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 visiting with Cassidy, a 2025 graduate from Animas High School. Welcome to Beyond the Bell.

Cassidy: Hi, thank you, I'm really excited to be here.

Greg: Cassidy, I know during your time at Animas, you were very involved in a number of extracurricular activities. Can you tell us a little bit about what you did and what you're most passionate about?

Cassidy: Gosh, there's a lot there. For the school, at least I was an ambassador. I did tours for people all the time and helped out at a bunch of different community events. But more outside of school, I've been really involved with local politics, especially the last two years. I worked as a poll watcher. I've been an intern with the League of Women Voters. I go to political events whenever I have the time.

Greg: What draws you to getting involved in politics and local events?

Cassidy: I guess politics in general, can see how it affects so many different aspects of my daily life. It's something I care a lot about because it affects me and it affects people that I care about. But especially local politics, I think there's a lot more space for individual people to have their voices heard and to make an impact. And at least for me, I can definitely see the work that I do and see how it affects my community, especially when it's locally.

Greg: Can you come up with some examples of that? mean, things that you were involved with that you were able to see and feel an impact?

Cassidy: One of my better examples this past March, there was the Durango City Council elections. And so the League of Women Voters, who I mentioned I'm an intern with, they put on a forum, so an event where they'd have all the candidates come out and then people could ask them questions, hear their answers, decide who they wanted to be voting for. And I helped a lot with the organizing of that, getting everyone into the room. And I did a lot of question sorting. So I was the person who decided which questions got asked. And it was really nice for me to, after that event had ended, go out to dinner with my dad and hear people in the restaurant at least talking about what they'd heard at the forum and what they thought of the candidates. And yeah, that was a good moment for me.

Greg: Sounds exciting. And are you thinking about continuing on in politics? What's your plans for the coming year?

Cassidy: In about three weeks, a little less now, I'm moving out to the East Coast. I'm going to a school in Worcester, Massachusetts, Clark University, and I'm going to be a political science major. That's pretty much the majority of my plans. Politics is something that I think at least right now is going to be a big part of my life. It's something I want to learn more about and something I want to stay involved in.

Greg: You've got a strong passion for social justice and making an impact in your community. Where did that come from?

Cassidy: I think for me, I've always cared a lot about the people around me, you know, about my friends. I've witnessed firsthand a lot of struggles that low income people have, that queer people have. And I guess for me, it kind of came naturally. I spent a lot of time hearing people's stories. And then when I actually went and started tuning into news and paying more attention to politics, I realized just how relevant the government is to my daily life, especially for environmental causes, you've always cared about the environment. But last summer I worked with a conservation group. I was actually out there in the woods doing work to protect our environment. And that especially fueled the fire inside of me of like, wow, this is such a beautiful resource that I care a lot about. And I want to do what I can to protect it.

Greg: When you think about the future, how would you describe your future? What do you see yourself doing in another 10 years, let's say?

Cassidy: 10 years from now, I honestly, I've got no idea. Maybe I'll still be in school. I've always loved learning. I feel like there's so much to learn just about everything. So I could see myself still being in school, but I know that no matter where I am, I want to be doing something that feels impactful, that feels meaningful to me. I want to be doing things that I can see affecting my community, wherever that may be, in a positive way.

Greg: You seem hopeful about the future. Is that a fair statement?

Cassidy: I think in some ways I am hopeful. I'm curious at least to see what it looks like 10 years from now. But that's not to say that I'm not also very afraid. There's a lot of uncertainty right now, especially regarding like if I go to school for four years, is my degree even going to mean anything? Or what if I can never buy a house? There's a lot that's uncertain. But I'm choosing right now to focus on the hopeful possibilities out there. Because I believe we only focus on everything that's going wrong and everything that could go wrong. That's all that we're going to see.

Greg: Let’s go back to your high school days and your learning. Animas has a project-based learning approach and there's a lot of emphasis on collaborative work and on problem solving and critical thinking. How well do you think it's prepared you for what's coming up in college?

Cassidy: At least for college, I know one thing Animas has done really well is give their students public speaking skills. We do our POLs and our TPOLs at the end of every semester, and a lot of times that looks like a presentation in front of the class, in front of your teachers. For me at least, I have become much more comfortable speaking in public, which in turn makes it easier to speak to authority figures, speak to professors and people out in the community.

