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Is the "Lost Year" of Achievement Truly Lost? An Interview with Liz Brooke, Chief Learning Officer at Lexia Learning, and Felecia Evans, Principal of Lander Elementary School

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With the shift to remote learning amidst a global pandemic, much has been said about a “lost year” of reading comprehension. Liz Brooke, Chief Learning Officer at Lexia Learning, and Felecia Evans, Principal of Lander Elementary School, recently spoke with Leilani Cauthen, CEO and Publisher at The Learning Counsel, to discuss lessons gleaned from a trying year, and how an adaptive blended learning framework like Lexia’s can help students excel in a remote-hybrid learning environment.

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Leilani Cauthen, The Learning Counsel

We have with us today Dr. Liz Brooke, who's the Chief Learning Officer from Lexia Learning, and also Felecia Evans, who's the principal from Lander Elementary School in Mayfield Heights, Ohio. So glad to have both of you.

Felecia Evans, Lander Elementary School

Thank you for having me.

Liz Brooke, Lexia Learning

Yeah, thanks for having us.

LC:

So we're going to have hopefully a lively conversation today about this particular topic, which is recovery from a lost year of reading achievement. The Learning Counsel has been watching a lot of data from our one-minute surveys that we lob out at our national audience. The last one we did, we got back 27,000 responses, and there's definitely a tone of desperation in some places—they know they're either losing enrollment or they're losing achievement, they've been scrambling madly in so many schools and districts just to do anything with a viable remote structure. And so they feel like maybe they shouldn't test kids, because they're not going to meet the achievement levels that they're hoping for. There's a lot going on out there. And really, it's so emotional for people to just try to keep it together in all this and get kids to arrive at all, when they're all remote. So we've got these gaps that are starting to appear, and of course all of the educators in the room and the intellectuals are like, "I don't want this to be a lost year. I want to make this happen."

So really what we're looking at is, what's happening that you can see from your perspective, and what's been successful. Let's go on to discussing what your viewpoint is of what's been happening in your arena. Felecia, I'd like you to go first and talk about what changed in your role, and then what you're seeing in terms of this "potential" for a lost year in terms of recovering from that.

FE:

I'm an elementary school principal. As a kindergarten through fifth-grade school, we've got a little over 500 little learners with us and we are considered a [Title 1](#) building, which means we have a larger population of students from low-income households. And we also have about 20 to 25 different languages that are spoken with the families in our school, so we've got quite a diverse setup, which we do really find to be a strength. One focus for us is because there is just so much emotion around what's happening with this pandemic, and parents concerned about lost learning, is that we are really trying to focus on the fact that our children are exactly where they need to be, and that is with us. We try to build confidence and collective efficacy with our team, and understand that we know what's best for our kids, because we have the data that supports it. And really just building our children's flexibility, building our families' independent learning skills, focusing on clear learning goals—these are all things that we want parents to understand, and what we call our “learning guardians” to understand: that although it may appear that we have lost learning, we are really also [building some strengths](#) with our children that we think will then last them, and hopefully in the end, when this is all said and done, they really have picked up some some new skills that maybe they wouldn't have before.

LC:

What you just described is a lot of bringing order to a new structure. So we could probably talk about that for an hour (we won't) but there's a whole thing about how you manage and recruit your families, your parents; and because you've now deputized all of them, that could be a whole rabbit hole we go down because that's another whole conversation we've been hearing about all over the country. So you're using a particular solution, and I'd like to invite Liz in

to talk about what she's seen overarchingly in this topic of the lost year, lost achievement. Go ahead, Liz.

“Not all hope is lost”

LB:

Thank you. I love Felecia, what you were saying about some of those new skills—that we can focus on the lost learning, but we can also focus on the new skills that these learners will gain out of this. And I think you said something else about using data that you have. That's one of the things that I've been trying to help schools and districts think about. Nobody has been through this—I mean, unless you were in 1908—but nobody's been through this and we don't want to throw everything out and start from scratch, right? We want to [leverage those systems](#) that we've put in place that we know have been effective in the past. One of those things is using data to help understand, as Felecia said, that the best place they can be is with us because we understand them, working with the family and working with the community. One of the things at Lexia that we've seen across this period is that if we can help schools to leverage the systems that were working, leverage the systems that were put into place, but looking at them now through that lens of remote learning—then we're going to be in a better situation and not all hope is lost, we don't have to start from scratch.

