



Museums for America

Sample Application MA-10-19-0684-19
Project Category: Lifelong Learning

Amazement Square

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$139,946
Amount of cost share:	\$142,450

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Abstract
- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

Please note that the instructions for preparing applications for the FY2020 National Leadership Grants for Museums program differ from those that guided the preparation of FY2019 applications. Be sure to use the instructions in the [FY2020 Notice of Funding Opportunity](#) for the grant program and project category to which you are applying.

Amazement Square respectfully requests funding from IMLS to address a local and nation-wide concern for access to quality early learning experiences for children of economically disadvantaged backgrounds. A high poverty rate in Central Virginia contributes to the prevalence of under-resourced early learning centers that have little ability to hire professional teachers or provide quality learning materials for their students. The result is that many students in our region are entering kindergarten without a solid foundation for learning.

Amazement Square has been working in partnership with early learning centers for at-risk children throughout the Lynchburg area for over 10 years to address an important community need for high quality learning. Beginning in early 2016, Amazement Square formed a partnership with Virginia Early Learning Foundation's Smart Beginnings and Virginia Quality Rating and Improvement System that allowed our organizations to combine our expertise and resources to deliver a comprehensive program to at-risk early learning centers in Central Virginia. The program, *Amazing Children, Smart Beginnings*, worked with 3 pilot centers, providing classroom structure and a social-emotional curriculum to students; supporting emerging teachers through modeling, mentoring, and professional development; and incorporating center directors who often have little awareness of best practices in the field and struggle with high staff turnover.

A shift in our focus from only student instruction to providing teachers with comprehensive early childhood instructional support was the result of observations made during the pilot program. We plan to double the *Amazing Children, Smart Beginnings* program to include 6 at-risk early learning centers, each of which will receive intensive mentoring over a 2 year period. The goal of this program is to provide the support needed to make accreditation possible for childcare facilities in our region by increasing teacher understanding of different early childhood pedagogies, social-emotional learning, and stages of cognitive development through modeling, paid professional development trainings, and through the acquisition of appropriate learning materials for each center. By expanding the program to 6 additional centers over a 2-year period, Amazement Square will be able to create a comprehensive template that can be shared and implemented within other early learning centers around the region, expanding the program beyond the individual centers the museum is able to physically visit.

The partnership benefits from comprehensive evaluation encompassing state-mandated assessment strategies employed by Virginia Quality and widely-recognized student and emerging teacher-centric evaluation performed by Amazement Square and Virginia Quality. Results of the project will be shared with the Smart Beginnings network in Virginia, and by extension, the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation. Program procedures and results will be compiled in a final report and presented with the aim of creating an approach that is replicable for other informal learning institutions in Virginia. By creating a comprehensive program template, Amazement Square will be able to continue reaching other early learning centers in the region and throughout Virginia, helping to improve access to quality early learning experiences. Through the *Amazing Children, Smart Beginnings* collaborative effort, Amazement Square will be offering a solution to address a deficiency in underserved early learning centers in our region.

Project Justification

In the community that Amazement Square serves, 1 in 3 children under the age of 6 in Lynchburg¹ and approximately 1 in 4 children in the surrounding counties² live in poverty. Because of income challenges at home, families often rely on non-accredited childcare facilities that, due to poorly qualified staff, are ill-equipped to provide adequate academic foundational skills and social emotional guidance.³ These centers are in desperate need of support to build a strong teacher workforce with a meaningful learning curriculum designed to develop critical and lasting foundational social and academic skills.⁴

As a community catalyst in the central Virginia, Amazement Square is in a unique position to help transform underserved early learning facilities through the expansion of a successful pilot program: *Amazing Children, Smart Beginnings*. This transformation is aimed at providing the support needed to make accreditation possible for childcare facilities in our region by providing their facilitators the professional development and support they need to improve the lives of the children in their care.