I think beyond that, at least the project-based learning part for me allowed me to reach out to different groups in the community, different community organizations. And it was through that that I made a lot of meaningful connections. That's how I got involved with the League of Women Voters in the first places. I reached out to them about a project I was doing on voter ID laws and requirements.

Greg: You strike me as having a high level emotional intelligence for a young woman. How have you developed that? How would you describe your journey into becoming more self-aware?

Cassidy: Well, I think your journey with becoming more emotionally intelligent and understanding yourself, it's something that takes a lot of work on your end. You have to be willing to see, you know, maybe where you're lacking a little bit and that has to be something you work on. I know for me at least, I am not anymore, but I was in therapy for like two or three years. And that was always a good space to get out my emotions, understand them, understand events that were happening in my life and be able to navigate them in a healthy, constructive way. I think a lot of emotional intelligence is also your own willingness to communicate with people. I don't think you can be an emotionally intelligent person without being willing to talk to other people and try to understand their opinions, understand their perspectives, and maybe not internalize that, but a lot of it comes from being willing to understand other people.

Greg: Let's take that a little bit further. With your interest in politics and all the work that you've done in the community, I'm imagining that you've encountered polarization, different viewpoints. What are some of the approaches that you've learned or discovered for bridging that political divide?

Cassidy: My favorite example for talking about reducing polarization is these civil dialogue events. I went to one just last night. I went to another one in May. But essentially the structure of this event is a bunch of people with differing political beliefs get in a room together. We have some snacks. We have some refreshments. And then we sit down at a table, a table of four. You've got two people with more left leaning views and two people with more right leaning views. And the four of you sit at that table and each of you answer a question. The most important part of these events is that when you're answering the question, that the people around you are listening to you. So you'll answer the question, you know, say your piece, voice your opinions, and then you'll have someone who disagrees with you, but they won't tell you why they disagree. They'll look at you and instead say, I heard that you feel this way. And while I don't understand that, I am hearing you.

The whole goal of these civil dialogue events is not to change someone's mind, but instead to understand someone's perspective more. There have been people who I've sat there and I've listened to them and I've been like, your opinion is the complete opposite of mine. You know, I never, never thought of it like that, but I can still find pieces in there of, we agree on this aspect of this topic, even if we disagree on this one. And I'm still hearing what you're saying.

Greg: When you consider the state that our world is in right now and the future and it's really gonna be on your generation's shoulders to fix things up a little bit. What advice would you give to an incoming freshman? How they can focus their efforts and their education to be able to be prepared to make a difference.

Cassidy: Making a difference comes from your own dedication and your own motivation. So try to spend your time in school finding what you're passionate about. You know, it doesn't have to be math or chemistry. It can be skateboarding or rock climbing or whatever. Just find

what you're passionate about and figure out how you can make life better in that one aspect. And then there you go. That's what you need to know and that's what you need to work towards.

Greg: Cassidy, would you just go out into the world and help teach the world how to do that?

Cassidy: I wish it was that easy.

Greg: I have a feeling you're going to make a big impact in life. Thanks for taking the time to talk with us.

Cassidy: Yeah, of course. Happy to be here. This was fun.

Michael: In today's episode of Beyond the Bell, It Takes a Village, we're asking a fundamental question. How do we get schools, communities, and families working together as true partners in supporting our young people's development? Joining us today to answer those questions are Bruce LeClair, former Title VII family school coordinator for the 9R School District, working with Native American and Alaska students, and current CEO of the Boys and Girls Club of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, whose comprehensive programs in arts, culture, leadership, education, health, and sports create pathways for youth to thrive both academically and personally.

We'll also hear from Elliot Baglini, Work-Based Learning and Intern Coordinator at Animas High School, who manages the LINK internship program that connects students with real-world learning opportunities throughout our community. Welcome both of you to the show.

Elliot: Good to be here.

Bruce: Happy to be here.

Michael: This question is for both of you. Bruce, maybe we'll start with you. So when you hear the expression, takes a village, what does that actually look like in practice here in our community? And maybe another way of saying that is, can you paint a picture of us of successful collaboration where schools, family, and community organizations really truly supported each other to help a young person thrive?

Bruce: **I** like that it takes the village. It really hits home with me, I guess. I'll use an example that in the Ignacio community of character counts. I worked in the Durango School District, as you mentioned, and when I went to the different schools, I saw different expectations of SEL kind of curriculums and how the kids conduct themselves. Then I went to Ignacio, I saw the same thing. Only three schools, but they had three different expectations. And so my recommendation to them was to pick one and differentiate it based on the developmental level of the students.

