to do better like I've always planned, then I need to make a change.

Greg: Good for you to recognize that. Did you get a lot of support and help from family and friends?

Asia: I did. My parents were very supportive because they knew how bad I was struggling at DHS and they were really proud of me for being able to see that myself. They didn't push me to make the choice. They saw that I knew I was struggling and I decided to make the choice for myself and so they were very proud.

Greg: So what was it like showing up at Animas and starting a new school with new people?

Asia: I It was intimidating at first just because it's a whole new different learning style I've never done before. And it was very exciting because I was finally able to be creative and to do all of these different projects and to be hands-on, which I really liked because I learned that it was better for me to understand things and to learn things better by doing it hands-on. So that part I really liked, but it was really hard in the beginning because I was so used to just taking tests.

Greg: What were some of the projects that stand out when you look back on your years there?

Asia: I'd say the hardest one, but I feel like the most rewarding was the senior thesis. Everyone has so many opinions on this because it's hard. It challenges every ounce that you have inside of you, but it is so worth it. We start out with a college essay that have to write. It's a thesis paper, so you get to pick a topic and then you have to write a whole thesis, which is at least 10 pages, I think it was, but most people end up with all the research you do. It's usually around 14 to 20 pages and

We get to pick our research topic and you get to do a bunch of research on it. I mean, I had probably 20 different articles trying to go over what I was trying to cover and then attached to that you also have a senior project and that is in some way tied to your research project.

Greg: What was your topic?

Asia: The effects of trauma both somatically and cognitively and therapeutic methods to help people recover from that trauma. Yeah, it was a very deep time.

Greg: Interesting. What drove you towards that exploration?

Asia: People deal with a lot in their lives. I myself have dealt with a lot in my life and everyone processes it differently and they understand it differently. And what I really wanted to know researching this and why I picked this is I wanted to know why people handle trauma differently. Why some people are better at coping with the things that they've been through while other people really struggle. Even if they've been through the same thing, so many people have different coping mechanisms and some people can handle it in certain ways that are more healthy and some people go to the negative ways. And so I just really wanted to understand why everyone was so different in that sense.

Greg: What did you find out? What were some of the major ah-has that came out of that project?

Asia: The major ahas would be that cognitively, obviously everyone's different, everyone's brain works different, but everyone has this, I'd say, this level of trauma threshold that they can handle. And once you have a trauma that breaks through that threshold, your whole entire hippocampus and your amygdala and all the parts of your brain that control who you are pretty much can start to go haywire.

And sometimes your brain can help like pick those pieces and kind of put them back together in a way that helps an individual go to understand their trauma or to pick a different path. But sometimes they go haywire and an individual struggles to really cope with that. So it just depends on the person and it depends on what they've been through and what type of trauma they went through. And I did find therapeutic methods that really help individuals reconstruct their sense of self, whether that be their self-worth, their self-confidence or who they are, is cognitive behavioral therapy or trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, which are basically two different therapies, but they both follow cognitive behavioral therapy, which is understanding your trauma on a deeper level, basically trying to find the breadcrumbs that lead back to the event that happened or what happened, decoding everything that was affected up and to the point where you are in your life, and then rewiring the brain to think about it in a different way.

Greg: What was the community project piece that tied back to that?

Asia: My community piece was I went to, what is it? It's the student. It's a resource in town. It's Oak Tree Resource Center for youth, homeless youth and adolescents. And I taught my whole lesson and what I learned through my whole research to them because there's a bunch of mental health professionals there. There were therapists there. There were the members and leaders of that Oak Tree Resource Center there and they were very interested in my research and everything I did because I ultimately did it to help other people understand what they went through and that it just because they went through something traumatic and serious, it doesn't define who they are. It doesn't mean they can't keep growing or living their life, that it doesn't affect them and it doesn't define them.

Greg: Beautiful. So with the project that you described for us, the project-based learning approach, you likely had developed some skills or some techniques. I'm curious what things you think you got out of project-based learning that are going to serve you best in your college career coming up.

Asia: I think one of the most important things I got out of project-based learning was being confident in myself and my ability to do things. With project-based learning, you take whatever project you're given at your own pace and you frame it in your own way that works best for you. And something that has really helped me throughout this whole process that I continue to use and to teach other people around me when they're struggling is just the ability to believe in your own skills and your own process and that you can do it, but just that part of having the confidence to do it. Another part is I was able to know myself more, know the things that I needed in school and know ways that I could talk to my teachers or professors about it, to where I'm able to have a more adult conversation to say, hey, I'm struggling with this. I think this would be the best way to support me in this case. Are you able to do that or can we work something out in that way?

