

## 87 - Early Learning – The Catalyst to Education Equity

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**Purpose:** The purpose of the transcripts is to provide readers and listeners with a written version of each episode of the UAGC Center for Early Childhood Education's Early Childhood Chatter Podcast so they can follow along with the audio content. [www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast](http://www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast)

**Audience:** Current Active & Enrolled Students

### Episode Transcript

**Host Dr. Shipley:** Hello, everyone, and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. We will be uploading a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

**Host Dr. Heald:** Twice a month, we'll come to you with a 10-minute professional development with new ideas for you to try. Don't forget to subscribe to the podcast for notifications about future episodes.

Today we are thrilled to have Leah Dozer Walker here with us today. Leah Dozer Walker currently serves as the Executive Vice President of Equity and Inclusion at Waterford.org, a national early childhood education nonprofit whose early learning program reaches over 300,000 children in 43 states each year.

Prior to joining Waterford.org, Leah served as the first-ever Director, for Equity and Community Engagement at the Virginia Department of Education, where she developed and led the implementation of Virginia's EdEquityVA strategies, focused on elimination of disproportionality in student outcomes. With a personal and professional dedication to equitable and inclusive impact, Leah possesses more than 20 years of public sector experience, across the human services portfolio. And we are so thrilled to have Leah with us today, to talk about the Catalyst to Education Equity.

Welcome, Leah.

**Leah Dozer Walker:** Thank you for that welcome. I'm happy to be here today.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley:** Hi, Leah. I'm so excited to talk about your title today, which is called Early Learning, the Catalyst to Education Equity, which I am so an advocate for, I guess I should say. I started teaching pre-K in Oklahoma, so we were one of the very first universal pre-Ks and still one of the only universal pre-Ks.

I wish more states would get into that. So, thank you for being here. And I just want to know why you chose this topic to bring to us.

**Leah Dozer Walker:** Well, thank you for having me. And thank you for your advocacy for early education access. I'll say that for me across my 20-year experience in the human services portfolio, as well as my work in the education space more specifically, we have always known that if we could close access and equity gaps before they begin, that we would be so much further along, reaching our goal of eliminating disproportionality in academic achievement for all students.

And so really thinking about where it all begins, we know it begins with readiness to learn, access to high quality early learning resources, at very early ages, and more importantly, the support that families need in order to successfully navigate their children throughout their educational journey.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley:** 100%.

**Dr. Stephanie Heald:** So, we know this is an issue, right? We know it's an urgent issue.

What is something that kind of alerts us to the fact that we have to take note of this right now and act?

**Leah Dozer Walker:** Well, as an equity warrior, I guess you could say, in the education space, I think what we all know is that equity begins with data, and it's data informed. And so, it's not what we think and it's not what we feel when we talk about closing equity gaps. What it really boils down to are the actual data.

And so, I'll share a few data points with you. Right now, in the United States of America, 2.2 million children are unable to access publicly funded early education programs. And we know, that is just completely unacceptable, not just from a moral standpoint, but even from the lens of thinking about our future viability and ability to compete in a global market, throughout our future as a country.

And so, there's an urgency of now. We need to do something today. We needed to do something, right, 10, 15, 20 years ago.

But there is a particular urgency of now, and really focusing on how do we create an equitable start for all children across the country.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley:** I love that because I agree with you. So, it goes bigger into just like the classrooms because the teachers can do this, but the schools have to understand also what the backing looks like and what does that mean. So where do you start? So, let's say you're a teacher that's not in one of these schools or that's not in one of these classrooms.

What can we do? What can a teacher do?

**Leah Dozer Walker:** I think, one, I'll just say the burden of this problem doesn't fall just on educators. But educators are most directly impacted by our lack of action as a community, right? Because they are asked to then ameliorate the impact of the failure to do something, on an everyday basis in their classrooms. What can we do? We need to bring together strong community coalitions, to advocate in advance equitable access to high quality early learning resources, for every child. And sometimes what that means is that we have to be willing to think outside of the box.

We have to think outside of the structure that currently exists, which is in some ways feeding this inequity. And so in order to be creative and innovative problem solvers, we have to be willing to think outside the box, disrupt what we might already think we know about how to solve this problem, and really come together as a community to have the desired collective impact on solving the problem of the day. There's no one size fits all solution to this problem.

And so, we're going to have to be flexible in the way we think about approaching solutions. And I hear you.

**Dr. Stephanie Heald:** I hear the need that we have to come together.

We have to partner. We have to think outside the box. What might be a foundational first step for our listeners to take in starting to be an advocate for this, recognizing like you said, there's not one clear cut solution, but how can we just take that first? What is that first step to becoming a partner for this?

**Leah Dozer Walker:** Well, I think there's a couple of things we need to think about in terms of like the root cause of the inequity, to access to high quality early learning resources for every child.

