



Wyoming Enrichment Network Time to Thrive Conversation Series: “Strengthening Partnerships to Expand Enrichment Opportunities”

By Aria Heyneman for the Wyoming Enrichment Network

On **Tuesday, Nov. 18**, the Wyoming Enrichment Network (WYEN) Time to Thrive Conversation Series kicked off with its first of four webinars: “Strengthening Partnerships to Expand Enrichment Opportunities.”

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.”

Tuesday’s lively discussion featured three distinct keynote speakers:

- [Terry Peterson](#), PhD, national leader in large-scale education reform
- [Jenn Beckstead](#), Youth Services Manager at the Natrona County Library
- [Liz Cassidy](#), Executive Director of the Sheridan County YMCA

The speakers shared strategies they’ve seen effective in their organizations and experiences working with youth and engaged two key audience members in a robust conversation about youth-serving organizations leaning into collaboration and creativity in their efforts to help young people thrive.

Highlights of the discussion included:

- The importance for youth-serving organizations to market to/extend outreach towards other like-minded organizations, fostering collaboration across multiple areas of youth development
- The idea that out-of-school programming can build skills for the workplace that are just as essential as in-school instruction
- Excitement over creative ideas for engaging youth brought by leaders in youth-serving roles in organizations across the state and country

After an introduction from WYEN's director Michelle Sullivan, **Dr. Peterson** began the discussion by highlighting the Wyoming State Board of Education's creation of the "[Wyoming Profile of a Graduate](#)," a model of a Wyoming graduate that can be used to guide state policy on education. He urged participants to look at the competencies laid out in the Profile and consider how after-school and summer programs can contribute to the achievement of goals such as habits, time management and follow through.

Peterson stressed the importance of after school and summer programs in his remarks and gave examples of instances where community collaboration has been successful in developing youth services out of the classroom. One was using art and artists to engage with art forms and concurrently build skills that are required in the workplace. He said that these programs, spread across the state of Maryland, have the highest attendance of summer and after-school programs and the greatest gains in reading, math and arts in comparison with other nearby programming. He hopes that attendees will gain some inspiration and tools to develop school, community, youth groups and after school programs so that students can reach their full potential.

Resources from Dr. Peterson's thoughts:

- [Wyoming State Superintendent of Public Instruction Megan Degenfelder on the Profile](#)

Jenn Beckstead continued the discussion, building off Peterson's emphasis on the strength of both the arts and after-school programs in youth engagement and development. She highlighted some of the youth services programs she directs through the Natrona County Library.

Highlights at Natrona County Library:

- Creation Station → Cricut machine, laser cutter, fully equipped makerspace
- Kitchen A La Carte → teens learn kitchen and cooking skills
- Summer reading programs featuring performers including magicians, storytellers, puppeteers

Beyond the library: Beckstead brings her programming outside the library as well, partnering with the Boys and Girls Club, YMCA and Rec Center youth groups. She said these partnerships have been in place for the last 15-20 years.

Beckstead shared some challenges of youth programming including access, especially for the teenage age group. When these older students do not have full control of their day, they may not be able to attend programming or engage in youth services. She shared a solution the library's teen specialists have found with activities and bookclubs — going into schools during homeroom or lunch hours. Through grants and donations, Beckstead and her team have been able to provide books teens can read on their own time.

Library partnerships:

- [Gear Up](#) through Casper College
- Natrona County schools → book clubs in middle/high schools, storytimes and STEM programming in elementary schools
- [Youth Empowerment Council](#)
- [Youth Mental Health Collective](#)
- [The Science Zone](#) at Casper Science Museum

Beckstead emphasized that as organizations collaborate through programming, sharing spaces and being in conversation with one another, youth and their families are made aware of more resources that they can benefit from within their community.

Springboarding the notion of getting creative with access to programming, i.e. “bringing the library to students,” **Liz Cassidy** discussed the Sheridan YMCA’s approach to summer camps, highlighting their strategy of creating an accessible “[camp in the park](#)” for children who are not able to attend traditional YMCA day or resident camps. Partnering with The Food Group and the local Dairy Queen, “camp in the park” brought YMCA games, swag and opportunities to engage with the YMCA to underserved youth.

Cassiday promoted the idea that the YMCA could function as “the glue” between community entities that want to engage youth but may not have the full staffing/resources/capacity for full day camps or robust childcare, and parents searching for affordable, full-day camp options that align with working hours. She mentioned ongoing efforts to secure scholarship funds and improve registration and financial aid for families.

Cassiday spoke with energy about her ambitions for the YMCA and other organizations to find creative solutions and work with one another to meet the needs of the community.

Following remarks from the three **keynote speakers**, “front row participant” **Ashley Leonard**, Education Supervisor at the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, shared some of her department’s programming in the state.

- Conservation crates → free educational resources with accompanying activity plans for teachers/youth leaders across the state
- Trout in the Classroom → partnership with [Trout Unlimited](#)
- WY Hunt Fish → collaboration with local nonprofits to provide hunting/fishing experiences to underserved
- [Education and Camps](#)

One creative way Leonard shared in engaging youth is through the [ACE](#) (Assistant Conservation Education) program, where some campers identified as exceptional leaders are invited to apply and volunteer to serve in the following year's camps. This is beneficial for both the students' development and Game and Fish programming's success. Last year, 11 ACE's returned and volunteered 1,032 hours across three camps for Game and Fish.

Another "front-row participant," [Brook Malone](#), Education Outreach Coordinator at CyberWyoming, discussed the way CyberWyoming's youth programming can introduce students to career paths they may not have considered, as well as increase their cyber-literacy and STEM skills as a whole. She shared creative ways that [CyberWyoming Alliance](#) has worked with educators and its cybersecurity education programming offered from kindergarten through high school.

The next Time to Thrive conversation will take place Dec. 2 and focuses on David Yeager's book *10 to 25: The Science of Motivating Young People*.