

Lessons from Rural Communities:
**How Two Districts Are
Reinventing Summer Learning**

**KATHERINE
LEWANDOWSKI**

Welcome to the Wallace Podcast series, “A Hot Time for Summer Learning.” I’m Katherine Lewandowski, senior program officer 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 explores how two rural districts, California’s Mountain Empire Unified School District and Oklahoma’s Eufaula Public Schools, have transformed their summer learning programs to meet the needs of their communities. Rural districts and schools across our country face unique challenges in designing and implementing summer learning programs such as limited funding, attracting and retaining staff, access to community-based organizations and other partners, transportation, and more. Mountain Empire and Eufaula have taken innovative approaches to addressing these barriers. The districts featured today are part of the District Summer Learning Network, which is led by FHI 360 and funded by The Wallace Foundation. This national effort of more than 100 districts and six state education agencies focuses on maximizing the potential of summer learning through coaching, professional development, and peer learning.

The participating districts are building summer learning programs that are rooted in evidence and designed for impact. Leaders from Eufaula and Mountain Empire have joined us today to talk about how they are approaching their summer learning programs and the results they are seeing. Tanika Lane is the 21st century program director and instructional coach with Eufaula Public Schools, and Dr. Patrick Keeley serves as superintendent for Mountain Empire Unified School District. Our moderator today is Liliana Polo-McKenna, a District Summer Learning Network professional learning lead at FHI 360. Thank you all for being here. Liliana, over to you.

**LILIANA
POLO-MCKENNA**

Thank you. I am so excited to be here today to talk about the work of these two districts. Before we dive in, we’d love to learn a little bit more about your respective communities to help ground the conversation.

Can you each share a little bit about your districts, your student populations, and what summer learning looks like in your district?

**DR. PATRICK
KEELEY**

Our school district is located east of San Diego, California. It is a very large geographic area, 660 square miles. We border Mexico and the Imperial County line up to an area called Mount Laguna. It's a very large area where we have students, families all spread out throughout. There's a lot of small little towns that are out here, but no one center in terms of one larger small town, if you will. Our students are all bused both locally to their elementaries and then also to our high school, which kind of sits close to the geographic center of the district. In terms of our population size, we have about 1,800 students. We fluctuate between 16 and 1,800 over the years that I've been here. We have a number of English learners, about a third of our population.

We serve three Native American reservations, on the northern end of the district. It's a variety of different students from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. In terms of our summer learning program, we run that for a four-week period. There's a unique piece to the funding model here where we have to do 30 days, which we can't really get in during the summer, so we do a spring break camp and a fall break camp as well. It's mostly focused on that K to 6 age range, but during the summer we also add in our junior high and high school-age students.

**LILIANA
POLO-MCKENNA**

Thank you. We'll dig into more of what you shared in a minute. Tanika, do you mind sharing with us?

TANIKA LANE

Thank you, Liliana. My name is Tanika Lane from Eufaula, and we are a very small, vibrant community in Oklahoma. Our district serves about 1,800 students pre-K to 12th grade. We are a very small, rural, two-stoplight town. We have a very unique charm during the winter, and we're very quiet. In the warmer months we have a lot of tourists, thanks to our beautiful lake. Our district, like Dr. Patrick's, is pretty widespread, encompassing a mix of farmland and different communities that surround the lake. This geography adds to difficult challenges with our transportation, as many of our students live where the travel would be very lengthy and time-consuming. Our district is also proud to have a diverse culture within our student population. We have a high percentage of both Caucasian and Native American students. We are also a Title I school, a very low-income community, which means that all of our students receive free and reduced lunches, which

speaks to the challenges that many of our family and community members face.

Our summer learning program runs for four weeks and serve[s] students kindergarten through eighth grade. Each summer, we try to select a unique theme to focus on for that summer. Last year we did the Olympics, and our staff was very creative in finding new and unique ways to tie that in, not only to your enrichment activities, but your educational activities as well. I believe that having a theme helps foster a great sense of belonging with our students. Our staff kind of just brings them together throughout the summer, helps them feel connected to our program, and they are then excited to participate.

**LILIANA
POLO-MCKENNA**

Thank you, Tanika. We know that summer creates opportunities, and each of your districts has done a really intentional job of bringing in the research, figuring out “what does that look like” here. You’ve also each started to talk a little bit about the challenges. We know that even thinking about the District Summer Learning Network, all types of communities—urban, suburban, rural—are facing challenges when it comes to implementing really strong, high-quality summer learning programs. Can you each talk a little bit about those unique challenges that you’re facing in rural communities when you’re planning and running summer programming, and how you’re addressing those challenges? Tanika, if you could start us off. Thank you.

