

Lessons from the Lone Star State:
**How Districts in Texas
are Thinking About Summer
Program Sustainability**

**CHARLOTTE
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Welcome to the Wallace Summer Learning podcast series. I'm Charlotte Phillips, senior officer for strategy and operations at The Wallace Foundation, and I'll be the host for today's episode. In this series, we delve into an important area of our youth development portfolio: Summer learning. This episode examines a critical yet tricky issue around summer learning programming, how to sustain it. Ensuring that young people have high-quality and engaging learning experiences they can go back to summer after summer, has been a longstanding focus and challenge for the field. Inconsistent funding, shifts in enrollment, and the often transient nature of summer staffing all play a part. Sustainability is an even hotter topic now because summer learning programs have proliferated due to the massive infusion of federal funding through the American Rescue Plan. But that money won't last forever. Funds must be obligated by September 24, so now is the time for program leaders to proactively plan for the future.

In Texas, many districts have already been doubling down on summer programs. In 2019, the state passed House Bill Three, a sweeping and historic school finance bill that created innovative new funding opportunities around evidence-based strategies. The Texas Education Agency oversees this work. One of these strategies, Additional Days School Year, or ADSY, has a summer learning option. This includes formula-based funding to provide up to 30 additional days of instruction to mitigate pandemic-related learning loss and prevent summer slide for elementary school students who tend to lose some of the achievement gains they made during the school year. Under ADSY, a minimum of two hours of instruction each day is required. Districts can also apply to be part of the ADSY Planning and Execution Program, or PEP, which goes deeper, providing funding for an array of supports, from technical assistance providers to evidence-based resources. Districts and charter schools that participate in ADSY PEP also commit to implementing a robust summer program, including a full program day with at least three hours of academics and two hours of enrichment. However, funding for these additional PEP supports, which have been provided by a combination of federal recovery dollars and philanthropic

support from Texas Impact Network, Educate Texas, and The Wallace Foundation is set to end in summer 2024.

Leaders from the two Texas districts have joined us today to talk about how they're thinking about sustaining planning and continuous improvement in the face of upcoming funding changes. Kasie Roden leads summer learning programming for the Grand Prairie Independent School District, which is part of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. And Lisa McNeill is accelerated learning program lead at the Varnett Public School in the Houston area. Joining them as our moderator today is BiNi Coleman, who has more than 25 years of experience working with and developing highly effective program systems and organizations. BiNi serves as a part of this ADSY summer learning community facilitation team, and has worked most closely with the ADSY school systems that completed their first planning year and are in the implementation phase of summer programming. Thank you all for being here. I would now like to turn the podcast to our moderator, BiNi Coleman.

BINI COLEMAN

Thank you, Charlotte. It is such a pleasure and an honor to be here. Thanks for having me. We're going to dive right in. First of all, I would love for both of you, to just ground us a little bit in a high-level overview of your school system and your summer programs. If you could just describe that for the audience, so we know where you are and what is the local context. So let's start with Lisa, can you tell us a little about your school system and your programs?

LISA MCNEILL

Good morning BiNi and Charlotte. Thank you so much for having me today. The Varnett Public School is a public charter school located in the Houston metropolitan area. We are a Title I school with a very high emergent bilingual population that's still continuing to grow. We serve 1,200 students currently, and our summer program hosts about 300 students. We have three campuses, but we consolidated to serve two of the campuses at the same site to make sure that we were being efficient in making the best use of our funds. We have a really robust program and we're looking to make that program even stronger this next and upcoming year.

KASIE RODEN

Hi BiNi. Hi Charlotte. Thank you for having me. Grand Prairie, ISD is a district that is right between Dallas and Fort Worth in Texas. We serve 26,000 students. A large majority of our students are in free and reduced lunch, about 75% of them, which qualifies us to be a Title I district. We have just completed our third year of the ADSY program, and we call our

program within our district My Camp. My Camp is a fun academic and enrichment program where we have academics in the morning, enrichment in the afternoon, and we engage about 700 students for that month of learning. Through this program, the academics focuses on two hours of reading and an hour and a half of math each day. And in the afternoon, our program has enrichment. Enrichment is where a lot of the fun comes in place, but we have sneaky learning, too, because what we do is we embed some of those skills into our enrichment program. Our enrichment focuses on things like social emotional learning tied to the reading that they had that morning, and academics. Our enrichment has screen and non-screen options. We incorporate STEM, fine arts, and so many field trips. We want our kids to have fun so that when they think about their summer, they talk about the good, fun experiences that they had. And that everyone, our parents, our students, and our teachers are really satisfied with how they spent their summer.

