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## Episode 51: Tips and Lessons from Summer S.O.L.E.

**Becky Lewis:** Hello listeners, thanks for tuning in today. My co-host, Samantha Stadtler, is not going to be joining us but instead I have my colleague Brandie Turner. Brandie, thanks for being here.

**Brandie Turner:** Becky, thank you so much for having me again. I am always excited to have the opportunity to discuss the importance of our Campaign for Grade-level Reading here in West Virginia and have new people to discuss it with.

**Becky Lewis:** Well, I'm glad you brought up the campaign, Brandie, because we know that part of our work at the West Virginia Campaign for Grade-level Reading is tied to extended learning. And we know the importance of providing extended learning opportunities to our students that are engaging and well planned is very important, especially during those times when school is not in session. So we're talking about before school, after school or even during summer vacation.

**Brandie Turner:** Yeah, that's right. Becky and like you mentioned, we know that extended learning is a major component of the work that we do here and now more than ever. It is vital that our students have that chance to enhance their learning through. Quality after school and summer programming, so it seems a little early, but now is actually the time in the school year where planning should be happening for those summer offerings.

So what we wanted to do today is provide the organizers of those programs with some insight into what worked last summer and ways to improve programs for this coming summer. We have invited back to the show, Christy Schwartz, a coordinator from the West Virginia Department of Education. She plays an integral role in the summer school program provided by the Department of Education, and we know that not all of our listeners take part in that particular program, but the lessons learned from them can be applied to any summer program throughout the state. So welcome back to the show, Christy.

**Christy Schwartz:** Thanks, Brandie! It's great to be here. I appreciate you all having me on the show today.

**Becky Lewis:** Christy, I'm just reiterating what Brandy said, it's really great to have you here to discuss summer programming. So for our listeners who may have missed your previous episode, can you provide an overview of the summer Sol program?

**Christy Schwartz:** Sure, as part of the pandemic recovery efforts, the West Virginia Department of Education allocated the entire \$34 million that we received from the federal government for the second round of pandemic relief funding. We allocated that directly to counties for the summer school program, and S.O.L.E. stands for student opportunities for learning and engagement. Uhm, so the department created this program to provide funding for counties so that they could offer all K12 students meaningful, in-person, research-based summer learning experiences and we wanted them to be interactive, engaging and to meet both the academic and social emotional needs of our students. We knew that pandemic recovery would require a sustained long-term focus on their overall well-being. So, we just wanted to make sure that we had that focus with our summer programs as well.

**Brandie Turner:** That is so important, Christy, and I know from talking with you previously that there have been some really great successes out of this program. I'm sure you have many stories that you could share, but what would you say is the overall success of the program last summer.

**Christy Schwartz:** I wanted to share with you a little bit about the extent of the program in the state, how many sites we had, and all of that. So, we're really proud of the work that happened last year. There were 280 weeks of summer sole programming offered across the state at 476 sites. And that included 221 elementary sites, 140 middle school sites, and 115 high school sites. So, we were really pleased with that um and those programs offered a lot of hands-on engaging opportunities for the students that they typically didn't have during the summer.

Typically, summer learning would focus more on remediation and helping students catch up, and we had that focus. Also, we had interventions and enrichment, but we wanted there should be a big emphasis on having something

that was engaging and fun for the students so that they would get up in the morning and be excited to go to their summer school programs. And I don't have any stories right now about a particular student. I can share with you that we did a survey of the county contacts for summer, so last year and the majority of them agreed or strongly agreed that all of the students were engaged and excited about the program and that they made significant social, emotional and academic growth over the summer, so that was really exciting, and parents also agreed that their students had positive social emotional experiences last year that they were engaged and excited about what they were learning and that their confidence increased and they felt more prepared for the upcoming school year. So, we were really pleased with that as well.

**Brandie Turner:** I think you as a program should be very pleased and just the numbers alone. I don't know what the numbers of programs that were offered pre pandemic were, but I'm not the exact number, but I know for sure that the numbers that you shared are drastically higher than what was offered before, so just the fact that students are given additional opportunities. This is a win in my opinion.

