BLOCK Fest® Report for 2018

In 2018, BLOCK Fest® employed a new coordinator. Throughout the year, events were held in the local and surrounding communities. The exhibit also made it out of state and into Wisconsin as BLOCK Fest® continues to gain exposure as early education programming. Participation at Northern Illinois University’s (NIU) STEM Fest was a success in reaching out to families. BLOCK Fest® continues to maintain and grow in popularity with events already planned for next year.

Local BLOCK Fest® Events

Due to a transition of the NIU BLOCK Fest® coordinator, events were not scheduled during the first quarter of 2018. The current BLOCK Fest® coordinator is Araceli Ascencio. Araceli is currently a graduate assistant for the Center for P-20 Engagement. In her previous role, she worked with pregnant moms and infants for seven years. During this time, she supported parents in early infant education and assessing that infants were meeting developmental milestones. These experiences highlighted the importance of the learning that happens in the birth to three stages of a child’s life. She is a firm believer that the importance of a solid foundation in early childhood education is vital to student’s success into adulthood. Araceli is enrolled in NIU’s Master’s program in Counseling and is on track to graduate as a school counselor and a licensed professional counselor (LPC) in May of 2020.

After Araceli joined the team, the remainder of the year was bustling with many local and surrounding BLOCK Fest® events. DeKalb held two events at the DeKalb Public Library and Ellwood House Museum. Surrounding communities that hosted events were: Sterling, Geneva, Sycamore, McHenry, Carol Stream, and Elgin, Illinois (Table 1).
As a result of all these events, BLOCK Fest® was able to reach out to 258 families to help educate parents on the benefits of building with blocks (Table 2).

**Table 1: Cities that hosted BLOCK Fest events in Illinois**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Event Attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rockford</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elgin</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schaumburg</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurora</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naperville</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol Stream</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glendale</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Table 2: Attendance per event**
Of the 258 families who attended, 84 of them agreed to an evaluation and provided valuable feedback of their BLOCK Fest® experience. Many of the comments were positive and helpful. Some of the parents stated the following:

- “Neat to see the gears turning in their head while they created.”
- “Fun and innovative – helps kids think in new ways.”
- “My oldest child (4) is building towers and houses with other children. My middle (2) is putting smaller blocks on bigger ones. My youngest (8 months) is knocking them over and using hand skills.”
- "We put our wooden blocks away years ago and now I think I'll put them back out."
- "Great for problem solving and using imagination and the kids learn as they play."

Additionally, as a response to feedback, an educational handout was created for parents to take with them and use at home. One parent stated, “The handout is helpful to learn more prompts and cues.”

**BLOCK Fest® Outreach**

As part of coordinating events, BLOCK Fest® reached out to many of the surrounding public libraries throughout the year. Just as the previous year, the exhibit held a spot at NIU’s STEM Fest. Exhibiting at STEM Fest allowed over 6,600 people an opportunity to experience a small sample of the blocks in a hands-on manner.

**Additional Exposure**

One of the more surprising events occurred when a school from Wisconsin requested to rent the exhibit. NIU staff was able to come to an agreement that suited both parties to facilitate a one-week rental. The Wisconsin site was excited to experience the BLOCK Fest event and had
some very positive feedback to share. Being the only exhibit in Illinois, serving those in Northern Illinois and surrounding border states, such as Wisconsin, is quite an opportunity!

Summary

As the year comes to a close, 2018 has been quite a learning opportunity when it comes to facilitating events at different locations with different hosts. It is promising to have BLOCK Fest® events already scheduled for 2019; some at previous locations and some at new locations. At the time of this report, six different communities in the Northern Illinois area will host events. Marketing and outreach efforts will continue as BLOCK Fest® reaches additional families.