



Museums for America

Sample Application MA-259709-OMS-26
Project Category: Community Engagement

San Diego Zoo

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$300,000
Amount of cost share:	\$301,308

In response to a community need for expanded access to nature-based early learning experiences, the San Diego Zoo will launch a new school program for transitional kindergarten and kindergarten students. Wild Beginnings will engage teachers and community partners in co-designing a two-part learning model that includes an in-school program and a field trip to the zoo. The program will be offered at no cost to classes throughout San Diego County along with transportation support, and the zoo will work in partnership with an advisory committee of classroom teachers to develop the program content and reduce barriers to participation. Consultants will provide staff training to ensure the project aligns with best practices in community-centered inclusive program design. The program will reach over 3,000 students and the zoo will share evaluation findings with peer institutions across the zoo and aquarium field.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the most recent Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program to which you are applying.

NARRATIVE

Wild Beginnings: Co-Designing TK-K Programs

Project Justification

The program goal and associated objective of MFA our project addresses.

- **Museums for America Program Goal 2, Community Engagement**
- **Objective 2.2, Support the implementation of community-centered partnerships, exhibitions, and programs.**

In response to community needs, San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance (SDZWA) respectfully requests a \$300,000 three-year grant to support *Wild Beginnings: Co-Designing TK-K Programs*. Based on community partner requests, feedback from San Diego teachers, and drawing from the strong positive reception and impact of *Wild at Heart* (our three-year IMLS grant-funded program), the San Diego Zoo (Zoo) and San Diego Zoo Safari Park (Park) education teams will build upon the lessons learned from our traditionally designed programs to integrate community-centered best practices and authentically incorporate community voice and expertise into the development process, resulting in responsive programming for Transitional Kindergarten (TK) and Kindergarten (K) schools in San Diego County. The need for *Wild Beginnings* is especially high now as TK classes are greatly expanding across San Diego and there are limited extended learning programs available for this age group, including at SDZWA, per feedback from our partner schools and teachers.

As part of this collaborative partnership, our Zoo and Park education teams will seek out and leverage the voice and expertise of the TK-K education community in San Diego to co-design and implement a new two-part school program series, consisting of one school-based component and one guided field trip at either the Zoo or Park. With California now offering TK to all children that turn four years old by September 1, this initiative celebrates expanded access while addressing an unmet community need: educator-led field trip experiences for TK students remain limited across the region.

In response, our education teams and community partners aim to provide high-quality programming for these young learners. Select education staff will participate in co-design training and then collaborate with a newly formed San Diego County TK-K Teacher Advisory Council (TAC), representing the broader community, to develop new SDZWA TK-K school programs that address barriers to informal learning participation and draw on our expertise in STEM education. By centering educator voice and community knowledge, this project aligns with IMLS's encouragement to foster collaborative civic dialogue and strengthen the role of cultural institutions in supporting healthy, engaged communities. Following preliminary evaluation through pilot programs, TK-K school groups will be invited to participate in the program at no cost during the subsequent school year. Formative and summative evaluation will be used to assess the program's impact on students, teachers, and chaperones. In addition to hosting school programs, staff will engage with the zoo and aquarium community by sharing the co-design process, lessons learned, and evaluation findings, contributing to the broader field of early childhood conservation education. This project also supports national America 250 priorities by fostering early appreciation of our country's extraordinary natural beauty and scientific heritage. Through hands-on STEM-rich learning rooted in local wildlife and ecosystems, the program helps young learners build foundational connections to America's natural heritage.

How our project advances our museum's strategic plan.

SDZWA's leadership and education teams are committed to the development of this new TK-K program, which will broaden the age range of students we serve while advancing our conservation message and reinforcing our strategic priorities. The mission of SDZWA is to save species worldwide by uniting our expertise in animal care and conservation science with our dedication to inspiring passion for nature. We are committed to delivering long-term, high-impact, science-based solutions to help all species thrive. Education

is a core pillar in achieving our vision of a world where all life thrives. Two of our strategic priorities directly connect to *Wild Beginnings*: “foster a community of learners inspired to explore and connect with nature and to take action for wildlife” and “cultivate partnerships and conservation leaders.” To nurture early curiosity about wildlife and the natural world among TK-K learners, strong collaborations and partnerships are essential. These relationships cultivate varied approaches to early informal learning and strengthen our ability to engage students, teachers, and communities in conversations about caring for our country’s natural beauty. As part of this program, we will work closely with the TK-K community, developing new partnerships to co-create high-quality educational experiences that are authentic, meaningful, and empowering. These partnership-driven learning opportunities will foster lasting connections between young students and wildlife and inspire them to become scientists and wildlife stewards in the future. Through this initiative, we will extend our world-class informal conservation education to a new age range, providing developmentally appropriate opportunities for exploration and discovery at the Zoo and Park. The program incorporates deep, continuous community engagement and offers young learners an early introduction to our natural heritage while promoting foundational STEM learning that supports future pathways, including potential interest in wildlife management and related fields.