I'm not scared to talk to adults about the things that I need. I'm not nervous about if they're going to tell me no, because I know that in order to have that teacher-student relationship, you need to be able to take charge and to ask those questions and to advocate for yourself and your needs.

Greg: I'm going to switch tracks just a little bit, but it'll all tie back. You read a lot about kids experiencing bullying and the trauma that's associated with that, both in person and as well as online. What's been your experience with bullying, both throughout your younger years and even at Animas?

Asia: I wasn't really bullied at Animas. I really was bullied one time in my life and it was when I just moved to Durango. And I was about six years old and this one girl just didn't like me at all. And she would just make fun of, I don't even know, like my hair or what I was doing at recess or who I was playing with and all of these things. And I just remember how bad it made me feel. And I was so young and I was like, why is she being mean? I didn't even do anything to her.

And we would go to counselors and I would talk to my teachers about it I would tell them and then we'd sit down in a room, me and her with a counselor and try to talk about it. And she would just be like, I just don't like her or like she would just be mean for no reason. And it was really from that point on that I realized that it doesn't, it doesn't take much to be nice. And I knew that I wasn't going to let other people be bullied in the way I was bullied or feel the way I felt. pretty much from that moment on, I would make friends with all the shy kids or the kids that seemed like they would stick to the walls because they were scared of other people or kids that have been bullied in the past. And I kind of helped that person come out of their shell and gain confidence or just be their friend and be someone they can talk to because I didn't want anyone to ever feel the way that I felt because it feels really weird and especially for a young child. And I just didn't want anyone to feel like that. So I would always go and try to help other people feel better.

Greg: You learned empathy at a young age. And you think that's contributed to your desire to go into nursing?

Asia: I did. Yes, I've always been a very empathetic person ever since I was younger. A lot of people, even if you ask my teachers now or the people that know me, they'd say I'm very emotionally mature for my age. Even though I still don't fully understand how, because I'm like, how does not everyone work like this? I don't understand it. But I've always been very emotionally mature and I've always loved to tackle the big emotional things because understanding those and being able to break them down meant that I'd be able to help other people break down their problems and help them. And so really nursing is just another way of helping people.

Greg: So for folks that can't see you, you're woman of color and you moved to a pretty homogenous community. Besides it being weird that a lot of folks didn't look like you, what was it like?

Asia: It's hard to explain because people don't really understand. It never felt like I didn't fully belong here or that I wasn't welcome in this town, but you could just tell that people were never really around people of color before. Like we were really the first family of color. And even though my mom is white, everyone else is not. And so we kind of rolled into town and took everyone by surprise and everyone was very welcoming and very kind and then throughout my whole life growing up here everyone was welcoming and kind but like it still felt like you were the odd one out like they were still looking at you even if you were in a room with a bunch of other people you never fully felt comfortable in your own skin and then when you start growing up and you are looking a certain way or have certain features and then you are to go back to your family in North Carolina per se when I went back they're like you're not like us anymore In a way, like you're more, they use the term whitewashed, as in like I'm not black anymore just because I grew up around people that were not of color. And so that kind of was a lot to take in

because it goes with the, I'm not black enough for black people and I'm not white enough for white people. And so that's something that I really struggled with.

Greg: It's hard for most of us who didn't deal with what you did growing up here to fully understand your experience. I appreciate you sharing that with us and I'm glad that for the most part you look back on your childhood here positively. Let's look in a different direction now. When you think about the future, when you look at the way the world is and when you look at what lies ahead for you, how would you say your level of hope is for the future, your future?

Asia: I'd say there's a level of hope for the people that my peers that I was around that are really strong in the civic engagement world and they love everything about it and they're constantly striving to do it. And I have a lot of peers that are very supportive of it and are very interested in doing that. So that gives me hope. But there is this other part of me that is there's so many people that are scared or so many people that don't know just how strong their voice and their opinion is.

And for that person to not stand up and to not own the power that they have can really be costing for people. Because if only a third of the people are standing up and saying, hey, something needs to change, but one third of them is saying no, and one third of them is like, I don't know what to do, I'm scared, then how are we ever going to move forward when we can't get that middle ground to stand up?

Greg: I can see why folks have said that you're emotionally mature for your age. You've got a great outlook. Really appreciate you taking the time, Asia. This was great. I wish you the best of luck up at CMU and your career in nursing. Have fun.

Asia:
Thank you.

Michael: In today's episode of Beyond the Bell, Know Thyself, we're exploring how schools can better support student well-being and emotional growth. Today we're joined by Dr. Mark Fallon-Cyr a child and adolescent psychiatrist who's worked extensively with local schools, as well as Colin Smith, who spent four decades working with adolescents as both a teacher and college counselor. Mark, Colin, welcome both of you to the show.

Colin: Thank you.

Mark: Thanks for having us.

