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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from Sparkling Innovation in Children Through STEM Exploration.

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1. Collaborative Spaces

Innovation districts are built around collaborative spaces (physical and virtual hubs) where individuals and teams come together to solve problems, share ideas, and cocreate.

- **Quick Connect to Your Context:** K–8 classrooms can emulate collaborative spaces by adopting flexible layouts, shared workstations, and breakout areas that encourage teamwork and cross-disciplinary exploration.
- **Example:** Learners in a middle school science class redesign their lab space to include group workstations and digital collaboration tools, encouraging joint experiments and brainstorming.
- **Look For It:** How do collaborative spaces transform the experiences of learners and teachers in the featured profiles?

2. Diversity of Expertise

In innovation ecosystems, professionals from various fields (science, art, business, technology) bring unique perspectives to intentional efforts that fuel creativity.

- **Quick Connect to Your Context:** Schools can cultivate diversity of expertise by integrating cross-curricular projects and inviting industry professionals and experts to mentor learners.
- **Example:** A fourth-grade team leans into “STEAM Week” where learners collaborate on a project that involves interacting with teachers from art, engineering, and technology disciplines, blending expert skills to mentor learners as they create a functional prototype.
- **Look for It:** Notice how diverse expertise sparks new ways of thinking and problem solving in the profiles shared.

3. Incubator and Accelerator Models

Innovation districts intentionally support startups through incubators and accelerators, providing resources, mentorship, and space to develop and scale ideas.

- **Quick Connect to Your Context:** Schools can adopt this model by creating “idea labs” where learners can develop projects, receive feedback, and iterate on their work.

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- **Example:** A middle school sets up a project incubator where learners pitch ideas for community improvement, get mentorship from local leaders, and develop real-world solutions.
- **Look for It:** How do educators serve as incubators for their learners' ideas in the profiles?

4. Community Engagement

Community is at the heart of innovation ecosystems. Partnerships with local organizations, businesses, and residents ensure relevance and real-world impact.

- **Quick Connect to Your Context:** Schools can become community hubs by partnering with local organizations to create experiential learning opportunities.
- **Example:** A middle school partners with a local hospital to create a health sciences pathway alongside a high school, allowing learners to learn from medical professionals.
- **Look for It:** Notice the impact of community engagement on learners and their work.

5. Technology and Infrastructure

Cutting-edge technology and infrastructure are the backbone of innovation districts, enabling seamless collaboration and creativity.

- **Quick Connect to Your Context:** Schools can integrate technology not as an add-on but as a core tool for learning, connecting learners to global resources and networks.
- **Example:** A second-grade classroom leverages augmented reality/virtual reality (AR/VR) to explore historical landmarks virtually, breaking down geographical barriers and enriching the curriculum.
- **Look for It:** How is technology used to expand possibilities and connections in the profiles?

6. Sustainability and Inclusivity

Innovation ecosystems prioritize sustainability (meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future learners to meet their own needs) and inclusivity to ensure long-term impact and equitable access.

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- **Quick Connect to Your Context:** Schools can embed long-term vision into their culture and operations while carefully and thoughtfully designing programs that are accessible to all learners.
- **Example:** A middle school revamps their afterschool programming and implements a long-term vision to offer an after-school coding club specifically designed to seek out young women interested in computer science.
- **Look for It:** Observe how inclusive practices and sustainability are woven into educational approaches.

7. Continuous Learning and Adaptation

Innovation districts thrive on a mindset of continuous improvement, driven by a loop of feedback, data, and fueled by a willingness to pivot.

- **Quick Connect to Your Context:** Schools can create a culture of learning by encouraging teachers and learners to view feedback as an essential part of growth.
- **Example:** Teachers codesign lessons with learners, identify success criteria alongside learners, and iterate based on feedback and outcomes to improve engagement and understanding.
- **Look for It:** How do continuous learning and adaptation shape the growth of educators and learners in the profile examples?

8. Networking and Mentorship

Innovation ecosystems flourish through intentional networking and mentorship programs that connect emerging talent with seasoned professionals.

- **Quick Connect to Your Context:** Schools can create mentorship opportunities for learners by connecting them with industry professionals, school alumni, and community leaders.
- **Example:** A seventh-grade teacher pairs learners with local entrepreneurs for monthly mentorship meetings, inspiring career exploration and personal growth.
- **Look for It:** Where do mentorship and networking drive transformative outcomes in the stories shared?

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A Little Spark



Ignite!

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One little spark of inspiration can change a lot. Invite your learners to look for sparks around them. Encourage them to take a walk through your school or neighborhood and view the spaces through a new lens: innovation. What do they notice? Maybe it's the library, a place where learners gather to learn. Maybe it's the playground, a place full of laughter and creativity, or the school garden, a place quietly transforming sunlight into food. Ask them to consider the technology they use every day; those who inspire them at home, in the community, or school; or the ideas that spark their curiosity.

Challenge your learners to see their everyday spaces and tools they use through a fresh lens. Could their cafeteria become a place for designing solutions to reduce waste? Might the school parking lot transform into a solar-powered charging station? Could the library evolve into the hub of a new community makerspace?

Have your learners document their observations: what spaces *already* connect folx, support solving problems, or improve lives? Then, guide learners to think about what's missing. What could make these places more vibrant, inclusive, or innovative? By the end of this simple exploration, your learners will begin to see all the possibilities, recognizing that innovation doesn't always mean creating something new; it often starts by uncovering the untapped potential in what's already there.