

Kid City Evaluation:

Staff and Artists Focus Group

Kid City is a partnership between the City of Maplewood Parks and Recreation (Maplewood) and Z Puppets Rosenschnoz (Z Puppets). Z Puppets is a Minneapolis-based theater and puppet company. With funding from the Minnesota State Arts Board, Kid City brings the people of Maplewood together through theater, puppetry, and interactive art installations.

As part of the Kid City evaluation, we conducted a focus group with Kid City staff and artists. This group primarily focused on impacts of Kid City that staff and artists observed, both individually and for the Maplewood community. A total of nine Kid City staff and artists participated in the group. This document outlines findings from talking with Kid City staff and artists. Additionally, we observed Kid City youth programming, conducted a focus group with Kid City youth videographers, and administered a short survey at Kid City events; there are separate write-ups of these evaluation activities.

Individual impacts

Participants mentioned a number of impacts that they individually had experienced because of their involvement with Kid City. These impacts can be separated into two main categories: government-related and art-related. The government-related individual impacts of Kid City were primarily offered by government employees, and include: new ideas for how to do government work, new or different interactions between government employees and Maplewood residents, and new ways of working internally with government employees.

"I think it made me a better leader. [Kid City] is not just going door to door or on the phone getting complaints or being at a council meeting trying to get through things. It was real things happening in real time in the community, which we don't always get a lot of. I just thought, 'Wow. I can talk all I want, but people aren't necessarily coming together.' I'm a better leader having [Kid City] as part of our city." – Government employee

"It's really made me talk to kids instead of making decisions without seeing them. I can no longer make a decision about a kid without talking to the kid. I changed my idea of what kids are about." – Government employee

"[Kid City artist] came to present [at a city council meeting] and I asked him to do an activity with us. There are people on the council that hate that kind of stuff and they just did it, they kind of had to. It was great to see adults do it! It's changed how we think about the arts." – Government employee

Many of the arts-related impacts were framed by Kid City being a new program and being the first partnership of its kind for Maplewood and Z Puppets. Artists mentioned learning to be flexible and accomplish goals in different ways. Due to small program group sizes (which can be attributed partly to Kid City being a new city effort), participants mentioned developing fairly deep relationships with youth who participated in Kid City programming.

"Administratively, there have been few parts of Kid City that have gone off without a hitch, so it's caused me to be more flexible in my thinking, often in the moment." – Kid City artist

"We realized that it's like a micro-performance, sometimes with 2 or 3 artists performing for 1 or 2 children. It's a very direct and honest communication that goes both ways." Kid City artist

Additionally, because Kid City has a goal of cross-cultural collaboration, Kid City enlisted a team of diverse artists, an outcome of which was engaging residents of diverse racial-cultural backgrounds (this is further evidenced by the racial make-up of survey respondents and of program participants).

"The artist team we put together is one of the most diverse teams of artists I've worked on. ... I see kids respond differently. I see kids respond differently when they go into a room of kids and there's people that look like them. I see them open up more. Trust is easier to build." – Kid City artist

Observed community impacts

We asked staff and artists about community impacts they observed. Participants mentioned a number of community impacts that were related to community members interacting with government in new ways, including: community citizens realize their civic importance (with a specific focus on youth realizing their civic importance), and new and more immediate connections between residents and government employees.

"For the kids we work with – [I would say they are] empowered. I did see kids say what was on their minds eventually, telling their stories." – Kid City artist

"You often see a divide between police and community. This project generated those connections." – Kid City artist

"One woman came [to a Kid City event] because she wanted to meet me. Just to have a place to connect, that she knew she could connect with me – we're creating a space where it's safe for kids and for adults to approach the council and say, 'I want you to do this.'" – Government employee

There were a number of community impacts mentioned that were related to Kid City's playful and fun-centered approach, including: diverse community participation, and increased community connectedness and social cohesion. In particular, one focus group participant commented that playfulness "is the beginning of building trust" between Maplewood residents.

"It was exciting to see kids connecting. I remember going to an event with the Karen community. Just how [Kid City artists] were playing with balls with the kids, and just seeing how quickly that brings people together." – Government employee

"I was part of the July 4th event and we were just doing puppet improv with kids and parents. I think part of it is adults not acting like adults, like they're 'supposed' to act. The people that came to the table were diverse as possibly could be. And I'm sure it was culturally and economically diverse; it was a diverse group of people interacting with the puppets." – Kid City artist

"I remember earlier I brought my nephew and son up here. They have big personalities but they're very apprehensive about going up to people. [Kid City] gives them a space to be vulnerable and open up. I saw that again at other events. It really gives that safe environment for kids and families to come together. I'm a shy person – seeing a room full of people drop their guard, that's what I see it bringing to the community." – Government employee

Summary and moving forward

The focus group with Kid City staff and artists identified a number of outcomes that were not initially identified by the Kid City grant application, particularly in terms of how government works as well as how government interacts with its citizens. For Year 2 of Kid City, Wilder Research recommends developing a theory of change that includes all of the impacts identified in this evaluation to describe Kid City and its intended outcomes.

When asked what they would recommend for Kid City's growth and success in the future, participants offered the following suggestions:

- Integrate Kid City – or the Kid City approach – into other city programming and government processes, such as doing Kid City activities during city council meetings or having single session Kid City activities in existing Maplewood Parks and Recreation programming.
- Involve youth in Kid City decision-making, such as through the creation of a youth advisory council. This activity is being explored for Year 2.
- Ensure that Kid City is responsive and driven by Maplewood citizens, by providing ample opportunity for input from Maplewood citizens (via a youth advisory council, for example) or by recruiting adult Maplewood residents for Kid City staff/artist positions. It should be noted that in Kid City's first year, an advisory council comprised of adult Maplewood residents offered guidance to the Kid City team.

As Kid City moves into its second year, these recommendations and learnings position the Kid City team to capitalize on already-occurring impacts and to direct its growth for maximum impact within the Maplewood community.

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