TANIKA LANE

Rural communities like ours, our biggest challenge, of course, is transportation barriers. We have a lot of students who live outside of our city limits. Again, being very widespread, lots of farmland, it takes a long time to travel to and from school, and then not having enough staff to drive those buses in the summer. One thing we’ve done is we’ve tried to implement some pickup spots, quite a few pickup spots in town, but we’ve designated a few pickup spots out of town at some local stores, gas stations, things like that, that are a good meeting point for some of those students. Another one of the challenges that we have has been staffing. We have tried to incentivize them by increasing the pay, doing some monthly celebrations and rewards for those teachers. It has helped some, especially with our certified staff, but has not worked for all of our other teaching groups that we need just as much.

Then, we have lack of access to those community-based organizations like the bigger cities have to provide those enrichment opportunities. So, we’ve

had to try and get really creative with our partnerships, strengthen the collaboration that we have with them, such as our tribal nations, our library, our local arts coalition technology center, which we don't have in our district. They are a good 30–40 minutes away, but partnering with them, getting them to come down to our district, has been very successful. It is a struggle that we have trying to get our students those enrichment activities and those thinking about other fields that they could learn about that we don't have in our district as well.

**LILIANA
POLO-MCKENNA**

I really can appreciate this idea of, let's look at our community, let's look at the resources that we have. What are other ways that we might be partnering with the library that we aren't currently doing? What are resources maybe just outside of our district that we could tap into? It's the, the creativity around design [that] is super clear. Patrick, do you want to build on that?

**DR. PATRICK
KEELEY**

Sure. I do touch on, just, that transportation issue is real. It's a real challenge for, I think, a lot of those of us that work in rural. In terms of the creativity—often I catch myself telling people, you know, our solution lies here. Our solution lies within the mountain. We were faced with a lot of the same challenges at first, trying to get this off the ground. One of the challenges we found was that a lot of these companies—we don't have a local YMCA within our district. The closest one is about a 40-minute drive. We just had to tap into, what's here, what do we have, who do we have here, and how do we get them going? Tapping into that natural creativity that exists within many educators, I think we've been able to develop a lot of different programs, you know, and activities that we can partner or marry to different field trips and make those field trips kind of smaller, one-off things instead of something that's programmatic in terms of getting a field trip from a larger vendor.

We might do a field trip that takes kids to the Scripps Oceanography Institute, or we might do a San Diego Padres game, or we might do any of those types of things. Then in terms of addressing some of the other challenges, just like Tanika said, increasing funding or increasing wages, I think was an important piece as well.

**LILIANA
POLO-MCKENNA**

Thank you, and Patrick, to your point about ... these large external partners versus looking within even the context that you all have described up to this point, I feel like I have this visual of what it looks like, and that's a really important part of sort of knowing and sort of living alongside the

community. I think you said that the solution is in the community, the solution is in the mountain. So, to build on that, we know that each of your districts has invested quite a bit in your staff. That can look like pay incentives for summer, and that can look like professional development and leadership opportunities. Can you each talk a little bit about what that's looked like and ... what it's looked like for students in summer? Tanika, can you start us off?

TANIKA LANE

With our professional development, one thing that we have done was we have our staff come in monthly. Of course, summer begins early in the year. You'll begin your planning throughout the year as soon as school starts. We are working on professional development, things like that to get our summer going. We've tried to, of course, incentivize them with pay to get them willing to work. We have tried to build around their schedules instead of just requiring them to work a certain number of hours. We want the best out of our teachers. So having them kind of work hours that best fit their family and their home situations has been really successful in getting my staff there and open and ready each day to work. I know in the summertime, they have the opportunity to stay home, and we have quite a few that choose not to. They love what they do in the summer. They love getting to do the more hands-on things that you are not able to do during the school year. So just spending some professional development and time showing them that that's OK, that's what makes a great summer, is one thing that we really do try to focus on with our staff.

**LILIANA
POLO-MCKENNA**

Yeah, I really hear this idea of being responsive and also, you're building this transformative experience for students. It sounds like you're also being intentional about building a transformative experience for your staff, so that it doesn't feel like business as usual or punishment. Patrick, can you build on that?