Since the museum's inception in 2001, early learning has been an integral part of our strategic plan and continues to be a top priority. Amazement Square has been working in partnership with early learning centers for at-risk children throughout the Lynchburg area for over 10 years to address an important community need for high quality early learning. Our ever strengthening relationships with these entities have allowed the museum to gain better insight into the communities and centers most in need of high quality early learning programs. We have worked within the local school system, with the YMCA, Boys and Girls Club, Parks and Recreation, as well as private childcare centers that serve at-risk children. The goal of our programs has been to introduce the concept(s) of child-directed, hands on, and experiential learning to children; but in working regularly with student groups, we have also formed relationships with center staff and administrators. Over the years, we found that the combination of enrichment activities, positive facilitator/child interactions, and modeling of developmentally appropriate practices has been as beneficial for the teachers as it has for the children. Our programs have been well received, positively influencing the teaching practices of the centers we visit.

The initial focus of our work with at-risk early learning centers was kindergarten readiness. However, we found that we needed to direct as much effort to childcare staff, who often come from and live in the same at-risk environments as the children they serve and are poorly equipped, undercompensated, and undereducated. Over the years, we found that our programs, delivered to children, were serving as an informal and even joyful staff development, playing a transformative role in shifting the paradigm from babysitter to learning facilitator. This new knowledge has guided our planning and has become the focus of our program expansion.

A key early learning partnership for the museum has been our nearly 10 year relationship with Hutcherson Early Learning Center (HELC). A Lynchburg City Schools entity, HELC serves at-risk and special needs pre-K students. When the school was closed in 2010 due to state funding cuts, the museum advocated for the school's reopening in 2013. Amazement Square's educational partnership

¹ Smart Beginnings Statistics, 2014: http://media.wix.com/ugd/ecbdc8_e5a6c33d7dd44c378d7e24e43e572bb1.pdf

² Smart Beginnings Statistics, Region 2000, 2018: [Campbell County](#), [Bedford County](#), [Amherst County](#), [Appomattox County](#)

³ Washington Post. October 6, 2015: The Staggering Cost of Daycare When You Make Only Minimum Wage

⁴ Dodge et al. "North Carolina's Early Childhood Programs and Policies on Educational Outcomes in Elementary School." Nov. 17, 2016: *Child Development*.

role was focused on introducing at-risk students to the world, bringing topics to life through hands-on learning. For example, the school's "life on the farm" curriculum unit was supplemented with a museum-led petting zoo and learning garden. The children had been studying animals in the theoretical sense but had never been exposed to real animals. The excitement and captivation displayed by the children was apparent and teachers reported that children referenced their experiences for the remainder of the school year and displayed greater memory recall of the unit information as a result of their experience. We continue this partnership with HELC as a comparative base for our work with other centers. In HELC's case, we are working at a public school with trained teachers, but we have noticed that both teachers and curriculum benefit from the platform of creativity the museum interjected into planning meetings.

Amazement Square has also partnered with other at-risk daycares in the community for the last 9 years. One of those partnerships was with a church-based, Social Services supported child care center, Dominion Kidz since 2012. The center, located in a high poverty, high crime neighborhood was selected because of its location in an extremely at-risk environment within a 2 mile radius of the museum as well as the center director's strong drive to improve her center. Her desire was for the children in the neighborhood to begin school with the same foundational skills as their peers. In our initial observation sessions, it was clear that Dominion Kidz was in need of more fundamental assistance than our work at HELC required: the center, while well structured, had limited curriculum guidelines and utilized outdated behavior management systems. Our educators observed non-developmentally appropriate expectations for child behavior and few opportunities for imaginative play. Between the center's lack of financial resources and the caregivers' lack of educational training, our Early Learning Coordinator recognized that an ongoing program could have a dramatic impact on the children. Our educators visited the center weekly, presenting programs emphasizing communication and creative play. The center also visited the museum on a weekly basis, providing an opportunity for children to broaden their life experience and for the center staff to observe and interact with children in a hands-on learning environment. Though the museum is located less than 2 miles from Dominion Kidz, the journey across the bridge separating the two, is one many of the children had never taken. Pastor Shirley Hunter, Director of Dominion Kidz, attests that visiting the museum helped to change what she calls a "poverty mindset," encouraging children to envision a wider scope of possibilities for themselves than what would otherwise be presented to them.⁵ "Amazement Square Day" quickly became the children's favorite day of the week, and the results were dramatic.