The need, problem, or challenge our project addresses, and how it was identified.

SDZWA’s education teams and community partners have identified a unique opportunity to respond to the needs of local school communities while advancing our mission to inspire passion for nature. With the rapid expansion of TK classes across California, partner schools and district-affiliated organizations have approached our education teams with an increased need for high-quality informal learning programs tailored specifically to TK students. Universal Transitional Kindergarten is now available at no cost to all young learners who turn four by September 1, providing a critical foundation for long-term academic success. However, the growth in TK enrollment has outpaced the availability of meaningful developmentally appropriate programs at informal learning institutions. Although many informal science education institutions (ISEIs) recognize the value of field trips, a recent search we conducted reported only nine in San Diego County currently offer educator-led programs for this age group, and most field trips remain self-guided experiences, with the Zoo included in that list.

Early learners benefit significantly from participation in STEM and outdoor field trips, particularly as science instruction remains underemphasized in elementary grades. Early learning in science and mathematics helps “promote socio-emotional development, supports the development of STEM-related habits of mind, helps with later learning in all subjects and benefits students from all backgrounds” according to a recent article on *Considerations for STEM Education from PreK through Grade 3* (Sarama et al., 2018). Additionally, outdoor learning is critical for young children’s health, development, and academic growth (California Department of Education, 2025). Educators across California are eager for more support in environmental literacy, with more than 80% of surveyed teachers and administrators requesting “more integration of environmental learning in their classrooms and districts” (California Environmental Literacy Initiative, 2024). Strengthening early STEM learning also reflects national priorities to highlight America’s scientific accomplishments and expand equitable access to high-quality science education.

Despite the value of high-quality field trips, significant barriers limit participation. In a survey of TK-K teachers in San Diego (personal communication, February, 2026), the cost of field trips and bus transportation emerged as the top barrier, with 72% of respondents identifying it as their greatest challenge (n=53). These findings underscore the need for accessible, community-responsive programming that reduces financial and logistical barriers for schools. Our education team is committed to co-designing programming that reflects the needs and strengths of the communities we serve. By pairing our expertise in STEM education with the experience and insight of the Teacher Advisory Council (TAC) members who bring deep knowledge of young learners, their communities, and common barriers to participation—we will create authentic, inclusive learning

experiences that support all students. This partnership-driven approach ensures that new programming is grounded in community priorities and designed to expand equitable access to informal STEM learning.

The primary audience for our project and how they have been involved in the planning.

The target audiences for *Wild Beginnings* are TK-K teachers and students in San Diego County, with outreach focused on schools within a 10-mile radius of either the Zoo or Park that have not previously participated in educator-led programming. In 2024-2025, there were 16,690 Transitional Kindergarten and 30,9231 Kindergarten students enrolled in San Diego County (Ed-Data, 2026), representing a substantial population of early learners who stand to benefit from the programming. Concentrating efforts on schools near the parks ensures that the program can serve a significant number of students while reducing transportation barriers.

TK-K Teachers: Through the formation of a TK-K Teacher Advisory Council (TAC), we will engage with up to 10 teachers over the course of the project to familiarize them with the Zoo and Safari Park, co-design the new two-part program, observe classroom culture, and pilot the program with their students. Priority will be given to teachers at schools within a 10-mile radius of the Zoo or Park. Program benefits will extend beyond the TAC, reaching more than 100 additional teachers across San Diego County through their classes' participation in the free *Wild Beginnings* programming.

TK-K Students: Following the pilot programs, the new two-part program will launch for nearby schools in San Diego, serving up to 75 TK-K classes each year in Years 2 and 3. We anticipate reaching approximately 3,060 TK-K students over the three-year grant period, providing each class with roughly two hours of contact time. Because class size varies by school and district, student reach will be quantified by the number of participating classes, using an average of 18 students per class (typical TK class sizes are capped at 20 students).

