NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Kidzeum Receives National Science Foundation Grant to Create Center for STEAM Education with the Springfield Area Community

Springfield, IL - Kidzeum is engaging the community in the co-design of a cutting-edge STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math) Center and learning network that will work to improve learning outcomes for students in Springfield and surrounding communities. The project is made possible by a grant from the Advancing Informal STEM Learning (AISL) Program at the National Science Foundation (NSF).

Led by Leah Wilson, Executive Director of Kidzeum, Dr. Catherine Haden of Loyola University, and Dr. David Uttal of Northwestern University, the project will position Kidzeum as a learning hub where children and families engage with hands-on science and technology activities in ways that are meaningful and relevant to them.

"Being selected for this funding reflects national confidence in Kidzeum's approach to learning through play," says Wilson. "It also positions our work as part of a broader effort to improve student competency in STEM subjects by expanding access to programs in informal educational settings."

Why create a Center for STEAM if the goal is to improve student achievement in STEM?

Adding art to make STEAM creates opportunities to foster creativity and innovation, as it can encourage design thinking and a more comprehensive approach to problem-solving. It also makes STEM concepts more interesting and relevant for learners who gravitate toward the creative fields, which can broaden participation from a variety of learners.

Why is informal science learning important? Children's museums are uniquely positioned to provide immersive, social learning opportunities where kids can begin to see themselves as engineers, scientists, or mathematicians. "We can't underestimate the value of pretend play," says Wilson. "When a child puts on a white coat, picks up a toy stethoscope and pretends to give mom a physical, they are building memories that can turn into dreams. And dreams can turn into goals. And goals can become reality."

What activities are planned? Over the coming months, the museum will host a series of workshops and focus groups, inviting input from a diverse cross-section of urban and rural constituents. This includes families, educators, farmers, nonprofits, STEM professionals, and business owners from Springfield and surrounding communities. Participants will discuss and map existing community

assets that support STEM/STEAM education and will also consider barriers that must be overcome to build a stronger learning ecosystem.

“Too often STEAM programming for young children is designed *for* communities rather than *with* them,” says Haden. “This project offers a fundamentally different approach – one that positions parents, educators, and community members as experts and genuine co-designers.”

Why use a co-design model? The goal of actively co-designing the center with the community is to develop exhibits and programs that not only teach important STEM/STEAM concepts but also connect to the daily lives and experiences of learners. For example, the center might offer after school programs introducing students to agricultural technology or hands-on engineering challenges inspired by local industries. Building children’s interest in STEM/STEAM at a young age helps to build job skills that will ensure a stronger labor pool for the future.

“I am excited about the partnership between Northwestern University and the new STEAM Center at Kidzeum,” said Uttal. “This innovative approach could serve as a model for other institutions across the country, helping to make science education more accessible and relevant to a variety of communities.”

Where will the center be located? In 2022, the museum received $497,560 from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Museum Capital Grant Program to renovate 2,200 square feet of vacant space. The two resulting rooms will serve as the primary operational space for the STEAM Center. The museum plans to open the center within the next 3 years, pending additional funding.

Who can participate? Kidzeum is putting out a call for participation that extends to constituents in Springfield and surrounding communities. Anyone who has an interest in expanding STEM/STEAM programs for children is welcome to participate. The project gets underway in February with two opportunities for the community to help us begin the process of collaboration and co-design of the new Kidzeum STEAM Center.

Option 1:	**Option 2:**
February 5	February 12
3:00-4:30 p.m.	7:00-8:30 p.m.
Meeting via Zoom	Meeting via Zoom
Register	Register

For more information on how to get involved in the design process of the STEAM Center, visit Kidzeum.org/education or email info@kidzeum.org.

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About NSF AISL funding (taken from nsf.gov): The Advancing Informal STEM Learning (AISL) Program is the only NSF program that exclusively invests in research and practice on how people learn STEM outside of formal education. The AISL Program is committed to funding research and practice, with continued focus on investigating a range of informal STEM learning (ISL) experiences and environments that make lifelong learning a reality. This AISL solicitation specifically seeks proposals that center engagement, broadening participation, and belonging in STEM, and further the

well-being of individuals and communities who have historically been and continue to be excluded, under-served, or underrepresented in STEM along several dimensions. The solicitation encourages proposals from institutions and organizations that serve public audiences and specifically focus on public engagement with and understanding of STEM, including community STEM; public participation in scientific research (PPSR); science communication; intergenerational STEM engagement; and STEM media.