Michael: All right, we're gonna start with a big picture. So from your perspectives, how are kids doing today compared to previous generations? Like, what are you seeing in terms of their mental health and emotional well-being?

Mark: Well, I think over the last few decades, there's been a progressive increase in terms of problems with depression, anxiety, more suicide problems. And I think in terms of COVID and technology, we also have the addition of existential threats.

Michael: You mean by existential threats like what?

Mark: Well, particularly when you get into the high school years, there's many more kids who are aware of climate change. And I will hear from kids at times, what's the point? We're not even going to be here.

Greg: Despair

Mark: Very much so.

Michael: Yeah, that's a big one. I remember feeling that as well. How much of that is normal for youth to feel? I I felt that and probably I read more environmental things than most students, but is that unique to this time or are the times just way more demanding right now? How do you think of that for either of you?

Colin: When I was in high school, which was in the 60s, things were messed up. There's no question. We didn't trust adults. We thought they lied. The world was in need of revolution. But we felt that we made a difference. And we felt our voice was heard. We had talked back. And I don't think they feel quite as hopeful this generation as the one 50 years ago. And I know that Mark's right in terms of depression. Depression, it robs the person of the most protective factors against depression because it isolates and it also subjects you to all kinds of info that aren't positive.

Mark: And Michael, I think you're bringing up a good point that some of those things are normal adolescent experiences. And what's different is the degree of it and the numbers. And that's been studied kind of on multiple different levels, how widespread and the severity of it is much more powerful. But I will add, in terms of not just to be pessimistic there, there are also positive changes in terms of there's much more acceptance of the importance of mental health. There's much less stigma. There's more openness to getting support.

Colin: Yeah, that was always one of my goals at the counseling center was I wanted to de-stigmatize counseling. And because I specialized in group therapy, I could get a lot of kids into the counseling center that didn't feel like they were being diagnosed or targeted for mental illness. And that matters.

Greg: Colin, from your classroom and counseling experience back in the day, how did some of these types of mental health challenges manifest in day-to-day school life.

Colin: It changed over the years. The biggest one, when I first came to the college, we did not have a medical model and we did not diagnose. We considered most of the problems existential, like relationship problems, academic problems, family problems, spiritual problems. And over the years, and Mark knows this, we dealt with more and more serious mental illness, partially because we could treat it. Kids that couldn't go to college before with especially psychiatric support, could now go, but they needed counseling support. And so what we did in the counseling center changed over the years.

Michael: What role has the pandemic played in shaping the current mental health landscape for students, or how do you think the pandemic played into that?

Mark: Well, I think it pretty much intensified the issues and in terms of it created more of a sense of isolation. And one of the protective factors in mental health is belonging. That's one of the great things schools can do. So it eliminated some of that. People felt much more disconnected, much more isolated. And there was an intensification of some of the problems with technology. More time on technology, more comparison, what I'm doing, what they're doing, more cyber-bullying, more deep dives into destructive aspects of technology.

Michael: So it sounds like it's really this combination of COVID and technology leading to isolation. Colin, is that how you see it as well?

Colin: Absolutely. You know, even when I was there before all this stuff, the factor that led to retention was connection and belonging. And I think after COVID, there was even less connection, less belonging, and less of a community and more into the virtual world, which is not community.

Mark: One of the things to be aware of with COVID, it did not affect everybody equally.

Michael: How did it affect people differently?

Mark: Well, some people with more resources where parents could actually spend a lot more time with their kids and would actually engage in a lot more projects and had many resources at their disposal to expand the kids' education. And other people, it added stress where parents going off to work. They don't have the resources. They're trying to figure out. They don't have as good a technology. Their systems are breaking down. So there is a division. So it wasn't equal across the board.

Colin: I think teachers felt that way too.

Greg: And you think a lot of that was socioeconomic?

Mark: I think a big part of it is socioeconomic, yes.

Michael: Colin, what were you gonna add?

Colin: Well, I have a friend that teaches at the high school and she said that it impacted her classroom dynamics hugely after they were remote. And she's had a hard time bringing that classroom spirit back into her classroom.

Michael: How do you bring it back? If isolation is one of the big problems with technology and an offspring of the pandemic as well, how do you teach belonging or how do you encourage belonging or how do we bring that back for our students?

Colin: You practice it, you talk, you process. You know, it's like the first step in any recovery program is, you know, you have to break through the denial and really explore the problem.

Greg: I think what you're suggesting is that the school as a whole need to do a better job or at least focus on building that sense of community and connection.

Colin: Absolutely.

Mark: Needs to be central.

Greg: How can schools most effectively identify students who might be struggling with mental health issues?