**DR. PATRICK
KEELEY**

Sure. We similarly have tried to be as flexible as possible with our staff. I think it's important to recognize that teaching and working with students and families, the school year can take a toll on people. I don't mean that it's all negative and all that; it's just people give a lot of who they are personally to their job. I think it's different than some other fields. I mean, there's a huge part of that, where your own person is given, and who you are is part of how you teach. I think that that can take some out of people, and people need that time to recharge. So being flexible, whether it's someone can

work two weeks, somebody else can work another two weeks, whatever it is to make it work for them.

We've tried to increase compensation as well, in terms of developing the people in the program at each of our sites. Again, we have four elementary schools, and a couple of them are about 40 miles apart from each other, so they're not close. Having staff on hand who are team leads, I think, is important. We've placed a team lead at each site, and teachers can apply for that position. Some apply, some are goal-driven in terms of, "I want become an administrator. I'm working on administrative credentials." So, they're looking for a little of that leadership experience. In terms of how we develop them, you know they're meeting throughout the school year to develop the summer and to get some additional training and professional development around that.

Then, in terms of how does that benefit the district beyond the immediate need and the immediacy of the summer program is it allows for us to continue to develop leaders within the district and have a sustainable leadership succession plan and leadership pool of people here. So, that also kind of helps in a school year where you have someone who has had a couple years where they've run the summer program and now, they develop on their site as more of a teacher leader and build confidence along the way. I think that's all very important as part of this.

**LILIANA
POLO-MCKENNA**

This idea that you're building these summer programs to create access and opportunity for students, but knowing that in order to do that really well, you have to be responsive to your staff and come up with all sorts of creative configurations, to make sure that they feel seen, heard, respected, and can bring their full selves to the programming is just a theme that I'm hearing. We're talking about summer, but these all sound like really powerful practices to sort of think about in general. I know that and we've talked about pay sort of as an incentive for summer, but we know that it's taken a ton of resources for you all to do this work. The conversation that's top of mind for everyone is, you know, as funding, federal funding and other funding sources, are set to expire. One challenge that we're talking about a lot is sustainability. What does this look like two, three, four, five years down the line? And we're going to start with Tanika. Can you talk a little bit about how Eufaula is thinking about sustainability and some of what you all are putting in place to make sure that this great work doesn't end here?

TANIKA LANE

That's definitely a huge concern that we have. We are a program running off of a grant and should this grant finish, we are highly concerned of what will happen next. We are exploring the possibility and have been tweaking into braiding some funds, some Title I funds, some other funds that our district receives that could go into and be braided in through our program. One of our biggest things is just trying to involve our community partners a little more. Whether that be in-kind supports through shared resources or donated supplies, volunteer efforts, those kinds of things. Being such a rural—small, rural district, even though we're trying all these things, it still remains extremely difficult for a district that is our size to run a program like this. It costs a lot of money, and we operate on a very tight budget. We don't have it within our district. Operating at a high-quality level can be overwhelming when the funds are potentially not going to be there. We're committed to doing everything we can to continue to serve our students, but without the consistent funding, the future of our program is very uncertain, unfortunately.

**LILIANA
POLO-MCKENNA**

Thank you for that. I hear you bringing that sort of creativity that you're thinking about programming with, to thinking about how are we currently using existing funding and how can we maximize that so that we can serve more students and also sustain the programs that we're building. Thank you. Patrick, could you talk to us about sustainability in Mountain Empire?

**DR. PATRICK
KEELEY**

Quite honestly, it would be very difficult. You can certainly cobble together some funds to address a couple of things, but to the level of what we are providing without the funding, it doesn't exist. That's the bottom line. Without coming up with additional grants or without extension of [what we get from California—] we do have, it's not just federally funded, it's state funded as well. Without those funds, it'll be very difficult to do what we're doing now in terms of paying people. Pay [is] not everything, but honestly, this is the people business. Our greatest resource in education is our people. So that's where most of your funding goes to anyway, in terms of making things happen. As far as sustainability, I think it's going to take not just the school district, [but] families and constituencies, they need to make sure that those who create state budgets also understand what this means to their community.

It might not be feasible for Mom and Dad to get you somewhere that's over 30, 40, 50 minutes away to help with the enrichment. Rural schools, I think in particular, create those bridges. I don't know that because we're rural and because so few people understand what it might mean to be out in an

area like this. It's almost as if our rural areas are unseen to an extent. Sure, they see us when they come up for the snow or go for a hike or what have you. That long-term, sustainable opportunity for our kids is so important. We'll continue to look at grants to enhance this program and to potentially fund it should state funding go away. It is of the utmost importance, especially for our most under-resourced and underfunded areas, to have this. I can't speak enough about how important keeping funding for programs like this is.

