Details

What Everyone is Saying About Education - Bonus Episode with Project Tomorrow
In this ISTE Spotlight episode, Dr. Julie Evans, CEO and Lead Researcher of Project Tomorrow, spotlights how the Speak Up Research Initiative has influenced the world of education. You'll hear how the initiative amplifies authentic stakeholder voices in education, impacting policies and practices with invaluable data and insights on how this all connects to EdTech!

Show notes: https://classtechtips.com/2023/06/25/project-tomorrow-bonus/
*Project Tomorrow

Introduction

Hello there and welcome to today's episode of the Easy EdTech Podcast! If we haven't met before, my name is Monica Burns. I'm a former NYC public school teacher and I've been out of the classroom for a few years leading professional development for teachers, and writing about all things EdTech on my blog ClassTechTips.com You might be used to joining me on Tuesdays for new episodes of the podcast, and today is a special bonus episode in partnership with Project Tomorrow. I'm excited to bring you another special bonus episode on a Sunday. Before we jump into today's episode, a quick reminder — you can head to my website classtechtips.com/podcast for all of the show notes and resources from today's episode, and if you're listening to this episode on a podcast player like Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or Google Podcasts, you should see a link in the description that you can click on as you listen today and it will take you to all of the resources I mention.

Promotion/Reminder

This episode is sponsored by Project Tomorrow. Project Tomorrow is an internationally recognized education nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring that all students are prepared to become tomorrow's leaders, innovators and engaged citizens of the world.

Today's Intro

This episode is titled "What Everyone is Saying About Education - Bonus Episode with Project Tomorrow" and today you'll hear from Dr. Julie Evans all about the best ways to hear from stakeholders, and what to do with the information you gather from your school community. Let's dive into the conversation.

Episode Transcript

Monica Burns:

Welcome to the Easy EdTech podcast. I am so excited to chat with you today about what is happening in the world of education, what a survey of stakeholders tells us about this space. But before we dive in, can you share a bit about your role in education? What does your day-to-day look like?

Dr. Julie Evans:

Absolutely. So as the Chief Executive Officer of Project Tomorrow, I have a very diverse role in education. Obviously running the nonprofit organization and working with our team members on all of their activities. But in addition to that, I'm also the chief researcher for the Speak Up Research project. So I think of my day-to-day Monica as somewhat immersed in data. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, which I know probably scares some folks or, and thrills others. I love the idea of pulling data out and looking at it and thinking about what does this mean for a school or district leader or teacher or parent or student. So I spend a lot of time thinking about the impact of the current trends that we're seeing in education and how we can leverage that information to create more meaningful experiences in our schools. Yeah.

Monica Burns:

And your perspective is one that I am really pumped to have a chance to tap into <laugh> for this conversation. Both reviewing, looking at data, diving in to the research around this. So today we're talking about how stakeholders view their educational experience and using that term stakeholder specifically students, teachers, parents, administrators. What are you hearing from these groups?

Dr. Julie Evans:

So there's lots of interesting things going on in education right now. Obviously there's lots of folks that are excited, shall we say, about the idea of artificial intelligence. Mm-Hmm.

<Affirmative> in education. There's also people that are still talking about what were the lessons learned of the pandemic and what I call the virtual learning experiment that we all went through. So there's lots of dynamic conversations going on. I think one of the things that is probably most interesting that, if we could call it, so what I'm hearing through the data is that school has changed forever because of the last couple of years. And in fact, 89% of district administrators tell us that they believe that as a result of the pandemic and the virtual learning experience, that schools have changed sustainably, and that we need to adjust to a new way of thinking about education.

Dr. Julie Evans:

And that includes thinking differently about the ways that we are measuring student achievement, what we're thinking about in terms of the metrics of student engagement, and also the role of technology in the learning process. So it's really interesting for us to take a look at the views of students. Where are they on these conversation points? What are parents thinking about, particularly around too much screen time? What are teachers thinking about in terms of how to increase their effectiveness using technology? And what are administrators thinking about in terms of understanding the return on investment for the technology that they have purchased or licensed over the last couple years? So there's a lot of energy, shall we say, in terms of these conversations in our schools and communities right now.

Monica Burns:

And it sounds like there are a few different, I don't wanna say hot topics, because I think this idea of artificial intelligence and the impact and the questions I know I'm hearing from educators, from family members, right. Students too, of course, are asking lots of questions about what this is going to mean for them. Right? That's a, a big topic at the forefront, but what you mentioned around metrics and what are we really getting from the ed tech or the technology that we've invested in, or are things that I know I'm hearing in conversations as well. So knowing that that matches the, the data that you've collected and that you are spending time really immersed in is so interesting. And so, you know, I'm hoping that you can provide for us a little bit of an overview of Project Tomorrow's annual Speak Up research initiative. You know, why is it important to collect authentic stakeholder voices?

