

Details

Data-Driven Ways to Boost Teacher Engagement This Year - Bonus Episode with Alpaca

In this episode, I'm joined by Karen Borchert, Founder and CEO of Alpaca, for a powerful conversation about data-driven ways to boost teacher engagement. You'll also hear surprising insights about teacher well-being plus actionable strategies and digital tools that school leaders can use to cultivate a more positive and supportive school culture. Tune in if you're looking to create an environment where educators feel seen, valued, and energized!

Show notes: <https://classtechtips.com/2025/06/13/boost-teacher-engagement-bonus/>

***Boost Teacher Engagement**

Introduction

Hello there, my name is Monica Burns and welcome to today's bonus episode of the Easy EdTech Podcast!

If you're used to joining me on Tuesdays for new episodes, you are in for a treat. This is a special bonus episode of the podcast in partnership with Alpaca.

Just like on Tuesdays, these bonus episodes are designed to give you ideas you can try yourself, share with a colleague, or bookmark for later in the school year.

If we mention something you'd like to check out, you'll find the link to it in the show notes. So don't forget to head to my website EasyEdTechPodcast.com for all of the links and resources from today's episode.

Intro Sponsor Message

This episode is sponsored by Alpaca, the teacher wellbeing platform designed for schools.

If you're a school leader who wants to support your staff without adding more to your plate, **Alpaca is your new favorite tool**. Their 2-minute semantic pulse check-ins help you understand how your teachers are doing—no sliding scales or scores, just meaningful words like “valued,” “disconnected,” “joyful,” or “stretched thin.”

Plus, Alpaca's free resource library is packed with hundreds of FREE, practical, ready-to-use tools for recognition, connection, and culture-building — so you don't have to start from scratch.

Learn more and get started at getalpaca.com/easyedtech — and listeners get 15% off when they come on for their first school year.

Today's Intro

Today's episode is titled "Data-Driven Ways to Boost Teacher Engagement This Year - Bonus Episode with Alpaca" and I chatted with Karen Borchert the Founder and CEO of Alpaca. I had the chance to meet with the team at Alpaca at the FETC conference in Orlando this January and see Alpaca Pulse (that's the teacher feedback tool we talk about in today's episode) and hear all the ways they are helping school leaders boost teacher engagement with big and little wins over the course of the school year. Let's dive into the conversation!

Episode Transcript

Monica Burns:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm so excited to talk about teacher engagement today, teacher wellbeing, all sorts of things related to this topic. Yeah. But before we get in Karen, can you share with us a bit what is your role and education? What is your day to day look like?

Karen Borchert:

Yeah. well, thank you. It's really fun to be here. So my name is Karen Borchert. I'm the founder of a company called Alpaca. And we focus specifically and fully on on the idea of employee experience or wellbeing for educators. So I got my start as an educator and as a high school English teacher. And then moved kind of quickly into an entrepreneurial path in my career. And I spent a lot of my career in the realm of employee engagement. So how to recruit and retain and engage our employees. And when I started Alpaca a few years ago I really wanted to bring a lot of what I had learned in the private sector around creating and developing great teams over into the, where it makes sense in the education sector. So, that's our focus. That's what we do. We spend all of our all of our days with with educators and principals and school leaders from around the country. And it's, we we're, we're learning something every single day. So that's what, that's what I, we do.

Monica Burns:

Well, I'm so excited to chat with you today because, you know, I had a peek at the app, you know, took a look behind the scenes, the platform earlier this year with one of your team

members. Cool. And so, you know, this idea of teacher wellbeing, school leadership, data informed culture building, right? All that we're talking about today. You've collected over, you know, just oodles of data, <laugh> on teacher experiences. So what is something, maybe what's one surprising or overlooked trend that school leaders should be paying attention to right now?

Karen Borchert:

Yeah, great, great question. I, we didn't know what we were gonna find either, honestly. So this is our first full year of, of really collecting the kind of first person data from teachers about how they're feeling at work. And we, we, we collect our information through just a really quick check-in mm-hmm <affirmative>. And what we do is we actually ask teachers to tell us the words that they would use to describe work. So we don't say, Hey, how are you doing on a scale of one to five? We instead say, you know, Hey, what words would you use to describe work? Mm-Hmm <affirmative>. And we didn't know what we would get, but we got more than a hundred thousand words that teachers use to describe work. And we have learned so much from that. I think the most surprising trend, honestly is that there is such, is there so much positive sentiment in addition to the challenges that are the things that make the news, right?

