

Early Literacy Environments:

CREATING "SPOTS" FOR SMART PLAY



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Minnesota
Children's
Museum
Smart Play

MINNESOTA CHILDREN'S MUSEUM'S PLAYFUL ROLE

Minnesota Children's Museum is a national leader in promoting children's learning through play. Numerous studies have shown that play cultivates early literacy skills, such as creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration, required for success in school and in life. Furthermore, ground-breaking research from the University of Minnesota has shown that after ten minutes of pretend play, children show improved executive function skills. These are the crucial school readiness skills that allow children to sit still, focus, take turns and listen.



Minnesota Children's Museum particularly aims to increase learning opportunities for children who face the greatest educational disparities. We see pretend play and its connections with executive function as a crucial part of enhancing school readiness, particularly among diverse and low-income communities. With funding from the State of Minnesota's Arts and Cultural Heritage fund, Minnesota Children's Museum developed and delivered an *Early Literacy Environments* initiative across the state through two key programs: *Smart Play Spots* and the tour of *Storyland: A Trip Through Childhood Favorites™* exhibit. These

exciting initiatives have not only extended the Museum's reach into cities in nearly every corner of the state, but is offering remote communities a learning experience that support the critical development of early literacy skills.

SMART PLAY SPOTS

Minnesota Children's Museum's *Smart Play Spots* are designed to support each host community in the area of early childhood education and literacy, which is critical to educational attainment and economic vitality. The Museum's goal for *Smart Play Spots* was to develop, produce and install at least six interactive, three-dimensional early literacy-learning environments in libraries and community centers across the state. Due to the overwhelming interest in the project, the Museum was able to leverage Legacy funding to increase the number of sites from six to eleven, partnering with each site to raise matching dollars. These local contributions resulted in deeper engagement and support for the project in each community. *Smart Play Spots*:

- Deliver high quality, innovative early literacy experiences that combine the unique and complementary expertise of museums and libraries for children ages birth through eight and adults;
- Provide accessible and easily customized messaging to promote ways adults can support children's early literacy learning;
- Share knowledge around the critical importance of playful early literacy experiences with the museum and library fields.

Our ambitious plan for *Smart Play Spots* was focused on achieving these **measurable outcomes**:

1. *Smart Play Spots* would be installed in 11 non-museum locations throughout Greater Minnesota.
2. Children and families would experience high quality early literacy environments that provide children with foundational knowledge and skills known to support school readiness.
3. Adults would increase awareness of their critical roles in children's early literacy development.
4. Children and families would increase positive, early literacy focused adult-child interactions.

The Museum developed comprehensive selection criteria when deciding the participating partners for the *Smart Play Spot* project. With an eye towards a comprehensive

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR SMART PLAY SPOTS

Installation of the *Smart Play Spots* throughout Minnesota has helped the Museum realize its goal of elevating the important role of play in early childhood development, with respect to literacy learning skills. Nearly each of the *Spots* chose customization details that celebrate the many parks, rivers, lakes and wildlife found here in Minnesota. Following are the project's main components:

- The **Tree** component offers children a space to read stories with their parents and serves as a puppet theatre where children enhance their narrative and storytelling abilities.
- The **Community Garden** offers a rich environment for role-playing where children sort, classify and count as they “plant and harvest” a variety of different vegetables.
- The **Farmer's Market** is not only a nod to the local farming communities where they are installed, it allows exploration of new words and colors through sorting fruits and vegetables into labeled bins.



- The **Bait Shop** is a small structure that offers unlimited role-playing possibilities as children are transported into a bait shop where they can find all their fishing needs. Children continue their literacy exploration through vocabulary building by exploring an I Spy alphabet game and letter matching touch boxes.



geographic distribution, each site was evaluated and scored on the number of children they served and the number of those in poverty. Additional considerations included:

- Commitment to Ongoing Maintenance Costs
- Free Admission to site
- Number of Children served
- Number of Children in Poverty
- Number Attending Children's Programs
- Weekday Hours
- Square Footage Allotted
- Distance from Minnesota Children's Museum (380m is max distance)
- Organizational Outreach
- Physical Site Requirements
- Staffing
- Organizational Commitment and Engagement
- Fundraising Capacity

Each venue was required to not just highlight their mission alignment with the program and their intended service demographic, they were also encouraged to help demonstrate the community need and support for a *Smart Play Spot*.