And so they adopted character counts. But it wasn't just the school district. It was the library, the Boys and Girls Club, other nonprofits in the area, the community businesses contributed as well.

There are six pillars of a character under that program. When we see one of the students exhibit one of those pillars of character, they could be rewarded with a plastic coin that had the Bobcat logo on it and character accounts on the other side. They would be given one of those as a positive reinforcement. They could take that to the local grocery store and get something

from the deli, take it to the Subway, get a sandwich, take it to the bowling alley, get a free game. So it really is a community-wide effort to support students in how they conduct themselves, standard expectations across the community.

Michael: So the whole community is in essence rewarding them for having shown character and who they are.

Bruce: Exactly.

Greg: Bruce, just to clarify, you said SEL, that's social emotional learning, correct?

Bruce: Yes it is.

Michael: Elliot, what about you? When you hear the expression, takes a village, what does that look like for you in the LINK program?

Elliot: Bruce, what you just described about Ignacio really hits home with me because it sounds like what Ignacio is doing is really communicating between school and library and even the Subway's on board with this program. And when I think about the phrase, takes a village to me, it really, it starts with communication where no one is siloed out and families are talking to the school and the school is talking to the industries or community partners that these students might be working at. It really, I think it is in essence everyone talking amongst each other with the student at heart. At Animas, it really starts with me being one of the conduits of information between the school and the community partner or the school and the student and the student's family.

Greg: Bruce, according to your website, the Boys and Girls Club of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe provides, quote unquote, a safe and nurturing environment that guides each young person on their path to developing good character, respect of culture, diversity, academic excellence, and development of a healthy mind, body, and spirit. How does this holistic mission position you as a bridge between families and schools?

Bruce: I think it's pretty evident for us that we have an opportunity that's pretty unique in our community because of the age range of the club members. We can have them as young as six and they can keep coming to club until they're 18, so 12 years. So we develop a really good relationship with them. We get to know the families and when you develop that relationship, it really builds trust.

Like Elliot was saying, communication is the basis, I guess, for us to address any kind of issues that might be coming up, whether it's with the program, with the kids, with the schools, whatever it is, we got to be able to communicate with each other. And trust is a big part of that. So we develop trust with our club members. And as mentioned, we do that with the parents as well. During the pandemic, we did mental health checks with our club members and we called the parents and the parents actually really liked that.

They spent a lot of time on the phone with her staff. And so that really strengthened that relationship with them. And so it brought us all together. It's one positive of the pandemic for us. So I would just say that relationship is the basis of it and communication.

Michael: So, speaking of communications, Elliot, you mentioned that communication is a big part of the LINK internship program. Tell us more about LINK. How did it come to be, and how convinced are you that authentic work-based learning requires these deep community partnerships?

Elliot: LINK started when Animas started. The founders of the school and everyone who was here from the very beginning who founded Animas under the theory that project-based learning is a really admirable way to educate our youth also decided that internships were going to be a part of that. And this was back in the early 20 teens and internships weren't as popular as they are now. And so this was certainly cutting edge back in the day and it still is.

LINK is in essence project-based learning outside of school. The project is let me learn about this industry and see if I can see myself in it in the future and also what can I get out of it at the time. It really aligned with the school's mission from the very beginning. Authentic work-based learning, like Bruce said, is really all about relationship, deeper the community partnerships are, the stronger that relationship will be, and then the more impactful that work-based learning is going to be. I'm going into my third year as the coordinator here, and year over year I've just noticed how much easier it is to build the partnerships when they know me from last year and from the year prior, and they know the LINK program. And so the history of the LINK program is really important in creating those deep community partnerships.

And then on the back end, we see a stronger relationship between the mentor and our students or me and the mentor where, you know, I could have more just real conversations, more transparent conversations with the mentor when otherwise, if I didn't know them as well, I don't think I would be getting that real boots on the ground perspective of how the student is doing. And at the end of the day, that creates an authentic work-based learning experience.

Michael: And what type of organizations do you work for? mean, these LINKs in the community, is it nonprofits? Is it for-profits? Is it government? Or what type of programs in the community do you work with?

Elliot: We've partnered with basically every type of organization you could think of from an individual artist who has a small company, maybe just it's an Instagram page and she sells art out of that all the way up to the city of Durango. I've had students work with large multinational organizations, out of state government organizations, lots of nonprofits, healthcare industry, even some organizations that normally work under the auspices of confidentiality because of the relationship that I build with the mentor and the understanding that they have with LINK and how impactful it can be. Sometimes students even get to access those spaces that otherwise would be off limits to a high school student.