Karen Borchert:

Like we will, you know, if you ask, you know, how are teachers feeling? Everybody will, will say out loud to you what they, what you hear in the news, which is, you know, exhausted, fatigued, burned out those sorts of words. And you do see those words. Those do show up for, for our teams and for, for educators everywhere. But they are also alongside some really amazing words. Like two of our most, our most popular words in our top five for the year are committed and supported. And that's, and that's really cool to see. You also see a lot of teachers talking about feeling like they're progressing or learning which, you know, I, of course they are because they're teachers and they're, you know, they're, they're learners. But they're also, I think the idea that educators are feeling like they are, they are learning and growing and progressing in their careers is really is really cool to see. So I think honestly, just the mix of positive mm-hmm. The mix in there of, of a lot of positive sentiment and positive feedback is really, really, really powerful.

Monica Burns:

I love those words that you shared and, you know, as someone who went through a doctoral program with plenty of like, questions to have to ask people and coding to have to do based on their responses. Yeah. Right. I was so fascinated when I got a look at how you all collect this data in just such an organic way, right? Like, choose those words and Right, like you said, the the learning or the committed or the supported, right. It really, even that one, those one words on their own just paints such a picture of what someone's experience is like. Yeah. And, you know, I'm curious as, you know, as you have gone through collecting information and talking to educators and school leaders, you know, why do you think small everyday leadership habits like these check-ins or moments of recognition have such an outsized impact on school culture?

Karen Borchert:

Yeah. Great. I, that's such a great question. We, we call them at our place, we call them little wins. Mm-Hmm <affirmative>. And they're just the, the little things that school leaders are doing. I think honestly, that it's, I think that when the, when the things that we do are these kind of big programs or these big strategies or initiatives sometimes they can feel a little bit a little bit contrived or a little bit mm-hmm <affirmative>. You know, kind of, they're, they're so programmatic and they're, and they're kind of trying to be all things to all people that they can feel not quite as genuine Yeah. Or as authentic. And I think those little wins, those little things end up creating this this, these, this, these moments of authenticity and these moments of care and these moments of, of support that actually feel so much more personal. Mm-Hmm <affirmative>. And I think that's really what it's often about for, for teams is that teams are, they're not like, oh gosh, nobody's, you know, come around and thrown us a pizza party lately. It's more like, you know, this person, like this person gets me. This person understands me. They remembered that that, you know, I was out last week and they said, welcome back when I got back today. Those are, those are really powerful moments.

Monica Burns:

That's such an interesting point. 'cause I think, you know, we've all been in situations where there's been maybe like this larger praise or recognition. Yeah. And that's nice, right? To have like something that's happening for everyone and, and you're there and a part of it, but it feels very different even if those moments are much, much smaller. Right. When someone has that personal connection, when someone has, it just feels like the effort is there in a different sort of way with these little wins that you talk about. Which, you know, I think is, is a really interesting thing for a school leader to consider. You know, as they're moving into a new

school year and maybe thinking about why something big they did might not have been as successful as they thought. Right. It's these little moments that are, are what people often remember, right. Or, or call back to. Yeah. So, you know, what are some practical examples you've seen where schools turned the feedback they got from their staff into real positive change?

Karen Borchert:

Yeah. Yeah. There's, gosh, there's, so we get, we get to hear so many good ones. <Laugh>, <laugh>. So one of them that I love one of the, one of the things that that a team decided to do to kind of build team unity and also to kind of create this culture of care within their school they, they did this very simple thing. They took their entire student list and they printed everybody, every student's name as a label. And then they put in their, in their staff meetings, they put out a stack of cards and envelopes. And at the beginning of every staff meeting you know, they have hundreds of kids in their school, and they, at the beginning of every staff meeting every staff member takes one label off of the off of the sheet and puts it on an envelope.

Karen Borchert:

And then they sit down and they write a note to that kid. And then they, and then the principal sends all of those, all of those home. And what they, they don't have to have a whole crazy, you know, spreadsheet and a whole system for it and assignments of you're just doing what? They literally just grab a label and put it on the envelope. And what they know is that throughout the year, all of those kids are gonna get a letter home about something awesome that they did. All of those kids are gonna have somebody that recognized them personally and said something to them personally, which is means so much more, right. Than even, you know, kind of winning, you know, something in the school or something like that. It's like, that's great, but those things are great, but that personal touch is huge.