In preparation for this project, SDZWA consulted with and received support from the San Diego Unified School District teachers and administrators, the San Diego County Office of Education, and additional community partners to identify and address the growing need for TK-K informal learning. Our education team brings extensive experience incorporating teacher and staff feedback into program development through long-standing partnerships, including School in the Park (Zoo partnership with community leaders and San Diego's Balboa Park informal learning centers) and the WE CARE program (Park partnership with San Pasqual Union Elementary). These collaborations include regular debriefs during pre-planning stages to ensure programs meet the needs of young learners and their teachers. A 2024 SDZWA Community Needs Assessment, along with a targeted survey of local TK-K teachers, further informed this proposal. Teachers identified barriers to field trip participation, including transportation and program costs as well as their annual frequency of field trips, preferred scheduling, and priority STEM topics. These insights have shaped program design and reinforce the importance of co-designing with educators to ensure equitable access and meaningful learning experiences. TK-K teachers will remain integral partners throughout the project, contributing their expertise in early childhood education and community knowledge. Their collaboration will help ensure that the new programs are developmentally appropriate, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of all students.

The ultimate beneficiaries for our project.

Long-term beneficiaries for *Wild Beginnings* include TK-K students and teachers across San Diego County through the development of the program and extension activities that can be used in the classroom or during a self-guided field trip. Zoo education staff will also benefit by gaining skills in inclusive design approaches, deepening their understanding of TK-K classroom culture and pedagogy, and participating in professional development focused on effectively engaging young learners. The co-design process with Teacher Advisory Council members will generate lessons learned and a replicable framework that will inform the development of future programming, ensuring that the impact of this project extends well beyond its initial implementation.

Project Work Plan

Over a three-year period, approximately 3,060 TK-K students will participate in the two-part *Wild Beginnings* program at no cost to schools or families. This estimate is based on 20 pilot classes in Year 1 and 75 classes per year in Years 2 and 3, with an average of 18 students per class. Students will engage in an interactive component at their school campus and a guided field trip to the Zoo or Park. All components of the *Wild Beginnings* program will be designed to meet the needs of young learners and are aligned with the California Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations for Science Domain guidelines and Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) for kindergarten.

Specific activities we will carry out and the sequence.

Wild Beginnings Program Activities and Timeline (September 2026 – August 2029) include:

Planning Meetings & Preparation

Beginning in September 2026, the project team will hold bi-weekly planning meetings for the first four months to prepare for the program launch. These meetings will address the Teacher Advisory Council (TAC) recruitment and facilitation, marketing and outreach to schools, and the development of evaluation questions, instruments, and front-end evaluation activities. In Q1 2027, the team will transition to monthly meetings to monitor programming, budget and overall project progress. Program team members will participate in trainings between Q3 2026 through Q1 2027. Training topics will be informed by front-end evaluation findings and may include Universal Design for Learning in Environmental Education and community-based learning approaches.

Teacher Advisory Council (TAC)

The TK-K TAC is central to the success of *Wild Beginnings*. Recruitment will be intentional to ensure representation from schools that have and have not previously participated in programming at the Zoo or Park. School administrators and district leaders will assist in identifying strong candidates. An application and rubric-based selection process will be used to assemble a varied group of up to 10 teachers by early Q4 2026. TAC members will participate in three to four sessions with SDZWA staff in Q4 2026 through Q1 2027. These sessions will include team building, listening sessions, and collaborative work using a SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results) framework. Teachers will also become familiar with the Zoo and Park, existing programs, and the co-design process. Together, TAC members and SDZWA education teams will co-design the new two-part program and extension activities, guided by the California Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations for Science Domain and NGSS for kindergarten. Topics will likely include social-emotional learning, observation, and investigation (Strand 1.0 - Science and Engineering Practices), and properties and characteristics of living things (Strand 3.0 - Life Science). In parallel to TAC sessions and co-design, select Zoo and Park educators will observe TAC classrooms to better understand TK-K classroom structure, culture and instructional practices. From Q1 to Q2 2027, the team will pilot the new program with TAC classes and nearby schools to collect feedback and finalize program revisions. After the pilot programs, staff will debrief with TAC members and maintain quarterly communication throughout the project period.

Program Administration & Implementation

Select educators and program aides will be trained to support the pilot programs in Q4 2026 through Q1 2027. A larger cohort will receive training and comprehensive professional development on working with young learners prior to the 2027-28 school year. Preliminary evaluation results from the pilot will inform final program revisions and curriculum adjustments. In addition to program design, the project team will purchase necessary supplies, market the program to San Diego County schools, focusing on those that have not previously participated, and update the program booking website in preparation for the 2027-28 school year. Up to 75 classes will participate annually in the two-part program during Years 2 and 3.

