

New Science Center Investments Ensure Kids 'Play With Purpose'

July 8, 2016

There's an unexpected item decorating the desk of Kentucky Science Center Executive Director Joanna Haas: a box of wooden blocks.

According to Haas, staff play with them throughout most of their meetings. It's fitting, considering the museum's ongoing initiative to encourage free play with loose parts.

It's a focus that underpins a recent \$300,000 investment in the museum's "Science in Play" program — a progressive "play learning" initiative built to encourage children to experiment with materials that can be reimagined in countless ways.

Since opening in 2015, Science in Play has welcomed more than 200,000 visitors.

"The beautiful part of loose parts play in my point of view is that it is precisely the kind of play environment that fosters the 21st century skills everyone is talking about," Haas says. "Things like problem-solving, collaboration and creativity."

A recent survey of more than 250 respondents shows that the exhibits are working.

According to the Science Center, 77 percent of parents surveyed said Science in Play aids in solidifying those 21st century skills, while 82 percent noticed improvement in their children's critical thinking. Additionally, more than 40 percent of families reported that they have returned to Science in Play multiple times over the last year — far outstripping previous family visitation trends.

Haas says the two main grants, which were provided by PNC and Genentech, will go toward expanding the museum's current loose parts play offerings and starting Science in Play 2Go, a mobile version of the activities that will be offered at state libraries.

"When we first opened the Science in Play permanent gallery, we had a dream that we might eventually be able to replicate its inspirational design in a format that could be transported to communities across the state, reaching more children and families with early learning experiences," Haas says.

But perhaps the most anticipated addition to the Science Center was made possible through a grant from the Louisville Water Foundation: the water table. The loose parts play continues there — with ping pong balls, pipes and steam-operated gears.

Haas says it's one more way to ensure that Kentucky kids are "playing with a purpose."