

Orion Middle School Unveils Cutting-Edge SmartLab to Ignite Student Innovation

Ribbon-cutting celebrates a hands-on STEM learning environment that inspires confidence, curiosity, and future-ready skills

ORION, IL, UNITED STATES, September 22, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Orion Middle School proudly hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Friday, August 29, to officially open its brand-new SmartLab, a state-of-the-art STEM learning environment designed to prepare students for future academic and career success through hands-on, project-based learning.

SmartLab is a career-connected STEM ecosystem that empowers students to build strong technical skills while developing resilience, creativity, and confidence. More than just learning content, students are discovering their own STEM identity—the belief that “I belong here, I can master rigorous challenges, and my ideas

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Chad Bahnks, Principal



Ribbon cut, doors open! Orion students now have a new SmartLab to explore STEM through hands-on learning.

make an impact.” Through meaningful projects and collaborative problem-solving, Orion Middle School students are engaging in real-world applications across multiple industry pathways.

Educators and administrators are already seeing the profound impact of the SmartLab. Oliver Jones, STEaM Teacher and Student Success Coordinator for the Orion School District, described how students have responded: “It’s incredible to see students in our new STEM lab. They’re not just reading about concepts anymore; they’re actually building, experimenting, and trying until they start

seeing things click. You can literally see their eyes light up when they figure something out – it’s those ‘aha!’ moments that make this experience so rewarding for our students.”

Veteran science teacher Kevin Roling shared his enthusiasm for the program: "As a science teacher of over 34 years it is exciting for me to be a part of Orion Middle School's SmartLab. It is easy to see the engagement of students in the classroom and the coding program we have been using definitely allows for differentiation among the students. We are very lucky to have this program in our school."

Principal Chad Bahnks emphasized how the lab is shaping student mindsets: "The SmartLab empowers our middle school students to imagine boldly, collaborate fearlessly, and take initiative with confidence. They no longer fear mistakes, but embrace them as stepping stones to growth. Each day, they walk into the lab engaged, inspired, and excited to learn." Seventh Grade Science Teacher Feryl Cutkomp added, "The SmartLab offers our students a chance to explore concepts that are difficult to incorporate into a regular science classroom in an engaging way that keeps them focused on learning. Students are clearly enjoying the experience of working in these novel scenarios."

The SmartLab approach integrates hands-on, project-based learning (PBL+STEM) with grade-appropriate tools and challenges connected to eight distinct industry pathways. By tackling meaningful problems, students develop both technical know-how and a mindset that prepares them for the future—whether or not they ultimately choose STEM careers. Dr. Jennifer Berry, CEO of SmartLab, explained, "The spark of curiosity becomes a flame of confidence when learners experience an ah-HA! moment. These moments are not accidents—they're the product of thoughtful design, hands-on learning, and the right kind of challenge."



Students dive into engineering challenges at Orion's SmartLab, designing and testing structures that bring science and creativity to life.



Families, students, and community members explore the new Orion SmartLab during the grand opening, getting a firsthand look at the hands-on learning opportunities ahead.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony highlighted Orion Middle School's commitment to cultivating an engaging, future-focused education that equips every student to thrive in an ever-changing world.

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Orion Middle School, part of the Orion School District in Orion, Illinois, serves students in grades 6–8. With a focus on academic excellence, collaboration, and innovation, the school is committed to equipping students with the skills they need to thrive in an ever-changing world. [To learn more, visit .orionschools.us/o/oms.](https://orionschools.us/o/oms)

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SmartLab delivers turnkey, career-centered K-12 STEM programs that equip today's students for tomorrow's challenges. Every hands-on PBL solution integrates grade-appropriate STEM applications across eight industry pathways. SmartLab programs include dedicated classroom setups or flexible systems designed for mobility, along with standards-aligned curriculum, teacher training, and ongoing technical and curricular support. [To learn more, visit smartlablearning.com.](https://smartlablearning.com)

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Innovation meets creativity as a student demonstrates how everyday items like fruit can be transformed into a working piano using coding and circuitry in the Orion SmartLab.



Educators and community members get hands-on with interactive STEM activities in the Orion SmartLab, experiencing the same kind of learning opportunities now available to students.

