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Episode 52: Summer Learning: How We Can Support You

Becky Lewis: Hello listeners, today Brandie is back to help me continue our conversation that we previously had about extended learning programs.

Just as a reminder to our listeners, one of the major campaign components for the West Virginia Campaign for grade level reading is extended learning, and this is a focus of the campaign because research studies that have been conducted over many years indicate that on average, students lose skills over the summer; however, not all students experience average losses and summer learning loss tends to be disproportionate when it comes to our low-income students. Low-income students lose a substantial amount of skills in reading during the summer. While their higher income peers often make gains or stay about the same. And the loss of knowledge and educational skills also occur during these summer months, and it's cumulative over the course of a student career. So, this really widens the achievement gap between low- and upper-income students, and that's the whole focus of the campaign for grade level, reading is decreasing that achievement gap.

Brandie Turner: You know that's right, Becky and I think most people don't realize that the loss is cumulative, and so it just further widens the gap year after year after year. If it's not addressed, and through the pandemic, we have seen that students who may not have been impacted. In previous years it might have been impacted now due to, you know, just the environment and situation that we're all facing.

Becky Lewis: Right, so Brandie and the last episode we interviewed Christy Schwartz from the West Virginia Department of Education about the summer S.O.L.E program. And Brandie, just thanks for being here again today. I would really appreciate it if you could provide a snapshot of that conversation to any listeners that we have today that may not have heard that episode.

Brandie Turner: Sure, of course. So, during our interview, Christie shared some really great lessons learned from the summer school programs that she helped

facilitate, and how those programs might improve this coming summer. So, what did they learn? What things needed to stay? What things needed to change? Those types of things, and one of her suggestions is to partner with community organizations for support and that includes our team here at the June Harless Center.

So, what I thought would be helpful for our listeners is for us to share more about how our center might help support their programs.

Becky Lewis: Yeah Brandie, I think that is a great idea. I think that there are many people throughout the state that are unaware of the support that we provide here. Let's talk about how we can help in two different ways.

So, the very first way involves our early and elementary learning specialists, and they can specifically help for pre-K through 5th grade plans for extended learning. Now that we have been named as one of West Virginia Department of Education Technical Assistance Centers, we go beyond that literacy component that used to be our major focus.

Brandie Turner: Exactly, Becky and I think that also an unknown is that we have been named one of those technical assistance centers. So now we are titled in the early and elementary Technical Assistance Center, and we abbreviate that L tech and what that means is our team has the capacity to support programs and developing plans not just for literacy like we have in the past, but also to include math, science, social studies, and integrating all of those areas together in a way that really engages our students.

So, what that means is we could help summer programs think through the structure of their program, the types of activities that they might provide and how those activities connect to state standards so that we can combat that summer learning loss.

Becky Lewis: I'm really glad that you mentioned the need to connect the activities with state standards Brandie. I know that this is a really important piece that Christy also addressed. We know that all students are in need of support over the summer to reduce the academic loss that we've seen during the pandemic. So, it's really vital that programs include time for academic support as well.

Brandie Turner: And really Becky, what immediately comes to mind for me is a conversation I was just having with Brittany, another learning specialist in our office, and we were talking about how we are going to support some kindergarten teachers in a county on how to embed academics into play. And play into academics and I think this notion also applies to our summer learning programs because it doesn't have to be one or the other. And I think programs often isolate them out. But they can focus on academics in a way that is still quote-unquote camp like so that it keeps the enthusiasm high for students that are attending and just makes it more engaging.

So, for example, I once taught at a summer camp. This was one of my favorites and the focus of the camp was on dinosaurs. And so, throughout the camp, we read nonfiction texts about different types of dinosaurs. We made dinosaur tracks using different patterns. The children designed their own dinosaur and labeled it, and then I also had them write a news article about the first sighting of the dinosaur, and we did so much more. But those are just a few examples uhm, of how I was able to incorporate many of the standards into this project in a way that kept the children engaged.

Becky Lewis: It sounds like it was really engaging, and a lot of fun and I really wish I had been able to participate in that camp with you. And you know Brandie, you bring up a great point about extended learning programs, not having to choose between fun and academics. I know that many organizations and school districts when they're planning, they're really thinking and keeping those students in mind who are already academically behind, and so they take this more traditional approach to summer school, which is like an extended school time for those students.

