

## Engage360 Episode 160 | Empowering Schools and Equipping Educators: The School Counseling Mental Health Initiative

**Dr. Adam Wilson**

[00:00:16] **Tim Koller:** Hi friends. Welcome to Engage 360 Denver Seminaries podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Timothy Kohler. Thank you for joining us for today's conversation. Back in 1996, General Motors partnered with several other companies to create a product called OnStar. So in 1997, that product launched into several of General Motors vehicles, and at the time GM was thinking this would be a thing to differentiate their vehicles from their competitors so that individuals driving along the road could say, Hey, OnStar, help me find a really good place for hamburgers. Help me find a gas station. And so they trained the OnStar operators to receive those phone calls and be a very interesting gimmick that you could do with friends in the car. What actually ended up happening with OnStar's operators is they're getting calls from people in crises. They are getting people who have just gone through traumatic vehicle accidents, and the OnStar operators are having to pivot very quickly to be able to mitigate and help the individuals who are in this danger. I. So as we think about OnStar and the way they trained their operators and how much they needed to pivot to retrain those operators to actually deal with trauma and the impact trauma was having on them, I Welcome to our podcast today, Dr. Adam Wilson. Dr. Adam Wilson is a counseling faculty member here at Denver Seminary, and he is the director of Denver Seminary's School Counseling Mental Health Initiative. So Dr. Wilson, welcome to the podcast.

[00:01:44] **Adam Wilson:** Thank you so much. It's fun to be here.

[00:01:45] **Tim Koller:** You've been directing this school counseling mental health initiative, which we internally sometimes refer to affectionately as SMI for short. You've been directing this for many years now and have been doing some very fascinating things. So can you tell me how are we identifying the needs of students, teachers? School systems in light of the work that you and your researchers are doing.

[00:02:12] **Adam Wilson:** Yeah. A great question. So it's, it's been an ongoing, similar to the, the OnStar story. There's been a recalibration that's taken place within, not just our own research initiative or the seminary, our counseling program, again, worldwide. We've all been pivoting and collaborating to try to understand. What is happening to youth in particular, but also the reality of society in general around mental health. 'cause what we've started to see are these, these metrics, these things, through research, we can track things like anxiety levels, suicidality, depression rates substance use, uh, loneliness. Or a, a sense of connectedness or belonging. There's these things that, that psychological researchers, social researchers, have used for a long time. This kind of standard things that, that we have tracked. What they started to notice around 2007 is they started to see this data pile up. Around 2007, we started to see the rates of these the more negative side, the anxiety, the depression, suicidality, just skyrocketing. And people are obviously very, very concerned, scrambling to try to figure out, uh, what is happening. Things we would've known of in the past but now are happening at such a scale that they were almost becoming normative. Almost becoming the common experience among some groups. And so people started scrambling and, and out of that. As we look at our research initiative, as we've partnered with you know, public-private, charter schools and school systems, what we've started on earth is some of the factors that are underneath these things people will refer to, like social media in these. But even then, we have to dig a little deeper and say like, what is actually within the experience of using social media that's leading to loneliness, that's leading to disconnection. What is it that's happening in family systems or in our, our culture? That's. Massive levels of anxiety, uh, among kids. And then this is the tricky one. The, the uncomfortable realization, and this is something that came out of our research, the uncomfortable

realization that the adults aren't doing well. We are very aware as, as we adults are on the, the wellbeing of our kids. What we started realize is we dug in deeper. It was, it was the reality that it's actually in large part the adults who are struggling, doing it in such a way that it's harder to identify versus our kids. It's just so much more obvious when they're not doing well. They have fewer tricks. Up their sleeve to try to cope or to mask that. a part of what, what we've been looking at is partnering with these, these different folks, boots on the ground. I say, are the people in the trenches who are engaging with these trying to understand one why? What's going on, but also what is it we can do that affects the changes at those levels, those things underneath the scary things. So suicidality is terrifying. underneath it is where we can actually make changes and influence change in these kids' lives to drop down, kind of move the needle on suicidality. So that's a big part of what the initiative has been about, is kind of helping people to dig into what impacts those things. What are those underlying things and how do.