Mark: Well, maybe back up there has to be an awareness and training about that. School teachers, staff have to be educated in that regard. And it's not to be therapists, and it's not to be treatment providers, but schools are often the front line for where mental health problems present. And just even on some level, you could simplify it to, there's kids who have externalizing factors. So maybe they have outbursts o they're getting angry or they act out and then there's kids who have more internalizing factors and they're more withdrawn. They avoid

things. disappear. Emphasizing it, being aware of it, training, have it be an ongoing process. And as Colin said, manifesting it in the staff.

Greg: And you've done some of that work with school districts and working with teachers, what's their willingness to learn and engage and practice some of things that you're teaching.

Mark: I think in terms of overall, they're in the profession, most of them are in the profession for good reasons, and this comes under the umbrella of what they would like to do in terms of helping kids and families. So a lot of time, there's not teacher education ahead of time. So many times they feel under-resourced or they don't know what's going on. They don't know how to identify it. They haven't been prepared enough.

Colin: One time the president was talking about the 24-hour learning community at Fort Lewis. And so I invited him to go over to one of the dormitories with me. And I got all the kids together and I said, how important are your classes to your life right now? And he was horrified by what he heard because they essentially said, all but for a few, they were irrelevant and that most of the learning was taking place outside the class. He spent the next two hours trying to understand that and he listened to them for two hours and he was still talking about it at commencement. So that's the kind of thing we need.

Greg: Colin, what have you seen work best when schools try to support students' emotional needs? What just have fallen short?

Colin: Well, when we started the counseling center, we had about four of us. When I left, there were 17. We see about a quarter of the student population at the college. I think they're doing a lot to address the problem. And we had psychiatric help. So we were doing a lot. And of course, the most professors knew about us because we were pretty active on campus.

Michael: Speaking of psychiatric help, how should schools balance their educational mission with mental health support? And I guess a follow-up question, where do you draw the line between what schools can and should handle versus what requires outside professional help? How do you think about that?

Mark: Well, to start with, I would jump in at the very beginning and say there's no separation between student mental health and education. Kids who have unstable mental health are not going to learn well. And the more stable, the more sophisticated someone's mental health is, the better they're going to learn. The more effective learners, the more supportive learners, the more engaged learners they're going to be.

So I want to just kind of challenge that idea and there's no separation in terms of from the overall concept and cultivating this. And then in terms of school support of it, I would look at sort of a kind of a three-tier model where the school has to embrace social-emotional learning and mental health as a whole and model that and it's embodied all the way through in classes, throughout academics.

The second one would be some of what Colin was talking about, maybe grief groups a little more intensified. And a third would be the individual counseling. The separation would be if it's severe, if it's broad, if it's crisis, if it needs a diagnosis, if there's danger, it needs to go outside the school. And the school's role would be in helping to identify that, initially, identifying the problems and helping to direct outside support.

Michael: Colin, do you see it the same way?

Colin: Yeah, I think it needs to be integrated. I mainly worked with resident staff more than professors. And I considered them the front line. I considered them the radar. That if there was a problem, especially in the dorms, they were going to be the ones to spot it. And I wanted them to think about me and the counseling center if they saw somebody going down in the river. Because a lot of kids get swept away in the river.

Greg: Mark, going back to working with the mental health professionals in the area, what would an effective collaboration between schools and the professionals look like in practice? How are we doing screening and referral? Are we standardizing things? How do we put that to work in practice, I guess is what I'm asking.

Mark: Well, in practice, there could be a couple things in terms of widespread for the school. There could be annual or biannual screenings of kids to check their mental well-being. And there could be systems in place to identify sort of those externalizing problems where kids are acting out, nor those internalizing problems where there's some kind of change, their withdrawal, not wanting to come to school, their grades drop, something happens.

So there can be that awareness. And then with the agencies, often it would be like the counselors, and there would be a setup with a connection with mental health services in the community. Ideally, there'd be an ongoing back and forth process that would involve the school, the outside services, and the family.

Michael: Colin, I'm going to switch over to you. I want to talk about self-awareness for the students, so individual self-awareness. How can educators help students develop a better understanding of themselves, their emotions, their strengths, their areas for growth? What can educators do to help students?

Colin: Well, I think education needs to be revisioned in this respect because it's based on a model where for thousands of years we sat around a fire and we told stories and we knew how to listen and we listened to young people, we listened to elders and we've lost that. We've lost that most human of activities. And I don't know quite how to bring it into the classroom in most schools. I was lucky, I taught at a private alternative high school and I'm a fan of alternative education by the way. Because I had small classes. I had eight students to a class and they talked and I had to listen. And if I thought I could just lecture for an hour and a half, I would get told off. They would let me know. So I definitely think we need smaller groups because huge, huge classrooms are pretty impersonal and they don't get a chance to individually express. And we need a voice. Everybody needs a voice.