However, what we know from research is that our students who are behind academically continue to fall behind during summer break, not just because they don't have those academic experiences, but they're not having those rich learning opportunities that their peers receive, such as going on family vacations and trips to the museums and zoos. We know that all of those experiences work to build their knowledge and vocabulary of the world around them, so that's why it's really critical not only do extended learning programs provide students with that academic support. But they also introduce students to topics that they wouldn't

encounter at home or at school, and it incorporates those hands-on experiences that they would be missing out on.

Brandie Turner: That's really a great point to make, and we know that building knowledge and increasing those experiences for our students will help them academically by increasing their knowledge about those topics. But it also helps them socially and behaviorally as well, and that's another impact that we've seen through this pandemic, especially as they interact and explore these topics with their peers with other adults with those museum curators, whoever it may be. So, another way that our team can support summer programming is really by aiding counties and districts and building those strong Community partnerships with stakeholders or by thinking about ways that the partners that they already have can work together to combine their efforts to enhance the summer programming opportunities that they.

Becky Lewis: Right, Brandie and I know in the past we've assisted with training programs with volunteers from Energy Express, so that's always an option as well. We're always happy to work with our district leaders and community partners to serve their students in any way possible.

Brandie Turner: Becky, I think this is a great place for me to mention to our listeners, wow they can connect with us if they want support for their program.

Becky Lewis: I think you're right. I think this would be a great place.

Brandie Turner: So, on our team there are seven of us learning specialists and we each support certain counties across the state. And the show notes we will be sure to link a map of the state and what specialist is assigned to which county. So, if we have a listener that wants to reach out, they can simply email the learning specialist assigned to that county and we'll see how best to support your needs from there.

Becky Lewis: Great! So, supporting our districts and community partners with their programs is one type of support that we offer. But let's switch gears for a minute and talk about the other way in which we can support extended year programs. So, this is by discussing the services that the June Harless Center can provide, and we have many teams at the center and one of the teams that we have is our steam team. And they can provide programs and they can provide

support to programs and developing summer learning programs that include different project focuses. So, what we've done is we've invited our colleague, J.D. Maue, who is a member of the Steam team to talk to us a little more about the services that can be offered through them. J.D. thank you for being here and welcome onto the show.

J.D. Maue: Well, I appreciate y'all having me here. I've heard a lot about the podcast. I'm excited to have an opportunity to join you all. I hope there's some forgiveness involved since this is my first podcast ever.

Brandie Turner: No forgiveness J.D.. We'll go easy on you. We're really happy that you're here with us today and we're really thrilled to share the additional services of the June Harless Center, because often we talk about our team and what our team can provide. And so, J.D., just to catch you up a little bit we've been talking about summer programming and how our EL TAC team can support programs and counties across the state. But we thought it would be helpful for you to share how the Steam team can do the same, but in a different capacity, of course. So first, can you just talk to us about the different services that your team provides?

J.D. Maue: Sure, I'd be happy to! So, you know our team provides services to many counties. The majority of the counties that we work with don't have all the opportunities, and don't have all the equipment that may be necessary to do. Some of the things that we do. So, when we go to counties when we're contracted with counties, we work with them and we do, you know obviously we're the Steam team, so we do science, technology, engineering, math, arts, all of those things are combined in the things that we do. We do a lot of robotics. We do outdoor learning.

I love how you guys have mentioned that you really want everything to be standards based and the things that we do are standards based as well as being engaging for these teachers and the students. So, what we'll do is we'll go into a county and do a training on something. And when we do the training, we give them not only all the support that we can bring but we also bring the equipment so they can see how it works and then you know they can see the step-by-step the things that they need to follow to be able to handle that equipment. We can provide them with equipment to take to their classrooms. And like I said, it's very standards based, but at the same time the kids don't really see, which is a plus

and which can help to keep it engaging through very hands-on things and like I said.

There are things that we can bring into the county that the county wouldn't typically have access to. So, we're bringing these things into these students that would otherwise not have those chances and also when we do it, we bring support to those teachers. You know we're available to even come to those counties and help those teachers bring those things into the classroom. So, I think we provide unique opportunities for the students and the teachers and I'm excited to be here discussing it.