[00:05:28] **Tim Koller:** So we're recognizing as a society that there's something wrong, there's an issue that is happening, it's getting worse, and we are not entirely sure how we can go about solving these issues that seem to be getting worse. So your work in this school counseling mental health initiative is to actually go into school systems to go partner with. Public schools, private schools, charter schools, and begin to do some research to understand not just that there is an issue, but now what can we do about it? So can you talk a bit about what that partnership with these institutions has been like?

[00:06:08] **Adam Wilson:** Yeah, that I love that question because that has actually been the. I, maybe it shouldn't have been surprising, but one of the, the greatest joys of this, uh, initiative, uh, as I kind of moved along with it, and as our team grew and we built up more and more partners, uh, within the education system, what I started to realize is that the core of what is needed. The core of what has been missing is what is empowering these partners to do what they're doing better, more of to, to encourage them forward is the collaboration, is the fact that what has been lacking. I think this reflects something larger in the, the cultural narrative as well as the experience of kids and families. Is that connectedness. Is how we thrive as humans. And we've seen that play out in our partnerships, these research partnerships. It could be something very dry, it could be something very like, you know, analytical and we just come in and do our nerdy stats work, uh, and research work. But what we've found is we've built connections and we've. relationships and we become a part of their community and they become a part of our community. And we are a hundred percent behind each other on what we're doing to change these things, to make these changes. So whether that's like the families that we do interviews with or the educational leadership, um, or the school counselors or the mental health folks in the building I just did a focus group it's with this partner that I mean the people running this thing, they're with highly at risk kids that within society are some of the most vulnerable and some of the. Most statistically speaking poor outcomes based off of stats, what, what you would expect. And they are changing lives, like, I mean, say literally, not figuratively, literally saving kids lives. we come alongside and we, we join with them. What's so fascinating about it is like it takes like two heartbeats before they're hugging us and we're like a part of their unit, and they're so grateful. We're so grateful, and it's just like this, like reciprocal gratitude for the fact that we're in this together What we can provide is something that maybe resources wise, time-wise to, to some cases, training wise, they don't have access to or they don't have the ability to do this, like proactive research, like building methodologies and collecting data. the stats and then giving them this output that helps empower them by either advocating for programs or verifying the amazing things they're doing. Sometimes it's helping them to create new programming that's gonna save lives but ultimately that community, that collaboration. is I just didn't see it coming as the most potent aspect of what we're doing, but it really is. There's no doubt that that's what God has done most centrally. it tells me something about society. It tells me something about what is needed is. We are so siloed and we are so fractured as a society and how we move about life that will we join

together on something. When we, collaborate together on something that everybody cares about, like there isn't a human who doesn't care about youth mental health. And so when we joined together the power that there is in adding what they are already capable of we come along with what we're capable of and it empowers them to do that work and to make those changes. It's, I mean, it's a remarkable kind of identity shift even for me as far as like the purpose of my calling, uh, in my career.

[00:09:42] **Tim Koller:** That's incredible. I mean, the opportunity to go into these systems where we recognize significant issue and to be able to do something about it, not just from this 30,000 foot view where you're coming in as an expert saying do these things, but to actually come alongside relationally and to be in the trenches with individuals who are seeking to save lives. That this is something where we recognize a crisis, we recognize an issue, but now we can come alongside as empathetic researchers to be in the trenches with them to begin doing that work of identifying not just the issue, but what potential bright spots, what solutions we might be able to bring is great. I mean, it's so fun to hear of researchers who genuinely care and are invested in the outcome to such a degree that they're recognizing, oh, this is having an impact on me as a specific individual, as a professor. That's such an encouragement to hear. I think that incarnation presence is just a, such, such a beautiful thing.

[00:10:39] **Adam Wilson:** It's been reflected by every one of the members of our team over, over the years. You know, we've had some, unbelievable humans on our research team and have a current set of amazing humans on the team. And, and it's the same thing, just that they feel altered by the work with these educators. Partly just seeing what these amazing people are doing, but then also realizing like what we're doing. Is having a deep impact is affecting like kids' lives and the teacher's lives and parents' lives. Like watching that happen is just such a privilege to watch God doing what he's doing. 'cause you know, it's not through like your own wisdom or power that's doing, but you just watch what happens as you follow him. You just kind of hmm, move into these relationships. So yeah, it's been so much fun.

