

Empowering Students Through Innovative Educational Practices

By Tonya O'Brien and Steve Mammome



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In the ever-evolving landscape of education, a new paradigm is emerging – one that places students at the forefront of innovation and at the center of their learning journey. At Dutch Ridge Elementary School, a grades 3-5 building in the Beaver Area School District, fifth-grade teacher (and co-author), Steve Mammome, developed the *5th Grade Marketplace*—a groundbreaking initiative that celebrates the collaborative spirit of educators and the insatiable curiosity of students. This article explores the essence of this transformative idea, and how it is reshaping traditional educational models.

At the heart of this innovative idea is the belief that the creative mindsets of educators, as the architects of learning, possess unique insights into what engages and motivates students and prepares them for life outside of the classroom. The Marketplace foundation lies in the idea that educators, as professionals and adults in the outside world, are best equipped to identify and address the evolving needs of students.

To truly understand the inception and foundation of Marketplace, you must hear the story through the words of its creator, Mr. Mammome:

When you look around communities like Beaver, you see many different people who all have unique passions, talents, and aspirations. These influences help to shape and determine where they fit in the economic system that surrounds them. The habits they have formed over time are key factors in how well they thrive in the economy and what pathway they choose.

Our ultimate role as an educational institution is to teach skills and habits that will allow students to one day thrive in that same economy, and also, to provide opportunities to help them discover the passions, talents and aspirations that exist within them.

Marketplace was born out of this thought process. So, what is Marketplace? Before I answer that question, let me tell you what it's not. It's not a one-time event where students make a singular product. Marketplace is an authentic economy established just for students and staff at Dutch Ridge. It is a platform that was designed to allow students to participate in a real economy where they are free to pursue their passions, take big risks and allow challenges to drive their next steps. You could think of it as a "pre-season" to the real thing.

Students have been given the opportunity to embark on a year-long immersion in this economy, where they buy and sell products, services and entertainment experiences. There is no due date. As they finish their product, service or entertainment experience, they advertise and sell it. The digital Marketplace money they earn from selling is added to their Marketplace bank account to be used to purchase

products, services and entertainment experiences created and sold by other students and teachers.

So, what does the Marketplace look like in action?

Each Marketplace Day, students work through the process of planning, creating, advertising and selling their products. Week after week, they work through these processes, allowing them to naturally grow and evolve in the quality and complexity of what they bring to the market. Any job or process that is a part of the real economy mirrors what we have created here. For example, if they want to advertise their products on a hallway billboard, they must create it and pay an advertisement fee. To make a sale final, both the buyer and the seller fill out a joint order form to be turned into the accountants that have been hired that day to calculate and enter sale totals into the student accounts.

Students have been able to experience and utilize many different tools, technology, and materials available to them. If they don't have the necessary tools or materials to complete their product, they can complete a "grant form" for approval to purchase those items that are crucial to their success.

An online component allows students to advertise their businesses and products, and to post wanted ads where they share ideas of products, services, and entertainment experiences they would like to purchase. This has been a critical tool to allow students to communicate what they need or want and what they have to sell.

The idea is that we are creating our own private economy that operates like a real economy, but is driven by students, allowing them to gain experiences on their journey of discovering where they fit in the economy.

We also want students to see value in habits like hard work, attention to detail, and determination in order to successfully earn money to be spent on the things they want and need... just like real life.

Another reason we are doing this is to provide a low-risk arena where students can feel free to take big risks now, while they don't have the pressure or responsibility of really providing for their wants and needs, like they will as they grow and become members of the real economy.