Brandie Turner: I love that J.D..

Becky Lewis: Yeah, I was just going to agree with that and say that I love that you're able to offer that support for educators and lending out equipment so that they can have their hands on some of that equipment that they may not have access to in their counties. So, J.D., Brandie and I've been talking about the June Harless Center and the summer support that we offer to program. And we know that your team has had the opportunity to work really closely with Logan County and that this summer you're going to be working with Summers County to support their extended learning programming. So, can you just share a little bit of information about what that support looks like?

J.D. Maue: Sure, so that support looks a lot like kind of what I had already talked about. We're bringing in programs that are very content based but also are project based and things that do provide are engaging. I think what everybody is looking for with their summer programs, we understand that in these summer programs you know teachers are not looking to just grind away with these students on things that they think they're missing, but as you guys have stated about these opportunities, you talk about the zoos and museums and things like that.

We're sort of bringing those kinds of things to the school that way these students can experience these things that they won't see as being an academic grind. They're very camp like activities that like how you guys have used that term because these are summer camps, so we're looking. At project-based things robotics-based things, some really exciting science programs get into forensics. And bone structures and just trying to find out you know who committed the

crime and water testing and we're able to bring these things in. And the interesting thing I've always found about our team is each member of our team has a very different background. I have a math background. The other two have science backgrounds and we all have more time than the teachers to just research these new programs, these new, exciting, engaging things that are out there in education. We can then bring them to those educators and allow them to bring them to their students, So, it's a situation where we are giving those educators the ability to kind of stay on top of the new things, new and exciting things that are happening in STEAM education So, that's really exciting and something that we hope we can continue to bring to these camps.

Brandie Turner: Well J.D. I know as a previous teacher in the classroom like yourself that teachers don't have that time and so I'm certain that they appreciate having that support and insight and research that you provide them to support them through. You know, engaging their students in that learning process. So, thank you for doing that. I also know that your team does have limited capacity, you can't reach every county in the state unless we clone you a few times. So, I get really excited thinking about how our team of learning specialists can collaborate with your Steam team to help provide some of those professional learning opportunities to additional counties across the state that you might not be able to reach on your own.

One way I think we could easily do this is and you kind of touched on this a little bit, but we have what we call a lending library at the June Harvest Center that houses a lot of those learning tools that you mentioned. So, can you share with us a little bit more specifically about that?

J.D. Maue: Sure, Brandie. I talked about the fact that we have a lot of these innovative things that we can bring into the classrooms with the teachers, and it's hard for some of these counties to get the money together to be able to afford to bring these things into the classroom. So, we have what we call a lending library, in which we have things ranging from you know, fish nets for outdoor learning all the way up to VEX robotics and Tello drone. iPads for coding things and so we do have just a very wide variety of things that are there, and these are certainly things that we can bring into counties.

Teachers can go online or talk to their EL TAC representative for their county. And they can find out how to just simply have these things brought to their classroom so that they may use them for a week or two or however long they may want to in order to bring these new and exciting tools into the classroom. And it could be a situation where it becomes something you know that the county looks at and says, you know, look at what's going on in this classroom, look how well they're doing with this; their students test scores are increasing by us bringing this equipment. And maybe we should look at, you know, purchasing some of this equipment and bringing it in.

And the nice thing is that when they do that, we like to go in and train the teachers on how to really use this in a classroom. You know it's harder to see how it hit transitions into the standards so we can show them, "Hey, this is where these standards are coming up, even though you know it, it's hard to see." And you can see where these standards are then showing up and the students will come back to them and ask those questions you know, "well what does this mean?" And then you can tell them and you're like, uh, oh, I see now I'm hitting that standard, So, having the ability for them to come in and get those things, but also to get some training from us to let them know how those things are going to connect. So, I think the lending library is definitely a positive, and we certainly would like to see it being utilized more than it is at this point.

Brandie Turner: So, J.D., some of the tools that you mentioned that you have as an elementary teacher I have no idea what you're talking about. It was like a foreign language. So, keeping our audience in mind, typically much of our audience serves pre-K through 5th grade. Let's talk about some of those specific items in the lending library that our team not being steam specialists could provide professional learning support for counties, and I think many educators may be familiar with the Foss kits. I know some school systems use them, but those are a great way to incorporate investigations into summer programs explorations.

