



# IN THE BEAVER AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT, BUILDING A BETTER FUTURE — BRICK BY BRICK

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To passersby, the Brick Club looks like no big deal.

Three students and a facilitator sit in the Zen Den, the Beaver Area School District's new mindfulness space at Dutch Ridge Elementary. Then, for the next 40 minutes, they play — aided by the most beloved, time-honored toys of all time.

Emily Sanders knows how it looks. "At first I thought, 'That's it? They're just in there playing with LEGOs?'"

But as Beaver Area's assistant superintendent soon discovered, what happens in Brick Clubs can change a student's life. "It's almost like magic," Sanders explains. "When you look at the research and see the results, all of a sudden you realize, 'Hey, we're doing something special here.'"

Something special, indeed. Beaver Area's Brick-by-Brick Program is one of the first such programs in an American public school district, brought here by Sanders through her partnerships with The Matt's Makerspace Foundation and the Project Baseplate Program at

Carnegie Mellon University's Center for Transformational Play. Using the "Brick-by-Brick" approach — developed by the UK-based nonprofit Play Included and the LEGO Foundation — Brick Clubs use intentional, collaborative play to help children develop communication skills, meaningful relationships, and a sense of belonging and pride.

Already popular across the pond, the clubs have finally come to the United States, starting in Beaver Area's Zen Den.

"We know that post-pandemic, students everywhere are struggling with issues of anxiety and mental health," says Jeremy Selepec, school counselor and Brick Club instructor. "What we've found is that the Brick Clubs break down those walls. I have been able to reach students who had previously not wanted to open up socially and emotionally. While working with them, I'm also facilitating future-ready skills such as problem solving, communication, collaboration, persistence, and most of all, joy."

The clubs are just the latest tool in Beaver Area's toolkit. A walk through the district's schools reveals their laser-like focus on preparing kids

for the future: there's the drone academy, the K-8 robotics program, hydroponic gardens, and the outdoor greenhouse. There's the cybersecurity class and the middle-school esports team.

Everything the district does, says Sanders, "equips our students for the future — academically, socially, emotionally. That drives every decision we make."

It's a focus that led Beaver Area to the Western Pennsylvania Learning 2025 Alliance, a regional cohort of school districts working together — with support from The Grable Foundation — to create student-centered, equity-focused, future-driven schools. Led by local superintendents and AASA, The School Superintendents Association, the Alliance convenes to help districts like Beaver Area do what they do best: prepare every learner for tomorrow.

"It's like a perfect storm," Sanders explains. "My colleagues and I get to learn together and grow together, to figure out how to keep moving the needle for our district. Being part of the Alliance, I think, has helped us see what's happening beyond Beaver County."

It's also helped others learn from Beaver Area's work. Though it's long been a high-achieving district, "Nobody else in the world knew about the great things happening here. Even our name would confuse people," says Sanders, laughing. As one of the nation's nearly two dozen school districts named after the mammal, "People would always say, 'Wait, which Beaver are you?'"

They no longer have to ask. In November 2023, AASA named Beaver Area a "Lighthouse" district in recognition of its future-focused efforts. The prestigious designation — awarded to just 31 school systems out of more than 13,000 nationwide — celebrates Beaver Area as a place that's lighting the way for others.

And soon, those others will be looking to Beaver Area as they start Brick Clubs of their own. Sanders is one of just four certified Brick-by-Brick trainers in the United States,

and the inquiries are already pouring in from school systems across the country. "It's catching on like wildfire," says Sanders.

It's also catching on at home, with students, parents, and Beaver Area educators clamoring to join the fun. "We'll share something about the Brick Clubs online, and I'll get five phone calls from parents the next day," says Tonya O'Brien, Dutch Ridge Elementary's principal, who is also a Brick Club instructor. "They're so excited about what these clubs can do."

Sanders thinks she knows why.

"It's such a positive, heartwarming program," she says. "We all know how important things like relationships and self-confidence are, but when you see the Brick Clubs in action, you realize how central it all is to students' growth and academic achievement. You realize, 'Here's a way we can build a better future.'"

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