

Ukulele Music

Keith: Welcome to the LeeCoSchools Edcast in this episode we spoke with Mrs. Nancy Blanco Kyle can you tell us about Mrs. Blanco Kyle: So Mrs. Blanco is our EL coordinator she's the lead EL teacher for Lee County Schools she's also in charge of our summer enrichment program Project Lead the Way all-around really cool person and very dedicated to what she does she has a real love for being able to interact with the families and the kids and just try to make their experience in the k-12 environment much better than it could be

Keith: yeah so there's a lot of great information in here that she gave to us a lot of things I didn't know about with how their students and the families learn English right and during this summer enrichment program PLTW how they're going to learn the STEM field which is super important that these kids start to learn these things early on and even if they don't get a STEM career the skills they will pick up will be very useful

Keith: is Project Lead the Way just for English language learners or is it for all students

Keith: no no it's for all students

Kyle: okay I legitimately didn't know the first time you said I was like maybe that's how this is

Keith: it's for all students she's she's a woman of many talents that's right many talents and many hats yes so if you find yourself with any questions, comments, complaints, criticisms, compliments, colloquialisms, conundrums, or concerns, you can find us on the web at www.lee.k12.al.us/EdCast, on Twitter @LeeCoSchools, on Facebook at facebook.com/leecoschools, or by email at edcast@lee.k12.al.us Kyle...

Kyle: vamanos!

Funky Transition Music

Kyle: will you introduce yourself tell us who you are?

Nancy Blanco: sure my name is Nancy Blanco I have been working with Lee County for five years as the one of two ESL teachers and...

Keith: ESL is...?

Nancy Blanco: that's a good question (ESL means) English as a Second Language so I work with the students who are learning English as another language some of them may already have two languages or three languages even so second language isn't always true

Kyle: okay other language

Nancy Blanco: yes

Keith: EOL: English as Other Language

Nancy Blanco: we go by many acronyms but

Keith: yeah ELL, EL

Nancy Blanco: ESOL, EAA

Kyle: What is EAA?

Nancy Blanco: No, EAL, English as an additional language

Kyle: see that one works oh I like that one

Nancy Blanco: that one's popular out west maybe it'll make it over here oh yeah okay well um I went to UAB to get my teaching degree I came into teaching in a roundabout way I started my undergrad in something completely different and I promised myself that would never be a teacher because my parents were in education and I saw their long hours and I just was like this is not for me and so I did everything I could do not become a teacher but when I was working in marketing abroad I started to tutor on the side ESL and I like that so much more than my day job but that's the route I went down to teach about me

Keith: so just when you thought you were out, they pulled you back in so if somebody were to pass you on the street somebody wouldn't go oh I bet she's the coordinator for so how did you get into that field how did you get into helping others learn English transitioning from Spanish primarily I guess but

Nancy Blanco: primarily Spanish is our biggest home language that's spoken and...

Keith: have you had any others like Italian or Portuguese or something?

Nancy Blanco: oh yeah there are over 18 languages spoken in the homes of our kids right now

Keith: Wow

Kyle: in Lee County?

Nancy Blanco: in Lee County

Kyle: Wow

Nancy Blanco: today....

Keith: is a lot of that because of Fort Benning over in Columbus?

Nancy Blanco: yeah absolutely the Smiths Station attendance zone has more uh more linguistic diversity if you could say than some of the other areas of course Spanish is the number one language home language of students over all but we have Hungarian Hindi Punjabi Italian Mixteco and Quiche and those last two are indigenous languages to Mexico and Guatemala

Keith: I was just about to say those sound like Aztec languages

Nancy Blanco: yeah I like the equivalent of you know if you were to speak Navajo or Lakota in the US we do have a lot more than than only Spanish and speaking kids so it's I think that's something special and tone overall there's three hundred and ten students in Lee County at present who have another language spoken at home

Kyle: really that seems like a lot I mean you know we're a decent sized school district we're 9500ish kids but I didn't think we would have that many

Nancy Blanco: it's true we do we do and now of course not all of them need ESL services many of them already are maybe they're more dominant and more fluent in English there are they are in their home language

Keith: some of them probably speak English better than we do

Kyle: well you're not wrong about that

Nancy Blanco: true true story but so there's about 170 who receive active services now I don't think I answered your question Keith about how did I get into it

Keith: yeah yeah yeah

Nancy Blanco: I just found that when I came back to the US after teaching abroad for two years it seemed like there was a need in the area that the need was growing to have people who were and you don't have to be bilingual to work as an ESL teacher but to have more people that spoke these students' home language and the school systems and they could be a resource for parents and for teachers as well on how to help working with these students and how to you know be effective and working with them and engaging their family so that was that was just a road I decided to go down

Kyle: and so how long have you been doing this?