Greg: So Colin, the question really was about developing self-awareness. I think what you're implying is that by listening to others and other sharing stories, we tend to get a better understanding of ourselves and others and that's being able to step outside.

Colin: Self-awareness is about a narrative. We need to have a story of ourselves, who we are, what our experience is all about. Rarely do kids get a chance to tell their stories. One definition of therapy is a better narrative because some of them have horrible narratives when they come into counseling. We've entered territory for which we don't really have language right now and we have got to work at getting that language.

Michael: Mark, I'll ask the same question for you. How do you think educators can help? And Colin suggested having smaller classes, which I totally agree. I think that makes a lot of sense. And he also mentioned providing opportunities for students to tell their own stories. What do you think educators can do to help students find self-awareness, figure out who they are, what their strengths are, what their weaknesses are, et cetera?

Mark: So I really support Colin's idea about the narrative and stories and bringing that in. Sometimes that can be done in very simple ways. For example, a student is learning something in math and the teacher could just offer, hey, tell me what happened as you work through that process. What worked well for you? Where did you run into obstacles? Hey, when you ran into an obstacle, how did you address that? And that can be in actually in every single class. In history, you can teach what your perspective is on it. You can ask, how do you see this? How do you think this relates to your life? So, very simple questions. Ideally, I would love to see reflection practices incorporated across the board. And they can be very short.

Michael: That's what I was going to ask next, because you're kind of getting into emotional intelligence. so Mark, from a clinical perspective, what are the key components of emotional intelligence that schools should be fostering?

Mark: Probably 20 years ago in Durango, I was trying to implement this idea and I went around to all the different schools and most teachers and administrators were not familiar with social-emotional learning and emotional intelligence. And I think, I hope and I believe that that is different now. So this is part of the progression. Emotional intelligence really doesn't, that concept doesn't even go very far back in time and is evolving.

But there is like an organization called CASEL, Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning. And so they try to break it down into structure and they look at self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, social communication. I believe their final one, if I'm remembering correctly, is something like healthy decision-making. And there's various models. And so there are things out there. It has a long way to go from my perspective, but it's going and I find that very exciting and it's finding its way more and more into schools.

Colin: Yeah, my main tool was I taught students how to use journals. And I didn't want them to be journals for grades. I didn't want them to be journals that I would evaluate. I wanted them to see the tool that a journal was for a mirror. And then how to use process groups, how to process. Mark used the word reflection because we don't just learn through experience. We have got to reflect on that experience.

Process in a journal, process in a group allows for reflection on experience and that's working on that story too. It's crafting the narrative. So that I think all teachers can do.

Greg: And we talked a little bit about some of the challenges the kids are facing these days, the stress and existential crisis. I'm asking you Colin, how do we help students develop resilience and coping skills that will serve them beyond their school years? And I'm talking about how do schools help develop resilience and coping skills?

Colin: You know, I can only speak for myself on this one really. I believe we're all in the soup. I believe we're all life in session at all times. And I was more than willing to disclose and share that existential problems are universal. They're the givens of life. We all deal with them. Different generations have different existential climates they have to deal with. The one I grew up with is definitely not the one they're dealing with today.

I let them teach me and I'm just swimming in the water with them. I use that term in the water. Mark is really good about analyzing what gets kids in the water. My job was more to jump in and learn how to swim with them and hopefully they learn how to swim with these things.

Michael: I'd like to hear Mark's take on that anyway. Mark, do you think we should help students develop resilience and coping skills?

Mark: Well, I think what Colin said about us being in the soup together is a really good point. And teachers can basically model it. Teachers can say, Whoa, I was really frustrated. So I took a walk to chill out and I had a really hard time with this and this is how I managed it. When we're trying to accomplish anything, we have to name it as that's our vision. So our vision is to teach resilience and coping skills and to have that just be really, really clear. So a lot of kids don't have a good understanding of what resilience is. And there are many opportunities. So you're doing a science experiment and it failed. I think I'm reminded of Thomas Edison, you know, I didn't fail. I'm paraphrasing here. I didn't fail. I just learned 999 ways not to do it. So that it's sort of those little things that they're not failures, they're not weaknesses, they're growth opportunities, they're opportunities to expand ourselves.

Greg: One of our episodes, we'll be dealing with how schools and families and the community can collaborate to support the development of thriving kids. If we in the school system are focusing on modeling appropriate behavior and self-reflection and helping to demonstrate resilience and coping skills. How do schools best engage the families to provide that type of consistent messaging and support and advocacy?

Colin: Well, the first thing comes to my mind is the kids might have to teach the parents because we're going to be starting bottom up on this thing. You know, just like with resilience, one of my main jobs was to go from post-traumatic to post-traumatic growth to help them understand how adversity can be used to advantage, how a crisis can be an opportunity.