Throughout our programs, our educators were exemplifying positive behavior management and modeling how to build a nurturing, child-centered learning environment for Dominion Kidz staff. The center's staff reported a decrease in behavioral issues when the children were engaged. They also reported a positive transformation in the children's engagement when joy was an ingredient in learning. We found that our program was providing working models for the center's caregivers, none of whom had been to college or had any formal training for their roles. We began to realize that impacting staff caregivers as well as students was a means of affecting a longer-term and more potent change. Through our efforts, the staff became more aware of their roles as educators and, as they became more comfortable facilitating learning as modeled by Amazement Square educators, they became better able to increase the social-emotional health of their students by utilizing positive behavior management strategies. In longitudinal follow-ups, children "graduating" from the program have shown a marked

⁵ NPR StoryCorp interview, Pastor Shirley Hunter and Emily Joseph, November 20, 2015

kindergarten readiness both behaviorally and intellectually based on recorded interviews with kindergarten teachers. The success of the program was highlighted and published in Amazement Square's award of the National Medal for Museums from IMLS in 2015.

The great strides made by working with HELC and Dominion Kidz encouraged the museum to expand this model into a pilot program to assist other at-risk centers in the region. In January 2016, Amazement Square began the pilot program, *Amazing Children, Smart Beginnings*. This program, along with other early learning initiatives, is currently supported through Pacific Life, Wells Fargo, as well as allocations from Amazement Square's Endowment Fund for programming to underserved communities. We partnered with the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF), Smart Beginnings Central Virginia (SBCV)⁶, and Virginia Quality Rating and Improvement System to help us identify 3 centers, (*5 Star Academy, Little Light Early Learning Center, and Bashful Giraffe Early Learning Center*), most in need and would benefit the most from our program. The VECF is a public/private partnership for the state's early childhood efforts and maintains the Smart Beginnings network. VECF and the Department of Social Services jointly administer the Virginia Quality initiative which is "designed to assist childcare and preschool programs in providing high quality early care and education. Virginia Quality also serves as a resource to families about the different types of childcare and preschool options available."⁷ Virginia Quality awards quality levels to child care and preschool programs based on four nationally recognized quality standards and best practices: the education and qualifications of the staff; the curriculum or intentional teaching approach the program uses to guide children's learning; the learning environment; and teacher-child interactions. The program is voluntary to centers, but having an improved rating helps centers to identify improvement needs and strategies and increases exposure to parents seeking care. Ratings increases also allow centers to qualify for state funding; helping with staff retention rates and the ability to purchase classroom materials.

Amazement Square offered weekly free hands-on programs to 2 classrooms per center demonstrating positive interpersonal interactions and play-based learning. We utilized a collaborative model whereby Amazement Square's Early Learning Specialist (ELS) and a Virginia Quality Technical Assistant Specialist (VQ TAS) worked with identified classrooms at the same time. The museum's ELS engaged students in hands-on experiential learning while the classroom teacher and a VQ TAS observed together. The VQ TAS coached the classroom teacher in pedagogy and positive behavior management using the Amazement Square ELS as a model. The ELS meanwhile, worked to improve individual and classroom gains in behavior management and kindergarten readiness. This approach maximized student and teacher learning and engaged the entire classroom in quality learning.

While we were hoping to translate the type of instruction program offered at Dominion Kidz to the new centers, the lack of structure and support at the pilot locations demanded a different approach. In this case, the teachers not only lacked training, but their classrooms lacked quality learning materials. Early observation indicated that many students faced behavioral challenges including a lack of awareness for classroom expectations and negative peer interactions. Creating a safe space for the children was one of our foundational goals. Modeling emotional openness for the teacher and children fostered a rapport

⁶ Smart Beginnings Central Virginia serves children from birth to age 5 across the four counties of Amherst, Appomattox, Bedford, and Campbell, along with the cities of Bedford and Lynchburg. SBCV is a coalition of public and private organizations, businesses, and citizens working to ensure that all children, age 0-5 are healthy, well cared for, and ready to succeed.

⁷ <http://www.smartbeginnings.org/home/focus-on-quality.aspx>

Early Childhood Foundation and Smart Beginnings network, as well as at local and national conferences, and the continuation and further expansion of this program into the ongoing future, will help to fulfill the museum's strategic mandate.