Nancy Blanco: five years almost to the day

Keith: I imagine you have some bilingual ESL teachers you know who speak Spanish but I'm not sure you know they have many of us speak Punjabi

Nancy Blanco: it's interesting too because just down the road in Auburn city schools Korean is the number one ESOL language second to English so 80% of their ESL students speak Korean at home and they have nine ESL teachers and none of them speak Korean at this point now they do have a Korean bilingual parent liaison but if you think about it the goal of the ESL teacher is to work on the target language English so speaking the other language is just kind of a plus to help out here and there but it's it's definitely not a must

Keith: so are there ESL teachers and all of the school districts around the state or most of them

Keith: that's a good question because unlike some of the other special services ESL isn't fully funded federally or by the state so ESL teachers don't you actually don't even have to have one by law if you're meeting all of these means as far as testing and there are a lot of federal regulations as far as when you test and the students who qualify how they should be served and the plans that they their classroom teachers use to accommodate their instruction and assessment so it's like there's a lot of things that require a specialized knowledge so most places do hire an ESL teacher but sometimes that falls in like smaller districts there's a few small or neighboring districts who have you know guidance counselors serving in this role

Kyle: they're serving the EL population?

Nancy Blanco: yeah you know I really have so much respect for them and they have a heart I really love working with guidance counselor's know because they have such a heart for kids they just want everybody to be successful and that but that is not what they went to school for you know and it's not

what they feel prepared to do most of the time so it's it's a plus to have ESL teachers in and your buildings now the districts in Alabama that have a huge ESL population such as Mobile that's the first one I think of Montgomery County and

Keith: Mobile has a large Vietnamese population right

Nancy Blanco: they do they do and a growing Spanish-speaking population as well they have over two thousand students and they're you were touched by their ESL program so they've got tons of ESL teachers and it's Shelby County, Alabaster a few of those other Pelham a few of those systems around Birmingham Jefferson County have a lot Madison up in you know the north part of the state yeah and Huntsville City schools not as much but yeah and so they have you know plenty of ESL teachers there in those areas but it's it's still since it's not mandated no I don't think we see that in some of the smaller districts

Kyle: so since districts aren't required to hire someone that sounds like that is a big challenge for districts as a whole and especially for the families that they serve what are some of the challenges that the EL families are encountering when they're coming to the school district?

Nancy Blanco: oh absolutely and I think that you know it's important to note that these school systems are trying to do the best they can with what is essentially an under underfunded mandate so yes there are a few dollars from title three that come towards helping these students and their families but it's you know not enough to hire a translator actually so there's just in our cases or in population of our size so I feel like they're trying to do you know systems are trying to do the best they can but when you look at the needs of the families it's hard to to meet all of those because you you have families who were they're in a new culture they're in a new system with a new way of living and different cultural norms and different attitudes towards education they have healthcare challenges sometimes and of course it's actually mentioned in ESL students are come from a very diverse population right socioeconomically linguistically but some of the some of the population has challenges with finding good quality home environments and whatnot the needs are plentiful and when you we're really lucky because we have someone who is just phenomenal and working with families and she really has a great rapport with everybody so they get to know her and feel comfortable talking to her they might even know her from church outside of school right but Miss McMullen is our countywide bilingual parent liaison and she just does a phenomenal job working with parents and helping them understand like what are the rules and expectations for your students here and so often our parents who come from more rural settings in Mexico and Guatemala they weren't always able to finish school they didn't have the opportunity and what's interesting to me is the dedication that they bring to parenting their kids and to making sure that they get a good education and making sure that they do well in school so you know I've had parents talk to me and say you know what I can write my name and I can read a few things but my student is going to college my child is gonna go to college and they're really serious about helping their kids and supporting them in any way they can and so we try to do a good job of communicating with them ways that they can support their students at home such as speaking their native language that's something that a lot of parents don't think about or they've been misinformed about because there's this myth out there okay you should speak English at home if you're trying to learn English you should practice it but actually that's damaging to the English learning process because the depth of your home language is going to be greater than the depth of English so you know if your parents speak like 20 percent of English then you're gonna get over that 20 percent forward base exactly in vocabulary and syntax

