



Game On

Boston Children's Museum tests models of multilingual family outreach

For almost a century, Boston Children's Museum has played a singular role in the life of families of Greater Boston, offering children their first opportunity to visit a museum and often providing their first formal experiences in theater, visual arts, or music. As a "gateway" institution that opens the door to arts and cultural opportunities, the museum's impact is not limited to the youngest family members. "Half of our audience is over 18," says Megan Dickerson, Manager of Community Programs & Partnerships. "We're often an adult's first museum experience, particularly in the case of people from countries without an institutional arts culture similar to the United States."

In 1979 Boston Children's Museum moved into a red-brick, late-19th century former wool warehouse on Fort Point Channel. An extensive green renovation and facility expansion, completed in April 2007, earned the museum the U.S. Building Council's LEED Gold Certification and provided space for more programs and exhibitions. When the museum joined the Participation Learning Network (PLN) a year later, it decided to reinforce its role as a gateway through outreach to "New Bostonian" families of diverse linguistic, national, and ethnic backgrounds as well as low income families.

“One of our challenges was to create a program that would appeal to every member of a family.”

– Megan Dickerson

Boston Children’s Museum cultivates ongoing involvement through family memberships, which include free admission for up to six people. At the same time, it emphasizes affordability by offering \$1 admission on Friday nights, thanks to sponsorship by Target. Moreover, most libraries in Massachusetts have library memberships to the museum, which provide discount admissions coupons.

The PLN project built on outreach efforts at community events during the summer of 2007. “We went to cultural festivals, took pictures of people in a traveling photo booth, then printed sticker pictures,” says Dickerson. Everyone was then invited to a party at the end of the summer. Staff wanted to further explore the potential of coupling community outreach with a culminating, museum-based event as a means to encourage museum visitation.

The concept was refined, in part, by a model developed by the Berwick Research Institute, a Roxbury-based nonprofit organization that brings artists and audiences together to foster community. Dickerson had been involved in a series of dinner table discussions among community organizers, urban designers, arts administrators, and artists about the role of art in activating public spaces. She recognized that it is natural for people to gather around a table and that sharing a meal helps to break down barriers.

In a twist on the Berwick model, the museum conducted outreach at community events as a prelude to “Boston’s Biggest Dinner Party” on the Harborwalk in front of the museum. The project involved the museum’s Community Programs staff, volunteers from the Berwick Research Institute, and the museum’s BNY Mellon City ACCESS Teen Ambassadors, who speak some of the top six languages spoken in Boston public schools.

Before each event, staff met with organizers to formulate an appropriate food-related activity that would serve as “a kind of an elaborate invitation to the big dinner party at the end of the summer,” says Dickerson. After experiencing “what we do and the people who do it,” she reasoned that people from different neighborhoods will be more likely to come together at one table.

Over the course of the summer, museum staff and volunteers attended and hosted activities at the Cape Verdean Community UNIDO Independence Day celebration on City Hall Plaza, the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center Oak Street Fair, the Brazilian Women’s Group Brazilian Independence Day celebration in Brighton, the Dragon Boat Festival in Cambridge (with performances by Indian, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese groups), the Cambridge Caribbean Carnival, and the Festival Betances celebration of Puerto Rican and Latino culture in the Villa Victoria community in the South End.

Boston Children’s Museum also incorporated its ongoing work with the Boston Housing Authority into the outreach project. Community Programs staff worked in three month sessions at Old Colony Housing Development in South Boston, Gallivan Community Development in Mattapan, Washington Beach Development in Roslindale, and Charlestown Development in Charlestown.

At each event, families were encouraged to attend the Biggest Dinner Party. To further the museum’s role in promoting local arts opportunities, staff also distributed copies of “Boston Children’s Museum: Gateway to the Arts.” This pilot multilingual brochure offering suggestions on low-cost arts activities in Boston was supported through the PLN initiative.

To follow up on the personal contacts made at the events, invitations to the Biggest Dinner Party

were sent to the community partners, residents at the Boston Housing Authority developments, and families who signed up at the events. (Although the museum was prepared to issue invitations in six languages, English and Spanish were the only preferred languages indicated by participants.) All museum members were also invited.

Weather did not cooperate on the evening of the Biggest Dinner Party. Wind and rain forced staff to move the tables indoors and also prevented many families from traveling to the museum.