FE:

I think you're absolutely right. We are in our third year of implementation of using the [Lexia Core5](#) program with our children, so saying “a lost year” is a really big, subjective thing to say. But when we actually sit down with parents, and we show where children are within that learning track within Lexia Core5 and then parents are starting to understand, to see, “OK, this isn't really a lost year; this is

where my child is, this is what we're moving towards." And all of those are conversations that are based on data that we're able to have with our teachers, with their learning guardians, with our families, and we're able to have with children—so everybody who supports the kids are all on the same page, and it sets up a very nice clear path for learning. So what might sound like or look like a year of lost learning is really not when we dig down into the data and we see specifically where kids are and where they need to go.

LC:

That's an amazing thing, and I think what we're really saying here is we titled this whole podcast "Recovery From a Lost Year" and you guys are not really having to try to even recover because you're already in a position—you already had a tool, you had a system. So you're rocking and rolling, whereas a lot of other places haven't gotten there yet. And I'm really concerned about them. Go ahead, Liz.

Artificial intelligence meets human intelligence

LB:

I was just going to say, I think it's great. But at Lexia, our programs are what we call an adaptive blended learning framework. So even when schools and learners were in the traditional classroom, there is a component of online learning. That's where you can leverage the data in the AI sense—all the clicks of the mouse and taps of the iPad are being captured. But then we partner the AI with the HI—the human intelligence, the educators, and we empower the educators as the center of the learning through that data to try to help them understand where their students are. To Felecia's point, they [understand their students because of that data](#). So when we had this shift, schools that had been using Lexia or other blended

learning programs, it seamlessly transitions from that “bricks to clicks” or “classroom to cloud,” whatever phrase you want to use. The students are familiar with it, which, again, gets to that feeling of comfort because it's something familiar; the teachers are familiar with it. And sure, I'm not saying it was easy to transition, because how do you deliver a lesson virtually over, for example, Google Classroom instead of face to face, but those components were there, and that foundation was there. So schools that have not had something like that in place were at more of a disadvantage and were scrambling a little bit to figure out how can they not have it be a whole year of learning loss?

LC:

I love what you said about the emotional side and the care factor of the human side. I'm a huge proponent of people looking at what's going on with technology, and teaching and learning in K–12 from that viewpoint. Technology is really great, but it should be actually providing enough automation in order to highlight and elevate the human interface so that you really have quality interactions. So back to you, Felecia: Can you talk a little bit more about what this solution has done for you?

FE:

Yeah, when we think about that idea of using data, when when we look at Lexia—our children are using the Lexia program—it really does highlight areas of intervention. The kids are working, and then they kind of hit a red flag moment, as we call it. Then what the program does is it sends a flag to our staff that, hey, this child is struggling with this specific skill, they need that human touch as you were exactly speaking of; they need someone to come in and directly teach them this skill to help move them forward in their learning progression. When we went remote last year, we had this set of paraprofessionals

in our school, and I know a lot of people were struggling with what you do with paraprofessionals in a remote classroom. And so what we actually did was, we took our paraprofessionals and kind of transformed their role into being academic coaches. And because the Lexia platform gives such nice data paired with such nice interventions, we were able to use our paraprofessionals in an academic coaching sense, then target them to the students that were showing that they needed the interventions, and then be able to quickly have those interventions at their fingertips in order to provide them. So it was really transforming that role of just being able to use everybody we have to be able to support the learning of the students. And if we didn't have the Lexia program, the way in which it functions, we wouldn't have been able to do that.