and whatnot so if they're speaking in their home language then you're getting you're developing all these language skills and then you just have to learn the new words in the order into the new language and that's actually a concept that I forget her name but there's a researcher in New York who is doing a lot on interlanguage right now and that's where she's heard studies are proving that the brain holds multiple languages and it's all in one pool it's not like two separate language pools or three separate language pools it's the three working together the two languages you speak all at the same time and then you just pull from the ones that you have and are the most strong in

Kyle: when we took Spanish in high school there would be times when people would start a sentence and they would just flow from one language to the other is that maybe you think

Nancy Blanco: that's part of it and that's the technical term for that is code-switching and I still do that it's actually a really good podcast on NPR - just as a side note so code switching is when you switch languages within the same sentence and you it's actually some people want to say it's Spanglish but it's a pretty sophisticated linguistic skill to be able to do that you have to understand the syntax of both if it's done well then it requires a lot of mental effort

Kyle: this is just so completely off topic but I remember when Spanish of course in high school Senora Gimenez what she used to talk about she only dreamed in Spanish she could of course speak both English and Spanish but the dreams were in Spanish only I thought that was interesting

Nancy Blanco: that's totally interesting that's a topic of conversation among bilingual people a lot and I remember when I was learning Spanish because I learned Spanish as an adult I took high school Spanish for the two required years to get the kind of diploma I wanted I took the courses at Auburn that I had to take in undergrad but when I traveled that's when I really wanted to learn the language and run I just kind of jumped off the deep end and moved to Spain it sounds like oh hey I'm gonna have to learn Spanish right I did and it was a really painful choice to learn Spanish but it worked and then I met my husband who's Paraguayan and we lived in Argentina as well so the Spanish got better over time but it took so long to become fluent even living in the environment

Kyle: how long do you think?

Nancy Blanco: I think I remember the moment that I knew I was bilingual was I was back in the US and I was working at a call center a bilingual call center and when I could just kind of sit back and after a long day and answering calls in my cubicle and I could I was just speaking in Spanish and I wasn't having to think about it and I knew it that's like okay I'm actually providing good customer service in my new language it didn't take any effort so that's I just got so excited that I immediately messed up and forgot what I was saying. But the dreaming happens too you know you start to dream in your different language and that is a real thing

Kyle: so one of the things that you've mentioned a lot because we're talking about servicing children with with English as a second language and so I guess my interpretation was we were going to be offering offering services to children but you have said families about 400 times it sounds like families is really important in this

Nancy Blanco: it totally is because the you can't ignore that part of the equation right and the kids are gonna learn English they're in English-speaking classrooms with great teachers so they're learning to read and write in English they're definitely gonna the their motivation to learn is off the charts you know

you want to play with your friends on the playground you want to play a sport and be in a club and do theater and have all these same experiences every other student and have you know a social life like all students want to have and so their motivation to advance in English is high and humans have the natural ability to acquire language and kids especially the way their brain is forming it's a little bit more fluid and easy for them to learn as children they their hearing is better they can hear those sounds and being immersed in like language learning anyway with you know hey our kids are all taking English and reading right so being involved in that process it's it's going to happen generally so not to say I don't worry about them because I absolutely worry about them

Kyle: I didn't mean to imply that at all in this it sounds like again you had mentioned the community that they come from is a very very tight-knit and so including the whole family sounds like it's really important

Nancy Blanco: it is because I think with something that I say that makes me sad is sometimes my students become so fluent in English by about the if they come to English speaking kindergarten from another language speaking home by about fourth grade they're way more fluent in English than they are in their other language and sometimes they lose the ability to communicate with their own parents and extended family as they grow older and so to me we have to do a better job at working with parents and in helping them understand the importance of maintaining that other language and that part of that child's identity because it it's such an extra value add to have to have that second culture and that second language that I mean the kids are gonna not just from a standpoint of like money right yes the bilingual people on average make fifteen percent more than monolingual people in the same position so that's cool but just to be able to have that connection to their family and their heritage is a big deal maybe not as big of a deal to them when they're 14 as it will be when they're 40