Greg: Bruce, your leadership and service programs are training young people to be community contributors. How do you coordinate with schools to ensure these leadership experiences connect to their academic and career development?

Bruce: We have couple different leadership programs specific that other clubs do. It's called Torch Club. It's a leadership club for middle school students and then also a Keystone Club, which is for older high school students. And it gives them the opportunity to really step into those leadership roles for their fellow club members, as well as in the community. They'll do some community service. They'll host events for the rest of the club and those sorts of things. These students in that group, they form that positive relationship with each other. And that's the thing that I really emphasize with these young club members is that if you want to do well in school, hang out with those kids who have the same motivation that they want to do well in school. And you guys can support each other. And they do that in club. But then when they go to the school, that relationship continues on. they see each other in school. They see each other at club. And we really want to grow that program by getting more and more kids involved in that.

The other thing I mentioned earlier was the character counts, academics a portion of that. We also do academic specific programming, power hour, so we help the kids with their homework. And then we also do summer learning loss programs during our summer program. But one of the things in my experience with kids is that we might want them to finish high school and do great things and whatnot academically, but if they don't want it themselves, it's like dragging, know, pulling them.

And I always say you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink, so then we got to make him thirsty. We got to instill that intrinsic motivation and that's kind of what we try to do with them is get them to take ownership of their academic success and their responsibilities.

Michael: Elliot, can you share an example of how the LINK program helped a young person develop confidence or skills that translated into their school performance or family relationships?

Elliot: Yeah, definitely. LINK is a mandatory experience for all of our juniors. So these are 16, 17-year-olds. And just in the couple of years I've been running the program, it seems like it really comes at a pivotal time in the high school career where students are deciding exactly what kind of student they are and how they want to leave high school because they're staring down the barrel of senior year.

I had a student who had completed his internship at the end of his junior year. And he was going to the beginning of his senior year and was fairly rudderless. He wasn't sure if he was even going to finish high school. He wasn't particularly inspired by his internship experience during his junior year, but senior year comes along and he gets an opportunity to just talk with some firefighters from a local fire department.

And he realized just through that kind of random encounter, he was interested in what they had to say. And one of the cool things about the LINK internship experience is that in addition to all juniors being required to do it, seniors can also have an internship experience. We call it a LINK 2.0. so this student, just having this sort of off chance encounter with some firefighters, realized that he liked what he was hearing and developed a little bit of a relationship with one of the captains. And eventually he was able to start working through his EMT with this fire department, building a relationship with a bunch of the folks over there. And after successfully completing his EMT and successfully completing the fire academy through this fire department, after high school, he was hired by them and worked for the fire department.

And so this student went from seemingly not entirely knowing what he was going to do, even during his senior year of high school, he was fired up. He was motivated. And he came to school on time because he knew that he had to get through his morning classes so he could go to the department in the afternoon. He had to graduate high school. He had to finish his classes and do what he needed to do to be able to pursue this path that he realized he was interested in. And so I think this really did translate into a school performance that he needed to graduate and move on to the next thing.

Michael: I mean, isn't that the benefit of working with community partners is just exposing young people to new people, new connections, new ideas, new thoughts that they haven't had, kind of making that first handshake of, hey, here's someone that could influence your life or be a positive influence in your life. I guess, Bruce, is that the way you see it as well?

Bruce: I totally agree with that whole broadening your support network. So when you make those connections, especially if somebody is an expert in their field, they got a lot to offer you.

Stuff that you might not get in a textbook in the regular curriculum in your high school. So it forces the students to put out those, the skills that they've learned, studying skills, reading, interacting, all those kinds of things, and put it to the test. And it's in a safe place because they're trying to learn. the mentors or the hosting work site take on that leadership role for them. And it's a partnership. And I think the students feel more like they're being treated as an adult. And I think that carries them a little bit more as well.

Michael: And Bruce, you mentioned leadership skills, and I also think of this idea you said of how do you make them thirsty? And I think that when you have students in school or after school or whenever you're working with them, you have them for that sort of time. How do you work with families to reinforce those same qualities at home? Leadership, responsibility, decision making, service to others. How do you work with families to reinforce those same, you know, character traits that you're trying to develop?