BINI COLEMAN

So that all is wonderful, and both of you just talking about that makes me want to come participate in your summer programs already. So, can't wait to hear more! Moving into sustainability in particular, when we talk about sustainability, funding naturally comes to mind first, but as we know, sustainability is about so much more than just money. What are some of the other important components of sustainability, and what are you doing to advance your work in those areas? We'll start with Kasie.

KASIE RODEN

As we enter our fourth year of programming, sustainability is so important to us. One key factor that we have is really engaging the people into our program. How do we make sure that everyone understands what this program brings to our students, our families, and our communities? How does it create a lasting impact? And in order to do that, we had to create a steering committee. Our steering committee is really the key to our success. The steering committee is comprised of people from every department across the district that is engaging in summer learning, which, in our district, is everyone.

We have transportation, food services, we have facilities in there, our campus leadership, our district leadership, teaching and learning department. Everyone, including special education, parent engagement, is involved. And we meet about once a month, going over ideas for the summer, what are our needs, and because we have this discussion openly and with everyone involved, everyone understands what this can bring to our students. So really engaging the people is what keeps our program

going. And, we've had a lot of success! We've had the highest attendance that we've had in our district in the summer program just this past summer. And that's because we engage everyone. We have parent focus groups. We complete surveys with our families and our students and our staff to see what worked and what didn't. And now, as a result of that, our students have a waiting list. Parents are talking to each other. It's really kind of a grassroots marketing. And they are requesting, "When can we sign up for summer camp? How do I get involved? My child loved it last year, we can't wait for his little sister to come." All of those things are part of what keeps it going, keeps teachers motivated. We have more teachers applying for our positions than we've had spots open. Because our student enrollment is so high and engaged, the teachers see the benefit throughout the classrooms, throughout the school year. And now they want to be a part of it, too, because they hear about all the fun things that we're doing.

BINI COLEMAN

So that, what you just said is huge to have a waiting list of teachers, not just parents and students even. What did you do to generate this interest and how long did it take before you kind of turn the corner into having a waiting list?

KASIE RODEN

Our leadership has really been focused on: How can we care for our teachers? We have a kickoff at the beginning of the year and it's so fun. We just want to engage the teachers in what summer learning could feel like. This isn't your traditional summer school. We had to make that shift from what previous summer learning looked like to what it looks like now and how can this be a camp atmosphere. So we want our teachers laughing. We have them doing the challenges. Our PD is hands-on, just like we want them to deliver it with the students. We give them shirts and apparel—things to make them feel like they're part of the team. Creating a sense of belonging is a huge part of My Camp, but creating a sense of belonging for the teachers is also a huge part. BiNi, it took about two years for us to build that reputation of fun for teachers. The new staff that came in, they're telling their friends, "Hey, come be on this team with me. Come join My Camp. I want you to teach with me over the summer too, because we have a lot of fun." So it's teachers recruiting other teachers, and that's been really fun and exciting to see.

BINI COLEMAN

That is exciting. Would love to hear from Lisa. What are some of the things that you've done outside of funding to build sustainability for your program?

LISA MCNEILL

So we are at the start of year three and sustainability is at the forefront of our minds. Tonight, I actually host our reflection meeting where we get to come together and talk about what worked really well this summer and what things we'd like to see. So we know that part is super important—the buy-in. And we keep talking about the buy-in, but it makes the difference between whether this is going to go beyond just getting funding, money, bringing that in, and having a program. So, I love some of the stuff my colleague said. And I want to talk more about some of the same thing. We talk more about climate and culture this year because we want to make sure it's an environment that people enjoy coming into. We provide dancing and singing. When our students come off the bus the very first day, they're greeted by a group of staff that's singing and clapping and applauding their participation and the fact that they're showing up. That has built into it being a program that people want to be a part of. So when we talk about how are we going to sustain this beyond the money that we know is key, it's sustaining it by making sure we have people that understand and people that want to be a part of what we're doing. Our theme, and I love that we do a theme every year, was Superheroes Assemble. And we made sure that every field trip, every academic, every STEM activity was able to highlight superheroes that look like you and me. So they were able to walk away understanding the hero lies within each of us. It's not just the people that we see on TV and the superheroes that wear capes. So we look at that to build in what we're doing. And when we talk about the steering committee, the steering committee was just like the teacher force. The first year, we had to beg people to participate. This year, I have people already asking, "Can I be a part of the steering committee? Can I teach, can I participate? Can I be a parent volunteer?" Which is huge. And so, we know the buy-in, the mind shift, the change in how we look at what we're doing, and the excitement that we build. So the marketing was key. Putting out wonderful videos of what they did last year, highlighting the fun activities. We did a big emphasis on STEM. We're moving to be a STEM environment year-round, and we were able to start bringing that together by building that into the summer. So there's lots of different ways to build the sustainability. Once the money is there, it's a matter of bringing in the right people at the right time, but having a variety and a diverse group of people so that we're not doing the same thing, but we're getting better and better outcomes.