Kyle: so it is so it is important in the ESL the s is the secondary language we also need to not stifle out the first language

Nancy Blanco: absolutely

Kyle: the primary language

Keith: so the fact of the matter is that the climate for a lot of your population that you deal with is not favorable towards them and so there are fears of being deported and things like that so how do you deal with that and help assuage those fears and say look we're here to help your children we have zero interest in kicking you out of the country

Nancy Blanco: oh well there's actually the way that I would do that and with working with teachers and working with these parents is these students are covered under the same laws of privacy that everyone else is

Keith: FERPA - Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act

Nancy Blanco: so thank you I know it's FERPA but I couldn't even tell you what it stood for but I know that it means that you as a teacher when information is shared with you confidentially you may not share it at all to anyone else so that's the number one law that protects families you know confidential information and also in the event that because the school handles confidential documents and sometimes this information becomes relevant and parents share information about legal status from

time to time if there are undocumented students or families they the school is actually prohibited from disclosing that information not just because of FERPA but because of I believe LAU v. NICHOLS was the court case that determined that schools couldn't do anything that had a chilling no PLYLER v. DOE but at any rate they couldn't do anything that would have a chilling effect on students attending school and so if you you know if you're a parent and you're worried about sending your child to school as a result of the school's actions then that would just be a no-go you know so we really try to maintain a positive welcoming atmosphere and in our schools

Keith: well that's important because the kids need education and we can't punish them for their parents' actions the children are we're just trying to get them to be productive people

Nancy Blanco: oh yeah and now the majority of our students are born in the US and they are US citizens but you know whether you know they didn't have a choice in this because they're children so you know it's it's their children and in our schools and children who are gonna grow up and be members of our society so how can we best meet their needs and make them you know let them live up to their potential because that's that's the job of every school system is to educate every child

Kyle: yeah yeah absolutely my next question is about uh resources resources for students but also for families what are some resources that you are aware of that others might not be

Nancy Blanco: oh that's a good question resources for teachers and parents there is a great website called Colorín Colorado and that's it's like spell discolor in Colorado but they're really good so we can we can link to that I bet

Keith: oh yeah we'll put stuff in the show notes

Nancy Blanco: ok cool because that is the best website with comprehensive information for people at all levels of knowledge about ESL and it's separated out by audience so if you're a teacher you can look start there if you're an administrator you can start there if you're a parent you can start there their resources are the whole website is available in English and Spanish and a lot of the resources for parents are available in ten languages so it's it's gonna have a lot of helpful tips the tip sheets for parents are great it starts with like what you can do to help your child your bilingual child from birth to age 3 from 3 to 4 from 4 to 5 and then kindergarten and so on and so forth so it just gives you ideas for working with your child I know that anybody can do and then of course duolingo I always recommend that it is the poor person's rosetta stone

Kyle: it's great

Nancy Blanco: and it is fantastic so

Kyle: I used it for a very brief minute and but I love the brevity of it you know you go in 5 10 15 minutes and it's once a day and it works on things with you and I really enjoyed it

Nancy Blanco: and it's backed the science behind it is backed by you know Ivy League linguistics centers so it is a top quality product it lets you practice your listening speaking reading and writing in the other language I've tried to learn French on there it's so hard I think I'm at 4% fluent but the one of my teachers at Loachapoka high school stopped me in the hall the other day I am 33 percent proficient it is fun to you so everybody likes that one those are the first two that come to mind

Kyle: okay no those are great so we talked about school districts and how some school districts are have not funded your position they don't have that what can a school district do to support people in your role what can the school system do to make it make a better experience for their EL families

Nancy Blanco: the most important thing that a school system could do to improve outcomes for EL students and better work with their families would be to provide translation and that is a legal requirement but again there's no funding that comes with it or almost no funding that comes with it but providing translation I would start with that for parents