Dr. Julie Evans:

So it's, it's very interesting and I'll tell you a little bit of a story, Monica, to set the context for this. You know, we've been at Project Tomorrow's facilitating this Speak Up research project since 2003. And it really started out with the idea of providing a way for schools and districts to tap into the views, the ideas, the perspectives specifically of their students as an asset, as they were thinking about how to plan for new learning experiences, how to use technology effectively, how to make sure that students are being prepared for the future. Why not listen to the voice of your key stakeholder, your student in that process. But I came up with the idea for Speak Up when I had started attending a number of education conferences and was listening to adults talk about what students wanted. And there was no students in the room.

Dr. Julie Evans:

And so it was the adult perspective, not the authentic student voice. So, speak Up is all about helping school and district leaders first listen to the voices of their stakeholders. And you, you said it appropriately, it's students, it's parents, it's teachers, it's principals, it's librarians, it's district administrators and community members. But then translating that into actionable knowledge. So how do we think about using the ideas, the attitudes, the valuations of our stakeholders as an asset to inform decision making? Now, that's hard in many levels. You know, our school and district leaders are used to using data. They're looking at student achievement data, they're looking at attendance data, they're looking at disciplinary data. But the idea of taking the opinion or the aspiration of one of these stakeholders and translating that into something that could inform their plans is a little bit more difficult. So what we do at Project Tomorrow is, one, we make it easy and efficient to collect these viewpoints.

Dr. Julie Evans:

This is 100% a free service that we provide to schools and districts. There's no cost in using our normed surveys to collect that data. But then we also work with our participating schools and districts to make sure they understand how valuable this data can be and how it could inform a technology plan, how it could inform parental engagement or community communi community communications. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> across their community how it could inform what they're doing for teacher professional development. So there's so many different ways to use stakeholder voice as an asset, but it needs to be used efficiently and effectively.

Monica Burns:

And that intention is so crucial, right? I think about it in my role as a classroom teacher supporting educators, right? We can collect as much data as we want, but if we're not using it, there's that, what's the point aspect. So mm-hmm. <Affirmative>, I love and really appreciate that emphasis on the action item that's tied to that. Right. Now that we know this, what can we do, you know, based on this information. So, you know, you mentioned a few things around the remote learning, distance learning, right. Learning in a very different way the past few years. So we know that there's been some big changes there around technology adoption and just the way that students are interacting with content throughout the day. Are there any, you know, insights or trends in addition to that, that have changed in recent years? Or have you noticed anything really consistent, maybe instead of those big shifts?

Dr. Julie Evans:

So I'm gonna take that from two different places, Monica. Cause I think it'll be interesting for you. You know, what we've saw as a significant shift as a result of remote learning, virtual learning, distance learning, whatever was facilitated during the pandemic, was that one, teachers are using technology much more today than they were previously. And we actually see that coming through in our data. Just to give you one data point, 70% of teachers now say that they're using online curriculum at least weekly with their students. We were nowhere near those numbers prior to the pandemic. So that's really positive in terms of teachers getting more familiar with the tools. We also are seeing where teachers' valuation on technology usage in their classroom has changed. So the example I'll give you is that for teachers, for principals, for district administrators, prior to the pandemic, when we asked what is the number one benefit of having a digital learning environment in your classrooms?

Dr. Julie Evans:

They would all say, well, it increases student engagement. That was the number one response they would give us. I'm all about student engagement. I love the idea of increasing student engagement. And I can give you some more numbers on that as well. But the com, it should be a comma after student engagement, not a period. So there's so many other benefits that come from it. What we're now seeing is teachers have realized some of those other benefits. So they're now talking about how students can collaborate more with each other, how they're communicating with their teacher more, how they are learning self-directed learning skills, and they're able to learn at their own pace because the learning is more personalized for them. It didn't diminish the student engagement piece, but it brought a broad more wide conversation opened up a more wide conversation about the potential impacts of technology.

Dr. Julie Evans:

So that's really interesting. So we changed teacher behavior as a result of the pandemic. We changed their valuation. Now we need to help them utilize the technology more effectively to design new types of learning experiences for students that really take advantage of the features and functionality of the different types of digital tools that are available to them. So we've made great strides, but we have more work to do. So I think that's really interesting. It's, it's a great promise of taking technology to the next level than where it was before. From a consistency standpoint, what I will tell you is our students have always been way ahead of us in thinking about technology from a learning tool perspective. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, you know, I just in the fall published my first book called Free Agent Learning, which is about how students are leveraging technology outside of school to self-direct learning around areas of purpose and curiosity and engagement.

