

# Museums in a Pandemic: School & University Collaborations

June 30, 2021

The ACM Trends Report team has continued to study the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s museums. To understand these impacts, we conducted multiple surveys: the first in May 2020, the second from September 24 to October 18, 2020, and a third in spring 2021. The Museums in a Pandemic series of Trends Reports illustrates the ways children’s museums have adapted to the evolving national and local situations surrounding the pandemic. For this Trends Report, we also feature a story from an ACM member outside of the US.

In the fall 2020 survey, 81 museums reported starting new collaborations or expanding existing collaborations since the beginning of the pandemic, while 15 museums reported no new or expanded collaborations. Those with collaborations started an average of two or three collaborative activities during the pandemic. This Trends Report will focus on collaborations with **schools and universities**.

This is the third of three Trends Reports that will tell the story of how children’s museums have undertaken collaborative work during a time of crisis. These three reports are also part of Museums Mobilize, an initiative of the Association of Children’s Museums that documents COVID-specific responses and innovations by children’s museums.

ACM TRENDS

#4.11

## ACM Trends #4.11

We asked museums about whether they had expanded existing collaborations or initiated new collaborations with different types of organizations during the pandemic. Out of 96 museums, 55 museums (57%) reported collaborations with local K-12 schools or school districts, and universities or institutions of higher learning. We also asked participants about the goals for their expanded or new collaborations. Partnerships with schools and universities most likely focused on the goal of developing content and programs (Figure 1).

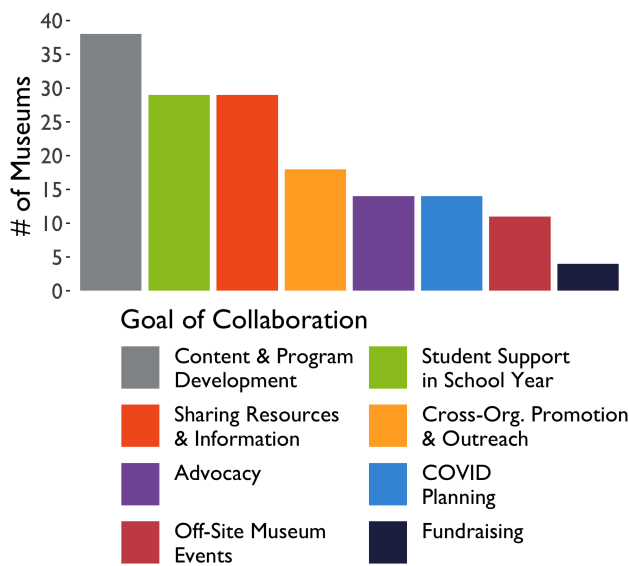


Figure 1. Goal of children’s museums’ collaborations with schools and universities.

Unsurprisingly, that goal was followed by providing student support in the school year, as well as the

objective of sharing resources and information. Cross-organization promotion and outreach was the next most common goal. Fundraising was the least common goal for museums in their collaborations with schools and universities.

What follows are short accounts from three children’s museums about specific collaborations they developed with schools and universities.

### Celebrating Diverse Learners at The DoSeum

The DoSeum, located in San Antonio, TX, collaborated with Celebrate Dyslexia on *Beautiful Minds: Dyslexia and the Creative Advantage*, an exhibition initiative that celebrated different ways of learning. The collaboration was funded by Celebrate Dyslexia, the City of San Antonio Department of Arts & Culture, and the Elizabeth Huth Coates Charitable Foundation.

The museum’s presentation of the exhibition opened in October 2020 and ended in March 2021. The exhibition’s objective was to illustrate and celebrate the uniqueness of every learner, and to correct popular misconceptions about people who learn differently. It also honored and celebrated learners with diverse strengths. The exhibition offers a variety of spatial and word games, including an oversized tile spelling game, color block puzzles, and digital interactive educational games for children of all ages and their families.

The goals of the collaboration, which began before the pandemic, remained the same throughout the project. But the partners adjusted conditions for the pandemic, particularly for the interactive aspects. Specifically, the team integrated motion sensor-enabled interactivity in activities that had traditionally relied solely on touch. To promote social distancing, the museum installed sound domes that feature stories of role models with dyslexia who live in the San Antonio region.

As part of the Beautiful Minds initiative, the museum unveiled an installation by its Artist-in-Residence, called *The Reading Brain*. This component was designed to immerse children and their families in the inner workings of the brain during reading, through a multi-sensory, data-driven interactive. In the gallery, a sensor detected the

## ACM Trends Reports

The Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) is the world’s foremost professional member service organization for the children’s museum field. We leverage the collective knowledge of children’s museums through convening, sharing, and dissemination. ACM has partnered with Knology to create the ACM Trends Reports. Knology is a nonprofit that produces practical social science for a better world.

ACM Trends Reports are commissioned on behalf of our membership to help advance the work of this community. They seek to draw attention to emerging issues and opportunities for elevating the field, and help our members use data to become more accountable to their mission and fiscal responsibilities. A product of collaborative efforts to collect data, the Trends Reports are an effort to support ongoing, accessible dialogue. Our objective is for this approach to be an equitable and inclusive way for museum professionals to contextualize our work and use data to produce effective outcomes.

movements of guests, and then translated that movement to changing patterns and colors in LED orbs hanging from the ceiling. The installation vividly demonstrated how the brain responds to stimuli, in a way that also enabled guests to socially distance.

The museum reported that Beautiful Minds drew a great deal of interest from educators and caregivers. Teachers visited the exhibition as part of their professional development. As part of the exhibition, Celebrate Dyslexia led a training for participants in City Year, a local service-learning organization, on the experience of dyslexic learners. Other trainees and participants included educators from Southwest Independent School District in San Antonio. For children, the exhibition provided active experiences that both recognize and celebrate neurodiversity.

