



# WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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**For release:**  
April 23, 2026

## **Room To Grow: The Present and Future of the Betty Brinn Children’s Museum**

*Analysis of operations, comparison with peer museums aims to inform relocation effort*

As Betty Brinn Children’s Museum leaders consider moving to a new location, they have an opportunity to expand their offerings and further enrich the lives of children and families in the Milwaukee area, a new report shows.

As museum leaders refine their vision for the ideal facility and begin the site selection process, completing additional modeling of their projected budget and target attendance levels would help support a successful relocation, the Wisconsin Policy Forum report finds.

Betty Brinn Children’s Museum has called Milwaukee’s downtown lakefront home for the last 31 years, offering hands-on, interactive learning opportunities for Wisconsin’s youngest children. But with its current lease set to expire in 2032, museum leaders have begun planning for a move into a new facility – at an as-yet-undetermined site – that can better serve children through expanded programs, exhibits, and administrative space.

A new [Wisconsin Policy Forum report](#) finds that the impact of the current museum is notable given its small size, number of permanent exhibits, and annual budget relative to peer museums in other states. Even so, the future relocation is “an opportunity to transform the institution into a beloved regional attraction with even greater impact on early childhood learning,” the report finds.

### **A look at museum budget, operations**

This study was commissioned by Betty Brinn Children’s Museum (BBCM) to provide insights on potential paths forward for the museum. It analyzes information about BBCM and six peer institutions in Buffalo, NY; Denver, CO; Kansas City, MO; Madison, WI; New Orleans, LA; and Pittsburgh, PA.

Our analysis of BBCM operations and finances found that its annual revenue and spending both are about \$3 million in a typical year. The largest revenue streams in 2024 were general contributions (23% of total revenues) and admissions (23%).

The largest spending category was “museum experience” (36% of the total budget), which includes the cost of exhibits, educational programming, field trips, and special events. Administrative and back-of-house office services were the second largest spending item (23%).

### **Comparing to peers**

Stemming from a vision of museum accessibility for all children, and in light of the significant percentage of Milwaukee children living in households with incomes below the federal poverty level, BBCM offers a variety of free or reduced-price experiences through its Community Access Programs. These have seen steady attendance growth since 2021 and represented 32% of total admissions in

2025. Total museum attendance, meanwhile, has increased slightly since 2019, after seeing a huge drop during the COVID-19 pandemic, then a steady rebound afterward.

Exploring six peer children’s museums throughout the United States, we found their exhibit spaces ranged in size from 15,000 to 30,000 square feet. BBCM has 10,500 square feet of exhibit space, making it the smallest of the group. Additionally, nearly all of the peers have higher annual visitor totals of between 200,000 and 525,000, compared with 170,000 for BBCM. BBCM’s annual operating costs were on the low end of the group. Milwaukee also has a greater number of children living in poverty than the other six communities, and thus may have greater demand for reduced-price admissions.

### **Insights for the relocation process**

Since 2020, BBCM has been navigating a period of significant transition, beginning with pandemic-related closures and continuing through the reopening period. Then 2023 brought the arrival of a new chief executive officer, Tina Quealy, who has overseen an organizational restructuring.

Meanwhile, museum officials are shepherding the monumental effort of planning a relocation. This initiative includes site selection, discerning whether to build or renovate, designing a capital campaign, and many other components. To support these efforts, the report offers insights for the planning process, as informed by interviews with leaders at peer institutions. Top recommendations include:

- Articulate a bold, dynamic vision that captivates donors and supports a capital campaign structured to fully fund the project, accounting for inflationary and scope-related cost growth.
- Plan for room to grow, as the museum may wish to expand and make changes five to 15 years down the road when it becomes clear that visitors desire change, but it’s too soon for another capital campaign.
- Anticipate at least four to six years from launching the capital campaign to opening doors at the new museum.
- Analyze annual visitor patterns – including first-time and repeat visits – and membership renewal rates to support targeted marketing and data-driven adjustments to exhibits, graphics, artwork, and programming.
- Recognize that BBCM is not benefitting from the kind of public funding provided to some of its peers, and attempt to adjust and appeal to donors to help with this additional hurdle.
- Implement a budgeting process that ensures general admission and membership pricing, as well as other forms of revenue such as foundation underwriting, offset the cost of free and reduced-price admissions.

Given that Milwaukee has one of the highest poverty rates among the major cities served by peer museums – and low student test scores by grade four – the report concludes that a key factor to consider is how to continue the museum’s focus on ensuring enrichment activities for all Milwaukee children, regardless of financial status. This is because access to high quality institutions that support early childhood education is a long-term investment that could improve the lives of children and help pave the way for a more socially and economically sustainable metro Milwaukee region.

“As museum officials position the organization as an important contributor to early childhood education, the accessibility of the museum to all children regardless of their financial status cannot be ignored,” the report concludes. The Herzfeld Foundation provided funding for this report. [Click here](#) to read the full report.

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