

## **Special Consultant to the Pennsylvania Secretary of Education discusses growth and impact of partnership with Pennsylvania PBS**

Pennsylvania PBS has developed a partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). Since students in Pennsylvania transitioned to remote and hybrid learning models, these two entities have worked together to continue providing educational content and opportunities to students and educators across the Commonwealth.

Judd Pittman is the Special Consultant to the Secretary of Education on STEM. With the transition to remote learning, Pittman has worked directly with Pennsylvania PBS on several collaborative projects with the goal of doing just that. In this Q&A Session, he discusses the development, growth, and impact of the partnership between Pennsylvania PBS and PDE.



### **Q: How did Pennsylvania PBS and the Pennsylvania Department of Education initially start working together?**

**Pittman:** This partnership was organic - it developed through networks and the process of figuring out what is working and what is resonating with the community.

One of our core priorities is to focus on collective impact, which means bringing together a variety of partners and making sure all those partners - whether its workforce partners, nonprofit partners, educators, caregivers, or students - are all pointing resources back to learners and helping learners reach their goals.

When school buildings closed last year, one of the first things the Deputy Secretary and I discussed was the need to leverage the networks we created in the STEM space and pivot to support learning during the pandemic. The pandemic created an opportunity for us to collaboratively reimagine learning, with our collective impact partners.

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Around the same time, I connected with the Acting Superintendent of the Harrisburg School District, who shared the immense value of a partnership with WITF centered around supporting learners as we journeyed into this distance learning space. After he shared some of the great things they were exploring with WITF, I processed around what a partnership with Pennsylvania PBS could look like on a statewide scale.

We didn't know what exactly the partnership would look like, but once we started conversations, we found very quickly that our priorities and vision were aligned. Those priorities included supporting learners and caregivers on this journey, being mindful of their needs, and doing our best to support and continue the learning trajectory.

**Q: How has Pennsylvania PBS helped support the education system in the state amid the coronavirus pandemic?**

**Pittman:** The datacasting initiative that we're working on collaboratively is a good example. There were over 53,000 households in Pennsylvania that didn't have access or weren't connected to the internet - that was a big problem we needed to help solve.

Other elements have really been a result of continued conversation and stakeholder engagement. Pennsylvania PBS has been a partner around 11 different beta projects or pilot projects that we've launched from the Spring of 2020 through the Fall of 2020. Those projects were born through a generative conversation between our Intermediate Units, our PBS partners, and through other stakeholders that were looking for solutions to challenges created by circumstances caused by the pandemic. Everything from grab and go learning kits, to using microcontrollers or minicomputers to connect students to learning when they would otherwise be disconnected from the internet.

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The great thing about having Pennsylvania PBS as partners is that they're willing to evolve and listen to stakeholders. Much to the vision of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, policy and program is generated by those closest to the work, not dictated from the top down.

**Q: How has this partnership grown into what it is now, working together on a variety of projects?**

**Pittman:** As the pandemic continued, our partnership evolved and went from "help filling a gap" to "how do we reimagine learning for all learners in the Commonwealth amid the pandemic?" The partnership started on a relatively small scale, but when you bring great minds to the table and have partners that are aligned by mission, vision, and value set, then that work

can expand and accelerate regardless of scale. As need for distance learning continued, we took a deeper dive into the assets that Pennsylvania PBS had to offer and additional projects and scopes of work grew.

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They're streaming standards-aligned programming to every television that can access a PBS signal, and exploring innovative solutions around using TV white space and TV signal to connect students who don't have internet access to learning.

**Q: What resources do you think PA PBS allowed schools districts to offer that might not have been available without these two entities working together?**

**Pittman:** The first thing that I can think of is teacher presence. When schools initially had to pivot to distance learning, Pennsylvania PBS was able to provide opportunities for students to see teachers and reconnect or create new connections. Another piece was the mindful nature with which Pennsylvania PBS attended to social emotional learning and the trauma that students, educators, and caregivers were experiencing as part of the isolation brought on by the pandemic.

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The collaboration with Pennsylvania PBS brought some normalcy and some things that were comforting to learners and caregivers. The opportunity to leverage something like Wild Kratts as a thread to ignite distance learning was comforting to students and families, because many of them were familiar with programs like that and others.

**Q: This partnership has been helpful with remote learning during the pandemic, but do you think this partnership will continue beyond that? Why?**

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**Pittman:** The partnership will last. Pennsylvania PBS is collaborating with our 29 Intermediate Units across the state, and engaging families and students in their home. This is a valuable partnership that will continue to evolve and grow.

If nothing else, this partnership has uncovered the mass amount of free resources Pennsylvania PBS has to offer. I’m also hopeful that through this collaboration, our educators have found value in PBS’ resources and opportunities to align content to their daily instruction or weekly planning.

**Q: What value do you see in this partnership?**

**Pittman:** Pennsylvania PBS has really been a phenomenal partner. I don’t know how you could contextualize the value of this partnership. The relationship has been so rich, and we’re making so many connections. We are so committed as a collective to supporting learners, educators, and families that it’s just awesome to be able to work with the Pennsylvania PBS community. I look forward to continuing to reimagine learning post-pandemic.

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**Q: Could you briefly discuss projects that you've been a part of in relation to the partnership and the impact you've seen those projects make?**

**Pittman:** There is a wide array of projects that we're working on. We're seeing the impacts at the student level, educator level, and in our state systems.

In the eastern part of the Commonwealth, there were several panels on trauma informed care and conversations targeted to students and caregivers around how to cope with loss, grief, and trauma during the pandemic.

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Pennsylvania PBS also collaborated with First Lady Frances Wolf about the importance of mask wearing when we're together.

Since September, hundreds of hours of standards-aligned programming has been broadcast into homes across the Commonwealth thanks to this partnership. This helps keep the learning trajectory going in a positive space and tracks along with learning progressions or expectations for students.

The stories we've heard from the field and from families have helped keep the partnership moving. We could share numbers on how many projects we've pushed out or how many pieces of hardware we've put in the hands of schools around the connecting to learning initiative, but it really goes beyond numbers. We're impacting lives. We're providing that connection point for students and we're keeping that positive energy alive, that's where the collaboration and that value and impact is immeasurable.

**Q: What kind of feedback or reaction have you received about the Department of Education's collaboration with Pennsylvania PBS?**

**Pittman:** The feedback that we've received from educators has been "Wow, I didn't realize there were so many great resources there" or "I can't wait to tap into these resources to support learning for my students."

From the caregiver and student level, there has been a great response to the level of normalcy offered. There's something comforting about being able to turn to something that you already know, like some of the programs we're all familiar with, in this time of uncertainty. I think those are the stories and reactions that push us forward.

**Q: What has your experience been like working with the Pennsylvania PBS stations?**

**Pittman:** It's been a lot of fun working with Pennsylvania PBS. Early on, when my first grader was still at home, he often overheard my conversations with PBS and enjoyed creating connections between what I was discussing and his favorite PBS programs. His reaction was a great reminder that, especially for our early learners, there's a connection point - something they can gravitate towards and feel comfortable with.

I've really enjoyed the opportunity to support this work and collaboration. In the midst of an unprecedented pandemic, we've created opportunities to take advantage of new and existing resources and use them to support learning across the Commonwealth.

I have a lot of personal gratitude, but it's really about making sure we continue these relationships collectively so we can continue to support learners - that's what helps get me out of bed in the morning and keeps me going on Zoom all day.

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