[00:11:23] **Tim Koller:** that's wonderful. I mean, you're stewarding the resources. You've been that you've received quite well, and I think part of that is even your research methodology. Individuals could receive funding to go and do this, and they might go out and find an anecdote that they can say, I talked to this one person, here's this one compelling story. So you have approached this research, not just trying to share an anecdote, but to actually design research that is designed well and executed well. So can you talk to us a bit about how this partnership looks so that the research is sound?

[00:11:58] **Adam Wilson:** Yeah, so the way we approach things, first of all, one of the things I, I learned very quickly was the last thing. These folks, who are the ones. Who are, like I say, in the trenches, the last thing they need is somebody coming from outside of those communities and saying like, Hey, here's what you need to do. Let me tell you how to do your job for your community, which I'm actually not a part of. And so when we join in with these partners, we use, uh, something that's a community-based participatory research, or it's like a form of action research they say. But all that is is that means that we join with the people who are actually within that community. We made a commitment very early on. One of our priorities is we're not going to tell people what they should do. We're gonna find out what they need, what they're asking, what are their questions, what are 'cause when you're gonna design something research wise, when you're gonna design a project, we. You wanna understand what is the question that I need to answer ultimately, like if I'm gonna collect a bunch of data, it needs to answer a question. So to start those questions we ask the, the people we're partnering with, like, what are your questions? What are the things you need to

know about what you're doing, about what you don't know about your community, about the mental health of the kids and the families, uh, your teachers, whatever. It's, and so by starting there, they are co-researchers with us. They collaborate with us from the beginning they move with us the whole way through. might be the ones doing more like the specific, uh, kind of nerdy aspects of things, because that's our expertise and we have the research resources and such. But ultimately, um, identifying who needs to be a part of this.

What questions do we need to ask? What format's gonna work best for your context, for your community? We design all that ahead of time with them so that it's, it fits naturally with who they are. It's not just some, white lab or white lab coat laboratory setting that is artificial. These, I mean, work is happening day in, day out with these kids and the mess and all of the dirtiness that is, you know, the elementary school, like this is where the work is being done, and so this is where the research needs to be done. That is harder methodologically to design sometimes because there's so many variables you can't control. guess what? That's when they're doing the work. so part of it is helping them to design a project that says like, how do you actually do this? Or How would you want to do this in real life? How would, if I, I jokingly say, the Smmi got hit by a bus tomorrow, how would you do this without us? Rather than just thinking through like, we're gonna do research, just thinking like, how would you actually do this? And we design our methodology around that fact so that what they walk away with in the end, 'cause the data is all theirs when we walk away from the project. This is something they can continue to do. 'cause ultimately that's the goal is if this is useful, if this is good, if this is helpful, we wanna empower them. Like, Hey, we'll help you set it up the first time. Here's ways that you can do it. And then they can run with it moving forward and the system changes. And ultimately, rather than just us coming along and doing it, and then we disappear and things go back to where they were, this is empowering them to do what they wanna do anyway. What they know they need to do, but they just don't have the time and resources to set it up and to get those processes started. So that's a big part of how we do that.

[00:15:13] **Tim Koller:** It's wonderful that you can come alongside these organizations who have. The shared interest and to be able to equip them, not just for a specific moment in time, to be well-resourced, but to actually have sustainable change. And I was able to, I was very fortunate to read one of the testimonials of an individual who's been participating. I. Uh, with this initiative and they were talking about how it is saving lives and it is transforming not just student lives, but it actually is impacting teachers and the entire culture of the school. That is a beautiful thing to be able to participate in. And so I'm curious, as you reflect on the work that you and your researchers are doing, what are some of those bright spots that are coming out of the research that you can point to and say like, this is an encouragement to me.

[00:16:02] **Adam Wilson:** And there's so many I think one of my proudest. Moments within this initiative is there was a particular private school system that we worked with, which just unbelievable people and, such a deep love. It's such a wonderful community. And they had been like so many school systems, but particularly private school systems, they had started to really struggle with the weight of student mental health issues and some of the, how do we support kids with mental illness? How do we support crisis moments? So kids that are suicidal or there's, traumas that occur, things like that. Maybe within the public school system, there's more of a history of like infrastructure with school psychologists and school counselors and such around that. There's a little more history to doing that, but most private school systems don't have that. There just really isn't resources or institutional history that supports those roles. And so they, they called us to come alongside and we started working with them. Did. Focus groups with, students and parents and teachers and administrators, and collected all this data and then brought it back to them and helped kind of see this, this bigger picture of the factors that were contributing to some of these crises, but

also part of it this reality of, a lot of folks who work in ministry and in in Christian educational ministry have a similar mindset to a lot of missionaries it is the, my, my entirety of my career is the mission, and all of these kids are the mission, which is true. But what can happen is there's no end. Hmm. No end.