Evaluation & Dissemination

All project team members have completed monitoring and evaluation capacity building training, ensuring a shared understanding of the importance of front-end, formative, and summative evaluation for community-engaged initiatives. At the beginning of the project (Q3 2026 through Q1 2027), the project team will develop evaluation questions, methods, and instruments, and conduct front-end evaluation to ensure alignment with teacher needs. Formative evaluation instruments will be tested during the pilot programs (Q1 – Q2 2027) and refined prior to full implementation in the 2027-28 school year. Formative and summative evaluation will continue throughout the project and will inform the findings and recommendations in the final report. At the conclusion of the project, the team will share the *Wild Beginnings* process, lessons learned, and evaluation results with TAC members, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) Education Network, and other informal learning organizations to support broader adoption of resources and process at their own institutions.

Risks to our project and how we will mitigate them.

A potential risk to the project is ensuring that barriers to participation in the TK-K TAC are minimized so that the Council reflects the demographics of the San Diego County community. While teachers consistently face competing priorities, the project team will mitigate this risk by remaining responsive to teacher availability, offering childcare when needed, and providing a stipend for participation. Teachers have also noted that transportation remains a significant challenge in both cost and scheduling. To address this, the bus reimbursement allocation is designed to make charter buses a viable option for schools, reducing limitations on which transportation providers they may use for travel to the Zoo or Park. If additional flexibility is required, the team will adapt the co-design process to ensure equitable participation. This may include offering alternatives to the field trip component such as a virtual field trip so that teachers can fully engage in the program regardless of logistical constraints.

Who will plan, implement, and manage our project.

Project Director Megan Medley will oversee the implementation of *Wild Beginnings* throughout the three-year grant period. She will lead school communications, marketing efforts, and the formation and facilitation of the Teacher Advisory Council, drawing on her prior experience establishing and managing Teacher Advisory Councils at Wildlife Conservation Society in New York City.

The *Wild Beginnings* project team will lead the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the Teacher Advisory Council and new TK-K program. The team is composed of education experience managers, education experience supervisors, and education program developers, all of whom bring extensive experience in program development, community collaboration, and staff professional development. The Associate Director at the Safari Park and Director of Education at the Zoo will provide additional guidance and support as needed throughout the project.

The time, financial, personnel, and other resources we need to carry out the activities.

SDZWA's commitment to *Wild Beginnings* is clear in both the staffing structure and the financial support dedicated to ensuring meaningful community engagement. The team will prioritize the time required for authentic partnership-building through the grant period. Education experience managers, supervisors, the Associate Director, and the Director of Education will contribute their time as cost share, reflecting the institutional investment in the program's success. Additional in-kind support will come from education coordinators, who manage program marketing and bookings, and from the office manager, who oversees bus reimbursements and the procurement of supplies.

IMLS grant funds will enable education program developers to serve as active members of the project team, providing essential support to the TAC and conducting data analysis for the evaluation. Funding will also support educator and program aide staff time for training, professional development, and program implementation at the schools and Zoo or Park. Also requested are costs for bus transportation between the

schools and the Zoo or Park, necessary program supplies and materials, staff training costs, and evaluation. IMLS will cover TAC participation support including costs for supplies, food, Zoo staff-provided childcare, and stipends to recognize the time and expertise teachers contribute to the co-design process.

How we will track our progress toward achieving our intended results

The *Wild Beginnings* project team will hold bi-weekly meetings at the start of the grant period, transitioning to monthly meetings as the project moves into implementation. These meetings will be used to review progress, address challenges, and celebrate milestones and lessons learned. The team will use Basecamp, a digital project management platform, to maintain a clear record of project activities, assign tasks, and track deadlines.

The project team will complete front-end, formative and summative evaluations (see “specific activities we will carry out and the sequence” section). Based on evaluation results, we will modify the programs as needed to help us achieve our intended results. If needed, more significant programmatic changes will be made annually so that implementation staff have the tools and training to deliver the program. Smaller revisions will be made throughout the school year.

Project Results

Project’s intended results and how they address the need, problem, or challenge we have identified.

The primary goal of *Wild Beginnings* is to apply best practices in program design and authentically integrate community voice and educator expertise into the development of new TK-K programming, resulting in increased engagement from schools in San Diego County.

