



BY DIANE KOPASZ

# Children's Museums + School Field Trips = 21st Century Learners

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There is growing interest for educators to teach 21st century skills and STEM learning, which proponents suggest must be incorporated into our children's education to ensure the future workforce and global competitiveness of the United States. What are 21st century skills and STEM learning and what resources are there for schools to reinforce them?

Innovations and discovery have almost always led to social transformations. In the Information Age, the need to complete high school and to obtain a college degree became that much more important in order to find work.

Today, the U.S. and most of the Western world is largely a service-based economy. Societal changes and technology have softened borders between countries and continents, making it possible for many people to more easily travel, work and

exchange information.

Ideas and knowledge have never been more important. And while literacy and mathematics remain central in developing a strong foundation for future learning, focusing just on these traditional subjects is not enough to prepare children for finding a job and their place in the 21st century. Service workers with 21st century skills need to be able to collaborate, communicate, critically think, creatively innovate as well as learn content. Global awareness, as well as financial, civic and health literacy are key themes.

STEM is an acronym for the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. The term is commonly used in relation to the nation's economic competitiveness and the related need for education programs. According to several reports, American students perform among the lowest internationally in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

How do educators make sure that kids are learning traditional core skills, plus build 21st century skills, plus strengthen STEM learning? And more importantly, how can educators motivate children to take an interest in this kind of learning?

Partnering with a local children's museum can be part of the equation. Children's museums create playful, interactive learning experiences. Children's museums understand that if you want to spark a child's excitement, reduce their stress about learning complex concepts and empower them to make developmental leaps, you need to let children to be in the driver's seat and let them play.

More than half of all children's museums develop curriculum materials and 70 percent provide school outreach, but perhaps the biggest partnership opportunity for schools and

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children's museums are field trips. A single school field trip can open the minds of children and make learning real, active and fun.

The Children's Museum of the Upstate (Greenville, SC), which opens this summer, features an exhibit inspired by Charles Townes, the Greenville native who gave the world the key theoretical tools to understanding the laser.

In "Light Waves Ahead" children can explore the role of optics, light and lasers. The exhibit will allow children and families to conduct open-ended experiments with projectors, colored gels, lenses, mirrors, filters and other 'Light Lab' tools. As they play, they will discover how light reflects and refracts, how lenses and mirrors can be used to bend light, how color allows us to create masterpieces of art and how nature creates her own masterpieces of light.

At Imagine It — The Children's Museum of Atlanta (GA), the exhibit "Tools for Solutions" allows children to operate six simple machines — pulleys, levers, screws, inclined planes, wheel and axle and wedges. Children have fun moving balls around machines, loading them onto the crane and figuring out how the system works, while also learning that even the most complex problems can be solved with a good strategy and tools.

Louisiana Children's Museum runs several programs that promote STEM learning, such as "Fetch! Sources of Energy," where children can make a thermometer, build their own windmill, watch an enviro-battery power a light bulb and share their plans to go green on the museum's Eco-Friendly Commitment Wall.

At Young At Art Children's Museum (Davie, FL), children join Artist in Residence Chisseko of Kenya and share an insider's view of daily life in a traditional East African village. The interactive program "Passport to Africa," the program encourages children to engage all five senses through art, music, artifacts, language and storytelling.

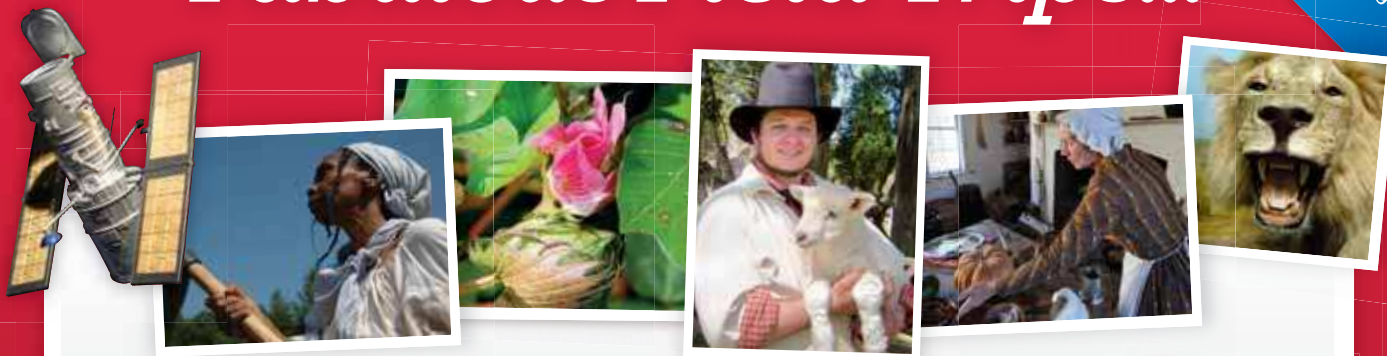
HealthWorks! North Mississippi (Tupelo) programming meets Mississippi's and national health education standards. School groups visiting the museum can partake in a range of programs from "Your Amazing Body!," which uses a game show format that gives kids a tour of the body; to "F.I.S.H.—Conflict Resolution for Kids," where museum staff facilitate role-playing strategies to help students deal with conflicts using verbal and nonverbal communication skills.

With budgets tight, many school districts have cut funding for school trips. Making the case to your school board, local government or corporations for a field trip to a children's museum can open doors. Target Corporation supports school field trips in many communities, visit <http://www.target.com>, and at the bottom of the page, under Company Information and select Community for a list of Education resources and an online application for field trip grants.

Looking for a children's museum near you? Go to [www.ChildrensMuseums.org](http://www.ChildrensMuseums.org) and click on "Visit a Children's Museum" to view an interactive map of children's museums and links to their Web sites.

*Diane Kopasz is Program Officer, Communications for the Association of Children's Museums. For more information, visit [www.childrensmuseums.org](http://www.childrensmuseums.org)*

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