

Transcript of McKell Withers

Interviewer

We are with Superintendent McKell Withers on Monday, March 23, 2015.
Tell me about Salt Lake City School District's Community Learning Concept?

McKell Withers

Okay, so, Community Learning Center or that Community Learning Concept is trying to build that capacity right in the community with partners that can benefit that community, can help change the trajectories on poverty, can help intervene as soon as possible to help young people with obstacles to their learning. So, the whole notion is, in a Community Learning Center, is that you look at the assets that are in that community and you look at the gap.

Interviewer

How do centers serve diverse populations?

McKell Withers

In many ways, that's the whole point, is to have as much diversity as you can congregate in a community center because you're breaking down barriers between people and groups, and those sometimes artificially surface in some unusual ways. So, you see, particularly in the neighborhood that we're talking about in Glendale and Mountain View that there is a portion of that community that's part of the refugee resettlement effort that goes on. So you'll get families and young people that come from all over the world with some incredible challenges, and all of a sudden you see new opportunities. So, you know, we have schools where Croatians and Bosnians are no longer trying to kill each other. They play together. You learn some things on occasion, like I didn't know there was a caste system in Somalia and you get to help young people learn that, guess what? There is no caste system in public school. You get to play together and have fun together, and you have the same opportunities to move forward. So it is having those diverse neighborhoods all feel a part of the school rather than pushed away, because sometimes schools rarely have community members that work in them. And so, when they don't have connections with the families, then you miss another opportunity. One of the things that is fascinating, this is a little bit of a tangent, so I apologize if it's not what you're looking for.

Interviewer

I'm assuming that these centers are also open to people who are not low income?

McKell Withers

Yes. So the Community Learning Center is exactly that. You want to encourage the community to come, like I mentioned, to have a university class there can open doors for a broader population, and teaching English as a Second Language, or cooking, or Parents as Teachers classes for those that have young

kids that want to develop those skills. So, you want to try and have everyone feel comfortable and feel a part of that. And how you then have that diverse community take ownership takes on some interesting dynamics over time. And so, after we had a little open house out there at that one, we had a couple of fairly senior gentlemen that came in, that clearly were not any longer the majority of the neighborhood. They were European descent, had a little bit of an accent, certainly over 65, and they wanted to come see, what's this thing that's been put in their neighborhood, because their neighborhood changed a lot. And they came and started poking around and asking questions and humming and hawing about things, and all of the sudden, they take on some ownership that this is a prized asset in the community that they can access and do different things in. The tangent, the only reason that was important to even touch on, is that I learned six or seven years ago, that we were scaring some families away because families that engaged in the school would often get asked to think about potentially working at the school, as a parapro or an hourly person or get involved in PTA or the school community council. Because in high poverty neighborhoods, it's hard to get parent volunteers because they're overwhelmed with just making things work from day to day with food. And so, we finally had some parents brave enough to say, "Well, can we actually come and volunteer and not then have to stay and work there?" And it's like, how did you even think that we were going to force you to work for us? That it was a neat opportunity for us to get neighborhood members to then pay them for services in their own neighborhood school, but there's a part of the population that then felt like an obligation to come. And once you break that down and say, "No, you're welcome any time." That doesn't mean that we won't try and recruit you because there are ways to break out of poverty by starting in an hourly position in the organization, then going back to school and having those additional doors open, so it's important.

Interviewer

So how do you engage the community at large to use all of these facilities offered? How do you let them know the Center is here for them?

McKell Withers

So, it's not, we don't go out and advertise as though this is your one stop for lots of other things, but the partners take advantage of communicating that more broadly. So like the clinic services, they'll certainly do more out in the community than they do with kids because that's the mission that they have and they're trying to keep costs down by keeping families and residents away from emergency centers and being more on the front end of those services. But the adult classes, if you know that you can take a class at the university here in your neighborhood rather than trying to figure out how to commute across town, that makes a big difference.

Interviewer

Does Head Start bring their people down to the Health Center?

McKell Withers

So, Head Start as a partner, they don't currently have a Head Start classroom or program in the building, but they're a partner across that broader community. There are Head Start classrooms just down the street and they're connected in other ways, so we start to share data. So we worked with Head Start a number of years ago to just be able to track young people before they start school, then track them into school, so they can show that those investments in early childhood pay off.

Interviewer

What is the district plan design for future centers?

