

RISE PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION

The Wagner Free Institute of Science



Overview

The Wagner Free Institute of Science (The Wagner) is a natural history museum and educational institution that is dedicated to free science education. Founded in 1855 in an era when most people did not have access to formal education and the field of science was rapidly advancing, the institution was a place where adults could learn about science. Programs were held in the evening to make them accessible and open to men and women. By the early 20th century, The Wagner started offering children's education and now serves about 10,000 children annually. Located in its original building – which is now a National Historic Landmark – in a low-income neighborhood in North Philadelphia, The Wagner serves the community through classes, talks, field trips, and adult- and children-specific programming. The Wagner's museum and library are also free and draw audiences from across the region and the country.

"We have a rather complex, multi-layered mission, but a big part of it is service to our community," said Susan Glassman, The Wagner's executive director.



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Susan Glassman, executive director at
The Wagner Free Institute of Science

One of the institution's longest-standing children's programs is GeoKids, an intensive science education program for children in the community. The Wagner currently partners with five neighborhood elementary schools to offer the program, which consists of year-long classroom teaching, museum tours, and field trips to local outdoor spaces. GeoKids has expanded to include SNAP (Science Nature Art in Philadelphia), a similar program for middle schoolers.

"It's really about being place-based and showing them this natural history museum is in your neighborhood and connecting them to nature and science and empowering them to participate in all those things," said Holly Clark, director of children's education at The Wagner.

The Wagner is further enhancing its impact as one of 15 organizations selected to participate in the RISE Partnership's "Implementation" phase.

The Wagner's work with RISE started with GeoKids, and subsequently logic models, surveys, and program evaluations were also developed for SNAP and some of the adult programs.

The museum always had anecdotal evidence from students, families, and community members about the value of its programs, but working with RISE helped to quantify impact.

"It's kind of hard to measure impact or quantify things because we're not doing a standardized test so it's hard to say, 'what did the kids learn?'" Clark said. "[RISE] has given us a concrete way to quantify the outcomes and focus the outcomes and measure the impacts."

The institution has long collected data on program satisfaction, but now has the tools, language, and questions to capture what people are learning from programs. For example, The Wagner has completely retooled the surveys given to students in the adult education classes, asking them for the first time if the class has had an impact on the way they understand science, the scientific process, or protocols.

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Holly Clark, director of children's education at
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Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, The Wagner was forced to shut its physical doors and pivot to virtual programming. RISE helped the museum navigate pandemic-related challenges surrounding data collection and working with minors, supporting the Philadelphia School District's Institutional Review Board approval process to allow the collection of evaluation surveys from teachers and students.

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Learnings from RISE were also applied to inform the museum's reopening

strategy. The Wagner took seriously the idea of feedback loops – collecting feedback and using it to shape and design programs – and created both a focus group and survey to understand visitors' comfort levels and needs. This resulted in a careful, targeted, and responsive reopening.

"We put the feedback loops to immediate use in a very practical way," said Glassman. "We're more targeted in our program design, but also incorporating more voices and perspectives in how we do it."

RISE helped develop a culture of evaluation at The Wagner. Not only did evaluation move beyond the original GeoKids program, but evaluation



principles like creating logic models, building staff buy-in, and especially engaging stakeholders became infused throughout the institution.

"We've engaged with the partners on a different level and I think that's resonated with them, even the kids and the teachers to be involved in that," said Clark. "We realized involving them in planning early on and getting another point of view could be really informative and useful."

"I think the biggest immediate change is more voices in the mix in the creation and the thinking about program ideas

from the beginning, instead of at the end," Glassman added. "It's a more dynamic process of creating the programs or planning the programs, even if we're just refining programs that already exist."

Overall, participation in RISE has been a very positive learning experience for the museum's leadership and staff.

"I just want to say that it's the best professional development opportunity I have ever had personally, but also for my staff," said Glassman. "It's been amazing."



Established in 2018, The RISE (Readiness, Implementation, Sustainability for Effectiveness) Partnership supports promising Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey nonprofit organizations. The RISE Partnership Evaluation Funders Learning Community is the first convening supported by a network of funders in the region. The Learning Community is a collaborative effort with the Barra Foundation, Campbell Soup Company, Horner Foundation, Nelson Foundation, Philadelphia Foundation, PropelNext/Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Scattergood Foundation, and United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey, and a partnership with YaleEVAL of The Consultation Center at Yale. The Partnership provides nonprofits with resources and training to strengthen organizational effectiveness and ensure a greater impact on social, economic, health, and educational conditions in communities, including the effects of racism, intergenerational poverty and trauma.