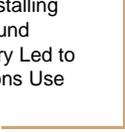
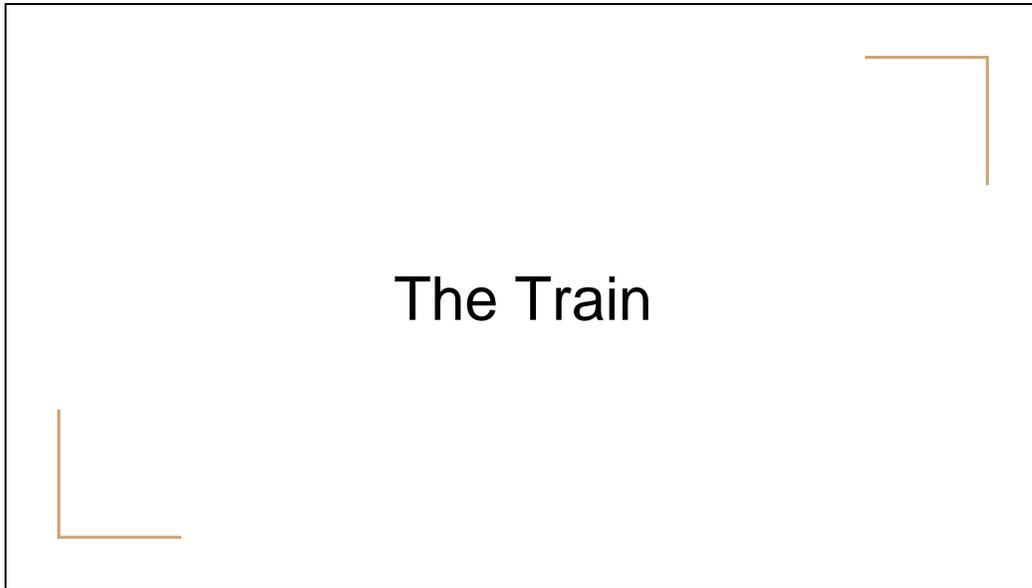




# Off the Rails

How the Crazy Idea of Installing  
Real Outdoor Playground  
Equipment Inside the Library Led to  
a Rethinking of How Patrons Use  
Our Space





The Library Station opened with strong transportation theme, to highlight Springfield's Frisco Railway heritage. The keystone of this theme was a huge (12 feet long, 8 feet high, 5 feet wide) scale replica of a train in the children's department. The idea was that it would serve as a quiet reading nook for children. What a cute idea! Wow! Right away there were problems.



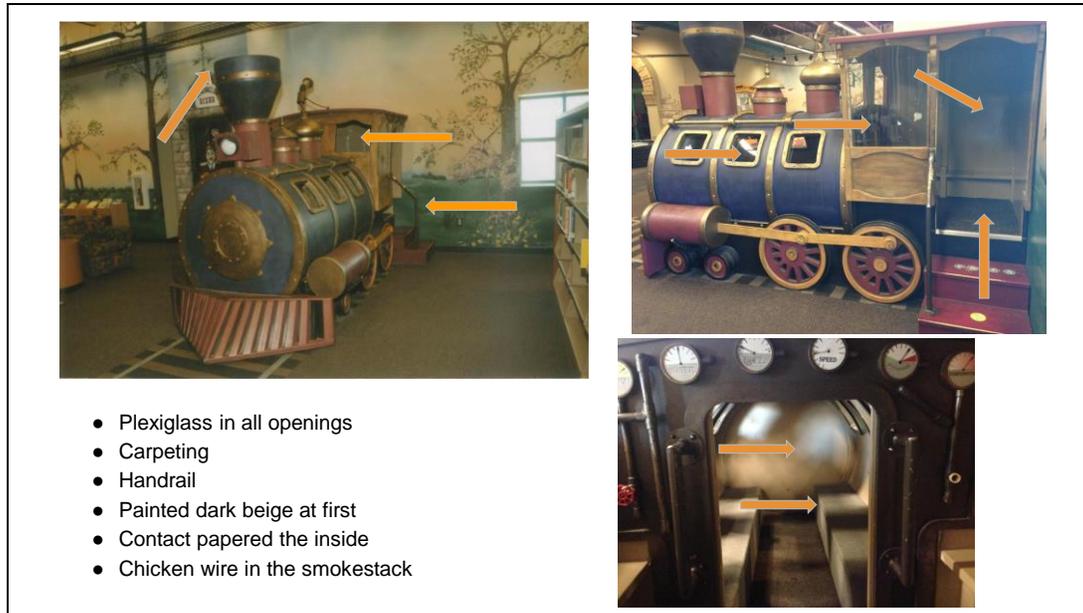
The train on opening day, 2003.