Commenting on the importance of supporting the different ways that people learn, leaders from the museum noted, *“With advancements in the learning sciences, it is important to adapt the ways we engage children, caregivers, and educators in public, interactive experiences of STEM, literacy, numeracy, and the arts. Informal learning environments like museums have unique potentials to involve others in emerging tools and models, to inspire and inform stakeholders, and ideally build confidence and curiosity to ultimately foster positive youth development.”*

### **Supporting Student Success at the Children’s Museum of Richmond**

The Children’s Museum of Richmond, located in Richmond, VA, is collaborating with YMCA of Greater Richmond on the *YMCA Success Center Enrichment Program*. Funding for the partnership is provided in part by the YMCA of Greater Richmond.

The program, launched during the pandemic, provides enrichment to K-4 students participating in YMCA site support for virtual schooling. The program brings in different partners to provide virtual programming after the formal school day finishes for students attending school virtually from YMCA sites. This ensures that children are able to learn in an engaging and fun way in an out-of-school setting. From Monday through Thursday, museum educators provide various activities for two one-

hour sessions each day that include movement, a mini-lesson with a literacy element, and a hands-on activity. These activities complement the learning that takes place during the school day.

The museum specifically serves students in schools in the City of Richmond and Henrico County, VA. In addition, the YMCA also serves students in Goochland County, VA. Museum leadership called attention to the benefits of the program during the pandemic. Taking place in-person at the YMCA sites, children and their families had access to more interactive and responsive learning opportunities during a time when most education was provided virtually. *“Our educators have learned to be nimble, adapt programming for different age groups, and respond to the changing group dynamics. This adaptive skillset is a boon as our education team learns new strategies and gains a deeper knowledge of student needs as they provide more intensive programming and revisit group sites over the school year.”* Museum leaders also noted that the knowledge they have gained through this partnership will enhance their traditional program offerings.

### **Providing Education and Social Services to Families at Play Africa**

Play Africa, a children’s museum located in Johannesburg, South Africa, is collaborating with schools and several early childhood development centers and community groups on an initiative called *Heal and Connect*. The program is supported by funding from the Government of Canada, through the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives.

Working with local schools and community groups, Play Africa brings parents together through virtual support groups with professional social workers. The museum also reaches out to families with one-on-one phone calls as “Psychological First Aid,” to offer encouragement, information, and links to services in emergency settings.

Through the program, families are supported with educational resources and play-based learning materials for their children. These materials free families to focus on healing, connecting, and cultivating resilience. At the time of reporting, the museum provided resources and information to 5,520 parents and caregivers through this program.

A total of 338 parents have received direct psychological first aid from Play Africa, and 667 children have received play parcels with a range of resources. A total of 680 parents have attended at least one of 15 in-person or virtual parent support groups hosted by Play Africa.

Discussing the value of the program, museum leadership highlighted the fact that since its launch, they have expanded their programming to support 46 schools, daycare centers, nursery schools, and community groups in new areas of Johannesburg and Soweto. These services support vulnerable children and families, including children with disabilities, children who are refugees, asylum seekers or recent immigrants and their families, and children experiencing housing insecurity.

Reflecting on their service audience strategy, the museum explained, *“Play helps children make sense of the world, process complicated feelings, and build relationships with others. In this program, we focused on outreach to eight organizations representing children and parents that we felt would most likely be excluded from other crises responses.”* Programs led by Play Africa and other children’s museums across the world are offering critical assistance to communities that have been hard hit by the pandemic.

## The Takeaway

Children’s museums’ partnerships with educational institutions are not unique to the COVID-19 pandemic. But the collaborative activities with schools that emerged in 2020 point to fresh and innovative conceptions of museums’ service to students, school communities, and the education field. As we’ve seen in this Trends Report, many of these partnerships are centered on developing new programs or rethinking projects already in place. In some of these cases, museums drew school audiences to their own facilities for learning experiences. Other

institutions have gone to schools and out-of-school providers’ campuses to work with students and educators. Still others have invested in a mix of these approaches. Across all of these education support initiatives, children’s museums have proven to be adaptable and in tune with the needs of their communities. Importantly, museums have defined *community* broadly, with offerings designed for students, families and caretakers, and teachers. These projects have also extended to university students in training to be educators in child development. We saw an example of this in ACM Trends Report #4.8, which explored museums collaborating with social and health services.

Museum leaders should continue to ask and reflect on how they can support students, educators, and schools. What works well now will likely evolve as communities navigate the changing landscape of education models, public health protocols, and learning needs. In this context, new opportunities for partnerships may also become available.

## About This Research

Some of the data used in this report came from an online survey that ACM sent to US-based children’s museums. Overall, 96 museums responded to at least part of the survey. A subset of museums that indicated they had new or expanded partnerships received an additional set of questions that asked for more information about collaborations with schools and universities that they formed or expanded during the pandemic.

Started in 1962, the Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) is the world’s foremost professional member service organization for the children’s museum field. With more than 460 members in 50 states and 19 countries, we leverage the collective knowledge of children’s museums through convening, sharing, and dissemination.

Knology is a nonprofit that produces practical social science for a better world. Since 2012, the collective of scientists, writers, and educators has been dedicated to studying and untangling complex social issues.



This study was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

ACM Trends #4.11 by Knology is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND)



Knology Publication #IML.145.568.11

Recommended Citation:

Thomas, U.G., Field, S., Flinner, K., Voiklis, J., & ACM Staff (2021). *Museums in a Pandemic: School & University Collaborations*. ACM Trends 4(11). Knology & Association of Children’s Museums.