Nonetheless, about 280 people ate dinner at the tables in the museum's broad first-floor hallway and about 550 people participated in other activities planned for the evening, including a museum-wide scavenger hunt. The last-minute change of plans made things a bit chaotic and crowded and forced the postponement of some activities. But it also encouraged complete strangers to talk to each other — one of the outcomes the planners had hoped for.

In addition to the families attending the Biggest Dinner Party, museum staff also facilitated arts activities with about 1,600 people at community events. The museum deemed the overall project a success, but staff did evaluate the experience to determine what lessons they could apply to any further outreach efforts. They decided that participating in community festivals was no longer the most effective way to raise visibility. The hands-on arts activities that have been so successful in the past are attracting fewer families and it has become increasingly difficult to compete with giant bounce-houses and slip 'n' slides.

By contrast, the outreach work in conjunction with the Boston Housing Authority allowed

staff to build relationships over time, making it more likely that families will visit the museum on their own and feel comfortable in the unfamiliar environment. Staff concluded that such focused, longer-term programs would offer the greatest success in measurable involvement with the museum, such as new memberships.

In addition, while staff are convinced that the “Gateway” arts guide is a valuable resource, they realized that families will be more receptive if it is distributed through a “trusted broker.” The museum joined forces with the Boston Public Library Community Service Department to include the guide in a mailing to all Boston public school students and teachers in the summer of 2009. This partnership expanded the reach of the guide from 4,000 people as originally projected to more than 50,000.

The thoughtful evaluation, combined with consultation with peer museums in Houston, Chicago, and Brooklyn, led to a major change in direction for the second phase of PLN funding. “We traveled the city only to find that some of the people we looked for were already attending on Friday nights,” said Dickerson. In fact, the Friday night crowd is the museum's most diverse and staff decided to focus on developing activities to enhance visitors' experiences and encourage them to return.





“We are getting better at documenting what we are doing and what works.... Our goal is to build a structure of belonging.”

– Megan Dickerson

To gain a fuller understanding of their multilingual visitors, the museum engaged students from the Boston University School of Management to conduct a study of Friday Family Nights, including a survey of those who attend. The museum also created a working group of four cultural organizations and four community-based ESOL programs to share ideas about how to increase the connection among

families learning English and museums.

The Boston University study indicated that families would welcome greater involvement with Boston Children’s Museum and with each other. Although many were not previously aware of the membership program, they would consider joining if they could purchase membership on a monthly, rather than annual basis. Data also showed that many families visit the museum in multigenerational groups.

“One of our challenges was to create a program that would appeal to every member of a family,” says Dickerson. What emerged was “Game On,” a model participatory game that leads visitors through the museum and that can be adapted to suit specific age groups and to explore varying themes.

The model was tested in the galleries in the fall of 2009 and debuted as “Operation: Spy Challenge” in December. On three Fridays a month, visitors are encouraged to adopt a “spy name,” follow clues throughout the museum, and engage in art-related games with museum staff and the bilingual Teen Ambassadors. “It’s dramatic play,” says Dickerson. “Visitors inhabit a character.”

While the basic concept remains the same, the specifics of the game are changed each week

so that returning families will discover something new. To further encourage repeat visits, families can earn eight levels of spy certificates by successfully completing the challenges.

“We wanted to start simple and get people engaged. We’re hitting most of our outcomes,” says Dickerson. “More people are coming on Friday,” including member families who are also intrigued by the participatory activities. As the game evolves, Dickerson would like to find ways to promote more interaction among visiting families and would like to break down the language barrier for families who don’t speak English as a first language. One remedy, she notes, might be to have visual images of the game on a wireless computer.

Boston Children’s Museum plans to continue to offer Operation: Spy Challenge activities. It has proven to be a good model to “spread people throughout the building and promote some kind of connection with staff,” says Dickerson. Moreover staff have tested this activity and may incorporate it into the museum’s after-school curriculum.

The museum is still exploring ways to make membership and admissions as affordable as possible. Options might include more flexible membership categories or a “bring a friend” program to encourage visitors to introduce another family to the museum. Staff were able to collect e-mail addresses for Friday night visitors so that they can receive program updates.

“Because we had this grant, we had time to really think about the project and how our efforts fit in with what others in the community are doing,” says Dickerson. “We are getting better at documenting what we are doing and what works as we develop programs for kids and adults. Our goal is to build a structure of belonging.”