

Ben Smith from Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units Discusses Education Partnership with Pennsylvania PBS

Ben Smith is the Assistant Director of Education Technology at the Lincoln Intermediate Unit of the [Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units](#) (PAIU). The Lincoln Intermediate Unit covers 25 schools districts with 89 public schools over three counties.

In this Q&A session, Smith explains the partnership between [Pennsylvania PBS](#) and PAIU as well as how Pennsylvania PBS resources have supported schools, teachers and students in this time of remote learning due to the pandemic.



Q: How did PAIU's relationship with Pennsylvania PBS begin?

Smith: The intermediate units in Pennsylvania sit in a position between the Department of Education and the school districts. The [Department of Education](#) (PDE) created the relationship with the PA PBS stations, but the intermediate units are doing a lot of the on the groundwork to help facilitate projects that come out of that relationship.

Q: What beneficial projects have come as a result of this relationship?

Smith: We've been working on three different projects with PA PBS. First, we provided STEM grab and go kits to more than 10 districts that tied curriculum and STEM activities and gave them to students so that they could work on them over the summer. The second project that we've worked on is helping to facilitate and get the word out about the work that PBS has done in aligning their content to school district and Pennsylvania education standards.

The third area we're working on is datacasting. Using this technology, we can send large amounts of data over the airwaves to students and provide them with content that they'll be able to engage in. While it's not a direct, internet connection where information goes back and forth, it does provide the richness that students need to be engaged in their learning.

Q: What are some of the challenges that you've witnessed in the transition to remote learning due to the pandemic?

Smith: Each of our districts is facing their own unique set of challenges that they are working to overcome. We have different modalities of how they are teaching. So, one of the challenges is just to be able to work with those students in ways that meet the students' needs.

Initially it was just getting them devices and getting them connected to their teachers. Then, it was teachers trying to go through and take all the things they were doing face to face in a traditional classroom and making them work in an online environment. Now, it's about really making sure that students are staying current and connected to their schools, engaging in the learning, working with students in whatever way we can and being ready to adapt at a moment's notice.

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Q: How does the Learning at Home program address some of those challenges with remote learning that you mentioned and keep students engaged in their learning?

Smith: One of the great things that PA PBS has done is, first of all, taking their content across all seven stations throughout the commonwealth and standardizing that. That allows us to be able to point toward those resources and say 'it doesn't matter where you are within the state,

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you can use this resource and you can use it at this particular time.'

Then because, you know you can count on this programming and you know you have advanced notice of it, it allows you as a teacher to be able to say 'okay, I can point my kids toward this type of lesson, and

whether I'm working with my face to face students, my hybrid students or my virtual students, I know I can count on that content.'

Q: How have you shared Learning at Home resources with students, teachers and/or families in your area?

Smith: We've added a clear agenda item that calls out the PA PBS and PDE collaboration, and what is happening in those areas. We pushed out a lot of emails for those three projects, and we've done webinars to help educators learn about these specific resources and how they can make use of them. The webinars are also posted to our help site for educators to go back to.

Q: Going back to the datacasting program ... could you explain how datacasting works?

Smith: The way that datacasting works is the technology is there to allow you to send data over the airwaves, so students who live in an area where they can't get that high speed internet access can still get content. In the student's house, they will have a receiver that is attached to their antenna.

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That receiver serves as a hub for the student's devices. Students might already have the computer, but before they didn't really have a way to access the content before. Now, they would connect to this receiver in their house and be able to pull the information down.

We're not just sending links and videos. We're actually creating a platform for students to be able to work through this content – similar to the learning management system they probably have when they're onsite at their school. They'll be able to work through the content, store it and later be able to give that back to their teachers.

Q: How does datacasting help address those challenges that you mentioned earlier?

Smith: One of the biggest challenges for all students is just to keep them connected to school. The school is a community, a place where we want to engage students in learning. When

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students are at a distance, that community can start to break down. They don't have the regular contact with their district that they need to really function as a member of that community.

You could take documents, put them in an envelope and mail them to the kid, and that student would get that material. However, that doesn't create the richness of the

experience that really connects the kid. By being able to send these larger amounts of data, we can provide them with videos that allow them to see and experience having the teacher and some online pieces that are more engaging to learn.

Datacasting provides us that opportunity to engage those students who are at a distance in an experience that is going to come much closer to bringing them into the community of the

school. We have this imperative to make sure we're educating all the students and this provides us with a much better way to reach those students that otherwise might be missed.

Q: How does datacasting help bridge the digital divide?

Smith: When I think about how this datacasting piece breaks down the digital divide, one thing I've learned during the pandemic – and I think lots of parents and students have learned – is that face to face education is really effective. But when we think about the safety of all people,

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we recognize that we need to do some things that are a little different. We have to work at a distance, and that puts some people at a disadvantage. That's that digital divide.

To me, datacasting breaks down that digital divide between those students that can go online and connect maybe in real time and see and interact with

their teachers and those students that can't do that. I don't know that we're replacing the face to face experience and we're not necessarily creating equity in the way that students can access it, but we can provide a much better experience for them that will engage them and give them the opportunities that they need to be successful.

Q: What are some benefits of the relationship PAIU and Pennsylvania PBS have formed?

Smith: The mission of the Department of Education is to educate all students. When I look at what PA PBS has put together, there is a rich and extensive amount of content that is available and can be used as part of the educational process. To me, it's a natural partnership and benefit to our educators and our students.

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On a local level, we've seen in Pennsylvania some of the PBS affiliates tap into educators who are teaching lessons and then posting them online, and things like the Robot Doctor that provides content in the area of STEM which we know is really important. So, the agility of PA PBS to not only take all the content they already have, but to create this new content targeted toward things that are important to Pennsylvania, makes it such a great partnership that really helps the schools be able to reach their goals.