Without exception, community response to the environments exceeded Museum expectations. Passionate interest from community funders, library staff and state officials has helped support the project through its rapid expansion into a statewide initiative.

- In the **Boat/Canoe** component, children and adults “sail away” on reading adventures or “motor” around to anywhere their imaginations will take them. The benches in the boat offer a quiet place for children and adults to sit and read together. A magnetic fishing rod serves as a fun letter sorting activity where children can “catch” fish labeled with individual letters and sort them into a cooler labeled with word trunks to build words.
- The **Change out building** is a flexible, “open-ended” building structure designed to accommodate a variety of learning environments depending on the props used. On the outside of the building there is a large removable sign that can be changed by the host library to reflect the current theme. It includes a space for costumes and other props.
- The **Grill and Picnic Table** encourages adults to join in the play as children engage in dramatic play, prepping, cooking, setting the table, and serving food to others. Children boost their speaking and listening abilities as they take orders for the grill and cook up some vegetables and burgers.
- The **Metro Transit-branded Bus or Light Rail Train** invites children to role-play going on a daily commute, becoming the driver, the passenger, or whatever they imagine. The bus or train includes a space for passengers with a built-in container for books to read as they wait for their stop. Children and adults can create a commuter route using a magnetic board on the wall or read a poem



that is printed across the top of the component. On the inside of component, three spinners create a fun interactive for children to practice their storytelling as they create a story about who is on the bus or train and where they are going. This component has also been customized to be a **Steam Engine**, **Bulldozer**, a **Parks Truck**, and a **Public Works Truck**.

- The **Window Mounted Telescope with Mural** offers a peek to the outside world where children can match items they see outside to the mural inside for a full scale *I Spy* matching game.

Finally, additional interactives such as the **Puzzle Crate**, **Block Letter Alphabet** and **Rhyming Boards** were regularly included to round out the early literacy development potential at each *Spot*.

To ensure accessible messaging that invites and promotes ways in which adults can support children’s early literacy learning, each *Spot* includes easy to find, read and understand signage highlighting five simple practices that adults can do to help children get ready to read:

- **Talking** with children is one of the best ways to help them learn new words.
- **Singing** songs is a natural way for children to learn about language. Singing helps children hear the different sounds that make up words.



- **Reading** together is the most important way to help children get ready to read.
- **Writing** and reading go together. Scribbling and writing help children learn that written words represent spoken language.
- **Playing** helps children express themselves and put thoughts into words.

SPOTTING SUCCESS

Following are a few highlights on how each of the eleven *Smart Play Spots* were customized to achieve both the host library and the Museum’s learning objectives.

Grand Rapids, MN - Grand Rapids Area Library Grand Opening: August 22, 2012

Officially kicking off the Legacy-funded *Smart Play Spots* project was the grand opening of the Grand Rapids Area Library’s “Down-By-The-River” themed *Smart Play Spot*. Representatives selected components that serve as a playful extension of the natural vista visible just outside the library’s windows.

Celebrated as one of the *100 Best Small Towns in America*, the city of Grand Rapids boasts a variety of recreational activities that has made this town a favorite vacation destination. Grand Rapids is a booming community that takes great pride in its cultural heritage and future focus. To that end, the librarians of the Grand Rapids Area Library were dedicated to reflecting this hometown pride throughout their *Smart Play Spot*, choosing specific components that, as a whole, captured the outdoor lifestyle of the Grand Rapids community. To honor the library’s beloved “Peter Pan” tree, the librarians required that the *Spot* include the Tree component to offer children a space to read stories with their parents. To help enhance the early literacy learning in a fully three-dimensional exhibit, representatives also chose to include the **Farmer’s Market, Garden, Boat,** and a **Bait Shop**.

The *Spot* also includes a **Nature Eye Spy “Bump Out Wall” mural** outfitted with telescopes for the children to spot local animals and nature scenes. A sound element was added to this wall to provide an audio matching game for children to hear sounds and identify the wildlife found in their community.

Willmar, MN - Willmar Public Library Grand Opening: November 26, 2012

The Willmar Public Library *Smart Play Spot* features a Farming Community theme. Farming is a proud way of life for the Willmar community and children have an instant familiarity with and understanding of farming. The Willmar *Smart Play Spot* began from this understanding, presenting the Museum with the opportunity to design the first barn for a *Smart Play Spot* project. **The Barn** component offers children a space to read stories with their parents and to practice their rhyming skills and build their vocabulary. Also included in this *Spot* are the **Farmer’s Market, a Boat, a Grill and Picnic Table, a Puzzle Crate, Block Letter Alphabet** and **Rhyming Boards**.