**LILIANA
POLO-MCKENNA**

I was very struck by Patrick, what you just said about sometimes it feels like we're not seen. I think from what you all have described in your programming, four weeks punches way above its weight in terms of the potential for, really, unlocking new ideas, sense of self, friendships, partnerships, new ways of teaching, sort of all the things that we talk about wanting to happen in education. I'm curious about in this telling of your story, right, of the impact of summer learning. Can you each talk about the results that you're seeing because of your efforts? What does impact look like in your district? Do you want to start off, Patrick?

**DR. PATRICK
KEELEY**

You know, we've been tracking some data around what's colloquially known as the "summer slide," where students fall back due to lack of engagement, lack of instruction, or what have you during the summer. There's the academic component, and we have our students who are reading below grade level, we make sure that we try to get as many of them signed up for summer to make sure that they're not falling further behind. So, there's that piece, but there's also just the joy in coming to school and being at school and seeing it as a place, not just for, "I'm going to go here and I'm going do math, and I'm going do English, and I'm going do history, but it's also a place where I get to go and it's fun. It's a place I'm going to go and there's laughter, and there's going to be joy there."

Creating that positive experience tied to school is super important. Then if you think about just that exposure part. What students see out there, if they're not the term that we always use up here, it seems, is "the mountain". Now, if they're only on the mountain, if they don't get off the mountain, then what? If they don't see things that are off the mountain, how do they know what's possible? Last year we created, for our sixth graders, we worked and partnered with the San Diego County Office of Education and the University of San Diego. There's an innovation center, and it's kind of a field trip spot, but field trips are really hard for us during the school year

just because of the time. Even if we take kids on a field trip, they only probably have about four hours due to trying to get back in time for busing.

With the University of San Diego and the county Office of Education, we did a one-week summer camp. The students actually stayed in the dorms at University of San Diego, and then they went up the street to the county office innovation center. They got to do a lot of different things. They did podcasting, for example. They got to create their own podcasts, they got to do robotics, they got to create and do 3D printing and all sorts of different stuff like that. It's like, what possibilities can get created and then what does that bring into the school year? Maybe there's a different drive that is created by that within that student that they go, yeah, I actually saw something I want to do this year, and so I'm going to continue to learn about it. The possibility and the engagement that happens is sometimes not quantifiable.

**LILIANA
POLO-MCKENNA**

Thank you. Tanika, how do you follow [and] measure success?

TANIKA LANE

I feel like we have measured success in many different ways. One of the biggest ones, honestly, would be our growth in our attendance due to our designated pickup spots with our transportation and things like that. Just getting students to the program is the biggest success, because if they're not here, then what are we doing? We also have shown growth with reading and math, improved on our enrichment activities with the hands-on STEM. The technology center coming and doing some project-based learning with the kids, getting them excited to be here in our program. We've added some social-emotional classes as well throughout the summer and tried to help focus more on that. Getting our kids to be a little more brave and stronger just with their selves, just developing the whole child there.

One of our biggest successes, honestly, has been a lot of our feedback that we're getting from parents, students, our teachers that are working the program as well. We've done many surveys last year, 100% of our parents reported being satisfied or highly satisfied with the summer program that we were offering. They were pleased with the growth that we've seen. A lot of my teachers have reported on these summer surveys that they have enjoyed working the program due to some of the changes that we've made and when they want to be there. Of course, it makes it a lot more fun for the kids to want to be there. Our parents are seeing the value of what we are doing. Like Dr. Keeley mentioned, we have a lot of students who aren't able

to get out and go see things due to the economic statuses that they live in and then the area [where] we live.

Academics are very important, but getting our students out and exploring other parts of our state that they can learn from and benefit from is one of our goals. We want summer to be fun. We want them to have these experiences that their families may not be able to provide them. That's something we definitely focus on a lot in the summertime. Then, of course, our partnerships that we've increased with our tribal nation, they come in and do some activities, some health and wellness type activities, our technology centers, the library, things like that. We've kind of come up with a schedule and tried to fit them in as much as we could. They're coming back each year asking for more and more time. So, it is something that we are extremely proud of.