Karen Borchert:

And they did it so simply, like, they just spend five minutes at the beginning of their staff meeting, writing handwritten notes to kids, and like, you can imagine how that feels for the team too, right? Mm-Hmm <affirmative>. Like the team then also just feels this culture of care and like, they're doing it, but it's, it was super easy and honestly, like cost no more than some note cards and some labels mm-hmm <affirmative>. So that's, that's one that I, I love that. I, I

was like, I'm gonna, I'm, I'm taking that one home with me. That's, that's really cool. The other one, I just, I just talked to a principal who, who did this? Well, there's a couple. So there's a, a principal that does this, she's been doing this for years. When she has a team member who has something going on in their life, like you know they lost a parent or they had like, something, something really hard in their life.

Karen Borchert:

One of the things that she does, obviously she takes care of them in the moment. She also puts it on her calendar with an annual reminder. And so a year later she will go to that teacher and say, you know, Hey, I bet that this might be kind of a hard week for you. I know, I know that, you know, you lost your mom a year ago. These teachers are like unbelievably floored by that care and by that compassion, and by that, like, that personal, that personal knowledge of them which I think is just is like such a cool thing. You know, that's not coming from the data, you know, saying, okay, let's, you know, we heard the data and let's do this. But it is just kind of that a practice on the principal side that is really, again, free takes no, yeah.

Karen Borchert:

Like almost no time. And just pops up a year later to help them be great. And they, they do it for celebrations. You know, if the, somebody gets married, somebody has mm-hmm <affirmative>. She has all their birthdays, she has everybody's stuff on one calendar that just surfaces her a little way to connect with them almost every day. Which I love that. And then there was one that came from the data. There was one that we heard and we loved where the teachers were saying, we need more celebrations. We need to have a little bit more fun. Like, that's what their data was saying. And so a principal said, okay, we're gonna do something really fun. And they, they did this actually as part of their end of school year last year, but they're doing it again this year which I, I absolutely love.

Karen Borchert:

And they, they usually have all their kids go out kind of different doors depending on if they're taking the bus or riding, you know, riding in a car on the way home. And she said, no, let's, on the last day of school, that's not what we're gonna do. So she has all of the kids come to the main hallway, she has all of the teachers walk out of the school and make a tunnel down to down, like, kind of out of the school. And they do this huge, like, scream tunnel and like party, and like, it's like hugging and crying and everything as part of like, the way that they do the

farewell. And she was like, the kids obviously love it, that families love it. Yeah. She's like, but our teachers love it because they get to like, have this celebratory moment with each other mm-hmm <affirmative>. Right at the end of the school year. And I was like, okay, I'm writing that down. That is an amazing idea. Yeah. So yeah, there's some good ones we hear, we hear awesome ones all the time at, at our place. So yeah, there's some good ones.

Monica Burns:

Those are amazing. And just, you know, so do, for as much as Right, there may be things on, on everyone's plate, like these are doable things, right? These are things that you're tying back to, like the moments that are already happening. And I think that's what can be really powerful. I mean, I, I love just how these are budget friendly strategies that you showed too. Absolutely. Because I think that's always something people are mindful of, but just that idea that, you know, people are probably more likely to show up to that faculty meeting on time if they know the first five minutes are going to be dedicated to this like, almost centering activity Yeah. Of writing these letters that have a big impact. Right. People are counting down to an event where everyone kind of comes together in the hallway to send everyone off. Yeah.

Monica Burns:

Right. For the summertime. And for someone who, you know, and I try and do this with the little reminders on my phone, like you mentioned mm-hmm <affirmative>. Like, don't forget to check in with that person. Or like, they just told me they had this doctor's appointment, like Yeah. On Thursday. Like, make sure to check in with 'em, right. Because they share that information, whether they meant it for a reason or not, right? Yeah. So just these little things that you can build into your regular practice can have such an impact. And so, you know, you talked earlier about collecting words and, and gathering teacher feedback. So can you tell us a bit about how does Alpaca work? Like what, how could a school leader get started using it if they're like listening to us chat today and they're curious, what does this look like in practice?

