Podcast: An AI Summit for Schools and Community

St. Cloud School Superintendent, Laurie Putnam and director of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment, Donna Roper, share their experience hosting an AI Summit that included about 200 local and national educators, business leaders, community partners and state legislators. They considered how we should respond to make our education systems relevant to the workforce and future needs and how a cross-section of stakeholders together can improve education policy.

Read the article on the Summit here.

Connect with Laurie and Donna here.

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.290] – Steve [Intro]

Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As instructional coaches and school leaders, you are tasked with guiding continuous teacher growth to create student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from experienced guests, as well as my own insights that I've gathered over the years. I'm thrilled to have you with us. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:30.370] – Steve

An AI Summit for Schools and Community. Returning to our podcast today is the Superintendent of St. Cloud, Minnesota Schools, Laurie Putnam. On an earlier podcast, she explored how an educator's belief that some kids don't care about school interferes with educators doing everything we should do to promote student success. Recently, I read a report that St. Cloud Schools held an AI summit for local and national educators, business leaders, and lawmakers, and I was anxious to learn more about the event. When I reached out to Superintendent Putnam, she agreed to return to the podcast and shared that Donna Roper, the Director of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment, should join us, and she agreed. Welcome, Donna and Laurie.

[00:01:22.020] – Donna

Thank you for having me.

[00:01:23.460] – Laurie

Thanks for having us, Steve. It's good to see you again. Good to talk with you.

[00:01:27.440] – Steve

I'm wondering, for starters, what did you observe or hear that led you to the decision to host the AI summit?

[00:01:37.830] – Laurie

One thing that we were drawn to is the need to be ahead to the extent that we can of the generative AI changes that are coming. We know that education can be a slow moving entity at times, and we've seen the the harm, for example, social media, right? It's easy access during a school day, for instance. We've seen the impact that can have on our students, and we knew that we needed to be on the forefront of that, not only for our students, but also for our community. And I will hope that Donna will talk a little bit more about that. But that's one of the things that we saw that drove us to say, hey, let's convene this. And then the other thing that was important to us is that when we look at professional learning or decision making across a variety of industries, including education, too often, close to always, it's like professionals meeting and learning together and making decisions together. And knowing that generative AI will have an incredible impact across all industries, across our society, we felt that it was important to bring stakeholders from different perspectives, from different levels of authority together to really tackle this as a team, from a multidisciplinary, multi-prospective approach.

[00:03:09.630] – Steve

Donna, I'm wondering if you'd describe a little bit about the design of the summit and the different participants you had there.

[00:03:17.350] – Donna

Yeah. I think just to piggyback a little bit on what Laurie said, we recognize that the technology can't lead the changes. It has to be a tool properly employed to get the results that we hope to get, which is improvement in learning. And the generative AI conversation is one that does require us to collaborate, if you will, and importantly, with industry and business as well as higher education and those in the education field who care about measurement, for example, and

the standards. And so it was It’s really Laurie’s vision of bringing together all of these cross-sector entities, and then to center it around the learning. We’re taking generative AI and AI as somewhat of it’s instigating a action for the district to promote leapfrogging ahead, if you will, to identifying what key things are central to learning so that we are setting kids up for success as they as they go through their career in K-12 and on. Because the learning is not going to end there. And so the design, really, of the AI summit evolved into being more about how do we capture the thinking and the brilliance in the room? So we did use a universal design thinking approach, and we had designed the sessions to really have the expertise in the room go deep into identifying the issues, identifying potential strategies for solving some of those issues.

[00:05:09.670] – Donna

And then at the end, what are some next steps and how do we build the momentum and have people be interested in taking the ball and moving it forward. And so it really was ground up, if you will, design came out of a group of planning team. It was collaboratively developed. And I will say Superintendent Putnam was very instrumental in directing us to be very collaborative and very open, because really none of us has the answer to all of this. We just know it’s going to require some really good thinking and wicked collaboration, if you will, across industry, across higher Ed, across policy-making, across business and industry.

[00:05:56.620] – Steve

Am I hearing that learning was a thread through throughout? So even for the business people there, it was how is AI going to impact learning for them? Did I get that straight?

[00:06:10.690] – Donna

Right. The prompts that we used in the design sessions were

focused on trying to understand issues and problems that might arise. How are we going to address these? And how are we staying focused on learner-centered solutions?

[00:06:27.820] – Steve

So, Laurie, I found a quote in the article that was assigned to you, and it was that this isn't about the how to of AI, this is the so what of AI. Expand on that a little bit.