I would love to see more empowered kids take what they're learning home and not be irrelevant to their life outside of the classroom.

Greg: Mark, how about you?

Mark: So I think that's a great way in terms of empowering kids to take what they're learning home and share it. But my belief is that it's really important for schools to offer parents programs on this. And it can't be like a one-off talk that at the beginning of the year that basically, we want you involved and you guys can do this. It needs to be more of a mindset and an ongoing practice, helping to get parents engaged in the conversation as much as possible. I think they do need to be brought in, specifically.

Michael: Colin, I'm going to change gears a little bit. is, you know, our world is changing very rapidly these days. What soft skills do you think are most crucial for young people to develop for future success?

Colin: Well, one that comes to mind first is they've got to develop media literacy. They've got to learn how to navigate all the misinformation, all of the biased information. They somehow need to learn how to research a lot better and use this magnificent resource that we do have. I love my phone because I can research everything with my fingertips. There's a lot of future shock going on, constant change. I sometimes feel like I don't have a lot to say about some of the problems because I didn't deal with them. So I just join in with them. And I'm very connected still to many kids. Students I had back in the 70s, I still recognize their voices on the phone. And they're parents now. In fact, they're grandparents. And soft skills, I'm not quite sure. Talking, I'm always big on talking. I think we need to learn to talk a lot better.

Michael: Well, from what you said too, it sounds like it's talking, but also listening. So more of the communication side.

Colin: If people spent as much time figuring out how they were going to listen as to what they were going to say, it would revolutionize the world.

Greg: I take that even one step further that as part of listening is learning how to ask questions.

Michael: Mark, what do you think? What are the soft skills that students need in today's world?

Mark: I'd like to just start with saying I don't like to call them soft skills because I think that somehow devalues them. I think what I would like us to do is to turn our attention and to make a list of these things and think how are we going to prioritize these. But for me, the foundation would be mindfulness, self-awareness, reflection, awareness of others, perspective taking, and we could keep going from there – the communication skills, problem solving, conflict resolution, teamwork, healthy competition, collaboration, decision making. There's actually a hundred I could put on the list.

Greg: I think the model of project-based learning could really help develop those skills. Mark, correct me I'm wrong, did both of your kids go to Animas High School?

Mark: Yes, they did. In fact, my son was in the founding class. was in the first class that graduated. So he started with the freshman year at Animas. And then my daughter was just a few years behind. So they both had a great experience at Animas. And I think it served them well. Jumping in on that, being able to present to a group, being able to explain what their process is on projects and being able to present that to adults and answer questions from adults, adults that they don't know when there's the exhibitions that serve them well. And not to mention the teamwork aspect of it.

Colin: I've watched both those kids grow up from the get-go and he practices, he walks his talk, he practices what he preaches. Those kids are amazing and they are both very successful. You know, the more enlightened use of that word success. I'm praising you, Mark.

Mark: Thanks, Colin.

Greg: This is for both of you. I'd like to hear each of your perspectives on this. If you were advising a school district tomorrow, what would be your top three recommendations for improving student well-being and emotional growth? Let's go to you, Mark.

Mark: It would be to make it a priority. And part of that would be recognizing that there's not a separation between academic learning and mental health well-being. So that would be the first. It would be coming together and creating maybe a group who are going to prioritize it to investigate it and decide on some kind of platform or program to implement it. I guess then it would be to actually carry that out and start doing it.

Greg: And have some form of evaluation too, to check on progress and make adjustments along the way.

Mark: Very much. So that's another one of those soft skills is how to assess, get feedback, and that we can make that very sophisticated. I'd like, yes, definitely like to see the school system model that.

Greg: Colin, how about you? What are your thoughts?

Colin: So begin with, I'm not a fan of the hierarchical system that rules education right now. So I think we've got some revisioning to do. And I think vision is very important. And that has to be a process. That's not something that's enforced. When the top enforces a vision down the line, they don't get the buy-in that they get when there's been engagement all along. I agree with Mark. There has to be a recognition that this is a need for that integration of the mental health along with traditional education. I sometimes make fun by saying we have outrageous technology that we spend billions on and yet our curriculum is still largely medieval. They devised it hundreds of years ago. In many ways it hadn't changed all that much. I taught at a proficiency school and I loved the fact that it could be more tutorial. I taught English when I first started and some kids I made sure they got into the best school they could get into, which meant they had to be able to write good essays and they had to get high SATs and others. They needed something else. I just wanted them to learn how to love reading and love writing. I didn't answer the question, but that's where I went.