McKell Withers

So the center at Lincoln is one of those more robust for us, but nothing like the Glendale/Mountain View Center, but it's going to become like the Glendale/Mountain View Center. So we are in the process right now of planning the replacement building for Lincoln Elementary and incorporating the bigger Community Learning Center with additional assets there. And beyond there, we've strategically mapped throughout the district where communities and neighborhoods that would most benefit from those services closer to home. And we've got five or six additional sites that we hope to be able to continue to build those partnerships and move that out. And like I mentioned earlier on, at some level, every school has to be a community learning center conceptually and philosophically, so that families feel as though they can have more needs met than they otherwise would. So, how do you open those doors more often? How do you have after-school programs regardless of the other assets on campus?

Interviewer

And also, how do you share your knowledge of the success of these centers to other districts and beyond your own district?

McKell Withers

Yeah, we probably don't do a very good job of advertising those successes. They're quite remarkable. On occasion, they're certainly life changing for some of the kids and families that we see. You have to understand how to invest in a community before you can really recognize what is taking place in a community learning center. So in some ways, it's less about advertisement and more about modeling investments that really turn communities around. So the data will speak for itself, has done already in early childhood, will in terms of access to other preventative services as time goes on. And then you get people's attention, because it's, well, why is this community turning around the behaviors? Like mobility. Families typically in poverty end up moving a lot because of circumstances in their life. But when they recognize that they're connected with

that school, they find ways to get back there even if they have to work out different kinds of transportation arrangements to stay at the school. So we've already seen that in some very positive ways.

Interviewer

Interesting. How does House Bill 96 help the district? Ann was saying there's coaching, part-time data specialists, supplies, and then there's a total of \$157,000 available. Talk about House Bill 96 because I know we really talk a lot about Granite and House Bill 96 and the special ed saving money for the state.

McKell Withers

See, and that won't happen, which is just unfortunate. But, I'd be happy to talk a little bit about that.

Interviewer

Yes, please.

McKell Withers

So, all of the energy behind, and it was Senate Bill 96?

Interviewer

House Bill

McKell Withers

House Bill 96? I thought Osmond was behind that?

Interviewer

It started there and then it ended up being a House Bill through Hughes.

McKell Withers

That's right. Yeah, with Hughes and then they partnered. That's right. So, House Bill 96 had lots of great and enthusiastic partners, had lots of community support, had lots of new thinking about ways to develop partnerships with businesses and invest on the front end to save money on the back end. So, lots of good healthy conversation. For us, we benefited because the state monies in that grant were intended to enhance or develop even further high-quality programs to see, can you take them to the next level? So for us, the grant that we've received has enabled us to do a full-day program, enabled us to invest more in Parents as Teachers, enabled us to invest more in materials and supplies for kids to actually have more sticking power, if you will, in terms of those investments early on. The concern side of House Bill 96 for me personally is that Utah invests so little in its kids proportionally to the rest of the country, and federal special ed resources have never got to their original target. And so, with the lack of federal resources, the lack of state investments, that even if you're able to find and identify young people that maybe are heading on a trajectory for special ed, there will be no special education savings because the disability rate

consumes all of the resources that are there. So, you have these challenges that I think people in trying to build partnerships and advocates, potentially overstated a little bit (that here are a bunch?) of kids' poverty is this incredible burden to learning. But it doesn't mean that every student in poverty is headed to special education. And so they tried to dig a little bit deeper and make sure you have the right characteristics of a young person that without some help right now, would be headed to special ed. But every district has what's called, Child Find, where you go out and look for three and four-year-olds and you actually provide pre-K services for kids who are already disabled. It's this preventative side that is much bigger than people recognize. That those investments in and of themselves, change the trajectory and are efficient. So investments in early childhood make a huge difference that they prevent kids from going into special ed or needing additional special ed services down the road. No question that'll occur with early childhood investments for kids. The challenge is, what did you actually save that you won't need to spend down the road? There is nothing down the road that you've saved. You're still going to have 11-13 percent of the population that have disabilities. You have kids today that are alive that a generation ago didn't even make it to school-age, that are fragile and expensive to educate, but they're amazing kids. So, that's the challenge with that model.

Interviewer

I didn't know that they were together. Those disabled were in the special ed funding pool?

McKell Withers

Yep.

Interviewer

Interesting. Wow. Did Representative Hughes know that?

McKell Withers

I spoke loudly and clearly about that, but they felt, they being Senator Osmond and Representative Hughes, that they couldn't get enough support to have state money for early childhood, so they wanted to get investment money and then promise to pay that back, so that you get these community investments.

Interviewer

Pay for Success.

McKell Withers

Yeah, and the concept is great, it's just the economic realities in Utah and investments in our schools, not so much.