[00:06:46.590] – Laurie

Absolutely. There are articles, videos, podcasts, you name it, on the how to of AI. That's important, and that is being done in lots of arenas. We did not want to or feel compelled to add our voices to that. It is happening and it is going to happen. Gen AI is almost ubiquitous at this point. Our interest is, so what does this mean for students? What does this mean for how learning is going to and needs to change? Some of the examples examples that we discussed that the listeners may be able to relate to is, why are we continuing to teach trigonometry but not data analysis? There are lots of assessments that still focus on fact recall. That's so easy to find now. How are we changing our standards? How are we changing our assessments in response to the myriad tools that generative AI has produced and will continue to produce at an even higher level of sophistication? It really is going to require, we believe, an overhaul of the state standards in Minnesota and across the country about what knowledge we believe is still going to be required knowledge two years, five years, a decade into the future.

[00:08:27.020] – Steve

As I'm listening, here's the thing that's rumbling around in my head. There's a look at what does AI's appearance force us to do, force us to change, versus where are places that we would have loved to have gone before, but we couldn't have gone there without the opportunity that AI presents to us. Is

it fair to say there's a little bit of a mix of both of those things?

[00:08:55.600] – Donna

I would say that's fair, Steve. I do think how we use AI to teach. You're talking about there's things we can do now much more efficiently, much more effectively because of AI. And then there's, what do we teach about AI? So it's how are we embedding the AI literacy skills that are going to be needed for teachers, for staff, for students? And then there's, what do we really think is important to know and be able to do to thrive in a world that is using AI everywhere. And I think it's the last piece where we're trying to leapfrog ahead and get people to put some attention on because there's so much attention on the first two, how to use it to be more effective, more efficient, how to use it, how to embed it into all of our content areas so that we're becoming literate in the skills, understanding large language models, understanding bias, understanding all those things. But we really do want also to have some attention given to defining the what, right? So as Laurie mentioned, redesigning the standards is a huge lift, and it's a big ask. But we have to start.

[00:10:16.290] – Donna

We can't wait. This is one of those things that because we know how much time it takes to do this work, it's really important that we start now.

[00:10:27.080] – Steve

I'm wondering what feedback you may have picked up from your participants regarding learning that was new for them, or I think would be a big one, questions they left with. The summit caused that question to arise. It didn't have the answer, but it left me asking it. I'm wondering if there's some of that that you picked up.

[00:10:53.350] – Donna

Yeah, I'm happy to share. So we did a full review of the feedback from the design sessions and we've landed with a couple of pathways we want to take out of that. The most important thing is that we're meeting again already. We have plans to meet again in October and in January, and we're taking two pathways. We're focusing on the what, which is with policymakers. And then there's the how, which is around all of the guidance and frameworks and needs that our districts and schools have that are urgent regarding the use in classroom. And Laurie, you can speak to that, too, because you've been intimately involved in some of that work. But I think the main thing that came out of that is we're interested, keep us involved. We had 70 people sign up to volunteer to move the work forward and engage other stakeholders throughout the state. So we're just getting started with that. And so it's like, yes, the near term, short term issues have to be addressed, and we're working to do that. And then we have to continue to push on the longer term needs that we will have.

[00:12:03.490] – Laurie

I think that was a great summary. I think it was really powerful to see people make connection across expertise area and be able to say, not a single one of us is going to be unaffected by this. If we want a well-informed, ethical, compassionate, creative workforce and citizenry community, we've got to start really working together to prioritize. Business knows what they need. Higher Ed knows what they're expecting. We try to deliver and promote what we believe is important. But there's so little conversation that happens between us. I think that was another huge takeaway, even outside of the generative AI conversation.

[00:12:59.440] – Steve

Any specific focus points you see coming out of this as next

steps for St. Cloud district itself?

[00:13:09.690] – Laurie

We continue to do a lot of the how and the what, because as I said earlier, education moves slowly. Right now, that's where our team is. We have to help our teachers, our students, our principals be ready for day one and getting super clear about the how and the what of that generative AI so we don't put ourselves behind or in tough positions because we weren't clear about expectations or providing the learning support. And then St. Cloud will continue to help advocate for change around standards, around assessment practices. Donna leads a lot of assessment work, both in the state and around the country. And so I think we just happen to be in a unique position to be able to help shape some of that long term so what conversation.

[00:14:09.080] – Steve

Donna, anything you want to add to that?

[00:14:11.240] – Donna

No, I think we will be, as Laurie said, trying to prioritize classroom assessment practices, assessment and instruction, increasing the toolkit, making sure we have that directional agility happening. And yes, being adaptive and understanding Planning AI is a part of it, right?