Bruce: What we do is we communicate with them pretty regularly about what their students are doing in our club. So we meet with them every day when they come to check out their club members from club and we'll talk to them how their day went, if they had any struggles, if they had a behavioral incident, we'll talk to them about that. But when we let them know about their school, like they finished their homework and he did this or she did that, and let them know that we reinforced that. So the positive reinforcement piece is something that the parents can do at home.

The other thing that I encourage parents to do is establish a daily routine that incorporates studying their academics. Same place, same time of the day, you know, those kinds of things. Elliot said it as well as, in order to graduate high school, I got to finish 12th grade. In order to finish 12th grade, I got to do my homework tonight. So we really need to help parents support the efforts of their students and really develop a partnership with the school. I think parents right now are such a valued partner, but we're not utilizing them as much as we should. And I'm not sure what the barriers are. I think for each of the families, it might be unique to their situation. So my advice to schools is you only get one chance at a first impression. Make sure people feel welcome when they come to the school. That's not a bad experience.

Greg: Elliot, I'd like to hear your response to that and from the perspective of what you're doing at Animas High School with the LINK program.

Elliot: I love what you said about building the daily routine. I poll my students after LINK and just get their anecdotal first take on what they learned and a lot of them just come back and say, yeah, I learned how to wake up to my alarm clock because it's not my teachers who I've known for years who are expecting me. It's this mentor who I want to impress because I might want a summer job from him afterwards or something like that.

Greg: Elliot, give me some examples of how to build that relationship with the families. It's got to go beyond just sending email newsletters, I'd imagine.

Elliot: We focus on consistent and early communication about the LINK program, starting really even at the beginning of freshman year when perspective families are coming to Animas. We talk about it when we talk about junior year because it is so atypical of a school experience. We just hit that communication piece early and often.

I shake hands and meet every family that I can at all of those info sessions. go to the junior year post-secondary nights and just make myself available for the families that are there. But as we know, some families are precluded from going to those after school activities or evening info sessions for whatever reason. So that's when I come in with newsletters and one-on-one

meetings with each individual student and then a follow-up email to their caregivers at home after the fact to make that introduction and just so people kind of have a face and a name to route their questions to.

Michael: So we'll switch gears a little bit about social and emotional issues. And this one's for Elliot. How do you help community partners recognize when a LINK intern might be struggling with social emotional issues? And as well, how do you coordinate support across the internship site with school, with the family? Can you walk us through that?

Elliot: First, I start with really front-loading to the mentor, especially if they haven't played that role before for a young person. Front-loading to the mentor how you really have to meet the student where they're at. In education, I think that comes a little more firsthand to us, but for lot of industry professionals who are excited to be mentors, maybe this is the first time they're acting in an educational capacity with a young person.

Really starting with that and highlighting the importance of the first thing in the morning check-in with the student each day. Because oftentimes those morning check-ins can really uncover if something is going on with that student. Because if they're bringing something to the workplace, social, emotional, related, it's probably not going to be a very impactful day or productive day for the student. And the sooner the mentor can uncover that, maybe they can head it off at the pass right there and address it and they can move on or because of the relationships that I build with each mentor, they can clue me in early. Especially if it's a student who is interning out of town and I don't have as easy access to see them or talk to them, the sooner I can hear from the mentor that something might be going on with this student, the faster I can first reach out to the student themselves.

I'm checking with them and then also start talking to the caregivers and saying, hey, are you aware of this situation? I talk to families pretty regularly during the LINK experience, especially if something is not going right to help support the student in what they need. I think coordinating the support between family and those community partners is also really important.

Sometimes parents are picking their student up from the internship and then the parent and the mentor start building a little bit of relationship and then the mentor is telling the parents or the caregivers about something that I'm not even privy to and that's fine because if the support is happening through that conduit, then it's a win. And just so long as I can help coordinate those relationships also forming, I think it creates a good network and good safety net of support for the student.

Michael: What you're saying in essence is it takes a village. The school is looking out for the benefit of the child, the mentor, whatever that is, is looking out, and the family member is looking out as well, and you're all communicating together.

Elliott: Precisely. Yeah, and the communication piece is key to making that happen.

Greg: Bruce, how do you work with schools to ensure that the educational programming at the club reinforces rather than competes with the classroom learning?