One final, unique component of the Willmar Public Library’s *Smart Play Spot* is an inviting reading area known as **Chris’s Corner**. This Willmar-exclusive component was developed in memory of Christine Beyerl, a career librarian and early childhood literacy champion who was passionate about working with young children. With the guidance of the Willmar Public Library, the Museum selected cozy furniture elements in playful colors, offering families a delightful, comfortable, and quiet place to practice reading together.

Maplewood, MN - Ramsey County Library Grand Opening: January 5th, 2013

The Ramsey County Library *Smart Play Spot* in Maplewood was themed as a “City Hub.”

The Maplewood Library is located within a bustling retail center, conveniently accessible for shoppers heading to or from the local mall. Construction of a new public transportation station just outside of the library means that more citizens are now including the Maplewood Library on their daily outings. Though there is much urban growth and expansion in this neighborhood, the library overlooks a small pond that attracts local wildlife throughout the day.



These local elements featured prominently in planning and design for this *Spot*. Library staff was eager to include components that would reflect the new transportation hub and highlight their pond. Additionally, the library staff wanted to honor their proud and robust farming community.

This *Spot* includes the first **Metro Transit-branded Bus** component, made possible due to an exciting partnership with Twin Cities Metro Transit. Through the partnership, Metro Transit has designed graphics that are scaled to size specifically for *Smart Play Spots*. Also included in this site are the **Tree** and **Community Garden, Public Service Building**, and the **Farmer’s Market**, a nod to their farming community in

Maplewood. Finally, the Maplewood staff wanted to highlight their pond, and included the **Window Mounted Telescope** with an *I Spy Mural* where visitors can peek outside and see the pond while also matching items they see to the mural inside.

Prior to the installation of this *Smart Play Spot*, library staff noted that their children’s area was mostly used for “running” or “burning off energy” and other activities not entirely conducive to the learning potential in a library setting. the installation, library patrons continually marvel at the *Smart Play Spot*, indicating how “thrilled” they are to have the *Spot* located within their community.

Rochester, MN - Rochester Public Library Grand Opening: March 16, 2013

The city of Rochester is home to what is widely recognized as one of the largest and most well respected medical facilities in the country, if not the world. The largest city outside of the Twin Cities area, Rochester is rapidly expanding and taking measures to keep pace with growing community needs. From increased and innovative efforts by the public library and its Bookmobile—a large library on wheels using green technology and reaching communities unable to visit the main library—to Mayo Clinic’s initiative titled Destination Medical Community, the city of Rochester is effectively serving its growing population of families with young children.



Over the past few years, Minnesota Children’s Museum has developed a significant presence in Rochester. Beginning in 2011, the Museum formed a partnership with the Children’s Museum of Rochester to create a new children’s museum in this fast-growing city. By spring of 2012, Minnesota Children’s Museum of Rochester launched, quickly becoming an important destination for families. Later that same year, the Museum partnered with the Rochester Public Library to deepen the relationship with the community with a plan to install a *Smart Play Spot* in the main library location.

Owatonna, MN - Owatonna Public Library Grand Opening: April 10, 2013

The Owatonna Public Library *Smart Play Spot* was themed with the “Great Outdoors” and opened to an enthusiastic crowd. For this *Spot*’s customization, many of the exhibit’s messages were translated into Spanish, including the Ready to Read entry sign that highlights the five simple activities parents can engage in with their child to promote early literacy. Also, the library staff chose a local artist to paint a *Smart Play Spot* mural.

In addition to these unique elements, the Owatonna Public Library *Smart Play Spot* is the first to feature a battery-operated audio system used within the **Tree** component, allowing for maximum flexibility when determining layout of the *Spot*. Previous *Spots* required the **Tree** component be located within a short distance of an electrical outlet. Now with the use of a lithium battery, the **Tree** was easily incorporated into the *Spot* to accommodate traffic flow as desired by the library staff. Because the battery is lithium, the **Tree** can be powered up for a full day of highly active use. In an added effort to provide an exhibit environment inspired by nature, the Museum repurposed two benches made from logs that were in the Museum’s warehouse collection and not slated for future use. The team made minor adjustments to the benches to better fit the Owatonna space before installing them.

This *Smart Play Spot* also features the Community Garden, Farmer’s Market, Boat and Puzzle Crate.