Dr. Julie Evans:

We haven't been paying attention to what students have been doing on their own using technology, and that by itself could be a really good model for how to use technology in the school day. So as part of the process over the last couple years, we still see students are using technology to support their own self-directed learning. And they're excited about how their teachers skills have improved, but their valuations have always been focused on technology as a utility. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> to help them collaborate more, to help them develop critical thinking and problem solving skills. They never have really seen technology just as an engagement tool. So they're great consistency in terms of the way they're valuing the technology. They're excited about the prospect of using it more efficiently and more effectively in school. But the big jump has been in the change in teacher's valuation and their use of technology in the classroom.

Monica Burns:

And that's so fascinating to hear because I'm sure listeners have had similar experiences to you and I both just in conversations with colleagues where, you know, I know now compared to five years ago, the types of conversations, the quality use cases for technology, even just the vocabulary <laugh> and talking to educators in different parts of the country around what's possible with education has changed so much. And this idea that we see students pick up a smartphone, right. Or, or do something with a Chromebook that's unexpected. And

because that they can see some of the potential for a quick fix or a workflow hack or something that might be easy to dismiss on the surface, becomes right back to what you're saying of students understanding the utility of the different devices. So hearing that the wider data is picking up some of the things that I know I've heard in, in casual conversations is, is really fascinating. And I'd love to get back to something you mentioned about just the process of all of this and kind of the behind the scenes look, if you will, <laugh>, you know, how has technology played a role in helping the data collection and analysis process for the Speak Up research initiative?

Dr. Julie Evans:

Absolutely. So we have always looked at it that we wanted to help facilitate easy collection of the views of, of students, teachers, parents, and administrators. So right from the beginning, the survey was always an online survey mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. And so folks would say, oh, but you know, you're, you're probably disenfranchising some folks by making it online back in 2003. But our participating schools always found a way to help parents or families that didn't have access at home to be able to take the parent survey in school. But the, I think the most interesting thing is, of course, we all use our smartphones for everything now, right? And so the ability to take the Speak Up survey through your smartphone is something that is much more optimized today than it ever was before. In addition to that, of course, we have so many more tools available to us today to disaggregate the data.

Dr. Julie Evans:

You know, sometimes people will look at a statistic and they'll say, oh, you know, 75% of students say this, or 45% of teachers say this. I'm just one of those crazy people, Monica, I always wanna get underneath the hood. Yeah. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> mm-hmm. <Affirmative> and, and look at it more deeply. And so, you know, what we're doing today is so much more sophisticated analysis of the data. So we're looking at it through the lens of is that school where the teacher is teaching? Is that in an urban community? Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, is it a title one school or is it in a rural community? Is the teacher one that has 16 years of experience in the classroom? Or are they brand new to the field and what are they thinking about? So we're able to do so much more disaggregation of the data, which I think tells a richer story about what the data means. You know, as, as I had mentioned earlier data is great to use, but you have to use it efficiently and effectively. And so where we can help schools and districts understand more details about the views of their stakeholders, that then helps them make better decisions.

Monica Burns:

And that point you made about, it's not just, although I don't wanna minimize it, right? It's an important component, right? Of gathering all the data, but it's not just that piece, it's also the analysis component That's right. That the technology can really help make sure that everything is coming to light, right? So you have this great data, you can add that extra layer of analysis, you know, and then that next step of taking action. You know, I'm curious as to what ways the Speak Up Research initiative has influenced educational policies or practice based on this analysis of data, right. Based on the findings. Do you have any specific success stories you could share?

Dr. Julie Evans:

Oh, there's so many, Monica. It's really been amazing. You know, we're coming up on our 20th anniversary of doing Speak Up and having that as a tool that schools and districts can use all across the country. So at the school and district level, we've seen lots of schools leaders that tell us that what they learned from their Speak Up data about, for example, how parents wanted to learn about what was happening at their school. You know, increasingly parents today are not gonna go to a website mm-hmm. <Affirmative> and look up information or wait for an email to come in. Particularly during a crisis or alert situation. They want a text message mm-hmm. <Affirmative> to their phone. And so that has changed the way school leaders have thought about communications or engagement with their community. District leaders, and we actually have a case study about this on our website right now, have always told us that they have used their Speak Up update to inform the professional learning plans for their teachers.