So certainly, things didn't happen without a few barriers. So do you have any challenges that you can share that some programs faced, and you know were they over to overcome those challenges?

**Christy Schwartz:** Sure, due to the timing of when we received that Pandemic Relief Fund the counties were on a pretty short time frame to plan and implement these programs. Some of the counties were already planning summer programming, so those counties were able to expand pretty easily and quickly. But for counties who hadn't planned on having the money to provide summer programs, they were under kind of a tight time constraint, so that was a barrier. The department offered weekly technical assistance meetings, because we knew that they would need help you know trying to figure out how to put together a program in such a short amount of time, so we helped them get their programs up and running over for the most part that was successful. We had some hiccups here and there. Most of what the parents indicated that they would like to change for next year had to do with communication. Communication about schedules knowing more about what their students were going to be learning

every day and more about the bus transportation schedules and that kind of thing. They were really pleased with the programming that was offered. They just wanted to, you know, have a little bit more information. So, I think that was definitely something that counties planned to do a little better this year.

The bulk of the counties also indicated that they intended to start planning earlier this year and also give teachers and staff more planning time in the schools as well. And one universal challenge that the counties all experienced last year was staffing challenges. So, they had a lot of trouble recruiting support staff. For the most part and some professional staff as well. Some of the things that they did to remedy that were they reached out personally to staff that they felt would be a good fit or might be interested in teaching or in driving the bus or doing other things that that needed to be done in the service. The program, some of them consolidated the number of sites that they were going to offer because of the staffing issues so that they could consolidate their bus routes and so that they could have enough cooks and custodians and that type of thing and teachers as well.

They all listed staff engagement and enthusiasm, though, as one of their biggest successes. So, I feel like that shows that even though staffing was a big challenge for all of them, the people who did participate and who chose to bid on those jobs were really excited and engaged and dedicated to providing a great experience for the students. So, that was really good to see and to know about.

**Becky Lewis:** I think those staff successes were there because unlike traditional summer school, these were planned out a little differently, like you mentioned. And I know from talking to a lot of my counties across the state, staff got to help choose the topics that were being explored, and we know that when you're passionate about something, that passion goes through to the students and you're using richer vocabulary and you're getting more out of it. So, it's kind of contagious and it kind of just grows. So, I figure that's a big reason that you saw that in your survey, which is so exciting.

**Christy Schwartz:** That definitely was true in many of the counties. Some of them didn't involve staff and planning, but that is definitely one of the strategies that we have talked about in our technical assistance meetings this year, and I think

many more of them are planning to use that as a strategy to recruit staff members.

**Becky Lewis:** And I think that's a smart decision to do that, Christy. We also know that summer programming has shifted since the onset of the pandemic, and we have seen some changes. So, what changes did you see happening last summer that you would recommend for the programs to keep in place as they continue planning for this year?

**Christy Schwartz:** Like I mentioned before, traditional summer programs focused on helping students catch up, and they were designed really similarly to the school year and the school day, that wasn't always the case. Some counties were doing things very differently in creating engaging programs, but for the most part funding was limited, and so the counties focused their funds on students and on topics where they felt they would be the most needed and for summer. Although there was a movement towards creating programs that teachers, students, and families were excited about because they had the money to do that. And because we kind of put that in into their requirements that we wanted them to, you know, do a lot of enrichment. And that means students like we said wanted to get up early in the morning during their summer vacation because they got to go program robots, or they were learning about insects as State Park, or they were designing and launching rockets or participating in NASA simulations. They created beautiful works of art. And so many more things that really made them want to be there every day and so that helped out with attendance as well.

There were even math interventions but those were also for the most part implemented in a way that was engaging for students, and that made them feel successful and proud of their camp. So, I hope that energy will continue for this coming summer and beyond. We have two more years officially of the project. Because that was really a beautiful thing to witness. Our 36-member site visit team went out and collected pictures and video footage from all over the state, some of which is included in the summer soul sendoff video that the department used as part of their connectEd Series, and I get like a little bit teary every time I see that because it's just phenomenal, what our administrators, teachers, and service personnel were able to accomplish last summer. And it's so wonderful to

see that at a time, especially when the pandemic has created so much struggle for everyone.

