



Wyoming Enrichment Network Time to Thrive Conversation Series: “Career-Connected Learning Across Young People’s Development”

By Aria Heyneman for the Wyoming Enrichment Network

On **Tuesday, Dec. 9 at 11 a.m.**, the Wyoming Enrichment Network (WYNE) Time to Thrive Conversation Series hosted its third of four webinars: “Career-Connected Learning Across Young People’s Development”

WYEN “bridges the gap between Wyoming’s out-of-school programs and the communities they uplift, fueling them with resources, support and opportunities that inspire lifelong learning, growth and connection.”

WYEN Director Michelle Sullivan began the webinar with a recap of the previous two webinars: discussions centered on building partnerships across communities to benefit young people’s learning and informed strategies on adolescent development outlined in David Yeager’s book *10 to 25*. The Time to Thrive campaign will launch at the beginning of the year,

Keynote speakers:

Sabrina Gomez: STEM Education Advisor at STEM Next Foundation, founder and principal consultant of STEMHigher, previously the Senior Director at Expanded schools in New York City where she led local and national initiatives that empowered youth to achieve success in STEM fields, she also co-led the NYC STEM Learning Ecosystem.

Fred von Ahrens: Served as Vice President of Manufacturing at Genesis Alkali in Green River, WY. With over 40 years of experience at Genesis Energy, he held multiple roles in engineering, maintenance, operations, plant management, and general management. He’s a board member of the Wyoming Charter School Authorizing Board and played a pivotal role in establishing the Pulse of Southwest Wyoming, an initiative aimed to inform regional legislators about crucial business, health, and education legislation and initiatives important to communities. Van Ahrens has also played a role in forming the Southwest Wyoming Manufacturing Partnership. Other past memberships include the governor’s RIDE initiative, Chair of the Wyoming Business Alliance, and a board member of the Sweetwater Memorial Hospital Foundation. He is a recent member of the Wyoming State Board of Education.

Highlights from keynote speakers:

Gomez introduced a career-connected learning framework for out-of-school providers that the STEM Next Opportunity Fund has created. STEM Next is a nonprofit scaling STEM learning for students across the nation. Gomez shared some foundational thinking that her organization uses to connect students with opportunities to engage in STEM fields beyond their high school learning.

She said career-connected learning can be broken down by age into these categories:

- Elementary school: Career awareness
- Middle school: Career exploration
- High School: Career preparedness

The framework she mentioned includes four research-based strategies that cut across these time frames:

- Broad skill development
- Career-connected STEM
- Family and community engagement
- Connected pathways and partnerships

For educators and leaders in education, Gomez said that her organization recently released a “playbook,” developed in partnership with [Jobs for the Future](#) designed for out-of-school time providers and education leaders that includes practical guidance for “initiating, strengthening, and sustaining employer partnership.” This actionable guide will help connect students to future careers.

Gomez encouraged participants in the conversation to visit the [STEM Next Website](#), where the slides she shared, data points, and other helpful tools can provide more context and information. STEM next will continue webinars and training on these topics in 2026.

Next, von Ahrens described his roles bridging the gap between businesses and educators through his both sectors throughout the state. Some highlights from his remarks:

- Students are not aware of the scale of employment opportunities available to them in the state of Wyoming which causes many to seek opportunity elsewhere
- Youth-serving organizations and individuals must set out to create business-education partnerships
- It’s crucial to raise awareness for careers in the state, and then provide concrete opportunities for career-connected learning, including mentorships, internships, job shadowing, ect.

- A success story on partnering with local colleges to provide trainings for highly-sought after and hired jobs so that local students are exposed to the opportunities for high-level, highly paid employment in their home state
- It's crucial for businesses to look at not how they can succeed today, but how they can set up their organization so that its profitable in the next cycle. This includes building a local, sustainable workforce with key skills
- Inextractable in elevating youth is taking a hard look on how students learn (a wide scale) and how we can match up business and education opportunities to their needs

Following the panelists' remarks, participants shared insights and resonances. The following are highlights from the energized exchanges:

- ★ The process of connecting students to careers must be both within industries and education
- ★ School systems are getting creative in providing students with out-of-school learning experiences and should expand upon them
- ★ It's important to lean into personal networks to create umbrellas of support around young people
- ★ Out-of-school time must be utilized to prepare students for life in the workforce

Sullivan concluded the webinar with two major findings from the “destination postcard activity” that WYEN, in partnership with the John C. Schiffer Collaborative School in Sheridan, has completed. The activity polled 600 middle and high school students from around the state, asking them what they wish they were learning as well as what they require from adults.

Sullivan said students responses centered on two ideas:

- ★ Young people want meaningful relationships with adults
- ★ Young people need real life skills, experience, and direction on what comes after high school graduation in order to thrive

The next Time to Thrive conversation will take place Tuesday, Dec. 16 at 11 a.m. and includes a panel of young people from around Wyoming sharing insights on how adults can support their learning.