And so the, the teachers were starting to struggle deeply, emotionally, and they were starting to burn out, and the administrators were struggling because this is stuff that they just historically, have the, the policies and procedures and the, the knowledge base to know exactly how to approach these things. So as we came along and kind of supported, we all collaborated and talked through the results, and we made some suggestions and they discussed kind of some ideas they had. I've watched this community like. Just own the student wellbeing and the teacher wellbeing and the family's wellbeing, and they already had that heart for their families, but they've now moved into like, we're gonna shape our policies. We're gonna change our procedures, we're gonna have first aid, mental health for every. Staff member, and we're gonna have mental health first aid for all of our high schoolers and like to have these people come in and they just have, taken this on in the cultural shift towards no one's telling us to do this, but now we know what we want to do, now we have some tools on which we can do that. And to hear them saying that they know for a fact that our work with them has saved kids lives. I don't know that I, you can't. Can't understand really the impact of that when you do something out of your heart and then you see them doing something outta their heart you watch God do something so cool like that. So, yeah, it's remarkable.

[00:19:07] **Tim Koller:** And this work was not started at the scale you are operating at now. So school counseling, mental health initiative didn't start with the ability to speak to some of the places that you've been able to go speak at conferences and with Colorado Department of Education. You, you've started at a small space and you've seen it grow over time. So like this idea of being faithful with a little and then being entrusted with more, being entrusted with more. And so I'm curious, when you began to do this work, you're working with a smaller group and now the scale is growing larger. What are some of the. Conversations that you and your researchers are having, not just with an individual school or an individual teacher, but give us a sense of how this has grown over time and the kinds of conversations that you and your team are having now.

[00:19:53] **Adam Wilson:** Yeah, no that's a good question too. 'cause that's another one of the places. Um, that's been a fun, I mean, fun and overwhelming surprise to watch where things have gone. 'cause it wasn't what I expected when I originally envisioned the initiative, it was to do something far more local. To do work with, uh, some schools in the area and then have like a conference where we would help kind of share, kind of cross pollinate. I say the information that we've learned to other schools in the area and then COVID hit. When COVID hit, we, we weren't able to work within the schools. We weren't able to engage directly in the ways that I had been thinking we would. so I just started these relational conversations with all these educators who at the time were scrambling trying to figure out how do we even, like, how do we even support our kids? How do we find out if kids are okay? Um, they just weren't systems in place to know if, you know, if you have suicidal kids and all of a sudden they're all just gone. You can't. 'em from class and talk to 'em, like, what do you do? So there was a, a fair amount of panic among school-based mental health folks to try to figure out what to do. So we just started having these conversations and through that we started building these, all these little networks of relationships in collaborations to where when, you know, the doors opened up again, where we were able to do things. We had all of these partnerships that people are like, Hey, we really wanna take what we were talking about and do something about that. And so it started to right away, these ball started rolling. In some of it in places that I thought be kind of difficult. 'Cause rightly so, a lot of the larger public school districts we've worked with have very good gatekeeping to protect external groups from coming in and



researching their kids, which I'm pretty thankful for that as a parent. And so because we had established relationships, we were now on the inside with them. We were like they viewed us that way. And so they were welcoming us in, we were making it through these, very quickly things launched into these large districts, and then we made these connections and, oh I should have said this already, but all of our partnerships are private. We don't say who we partner with until we've done something public with them. Where we've done presentations or, or they've kind of advertised their relationship with us, then we will, you know, say we've worked with them. So we've, we've had a partnership with the Colorado School Counseling Association, so looking across the state at the needs of school counselors and kind of how their identities develop and what are the barriers to effective school counseling, what works well, what doesn't? Having these like large organizations. And then another one that is, is out there is Association for Christian Schools International, which we've done research with and, and written some co-written some things with them related to student mental health within Christian schools. We're gonna be doing a conference with them here in the near future. these things that, again, I had no. plans, no agenda to, to develop this direction. but we just continued to follow what God was putting in front of us in the next relationship and just building connections and offering support where we could. And then just, you know, as things happen, there's these snowballs that rolled forward and people would, uh, be reaching out to us. what we have to do is we have to slow down and we have to be able to say like, Hey, we can only handle so many partnerships at a time to be able to do them really well, and we can grow our team to, to kind of match that, but, which is a really fun problem to have. A big part of this has been surprise of watching influence. Spread out and very quickly from the beginning in ways that it just wasn't an agenda item, it wasn't some master plan or anything that we had, it was just really following the needs to the needs, uh, that, that God put in front of us.