**Brandie Turner:** I really loved that video, Christy! We'll be sure to include that in the show notes that way others can view as well. Because I think you're right, I think we need that positive energy around education in general right now, but definitely summer learning because you know teachers and students are burning out and we want them to know that it can be an exciting time.

So, you shared some overall things. If you had to narrow down just some key components of what you feel summer programs should be sure to include in their plans for this upcoming summer, what would you narrow those down to?

**Christy Schwartz:** Be well, our original requirements for counties who apply and receive the grant funding included several things that were evidence based, based on research out of the Wallace Foundation, the Rand Corporation, and other organizations that do a lot of summer learning, research, and education.

So, I think that we have to make sure we keep using those evidence-based practices. And the consensus of research shows that to be most effective, summer programs have to be at least four days a week for four to six weeks. And they have to have intervention and an enrichment component. They should be all day for students from kindergarten through 8th grade. And in order for all students to be able to access and benefit from the programming, they need to provide transportation and meals because we know that those are the most important things for our students who are food insecure and housing insecure, they don't often have transportation to get to a summer program, and so, we just have to make sure we provide. Those were some of the requirements last year, like I said, and so we want to keep those high expectations because we know that's what works best for students.

**Brandie Turner:** I'm so glad that you mentioned having an intervention and an enrichment opportunity for students because I think some programs may feel like they need to be all in one way or the other and letting them know that it is OK to do both. And there's ways that you can do both, I think is important.

**Becky Lewis:** Christy, we know that building community partnerships is really critical and important for our school systems because it just strengthens all the

learning that takes place. So, what are some new opportunities available for summer programs to build community partnerships this year?

**Christy Schwartz:** I'm glad you mentioned the Community partnership piece because last year we had so many community partners involved with Energy Express 4H extension offices. We had 21st century learning, Community Learning Center programs. We had the June Harlow Center helping out some counties with their STEM programming, and of course you all the early learning specialists with the June Harless Center we're helping out with some of the planning and implementation. And that's just the tip of the iceberg with the community partners who were involved last year, who I'm sure will continue to be involved this year.

But this year, as you know, in partnership with institutions of higher education, the West Virginia Department of Education has started 4 statewide technical assistance centers to address the loss of opportunities and time due to COVID-19 and a variety of challenges and risks that existed prior to the pandemic. So before technical assistance centers include the early and elementary learning Technical Assistance Center, which we sometimes shorten and just say tack instead of technical center and that is in partnership with Marshall University. This team TAC, which stands for science, technology, engineering, math and the arts, is the EA and Steam that is in partnership with West Virginia University. We also have a behavioral mental health TAC at Marshall University and the accessibility and transition stack, which is in Romney, WV, and those are all fully operational this school year, so they started this year, and they are providing services to all regions of the state. Uhm so the STEM TAC just recently met with me and some of the county contacts for the summer school programs and discussed with them how they can provide immersive steam experiences in their summer programs for particularly middle school students. So, 6th through 8th grade. And they are offering free immersive steam experiences as well as a kit that teachers can keep and use for future classrooms of students. So that's really exciting and the county contacts were really excited to learn about that. And to find out how they can become involved with that and get the student specialists in their summer program from this summer. And also, the Early and Elementary Learning TAC is where the Campaign for Grade-level Reading is housed and has always been available to county. But I'm excited about the expanded opportunities for

counties to receive assistance with elementary math, programming and planning as well as literacy. So that's something new that's happening this year that wasn't available last year.

**Brandie Turner:** And I think one thing to note for our listeners who are within the state of West Virginia but may not be a school system, is that some of these resources that Christie has identified, and again we can put links to their websites in the show notes are resources that are available to many community organizations in the state as well. The services are not necessarily limited to school systems, which is the focus of the Summer S.O.L.E. So, keep that in mind as you're listening.

**Christy Schwartz:** Thanks so much for having me Becky and Brandie. It's always good to touch base with you guys and talk about education in West Virginia.