



**PROGRAM  
SPOTLIGHT**



# PROJECT EXPLORATION

*Chicago, IL*

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Project Exploration (PE) has been providing STEM programming to communities in Chicago, IL for more than 20 years. The PE team strives to include youth and family voice in all their efforts, especially underrepresented voices, and they frequently adapt offerings based on youth and parent/caregiver feedback. Recently, PE opened a new STEM Learning Center in the Austin community on the West Side. (The previous location was a public school, but pandemic restrictions restricted family access.) While the move presents PE and the Austin community with new opportunities, it also introduces challenges as the team engages new families in a different community. While the PE team feels that they have a solid model for building relationships and planning family events, they are “breaking away from the ‘norm’ of events we’ve done” and renewing their focus to meet the interests and needs of all families.

## The Family Engagement Plan

The PE team engaged new and returning families in the Austin community through a series of STEM events, with the Chicago STEM Pathways Cooperative., at whose Fall event “Austoberfest” PE facilitated fun STEM activities for youth and families. PE built STEM into larger events so they could accommodate more participants, and added new activities (not STEM-themed) to bring in families unfamiliar with STEM or PE’s new STEM Learning Center. The PE team also consulted with the community around making their new space welcoming, by bringing both families and STEM experts into the space to share impressions and ideas, with the hope that family input will promote more belonging.

## The A-Ha Moment



The PE team showed how clear intention can increase efforts to engage families. As an example, as the PE team worked out strategies to bring more families to their new location, PE’s Program Manager (PM) shared that she “happened to be outside a building and sees a mom with a handful of kids. She reached out—‘Hey, you should come over. Let’s talk!’ It was a recent immigrant family from Columbia. [The PM to the mom] was like ‘I don’t speak Spanish.’ And the mom was like ‘I don’t speak English.’ So [the PM] dragged staff to come talk to the family. And the family showed up [and kept coming back]!...We did an interview with her... she said ‘I don’t know what this program is about, who this lady was...the kids say she seems nice’... Now she talks about how her kids are engaged, and how Benji is studying to be an engineer.” The PE team recorded this story (with permission) from the perspective of the Gonzalez family and PE’s staff. PE’s Executive Director described how the pandemic still impacts everyone: “If you want to really broaden participation, and you are really focused on underrepresented and underserved students, then you have to think about community and family. You cannot do this in isolation...educational systems that were already not equipped to do STEM before...need a true framework to engage families and communities in the OST space...it is now more important than ever to engage families.”

## Family Engagement Strategies Reimagined

The PE team broadened their focus on the quality of STEM programming and events to include their engagement with families. “One of the things we’re looking at is ‘What is the quality of the program?’ This says ‘What is the quality of your interaction with families and communities?’ and ‘Do you maintain that level of intentionality?’ ...It’s important to value community and family. That is something that has been eye-opening. People now say it is important that we value that in the same way as program quality.” The PE team described changes in their approach with families: “I am excited to leverage the tool...to be extremely intentional about checking boxes as we engage families. Did families have opportunities to tell us what they want to do with us? Did families have the opportunity to tell us what they are interested in? Have our resources been translated? Have we elevated the fact that expertise is not required in STEM? That they can do STEM alongside their child without that [expertise]. Did we elevate that expertise is not required to join PE or this STEM event for the family? If not, how could we do that better in the future?”

## Evidence of Success

The PE team succeeded in encouraging youth and families to have more voice in the program and talk more about STEM together. During the youth/family orientation for a winter STEM camp, “We were able to really talk to the families about what it really means to support the students while they are exploring PE. I had that framework [CARE] to use. [We told families] you don’t have to be a STEM expert, but here is how to support them [your children]. Everyday after camp, ask them what did they like, and what did they learn? ...We got families to commit to asking that question every day.” They increased the number of students served by 300% since the pandemic, but are still reaching out: “Once we do more best practices informed by this tool, I think we will be able to scale up in a sustainable way...The tool is helping us on our path toward meaningfully engaging families.”