[00:23:27] **Tim Koller:** I love that, and it's so fun to see the kernel of an idea now blossoming and having impact not just in a county in Colorado, but throughout Colorado, and now even having conversations with an accreditor that is. Overseeing schools internationally. So the global reach of this is pretty exciting. How does Denver Seminary fund this initiative? Because do schools, are they participating in this at a cost or how does, how does all of this actually function? How does it work? I.

[00:23:58] **Adam Wilson:** No, and that's, that was a key thing for me from the beginning. I knew, already knew educators do not have money to toss around. they are usually very, very tightly bound and underfunded. And. They also have a lot of people coming to the door offering really amazing things, and this isn't disparaging any of the programs and, and options that schools can tap into out there, but they're very expensive and they're very costly for schools and school districts take part in. And so we very early on wanted to be completely free to our school partners. did not wanna charge anything for our services. To quote Dan Garcia on our team, we're the Swiss Army nerds for free. we come alongside and I'll tell you that's the number one thing when we're talking to a partner, kind of establishing a relationship. That's one of the first things people are asking, like, really free. Like, where's the catch? And we're like, no, there's string attached is we want to have a part in improving student mental health support. Like that's our agenda item. Is we wanna see that happen. how, how we've been funded so far has been through donation. Just wonderful people who heard what we were doing, the vision of what we were doing, and have gotten behind us and have donated to support this work. And it's, it's I think without fail, people who. Can see the, the need maybe in their own families or their own communities and have recognized like, this is something we have to do better at or continue to do good in. And so they've gotten behind this and have been our cheerleaders ever since. Just really behind what we're doing. we are, we are reaching a place because we are donation funded where we will have to move forward to find additional funding. We've, we've looked for grants and we're applying to grants to have money. and that's good. I. I also have hesitations at times. I, I Grants will usually direct you towards a particular thing that you need

to accomplish. And that's good. But I also love the freedom of being able to match our partners in whatever their needs are, regardless of that, not have any strings attached. So donation is, is the primary way that, that we move forward. Yeah.

[00:26:14] **Tim Koller:** That's wonderful, and thank you to all the donors who are listening to this that have supported the school counseling mental health initiative here at Denver Seminary because it's evident that it's making significant impact. So thank you to those donors. And if there are individuals listening who are interested in supporting the work, there is an opportunity to go ahead and support the work here at Denver Seminary through this school counseling mental health initiative. So I'm curious, in light of the significant work that's happening, there is credible research design. You have gained trust through multiple systems, whether it be individual teachers, schools, school systems, through accreditors, through some of the regulatory agencies that exist out there. You've gained trust, you've gained credibility. What's next for Denver Seminaries? School counseling mental health initiative.

