



# Transforming a School District, One Classroom at a Time

## **ELIZABETH FORWARD SCHOOL DISTRICT** empowers educators and students to re-imagine the future of K-12 education and then make it a reality.

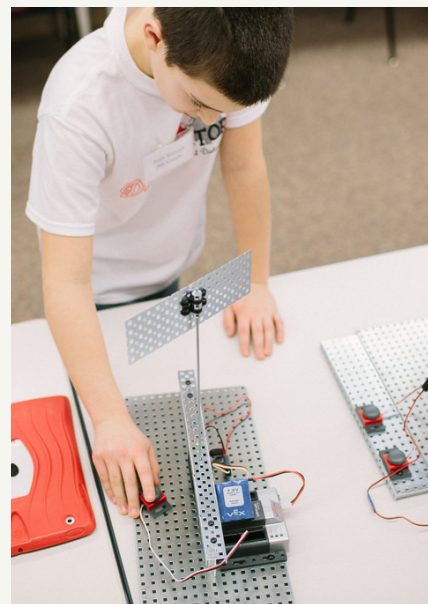
Elizabeth, Pennsylvania might be considered an unlikely place to find the cutting edge of technology and innovation. In an old river town fighting to recover from recession, and in a public education environment marked by increasing standards and decreasing budgets, Elizabeth Forward stands out as one of the most innovative school districts in America.

When Superintendent Bart Rocco and Assistant Superintendent Todd Keruskin started at Elizabeth Forward, the district was hardly a hotbed of education innovation. Students were dropping out at alarming rates and opting for charter or cyber schools. The school was stuck in the middle of the pack on state standardized test scores and teachers were struggling to keep students engaged.

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“Elizabeth Forward is a living example of the triumph of opportunity over challenge in American education.”

**KAREN CATOR**, PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, DIGITAL PROMISE



Still, there was opportunity for the district, located just 30 minutes from Pittsburgh's research universities, education technology companies, cultural institutions, philanthropies, and civic leaders. Tapping into the Remake Learning Network, Rocco and Keruskin began transforming their district—one space, one program, one teacher, and one student at a time.

Early in their tenure at Elizabeth Forward, Rocco and Keruskin attended an event at the Allegheny Intermedia Unit to hear a speech by Don Marinelli, then-executive director of Carnegie Mellon's Entertainment Technology Center (ETC). Intrigued, they followed up with Marinelli, who suggested they partner with ETC and local education technology company Zulama to transform a space in their district. With guidance from these partners, district leaders, teachers, students, and facilities staff came together to create the Entertainment Technology Academy, a classroom that does away with the rows of desk and chalk board in favor of a flexible and collaborative learning space. Teachers use game design theory to offer engaging, effective English, math, art, design, and computer science curriculum. Encouraged, Elizabeth Forward's leadership didn't stop there.

Next came the EF Media Center, which transformed the static school library into an attractive high school hangout space with comfortable seating, gaming consoles, a stage, and state-of-the-art audio and video production studios. Then came the SMALLab, an interactive digital media space that used gaming to provide fun, kinesthetic educational opportunities for middle school students. Next came the Dream Factory, combining the middle school's art studio, shop class, and computer science lab into one integrated innovation space. In 2013, Elizabeth Forward launched a district-wide 1:1 iPad learning initiative for every student K-12. In 2015, they partnered with Chevron and the ETC to build an interactive Energy Lab for middle school students to learn about Earth, space, and energy concepts.

Rocco and Keruskin formed strategic partnerships with regional and national education innovators to advance their work, but they consistently remained grounded in the district, working closely with their school board, teachers, and students to develop, adapt, and improve spaces and programs.

Today, the district is one of 57 members of Digital Promise's League of Innovative Schools. More importantly, though, student test scores are up, their dropout rates are down, and the transition from "frontierland" to "futureland," as Superintendent Rocco likes to say, is well underway.

### BY THE NUMBERS

In the 2008–09 academic year, 15 of Elizabeth Forward's 800 students dropped out, and more than 70 district students opted for charter or cyber schools.

Today, **Elizabeth Forward's dropout rate is almost zero**, and only 11 students are enrolled in charter or cyber schools.

In state standardized testing, the district, which ranked #250 out of 500, has moved **up 105 spots** to #145.

Enrollment in summer enrichment programs has shot **up more than 500% since 2009**.

### NETWORK IN ACTION

#### COMMUNICATE: SITE TOURS SHARE THE BEST OF THE NETWORK WITH VISITORS FROM OTHER REGIONS.

Elizabeth Forward has tapped in to the Remake Learning Network to share its success with other districts seeking to reimagine how teaching and learning works in today's classrooms. Responding to growing demand to see Elizabeth Forward's transformation in action, the district offers monthly **tours for teachers and administrators**. To date, the district has hosted more than 400 educators from more than 100 school districts from around the world.