As you can see, children quickly figured out that giant model trains are FUN!

It was never used as a reading nook. Kids immediately recognized this as the world's greatest pretend play/climbing device. They climbed all over this thing. They climbed out the windows, they climbed up on the roof, one kid climbed INTO the smokestack, which is really cool but oh man so dangerous.

Other problems: The windows were angled in such a way that if a kid got all the way in and laid down on the floor, you couldn't see them. The inside is very small. An adult cannot sit upright. Some kids (and adults) got claustrophobic and stuck. EVERYONE bonked their head on the step up from the inside. The controls popped off. Kids had a lot of fun bringing books and toys into the train and then leaving them there, so we adults had to haul them out at closing. You know what toddlers sometimes do in secluded places? Yes, that's right. This train got peed in many times. We quickly realized teenagers could not be allowed in the train together because it's so secluded and cozy in there. Graffiti.

Slide 4



Glassed in the windows. (which were then always covered in snot.)

Added a hand rail.

Chicken wire in the smokestack.

Reinforce rails on the outside.

Repainted the inside (it was white).

Carpeted the inside. Eventually papered the inside.

Sanded down benches.

ALL THESE REPAIRS WERE DONE BY SGCL'S BUILDINGS AND GROUNDS TEAM.

Slide 5



**Complete overhaul in 2008 for \$2,735**, (with a \$700 discount because the company thought this was “forever” work). Repairs to bottom of kiosk post (?), repaint handrail, repair interior hardware and gadgets, repair air pistol to train, repair worn paint on train, repair worn paint and add MDF (medium density fiberboard), repair tear in urethan hardware, repaint steps, repair mock light on train, replace missing hardware, repaint interior, repair whistle on train, repair train piston. **Basically, repainting and foam reconstruction. Replacing broken molded pieces.**

So all in all, it's cost almost **\$17,000 to maintain over 10 years**. Yeesh, guys. For comparison sake, our programming budget over that same period was under \$3000-- for the whole 10-year period! It's weird how you can be so frugal in one area and then let this thing keep bleeding, ya know?

And by 2013, it needed even more repairs.

I got a estimate for the repairs we needed in 2013, which included MANY of the same repairs we had done in **2008, for \$4,500**. (By the way, this is not Garage Graphics fault! This is what baked foam is! It's not for play, it's for display. BY contrast, the face around our children's staff desk is also made of baked foam, and we haven't had to do any repairs on it.) So that was our trajectory.

Realistically, we would need to find \$3000-\$5000 in the budget every 5 years for as long as we wanted to maintain this train. This seemed unrealistic, to put it mildly.

## Slightly less expensive than a real railroad!

Original design/installation in 2003: \$14,000

Refurbishment in 2008: \$2,735

Quote for refurbishment in 2013: \$4,500

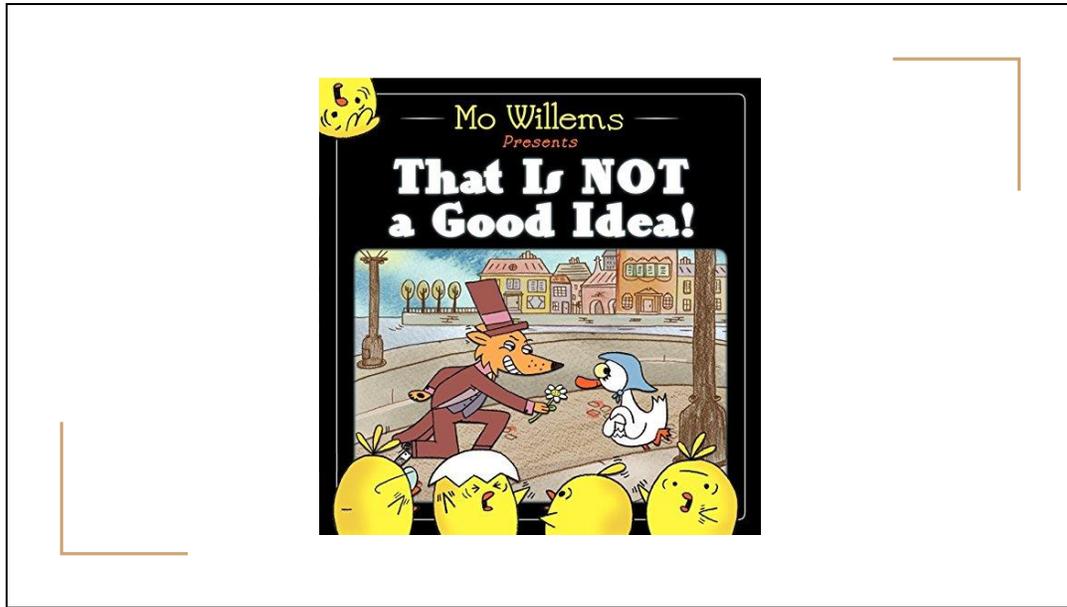
Time spent by buildings and grounds team (40 hours a year over 15 years) \$6,000