Kyle: for all of the materials student handbook everything

Nancy Blanco: everything so and that can become pretty cumbersome and it's in some cases not possible let's get real but for the most the most important thing I think is to have someone there who can talk to them when they need them so whether it's that's done by purchasing a language line service kind of like the phones that they use in hospitals and stuff that you can call and have a translator on the line that could be an option an affordable option for some places

Keith: yeah we have we have that in DHR it's a thing you schedule a time with the language line you say okay we need to somebody who speaks this language at this time and call and they set up a three-way call they would call us at DHR and then they would call the family I remember the one that I had was Russian

Kyle: oh yeah

Keith: and they will they can they'll translate everything but it's strictly like a robot

Kyle: they will say the words that you say to them and say the words they say back

Keith: exactly that and that is literally all they're allowed to do and so like I've got this Russian woman blessing me out just cussing me up a blue streak but it was funny because you could you could feel the emotion on her from her but then the Language Learners [Keith meant to say the Language Line person was] like hmmm hmmmhmmm so but that's that's a really good service I like

Nancy Blanco: and to have a real person too though that's where you can't get that extra that extra step because sometimes the things that the translator has to translate or interpret are culturally related so there might be some kind of cultural norms at play or some sort of

Kyle: idiom

Nancy Blanco: right exactly or the parents are coming with it the expectation that a lot of countries teachers in school are ranked high and get a lot of respect from parents and so you send your child to school and that's it you're just expected to send them and you don't mess with the school they will take care of it you don't tell them what to do and who are you to tell the school what to do so that's kind of the attitude that some of the parents bring and it may be interpreted this like by American school people at school personnel as these parents aren't engaging they're not coming up to school

Kyle: uninvolved

Nancy Blanco: exactly and so well number one do they have someone there that can speak their language do they know about these events and do they know that they're expected to participate that's something that language line can't always get across

Keith: that is true they're not allowed to do anything outside of

Nancy Blanco: word to word

Keith: pretty much yeah and so like Google Translate is not good for

Nancy Blanco: no no

Keith: especially for long documents for like a short sentence or something that might be okay right

Nancy Blanco: most of the time it's gonna do a sentence or a phrase fine but some of the time it doesn't and certainly not for anything of any length or have any importance

Keith: so you're saying we shouldn't take the whole student handbook feed it into Google translate and just print the result

Nancy Blanco: no it would be completely unintelligible to any Spanish speakers

Kyle: do you have any advice for a school district who's looking to try do that is there a less expensive way to get these things translated or is

Nancy Blanco: that is still pretty expensive is it someone in-house it's gonna be your MOST cost-effective method I priced I mean I got quotes from six different places on translating the Lee County Schools handbook and because that's you know such a gargantuan task that you really don't have time to do that if you're doing translation for everything else and so it's expensive there's just no getting around it it is expensive

Kyle: and is expensive enough to consider hiring someone internally to do it

Nancy Blanco: absolutely and then the other thing that beyond translation the thing that school systems can do to support this population and ESL teachers would be providing these teachers with teaching time active teaching time with the students

Kyle: like one on one?

Nancy Blanco: like in the classroom push in or pull out one-on-one or small group but they need time to work with the students specifically on language and so it could be related to the language they need to complete classwork assignments I find them in secondary sometimes if your student is pretty proficient they're near maybe exiting the program they may just need a little bit of support to help them complete assignments almost like a resource study hall type situation or maybe they just need to increase their use of strategies in their reading so that they can increase their reading comprehension or they could have an error in decoding they an ESL teacher can help diagnose and address and just kind of fix it there but if the teacher's not spending time with the students then they can't figure these things out and classroom teachers have so much to do these days they are so they're doing so many things and it's kind of like not fair to expect them to

Kyle: carve out an additional piece of their day

Nancy Blanco: right when they're already working on and you know they have interventions for specific students already they're already accommodating for these students and any students with IEPs in their classes so they're they're already doing a lot to serve the students in that extra time just sometimes isn't there so for them so and that's when it could be helpful to have more active time with the students and collaboration time between the student the ESL teacher and the classroom teachers

Keith: before we change subjects is there anything else in the EL area that we should be aware of or you would like to address

Nancy Blanco: I think really those are the the most important things or the most frequently asked questions I'm trying to think of there's another myth that we can dispel

Kyle: I'm all for myth-busting

Nancy Blanco: I mean there is a book called myths and realities for teaching English language learners and that's where I always recommend that one to teachers because it's super short you can read a chapter they're organized by topic you can read one little case at a time brief but to the point and so there's there's all kinds of myths and the enrollment myths like do you have to have social security number to be enrolled things like that

Kyle: do you?