Themed as “My Backyard,” the Rochester Public Library *Smart Play Spot* has welcomed many children, families and community leaders. For this *Spot* the Museum customized a **Bookmobile** component as a representation of the Rochester Public Library’s mobile library. In this component, children role-play as the librarian, the driver, the patron, or whatever they imagine, checking out and returning books. Children have a space to sit and read or practice their storytelling as they create a narrative about who is on the bus and where they are going. Also included in this *Smart Play Spot* are the **Community Garden, Farmer’s Market, Canoe, Tree, Post Office** and strategically placed **End Caps** on the bookshelves for additional letter and word learning.



Shakopee, MN - Scott County Library, Shakopee Branch Grand Opening: May 29, 2013

With a theme that honors “Historic Shakopee”, the Scott County Library –Shakopee Branch *Smart Play Spot* opened in May 2013 to the Shakopee community. For the Scott County Library – Shakopee *Smart Play Spot*, the librarians felt very strongly about representing the history of the town.



Historic Shakopee and its Main Street preservation were captured on a two-sided mural, one side depicting the original Train Depot and the second side reflecting the businesses flanking the Main Street of the past. Unique to this *Spot* is the customization of an historic **Steam Engine** component that serves as a dramatic focal point for this installation. The design of the **Steam Engine** is based on actual steam engines from Minnesota’s past and reflects design and colors based on historic research. The “coal car” features space for passengers with a built-in container for books to read as they wait for their stop.

This *Smart Play Spot* also features a **Union Depot**, **Market Street Grocery**, **Lewis Street Tailor Shop**, **Sommerville Street Post Office**, **Change-out building**, **Tree**, **Community Garden**, and **Canoe**. This *Spot* also features words and activities in multiple languages, including Dakota, English, Russian and Spanish. The *Spot*

includes both a painted **Mural** and a Museum-designed **Wallpaper Mural**.

The greatest challenge for this *Spot* was finding a home for all of the components while staying within the modest square footage and budget. The result is a beautiful, historic representation of Shakopee which cleverly encompasses early literacy learning play, offering children many roles that allow self and guided discovery of the environment.

St. Cloud, MN - Great River Regional Library Grand Opening: August 14, 2013

Saint Cloud’s *Smart Play Spot* honors the great Mississippi River that rolls through the heart of St. Cloud. The *Spot* in the Great River Regional Library opened to the public in early June 2013.

Overlooking the entire *Smart Play Spot* is a hand-painted mural capturing the rolling Mississippi river as children and families may see it during their daily routine. Small animals dot the landscape in the mural, encouraging children and adults to use the animals to talk about the animals they see in their daily lives. A special design for this *Spot* was the customization of the **Stearns County Park Truck** which offers children an opportunity to explore their love of books as they sit on the reading bench or spell out words at the “spin a word” interactive. As with the branded Metro Transit bus and light rail, Museum staff worked directly with the Stearns County Park department to obtain full branding permission to design and paint this truck component.

Also included in this *Smart Play Spot* are the **Tree**, **Community Garden**, **Farmer’s Market**, **Bookworm Bait Shop**, **Grill and Picnic Table** and the **Puzzle Crate**.

White Earth Nation, MN - White Earth Child Care/ Early Childhood Program Grand Opening: August 14, 2013

For the White Earth *Smart Play Spot*, conversations about what to include and how to customize began early in the project timeline, and extended out toward the latter half of the project. Initially slated for a spring 2013 launch, White Earth community leaders and Museum staff were eager to customize their *Smart Play Spot* to be culturally sensitive and inclusive. In addition, the community leaders wanted to use the *Smart Play Spot* as a tool for teaching and preserving their native Ojibwe language. To ensure this level of

customization was done accurately, the Museum moved the installation date of the *Spot* to occur in the latter part of the overarching project timeline.

Of the two uniquely customized components for this *Smart Play Spot*, the **Wigwam** serves as a cozy component inspired by authentic Ojibwe wigwams. Framed by a steel structure that is wrapped with a customized birch bark print fabric approved by the Nation, the **Wigwam** is home to reading and storytelling, important activities that both reflect Ojibwe culture and are a natural fit for early literacy play. On the outside of the **Wigwam** a small fire pit (complete with pots and pans) encourages children to use their imaginations as they prepare food. On the inside of the **Wigwam** a small bookshelf holds many storybooks, and on the floor are comfy fabrics that look like animal furs.

