



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2025.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: James City County

Program Title: Kiwanis Kids Idea Studio

Program Category: Regional Collaboration

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Scott Stevens

Title: County Administrator

Signature: 

Title of Program:

Kiwanis Kids Idea Studio: A Public-Private Innovation for Early Learning and Community Impact

County:

James City County

Overview:

The **Kiwanis Kids Idea Studio** at the James City County Library is a groundbreaking early learning and family engagement space designed to address school readiness, promote hands-on STEAM and literacy experiences, and transform the role of public libraries in post-pandemic community recovery. Launched in 2021, the Idea Studio was made possible through a visionary public-private partnership between James City County, Williamsburg Regional Library (WRL), the Friends of WRL Foundation, and a range of local civic and business partners, including the Kiwanis Club of Williamsburg, the Kiwanis Club of Toano, the Kiwanis Club of Colonial Capital, the Shops at Carolina Furniture of Williamsburg, Noah's Ark Veterinary Hospital, and Publix Super Market Charities.

This space has proven to be not just an educational resource, but a powerful driver of community participation and family literacy, welcoming over 142,000 visitors in 2024 alone and helping boost picture book circulation at the branch by 89% since the renovation.

Problem and Innovative Solution:

The original children's area at the James City County Library, opened in 1996, no longer met the educational and developmental needs of today's families. Static displays and outdated furnishings lacked the dynamic, hands-on elements essential for early childhood learning. This was further compounded by the learning loss and school readiness challenges stemming from COVID-19 closures, which disproportionately affected preschool-aged children and those from underserved backgrounds.

To address these challenges, James City County and WRL reimagined the space as a 21st-century early learning environment, integrating interactive exhibits, pretend play areas, and accessible design features. The resulting **Kiwanis Kids Idea Studio** blends the best elements of children's museums and libraries to create a no-cost, high-impact destination for families.

Key features include:

- A floor projection play area, where children can engage with responsive digital games that promote movement and coordination.
- A giant illuminated pixel peg wall, where children create colorful designs while developing spatial awareness and fine motor skills.
- A LEGO wall and moveable magnetic gear wall for engineering experimentation and open-ended creativity.
- A sensory corner with a bubble tube and other calming elements for all children, especially children that are neurodivergent.

- Window seat reading nooks with comfortable cushions and ample space for a caregiver and child.
- A magnetic ball wall with ramps, shoots, spinners, and other elements, allowing children to explore the principles of gravity and kinetic energy through trial and error.

In addition, the Idea Studio includes a custom-designed “Village” area, which promotes pretend play and social-emotional learning:

- A child-sized house, with furnishings supported by The Shops at Carolina Furniture of Williamsburg, encourages dramatic play and cooperation, and supports language development.
- An imaginary veterinary clinic, outfitted by Noah’s Ark Veterinary Hospital, introduces children to care and empathy through role play.
- A market play area, stocked with toy groceries, displays, a cash register stand, and mini grocery carts donated by Publix Super Market Charities, supports early math, language, and life skills. This represents the first time Publix Charities has supported a library-based market play space, and reflects the program’s strong local business engagement.

This diverse array of learning tools encourages cognitive, emotional, and social development—laying the foundation for kindergarten readiness and long-term educational success.

Intergovernmental and Private Sector Cooperation:

The Kiwanis Kids Idea Studio stands as a premier example of meaningful intergovernmental

cooperation and private sector engagement. James City County and WRL collaborated on facility renovation and long-term planning, while the local Kiwanis Clubs and the Friends of WRL Foundation led a major fundraising campaign, raising over \$200,000 to fully outfit the space. In-kind donations from local businesses added not only material value, but deepened the community's sense of investment and pride.

This spirit of collaboration extended across sectors:

- Library staff and County administration ensured accessibility and safety standards.
- Educators and parents were consulted throughout the design process to ensure developmental appropriateness.
- Local civic organizations and businesses contributed funding, furnishings, and thematic play components.

The project demonstrates how localities can amplify public value through creative funding and shared vision.

Model for Other Localities:

The Idea Studio offers a scalable, replicable framework for other communities seeking to transform underutilized library spaces into modern, high-impact learning environments. The program showcases how a modest capital investment, when paired with community-driven design and strategic partnerships, can yield a deeply impactful public resource.

Key takeaways include:

- Structuring public-private partnerships to support educational infrastructure.
- Leveraging civic groups (e.g., Kiwanis) and local businesses for sponsorship and thematic play area support.
- Designing for school readiness and post-pandemic learning recovery, especially for communities working to close early learning gaps.

Importantly, the Idea Studio proves that by reimagining what's possible within existing community assets you can achieve transformative results.

Demonstrated Impact:

The measurable impact of the Kiwanis Kids Idea Studio has been profound:

- Picture book circulation at the James City County Library has increased by 89% since the renovated space opened in 2021, signaling a significant rise in family engagement and early literacy.
- In 2024 alone, over 142,000 children and families visited the Idea Studio—demonstrating the space's role as a vital community hub and affirming strong public demand for experiential learning.
- Families from across the region, including neighboring counties, now travel specifically to visit the Idea Studio, making it a destination attraction and a point of civic pride.
- Local businesses benefit by increased traffic to the area

Beyond the numbers, parents report that their children are more eager to read, explore, and return to the library—helping reestablish the library as a trusted community resource after the disruption of the pandemic.

Innovation and Local Customization:

While inspired by best practices in library and museum design, the Kiwanis Kids Idea Studio reflects James City County's unique customization based on local input, available partnerships, and community values. The program directly supports regional priorities for early childhood education, public access, and economic inclusivity. It also recognizes the library's essential role in rebuilding trust and learning capacity in the aftermath of COVID-related school closures.

The space is free to access, barrier-free, and intentionally inclusive—welcoming children of all abilities and backgrounds to explore, play, and grow. Through this transformation, the James City County Library has reaffirmed its position as a cornerstone of lifelong learning and a model of how local government can lead with imagination and purpose.

Conclusion:

Step into the Kiwanis Kids Idea Studio at the James City County Library on any given day and you'll hear the joyful sounds of children laughing and playing—the unmistakable sound of children learning. The space is alive with discovery, creativity, and connection, providing families

with free access to high-quality early learning experiences that support school readiness and community well-being.

The Kiwanis Kids Idea Studio is a shining example of what local government can achieve through innovation, collaboration, and responsiveness to community needs. It offers a blueprint for other communities to follow—one that centers early childhood development, educational equity, and public-private partnership as foundations for lasting impact.

As James City County continues to build a future where every child has the tools to succeed, the Idea Studio stands as both a beacon of possibility and a proof of concept: when we invest in our youngest citizens, the return benefits the entire community.

