

STEPPING STONES MUSEUM FOR CHILDREN LEARNING FRAMEWORK & PLAN

BACKGROUND. In its first decade, Stepping Stones Museum for Children (Norwalk, CT) pursued growth on several fronts. Soon after opening in 2000, it began to focus on increasing its capacity to offer a consistently robust learning experience for its audience of children 10 years and under, their parents, caregivers, and teachers. Consolidating lessons from early planning and operations, it developed a learning framework and exhibit master plan to implement beginning in 2003. Finally, it began to attend to and respond to public policy with well-focused initiatives by reaching out to the community. To support its work and extend its reach, the museum forged local and statewide partnerships and collaborations.

In less than 10 years, the museum served nearly two million visitors. Annually, it welcomed approximately 215,000 children and families with significant opportunity to expand its reach over the next five years. In spite of imaginative and flexible use of its building and site, it had pushed the limits of both its indoor and outdoor space. Taking its growth commitment seriously the museum launched *An Opportunity to Grow: The Campaign for Stepping Stones at Ten* to enhance museum experiences, expand and reconfigure the facility, and endow the future.

PROCESS. In 2008, Stepping Stones engaged Vergeront Museum Planning director, Jeanne W. Vergeront (Minneapolis, MN) to facilitate an update of the framework to reflect a sharpened understanding of its role as a steward of the community and a multi-dimensional educational resource, to strengthen the connection between learning intentions and impact, and to serve as a guide for new gallery and program planning.

Grounded in a review of organizational documents, the planning process actively involved staff from across the museum. Through targeted exercises, readings, discussion and reviews, the framework team adapted and refined elements of the existing framework; explored new dimensions of Stepping Stones' learning experiences; and strengthened the connections between others.

The 2009 Learning Framework & Plan integrated the museum's vision and mission with issues of local and regional significance to children's wellbeing and future. Parent involvement, the importance of play, early literacy development, and an increasingly diverse future produce a strong focus, an understanding of its distinct learning approach, an interest in learner impacts and clarity around learning experience outcomes.

RESULTS. The framework and plan merged lessons of Stepping Stones' first decade with a firm belief in a greater potential to deliver value to the learners and community it proudly serves by:

- Articulating a stronger connection between the museum as a steward of the community and as a premier multi-dimensional educational resource;
- Developing a sharper, fuller view of its enduring learning interests;
- Creating a shared understanding and common vocabulary around its learning interests for the entire museum; and
- Integrating the framework into the life and work of the museum.