Nancy Blanco: you do not and so things like of that nature that people might think or might assume can be dispelled and that's definitely where the bilingual comes in into maintaining the native language at home that's the most important one of those I think that's something that's pretty interesting the prevalence of my students who come from other countries to speak they already speak more than one language a lot of them so I just I think that's pretty cool they bring a lot to the table that's if there's anything I have to say about working with my students and my families that hasn't been said it's they have so much to bring to the table and in education the buzzword I guess for that is funds of knowledge right these families and students bring in all kinds of knowledge that we wouldn't otherwise tap into yeah there's a lot you can do to build interest in learning about other places and other ways of doing things and seeing the world but there's nothing quite like having a student who has that perspective already and they have such you know unique things to bring into the classroom and it goes deeper than just food and celebrations those are important too

Kyle: right

Nancy Blanco: food and celebrations are very

Keith: any excuse for a party is a good thing

Nancy Blanco: exactly and so everybody loves to share their food that's a big important part of culture ways of passing down wisdom and folktales

Keith: you can tell a lot about a culture from their folk tales

Keith: oh yeah

Nancy Blanco: I love how they all have a scary one too obviously they're for keeping kids in line everybody's got a folk tale for that if every cultures come up with this story for this that that does make me laugh a little bit

Keith: so in your free time that you have

Kyle: your ample free time

Keith: all the free time that just comes your way as the ESL lead teacher you're also heading up the this new summer enrichment program Project Lead the Way or PLTW right

Nancy Blanco: yes

Kyle: tell us about about that

Nancy Blanco: okay

Keith: that seems to be an exciting new thing coming on

Nancy Blanco: I am excited about this and it is a new thing for Lee County I don't know in what capacity I'm serving

Kyle: not sure what the hat's title is

Nancy Blanco: exactly long story short last summer I had the opportunity to pilot to develop and pilot a summer program with the idea of it being a STEM academy so a science technology engineering and math some people throw art in there to make it STEAM but first having some sort of fun summer academy and I was able to do that at Loachapoka elementary school we used the project lead the way curriculum which a lot of people just refer to as PLTW and it it was an absolute blast so we had a month of the month of June half days Monday through Friday and the students came and they kept coming so we don't approach it from a remediation type angle

Kyle: that's not what it's about at all

Nancy Blanco: no

Keith: it's enrichment

Nancy Blanco: it's enrichment for everyone because there's a lot of modalities involved in engineering and stem activities and types of ways of thinking and in the engineering design process that aren't necessarily tapped into and the other content areas as often so there's creativity and parts of your brain that you just still get to use in other places that you're able to use here and some of the students who were maybe reluctant readers or don't feel like they're good at math they come here and they're doing all this reading and all kinds of math in order to complete their their builds and their projects exactly the thing the curriculum is very highly motivating to them and so they're able and you get to work as a group and they're having academic discussions together and so it's incognito teaching they don't even realize that they're having to work that hard for it because it's so much fun so

Keith: it's like hiding the broccoli

Kyle: yeah

Nancy Blanco: I mean the kids didn't even want to go to lunch last year they would just no I just want to work through lunch go get your lunch

Keith: that's great though

Nancy Blanco: it is it's super fun to see the kids be so excited and and really put so much effort into it

Kyle: how many students did you have this past year

Nancy Blanco: we started with 116 and we ended up with over 100 so I was very pleased with that turn out and attendance rate

Keith: what are they actually doing day to day

Nancy Blanco: good question project lead the way their curriculum is structured in a way that well first of all they're a non-profit and they're all over the nation all 50 states schools use their science curriculum it's aligned to the next generation science standards for each grade level and there's four different modules is what they call them but essentially they're units of study available for each grade level in the elementary levels and so we chose one module for each grade level and they're set up in a way that you have a problem that's presented to you in a story format so the students read a story or the story's read to them depending on their grade level and they have to figure out what the problem is and they go through three different activities they go from more teacher directed to more student directed they're building skills and knowledge that're gonna help them solve the final problem which is a big project build to solve the problem that was introduced in the initial story so it takes us about four weeks to get through all that some of them are able to finish a little bit early and some of us it's down to the wire but