Project Work Plan

The scaled *Amazing Children, Smart Beginnings* program is designed to serve 6 early learning centers in Lynchburg City and surrounding counties in order to double our reach over a two year period to allow for work with the same instructors and students. After the second year of the program, the children who were 3 years old when it started, will be 5 and will be moving on to Kindergarten. The three pilot programs were completed in May 2018. Currently Amazement Square is working with Smart Beginnings/Virginia Quality to further review the impact of the program through the 2018-2019 school year now that the modeling period with Amazement Square Educators has ended and to identify the 6 regional early learning centers that are unable to meet foundational quality ratings because they are struggling with Virginia Department of Social Services licensing standards, Virginia Board of Education regulations, and/or are unable to meet further quality qualifications because most of their lead teachers/center directors lack appropriate qualifications in child development.

The overall goals for this program are to identify and support children's social-emotional needs through developmentally appropriate play and introduce educators to various teaching techniques and learning styles to ultimately increase student engagement and retention. During each academic year, all 6 centers will receive 20 bi-weekly program sessions (for a total of 40 over the 2 year span of the program), including a preparation visit to determine the needs of the teachers, 18 sessions of instructional content and teacher coaching, and a post annual visit. Amazement Square will focus on the learning modules that best fit the centers specific needs, dependent on the center's and staff's strengths and weaknesses as identified through a baseline assessment, meeting the social and emotional needs first before advancing to academic skills. This baseline assessment is conducted through informal and anecdotal observations as well as through CLASS evaluations (**Appendix A**).

Preparing children for success by first providing appropriate social-emotional education will better equip them to handle challenges when they occur in school and beyond. Teaching to the "whole child" by focusing on cognitive, emotional, social, and physical support within the early childhood setting prepares the child for academic success later in life.¹¹ Modules will incorporate elements of social emotional learning including: music, singing in unison and through call/response, American Sign Language (ASL), fictional children's literature, comprehension questioning, art projects, and classroom center time. Each of these elements enforces social emotional concepts for children by encouraging different modes of communication (music, ASL), empathy building (literature, group discussion of emotions), and self-expression (art projects, center time) (**Appendix A**). As educators observe modeling of appropriate teacher-child interactions and support of students' social and emotional needs, the focus will shift to exposure to innovative learning methods.

The early learning curricula will be developed by a team of Amazement Square Director of Programs and Outreach, ELS, and Director of Education in concert with Smart Beginnings. At each center, the museum's ELS will provide instruction and coaching for up to 3 classroom teachers for children aged 3-5,

¹¹ Schonfeld, D.J.; Adams, R.E; Fredstrom, B.K; Weissberg, R.P; Gilman, R.; Voyce, C.; Tomlin, R.; Speese-Linehan, D.; (2015). Cluster-randomized trial demonstrating impact on academic achievement of elementary social-emotional learning. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 30(3), 406-420.

visiting each classroom for 60 minutes per week. The classroom teacher(s) will observe the museum ELS for the first 3 sessions of each module. The fourth session will see the teacher begin to actively assist the ELS. During the fifth session the teacher will present the ELS with a lesson plan which they will lead during the 6th and last session of the module. This will ensure that the teacher gains experience in the learning objective while simultaneously being supported by the ELS. During select program sessions within each learning module, a VQ TAS will provide observation-based evaluations and teacher coaching as the ELS is modeling behavior. Having multiple teachers train within a center will encourage the collaborative nature and peer support necessary for successful instruction. Teachers and students from each center will visit the museum 3 times a year, providing positive new experiences for both teachers and students, as demonstrated from our experience with Dominion Kidz.

The VQ TAS, certified in the evaluative techniques required in formal quality ratings, will work in concert with the museum educator and Amazement Square Director of Education to collect data (pre, post, and during the intensive program). During select visits each quarter, the VQ TAS will be working directly and simultaneously with the teacher to highlight classroom management techniques, teacher/child interactions, explain the learning objectives behind each activity, and answer questions/concerns from the emerging teacher.

