

How Dramatic Results Supports STEAM Ecosystems

Mary Dell'Erba and Matt Weyer

Dramatic Results was founded in 1992 and began offering programming to students a year later. In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education awarded them their first multi-year grant for the [Math in a Basket](#) program. In 2010, Dramatic Results began a pilot program for STEAM professional development for kindergarten through fifth grade teachers. The Art of Building a City Project launched in 2018 to promote student achievement through out-of-school STEAM education using an ecosystem model.

Building on this model, the STEAM Ecosystem Expansion Demonstration Project was established in 2021. This project supports communities in creating and sustaining high-quality STEAM programs for marginalized students and in building arts-integrated pathways for a more diverse workforce through capacity building.

Who's Involved

Dramatic Results comprises six full-time staff members, 10 teaching artists and seven board members. The [STEAM Ecosystem Expansion Demonstration Project](#) is a partnership between Dramatic Results and teams of public libraries, school districts and teacher preparation programs in three communities: Long Beach, **California**; Fond du Lac, **Wisconsin**, and Prince Frederick, **Maryland**.

Dramatic Results has established a formal agreement with the primary partners in each community to establish protocols for collaboration and to support institutions in hiring additional staff as needed.

How It's Funded

As an organization, Dramatic Results continues to be supported through a combination of [public and private funders](#), including the U.S. Department of Education, state and local arts agencies, school districts and private foundations. Costs for Dramatic Results programming is tailored to the budget and needs of each program, and the operating budget includes designated funds for Title I schools to offset a portion of the program costs.

The total budget for the five-year STEAM Ecosystem Expansion Demonstration Project is just over \$10 million. The U.S. Department of Education funds 82% of the project and additional funding is provided by lead institutions with private funds or in-kind donations. Nearly \$500,000 is budgeted for program evaluation.

How It Works

Generally, Dramatic Results operates [in-school](#), [out-of-school](#), [summer learning](#) and [professional development](#) programs. All programs use hands-on arts learning to explore STEM subjects and leverage design thinking and social and emotional learning. Programs are offered for students in kindergarten through eighth grade and are customizable to meet the unique needs of students, including general education, special education, gifted education and [Specifically Designed Academic Instruction in English](#) strategies. Each community has established individualized priorities to meet the identified students.

The STEAM Ecosystem Expansion Demonstration Project is guided by four strategies, which include:

- 1| Partnerships among community and education institutions.
- 2| Pillars of professional development to address challenges around cross-sector collaboration.
- 3| Programs that engage students and educators in arts-based strategies and fosters self and social awareness.
- 4| Public outreach intended to promote the launch of STEAM ecosystems in more communities.

Interviews With Program Leaders

Through an interview with Executive Director Ryan Nuckolls-Rosa, Curriculum Manager Tori-Ann Hampton and Program Manager Brenda Cruz, the following themes and ideas emerged:

- Aligning and embedding STEAM within communities.
- Creating space for continuous reflection and improvement.
- Building capacity and adapting mindsets.
- Sustaining and growing STEAM opportunities.

Aligning and Embedding STEAM Within Communities

During the Art of Building a City Project, Dramatic Results served as the central hub organization supporting their local STEAM ecosystem and providing professional development. For the STEAM Ecosystem Expansion Demonstration Project, Dramatic Results made a strategic decision to transfer this role to community actors (i.e., libraries and institutions of higher education). This shift allows the programs to adapt to community needs, target student populations and take better advantage of resources — such as facilities, materials, technology and funding — offered by the institutions. As a result, Dramatic Results' role is focused on supporting partnerships, connecting ecosystems and building capacity directly within the communities.

Creating Space for Continuous Reflection and Improvement

Dramatic Results staff emphasized the importance of dedicating time and space to co-create solutions and share decision-making with students, educators and partners. This allows the ecosystem to practice problem-solving skills and build trust among partners, while ensuring that student and educator voices are present in conversations about improvement. Staff emphasized the values of practicing clear, constructive communication and reducing outcome urgency to create space for this reflection to occur.

Building Capacity and Adapting Mindsets

Dramatic Results integrates design thinking both within classroom and organizational practices. Design thinking is a human-centered, problem-solving process that guides practitioners through multiple iterations of an idea until a solution is reached. This requires flexibility, openness to ongoing conversations and making quick shifts when necessary. This is not always aligned with the ways public institutions operate — especially those with rigidly defined decision-making processes and procedures.

Dramatic Results aims to build capacity for this method of planning and implementing at the institutional and classroom levels. Staff create safety for educators and students to share divergent solutions to problems — especially those that are least likely to be successful — to inspire creativity and innovation. Cultivating safety to fail, remaining open to unexpected outcomes and dedicating time for co-planning and co-teaching are key ingredients to adapting mindsets within and outside of classrooms.

Sustaining and Growing STEAM Opportunities

While the initial timeline for the STEAM Ecosystem Expansion Demonstration Project is through September 2026, Dramatic Results begins collaborations with sustainability and long-term success at the forefront. This is achieved in three ways:

- 1| Integrating STEAM goals with broader missions.
- 2| Building capacity for financial management and marketing.
- 3| Supporting sites in accessing state and county funding.

Aligning the goals and mission of the STEAM ecosystem with broader institutional values helps ensure that the opportunities available to students and educators through the STEAM Ecosystem Expansion Demonstration Project continue beyond the duration of the grant. Dramatic Results also trains partners on financial management, building partnerships and developing marketing strategies to support the ecosystem in the long term. Centering libraries as the hub institutions within the STEAM ecosystems also opens opportunities to access state and county funding that would not be available to Dramatic Results independently.

Considerations for State and Local Leaders

State and local leaders may consider the following ideas for enhancing STEAM education in their states:

- Integrating STEAM goals within publicly funded institutions like libraries and higher education.
- Providing flexible programmatic and reporting deadlines to reduce pressure to achieve outcomes within a specific timeframe or area.
- Encouraging evaluation requirements that are intended to be used for improvement and reflection and fund evaluation as a project component. The Dramatic Results model establishes opportunities for educators and practitioners to directly contribute to problem solving and decision making.

Additional Resources

Dramatic Results hosts extensive resources on their website for [educators](#) and [communities](#). The website also includes deeper information on program evaluation and [impact](#).

See additional case studies in the series:

[Key Lessons from Effective K-12 STEAM Education Organizations.](#)



About the Authors

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As a policy director, Matt focuses on early care and education issues. Prior to joining the Education Commission of the States, Matt worked for over four years covering ECE issues for the National Conference of State Legislatures, earned his doctorate in educational leadership and policy studies from the University of Denver and was a kindergarten teacher in a bilingual classroom for Denver Public Schools. When Matt is not working, he can be found snowboarding or mountain biking in beautiful Colorado. Contact Matt at mweyer@ecs.org.