Kyle: can you give us an example of one of the problems

Nancy Blanco: sure sure sure so one that's really fun and compelling is a second grade and the students have to build something that will keep ice pops or popsicles cold in the heat for a for an hour so every one of our second-grade students every group of them this summer it was 98 degrees by the way and there were no treats no shade and they put there they just use random materials that you can find around the house or packaging materials and they were able to with everything that they learned build successful coolers and their popsicles didn't melt I was actually a little surprised you know I'm thinking you know you teach them that the engineering design process part of it is making mistakes and you learn from them and that's good and they're not a bad thing and you have to be flexible and adapt and not get upset when things don't go how you expect the first time because that's very unlikely but but I was pretty shocked to myself that they did such a great job

Kyle: what kind of technology were you guys using was there anything specifically that y'all used

Nancy Blanco: the iPads were very helpful in the upper levels especially they used a few apps where they're using vex robotics and vex construction kits

Kyle: and vex is a name-brand of a like a packaged robotics

Nancy Blanco: right like like fancy grown up Legos and so the the kids were following really detailed instructions I mean it was like an Ikea build right they were looking at the iPad to be able to figure out how to build these different simple machines for example was the fourth grade so the iPads were

helpful some of the vex robotics again that was some of the technology the students were programming the brain and they made in the fifth and sixth grade students made some sort of device that could deliver supplies in the event of a disaster a natural disaster and it had to be able to

Kyle: a mobile machine that could deliver things

Nancy Blanco: yes and it had to be able to go around water obstacles and I can't remember the other constraints that were there but that that was their build

Keith: but it couldn't fly

Nancy Blanco: no no flying this time but we did bring in for fun the drones from Auburn University's COSAM outreach department Mr. Harlan is going to be working with this this summer with PLTW and using the middle school curriculum gateway from here on out in his classes so but he came and brought drones and Ozobots which are so fun

Kyle: the Ozobots are very neat

Keith: what is an Ozobot

Nancy Blanco: you may you know all the correct terms for it but I know it has the Machine where you draw lines or whatever pattern you make it responds to

Kyle: it will follow that pattern

Nancy Blanco: your pattern so we used it in the capacity of kindergarten kindergarteners of course you know writing your name is a big deal in the first nine weeks of kindergarten and by the summertime you're writing more than that for sure sure right everyone loves to write their name and have the robot trace it so they could look at the different codes that they could things that they can make the robot do by using different colors for example in their in their writing so they were super motivated to write and complete those tasks and I can see where it would have a lot of applications for classroom teachers in kindergarten and first grade when the kids are working on their phonics and developing the letter identity and what's that letter shape and sound I could see where that would be awesome to have a class set of those

Kyle: yeah and so one of the things you mentioned was the I think it was third fourth and fifth graders that they would program as part of this as well they would tell the robot what instructions to execute

Nancy Blanco: that was part of it and so the same thing with the drone it was a different but similar programming app available on the iPad they connected their drones to so they had to land it in a certain place for example and they had to figure out how to write the program that would and run the program that would land up there of course without running it into the wall or someone else's drone in the process so I've never seen kids so excited about programming

Keith: yeah that's a good thing though because we need they need to learn that skill more and more

Kyle: well and you know programming more than anything about the syntax of programming is the logic structure if you can build a logic structure of how to program even with those things that can follow you throughout and then if you want to become a programmer you would already have something

background but if you want to become anything in the STEM area you know you would have some of those logic gates already built in and that's really the hardest thing to do

Nancy Blanco: PLTW is really cool in how they teach that too because in grades k-2 they're analog it's you're actually following patterns that are laid out on the floor and it makes me remember kindergarten when I went which is what second grade now right the old kindergarten we would have tangrams and make patterns that's to be some of the same skills that they're employing there and then they start to and that they're great units for computer programming and PLTW they start to incorporate more technologies and and I totally am the most unlikely person to be anything related to STEM

Kyle: You're not a programmer in your offtime, is that what you're saying

Nancy Blanco: oh yeah you know I struggled with math in high school and maybe I was a product of the girls who were under you know with underdeveloped math skills because they like the self-fulfilling prophecy of I can't do math and it helped me kind of get through that because hey Project me the way stuff is so simple if I can do it I promise anybody can and in this summer ever there's a lot more people that will be doing it because instead of just being at one school

Keith: are we putting it at all...