Karen Borchert:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, the easiest way to get started is is our resource library. So it's, it's full of what we call, you know, little wi Yeah. So our, and it's free, it's a hundred percent free. And it is, it's at our, it's at our, at our website, at getalpaca.com. But the, our research library, it's super fun. It's all things that are built by and for education educators and education leaders. And they're all these same ideas, like mm-hmm <affirmative>. Just really fun ways to build school culture

ideas for like, icebreakers for your staff meeting or really meaningful stuff around like, kind of how to, how to personally recognize staff, how to make a monthly one-on-one happen with every staff member on your team. That, that, that can feel really impossible to a school leader. Yeah. But it's, but it's definitely possible.

Karen Borchert:

And all of those resources, they all come with all of the stuff, like anything that's printable or anything that's part of it, it's all kind of bundled in one PDF. And like I said, it's totally free. So that's a super easy way to get started and just kind of get to know what we're all about and how we think about school culture. And then the other thing, two things that we do and it's kind of perfect timing, you know, gearing up for the next school year ahead. We do we do what we call Alpaca pulse which is a little mm-hmm <affirmative>. Tiny check-in. It's a one one to two minute survey that educators take. It's completely anonymous and it's on their own phones or, or their own devices. And it's really just a quick check-in.

Karen Borchert:

It's a little tiny check-in to say, Hey, how are you feeling? How are you doing at work? What would help you the most right now? And then that data is instantly available to the principal to understand, Hey, this is, these are the words our team is using to describe work, and this is how they're feeling and this is what they need. And you can act on it really quickly. So we do that mm-hmm <affirmative>. That's a lot of fun. And then and then we also have what we call our celebration kits. That's the most fun thing Yeah. That we do. Mm-Hmm <affirmative>. We're kind of obsessed with school supplies around here, so we actually create like a little care package. We release one every, a different one every month. And our celebration kits have five of them, and they're plus an activity of a fun way to recognize five people in your building. So you can, you can that comes to the principal every month. And so it's totally ready to go. It's like turnkey teacher recognition. Yeah. So we can do any of those things or all of those things with, with folks. But, but like I said, the easiest way to get started is check out all of the free resources. 'cause They're they're a lot of fun. And then you know, we can, you can, you can kind of mix and match all of the rest of what we do as you wish.

Monica Burns:

Oh, yeah. And I had a chance, as I mentioned earlier, to see the Alpaca Pulse. Excuse me. I'm gonna say that one more time, so I get it.

Karen Borchert:

Oh, yeah, no problem. <Laugh>

Monica Burns:

As I mentioned earlier, I saw the Alpaca Pulse in action just this way to collect some really quick actionable information. Right. We talk so much about formative assessment data for students, right. And collecting info all the time and all the, yeah. The things that go into a classroom teacher's life, but for them to get a chance to share Right. With a school leader who's gonna take action for them, I think is really powerful. Is really powerful too. Yeah. So as we're, you know, in this kind of summertime reflection and looking forward towards the next school year, what's one mindset shift you hope school leaders will adopt to better support their teams?

Karen Borchert:

Yeah, I think so we, there's, there's something that we think about with this and we call it Find your five. And so the, and the idea is really the, the mindset shift or the idea is really to be very intentional about the culture you want and the culture because there's, there's lots of positive school cultures, but they're defined in different ways, or they have different words to describe them. Mm-Hmm <affirmative>. So if you say, you know, I really want my school culture to be ambitious, learning, growing, achieving. Mm-Hmm <affirmative>. Those are the words that you, you, you really want to hear in the hallways. Right. whereas there, there are some leaders who say, you know, I really want my teachers to feel supported, cared for, loved. Mm-Hmm. You know, really, and, and really kind of, you know, kind of embraced in that way.

Karen Borchert:

And that, and both of those are really great school cultures. Yeah. Mm-Hmm <affirmative>. But it's really about the leader saying, this is what I, this is what we want. And this is the, this is the culture I'm trying to set. So when we say find your five, we say, you know, think about the five words that you most hope that teachers will use to describe work this year. And to describe

the, your school and your school culture. And then, you know, write 'em down, put 'em on the Yeah. You know, put 'em on the wall. We make, we have like stickers with all the words mm-hmm <affirmative>. That have those. But we it's, it can be a really powerful exercise just to know those five words or three words, whatever is most meaningful to you to know this is how I want teachers to feel at work.

Karen Borchert:

And then, and then ask yourself the question, okay, what do we as a team, because it's everyone's job. Yeah. Not just the leader's job. What do we as a team need to do in order to make those words come true? So those are, those are the things that we think that's a great summer, a summer project for, for leaders and educators. You can also, as an educator, you can do that for your classroom. Like, what do you want your kids to say about, about your classroom and about your, your culture in your classroom? And and then what do you, do you as an educator want to do to, to to get there?