Bruce: Well, primarily our work is focused on the club members, but we do go to the schools. We do Youth of the Month. We attend the assemblies at the elementary. We have a seat at the table of the Multicultural Committee of the school district, and that's where that Character Accounts program kind of took off. But what we do is if we have a club member who has an IEP (Individualized Education Plan), we will get a copy of that. We'll talk with the parents, let

them know. What we want to do is reinforce and use those strategies and methods that the schools are already doing, rather than having the club members come to club and have a different experience and expectation and language. So we'll do like zones of regulation. That's something familiar with the kids. We'll do checks with the teachers if that person is struggling whether it's with academics, whether it's a behavior, whatever it may be in the classroom, we will touch base with them as well as the parents and say, what do you guys do when you're experiencing this? How do you guys handle that? And we try to use our communications just to find out what's the best response that any or all of us can take to help the student navigate those situations when they're having difficulty, even if it's struggling on a problem or if it's behavioral issues in school.

Michael: Elliott, I'm going to switch gears. I have this question about parents who really prioritize traditional academics, know, reading, writing, they should be in the classroom, and who might be somewhat skeptical about the LINK program. How do you help families understand the educational value of the program?

Elliott: I start by highlighting how really no matter what academic interest a student might have, there's an internship available for them to go deeper in that interest and expose them to professional applications and industry recognized skills that they would need to really pursue that area of academia. So really if a student is coming to me with any sort of interest or aspiration, there are internships available here in the region and examples that I can provide that describe how LINK is really aligned with those academic outcomes.

For example, say you have a student who is really interested in going to college for computer science. Well, we've had a number of students over the years who have interned under professors at Fort Lewis College in their computer engineering program. And so the internship is really three weeks of full-time work, learning about what it's like to work in a research lab, which is a sought after experience for undergrads and almost unheard of at the high school level. But because of that relationship we've built with FLC, we are able to provide that experience for those students because of the professors that we've worked with in the past really giving their time and their effort to mentoring our young students.

And so as far as a time away from traditional academics, that is also a worry because for some of our students who are taking concurrent enrollment classes, which means they're concurrently enrolled in Fort Lewis College classes while they're doing their LINK internship, or they're in an honors class here at Animas, that it does require them to coordinate their schedule so they can be at Fort Lewis College for their college class or at Animas for their honors class and also completing their internship. And for those concerns, we really spent a long time talking about how that's just life, isn't it? Once we graduate from high school and we become adults, we're balancing multiple objectives and draws on our time. And so I really play up the schedule management component of LINK as being a really important outcome for our internship experiences where students are communicating with their mentor, they're communicating with their professor and making sure they're making everyone happy and meeting all of their obligations. And that is such an important life skill because in high school, oftentimes your schedule is given to you, you know, maybe you have athletic practice after school or there's something like that. But LINK really adds a layer of complexity that is authentic to adulting. And I think that makes it all the more powerful experience.

Once I play that out to families most of the time, they bite.

Greg: I'm going to ask this for each of you to respond to. Let's start with you first, Bruce. What do you think needs to change structurally for families and schools to move beyond occasional

check-ins to genuine partnership in supporting young people? What do schools need to do differently?

Bruce: I appreciate this question because I've been involved in the EIB, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging for a few years. And when I took my job as the Title VII coordinator for American Indian Education, some of the things I noticed right away is some systemic issues. And so we have to review the systems we have in place to make sure that they're equitable for all students. And if they're not, then we make adjustments so that they are.

The other thing would be to look at job descriptions, making sure that they are detailed. I had some experiences where I had one administrator who supported the program and one who did not. And it was up to that administrator. my recommendation was it shouldn't be up to them to support a federally funded program. It should be part of their job in their job description. So I would say making systemic changes to require the system to be continually assessing itself. If we don't look at our policies, they'll get outdated. It's just like bylaws for an organization. You got to go through it, make sure it's still relevant. Technology changes, maybe we need to change. So we got to update all of our systems and continually reassess them, and then make adjustments, and then implement and do it again. We call it continuous quality improvement. So I'm all about systems change.

And so if there's something that is not working right now, let's look at it and let's assess it and let's figure out if there's a different way we can try and then try that. And if we have a positive results, then let's update our systems to incorporate that and move on.

Greg: Elliot, how about from your perspective? You're doing good work with what you've got with the LINK program, but are there any changes structurally you see both within Animas High School as well as just on a national basis, you know, for schools to implement better connection with and partnership with families to support them?

Elliot: I want to echo what I heard from your answer, Bruce, that people really need time, right, in their jobs to be, if they have that time, that they can assess how they're doing and if there's additional progress that can be made or if changes need to be made. But it really starts with time in their job to be able to authentically look at those things and make changes. And then I also heard you talk about what's the relationship with the caregivers at home, because that's really the biggest influence on these young people in addition to what they're getting at school.