Another real kind of unintended benefit that I found was once children were at home, or maybe they were in a daycare or some type of setting outside of our school, Lexia does have a nice learning progression. So parents or learning guardians or whoever is working with that child can explicitly see how we are teaching those basic rate reading fundamentals. So what might have been abstract before for parents or for families really became more concrete, because they began to see, OK, this is really what my child is doing; this is really how we take phonemes and then turn them into reading sounds, and then turn them into letter sounds, and then turn them into segmenting and blending and rhyming. And really understanding the science behind the teaching of reading, it kind of illuminated that for our families, and I think that was an unintended benefit: opening up our playbook of reading instruction for parents and families to be able to really see ways that they can also support their child offline from the program.



“One of the things at Lexia that we've seen across this period is that if we can help schools to leverage the systems that were working, leverage the systems that were put into place, but looking at them now through that lens of remote learning—then we're going to be in a better situation and not all hope is lost, we don't have to start from scratch.”

– DR. LIZ BROOKE, *CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER*

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Real-time benefits

LC:

I love that. This is a solution—this isn't just a tool, right? This isn't just like email where you just have to route everybody: “Here's your directions.” This is actually capturing the content and facilitating it in an orderly fashion, both with the knowledge that you should have as well as the reading material, along tracks that allow you to organize the humans around that in order to really help a child progress. And it takes a lot of the hard work that is in the, let's say, Google Docs world of trying to organize everything yourself, individually file everything, sort it out, email it to everybody at the right moment, the right time, send them where they've got to log in somewhere else—all those other kind of things. Not a real big hit on Google because they're great, but the thing is, until you have a system of this magnitude, you haven't done everything that you've just said, Felecia, which is organizing it so that people can understand the path of learning easily.

And they're sort of brought into this group, like, "OK, we're all in this together and the technology is facilitating us actually getting this done with this particular student," which I love, and that's really what technology should be doing. It shouldn't be more work.

FE:

And it's real-time, right? Because the students are using it every day. So it's not in a traditional summative assessment world, where we would give a checkpoint on paper and pencil, and the teacher would have to grade it and the teacher would have to find assessments aligned, and then maybe give those to a paraprofessional or do them themselves. It is really, really real-time, which we know is so important in terms of reading development, that the students are getting the intervention at the time that they need it. So the real-time benefit of that is huge as well.

LB:

And if I can jump in on that point, because not only the [real-time data](#), as you said, Felecia, not waiting until the end of the year to find out, "Oh, wow, this student didn't learn what he or she needed to;" but real-time every day—that daily, weekly, monthly progress monitoring, but then you layer on top of it this current situation, and how can you do that in a remote environment at scale?

You talked about almost 500 learners, and how do you replace the teachers observing in the classroom, doing checklists with the students—all of that is a really important part of informing them. I think our Assessment Without Testing, which I always describe as ice cream without calories because it's just that good, but that idea of not stopping your instruction time to test but every click of the mouse or tap of the iPad is helping to create that picture for that teacher, for

that human intelligence. So I think, Leilani, you mentioned that technology should be used in a way that empowers the educators and that's exactly how we see it, and leveraging technology for what it can do best. So maybe repetition and practice with the student, because the teacher is not able to get to all 30 students for those time periods. But giving that remote access to that real-time data that's so valuable, but still needs to happen in this remote world, is something we're excited that we've been able to do through that Assessment Without Testing.

Targeted tech

LC:

What you just described lays down this line of demarcation that The Learning Counsel talks about a lot because as UI/UX experts, we're experts in user interface, user experience. And most of education really talks about technology as a tool; like it's something that is a little widget that performs the function of a calculator or a digital document, and you can email it around or you can enter data into a system. And they tend to look at it as something that is a sort of an augmentation of existing ways that teachers do things, whereas what's happening with a solution like this is it's more than a tool—it's an automation. It automates some of the distribution of the knowledge function, and it does what you're talking about, with the ice cream analogy, which is awesome. It's doing things along the way that the teacher now doesn't have to do: She didn't have to or he didn't have to remember to zing that little assessment over at this exact interval when the student was in that particular piece of text—it's doing that.