Michael: Colin, I'll give you another question. Oftentimes I talk to teachers that seem like they're just surviving. They have so many demands on them, standardized tests, cell phones in the classroom, technology, whatever, that they're just surviving and feeling overwhelmed. So my question is that for educators listening who want to make a difference but feel overwhelmed by whatever it is, what's one small step they could take today to make a difference for their students?

Colin: I think schools exist for the teachers as much as the students. And I think if they're not growing and if they're not thriving, it's not gonna work. So I would love to see a lot more support for teachers together to share the problems that they have in the classroom, to be able to talk about these things, and to have an input, and to have more of an input, because it seems like I know a lot of teachers that are afraid to talk. And that is not good, because it's not just the right, it's the left. There's a lot of suppression going on.

Greg: Let’s transition from that perspective to the future. Looking ahead what gives you hope about the future of student mental health and well-being. Mark.

Mark: One of the things that I mentioned earlier is that 20 years ago, many people didn't know what social-emotional learning was or emotional intelligence, and now it's much more widespread. And also the reduction of stigma around just mental health issues and the recognition of the importance of it. I think that's progressively growing all the time. So that gives me a lot of hope. And there are more and more sophisticated programs looking at this issue, trying to figure out, hey, what's the best way to do this? And so that gives me hope. I guess one other thing I'd like to add in that is I do think it's by far from universal because we do live in a polarized world this day. But there is an undercurrent, particularly in younger generation, of inclusion. And I see that as much more widespread today than two decades ago.

Michael: Can you give an example of that or why do you think inclusion is bigger now?

Mark: There's been a tension directed towards it. And I also think that that's one of the upsides of media. So the media can incredibly enrich our lives on so many different levels. If we put it through that lens and not do the things that make it more destructive. But I think media does cross a number of boundaries or offers the potential to cross those. And so people can see people who are different and it's like, well, they're different, but they're not that different from me. So I think there's more groups, there's more speaking to it on all different levels. That makes me optimistic.

Michael: Colin, what gives you hope about the future?

Colin: I have a lot of things. One is because I've been teaching for as long as I have, I have watched kids transform. I have watched them turn into beautiful human beings. They've become, well, there's been some of my students on the board of trustees here, they've gone way high. That always gives me hope.

Also, I have to differentiate between the collective and the individual. I can sometimes get a little despairing about the collective, but I know there's always hope at the individual level. And because I was a counselor, I worked one-on-one, and I watched crises become opportunities all the time. And I think we're heading into a tipping point, crisis point, in terms of the culture. And that will mobilize. And I have faith in that mobilization. And especially, there's a lot of youth that are, they're jazzed about what they can do.

Michael: Last question for both of you. What's one key message you'd want our listeners to take away from today's conversation?

Colin: I'm going to stick with that narrative. I'm going to stick with we got to work on our stories, both at the individual and collective levels. And that also implies vision and it implies integrating that social and emotional and with the academic.

Michael: What be a successful story versus a non-successful story? I like the idea of you sticking with the story idea, but what makes it a success? Or what's a healthy story versus an unhealthy story?

Colin: Well, I think you have to ask each individual that. For instance, I do not think I'd have been successful as a public high school teacher. I think I was magnificently successful at an alternative school. I was meant to be a counselor more, I think, than a professor. And I just think it was more congruent, it fit me more, and that's what part of our job as educators is, to help a child find their fit, their identity, what they want to do with their lives and who they want to become. And to write that story with with a sense of engagement and they know. I'm gonna put it that way, they know.

Michael: Mark, what about you? What's one message you'd want our listeners to take away from today's conversation?

Mark: It would be the central importance of paying attention to this aspect of ourselves and seeing that it's instrumental in all of our development. And I'm going to throw in another one with it, is that that can begin to be accomplished just with a small step. A parent, a teacher, a friend could just do a conscious check-in with somebody. And they can model checking in themselves. So that, I guess the message there is that it's important and we can begin to do it with just even a very small step. And that small step can be very important.

Colin: I love the idea of a check-in. I think if a group has time to do a check-in each week, that can be transformative, because they can find where everybody's grinding, and everybody's grinding on something. And man, that is so empowering.

Michael: You guys mentioned that one thing that brings you optimism is this idea that counseling is okay, that therapy is okay, you know, that it's okay to be in therapy, it's okay to have depression or anxiety or these sorts of things. Is there a downside to that? And specifically, I think with some of my students, sometimes it seems like there's an identity build around it. Like on the one hand, it's great that they're like really open about, I have depression or I tried to harm myself in my youth or something like that. But I see some of them, that's their identity as well. Like I have depression, I'm a depressed person, that's who I am.

Mark: I sort of look at it as anytime we're changing and making steps, there's usually some kind of fallout. The reduction of stigma in terms of mental health, in terms of having it be more widespread, what you're describing I think is very prevalent and is part of the fallout of the step towards reducing stigma. Then it can be brought into the conversation. Being a depressed person is not who you really are.