The program directly addresses the challenges identified through community consultation, teacher surveys, and the 2024 needs assessment. By co-designing the program with TK–K teachers and aligning it with state standards and NGSS, the results respond to the identified challenges by reducing barriers, elevating educator expertise, and creating equitable access to meaningful informal learning experiences for young learners. The project’s intended results include:

- Expanded access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate science and nature-based learning experiences for TK–K students, filling a gap in educator-led programming currently available in San Diego County.
- Increased participation from schools that have historically faced barriers to informal learning opportunities, supported through free programming, bus reimbursements, and targeted outreach to schools within a 10-mile radius.
- A co-designed program that authentically incorporates community voice, ensuring the content reflects the expertise, priorities, and lived experiences of the TK–K teachers and families.
- A standards-aligned, two-part program grounded in the California Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations and NGSS for kindergarten, addressing the need for early STEM experiences.
- A replicable framework informed by lessons learned through the TAC and ongoing evaluation.

How the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes of the primary audience will change.

TK-K Students:

Students participating in *Wild Beginnings* will demonstrate measurable growth in their learning, engagement, and appreciation for wildlife and our nation’s natural beauty. Expected changes include:

- Greater access to educator-led STEM learning experiences through the Zoo and Park’s two-part program and extension activities, measured through teacher surveys.
- Increased engagement and a stronger sense of belonging with SDZWA, measured through embedded assessment and teacher surveys.
- Demonstrated commitment to at least one empathy-based conservation action to help wildlife and our nation’s natural lands, measured through embedded assessment tools.

TK-K Teachers:

Teachers engaged through the TAC and program implementation will experience growth in their instructional knowledge, confidence, and partnership with SDZWA. Expected changes include:

- Deeper understanding of local environmental stewardship, STEM instruction, and outdoor-based learning strategies for TK-K learners, measured through teacher surveys and interviews.
- Increased sense of belonging and ease of collaboration with SDZWA, measured through teacher surveys and interviews.

Zoo Staff as Beneficiaries:

Staff involved in designing and delivering *Wild Beginnings* will strengthen their professional practice and capacity to serve young learners. Expected changes include:

- Improved lesson plan frameworks that enhance the quality of Zoo and Park school programs, measured through detailed surveys.
- Stronger understanding of the value of co-design and community engagement, measured through detailed surveys.
- Enhanced ability to create engaging learning environments for TK-K learners, measured through staff observation.
- Increased confidence in delivering programming for TK-K learners, measured through surveys.

Products resulting from our project, and how we will make them accessible to the primary audience.

The *Wild Beginnings* will generate several tangible products that strengthen our early-learning programming and support long-term institutional capacity. The primary deliverable is a co-designed, two-part TK-K program lesson plan that incorporates intentional design practices and reflects the expertise of the TAC members. In addition, the program will produce a set of extension activities for teachers to use before and after their visit. These resources will be shared with teachers upon registration for the new program. To ensure the extension activities are responsive to teacher needs, the specific content will be developed collaboratively with TAC members as part of this IMLS request. Staff training modules will also be developed to support Zoo and Park team members who implement the programs. The project's findings, best practices, and co-design process will be disseminated broadly within the informal science education community. The team plans to share outcomes through presentations, posters, and resource documents at professional convenings, including the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) annual conference, the California Association for Science Educators, the International Zoo Educators Association, and other informal learning networks. These dissemination efforts will help support other institutions in adapting the project's approaches and resources to their own contexts.

How we will sustain the benefit(s) of our project beyond the conclusion of the period of performance.

The benefits of *Wild Beginnings* will extend well beyond the grant period through the integration of co-developed lesson plans, updated curriculum templates, and new staff training practices into current and future Zoo and Park programming. By incorporating the adjustments and insights gained through the project, SDZWA will strengthen its long-term capacity to deliver developmentally appropriate, community-responsive learning experiences for TK-K students. By embedding these co-designed lessons and practices into long-term operations, SDZWA will support IMLS's vision for sustainable, community-centered programming that endures well beyond the 250th anniversary period. Because the Zoo and Park already offer school programming at no cost to eligible elementary students, SDZWA is committed to continually improving program quality and maintaining equitable access. This commitment is supported by SDZWA's broader priority of maximizing resources to ensure the financial stability necessary to remain an effective wildlife conservation and education organization. At the conclusion of the grant period, SDZWA Education and Philanthropy teams will pursue additional funding to expand *Wild Beginnings* to even more local students and schools. With an initial investment from IMLS to pilot the program and establish a strong foundation with community partners, we are confident in our ability to secure the resources needed to sustain and grow the program in the years ahead.

San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance

San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance

Wild Beginnings: Co-Designing TK-K Programs

September 1, 2026 – August 31, 2029

Q1 – Jan-March, **Q2** – April –June, **Q3** – July-Sept, **Q4** – Oct-Dec

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