Interviewer

I guess we'll see.

McKell Withers
We will.

Interviewer

Is this just a drop in the bucket, the House Bill money? Because I think the piece that disappointed Ann about the film, and I wish I really would have followed up on this is, is people have a sense, she's afraid people will have a sense after watching this film that, "Oh, things are taken care of. We don't need to spend any more money on this age group and preschool kids, because House Bill 96 is taking care of it." And you know, she mentioned the 15-million dollar opportunity, federal opportunity, to improve, and you know about this too, that Herbert...

McKell Withers

All it took was a letter.

Interviewer

All it took was a letter and Herbert turned it down. Do you want to talk about this?

McKell Withers

In a broader context of early childhood, and I'll try to be brief, if that's okay. So, recognizing that investments in younger kids pay off. I mean, the literature and the studies of cognitive development in and of itself are so clear that so much of learning and preparing the brain for learning occurs from birth to age four and five, and if kids aren't able to have the experiences that develop language and ways to express themselves and ways to become creative, then those investments in kindergarten are even more important because you're trying to close gaps that didn't need to be there had we been smarter with that younger population. So when we worked in the state to just have the optional full-day kindergarten, it was fascinating the political challenges. We were accused of ripping the babies out of the arms of their mothers to put them in government schools. Well that's a pretty scary picture if you don't know better, because really what it is, is it's an optional opportunity to have additional support for parents so that their kids are better prepared for learning. Well, you take that then back to pre-K before kindergarten and families recognize that those investments, if they're not living in poverty, most kids are in a preschool or in some type of enhanced childcare that provides some learning opportunities. So we've tried to argue for ordinances in the city, the county, the state, that you can't have a license to do childcare or preschool unless you have an approved pre-reading program. Wouldn't that be awesome? So that you have some partnerships that you recognize that we're all in this together. Let's help kids develop those synapsis and those cognitive connections so they're ready to learn. And so, as you look at those investments early on and how to connect those in that early childhood time, how early is too early? Where do you start to scare people? That's where Parents as Teachers is just phenomenal because it's, we don't ever want to take your child away, even though people often will even call me and

say, "Did you know your kids did this?" And I say, "Well, I'm not sure what my kid's doing today, but our kids as a community that are in the school or out there maybe we did some of those things. Let's help them be more focused." So you look at how you can help parents from birth to age four and five in more passive ways and then once they enter school fulltime, how we can we help them in more active ways to be a team in working together so that their kids are college and career ready, are civically engaged, are competent in literacy and numeracy because there's no question that those first three or four years of school are critical. The only thing more critical are the two or three years before that.

Interviewer

So you're saying the House Bill 96 is just a drop in the bucket? It's...

McKell Withers

Oh, sorry.

Interviewer

That's okay. So, perhaps that drop is for three- and four-year-olds and not zero to two?

McKell Withers

Yes. So, House Bill 96, even though it's only a drop in the bucket in terms of all of the challenges that are out there, at least somebody finally paid attention. And so now they'll be able to see the data. The fear that I have related to the connection with special education is that often people don't ask the right questions or look at the right indicators. So now over time, special ed census is still the same even though some kids were deferred or delayed or didn't need as many services, that savings is there, the benefit for the child is there, but there's no dollars to give back. So then how do people evaluate that investment? Was it successful or not? And I'm saying that if you will invest in early childhood, you will see that turn around in terms of closing achievement gaps, opening doors for kids, in the first few months, let alone the first few years. The criticisms of Head Start over time, the data is real clear that it helps kids in kindergarten through 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade. Then it looks like that gap grows again. Well, why did the gap grow again? Because we're not paying attention to after school and summer school that would enable kids who otherwise live in poverty that don't have access to learning experiences after school and in the summer, can find that. So, early childhood is connected with summer school. Early childhood is connected with afterschool. Early childhood is connected with parenting education and smart community investments. So yes, House Bill 96 was a drop in the bucket, but at least there's finally a bucket that's paying attention to it.

Interviewer

What else needs to go into that bucket?

McKell Withers

Oh man.

Interviewer

Briefly, or, and you can tie that right into legislatively like, because we do feature Hughes in here and the Salt Lake County Mayor is in here, etc. So what else needs to go in that bucket?

McKell Withers

Okay. So, recognizing that we had an opportunity to partner with other government agencies like the Federal Access to additional pre-K resources -- what a missed opportunity to get our own dollars back in the state investing in early childhood education to then have young people be more successful, more often, and spending less money on them. Those kinds of things seem to make a whole lot of sense on the surface, but people become politically nervous because they don't want to lose freedoms. They don't want to lose control. Well, good partnerships don't lose freedoms and don't lose control. They build trust, and they build expectations. And so, that's what needs to be in the bucket, is a little bit more local autonomy and a few more resources and expectations to deliver on those resources to benefit kids and families.