Monica Burns:

Yeah. And that's, you know, perfect. Like we mentioned for summertime to set the stage for the upcoming school year, but it's also something you could do midyear, right. If you need that reset Oh, yeah. Or you're ready to reflect right. On how the first few months of that's a good idea of the school year have gone. So I think that's just such a powerful thing a great exercise for someone to do maybe themselves, and then with a wider team Right. To make sure everyone is, is really aligned. So, absolutely. With the, the little wins you mentioned earlier, Karen mm-hmm <affirmative>. Right. That seems so doable, right. The, the resources that you all have related to that, if someone's listening today, you know, if a school leader's listening and maybe has 15 minutes this week mm-hmm <affirmative>. Right. To make a meaningful impact on their team, how should they spend it?

Karen Borchert:

Ooh. Gosh. That's such a fun question. <Laugh>. Okay. I think, you know, I, I honestly I honestly think that handwritten notes are one of the most powerful things mm-hmm <affirmative>. And, and one of the things that is a really fun a really, I don't know, it's a, it's a very powerful little thing to do, but asking other educators, you know, Hey, tell me something. Tell me about an interaction you've had with a member of our team that really made a difference in your year this year. You know, kind of looking back, ask the other team members

that, and then say that to the teacher. Say, you know, what I heard from Ms. Burns that you were incredibly patient with a couple of her students that were really having a hard day, and that you kind of stepped in and brought an additional level of support for her.

Karen Borchert:

And I just wanna tell you that like, you know, I, I really appreciate you helping Ms. Burns, and I know she appreciated it too. Mm-Hmm <affirmative>. That, that thing that happens when somebody, somebody hears that somebody else said something nice about them Yeah. Is so powerful. It's a, you know, we, we we love that that kind of compliment, compliment chain mm-hmm <affirmative>. But that, that, putting that into a handwritten note, you know, listening and hearing what teachers are saying and then putting that into a handwritten note for someone is just, it's so powerful. And can be really the difference in kind of how somebody's going into the summer or how somebody's coming into the next school year. I think that can be really powerful. Yeah.

Monica Burns:

Just that idea of the complement chain, it's not just something Yeah. Maybe you notice 'cause you know mm-hmm <affirmative>. Maybe you've noticed a lot of things, but something you heard someone else say or heard someone else share. And it may be right that you put that little 10 minute, you know, calendar block on a, you know, Thursday at lunch or whatever it is. Right. And just say like, who's my person? Right. And one of the things I like about that too, and we've talked with different educators who have, you know, gratitude practices Right. Are looking for small moments and using, you know, different tools to do so. It's just that idea that you're also looking for those moments throughout the week to share. Yep. Right. It kind of changes your outlook, like you're looking for the good stuff all week, and now you have this moment where you know you're gonna share the best one. Right. Or, or the one that you know is most needed, perhaps. So.

Karen Borchert:

Yep.

Monica Burns:

Absolutely. What a great idea. So this has been so actionable Karen, and I think just such a great way for people to think forward into the upcoming school year. And I of course, will link out to all the things for people to check out Alpaca. But for someone who's, you know, on the go, maybe making the like mental bookmark of where to follow up. Yeah. Where can people connect with you? Where can they learn more about your work?

Karen Borchert:

Yeah, you can find us at getalpaca.com. That's the easiest easiest way to get to us. And if you Google, you know, Alpaca teacher wellbeing, you'll find it mm-hmm <affirmative>. So that's it. You'll get to it quickly. That way we're the only ones with that mascot for this kind of work. So that's, that, that, that is that's the best way to find this is that getalpaca.com.

Monica Burns:

Perfect. Well, thank you so much for your time today for sharing all of this with listeners.

Karen Borchert:

Awesome. Thank you so much.

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

Small, authentic actions build stronger school culture.

Teacher feedback often reveals surprising positive sentiment.

Personalized recognition matters more than big programs.

Little wins, like handwritten notes, create lasting impact.

Remember, you can find the shownotes and the full list of resources from this episode on EasyEdTechPodcast.com including all of the ways to connect with the team at Alpaca.

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Outro

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Episode Resources

- Learn more about [Alpaca & get 15% off](https://getalpaca.com/easyedtech)
- Connect with Karen Borchert on [LinkedIn](#)