A **Canoe** sits nestled in front of a hand-painted mural inspired by an important lake on the reservation used for fishing and harvesting wild rice. The **Canoe** serves as a great way for children to role-play as adventurous anglers; testing their storytelling and imagination skills as they “paddle” to any magical destination. While other *Smart Play Spots* have included the **Canoe** component, the Museum collaborated with the White Earth nation to develop a ricing activity that will be programmed during harvest season, reflecting the rice harvesting tradition still observed by the native people today. Special props such as winnowing baskets were created by artists from White Earth.

This *Spot* also features the **Farmer’s Market, Tree, Community Garden, Puzzle Crate** and **Bulldozer** with a **Construction Mural**.



Due to a focus on preserving the Ojibwe language, this *Smart Play Spot* includes a nearly full translation, and features Ojibwe as the primary language in the *Spot*. Children coming to this *Smart Play Spot* will see the Ojibwe language featured first and English presented as the second language. In addition, this *Spot* incorporates Ojibwe audio in the **Tree** component. The Museum worked with University of Minnesota Associate Professor, Mary Hermes, to translate English into Ojibwe and to record the audio for the *Spot*. Professor Hermes composed original lyrics in Ojibwe to accompany the **Bulldozer** component that staff can use as an add-on piece when appropriate.

Fridley, MN - Anoka County Library, Mississippi Branch Grand Opening: September 21, 2013

This *Smart Play Spot* features a “City Park” theme that honors the large courtyard garden at the Anoka County Library —Mississippi Branch in Fridley. This courtyard garden provides children and adults the opportunity to observe nature through the window or step outside to enjoy the benches to sit and read.



Due to the size of the children's space in the Anoka County library, Museum staff worked with library staff to rearrange the space to make room for the *Spot*. This allowed the Museum staff to better position the early literacy learning components within a cozy corner of the library. In addition, the library requested that the computer stand located within this section remain. The Museum staff customized a tree-like kiosk hard-wired for the computer that would blend with the urban park themes. While featured in other installations, this *Spot* includes the **Metro Transit-branded Bus**, featuring the iconic locations the bus might stop in this community: fire station, post office, grocery store, the Mississippi Library and Fridley's own Moore Lake Park. This *Smart Play Spot* also includes the **Tree, Community Garden, Farmer's Market, Grill and Picnic Table**, and the **Puzzle Crate**.

Overlooking the entire *Spot* is a mural of Fridley's Moore Lake and the Minneapolis Skyline, painted by a Museum staff member who grew up in Fridley and regularly visited the Mississippi Branch as a child. This *Spot* also features words and activities in multiple languages, including English, Arabic and Spanish.

Woodbury, MN - Washington County Public Library, R.H. Stafford Branch **Grand Opening: October 12, 2013**

Over the course of a year, the Museum collaborated on the customization of this *Smart Play Spot* to reflect the community living within the library's service area. Tucked into an inviting nook of the library with tall glass windows and plenty of natural light, this *Smart Play Spot* is themed to "Celebrate Parks and the Great Outdoors."

The R.H. Stafford Branch of the Washington County Public Library is nestled within a highly active community hub. Sharing the walls of the library include the local YMCA, a theatre stage, and a large climber, all surrounding an indoor park theme. The Library staff wanted to build off this communal environment and chose elements for their site that celebrated the great outdoors. Overlooking the entire *Spot* is a hand-painted mural of an outdoor lake and park. The three-sided **Natural Resources Park Building** combines early literacy learning with exploration of the natural world. Through fun interactives and role-playing, children expand their vocabulary and storytelling ability as they explore nature from bugs to birds. The **Community Board Frames** hold familiar maps of Washington County parks.

This *Spot* also includes the **Boat, Tree, Community Garden, Farmer's Market, Grill and Picnic Table** and the **Puzzle Crate**.



Richfield, MN – Hennepin County Library–Augsburg Park Library **Grand Opening: October 26, 2013**

The Hennepin County Library -Augsburg Park Library *Smart Play Spot* in Richfield was themed to reflect a "City Park" and was customized with the help of the branch librarians. The community of Richfield takes great pride in their city, tucked in close to the Minneapolis –St. Paul International Airport. With a name derived from the rich farmlands that once sprawled south of the Minneapolis city limits, Richfield maintains a small-town feel and is now home to over 35,000 people. The Augsburg Park librarians wanted to celebrate this hometown feel by customizing their *Smart Play Spot* to reflect Richfield pride and diversity.