So now what you're talking about is a workload shift, which is, again,

that refinement now of what the human interaction side has to be, because the machine is doing some of that distribution of pieces of the learning journey, rather than the teacher having to manually distribute—even though it's on technology—all those individual pieces. That's really where technology is going to go even further along the way, and it's all because then it elevates that teacher's human interface to be perfected so that the teacher is zeroing in on exactly that point where we need to do some direct instruction with little Isabella or Henry or whoever, because this is the sticking point, right? So then no child doesn't achieve. This is where the “lost year” symbolism gets wiped out, because now this automation comes sweeping in and it says, “We can fix this, we can fix everyone.” And I think that's really an amazing thing to say. It's just huge. It's really huge.

FE:

I think it's maximizing the time that we have the attention of the children as well. There are concerns out there, obviously, about screen time and kids in a remote environment and even kids at school with all this technology: Is it too much screen time? And so what we have conversations with families about is that we want our children to have screen time where they're interacting, where they're not just consuming, not just watching something—where they're actually interacting with the technology as the most beneficial use of technology and that screen time that we can have, and use of our instructional time as well. So, I look forward to this increase in technological tools that can really interact with children and be responsive to the needs of children. I think there's a lot of benefit in that.

LC:

That's a really great point: the interaction aspect of it, not being a flat

digital document only—it's not flat, it's got dynamic action to it. That's amazing. Liz?

LB:

You spoke to this, Felecia, and really our aim is to allow those precious moments when the teacher is interacting with a small group of students or individual students to be really targeted and time efficient. This methodology allows not only for those students who are struggling, but those students who are working above grade level to have that runway, that scope and sequence we talked about earlier that is designed around the science of reading but allows that student to be able to go beyond the grade-level material, but he or she may still be struggling on something. So it is intervention in a way, but it's not only for those who are behind. But again, it automates it in the sense of allowing it. I don't want to sound like it's this silver bullet, because certainly it is that human intelligence that takes that data, takes that connection with their students. But we want to allow that educator to be really focused and then also keeping those students engaged when they're in the screen time, with something that is appropriately targeted at their level—it's personalized, so it's more engaging, because they're not either frustrated or bored, but they're there at a level that is appropriate to them.

FE:

It's about equity and access. It's about [providing the children what they need](#) at the time that they need it. I can name stories of—and I can see their faces and give you their names—but just of children who, on both sides of the coin, came into our kindergarten classrooms and we were able to get them connected with Lexia and using Lexia, and push them into reading at first- and second-grade levels. And then the opposite side of that, children who might come in

without any preschool experience. And because there are pre-K skills that are built into Lexia, we're able to drill down the instruction to just those basic fundamentals of the reading process, so you're right—there are just so many different ways that we can use this to both challenge students and also to provide those students the extra support that they might need, that a teacher might not be able to just individually provide for every child.



"Because the Lexia platform gives such nice data paired with such nice interventions, we were able to use our paraprofessionals in an academic coaching sense, then target them to the students that were showing that they needed the interventions. And if we didn't have the Lexia program, the way in which it functions, we wouldn't have been able to do that."

– FELECIA EVANS, *PRINCIPAL OF*
LANDER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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Equity for all

One other component of this that I've found beneficial as well is the removal of bias. In the human situation, in the human psyche, there's bias that comes in and sometimes without even knowing it, teachers might make a decision about, "Does a child need this challenge?" or "Does a child need this?" With the use of artificial intelligence and some of this technology, the computer doesn't know what the child looks like, right? They don't know what to expect or to have any assumptions or to have any bias towards a child. The machine simply knows that this is where the child needs to go next in the

learning. And so I think there are some fascinating things that can come out of just equity work and understanding how sometimes when we remove the bias by the use of technology, we can sometimes close gaps and push kids further than maybe we thought we could.

LB:

I love that, Felecia. We've talked about equity, but I haven't thought about it from the lens of the bias, that unconscious bias that we sometimes have as teachers (I'm a former teacher myself). You either want to support the student in their answer on the assessment, so you might give them credit for something, or you might bring in pre-existing expectations. So I love that idea as well. I think we think about equity as not providing the same resources, but providing specific resources to provide the same opportunities to succeed. Having the scope and sequence based in the science of reading—as the situation, Felecia, you talked about in kindergarten—whether you have students reading on a third-grade level or those that are coming in really more at a pre-K level, and helping the educator manage those 24 to 25, sometimes 35, profiles of students and again, making their time together more effective.

