

➤ **CASE STUDY**

FAB LAB COMMUNITY ACCESS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

PRESCOTT SCHOOL DISTRICT

BACKGROUND

Prescott School District is situated at the confluence of the St. Croix and Mississippi Rivers, on Wisconsin's western border (a 30-minute drive from downtown St. Paul and part of the Twin Cities metro area).



A forward-thinking district located in a supportive community, Prescott has slightly more than 1,000 students from pre-K through grade 12, with a student-teacher ratio of approximately 13:1.

Prescott School District is a one-time recipient of a Fabrication Laboratories (Fab Labs) Grant from the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation. One of the grant program's expectations is that recipient school districts offer community access to their fab lab spaces and take into account the unique needs of the community and the district.

APPROACH

Prescott School District approached the issues of community access and community engagement by getting in touch with business and community leaders early in the process of planning their fab lab.

They worked with the community education coordinator, who continues to help the district build community involvement and offer classes in which community members can enroll for a fee to cover the cost of materials. The school district administration was available for consultation as needed, but entrusted those planning the fab lab to create a suitable community engagement strategy.

Effective use of social media to promote the fab lab and its offerings has been key to Prescott's approach. The district maintains a Facebook page for the fab lab and uses various other profiles (including the main school district page and community education partners) to share and promote the page's content. To promote engagement and ensure they are responding to community needs the district has posted surveys asking about what subjects and skills their social followers are most interested in learning. This approach resulted in enrollment of 12 people for community metalworking and art metal classes (including the use of CNC machines), with each class comprising four or five sessions of two or three hours each. The lab is also available for outside instructors to hold classes on topics such as glass-blowing.



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BUDGET

The district does not have a specific budget for the community access aspect of its fab lab. The goal is that revenues from community programs will cover the costs.

PARTNERS

One of the most critical partnerships for the district is with the local community education program. Completing projects for community spaces—such as constructing a sign, a bench, or a shed—helps to raise fab lab's profile.

Two years in, the fab lab team feels that community support is growing as awareness and trust build. The district is beginning to receive more inquiries about upcoming courses and offerings.

DETAILED PROCESS AND FINDINGS

The fab lab team recommends writing out a detailed plan for each of the next five years and sharing it with district administrators. In the absence of a local community education program, the local chamber of commerce may be able to play a similar role.

The team recommends creating a product your fab lab can offer for sale for \$20 or less. By setting up outside a grocery store for two days and sharing about it on social media, the district sold \$800 worth of steel coasters at \$5 each in just five hours.

The team also recommends asking local businesses to stock fab lab products on their shelves. The Prescott School District has made between \$1,000 and \$4,000 per year by selling products such as keychains, cutting boards, coasters, shelving, and other décor. Successful strategies have included promoting the products in advance of major holidays and adding notes to the products stating who made them and how (especially popular were products that stated scrap wood made up 70% of the inputs).

Toward the goal of self-sufficiency for the program, proceeds from product sales are reinvested into tooling, materials, and repairs for the fab lab space, with any leftover funds saved for future equipment

purchases. The school district also receives donations of supplies from area businesses to utilize in the fab lab space, and students are trying their hand at milling and drying lumber with logs donated by an instructor from his tree removal business, allowing the funds that would be spent on these supplies (wood) to go toward other purposes.

ADJUSTMENTS

Based on community input, the district learned that Monday through Thursday from the early fall through the beginning of March would be the best time to offer classes to ensure maximum availability for participants, with summers and weekends being busier times when people would be more likely to have conflicts—indicating that even with initial strong interest, the program could extend its reach and impact even further with some schedule adjustments.

The district is grateful for the help they received from the community education director, who helped promote the classes via email and social media—and also conducted surveys about class times and topics, leading the district to offer beginners' welding and metal arts classes in fall 2024.



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The district also spent two years optimizing the lab's physical layout, making changes to workspaces, materials storage, and tool placement to help students and community members work more effectively.

The district initially ran the courses without paying the community education instructors after a referendum that would have included funds to pay them failed to pass. Student fees covered the cost of the materials. Without revenue left over to reinvest back into the program, discussions arose about how to cover wear and tear on the machines or accidental damage, with one proposal calling for an additional fee per student (such as a \$10 lab fee and/or 15% upcharge on the materials fee). Questions also arose regarding the district's liability for community activities taking place in the fab lab space, but the fab lab team ultimately decided these concerns are addressed by the waiver community members sign and the fact that the lab has strong support from the district and the community.

KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The Prescott School District fab lab team reported these lessons learned from their experience:

- Focusing on one-of-a-kind, rather than mass-produced, items so buyers can feel they are purchasing something special will help to maintain interest and demand for your fab lab's products.
- Take a proactive attitude. Be on the lookout for trends and opportunities. Take control of the situation early and make changes instead of waiting for things to happen.
- When considering community engagement programming, keep adult learning styles in mind. Allow for choice and self-direction rather than being prescriptive. Also remember that your adult learners may actually have less experience with the skills you are teaching than high-school students do.

- When planning class times, start with a survey to find out when your adult learners will be available. Then find out who can teach during those times, instead of starting your planning based on when the instructor is available.

Prescott School District feels that overall, incorporating community fab lab access and community engagement has been a benefit, not only because of the classes and access to equipment, but because these features help to raise awareness of the opportunities the school provides for its students. Integration of the fab lab into the community helps to build support for school funding referenda and public education in general. Through these experiences, community members come to see the school as a living entity with real people and important learning taking place, rather than just a building.

