



Heather Nessler, Executive Director
The Children's Museum of Rochester, Inc, DBA SPARK
Testimony to the MN House Education Finance Committee

March 9, 2023

Thank you, Chair Youakim, Vice Chair Clardy, and committee members, and thank you Representative Smith for authoring and introducing our bill.

My name is Heather Nessler and I am the Executive Director of the Children's Museum of Rochester, also known as SPARK. I am here today to speak to House File Number 1023, which would provide \$50,000 in fiscal year 24 and \$50,000 in fiscal year 25, appropriated from the Minnesota Department of Education. This funding would sustain initiatives funded with previous appropriations from the Minnesota Department of Education...these initiatives, which are access and programming for diverse audiences, are critical to our community. At our core, we focus on STEAM, culture connectedness, and health and well-being through interactive exhibits and programs in our collaborative learning environment.

The story of SPARK began as the pandemic was ramping up locally. We opened our doors in August 2020, expecting to serve around 40,000 visitors a year in our first year. Now, just over two years later, we have engaged with more than 150,000 visitors at our museum, 70,600+ in this past year alone. Our Economic Development Region (EDR) 10 serves a population of nearly 520,000 people, and while our admission has grown by 87% between 2021 and 2022, we clearly have many more families to reach. Even still, we want to celebrate that last year we served individuals from 81 counties in Minnesota. And access to the museum, which means free or reduced admission fees, has increased by 1600% since August 2020, an expense we incurred from our general operations budget.

We are a unique children's museum. Throughout the year, SPARK has implemented more than 750 hands-on programs in our space with more than 200 community partners. As the director of SPARK, my personal mission is to continue to find ways to serve more families, ALL families, in our community and region. This is why we also take SPARK into the classrooms at local schools through Museum to Go, and into the community through the activation of educational play in some local parks. This year, we are pleased to partner with organizations like the American Indian Education Department from Rochester Public Schools, ACHLA, the Alliance of Chicanos, Hispanics, and Latin Americans, the Pamoja Women, a group that exists to empower the women and girls of East African heritage, the Ronald McDonald House which serves as a safe haven for families of children with devastating illnesses, Families First - Head Start, and more. We provide enrichment, special accommodations, and most importantly, free access to our museum for organizations like these in our community.

We intentionally focus on early childhood screening and parent education so that the youngest members of our future generation receive support to meet important developmental milestones which may include interventions and support. In other words, we wrap around the whole family, and all families.



With the continued appropriation of funding from the Department of Education, SPARK can sustain our programming efforts and access for the children and families that are in need of enrichment. We aspire to introduce our families to rich cultural traditions and diversity in arts and language. We have a successful foundation to build upon with programs like Celebrations Around the World, Sign Language Story Time, the exploration of different art mediums, and yoga.

Children's museums have become an even more critical community asset, serving families needing educational opportunities outside the home and school. We see a tremendous need in our community and we do not anticipate this need subsiding. In fact, we expect 100,000 visitors this year with approximately 20% of those visitors accessing the museum with Free or Reduced Admission because of the need in our community. It is our duty to see that this gap is filled.

Thank you for your time and consideration of House File 1023.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heather Nessler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Heather Nessler
Executive Director
SPARK
(507) 218-3102

hnessler@sparkrochestermn.org