Structurally, I would like more time to build relationships with families better. I see in all the schools that I've worked at in my educational career, no matter how many good intentions we make at the beginning of the year about celebrating students who are doing excellent work, unfortunately the reality is a lot of the time we only have time to call out the ones who aren't doing well. You know, so many of our meetings are taken up by the students who we need to bring up to a level, like a standard. And so we're not spending as much time building those relationships with families at home. And so it creates this dynamic where a teacher is calling a caregiver at home and the caregiver is already triggered because it's like, I only get a call from the school if something's going wrong. And I don't think that is an effective foundation to build a relationship in which we're all supporting young people because there's inherently going to be some animosity between the school and the family if that's the basis of the relationship.

So really what I would ask for structurally is time. The ratio that I always try to hit with all of my students, which is three positive comments to that person to every one constructive comment. And I would like to keep that with families as well. So I have the time to make relationships with families in which the foundation of that relationship is praise for their student. Once that's set, I think we'll be able to truly create a partnership between families and schools where we're

supporting young people as best we can instead of a dynamic where sometimes it feels like we're at odds.

Michael: You know, Bruce, in your long career, you've worked a lot with Native students, you know, as the former director of the Intermountain Center for Human Development, the Title VII Family School Coordinator, your current role. You're also recognized nationally for your work and you serve as a co-chair for the Indigenous Connections Movement Resource Group. What have you learned about building lasting partnerships between tribal communities, schools, and families?

Bruce: One of the things that I've learned is that we really need to, no matter which our entity or organization that we represent, we got to be willing to be real insightful about our willingness to collaborate. People operate in silos, they get this tunnel vision and you know, this is my lane, you stay in your lane. We got to get over that. We got to figure out how do we collaborate versus compete. There's an old saying that we're stronger together than we are just individually.

So we need to recognize that we all have strengths and we all have something to contribute when we keep our children in mind. That's the focus. Let's loosen our barriers, pull down our walls and really allow people to develop those working relationships where we're collaborating. I mentioned earlier about character counts and that was something that I think is a good model for communities to use in different approaches, whatever those approaches may be that we work together. We got to recognize that our children are valuable assets for our communities and we as the adults, we have a responsibility to protect them and keep them safe, guide them and help them develop into their unique and individual selves and what they want to do in life. Even if it's something that I don't necessarily understand or agree with or whatever, it's really not up to me. It's not my life. It's their life and I'll support them.

Michael: Bruce, you mentioned being insightful and I also heard out of that, and let me know if I'm wrong, intentional as well about placing the child first. And so what can schools do to better understand and support the insightfulness or the intentionality and the cultural values and family structures of the communities that they serve?

Bruce: I appreciate this question because working with American Indian students, traditionally they've scored lower on the standardized state scores test. And so there was an achievement gap. And I always feel that I say this and try not to make people feel defensive is I think it's our professional responsibility to find out about the uniqueness of the students that we're working with.

So if they come from a different cultural background, we need to put out some effort and energy to figure out a little bit about their culture. There might be some taboo things that we're not aware of and we expose our kids to if we don't know. There might be a different communication style and a lot of Native kids will just through their upbringing will not make that direct prolonged eye contact and those kinds of things. And sometimes it's interpreted as they're reluctant learner.

And that's what I've heard from different teachers. And if that kid doesn't care, why should I? But it really is our professional responsibility to find out about the uniqueness of the cultures of the kids we work with. There are some values that we might not be aware of. Like education is important for us, but where does that sit on the value spectrum for this family? And so I'll say this one thing for American Indian is that family comes first, ceremonial stuff.

American Indian, native student whose family says, we need to do this ceremony. school comes secondary at that point. They're just going to go. And so they might not know about the ability to make a prearranged absence or whatever. And then if the school says, OK, you didn't fill out this form, so you're not going to get credit for the makeup work, that's all systemic issues there. We need to build and navigate those situations. And all that comes down from that cultural awareness.

So I would say take advantage of the opportunities to learn about the cultures of the students you work with. If they're American Indians, we've got a lot of tribal people in this community. We've got a lot of different tribal events that happen in this community. Ask the question. If there's an opportunity to learn about culture in a workshop, take the workshop. I've done training with 9R, and what I've found is that the people who attend those are currently allies of American Indians. So it's not those people that really would benefit from it that come. And so my recommendation was don't make this an elective, make this a mandatory type of course and just offer it, you know, within the next four years, you're have to take this course. So there's no avoiding it. So again, systemic change.

