

Innovation Centers: Designing a Stimulating Learning Environment

Colors splashed across the walls, media centers and LEGO® dot the technology classrooms of McHenry School District 15.

For Fred Laudadio and Kristin Thorsen, developing digital literacy and information literacy in students goes beyond the traditional classroom. They're interested in thinking outside the box to **create learning spaces that are engaging, collaborative and cross-curricular.** They call them Innovation Centers, and every detail has been carefully crafted, from decorating with stimulating, research-based colors and furniture concepts to integrating flexible seating and collaborative workstations.

These spaces, along with the specialists they call “coaches,” are part of the District 15 **goal of fostering a culture and climate of innovation.** According to Laudadio, “Innovation Coaches, STEM Coaches and STEAM Coaches offer new curricular options for inquiry-based, hands-on learning, projects, and flexibility—keeping in mind goals of their current core curriculum.”

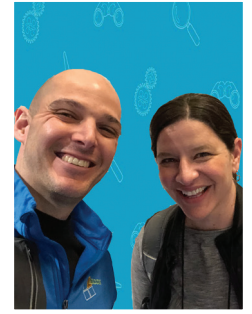
Laudadio explains that one of the ways these innovation coaches “creatively supplement the core curricular while bridging the passion and love for literacy with that of technology and the digital world” is by integrating LEGO® Education products with the broad suite of technology available in the Innovation Centers. **“LEGO® Education has a huge focus on**

digital literacy and information literacy,” he says, adding, “And whether it's EV3 or WeDo 2.0 or StoryStarter, **everything that LEGO® Education offers is complementary to the core curriculum.”**

Laudadio admits that what they're doing can be a bit intimidating at first to teachers who are used to a more traditional approach. But when they see the impact this type of learning has on students, he says, it's easy to get even the most doubtful teachers on board. “You go into these spaces and see the

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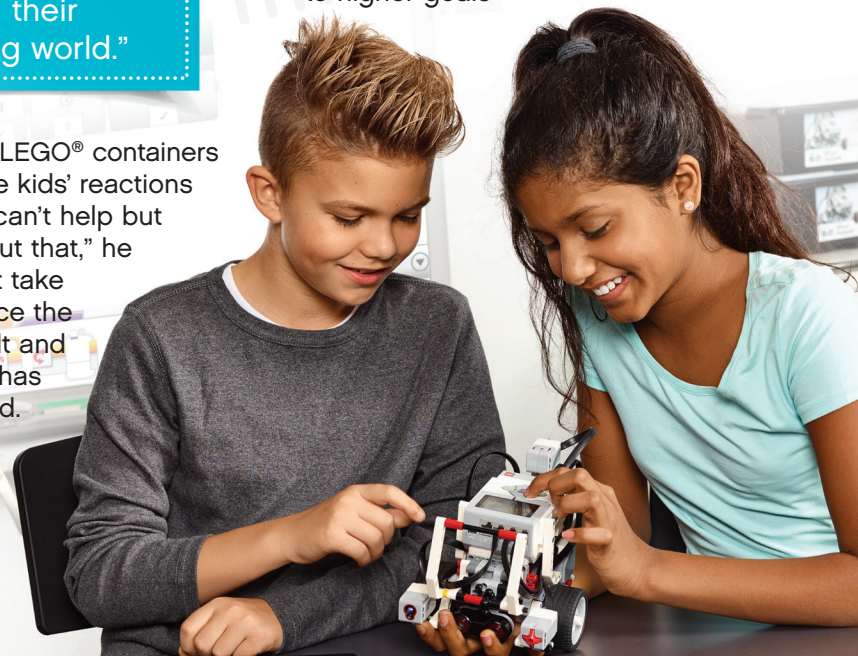
colors and the LEGO® containers and you see the kids' reactions to it—and you can't help but be excited about that,” he says. “It doesn't take much effort once the spaces are built and the curriculum has been purchased. They see it for themselves. That's been the turn of the corner.”



Fred Laudadio and Kristin Thorsen

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And it's not just about the excitement—**this culture of innovation is changing the way their students approach learning.** They are self-motivated and becoming leaders and mentors to young students. “They want to be in these environments and help each other develop as leaders and design their learning world,” says Laudadio. In just a short amount of time, he and Thorsen can see them **becoming active participants in their educational journey.** “It is amazing how [students] aspire to higher goals



simply by allowing them to work together in an environment that is dedicated to trial and error and being comfortable to FAIL: First Attempt In Learning,” says one of the Innovation Coaches, Carole Zei.

With this kind of exciting development, it's no wonder that other schools and districts are taking notice of what Laudadio and Thorsen are doing. And they have advice for educators trying to do the same. For instance, “Collaborate with your future STEM and STEAM coaches. Do your research. Do site visits. Talk with people in the field.” Laudadio also encourages creativity and consistency in creating learning centers, as well as developing partnerships with district colleagues. And he especially advises teachers and administrators to use grants to get the resources they need; LEGO® Education fits Title 1 funding, and he **says using grants to their advantage helped make so much of what they have accomplished possible.**

