



STEM Education Works®

SOUTHWEST FLORIDA
SWFLN
LIBRARY NETWORK

When Amy-Jane McWilliam talks about the Bits and Bytes to Borrow collection, she doesn't describe it as a one-off grant project. It's something they plan around every single year.

"Now it's a budget item," she explains. "Every year we're looking at ways to grow and improve."

That shift from "extra" to "essential" has everything to do with how Southwest Florida Library Network (SWFLN) has built a long-term partnership with STEM Education Works.

WHO THEY ARE

SWFLN operates one of its most popular services through the Bits and Bytes to Borrow collection and continues to expand that work each year based on member demand. The organization now treats the collection as an ongoing budget item and a strategic service area rather than an occasional add-on purchase.

"It's one of our most popular services," Amy-Jane says. "We ask our members for wish list items throughout the year ... when we're ready to buy, we review all of the items."

THE GOALS: A PARTNER, NOT JUST A VENDOR

SWFLN wanted a partner that could help the organization make wise purchasing decisions, understand emerging technologies, and support members long after equipment arrived. The relationship also needed to support future growth through events, workshops, and training opportunities.

"We talk to STEM Education Works. We talk to other educators to see, 'How would you use this? Do you think it would be used often?' We weigh the pros and cons," Amy-Jane explains. "Working with an organization like STEM Education Works really helps you figure out where to put that money in the most useful way so that the equipment is being used."





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THEIR SOLUTION: EQUIPMENT, TRAINING, AND TRUST

STEM Education Works has supported SWFLN with both equipment and ongoing professional development, including workshops and participation in their annual educator training event, Makerpalooza. The STEM Education Works tools currently supporting the network include Ozobot products, Sphero products, Make Wonder Dash robots, MakerBot Sketch Sprint with filament, Glowforge Aura with craft filter, Horizon DIY Fuel Cell Science Classroom Packs, STEM Quest Activity Cards, and professional development services that help members confidently use the tools in their own settings.

For Amy-Jane, the partnership stands out because the team understands budget realities, offers practical guidance, and helps SWFLN get the most value from each purchase.

PARTNERING WITH STEM EDUCATION WORKS

Customer service and professional development aren't extras; they're the reason many programs become sustainable. "Our partnership with STEM Education Works helps us get the most out of our budget and really helps us understand, like emerging technology and what's been working well in schools," she says.

She is also clear about why trust matters.

"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," she explains. "When you have a partnership where they're looking out for your best interests rather than just looking at what they're going to make in commissions for selling you equipment, that says a lot."

"At the end of the year, you have a couple extra thousand maybe, if you're lucky. But if you 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."

THEIR BITS AND BYTES TO BORROW STEM COLLECTION

- Ozobot Evo and Accessories
- Horizon DIY Fuel Cell Science
- Wonder Workshop Dash
- MakerBot Sketch Sprint and Filament
- STEM Quest Activity Cards - 3D Printing Edition
- Sphero RVR+ and Accessories
- littleBits
- STEM Quest Activity Cards - littleBits Edition

These tools sit alongside other low-tech and high-tech items that SWFLN adds each year to serve all ages.

THE SWFLN PROGRAM: GROWING A SUSTAINABLE STEM SERVICE

Looking ahead, SWFLN plans to continue growing the collection each year by gathering wish-list items from members, reviewing use cases, and balancing low-tech and high-tech additions.

"Each year we add a little bit more. We make sure that we add low-tech and high-tech items," says Amy-Jane. "We've offered things not just for children; we offer things that can be used for all ages."



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Makerpalooza remains part of that long-term strategy, giving librarians and educators a chance to learn together, explore equipment hands-on, and bring new energy back to their communities.

“It’s very inspirational,” she says of the event. “People share their stories, and you just see a lot of creativity, a lot of excitement ... even that one big pump of energy from going to a small event like that, it’s great. It just powers you for the rest of the year.”

CONTINUING THE MEANINGFUL LEARNING

SWFLN’s experience shows that sustainable STEM programs are built on a shared commitment to growth. With STEM Education Works as a long-term partner, SWFLN continues to expand opportunities for its members and bring meaningful STEM learning to communities across the region. For organizations considering a similar effort, SWFLN’s experience suggests that the right partner helps stretch budgets, simplify decisions, and support long-term growth.

“We’re just really looking forward to growing the training, growing our collection, and really just continuing to support STEM education,” Amy-Jane says. “It’s so important.”