LC:

I think there's this other angle that a lot of people don't talk about, but I love this angle in terms of equity, and that is: You live within a system where not every child needs to be in the same exact book or text if they're reading, and they get to choose sometimes. You can frame around “Here are your different choices,” which has a huge impact on students being interested. Little people have their preferences for what they're interested in, and one child may think this topic for this particular text is horrible and boring. That becomes another level of equity, right? Interest alone can drive your learning.

So, I think it's time for us to tell a few little stories if you guys have them. You don't have to say specific student names or anything, but what have you seen, Felecia, in terms of students just lighting up?

Achievements worth celebrating

FE:

We've really worked a lot with just personalized learning goals and helping students identify how many minutes and how many units that they need to meet each week. Specifically, we had a kindergartner who came in to us a couple years ago and did not have any preschool experience. In working through the Lexia program and partnering with a teacher, we were able to move the student light years beyond anywhere we ever thought that we could. And now actually going into second grade, this little guy just finished his assessment for gifted and has actually just picked up a gifted reading identification. So it goes to show you, a child who came in with no school experiences, no preschool, nothing—we were able to use this program to really push him to the place where he needed to be. There are many stories like that of just being able to meet the needs of all kids, knowing that our teachers' resources are stretched so thin, that they are really able to kind of widen their net and widen their arms and reach all of their learners.

LC:

Amazing. I love that. Liz?

LB:

I love that story, too. I think at the end of each of the levels, whether in Core5 or [PowerUp](#) (our program for older students), we do a lot of self-monitoring. You talked about the user interface, and there are

ways—we do it differently for the younger students and the older students—that engagement of them [seeing their own competency be built](#), whether it's the circles on the screen filling in or at the end of each unit, there's a little two- to three-second video celebrating their success that they completed this, and then at the end of a whole level, there's a bigger animation, there's a certificate. You see it in some of the more shy students, their eyes lighting up. I even saw it in my own nephew this past weekend; he finished a level and his eyes lit up. He's not necessarily a struggling reader, but just finishing this level and seeing his accomplishment, he was so proud and wanted to share it with his parents—and like you said, Felecia, the learning guardians I think get a deeper appreciation in all of this for many things, including teachers and their jobs, but seeing the development of reading skills in their own children and seeing that progress not just visually on the screen, but in their eyes of their children—that's what it's all about. That's really priceless.

FE:

I love how you talked about celebrating kids. That's definitely one thing that we found as well, is just being able to celebrate those little moments when they pass a level and giving them their certificates. We created a little bulletin board in our hallway. It's a bubblegum machine, and anytime a student passes a level—and we've got 500 students—we put a little bubblegum ball with their name on it in the hallway. And then, by the end of the year, we had an entire bulletin board and half of our wall filled with bubblegum balls for all the success of our students. Those are just little ways to be able to celebrate all kids and to celebrate learning, which is important for them.

LC:

I love how this is personal, not just personalized—they all get the little

bubblegum thing. That's amazing. So Liz, can you tell me a little bit deeper now, as we're going through this—give me a little bit more of an idea of the UI/UX, give me a little bit more detail on that and the analytics part. Give me a visual.

LB:

Sure, so again, as I mentioned, we have our program Core5, which is designed for students of all abilities in pre-K to fifth grade. And then we have PowerUp, which is designed more for struggling students in middle school and high school. Although we wanted both programs to cover those foundational reading skills, we obviously had to have a different UI/UX for the younger students and the older students. We really tried to follow three principles of motivation getting toward [intrinsic motivation](#), which stems from something called the self-determination theory by Ryan and Deci.

One is autonomy. The students have a dashboard where they have choice—even though it's a forced choice, it's a choice. And so they have a dashboard—talking about the younger program now at the elementary school—that has five activities, and they get to decide which activity they want to go into that day. So that's one element, the autonomy.