Interviewer

We have a legislature that, in this case with children, really doesn't want to pull in the federal dollars, do they?

McKell Withers

So, a number of years back and so maybe this needs to be edited out, because this would be a fascinating story related to that question, but we had legislators that wanted to turn down all of the Title 1 money, still do. They still talk about it. They still talk about fighting the Elementary/Secondary Education Act, which is really the war on poverty, part of the war on poverty. It's compensatory education to say poverty stands in the way of learning, let's, what barriers can we remove with these resources? Well, in the state legislature, and President Bush was in power at the time. Secretary Spellings was the Secretary of Education at the time. State of Utah drafted legislation to refuse all Title 1 money and turn that down. It would've just devastated our schools. So I was able to get an appointment to meet with Secretary Spellings and I said, "If our state does that, what would it take to consider Salt Lake City the same as Guam or Puerto Rico or some other separate entity that the United States works with, because it would be wrong for kids, wrong for a country, wrong for our community?" After she stopped giggling about that, because it was a challenge for them to see these push backs of -- and I get federalism arguments and local control and state empowerment and that the Federal Government shouldn't overreach. But you can build partnerships that don't overreach. They're built on trust and smart language and good data and accountability. So, yeah, we ought to lighten up and recognize that we're in this together. We're not only in it together with families at the local community level. We do actually do all live in the same

country and it's okay to admit that. And when you're elected leaders say, "You can't trust the government." And I'm sitting here saying, "You are the government. You're telling me not to trust you?" Isn't that something we ought to build trust about so that we can work together to better serve kids?

Interviewer

What needs to happen systematically for early childhood education in Utah?

McKell Withers

So there are a lot of great private partners out there. So systematically, we should be smart enough to recognize the thousands of kids who don't have enough learning opportunities and supports in those early years to be successful. So, you saw what an investment in Parents as Teachers can do to empower families. Those dollars pay off for generations to come because the family learns how to help themselves. You can't do it by just pretending as though you solved the problem. Like we have some legislation that essentially provides access to curriculum online for families that want to help their preschoolers become even better prepared for school. Well that's great. What do you do with families that don't have access to the internet or a computer or the curriculum?

Interviewer

HB96 funds are paying for that—UPSTART. Did you know that?

McKell Withers

Well, it's always intended to include that, but that's really not the target audience. That's the way to access additional resources. So that's the challenge between bills that are written to help sustain business versus bills that are intended to develop communities and empower those communities from the ground up. But you can be efficient. Using technology is smart. Having good curriculum and resources readily available is smart. But how many times do you have to pay for those over and over to sustain the business? Some of those are available to everybody through libraries and online. Let's open those doors.

Interviewer

A few more questions, real quick. Explain briefly the Capital City Education Concept?

McKell Withers

Oh, so, Capital City Education. What an awesome partnership with Mayor Becker. So when Mayor Becker was first elected, we had communicated about strategic alignments to be able to help more kids be more successful and more often have people recognize the great schools in the city. But there are folks that worry about our mission being broader than what they imagine it ought to be. Some people believe that we ought to just stick to content in a few areas and don't do breakfast programs, don't do lunch programs, don't do after school

programs. But again, to develop the community, it's about breaking down those barriers of poverty so that food is necessary to do that, time and access, support for families is required to do that. But our mission is primarily age 5 to age 17 or 18, kindergarten to 12th grade. We try and do as much as we can in early childhood, but that's things we have to go out and find our own partnerships for or grants for to enable it to happen. So if the city is a partner, focused on the same research and understanding what's possible, they can communicate and leverage what it means to work from birth to age four and what it means from 18 until you leave this earth, so that adult education, lifelong learning as well as early childhood education becomes partnered with the city through a Capital City Education in addition to their own strategic plans that we have as a school district.

Interviewer

Sounds like it is a challenge to organize something like that.

McKell Withers

It is, but you overlap in so many ways, so why not help each other leverage even further?

Interviewer

Our next program covers issues for children ages 6-12. What are the programs through the SLC School District that are making a difference for this age group? Is there anything that clearly stands out?

