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## **Wisconsin to Lead the Nation in Fab Labs**

*25 new grants to school districts brings state to #1 in the country*

**Madison** – This week the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) announced the first recipients of the Fabrication Laboratories (Fab Labs) Grant Program. The program was created in the 2015-17 biennial budget at the urging of Rep. Mary Czaja (R-Irma) and made \$500,000 available to school districts across the state.

Fab Labs are classroom facilities located on a school campus where students and members of the community can learn hands-on skills related to jobs in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math). Tools in the Fab Lab can include items such as a 3D printer, a mini-mill, router, plasma cutter, or a laser-engraver. The idea and curriculum began in 2001 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and has since grown to more than 500 locations around the world. As part of the process, students also receive training in project management, cost accounting, and other managerial skills to prepare them for the future workforce.

To qualify for consideration in the Wisconsin Fab Labs Grant Program, a school district was required to provide matching funds and have the Fab Lab initiative approved by the school board. All Fab Labs are also required to be available at certain times to members of the community and general public to allow interested persons to pursue STEM skills.

Initial funding provided for the Fab Lab grants was set at \$500,000 with the expectation that several dozen school districts would apply. However, leaders were pleasantly surprised to learn that over 90 school districts applied and an additional \$101,000 of flexible funding was added to the initiative. This amount allowed for awards of up to \$25,000 for 25 school districts. All applications were competitively evaluated on the basis of long range planning, partnerships with private industry in the community, and overall financial need.

**“A key benefit of Fab Labs is the ability to connect students to ideas and research from around the world,”** said Rep. Czaja. **“In Wisconsin 44% of our students attend school in a rural classroom and increasing their exposure to technology and solid skills is a sound investment in the future workforce of our state. I will be working next session to build on the success of these initial 25 grants and further expand the Fab Labs Program.”**

Superintendent Ben Niehaus from the School District of Florence made the following comment, **“Through our regional schools providing educational opportunities with the STEM and Fab Lab movement, we know that businesses and industry will greatly value knowing there are students being prepared in our local region with the technical, analytical and problem-solving skills desired and needed in so many fields today.”**

Wisconsin’s first K-12 Fab Lab was opened by the Three Lakes School District in September 2014. The School District of Florence Fab Lab opened in September 2015 and was followed by an additional six districts. The new grants will bring Wisconsin’s number of Fab Labs to 33, the highest in the nation.