So, first, there are many families who experience different types of barriers in accessing high quality early learning resources. So doing the work to understand what are the barriers currently in place in your community, for all children to access high quality learning. And then deciding what are the ways that we can mediate those barriers, and who are the partners that we need to bring to the table to ensure, that our efforts produce and result in high quality learning for all children, and the desired impact that we're seeking to have. I think the other thing that we need to be really, really mindful of as we think about what can I do to solve this problem, I think is actually asking the right questions.

How many children are not accessing high quality early learning in your community? There's the network is very all over the place kind of early learning, right? There's publicly funded early learning programs. There's private preschool programs. There's programs that are attached to like childcare and daycare centers, or in-home child care providers, but

who's being left out? And assessing what is the quality of the early learning curriculum that those children are accessing? And so how can we be good stewards, by being informed? So, knowing exactly how the problem is manifesting for us.

And then secondly, being able to develop partnerships that are strategic to really address what those barriers are for all families and children.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley:** That's spot on. I love this.

I love listening to you speak about this because I have been an advocate for early childhood education, highly accessible to all students, for over 23 years, now. And I think that times are changing. Things are changing.

More people are seeing the research, but it's still funding and just, you know, things are still getting in the way. So, one of my questions is what blockers are impeding innovation and progress?

**Leah Dozer Walker:** Yeah, I think that the biggest blocker is this notion and idea of traditional access, to early learning resources. So, when we think about this problem, we might think the solution is universal pre-K for all children, but all children might not live in an area where they can access center-based early learning instruction.

All children might not have a family dynamic, that allows them to attend a high-quality pre-K program every single day of the week. Every state doesn't have the budget and wherewithal to provide universal pre-K to every single student. And so, we need to have innovative solutions and innovative partnerships.

We need to lean on both philanthropy, government funding, and private funding to ensure that every child gets the best start that they possibly can have to their academic career. And I do think that one of the things we have as an advantage in the United States is that we are an innovative country. We are the most innovative country in the world.

That's a known fact. And so, the promise of innovative technology combined with leveraging inclusive research and curriculum content, that will be the accelerator of academic progress for all children. And so, this kind of goes back to what I said before, which is thinking outside the box, thinking about new ways to solve old problems.

And that's one of the reasons I love working at Waterford.org, because we're an organization that really does leverage the power of technology to deploy, not just curriculum, but also the support, the family engagement, and the caregiver coaching, that children need in order to find success at the earliest of ages.

**Dr. Stephanie Heald:** You know, Leah, as you talk, I understand the problem. I can hear the need for us to address this, but I also hear a level of optimism and positivity in your voice.

And I'll tell you, that does warm my heart, because it is something there that needs to have our attention. And you've shared several ways for us to put our attention there for probable solutions and steps forward, at least, right? Maybe not a full solution, but at least a step forward. And I love that.

Can you share three final takeaways for our listeners?

**Leah Dozer Walker:** Yeah, I'm happy to do that. First, I'll start with why I'm so optimistic. I'm optimistic because we know that by closing educational achievement gaps, between Black and Latino children and their white counterparts, that would result in an estimated \$2.3 trillion benefit to the United States economy by 2050.

If we're able to solve this problem, the world is our oyster. And so, three things, I guess, I would leave as takeaways. First, we have to focus on mediating the barriers that families do experience, accessing high quality early learning resources for all children.

This is just critical. It's essential. It is the number one starting place that we need to all focus on.

The other piece is that we're going to accomplish this by partnering together with families and caregivers, and other caring adults, to ensure that every child gets what they need, at the time that they need it, to be successful. Parents and

caregivers are the foremost experts in what their children need to thrive. And we have to become better listeners, of those experts to inform the decisions, and the programs that we design to meet their needs.

And then lastly, we have to be unafraid of technology and innovation and understand that that is the true leverage point, that we have to scale solutions, that can actually solve this problem of inequity and early learning.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley:** I love it. OK, so you have given us a lot to think about.

What is one challenge you want to leave our learners with?

**Leah Dozer Walker:** Well, it's a big one. And so, I say challenge the status quo. And I know that sounds like a soundbite, but it really isn't, because by challenging the status quo, that's what enables us to develop innovative and new constructs, that can solve this pervasive and systemic problem.

If we think the current system tweaks and minor adjustments to that system, are going to create the systemic solution that we need to have, that's probably not going to work. We've sort of been doing that for the last 20 years. What we need to do is challenge what exists today, and define and develop new constructs to solve these very pervasive issues and challenges.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley:** You are so right. And everything you said today is spot on. And I hope that our listeners will really take it to heart, and start figuring out how they are going to advocate for this such important topic.

So, Leah, thank you so much for being here with us today.

**Leah Dozer Walker:** Well, thank you so much for having me. And best of luck to everyone out there who's advocating for high quality early learning resources for all children.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley:** Thanks, Leah.