



PROGRAM
SPOTLIGHT



GROWING GREAT MINDS

Wausau, WI

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The Growing Great Minds (G2M) team in Wausau, WI has many STEM resources and partners in their rural community –including a botanical garden, a planetarium, and a technical college. There are many opportunities to engage families in STEM, but G2M felt a great need to raise awareness of what STEM is and how it is relevant and important for the community.

Getting families outside and into the community to engage in STEM in familiar, welcoming places can dispel the stigma families may have around STEM—such as feeling that STEM is too hard or that youth/families do not belong in STEM. “People are afraid of STEM, so we want to infuse it [STEM] into what we are already doing with families to raise awareness around STEM.”

The Family Engagement Plan

The G2M team hosted a “Science of Birds” event for K to 5 children and families at Monk Botanical Gardens. The team considered several factors when choosing the STEM theme and venue: it was easy to get to (on foot and by car), it was open on the weekends (when more parents are available), it was handicap accessible and provided activities that children with different abilities can do at different levels, and collaborators could facilitate quality STEM activities on a topic of local interest (scouting birds). **“We wanted to get families outside ...getting into nature is very important. So often we’re connected to devices in the winter, especially children...get them out and observing outside...”**

Partners included the Wausau Bird Club, which provided a DIY bird feeder craft project and walked with families to point out different birds living in the garden. The Raptor Education Group, which rehabilitates injured or orphaned birds, brought a variety of birds for families to see and learn about together. The partners also provided families with “goodie bags” complete with a bird guide, binoculars, a magnifying glass, a bird quiz, and a scavenger hunt, among other tools and information.

The A-Ha Moment

The G2M team focused on making STEM accessible both literally and figuratively, and recognized that this does not require huge or flashy events. **“So often I feel like we need to do a big dog and pony show... So often, when we say the word STEM, we lose sight of ‘it’s just in our backyard.’ We have birding! Let’s drill into that a little more. We don’t just take the things that are right in front of us...we try to make it bigger, flashier...families can’t connect with that. It gets intimidating.”**

The team focused on what would help more families participate. **“We really thought about space, availability, and opportunities to do multiple events. The planetarium was a great idea, but we could have only gotten a certain amount of families. We really wanted to include everyone...especially families who don’t have means...”** The G2M team engaged families through community-based, hands-on activities: **“The community partners were really the catalyst for that. The [Wausau] Bird Club made people feel good about being in the garden. Birding is huge in northcentral Wisconsin. This is the reason we chose to do a bird event...the groups had a huge presence; people know who they are... there were activities and the ability to walk around and experience the garden. There are walking paths, it’s just a beautiful environment. There were many families who had never been there before.”**



Family Engagement Strategies Reimagined

The G2M thought more intentionally about partnerships and embedding STEM into more family events. The G2M team facilitated a collaboration between two Elementary schools (both G2M sites), which they had not done previously but want to continue, to expand family engagement by adding community engagement. The G2M explained: **“... some families have children who go to multiple schools. Two families came up and said my other daughter goes [to name of school], it’s great!”** The team further elaborated that: **“It builds capacity among ourselves as enrichment coordinators, we get to help and partake because we have enough staff.”** The G2M team also plans to continue to raise STEM awareness by building it into all their family engagement events.

Evidence of Success

The G2M team received positive feedback about their Science of Birds event, during and after the event, from youth, parents/caregivers, and community partners. The team noted that, **“Even with the weather [being unusually cold], there were a lot of smiling happy faces—there were definitely people who understand the value of getting outside—and we got positive feedback from the partners. Everyone gave positive feedback personally and through emails.”** The G2M team also provided an example of a successful mind shift—they would like to share their program’s learnings and resources to support the larger community, meaning at a systems-level: **“We talked about making a kit out of this [Science of Birds event] so that other schools could utilize the resources...We create things and we don’t share them. Or they happen at one site and not at another. Everyone is struggling to have things to do... Let’s expand that to other sites, other families, other opportunities.”**