Kids, adults, we all need healthy avenues for establishing our identity and making connections with other people. And doing that as a group cutting behavior or we're part of the depressed group or we're part of this, that's not the way to do it. So I see that as a fallout, but a fallout that can be addressed.

Michael: Colin, how do you see it?

Colin: I was walking with a friend the other day and he said that not one teenager comes into his office that hasn't googled the symptoms and has come up with a depression and knows almost about the, as much about the diagnosis as he does. And they've identified with their diagnosis. And there is a real problem when you start identifying with a diagnosis. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in many ways. And his job, as he told me, was to get them to dis-identify from that diagnosis and to realize it's existential. That this comes with the ages, comes with the time, and that it's a normal response, but it needs to evolve like Mark said. It's the start. It's definitely not the end. So yeah, because it's true. We first started by trying to de-stigmatize, and sometimes you overshoot, and then people become a little too worried, a little too obsessed with is this healthy or is this not, is this good or is this bad, you know, it becomes neurotic, a word you don't hear very often.

Mark: If I could add one more thing in here, because going back to one of earlier questions in terms of some of the main things to try to instill or help with, I think in education, this is just my bias, that the main point in education would also be the main point that I carry in my office in terms of mental health. My overarching objective is to help in the process of somebody being who they truly are.

So I put that, that's my goal in life. I'm trying to be who I truly am as fully as possible and do more of the things that move me in that direction and less of the things that move me away. When I talk to kids, a lot of times I'll say, I'll try, I'll instill that and they can actually get that idea. But the most common response is that they don't know who they are. But I will ask them, is being depressed who you truly are? And they drop into just minuscule amount of mindfulness and they answer no.

Greg: I want to go into an area that we didn't really even touch on. We see across the country an increase in the number of kids with learning challenges, learning disabilities. We see an increased incidence in diagnoses of ADHD and other conditions. With all that we're talking about with addressing mental health and getting teachers more engaged, and recognizing and referring, with getting families supportive, with it being tied to our missions and visions, does the same skill set require, regardless of where these kids are coming from and what conditions they're bringing?

Mark: I would say yes, it's just a matter of how that's implemented is different. Self-awareness for somebody who has some intellectual disability is going to be different, and how that's going to be taught and reinforced and cultivated is going to be different. But same idea.

Colin: And counseling frequently, when a big problem would come in, counselors would think they have to work harder, faster and stuff. And I would remind them, no, basic skills are more important than ever. Slow down and go back to your basic listening skills, empathic skills. Get

to know the person. You know, in many ways, counselors are magic mirrors. We both reflect what we're feeling and what we're seeing, but we also talk and we also give feedback. If they got a booger, we'll let them know they got one. If they're beautiful and don't know it, we'll let them know that.

Michael: Well, I think that might be a good place to end. As Colin, was thinking about your comment that sometimes we're a mirror for each other and we tell each other what they need to hear. So you both know it, but I want to let you know you're both beautiful.

Colin: Right back at you. Right back at you.

Greg: Thank you guys, that was an incredible conversation. We really appreciate you taking the time to share your expertise and your perspective.

You give us hope.

Colin: Thanks.

Mark: Thank you very much.

Michael: After that deep dive into student wellbeing with Colin and Mark, it's clear that the pandemic had a huge impact. And of course, as they both mentioned, we can't talk about kids' mental health today without talking about screens. Recently, UC San Francisco published a study that followed almost 10,000 kids for two years, starting when they were just nine and 10 years old. And what they found was pretty clear. More screen time is linked to more symptoms of depression, anxiety, and even aggression.

Additionally, the CDC tells us that half of our teenagers now spend four hours or more every day on recreational screen time. Four hours. That's like a part-time job. And the kids with higher screen time? Well, they're more likely to experience anxiety and depression. But here's where it gets more interesting, and this is what I really want us to explore next week. It's not just about how much time kids spend on screens. It's about how they spend that time.

Some research suggests that when students use technology for creative projects or collaborative learning, they actually show improved problem-solving skills. So the question becomes, how do we help young people build a healthy relationship with technology? Can we actually use these digital tools to support the social and emotional skills we were just talking about instead of undermining them?

Greg: Michael, I'm really excited about our next guest because they're going to help us unpack this. John Fisher is a professor at San Juan College who just won a Distinguished Teaching Chair Award for his innovative work on integrating AI into the classroom.

And Shane Voss, now here's someone who's taken a bold approach, he's the head of Mountain Middle School, was named Colorado Charter School Leader of the Year, and he actually banned cell phones at his school years ago. So join us next time on Living in a Digital World, when we'll look at preparing our students to not just survive, but really thrive in our digital world.