Working with the Museum, the librarians developed a process to conduct extensive community engagement to ensure their *Smart Play Spot* would truly reflect the ethnic diversity of Richfield, the pride that residents of Richfield feel for their city, and the importance that real places have for residents. The library staff asked their patrons and community members to reflect on "what is at the heart of

Richfield, what does early learning mean to you, and how can we represent Richfield in this new space?" After reviewing community responses, the library staff determined their component selections following three questions as a theme, "where are you going, how are you getting there, and what do you see?"

Unique to this *Smart Play Spot* is a **Public Works Vehicle**, officially branded through a partnership with the Richfield Public Works Department. Children can move the steering wheel and pretend they are in control of taking care of the streets. A small panel of moveable magnetic gears brings science fun into this component. Highlighting real places in Richfield was instrumental in achieving the librarians goals for this *Spot*, which includes a cleverly designed **Crossroads/Directional sign** with whimsical arrows that point to real places including: Veterans Park 1.2 miles, Airport 5.68 miles, Wood Lake Nature Center 1.1 miles, and Heredia, Costa Rica (sister city) 3,480 miles.

As previously reported to the State, the Brainerd Public Library was initially selected as one of the sites for a *Smart Play Spot*. Initial planning work and site visits were conducted with the library to determine the needs for their *Spot* and space specifications. Immediately following, the library staff determined that there was a greater need for capital improvements of their library, including a much needed roof repair. Due to this, the Brainerd Public Library opted out of the *Smart Play Spot* project.



TRAINING

In addition to the installation of the three-dimensional learning environments at 11 libraries and community centers across the state, the *Smart Play Spot* project included a training component for the librarians and community center leaders on how to engage visitors with their *Spot*. Training then focused on librarian input, helping them to understand the optimum methods to engage children and adults in the *Spots* and how to connect the experiences to the learning. Specifically, training focused on:

1. An introduction to play and the Museum's approach to playful learning
2. Ways to engage staff in play, from easy interactions with visitors to more in depth experiences
3. Adult engagement.

Each site had their own specific needs for engaging the library staff and the community and Museum staff responded to that by tailoring the training to focus on those needs. One unique training element that surfaced for each site was addressing the increase of the noise. The success of *Smart Play Spots* is how they engage children in play and learning, which sometimes results in a noise level that may be challenging for some patrons and librarians. To that end, the Museum has helped focus training on why the *Smart Play Spots* are important so staff is more enthusiastic and supportive of the learning environment when explaining the new volume level in the children's area to library patrons.



LESSONS LEARNED

The Museum has engaged the University of Minnesota's Center for Early Education and Development to conduct a thorough evaluation of the *Smart Play Spot* project. Results of the evaluation will be completed early in 2014. While those results have yet to be learned, several lessons learned are noteworthy.



In addition to creating and maintaining the exhibits in the Museum's downtown St. Paul location, Minnesota Children's Museum is the nation's leading producer of traveling exhibits for children's museums. Museum staff leveraged existing expertise in a new way, to design, fabricate and install small Museum-quality environments in libraries across the state.

As the project progressed, Museum staff continually improved the process, with an eye to minimizing construction impact at each site. At the beginning of the *Smart Play Spot* project, it was not uncommon for the installation to take one to two weeks to complete. By the end of the project to date, installations took just a single day.

Following are process improvements realized throughout the project which enabled the Museum to deliver 11 Legacy-funded sites across Minnesota:

- **Technology and meetings** – Initial introductory meetings were hosted at each site in order to get an understanding of space dimensions and traffic flow, which helped to determine the overall design of each *Spot*. Follow up meetings for sites located an hour or more outside of the Saint Paul area were conducted via Skype, reducing travel time, and allowing more time to be dedicated toward design and production.
- **Catalog** – The Museum developed a changing catalogue of *Smart Play Spot* components that was taken to each site for the initial design conversation. As the *Smart Play Spot* project progressed, staff was able to utilize this document to quickly select components, highlighting to the librarians and community leaders what worked best independently and what components worked best with others. The catalogue now serves as a guide for generating a high-functioning three-dimensional early literacy-learning environment.