Some successes that we love to share with people, because coming from a very rural community, sometimes it feels impossible. Like we don't have the things that we need. Just sharing our story, sharing what we do, it just brings to light that it's not impossible. What we do is great. Some larger districts may have other things that they have that we don't have in a rural setting like ours, but it's not impossible. I feel that our district is doing great things with what we have and are just trying to grow each year.

**LILIANA
POLO-MCKENNA**

Thank you. As a parent listening to both of you, I'm like, yes, I want all of those things for my kid, and 100% satisfaction. I don't know that I've ever seen that about anything. So, kudos to you all for the work that you're doing. I think it really speaks to, I imagine how, as a parent seeing their own child's growth and how by the end of those four weeks, sort of standing up a little taller, sort of talking about new career aspirations even. Thank you both for sharing that. We're on our final question and curious about what final advice do you have for other leaders in rural communities across the country who are starting or on this journey to really transforming summer? What would you all leave them with?

**DR. PATRICK
KEELEY**

I think ... some of this will depend, because rural schools are some of the most unique places. I think identifying the right people, in terms of leadership. When you're in a leadership role, you have a lot of things coming at you. It makes it very difficult to focus on any one thing and find someone with that passion. Someone who's a champion for your program, where that is their baby, if you will, and they are the champion for it. All of our programs need that. Summer programming needs that as well. That

this becomes somebody's driving work. I think that's a very important piece of building sustainability and building a unique program. Making sure that this person is the best that they can be at their job and have what they need is a really big piece for me as a leader.

“How do I support the person that's in charge of our summer programming?” I think is one thing. Making sure that they have connection to peers, both like locally, but then also something like this where you can connect with people across the country. I think you have to have to shout it from the mountaintop, right? You have to tell people all the cool stuff you're doing, and if you're not, they're not going to see that. We all know that in terms of how people sometimes feel if they're not hearing all the good stuff, the one time they're going to talk about something is when something didn't go right. We have to do that part. I think the other thing, this is probably more personal, my leadership style, or at least my style is I'm going to make sure I'm telling you exactly how it is.

If we don't have funding, and if we don't do our work to advocate for that funding, then some of this can go away. In the end, we can all sit here as grownups and talk about all the debate and the politics and all that stuff. In the meantime, we have kids not getting opportunities. It's like, I always tell people like, I had my childhood, I had that, and now I'm a person that has the ability to provide a voice in that term, in those terms. From a rural leadership standpoint, we need to make sure that we are advocating, because our children are just as important as those kids that are sitting in urban and suburban areas. We have to make sure that we are not shying away from our challenges, not telling people, “oh, no, it's fine. We'll just make it work.” No, we need the funding. Let's just be clear. Let's just be clear about that and not play around with it. I think from an advocacy standpoint; we need to advocate very strongly and passionately that this is just as important as every other issue that we're dealing with. We provide a lot to our communities, and where opportunity grows, so do our kids.

TANIKA LANE

I will have to agree with everything that he said. I will say that talking with people within the community, even through advisory meetings, things like that, community partners, stakeholders, having those conversations with those people, they have many ideas that we may not be thinking of from a different standpoint. Someone in a different mindset than education may have some of the answers—not all the answers, but some thoughts to how to solve some of the issues that we have, how to incorporate some other things to help with sustainability, things like that. Just having those conversations. I know until I was partnered with the District Summer

Learning Network and meeting with people from other districts, other partnerships, other community-based organizations, there were a lot of things that did not come to my mind. Just hearing it from other people and being reminded, OK, there are other options out there, there are ways to make things better. Just bouncing ideas off of each other, learning from each other. If someone has tried something and it didn't work, well, maybe we try it a different way. Just being open to new approaches, new partnerships, and just to help foster the growth and innovation for summer learning.

**LILIANA
POLO-MCKENNA**

I love that. That's a great note to end on. I think the District Summer Learning Network can be a place that's really affirming, like, yes, we're on the right track. While also being a place to bring those challenges. That kind of network is really important to continue to build this out and to do the kind of advocacy and storytelling path that you were talking about. Thank you both. Thank you for sharing your experiences, your insights, your tough questions, and posits for the world. Katherine, I'll turn it over to you. Thank you all.

**KATHERINA
LEWANDOWSKI**

Thanks so much, Liliana, for moderating today's conversation and for helping to share some of the innovative and exciting work of the District Summer Learning Network. I also want to join you in thanking our guests, Dr. Keeley and Tanika. It's just so valuable to hear how communities like yours are using evidence to build programs that are responsive to your local context and the unique needs of your students. 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.