One more thing. You mentioned, “How long does it take to build that wait list?” For us, it was one year. The beginning of last summer, there was no one that wanted to work. The cost that it takes to commute back and forth from where they live, The time, the commitment after having a long school year, after coming out of COVID (we had lots of COVID outbreaks last year). This year, we have a wait list. Last year, we had a wait list. So it didn’t take long. Once they knew that the program was well designed, that there was not a lot of work for them to do outside of the classroom. Lesson plans are created. All you have to do is pull the lesson, plan your material, implement. Once they understood that we are here to provide a fun, safe environment for everyone, the wait list came. Before we even walked into the new school year, I had people already emailing, “How do I become a part of the program that you’re going to have next year? And is this going to be a continuation?” That’s exciting because that makes you and the steering committee want to continue to build and do better every year.

BINI COLEMAN

Thank you for some of those examples. For both of you, what’s been your greatest success when it comes to engaging stakeholders around your summer work?

LISA MCNEILL

Knowing that our superintendent is a hundred percent behind success and how that looks in all different avenues (STAR testing, accountability for the district). So, it was really changing how people viewed The Varnett Public School and what we offer. What I always instruct my staff to remember is the only constant is change. So COVID really made us have to walk away and understand what we did before, might have worked and been successful, but it’s not necessarily going to be that way now. So we did start with knowing what the vision was, what we were trying to receive out of this, and we have a mindset shift. So one of the things that I started very early was no longer allowing them to refer to it as summer school. Summer school is punitive. It was for retention promotion purposes. It was for those students who could do the work, they just didn’t show up. So they needed to do attendance or they had to do credit recovery on the upper grades. And so everyone now, if you walk into the school and say, “Hey, do you have a summer school,” they’re going to say, “It’s summer learning.” So the mindset shift really was important because if we believe in what we’re saying and what we’re doing, the outcomes are going to be greater. So that was one of the biggest things. And then the enrichment component, because summer school does not usually contain enrichment. I’ve been part of some I’ve overseen some, but that’s normally not the focus, it is academics. Bringing in the enrichment and making sure that had just as

much time and attention, they had just as many materials and opportunities, and the exposure. We're in Houston, which is a huge place with lots of different cultures exposed. And we made sure to touch upon that. So that made a big difference in what we were able to provide going into even to the first year but the second year. And when you talk about the change of language, about not being punitive, that plays right into SEL, which is just as important. We know coming away from COVID, students and parents walked into organizations after having been home for so long, the anxiety was there. We saw lots of little children who used to once love coming to school not want to do it. So we know we have to understand that that is important and that it plays a role. And so our enrichment incorporates SEL into it as well.

BINI COLEMAN

Kasie, what do you have to add to that?

KASIE RODEN

One of our greatest successes is how we're able to carry the program ideals of engaging the students in academics and enrichment throughout the summer, all the way through the school year. Just because summer program ends doesn't mean that the summer idea stops as well. It continues. Our teachers are reporting that they're using the same strategies, same engagement with academics and enrichment. They're using some of the key things that they've learned through our SEL component in their classrooms all year long. And they're saying that being part of our summer program has actually made them a better teacher, which is so exciting because as district leaders, we want to make sure that all of the time, attention, and money that we're pouring into our summer program is benefiting our students throughout the school year as well. And so those strategies and things, the investment that we put into summer impacts far more than just the 700 kids engaged in our program. It carries through to those teachers and those classrooms where maybe they had students who weren't in our summer program. And they get that opportunity now for that more robust, engaged learning. And it's really exciting to see some of those strategies just carry through throughout the program and create more success within our classrooms.

BINI COLEMAN

That is so important. I've heard that said before, and I think it's just so intelligent and it's part of the RAND research as well as to integrating your summer program and your practices into the fabric of your school district. So sustainability can also look like the extension of those practices into the school year. And just making it part of your district culture at this point

without, you know, necessarily needing additional resources to do so. So thank you so much for that perspective as well. So did you just have a question along those lines in terms of internal, your school districts, did either of you have like a champion within the district? And if you did, how important was that in order to work toward the sustainability of this work? And how did you cultivate that support?

LISA MCNEILL

So we very much had a champion, and it started with our superintendent that just retired in August. She was dead set that this was going to be something that we did, and that we did it well because it was going to have the outcomes of bringing our students back in a way that was going to work for them. So I say that the district has to have true buy-in from every partner internally, because otherwise, when you receive a grant like this, it becomes a compliance checklist. We did it, we're done, move on. And when the grant sunsets, there's nothing, it goes away. I've seen that happen with lots of grants that I've worked with and that I've written, but the buy-in at the district level was the most important. Before we could go outside and sell to others, we had to sell it to ourselves.