[00:27:02] **Adam Wilson:** Yeah, no, there's some exciting stuff in that question. So, one, we will continue to partner with the, we always say once we start partnering with somebody, as long as it is useful to them, we're gonna, we're not gonna just exit and leave them hanging. So we're gonna continue forward with the folks that we're partnering with. We're always, we have a, a list of folks that, that we are looking to, to begin projects with in the next, uh, couple years. So there are those projects that will involve some pretty cool things, even collaborations between large public school districts working together to do research to look at an area. Uh, one of those things being we have several projects, but one of 'em being what's the role of animal assisted interventions in schools? How does having therapy dogs and things like that in the school help with addressing anxiety levels within a school system? Just really fun cool. Important questions like that. And by the way, spoiler alert, it helps just so you know, but we're gonna, we're gonna collect more data. There are things like, uh, we're, uh, working on projects for, again, pro programs. And this has been actually from early on. A hope was to look at public, private charter schools, but also. But also to look at. Urban, suburban, and rural school settings. 'cause part of what we look at, rural mental health support in a school system or in a school is gonna look very different in certain ways from like a suburban or an urban context. And again, the needs and the resources and all of that. So we're right now, uh, gratefully we've had a chance to work with, uh, all three of those, those domains. And we've worked with public, private charter schools. We'd like to do even more work within the urban context to understand the needs there. Um, and then in the rural context as well to try to understand the needs of those kids and families working out you know, kind of removed from a lot of the infrastructure, uh, of support that might be within a city. But a particularly, um, exciting. Project that we've been developing and we're kind of at the cusp of that. Frankly, is just limited by funding at this moment. That's what we're looking for and hoping for and praying for is, uh, something we're right now trimming the digital toolbox, mm. I'm sure, re renamed at some point. The idea is we worked with counselors and school-based mental health people. We kept hearing this theme of, I wish I had like a toolbox that I could pull to have interventions when I'm about to meet with a kid. And I don't know quite how to approach, teaching a kid relaxation techniques or, or teaching a kid how to combat suicidal thinking.

If I don't know what to do, I wish I had like a toolbox I could just pull resources from. Or if there's things like, how do I know if. What I'm doing is having an impact, like how would I collect my own data to be able to see if what I'm doing is having an impact. what we are gonna create is a digital toolbox, an app and maybe a corresponding website that will provide resources. It'll provide journal articles, it'll provide research summaries that'll provide uh, training videos. Uh, even the possibility, like continuing education credits for people who, in their, their roles need to do that in order to

become licensed or do whatever, we're gonna try to again, facilitate the boots on the ground workers with every resource they can have to develop in their identity as a counselor, as a mental health professional, there. Ability to work on skills that maybe they didn't get in their training programs or maybe they've been in the field a long time, but the field has changed. It's become so much more oriented around mental health and what they were trained in. So we wanna help support and build up those those folks. then frankly. Uh, be able to have a trusted source of information. 'cause as we all know, uh, Google is a very sketchy place to find trusted information, or at least it's hard to know if what you have is trusted information. And so part of what we wanna do is have something that is evidence-based like that they can come to a hub and say like, I know that what's here. Has been, uh, vetted, has been shown to be effective and is something that I can use to, to make an impact. And some of that being the research that we do with our partners where they give approval, we can incorporate the findings, not their data, but the findings of those studies to help empower other schools who might be working on similar questions as those.

[00:31:27] **Tim Koller:** I love that. I love that you're able to transcend an individual school or even an individual school district to be able to say, here are the trends, here are the patterns. Here's what's happening in rural schools. Here's what's happening in suburban schools. Here's what's happening in urban schools. And to be able to identify those trends and help other schools begin to address the issues they're facing or even perhaps proactively. Get ahead of some of the issues that may be coming to those schools so that they've got the suite of resources that are needed in order to accomplish that. So it's really fun to hear about the strategy and the execution of it. You know, part of where I love the evidence-based emphasis that this initiative has is, you know, you could clean your hands with brake fluid. But it would be doing some very destructive things, right? So to be able to recognize like, Hey, we know that yes, it cleans your hands, but the byproduct, the, the, the outcome of that is actually not what you want. So it's a temporary solution with a very negative long-term impact. So why don't you just use SOAP instead? Like that type of evidence-based thinking is super helpful because we all mean well. But there can be negative consequences and byproducts that are created by some of the interventions if they're not sound interventions. Your team is creating trusted resources and it's a beautiful thing.

