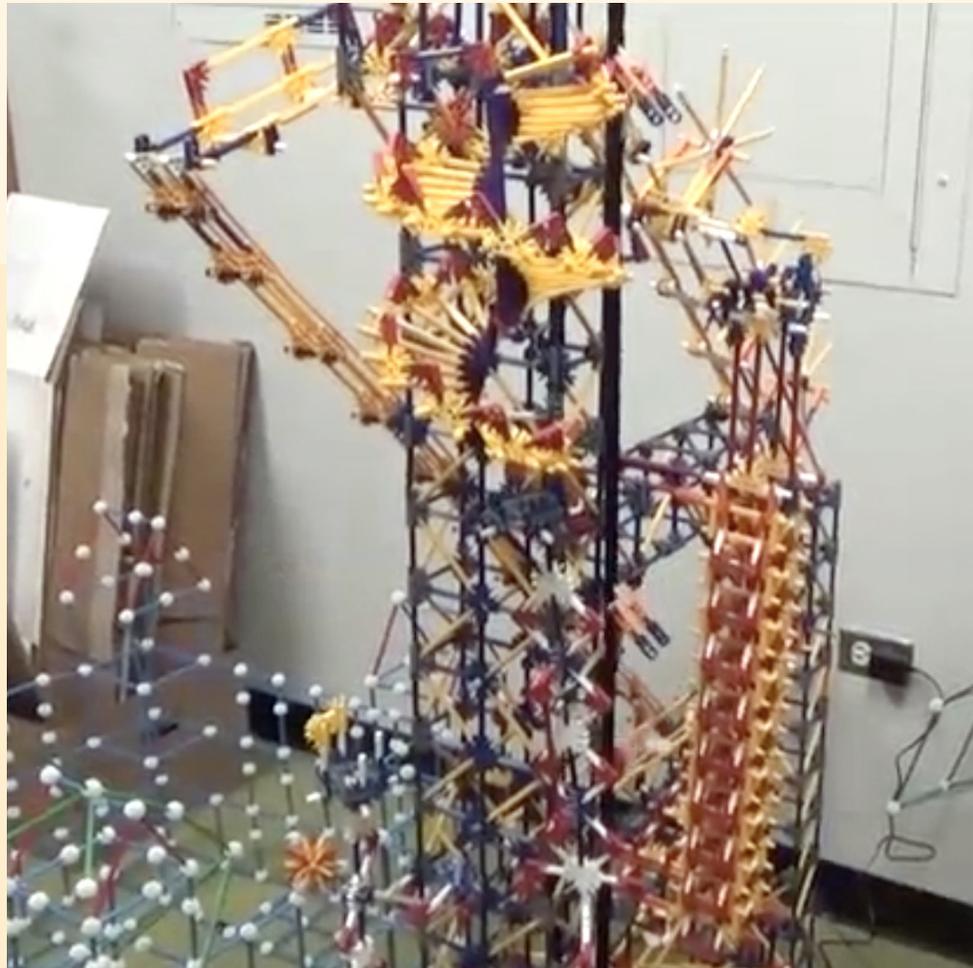




CASE STUDY: M^CHENRY AND PARKLAND MIDDLE SCHOOLS

REIMAGINING LEARNING INTO AWARD-WINNING SCHOOLS



In 2016, the team at McHenry School District 15 was looking to reimagine learning for K–8 students.

“We wanted to give students a choice in their learning but have the structure needed to help guide them. And we wanted to create a space that looked like a 21st-century learning space—not a classroom with rows of computers,” explains Dr. Fred Laudadio, the district’s Executive Director of Learning and Technology.

Laudadio and his team transformed their vision into action, and have since earned two prestigious awards:

- 2019 FETC STEM Excellence Award—second place, McHenry Middle School
- 2020 FETC STEM Excellence Award—first place, Parkland Middle School



As a district with only two middle schools, McHenry School District 15 may be the only district in the nation with all of their middle schools nationally recognized by such a prestigious organization. The team plans to showcase their elementary schools and what they are accomplishing with K–5 students soon.

We spoke with Laudadio to hear more about how he implemented his vision.

SmartLab: Why did you select a SmartLab HQ to help you accomplish your vision?

LAUDADIO: The SmartLab HQ environment helped us open the learning space, which allows students the flexibility to move around and collaborate in a more real-world way. And the SmartLab Learning curriculum allows students to explore a vast array of engagements and projects. It also allows the facilitator the flexibility to add new engagements, new projects, and new ideas easily.

Students now receive a full, all-around STEM experience. They’re able to test the waters with engagements they may not be familiar with, but also go in depth with something they already know.

SmartLab: How has the SmartLab HQ affected student learning?

LAUDADIO: Students embraced the flexible technology-driven learning environments from the first day. Student growth and engagement is at an all-time high, and students are learning a wide variety of skills and techniques that are unique to the STEM program. They’re also collaborating daily and solving problems in a variety of ways to accomplish their goals.

Additionally, students are bringing their experiences in the SmartLab HQ into their core classes. Students are 3D-printing

WE TRANSFORMED OUR VISION INTO TWO PRESTIGIOUS AWARDS





“The SmartLab HQ environment allows students the flexibility to move around and collaborate in a more real-world way.”

projects for their math classes, creating stop-motion projects for their science projects, and using many other tools they learned in the lab in their everyday classes.

SmartLab: Can you share ways that the SmartLab HQ has impacted students?

LAUDADIO: The SmartLab HQ is a place for students of all ability levels to find their niche. One student, in particular, saw the STEM lab as a way to get away from the frustration he felt in other classes where he wasn't performing up to standards.

In the SmartLab HQ, he found his passion projects and delved into the engagements that most interested him. He'd skip lunches to come in to work in the lab. He'd even come in before school so he could get his engagements set up for the day. Even after he completed the STEM class, he'd still come in to work on old projects.

SmartLab: What advice do you give other districts that want to reimagine learning?

LAUDADIO: It's easy for people to get stuck in the “that's the way it's always been done” approach. But we knew we needed to challenge and stretch our students' minds and to engage them in real-world, hands-on learning opportunities that gave them a digital edge in a competitive world.

This work took 2 years and it was easy for some and difficult for others. We had to be part visionaries and part cheerleaders when collaborating with our stakeholders.

The statement, “If you build it, they will come,” proved to be 100% true. Since opening these amazing learning environments, we have expanded our offerings to before-school clubs, after-school competition teams, and STEM/STEAM-based summer camps for students inside and outside our learning community.

SmartLab: What made you apply for the FETC STEM Excellence Award?

LAUDADIO: We wanted to share our journey with other school districts around the country, and we also knew that we'd designed a special place that really stood out.

SmartLab: What tips can you give other schools that want to apply for this award?

LAUDADIO: We'd already had a lot of interest from outside school districts that had heard about our program, so we knew it was worth the effort to complete the application.

We approached the application as an opportunity to nationally showcase what we're offering students.

The FETC STEM Excellence Award honors the work that's being done by school districts across the nation. If you believe you have impacted the lives of students in ways that will improve their learning, while giving them a digital edge for the future job landscape, I recommend that your team consider applying. If you've shifted your culture by redefining roles, reimagining education, and developing innovative learning spaces, you should absolutely apply for this award.

McHenry and Parkland Middle Schools, located in McHenry, IL, opened their SmartLab HQs in 2016.

6-8

Grades served

801

Students