And then I was the other champion. I've always known how important afterschool programming is, summer programming is when you live in areas like this, that there's lots of crime and there's lots of other opportunities for our children to engage, and they're not healthy and they're not safe. Having something for them to do is key. So that was my perspective going in. Coming out of that first year, my perspective has grown. I love how we have the intentionality with the academic understanding of what they need, bringing it in. We actually ended up adopting as our district math, the math that we were introduced to—Eureka—through ADSY. So now we have something that's sustainable throughout the year. We're looking to have an afterschool program that's going to mimic what we did in the summer. And I can see this going on for much longer. We would not have had that had we not bought in at the beginning with the district, the finance department, transportation, nutrition, and the academic staff.

KASIE RODEN

In Grand Prairie, our champion also was at the top. Our deputy superintendent, Dr. Pat Lewis, is the person who brought it to our district. And she was on fire about it. Her excitement, you could feel it. Whenever we talked about it in a room, it was actually a tangible feeling that just spread through everyone. She brought everyone together, shared the vision. We were all part of it with her. It was not Dr. Lewis's project, it was

our project. We were here for our kids. And what happened is through the program, it spread. It went to our district department leadership, it was at our school board, it went down to our campus principals who were the ones who were driving that excitement and that fire every single day during the camp. And so it was just a daily excitement, but it all started with that one at the top who said, “This is something we need to do.” And when you have a leader who believes in what you're doing, you get right on board. It just makes it so much easier. But also, it makes it fun. We have a great time. We care just as much for our teachers as we do for our students, and that is really what makes it sustainable and we're very excited to go into our fourth year this year.

BINI COLEMAN

Outstanding. So before I pass it back to Charlotte, I have one last question for both of you, which is, what's your parting advice for summer learning leaders who are beginning this journey or somewhere in the middle and focused on building sustainability?

LISA MCNEILL

That's a great question. Here at Varnett, we received the ADSY grant, but we did not know what it really entailed. I've written grants, I've implemented grants, but when I started, I did not realize the fine details that were going to be required. So one of my pieces of advice would be, truly do that deep dive, look at all of the material, participate in all of the meetings. Sometimes they can be a lot, but they're important because knowing what you're going to walk into and knowing the expectations will help make that first year not such a struggle. Making sure you're using the planning documents. Sometimes you'll find they're not all needed—you might already have a planning timeline that you use for your grant implementation. But if you don't, they have wonderful resources that will guide you through identifying the key people that are going to be participating in that. For our first-year steering committee to the second-year steering committee looks worlds different because I realized what I needed to make it successful. Our new steering committee for this year is going to be a continuous improvement upon what we know and what we've done well. There are some pieces we won't have to retouch, but there are some pieces that will now need to be the emphasis. And knowing what that looks like upfront will help make this a much easier process to get through to where you're now talking sustainability and scaling up. So the partnerships is the other. Making sure you start early marketing and building that bandwidth to have the sustainability. Because sometimes it takes a couple of grant cycles before entities are willing and able to provide funding for you. So if you want to have the Brown Corporation bring in their resources, you need to make

sure you're talking to the Brown Corporation a few years ahead of when you know that you're going to need those funds. So those are the two big pieces. Maybe at the end of this summer, I'll have some more advice. But those are the ones that made the most impact on us.

KASIE RODEN

And I really want to reiterate what Lisa just said: Start early. You can't start early enough when you're planning for the summer, really. Challenges are going to pop up. So when they do, just know that, "Hey, we knew that this was going to come." And just stay positive throughout the whole process. In the end, the outcome is worth all of the effort. When you have all of those students there, all the children having fun, teachers having fun while they're at their jobs during the summer, it makes it so worth it. The students are learning, the outcomes and data show that, and all of the little things that are hard, difficult, challenging right here in the planning process are worth it in the end.

LISA MCNEILL

I have to come back and say fun. We didn't speak on that a lot. The program is fun. My comments from the staff—we do surveys—from the parents, from the community partners, and from the students. And the word that stuck out the most was fun. They enjoyed it. It was not just we're here. We're not just learning. We're not just doing these activities and taking these field trips. We are having fun. And that's the outcome. If you're having fun, the learning's going to come.

CHARLOTTE PHILLIPS

I want to thank each of our speakers for joining me today. And thank you to our listeners for joining us as well. If you want to learn more about planning, implementing, and sustaining summer learning programs, please visit our website at www.wallacefoundation.org.