[00:14:34.120] – Steve

So it's recognizing we have work to move and continuing to support it at the highest level that we can and providing clarity, all those things that are necessary to make sure we're moving the needle. So a lot of the listeners to this podcast are instructional coaches in schools and building-level administrators. And I'm wondering what thoughts you might have as to conversations that those folks would be

looking to, one, both engage individual teachers in as an instructional coach or as a building principal, maybe looking at teams of teachers, if not the whole faculty. What are some of the conversations, maybe some of the questions that they should be asking?

[00:15:27.690] – Laurie

Some of the things that come to mind for me are asking people, what knowledge are they valuing? Are they moving beyond the declarative knowledge stage to asking kids to make meaning? Are they asking them to think critically? I think having some questions about how clear are and how much do our teachers know about the tools? I know our time is so limited. The demands on teachers are so high. And yet, this is not something that we can walk past for so very many reasons. The bare minimum is that kids are going to use it, and we owe it to them to be clear about when and how. So I think some of those are some of the just basic beginning conversations. And then to Donna's point about assessment, and I'll turn that to you, Donna.

[00:16:25.540] – Donna

So I think having our practitioners practice evidence-based assessment work in this day of AI means understanding intimately the tasks that we're asking kids to do. And we know our teachers don't all have the time required to do all of this outside learning that some of us who aren't in the classroom are able to do. So making sure we're bringing our instructional coaches and our PLCs, frankly, the tools and the support necessary to iterate around evidence and understand quality evidence as it relates to the learning tasks. And how do they evaluate tasks with AI as a part of that equation? So we have lots to do. Our teachers are working so hard, making sure everyone just comes to the table with open minds and willingness to learn and to know we aren't perfect and we aren't always going to do it exactly right, but that's okay.

And just being committed to iterate around it is really, I think, the key thing.

[00:17:42.900] – Steve

I had my own fun I did a little experiment with that a couple of weeks back. I'm always getting pushed by people going through coaching training with me to give them a list of good questions for coaches to use. And I always shy away from it because as soon as I give them the questions, they're going in with questions planned instead of listening and raising questions. But I was getting pushed and I thought, well, let me see if people could use AI to help them with this. So I put into AI what would be good questions an instructional coach could use working with middle school teachers in pre and post-conferencing. And it came back with just a terrible list of questions. They were totally supervisory and evaluative. So I ended up coaching AI. And after a few coaching sessions, it came back with a pretty good set of questions. And it dawned on me that if I was going to evaluate a person's ability to understand questioning and coaching, if they went to AI and coached AI until AI got it right, it would tell me that the person understood the principle better than me asking them to come up with a list of questions.

[00:18:55.510] – Steve

It just made a really interesting twist for me in my own mind.

[00:19:00.260] – Laurie

I think that's such a good example of the need for the human to get really clear and to be able to communicate with very little ambiguity about what they need, what they want, who the audience is, what the task is. And that's often, I think, the hardest part of any task is to get really clear in thinking.

[00:19:23.580] – Steve

That clarity shows the understanding. If a student can get AI to do that, that's right. That tells me the student understands it.

[00:19:32.930] – Laurie

Yeah. That's right. Or the teacher understands what they're asking.

[00:19:36.060] – Steve

Yeah.

[00:19:36.720] – Laurie

It's on both ends.

[00:19:40.050] – Steve

Closing out, any thoughts you'd want to share with folks around the topic I didn't bring up here or some response from your summit that we didn't touch on?

[00:19:53.610] – Laurie

The only thing I would like to say is that this was a team effort. We had senators, our attorney general was here, our commission of education was here. We had Charles Fadel, who is an internationally known thought leader, and Keith Kruger from COSEN. There are a lot of people who are very excited about thinking about the so what, and any time people who are listening can bring together those partners. We had the Director of Minnesota Business Partnerships. So any time people can bring together those wide-ranging entities, the better we all are. And so I just want to say I'm grateful to all of those people for their support as we start traveling this road together.

[00:20:42.860] – Steve

That did jump out to me when I read the short article about

it, the group that you bought together. I know that doesn't happen very often, and it needs to. Powerful. Any best way if listeners want to check back with you, if they've got a question or want to find out more about what you did?

[00:21:08.300] – Laurie

We have a spot on our website where we will have it may be posted, the video from the morning sessions. And then they're always welcome to reach out to us over LinkedIn, through our school emails. We're pretty easy to find, right, Donna?

[00:21:23.630] – Donna

I think so.

[00:21:24.780] – Steve

Alright. I will add those to the lead-in to the podcast to make it easy folks.

[00:21:31.330] – Laurie

Awesome. Thank you.

[00:21:31.680] – Steve

Thank you so much. Take good care.

[00:21:35.480] – Donna

Thank you. Take good care.

[00:21:35.510] – Laurie

Good to see you.

[00:21:38.750] – Steve [Outro]

Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn at Steve Barkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and

blogs at barkleypd.com.