Amazement Square will lead paid quarterly Professional Learning Community (PLC) trainings in the museum's Education Building for the 18 teachers and administrators throughout the academic year during the months of October, January, April, and during the summer, in July. These training sessions will be conducted in 4-hour time blocks on Saturday mornings. During each meeting, teacher trainings and administrator trainings will be conducted independently for 2 hours, and, after a brief break, the remainder of the session will provide opportunities for collaborative trainings between administrators and their staff. PLC trainings offered by Amazement Square (Director of Programs and Outreach and ELS) and VQ will focus on the fundamental pillars of child development education as established by both the Council for Professional Recognition (CDA credentials) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) standards that mandate these professional preparation programs.

The Department of Social Services licensing requires all teaching staff at licensed centers to participate in 16 teacher training hours per calendar year. Combining our PLC trainings into the service requirements ensures the buy-in of center directors and the participation of the staff. Compensating the teachers and administrators for attending trainings, as well as providing a meal, would further create incentive for participation and help center staff to find value in professional development. Our hope is that by improving the administrative support teachers are given, teacher turnover rates within low income centers will be reduced, as both administrators and staff gain a better understanding of their roles and build better working relationships.

Project Results

The 6 centers chosen to participate in the *Amazing Children, Smart Beginnings* program will be identified based on Virginia Quality's Ratings and Improvement System (QRIS), whose metrics are informed by state licensing and Virginia Board of Education Regulations.

The Virginia Quality Certified Rater and Virginia Quality Local Coordinator will conduct a pre and post formal rating for each academic year, enabling us to compare teaching practices such as teacher/child interactions. We will further be able to compare pre and post QRIS scores with the scores of other

qualifying centers who did not receive programming to measure efficacy of the initiative overall. The formal and center-wide rating will be followed by evaluations of each identified classroom by Amazement Square's Director of Programs and Outreach, ELS and the VQ TAS, using the same rubrics, with particular emphasis on the CLASS evaluation, the ECERS-R Environmental Rating Scale, and observations that measure teacher/child dynamics (**Appendix A**).

Student and teacher gains from the social-emotional curricular emphasis will be monitored through the Social Emotional Assessment Measure (SEAM) (**Appendix A**). The learning outcomes for students as a result of this emphasis will include developments in self-regulation, problem solving, social and emotional competence, curiosity and imagination, and teamwork. Learning gains for teachers will indicate the teacher's awareness and ability to meet and support the social-emotional needs of children such as responding to needs and providing routines.

With this project, Amazement Square will be addressing, on a regional level, one of the challenges faced by early learning centers in low income areas throughout the country. Upon conclusion of the granting period, we expect to have significantly impacted the teaching practices, classroom environments, and supportive curriculum for 6 of our region's most vulnerable early learning centers, which will be reflected in improved Virginia Quality ratings for each center. We will have created an informal network of emerging early learning center professionals who, despite lacking the ability to pursue higher education, will have access to a host of resources through a professional learning community created around and for their needs.

Further, by demonstrating and measuring the positive impact of a social-emotional curriculum delivered through a hands-on, play based approach and our findings at our pilot centers, we expect, based on our success with the pilot program and Dominion Kidz and 3 pilot centers, the competencies of participating children moving to kindergarten to be improved over the social competence of rising kindergarteners in similar care situations who did not receive programming.

Results of the *Amazing Children, Smart Beginnings* initiative will be shared with the Smart Beginnings network and the Virginia Early Childhood Education Foundation. Program procedures and results will be compiled by Amazement Square's Director of Education in a final report and presentation with the aim of creating a template that is replicable for other informal learning institutions throughout the state. Further, the challenges and successes of this program will be presented for inclusion at local and national conferences. Project sustainability will be ensured, in part, because much of the logistical and evaluative demands rest with VQ, an initiative that works in tandem with state mandates and funding.

Through the *Amazing Children, Smart Beginnings* collaborative effort, Amazement Square will be offering a solution to address a deficiency in underserved early learning centers in our region. We will have also built a greater body of results and measureable outcomes in order to create a more comprehensive template that would enable Amazement Square to reach out to other foundations and corporations, locally, statewide and nationally, in order to continue our efforts to help financially challenged early learning centers in our region and provide a replicable template for statewide use.