- **Pre-staging all *Smart Play Spots*** – During the assembly of the first *Spots* necessary tweaks and adjustments required special attention, extending the installation timeline. Generally when exhibits are produced and installed at the Museum, exhibit staff have access to a fully equipped, on-site shop. During off-site installations of *Spots*, resources necessary for adjustments are not always

available. Early in the overarching project, the Museum transitioned to pre-staging all *Spots* onsite in order to see how the exhibit would look at the location. This gave the team flexibility to make adjustments and modifications in-house with resources on hand. This single change in the installation process shortened the installation time from one to two weeks at the beginning down to one to two days, greatly minimizing the disruption of construction for the libraries and community centers.

- **Backend Efficiencies** – Over the course of the project, the Museum developed processes that were instrumental in keeping within budget and on time. These included budget-tracking check-ins that ensured expenditures were occurring on time. In addition, the Museum developed a process for tracking staff time that has been implemented within other projects.

SMART PLAY SPOT PARTNERS

The *Smart Play Spot* project served as a collaborative project between Minnesota Children’s Museum, public library systems and community centers throughout the state. Our goal was to not just partner with but also create a model of museum-library partnership to accomplish shared goals around early literacy. This collaborative partnership built on the early literacy strengths of the librarians and the Museum staff while delivering community themed, three-dimensional early literacy learning environments. In fact, a successful customization of each *Spot* was dependent on the librarians and community leaders.

Funding from the State of Minnesota through the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund provided the Museum the opportunity to deliver this program to six *Spots* throughout the state. However, the Museum realized that by leveraging funding and seeking matching support in each of the communities where the *Smart Play Spots* would be installed, we could increase the amount of installations. Working with the partner librarians and community leaders and providing fundraising leadership for the individual *Spots*, the Museum was able to make meaningful relationships with funding partners that resulted in 54 funders throughout the state providing financial support to this program. Following is a list of those passionate community members, foundations and companies who made this project a success:

Rachel Anderson
 Bernick Family Foundation
 Blaine – Ham Lake Rotary

The Blandin Foundation
 Burlington Northern Santa Fe Foundation
 City of Maplewood
 Fridley Lions
 Friends of the Anoka Library
 Friends of the Augsburg Park Library
 Friends of the Grand Rapids Area Library
 Friends of the Hennepin County Library
 Friends of the Ramsey County Libraries
 Friends of the Rochester Public Library
 The Grotto Foundation
 In memory of Joan and Vince Bartell
 Initiative Foundation
 Jennie-O Turkey Store
 Maguire Agency
 Maplewood North Lions
 Maplewood Toyota
 Metropolitan State University
 Midwest Minnesota Community Development Corporation
 Minnesota Library Foundation
 Morgan Family Foundation



North Ramsey 500 Lions Club
 Northland Foundation
 Owatonna Public Library Foundation
 Pablo's Restaurant
 Paragon Bank
 The S.F. Perkins Fund of the Minneapolis Foundation
 Rahr Malting Company
 Sam's Club
 Scott County Library System
 Jim & Yvonne Sexton Family Foundation
 Shakopee Friends of the Library
 Shakopee Heritage Society
 Shakopee Jaycees
 Shakopee Lions
 Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community
 Shakopee Public Utilities
 Shakopee Rotary Club
 Southwest Initiative Foundation
 Spring Lake Park Lions
 St. Cloud Friends of the Library
 Target Stores
 United Way of West Central Minnesota/Empower: Women
 United in Philanthropy
 Washington County
 West Central Initiative

STORYLAND: A TRIP THROUGH CHILDHOOD FAVORITES TOUR

Beginning in the fall of 2009, Legacy funding supported the production and tour of *Storyland: A Trip through Childhood Favorites*, an exciting new early literacy exhibit designed to enhance child and adult engagement around the development of literacy skills. Touring to communities throughout the state, *Storyland* is impacting children and families by offering a special, high-quality learning experience.



Storyland: A Trip through Childhood Favorites immerses visitors in the world of three beloved picture books. From the gardens of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* to the urban snowscape of *The Snowy Day* and the curious home of *Spot*, the exhibit immerses children from birth through 8 years old and their adult caregivers in literacy adventures. With text presented in English and Spanish, *Storyland* provides practical tools for cultivating literacy through everyday activities while helping young visitors form a love of reading. Legacy funding is currently supporting the second leg of its regional tour, reaching six cities throughout Greater Minnesota.

Measurable outcomes **for *Storyland*** are as follows:

1. *Storyland: A Trip through Childhood Favorites* will tour to at least three sites throughout Greater Minnesota.
2. *Storyland* will catalyze children's development of a disposition to read.



