



STEM Education Works®

SOUTHWEST FLORIDA
SWFLN
LIBRARY NETWORK

When librarians and media specialists come to Southwest Florida Library Network (SWFLN)'s annual Makerpalooza, they arrive carrying long to-do lists and the usual day-to-day stress of running programs. By mid-morning, they're coding and cutting on lasers in a buzzing "tech playground."

"Everybody looks forward to it," says Executive Director Amy-Jane McWilliam. "They get the permission to go for the day, and they can really, really focus on learning about emerging technologies and what we have to offer and how they can bring that back to their community."

That same spirit of making high-tech learning feel doable for any branch drives how SWFLN runs its Bits and Bytes to Borrow STEM collection.

WHO THEY ARE

SWFLN serves a wide range of public, school, academic, and special libraries across southwest Florida, as well as additional libraries statewide. Many of those locations rely on frontline staff who are not full-time STEM specialists, but still want to offer high-quality STEM programs.

That reality made usability, flexibility, and support essential to the Bits and Bytes to Borrow collection's success.

THE GOALS: STEM THAT FITS REAL LIBRARY LIFE

One of SWFLN's central goals was to make STEM programming manageable in real library environments, where staff juggle reference questions, storytimes, circulation, and outreach, and may not have the hours to learn every new device.

The program also had to work across ages and settings, from school visits to homeschool meetups to evening public programs.





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THE SOLUTION: PAIRING EQUIPMENT WITH HANDS-ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

STEM Education Works supported SWFLN not only with technology but with professional development that helped staff understand how to use the tools confidently and run stronger programs.

Amy-Jane is blunt about the impact of that training.

“Professional development classes, whether they were standalone or whether they were coming down for a big event, have impacted how our members use our equipment in so many ways.”

She explains why that matters so much in a library context.

“There is a learning curve when learning about new technology, and especially when you’re going to be bringing it to students or kids attending a program. You want to make the most of the time that you have, and you want to be able to troubleshoot ahead of time in your head.”

Hands-on sessions with STEM Education Works trainers, especially with a former classroom teacher like Chauntée, give participants space to ask questions, practice classroom management scenarios, and think through what will realistically fit in a one-hour program.

“Once you are confident with using the equipment, it helps you to be able to manage the other dynamics that are going on in the room as well. But it also just leads to a better program because you’re getting the most out of it.”

Before that training, some STEM Education Works kits simply weren’t getting checked out. Afterward, they started to circulate.

“I would say that prior to the instruction, the kit wasn’t being utilized. Afterward, it was. So it was being checked out. And that’s the difference. And we noticed that across the board.”

THE SWFLN PROGRAM: CONFIDENCE FIRST, THEN CREATIVITY

McWilliam emphasized that live, hands-on professional development made a major difference because participants could ask questions, think through troubleshooting, and gain the confidence needed to manage a room full of learners.

“Nothing beats professional development where you turn everything off, you’re in one place, you’re with like-minded learners. You can share ideas, network, and also just learn hands-on. You don’t have any distractions. And really, that’s absolutely the best.”

As confidence grew, so did creativity. Staff began to see what was realistic within a single program and how to prep, so they could focus on one powerful aspect of a tool rather than trying to cover everything at once.

That confidence helped staff move from uncertainty to active use, which in turn improved both program quality and equipment utilization across the network.



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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

A LASTING IMPACT

SWFLN's success shows that effective STEM programming isn't about having experts on staff or dedicated makerspaces in every building. It's about giving educators and librarians the right tools, practical training, and ongoing support. By pairing loanable technology with hands-on professional development, SWFLN has helped libraries across the region turn curiosity into confidence, making high-tech learning accessible, manageable, and meaningful for the communities they serve.