The second one is competency. So they can see them developing skills; they can see each circle that they're choosing, the activity has units, and they're filling in that circle. They can see a progress bar in the middle of every single activity as they go through that activity, down at the bottom of the screen—so another big thing is celebrating their success, celebrating them building competency.

The third piece is relevancy, and how does this relate to me? So that idea of interest in the different stories, but also how am I relating to

my peers and celebrating peers? We do that through things like polls, and they get to see responses for other students across the country who are in that same unit. For the older students, we do that in a similar fashion but just a more mature interface. There's a little bit more of that social aspect in it of likes and dislikes, and thumbs up/thumbs down, and streaks, and some more of that gaming, but that all is quick and gets them right back to time on task. You can see in Core5, we have 21 levels, and those levels take place around the world so the students get to see this globe and they get to travel and learn about all of these 21 locations. In our older program, we have different themes—again, always trying to build that background knowledge as they learn and go about their learning.

LC:

I love the whole picture that you just painted, because if we're going to recover from a lost year, we have to make it something that you can traverse individually, but also so thrilling that you want to do it until bedtime, as a student.

LB:

And I think that another thing is that all of those things are important—the engagement and the fun aspect of it, certainly. But the other big piece that is the foundation of what we do at Lexia is efficacy. As schools are thinking about, there are a lot of programs out there that are maybe offering them for free or at a very discounted rate. It might seem like a great opportunity because budgets might be tight and we need to get something in place quickly, but the idea that Core5 and PowerUp are not only fun and engaging and built on the science of reading but they've been proven in rigorous research studies to make a big difference, and make a big difference within one school year—there's this idea of urgency, and we don't have another year to waste on a program that

hasn't been proven effective in rigorous research. So I think that's another thing, as schools are thinking about finding a blended approach, finding something that has elements. Whether it's Lexia or another program, I would just ask them to focus on making sure that it's been proven effective with the population of students that you're thinking about using it with.



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Looking forward

LC:

Perfect, good comment. So let's go forward here. Let's have each of you answer this: What are your hopes for other schools and districts in terms of their recovery from a lost year? If you were them and maybe just sort of did a mad scramble—you threw devices out to all the students and then if people were just trying to surf around and find stuff to use, and they were looking at this lost year, what would be your hopes that they would think with now? Felicia?

FE:

I think that I would hope that they take an evidence-based approach. I think what Liz talked about is really important, because as educators we're inundated with lots of different magic bullets. But I think when you dig deep and you really look below the surface, all of the components that Lexia does have kind of checks all those boxes that you need as a school leader. I'm able to have a 30,000-foot view of where my teachers are, where my students are at. I can look at curriculum decisions through the lens of looking at our Lexia reports. So I think that I would hope that schools—school leaders—really take an evidence-based approach when they're choosing ways to support their students. I think that how we started the conversation, talking about data, then they can stop just saying it's a lost year and really be able to drill down to specifically what the needs of their students are, and help grow them forward and unleash the potential for the rest of the school year.

LC:

Good. Love it. And Liz?

LB:

It's a great question. I think obviously the efficacy piece is really important, and something to not get lost again as people are reaching out for something maybe more quickly. I think flexibility and ongoing progress monitoring of your plan: the idea that we need to do that for students' learning, and we need to do that for our remote learning plans. I know things are changing on a day-to-day basis, so really being flexible, leaning on that village, the learning guardians, the communities, the businesses, your educators in the schools and districts. And really, again, monitoring the system, building on what you know works—don't throw everything out and feel like you have to start from scratch. And maybe most importantly, making sure that we give—whether it's as an educator, principal, superintendent,

learning guardian, or the students—everybody giving themselves a little bit of leniency or a little bit of a break, in that we're not going to get everything perfect and we need to set realistic expectations. But still, again, don't give up trying to reach those goals, but give ourselves a little bit of a break along the way, and lean on each other for that support as we're being flexible and have to adapt in this environment.

LC:

Exactly. Good. Excellent comment because it's true. We need to have sort of both angles. So, excellent. Thank you both.