Nancy Blanco: all elementary schools and two middle school sites at Loachapoka high and Sanford middle school they're gonna be the first to offer the Gateway program we're really excited about having building this capacity for our students letting them have this fun summer experience and then also as they get older maybe this is you know STEM classes start to get on the schedule in secondary schools they are gonna already have that capacity built up to succeed in those classes

Kyle: so if a parent or a student wants to be involved with this how do they do that

Nancy Blanco: yes parents are gonna get the application either the first or it will go out by the first week of March so like I'm shooting for Monday March 5th for the student applications to go live so it'll be just the flyer will come home with students and I'm sure that the schools will share on social media and it'll be a little application they just fill out it's one page on Google Forms you can do it on your phone doesn't even take five minutes and they'll be able to apply in that way and they'll be notified of the selection by because spots are limited and there's a team working on a rubric for student selection now actually and the they'll be notified before spring break so that they can make summer plans

Kyle: so it's pretty quick yeah ok

Keith: is there a fee

Nancy Blanco: there is no fee I'm excited about that because I feel like this kind of opportunity should be available to all students and we don't want money or behavior or anything like that to be a barrier to students getting to have these high quality STEM opportunities

Kyle: how many total seats will there be and

Nancy Blanco: quick math quick math

Jeopardy Theme

Kyle: okay so you will have a total of after all of our arduous math um so 525 spots for early which is K through six

Nancy Blanco: K through five because the kids in six graduate up

Kyle: okay and then for middle school you'll have 105 slots and those slots are at Loachapoka and then there those spots are at Sanford

Nancy Blanco: yes

Kyle: Wow right that's a lot okay way bigger than it was this year

Nancy Blanco: it's a lot of students so but I cannot say enough about the teams that are working now teachers haven't been hired yet but I'm sure that this program is gonna attract great teachers just like it did last year sure and the coordinators have been hired for each site and they each school has a dynamite person who is an integral member of that school's identity in team already and they're gonna all do a very great job with running these camps and giving these students a great experience

Kyle: that's awesome two more questions about this specific area if someone at another district is listening to this and they want to be a part of some of this is there some way they can become a part of the PLTW

Nancy Blanco: oh yeah absolutely PLTW training for the state of Alabama is offered in two locations the majority of it is offered here in our back yard at Auburn University

Kyle: very convenient

Nancy Blanco: and there is a I believe the computer programming as it gets more advanced is offered at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa to be a part of PLTW you pay a participation fee you have to attend their training and from there then you can be a classroom teacher and you can go on to get additional training but it's not that hard to get started it really is not so they make it pretty simple

Kyle: well it sounds like it's something that is so good for a school district to do

Nancy Blanco: and it is being done all over the state because I had the opportunity to attend and present on our program from last year at the PLTW conference that was held at Auburn in January and there are people all over the state who are doing this a lot of them use this as their regular during the school day science curriculum and some of them offer it in after-school for a lot of them it's it's a special just like you would have music or art it's different in each place but there were school districts big and small who are using PLTW

Kyle: that is awesome my last question about this is can we go play with the robots that would be great

Nancy Blanco: you can absolutely show up to the engineering Expo which will be on the next to the last day of camp it'll be like the last Wednesday of June and so that's the day that we have at each school they're gonna have an expo just like an exposition you know for grown-ups for designs and whatnot they're gonna show off their models and how they solve their problems and let parents and visitors guests know about what they did and what they learned and last year that was such a fun part of our of our experience that we're definitely gonna put that in place again

Kyle: oh yeah well I was just really hoping you would let me sign up with a Groucho Marx mask saying I'm a third grader

Keith: that's a heck of a moustache for a third grader

Kyle: no really, I'm tree [three] and a half years old

Keith: he got held back a couple times

Nancy Blanco: about thirty-five

Keith: right

Ukulele Music