

probability that many of today's students will work in this industry in one job or another in their lifetimes. With a little more knowledge and the resulting pride in this heritage, perhaps many will aspire to more than entry positions as dishwashers."

—Susan Bretkopf

## Making It Look Like Child's Play

As they sat around the table wearing red foam noses and wild glasses and playing kazoo's, members of the Chicago Children's Museum's advisory board knew they were making serious progress. At their December meeting rather than listening to a traditional presentation from CCM staff on the topic of developing exhibits, the board was taking part in an interactive opera that conveyed the same information.



At the unveiling event on Jan. 19, experts in early childhood development discuss the Chicago Children's Museum's Standards of Excellence in Early Learning.

"We want to be an environment infused with play, we are talking about our board and volunteers as well as our staff," says Jennifer Farrington, CCM's vice president of education. It's all in the name of understanding the link between play and learning, one of seven major themes in CCM's Standards of Excellence in Early Learning, which was unveiled to the field in January. The document resulted from a two-year study CCM undertook with Gyroscope, Inc., a museum planning, architecture, and design firm; and the Erikson Institute, a graduate program for the study of early childhood learning. "What we really unveiled is a new way of doing business," says Farrington.

It began about three and a half years

ago, when the museum welcomed its new president and CEO, Peter England. "He invited staff and board and advisors and funders to take a closer look at what we were doing," says Farrington. "It led to a set of interviews with stakeholders, funders, community leaders, people who know us." Their guiding question: How can CCM make a lasting impact, on visitors, the community, and the field at large?

"We wanted to figure out what it means to be a leader, achieve excellence, and create a model," Farrington explains. "But to become a model of excellence, we needed to step back far enough to see how that would look in our entire institution." To gain that perspective, the CCM team (which included staff from Gyroscope and Erikson) surveyed the current literature and conducted series of interviews with experts in the field of early learning as well as children and their families. Then they analyzed the recurring themes and recommendations and drafted the standards for excellence.

The project was less about conducting original research and more about bringing together current ideas and best practice. "There are people who have made it their life's work to study early learning," says Farrington. "We sought ideas that are innovative, even controversial." Those ideas emerged during the interviews, which extended beyond the CCM's stakeholders and leaders of other children's museums to others involved in children's education, including people from the media, toy development, policy, and curriculum development.

The project team had to start at square one: finding a common definition of early childhood. They decided to accept the parameters of birth to 8 years, the reigning definition in academia. In addition to defining early childhood, the remaining six topics found in the standards are: understanding play and learning; making learning visible; behavioral measures; families and learning; design and learning; and institutional capacity.

"As a children's museum, a public venue, it's our job to figure out how to bring all of this information to visitors," says



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# M Notes

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Farrington. “We want to be more than a place to spend an afternoon. We want to be a dependable resource for parents.”

With an intellectual framework in place, Gyroscope is designing CCM’s renovation and expansion, which will incorporate findings from the Standards of Excellence. “Kids have an important role in what the museum’s space will be like,” says Gyroscope founder and president, Maeryta Medrano, “because having a dynamic relationship with visitors means that the museum learns from the visitors even as the visitors are learning at the museum. The way the museum looks is changed by their actions.”

The summary includes implications for practice but, as Sam Meisels, president of the Erikson Institute, points out, the guidelines are not a formula that can be followed by any children’s museum. Any institution wanting to achieve excellence would have to begin with intensive self-assessment. “Get together your senior staff

and build outward to the supporters of the museum like the board, donors, visitors, and then schools, colleges, and the like,” he says. “First you have to get a sense of how you’re doing. . . . It’s very important to get all these different groups looking at these issues together.”

The final report will be available this spring, and will be featured at the annual conference of the Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) in April. ACM Executive Director Janet Rice Elman says she is impressed by the way the guidelines represent the strengths and contributions of many children’s museums, large and small. The standards, she says, “are a wonderful tool to guide museums not only in developing exhibits and programs for young children and their families, but also in developing the institutional core values required to serve young visitors.” Pull out your foam noses everyone, it’s time to work.—*Amanda Kraus* **M**