



STEM Education Works®



When a rural chamber of commerce met at the DeSoto County Library, the agenda looked typical: updates, reports, formalities. Afterward, the librarian rolled out carts of STEM kits from the Southwest Florida Library Network's Bits and Bytes to Borrow collection. Within minutes, business leaders in suits were on the floor driving robots and exploring code.

"They said it was the best, most fun meeting they'd ever had," recalls Amy-Jane McWilliam, Executive Director of the Southwest Florida Library Network (SWFLN). "It reminded them how joyful it is to play and discover and learn in the library."

WHO THEY ARE

Southwest Florida Library Network (SWFLN) is a multi-type library cooperative serving public, school, academic, and special libraries across southwest Florida, while also supporting libraries statewide through training, resource sharing, and shared services. Its Bits and Bytes to Borrow collection allows member libraries and schools to check out STEM equipment for programs and classroom use, rather than purchasing everything themselves.

THE CHALLENGE: MAKE STEM ACCESSIBLE WITHOUT EVERY LIBRARY BUYING A LAB

Years ago, SWFLN heard a clear message from members: patrons wanted hands-on STEM, but most libraries could not afford full classroom sets or dedicate space to permanent labs.

"In the beginning, we just had one piece of equipment you could try," Amy-Jane says. "But that wasn't enough. If you have twenty kids, you don't want nineteen watching one person at the front of the room 'do the thing.' You want everyone doing it."





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THE SOLUTION: A “LIBRARY OF THINGS” FOR STEM

SWFLN began purchasing classroom sets and sharing them across the region through a “library of things” model. Members reserve equipment through an online system and typically borrow it for 21 days, with extensions when teachers need it for a longer period, such as a full semester.

Instead of libraries purchasing their own STEM equipment, we purchase it and then loan it to libraries and schools for their programming and classroom work.” Amy-Jane explains. “For the libraries and schools that can’t afford this equipment, we provide it for them. Or for the libraries that aren’t sure how to spend their budget, it’s sort of a try before you buy.”

Through STEM Education Works, SWFLN’s collection now includes tools like Ozobot Evo Classroom Kits and challenge mats, Sphero RVR+ class packs and code mats, Make Wonder Dash robots, MakerBot Sketch Sprint with filament packs, Glowforge Aura with craft filter, Horizon DIY Fuel Cell Science Classroom Packs, and STEM Quest Activity Cards, paired with professional development.

LIBRARIES AS THE COMMUNITY’S FIRST MAKERSPACE

The shared collection has turned member libraries into community STEM access points. Homeschool families, seniors, and school groups all find approachable ways to explore technology.

“Public libraries, especially in Florida, are seeing an influx of homeschool students down here, too. So it’s also an opportunity to meet the demands of homeschool families that are coming in. We have a larger senior population, and they also like to explore technology in a way that’s not intimidating or overwhelming.”

Patrons are often surprised to find this kind of STEM in a library.

“People say things like, ‘I can’t believe libraries are still around because we have AI and Google,’” she notes. “Then they come in and see 3D printing, robots, coding ... It reminds them why libraries are much better than just a search engine or buying something on your own.”

PARTNERING WITH STEM EDUCATION WORKS

For SWFLN, the partnership is about more than equipment lists.

“Our partnership with STEM Education Works helps us get the most out of our budget and really helps us understand emerging technology and what’s been working well in schools,” Amy-Jane says.

She’s especially candid about the importance of trust.

“Everybody that we’ve worked with at STEM Education Works has been really kind and patient. They understand our budget issues. With grant funding, things can be really tricky, so they have helped us in so many ways, and we trust them. And so that’s helpful too. When you have a partnership where they’re looking out for your best interests rather than just what they’ll earn in commissions from selling you equipment ... that says a lot.

“At the end of the year, we have a couple extra thousand maybe, if we’re lucky. But if we do, I know I can call up Chauntée and say, ‘What would be the best use of this money? What can we get with this?’ And I know that I have somebody again who understands my organization and is looking out for our best interests.”



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EQUITY AND REACH: ONE NETWORK, MANY NEIGHBORHOODS

What started as a collection of loanable STEM kits has grown into a regional Makerspace without walls. Through SWFLN's shared-access model, libraries across southwest Florida are giving students, families, educators, and community members opportunities to explore STEM concepts, regardless of zip code or budget. By combining trusted partnerships, thoughtful resource sharing, and a commitment to equitable access, SWFLN is helping libraries redefine what learning looks like in the 21st century.

As Amy-Jane sees it, the goal is simple: make sure every community has a place where curiosity leads to discovery, and where the next generation of creators, problem-solvers, and innovators gets the chance to begin.