Gears designed in Tinkercad software and 3D printed by students

We don't see Marketplace as separate from what we do in the classroom...it all connects. It starts with the laws that govern our Marketplace and parallel our classroom expectations:

1. Pay attention.
2. Participate.
3. Work hard.
4. And don't quit (determination).



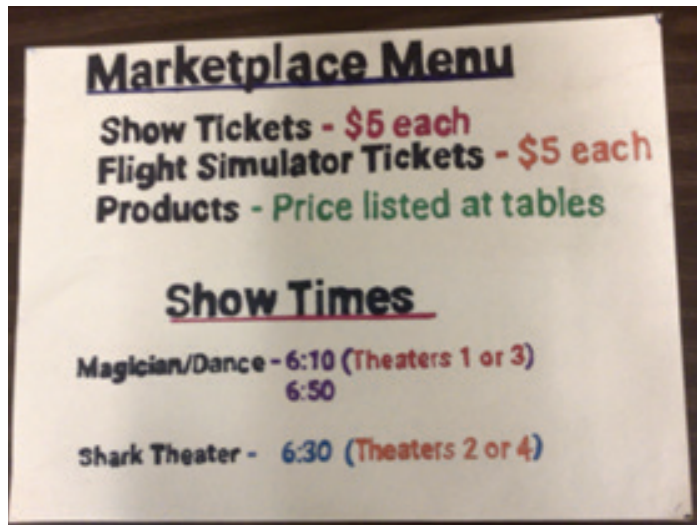
Holiday cards created by a student using a laser cutter

Our intention is to develop strong habits as students practice those four laws in all they do. Consistent demonstration of the skills results in account bonuses, while lack of consistency results in fines. The goal is to cause them to feel and experience the connection of how these real-life habits affect their success and outcomes in class, and ultimately, in real life outside of school. Marketplace is meant to be a platform where students apply the skills they've learned in math, science, social studies, English language arts, the arts and technology, in authentic ways that have real-life rewards and benefits.

Throughout this inaugural year, I have witnessed a consistent progression from very simple products and ideas to more complex systems. This experiential learning shows students how to solve problems, how to research and find new and creative ideas, and how to put their plans into action using tools and technology. Students feel the satisfaction and pride of working hard to produce and sell a product.

You can see and feel the excitement as new ideas arise in the students. They can't wait to bring their ideas to the government (the teachers) for approval. Visiting classrooms, you see students engrossed in whatever they are attempting to accomplish that day. When they reach the point of completion and they actually sell what they have made – whether it's a product, a service they are providing or an entertainment experience they've choreographed – there is nothing like seeing the excitement and sense of accomplishment on their faces. I truly believe it gives them a sense of purpose and direction.

In my opinion, Marketplace is "as real as it gets" when it comes to having students apply what they are learning in the most authentic way possible.



Billboard advertisement menu created by students for Marketplace

The Marketplace stands as a testament to the transformative power of collaboration and innovation in education. By recognizing and harnessing the expertise and creativity of students and tailoring educational experiences to their unique learning styles and interests, Marketplace is paving the way for a student-driven approach to learning. As we continue to navigate the future of education, initiatives like these serve as beacons of change, inspiring a new era where teachers and students actively shape the landscape of learning. Please visit this link for the Marketplace Conceptual Process: <https://www.papprincipals.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Conceptual-Development-of-Marketplace.pdf> You may contact Mrs. O'Brien at obrient@basd.k12.pa.us for further information.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS: Tonya M. O'Brien, M.Ed., Co-Principal at Dutch Ridge Elementary School and Beaver County native, brings innovation and passion to her role in shaping the educational landscape. Known for her collaborative and communicative leadership style, Mrs. O'Brien is committed to building strong relationships with students, staff and parents to create a supportive educational community.

Steve Mammone, a dedicated family man hailing from Beaver County, has spent the last two decades as a fifth-grade math teacher at Dutch Ridge Elementary School. Mr. Mammone understands the importance of education, not only in the classroom, but in preparing students for real-world challenges. His vision extends beyond traditional teaching methods, as he aspires to create a trailblazing program at Dutch Ridge, empowering students to apply their learned skills in a school-wide economy, where they become the architects of their own economic system.