[00:32:39] **Adam Wilson:** I can give a, maybe an example of what that has looked like. And again, this, this one we will draw from a private school partnership, but what we found was, there was a, a high level, and this is across the board, this is pretty true across education, public-private, charter, that teachers are really struggling with burnout right now. a, a significant portion of that is because of the level of mental health struggles and issues that are now a part of their daily role. they are dealing with crisis or students with high levels of anxiety or depression in the classroom all day long. And that's something that they weren't trained for they weren't equipped for in their training programs, typically, historically, to, to manage that, that, a running phrase I've heard is I wasn't trained to be a counselor, and yet that's. What I feel like I'm doing. So one of the factors that we know leads through the research, leads to burnout is when I am asked to do something that goes beyond my sense of capacity or beyond my training resources. If I have to function above or beyond what I feel like I'm equipped to do, I. burnout is, that's a burnout factory. but what's interesting is we didn't see this one coming, but when we worked with Christian school teachers, what we found was a part of that burnout was connected to this idea of a theology of ministry. idea of like, what does it mean for me to minister to these kids? and as we worked with them, we found out like the, the really kind of hard and scary levels of burnout among the staff. We started working with them to understand like, how do you as a community define what it means to minister, but with Sabbath? Sabbath as a part of God's design for ministry. What does that look like? When is it that you are off duty, so to speak, or when is it you end and somebody else begins? And policies and procedures can help shape around that. But what we found is in, in doing that, this community was able to shift the perspective of the staff say like, Hey, it's okay for me to say no because this is in place, or this person



is in place to support the student. And so burnout. Starts to go down because now they feel like, okay, I have the equipment. One, I've been trained more around mental health issues. I know what to do. We have policies, procedures, there are people in place that I can defer to, and I know how I play a role. In this kid's life of helping them to emotionally regulate or to helping them to understand their identity. So that's just been an amazing thing to watch, like something that can be so nerdy, so dry, and yet at the same time, when you move it forward and it plays out within the system, you see people's mental health improving and you see burnout, lowering lowering. Um, so that's been a pretty fun thing to watch.

[00:35:24] **Tim Koller:** I love that it's such a beautiful opportunity for not just Denver Seminary to fulfill its mission through this initiative, but to actually treat others the way we'd wanna be treated. You and I both have kids that are in schools, and I certainly want my child to have the ability to be loved on. By competent adults who can help them navigate the social complexities and the mental health complexities and all of these things that can really. Impede a student's success. You are helping to create a system in which school counselors, teachers, whole school cultures are being transformed. As a result of this research, it's really exciting to think about if this can continue to grow, the impact that it can have, not just here locally in the Denver metro area, but not even just across Colorado, but at scale. What this could be able to do, creating, like you said, that digital toolbox.

[00:36:19] **Adam Wilson:** That's, that is also something we've been working hard to do is we've been going to national conferences and presenting not just the findings of our studies, some of that too, and getting, you know, journal articles published and things like that, dissemination of, of the results. Which is really good because that helps people to know like, Hey, this. This is something that's been shown effective. We can try that or we can study that further. But it's also another thing we've been pushing is just this model. What we're trying to, to replicate in other settings is collaborative research between whether it's like a university or a seminary like us in these K through 12, uh, schools or even college level counseling programs. This is something that needs to happen. Like we need to be doing more of this 'cause this. This is a huge solution to the problem of under-resourced schools and over tapped resources for these folks that are doing everything they can to support their staff and their students. We can come along and just, again, it's some of it's anecdotal the gratitude and the joy that our, our partners express for having us come alongside, but also just the fact us just watching it happen that one, one study we did. We were studying the effect of skills groups, so groups that teach kids how to address their anxiety or how to to deal with anxiety. And so we watched this and we had people that were, uh, students that were getting the group. And then we have students that were in a wait list group. They would get it later, but while we were studying, they were gonna compare what happens to the group that gets it in the group that doesn't get it? here's the thing. We, it kind of messed up our research findings a little bit, but what, what happened was all the staff was learning how to do this program. And they started doing it with, like, they started using those skills with all the kids, even if they weren't in the group. So all the kids were getting better and it's like, well, okay, kind of messed up our research, but good. Like, I mean, kids were getting better, so who really cares? Ultimately this is just kind of a fun thing to watch. Like the system just starts to shift and change. You see it expand beyond what your even like little intention is in that moment. And that's, it's such a joy to watch and may not get you a published journal article because the, the data got muddy, but it showed that this was working and it was helpful.