Dr. Julie Evans:

So every year we ask on the Speak Up survey, we ask teachers, what's on your wish list for professional learning? Now we would love to hope that our district leaders are in sync with their teachers in terms of what those needs are, but some ki sometimes they're not. And so understanding that, for example, teachers really wanna understand it's the number one thing they're telling us, how do I really differentiate instruction? Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> using technology. How do I personalize that learning process for each student? How do I take advantage of different types of technologies to do that? And so we've got some great success stories at the school or district level. In addition to that, because we aggregate our data at the

state and national level, we can impact policies and programs at the state as well as nationally. So we had a state a couple years ago since prior to the pandemic that was very interested, particularly be in their rural communities of supporting distance learning.

Dr. Julie Evans:

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. So they used their Speak Up data to advocate at, with their state legislature for funding to support distance learning cuz they were able to prove the case that there was a desire, there was interest, there was excitement about students being able to be connected online and take some virtual classes. And again, that was before the pandemic at the federal level. Every year we do a congressional briefing where we update Congress, the US Department of Education, other federal agencies, the education associations on the latest findings from the Speak Up research. That work has had large, large scale impact at the federal level. One of the organizations that we also update every year, particularly on our, what I will call the homework gap data mm-hmm. <Affirmative> that we collect is the fcc, which has used that data from Speak Up to inform some of the new rulings that they've done and the ways they've been thinking about closing that homework gap. And that, again, go precedes even the pandemic. So there's impact at all three levels. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> the local level at a school or district level in terms of using their own local data, the state level in terms of impacting policies, advocacy with their legislature, funding for programs. And then the same at the federal level as well.

Monica Burns:

And it's so fascinating to think about the different use cases for these data sets mm-hmm. <Affirmative>, and I'm sure there's many listeners, especially if they've been in front of their school board or they've had a conversation at the district level and someone says to them, well, how do you know that? Mm-Hmm. Right. Or I need mm-hmm. Something more <laugh> to work with. Right. So having that data is so huge in, in all these different spaces. So, you know, if someone's listening today and they wanna participate in their research or they wanna use the data that you've collected, what can they do?

Dr. Julie Evans:

Well come visit us at tomorrow.org. So easy to remember right tomorrow.org, we have a, an extensive collection of our annual reports, infographics, briefing presentations. Our congressional briefing is always there. The congressional briefing is particularly meaningful to

folks. I all each year have a panel of students and facilitate a conversation directly with students around the country about their learning experiences. So if you're interested in using our data, come visit us there. If you're interested in participating in the Speak Up process, which again is free, we give you access to the surveys for all these different stakeholders. We aggregate all the data for you and give you back a complete report. All the information is a hundred percent confidential. And again, there's no cost for this. You can again, visit us@tomorrow.org. We will open up registration for next year's Speak Up surveys in the August timeframe, and the surveys themselves will be open for schools and districts to use on October 26th.

Monica Burns:

Well, that's fantastic information, especially with the timing that people will listen into this episode. Right, right At the beginning of summer, that school year has come to an end and they're thinking forward. So this is just so fascinating and wonderful for people, for listeners to understand that they can participate, you know, in this work, in, in so many different ways. So as we get ready to finish up, everyone who's listening in knows they can click on the links <laugh> that are aware they're listening to this episode to learn more. But can you share with us where can people connect with you? Where can they learn more about your work?

Dr. Julie Evans:

Again, the best place would be to come to tomorrow.org or to contact me directly. I love working with schools and districts really to think about how can I leverage the, this incredible asset of the views of my stakeholders? And in some cases, the school and district leaders have kind of put that off to the side, like, maybe I don't wanna know what my parents are thinking or what my teacher's aspirations are. We'll help you change that perspective so that we can help you with the tools that we have. They can find me at jevans@tomorrow.org and we're happy to set up a meeting to talk about how we can help them.

Monica Burns:

Well, thank you so much for your time today for sharing this information with listeners. It has been a fascinating conversation for me and I know for folks listening in today.

Dr. Julie Evans:

That's great. Thank you so much, Monica.

So let's make this EdTech easy with some key points from the episode…

Check in with the stakeholders in your community.

Explore Project Tomorrow's annual Speak Up Research Initiative.

Use the data you analyze to make informed decisions.

Remember, you can find the shownotes and the full list of resources from this episode on

classtechtips.com/podcast including all of the ways to connect with the team at Project

Tomorrow.

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Thank you again to Project Tomorrow, our sponsor for this episode. To learn more about Project Tomorrow and the Speak Up Research Initiative, please visit www.tomorrow.org/speakup.

Outro

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Episode Resources

- Project Tomorrow's annual Speak Up Research Initiative
- Connect with Project Tomorrow on Twitter, LinkedIn, & Facebook
- Send Dr. Julie Evan's an email
- Check out Dr. Julie Evan's book *Free Agent Learning* on Amazon