But some educators may not be familiar. So, in a nutshell and J.D. correct me if I'm wrong basically those kits provide all the materials that an educator, a teacher or summer program would need to complete an investigation on a specific topic. If I remember correctly from my days in the classroom, they include a teacher

guide, student materials, measuring tools, consumables; basically, everything you need.

J.D. Maue: I agree they do. They even contain videos of them being used in a classroom, so that you can see exactly what's going on.

Becky Lewis: Yeah, those false kits are great in elementary classroom. And another thing that I know that we have in the lending library that is also great are Make Do Sets and these are easy to incorporate into your classroom for innovation and engineering or summer programming. And for anyone who doesn't know what Make Do's are, they are these little connector pieces almost like screws that allow old cardboard boxes or broken-down pieces of cardboard to be connected and engineered into anything imaginable so students can sit down in design things like robots or structures that go along with whatever your topic is, and you're investigating, and they can create it out of cardboard and these connectors.

J.D. Maue: I agree, Becky. They are great examples of things that can be brought into the elementary classroom. And you're right, the innovation and creativity that's allowed through that set is fantastic. And keeping with that kind of same idea, we also have Little Bits. So Little Bits are a kind of an electronic play set where they get to be able to put together things that will make noise, will, you know, create lighting, they will be able to make things move by connecting electrical pieces, the interesting thing about little bits is it's mostly with magnets.

Another one we have is Rockenbach. So Rockenbach, it's kind of like Legos on steroids. They put these things together but by putting them together they can build ramps that can build pulley systems. They build bridges where they have to have different ways of strengthening those bridges. So just a really interesting and again you know you can go step by step and they can all make the same thing, and then have to make adjustments from there. Or you can kind of give them the freedom to be creative, as creative as they want to be. So that's you know, another exciting thing about Rockenbach.

Another one, as well as straw rockets. Straw rockets are a really simple idea. It's cardboard and clay and straws, you know, drinking straws more or less, you know, and they're able to build rockets. And they and they can make their own rockets, and they and they get again, a creative side, they can do all kinds of decorative

things with those rockets, and then they get to use pneumatic power to be able to fire those rockets. And then the interesting thing about strong rockets is kind of towards the end they get into collecting data and analyzing data, which is something that we all know is very, very important moving forward for these students. So, it's a really early time for them to get a chance to see that in action.

Another one we have is Sphero Robotics. So, one of the things I always like to show when I want to do Sphero is there's an interesting YouTube video out there with Former President Obama and he's walking in the street, and somebody introduces him to Sphero Robotics, and he thinks it's the coolest thing ever, he's playing with it. So, it's really neat. But it gives them a real early look block programming and coding.

Becky Lewis: I think this conversation is making me want to race over to the lending library just to get some of those tools out to get set my hands on, to explore with because there are some that we have over there that I unfortunately didn't have exposure to in the classroom, and I really wish I would have had them in the classroom. So, something else I remember seeing over there J.D. were children, innovation kits and our lending library. So, what are those?

J.D. Maue: Children innovation kits are somewhat similar to Little Bits, and they do involve electrical circuitry. But they're designed for smaller hands and students that don't have quite the digital control that the, you know, the hand eye coordination to handle some of those other things. So, it's kind of like little bits. But at the pr-k, K, 1 level. So that they still get the idea of the circuitry, but it's a little bit easier for them to connect things, it mostly involves wires, as opposed to magnets, and you know, again, that creativity is still really there. They can build little robots you know, little simple robots that will again make noise, light up, and move using those electronic circuitries, but like I said it's that kind of the pre-k, K, 1 level which is really nice to be able to bring something like that that does kind of trigger those thoughts.

Becky Lewis: I love that that we have tools available for those smaller hands like you were saying, J.D., those who don't have as much of the fine muscle control as the older kiddos. So, we have talked a lot about a lot of different support that we can offer. So, to simplify it, if you are listening today and you are in West Virginia and would like support with planning for summer programming or you just want

to learn more about our lending library, be sure to check. Out the show notes for that map that Brandie mentioned earlier for the early and elementary learning specialists assigned to your county and just send them an email and contact them and they will give you whatever information that you need.