McKell Withers

So, let's talk about that age group for just a minute so you know where to look and what's there, because you've heard it said, maybe in a few different ways, but the most common is, "You're learning to read up until 3rd grade and then from then on, you're reading to learn." So literacy and language acquisition and being competent enough to engage in language by the time you're in 3rd grade so that you can learn from content material, is really the key. So, 3rd graders are eight years old, so the six year olds are typically in 1st grade, so you're overlapping that transition from early childhood into that little bit later childhood before you get to early adolescence, and so it's all about gaining literacy skills and early numeracy skills to be successful. So what's the best thing going on in any district? Great classroom teachers doing what's called Tier One instruction with their whole class. Good instruction that's differentiated, culturally competent, enables non-English speakers to develop vocabulary and skills to be successful. So great teaching is what stands out for 6 to 12-year-olds. Now in addition to that, how do you, what do you match up with great teaching? Well, you need to match up opportunities for kids to be creative. It's been so sad to see across the country school systems that under high stakes testing, narrow their curriculum to just focus on English, Language Arts, and Math. Then they're surprised that their test scores go down. Well think of your own learning. If you don't have ways to connect what you're learning with your real world, it's not as powerful. It doesn't

stick to you. So, investing in arts, investing in music, investing in integrated science and movement, and PE, and activities are so important, and some people miss that. They think, no, just do, just teach the core subjects. Well the core subjects only stick if they're integrated with science and arts and movement and other parts of the educational experience that become enriching and personalized. So, in that age range from 6-12, exploratory learning is very important. Experiential learning is very important. Group work is very important. So, the classroom as it extends to other classrooms, both on the playground, in the lunchroom, walking to and from school, I mean something as simple as a walking school bus where kids are able to talk to and from school about the day, builds social skills that enables 6 to 12-year-olds to be prepared for early adolescence where they scare their parents. I mean, teenagers can go from real high to real low in just a second based on a smell, a frown, a pimple, all kinds of things. And so, 6-12 is preparing those kids to have the skills socially and academically to be successful.

Interviewer

So Mountain View, is that an elementary school?

McKell Withers

Mountain View is elementary. Glendale is a middle school. So, Mountain View is K-5 and Glendale is 6-8. It is a middle school. So the campus, that's part of the image that's great with the Community Learning Center. It's a K8 campus, that...

Interviewer

They can use that Learning Center? These groups can also go there?

McKell Withers

Absolutely.

Interviewer

Is there an after school program there?

McKell Withers

There is, but there's also on both campuses, so it's only if you need space there because **it's more focused for the parents at that site.**

Interviewer

Where do working families send their children? I mean, this is a critical choice that parents have to make. While you're working is this child to go down the street to be cared for by somebody you don't really know so well? You know, it's also keeping all these age groups, keeping the child safe.

McKell Withers

And sometimes there are such simple connections that for whatever reason, we didn't seem to make sooner, so it's only been the last seven or eight years that we've been more thoughtful in the after school program to actually ask about homework, help with homework, connect it with the daytime learning. Because before, it was more like, how can we make sure your child is safe until they're picked up by mom or dad? Well, what if they're not only safe, but they're engaged and they're learning, and they get their homework done so that when mom and dad come, you can actually spend time together. So, we've become much smarter in the after school programs being connected with the daytime learning.

Interviewer

Okay. Any comments to the legislature? Anything you want to say to them?

McKell Withers

I deeply appreciate elected leaders who can see beyond the anecdotal story and believe that there's a way to craft a law to fix some single injustice that maybe occurred that then gets overgeneralized. Because as you think about what really makes a community and a state great, it's trust, it's respect, it's mutual responsibility, and it's using your resources wisely. But spending enough resources to be able to make a difference. And so the young people in Utah need a few more investments to make that difference. And we can be smarter because there are different ages that cost a little bit more. That's okay. Why does it cost more? Because it's a smarter investment to make sure that every kid in pre-K through 3rd grade can read, so you better have robust after school and summer programs, so they can read. And then when you get to high school, you better have robust apprenticeships, internships, and experiential programs so that if you want to encourage kids to go into careers that are maybe different than what they were thinking, they have ways to see them and access them. So, investments, a little bit of autonomy, and getting away from single stories that get overgeneralized would be great. The family that never moves, never requests a class change, is likely to see 45 different teachers from kindergarten through high school graduation, just in terms of the classes they've taken, the years that they experience. So that's not moving. That's not changing. That's just going through tradition high school all the way down to kindergarten. The odds of having had a bad day with one teacher in 45 over those 13 years is pretty high. Why some people only remember that bad day and then overgeneralize that is just amazing to me. Because there are hundreds and thousands of great days where learning takes place and investing in more learning opportunities pays off forever.