Greg: Elliott, for community organizations that are listening now who might be interested in hosting LINK interns, what should they know about what this partnership really involves?

Elliot: I'm always looking for new partnerships and more places to send my students. What this partnership really involves is a fair amount of time that the mentor can take to learn about the student. It really involves an intrinsic interest in the mentor in developing some aspect of a young person. Maybe they know them already or maybe they don't, but the partnership really starts with an interest in building a relationship with a young person. And that takes time and it takes effort and it takes putting on a little bit of a teacher hat.

Michael: All right, final question for both of you. And Bruce, let's start with you first. What's your invitation to our listeners, whether they're parents, educators, or community members, what's your invitation to them to help strengthen this village approach to supporting young people?

Bruce: In the past and currently, there's division amongst us in our communities. And so my invitation would be to take healthy risks to learn about one another so we can better understand and accept each other. We need to learn about the differences that we have, but at the same time, focus on the similarities, focus on our strengths. We got to look at for our common goals, what do we want for our children? And when we talk about academics, I mean, that's pretty basic thing that we want for our children. We want them to learn, to do well academically. The other thing is to keep them safe. We want them to feel welcome, as I mentioned earlier, treated with dignity and respect, all these things. And so there's a saying that, don't walk behind me. I might not lead. Don't walk in front of me. I might not follow. But walk beside me so that we could be as one.

So we need to recognize that we can all do better and it's going to take us keeping our own egos in check, taking healthy risks to know those people that are different from us.

Michael: Thank you. Elliot, what about you? What's your invitation to our listeners that helps strengthen this village approach to supporting young people?

Elliot: I would invite our listeners to take the approach of a tree planter. People plant trees from little seeds and will probably never see the tree grow. And will probably be dead long before the tree matures into a fruit bearing tree or something that will provide shade or something that will provide habitat. But people plant trees anyway. It's a lot of work. Your hands are dirty. It's

annoying. It's frustrating. Your back hurts. But people do it anyway because they know the benefit that it'll provide to maybe themselves, but really to others. And Bruce, I love what you said about kind of trying to take some of the ego out of it, because at the end of the day, I think working in any educational space, you have to suspend this idea that you're going to get immediate, tangible benefit from the work that you're doing. And if you can suspend that idea and continue with that work, I think it'll make it all the better.

Greg: We're making deposits along the way and each of us with our impact, with our interaction with the student makes a contribution to their future and who they are. So be aware of that contribution and recognize that it's going to be one of many hopefully that's going to help shape this young mind.

Elliot: Couldn't agree more.

Michael: Bruce LeClair, Elliot Baglini, thank you both for your time. It's been a pleasure chatting with you both.

Bruce: Now you're welcome and I appreciate the invitation.

Elliot: This was inspiring. Thank you.

Michael: That was such an inspiring conversation about getting our kids engaged in their communities. I mean, hearing how these young people are making real change happen, gives me hope.

Greg: Absolutely. But you know what struck me as we were talking? How much of this comes back to the foundation we build at home, the values we instill, the conversations we have around the dinner table, how we model civic engagement ourselves.

Michael: Which is perfect timing because next episode we're diving deep into parenting. Specifically, how we can raise children who don't just succeed academically, but who truly thrive as whole human beings.

Greg: And the research is pretty eye-opening about where we are right now. A Pew Research Center survey reports that 55% of parents are extremely or very concerned about the mental health of teens today. But only 35% of teens say the same. Clearly, a disconnect in how parents and teens are experiencing this moment.

Michael: And when it comes to communication, which is so central to everything we've been talking about, majority of parents, 77%, reported their teen always received the social and emotional support they needed, but only 28% of teens perceived the same. So we're hearing very different stories depending on who you ask.

Greg: That's exactly why our next episode, Parenting, Raising Children to Thrive, is going to be so valuable. We'll be joined by Rachel Turiel, a nonviolent communication coach, along with her daughter Rose, for one of those honest, real conversations about what it's actually like to navigate the parent-teen relationship.

Michael: These are the conversations that don't happen enough, where parents and teens are actually talking to each other and not just about each other. So join us next time at Beyond the Bell as we explore how to build those bridges and raise kids who are equipped not just for success, but for meaning and purpose.

Greg: See you then.