

LOUISIANA CHILDREN'S MUSEUM

EARLY LEARNING VILLAGE PLANNING FRAMEWORK

BACKGROUND. Following Hurricane Katrina Louisiana Children's Museum recognized the crystal clear starting point for the incredible opportunity to rebuild New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region. The region's children. Long-standing challenges that too many of its children had faced in multiple areas in their lives were compounded by disruption, separation and uncertainty following the storm. The region's future prosperity depended upon a robust citizenry, the best and brightest minds investing in and committing to the city and region and placing children high on the agenda of community priorities. In 2005 Louisiana Children's Museum convened a set of partners to create the Early Learning Village (ELV), a social, cultural, and learning resource for children across Louisiana and the Gulf Coast. Permission to build on 10 acres in New Orleans City Park created a prime opportunity for these long-term, strategic collaborators to give shape to its vision

To explore and develop its aspirations in a collaborative way, build on the critical expertise of the partners, and lay a solid foundation for extensive planning, Louisiana Children's Museum engaged Vergeront Museum Planning (Minneapolis, MN) to develop a planning framework. Vergeront brought a familiarity with Louisiana Children's Museum from a previous project, strategic planning experience with museums, and a neutral "outsider" perspective to the planning.

PROCESS. The process Vergeront facilitated engaged representatives from Louisiana Children's Museum, ELV partner organizations, and other stakeholders including local schools, colleges, universities, and community organizations. Reflecting the strategic nature of the planning, the group developed a vision, mission, and organizational definition. A set of commitments to guide decision-making, behaviors, and practices necessary to bring the ELV to life reflected its broad interests, understanding of its community, and profound obligation to nurture and enhance children's wellbeing. Central to its view of its audience is a view of all children as having capabilities and potential in all developmental domains. The planning team distinguished between the audience it must serve *fully* – all children birth through eight years in the Greater New Orleans area – and the audience it must serve *well* – children birth through eight in the Gulf Coast region and Louisiana, their parents, early care and learning professionals, and children above eight years served through targeted experiences that also benefit children under eight. The ELV's programmatic foundation rests on a convergence between research and community wisdom that suggests that there are essential experiences that allow children to become strong adults who are healthy, caring, and responsible. In defining the ELV's learning value, the framework identified a set of learning resources, a learning focus, and areas of intended impact.

RESULTS. Current research, varied perspectives, and children at the center of planning have been critical in shaping a planning framework that supports the powerful relationship between a community's prosperity and its children's wellbeing. The set of core ideas and key relationships that the framework establishes and defines will guide major decisions in constructing a facility in a new location, planning and building new exhibits, developing new programs, cultivating support, and operating the ELV. While the framework is a valuable tool and document, it also blends the broad expertise of ELV partners, aligns partner interests and cultures, and forges a sense of ownership. The essential experiences defined in the framework set the course for varied activities the ELV will offer to nurture in the region's children: a robust sense of self; supportive relationships; a sense of well-being; making sense of the world; and an expanding world. Finally, the framework lays a foundation for defining the impacts this valuable social, cultural, and learning resource hopes to achieve on behalf of the community and its children.