3. Adults will increase awareness that literacy development begins in **infancy** and continues through childhood.
4. Adults will increase awareness of their key role in cultivating literacy through everyday activities.

Storyland transforms picture book illustrations into three-dimensional play and learning environments that highlight the six major literacy development areas (as originally defined by the Public Library Association and Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association): print motivation, print awareness, letter knowledge, sound awareness, vocabulary, and narrative skills and comprehension. Legacy support from the State of Minnesota was used for the second leg of the *Storyland* exhibit tour. For this granting period, the exhibit toured to the following sites:

White Earth Tribal Council

Ogema, MN
 Opened February 2013

Becker County Historical Society

Detroit Lakes, MN
 Opened April 2013

Minnesota Children's Museum - Rochester

Rochester, MN
 Opened June 2013

Lake Agassiz Regional Library

Moorhead, MN
 Opened October 2013

Upcoming

Marshall County Early Childhood Initiative

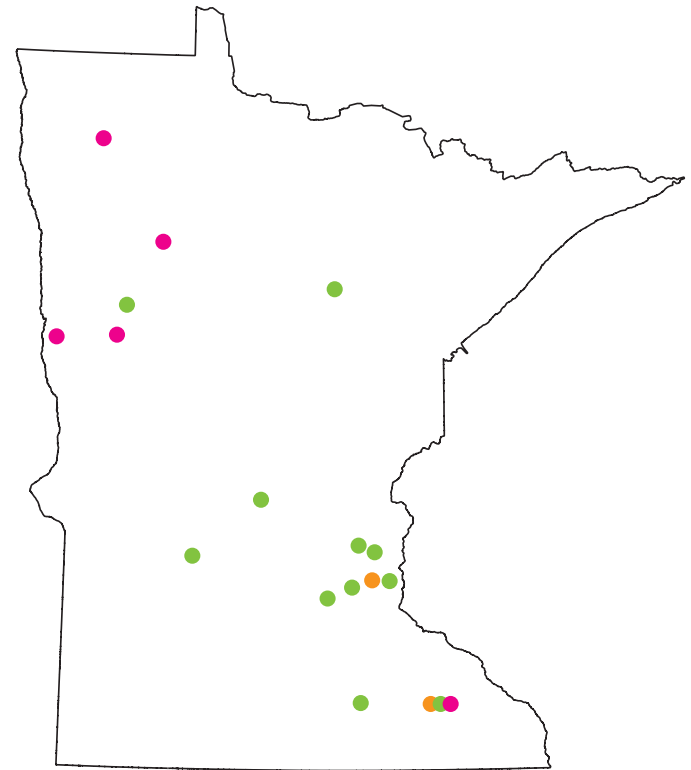
Thief River Falls, MN
 Opening February 2014

Based on early findings of a formal evaluation, *Storyland* has successfully demonstrated support in the growth in cognitive activity, especially around concepts identified as format (book layout, design, or parts) and reading (the act of). In addition, the evaluation documented adults' changed perception of the critical role they play in their child's early literacy learning, and successfully provided adults with basic literacy learning ideas and activities they could integrate or emphasis in their day-to-day lives. Finally, a follow up survey given to adults after visiting *Storyland* seemed to indicate that the exhibit has staying power with nearly all of the respondents saying that the exhibit sparked conversations on their way home, with half

indicating those conversations with their children continued throughout the days immediately following their visit.

The Museum is confident that this exhibit will continue to serve Minnesota communities as a valuable literacy learning resource for the remainder of its tour.

Community Reach for this Grant



- Museums
- Smart Play Spots
- Storyland Tour

THANK YOU!

Minnesota Children's Museum and our Early Literacy Environments initiative has been enthusiastically received throughout the state, as witnessed by strong attendance to the *Smart Play Spots* and the *Storyland* tour as well as by the project partners, funding community and, most importantly, children and families. This *Early Literacy Environments* initiative would not have been possible without the State of Minnesota and funding through the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund resulting from the Clean Water, Land and Legacy amendment. **Thank you!**

Minnesota
Children's
Museum
Smart Play

10 West Seventh Street, St. Paul, MN 55102
651-225-6000 • MCM.org

Mission

Sparking children's learning through play

Foundational Beliefs

Early learning is the foundation for lifelong learning.

Families are our children's first teachers.

All children deserve a time and place to be children.

Diverse perspectives enrich children's lives.

Playing is learning.