[00:38:38] **Tim Koller:** I can think of the times when I've gotten a tool that was a wonderful tool to solve, a specific issue, and I'm so excited to use it. I'm looking for more opportunity to apply it. Like, is there anyone else I can help with this? I have a solution. So it's so wonderful to hear te Yeah. Have teachers go like, yes, I have a solution. Let's do this everywhere. Like. That is wonderful, especially in

a population where there is a high degree of burnout. So to have it go from high degree of burnout to I have a solution I'm so excited to use, I can't restrain myself from being able to use it. That is a marvelous opportunity. Thank you for sharing that story. So in the leadership language, what we talk about is adaptive leadership of the system you're in isn't working. So the system itself needs to change. And the way that you function in adaptive leadership is to be able to get on the balcony, to get off the dance floor. And from the balcony you can observe some of the larger TR trends and patterns and you create a holding environment where you regulate the temperature so that people aren't being underwhelmed or overwhelmed. And it sounds like your group is really leading adaptive change within school systems. Am I accurate in making that assumption?

[00:39:43] **Adam Wilson:** Yeah. No, and again, I'm, I'm always one. To make it very clear that what we're doing is facilitating that change. I think we are at the forefront, but I was gonna make it very clear that we're at the forefront because of these people that are in the trenches, the, the boots on the ground folks that are doing the interventions. We're empowering them. So we are, I believe our initiative has and will have and is having, uh, that impact. I think it's because we are helping to facilitate what these remarkable humans are investing their lives in these kids and, and frankly, what these kids are capable of. We're coming alongside and empowering these kids to, to flourish in what they're doing. So I think that's very true and I think it's very true that taking. That higher level understanding of what some of the factors that are involved. It isn't, we all wanna change things at the ground level. Like we want fewer suicides, rightly so. We want less anxiety, we want less depression. It's so much harder to take that extra step of saying like, okay, yes, we're gonna do that, but we have to understand what's actually fueling those things, what's actually feeding into those things. Because too often within, I think, education, but probably just across the culture we try to go for the quickest fix we can get. Those can be good. Like you can prevent a kid from committing suicide and that is good. If we can get at why that kid's. state reached a point where that was what was becoming their viable option in their mind. That's where we're gonna create that long-term induced change. And I think that's what we're trying to do in the, in the system. We're trying to come in and help those folks who know what works, but maybe they need to understand like, what does it actually address addressing? What is it actually changing? Or they know it's not working, and we can come in and say like, why isn't it working with them? Getting at those questions, I think does require that, that higher level viewpoint right at first, so that you can have confidence in what you're doing in those like ground level interventions.

[00:41:47] **Tim Koller:** That is wonderful. And as you think about the growing tide of. How much anxiety, depression, suicidality is impacting the youth of today. You're shining a light into that darkness and you're equipping people to be able to actually address those concerns with long-term solutions because of the transformation of these school systems. So thank you for the work that you're doing through the school counseling mental health initiative here at Denver Seminary. Adam, as we wrap up our conversation, I'm curious, is there something that we've not talked about that before we close, we really wanna make sure we capture in this conversation?

[00:42:21] **Adam Wilson:** I think the thing I would just emphasize is it's working. There's, there's a whole lot of. Doom and doom scrolling out there right now. And even when you look at the statistics, the, the sense that everybody is just on this precipitous down slide I think disregards the fact that there are millions of people that are fighting hard support kids and support families, and support educators, and it is working. And so what, what I think what I would put out there is just that there is so much hope. Um, and that's the thing I've just been, I mean, I believed it already. I think as a clinician I knew that 'cause I'd seen it in people's lives. But watching this happen time and time again, just partnering with these remarkable people across all these districts and my team. Um, just watching the our kind of joint joy of watching the impact roll out and watching these, these

schools and seeing these individuals make an impact in people's lives. Again, I'm coming off the high of that focus group I just came out of with. It's astounding stories of these kids' lives has just been completely altered because of people investing in them, people seeing them for who they are, people taking that time. And so I think I would say is like we, we are getting after suicide, we are attacking it. Um, we are attacking anxiety, we are attacking depression rates. We are attacking belonging and connectedness, and the initiative I think represents, um, and we get to represent. That battle front. Um, and I think that's, that feels a little melodramatic, but I don't, I don't think it really is. I think this is where the front is for youth mental health. It's in schools. so I think whatever people can do, whether it's through the initiative or through their local schools or through their churches or, or wherever it is that they can get behind this fight, to push, it's working and it is absolutely worth doing.

[00:44:23] **Tim Koller:** Thank you for sharing that, and thank you for the work that you're doing through the initiative. Well friends, thank you for choosing to spend some time with us. We're grateful for your interest, support and prayers. Until next time, may the Lord bless you.