Price to maintain the train over a 15-year period:

**\$27,235**

What was wrong with us? What were we thinking? Were we really considering sinking this much money into this thing? At this point, you are all probably thinking the same thing:

Slide 7



Ha ha, children's librarian humor. But really, why? It's important to look into, because I know we're not the only library who has ever spent too much money on a thing.

## Sunk-Cost Fallacy

Reasoning that further investment is warranted on the fact that the resources already invested will be lost otherwise, not taking into consideration the overall losses involved in the further investment.

**Also, love**



Sunk cost fallacy. Should we keep throwing good money after bad? Why were we so reluctant to part with this albatross? (dramatic, TED-style pause) Because we loved it. Our patrons loved it. For all its obvious flaws and its great expense and its dangerousness and unsanitary conditions and difficulty in cleaning and all the toys lost inside and all the heads bonked and all the kids who hid from their parents inside it, we loved the thing! Take one more look at this beautiful behemoth, because it is gorgeous.

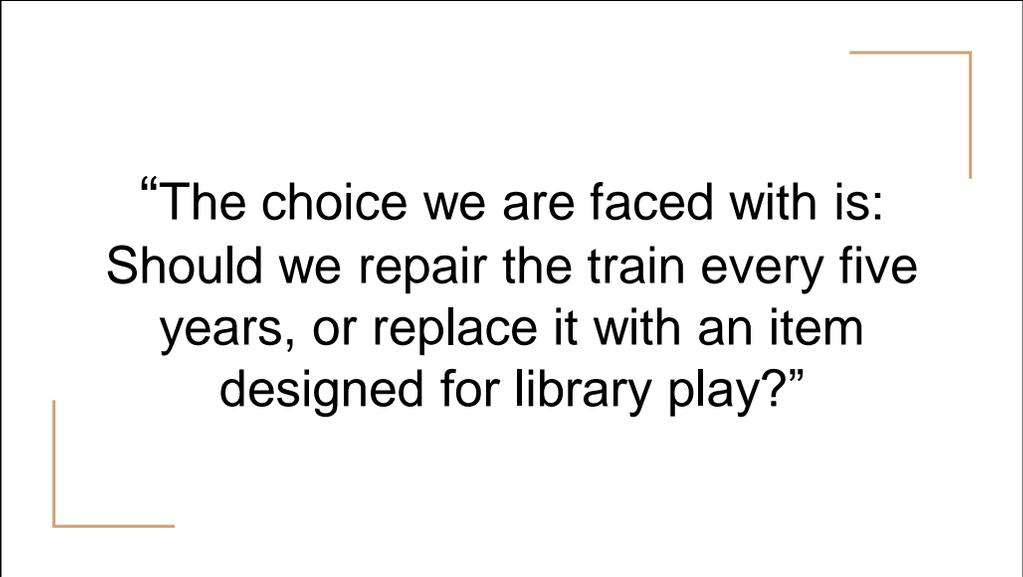
Slide 9



Kids ran into the department shouting “Choo choo! All aboard! The train, the train!” This is the kind of joy it inspired. That kind of joy is INTOXICATING. To get rid of it was unthinkable. To replace it was almost as risky. We knew that if we messed this up, we would make children cry. (You laugh, but I mean it. I take that seriously.)

We knew that if we replaced it, we would make children cry. But if we kept up this schedule of repairs we might make them cry because, ya know...we’d go bankrupt.

So I did what anyone in my position would do. I tossed the decision up to my director.



“The choice we are faced with is:  
Should we repair the train every five  
years, or replace it with an item  
designed for library play?”

I ended my budget request to my director with this line. If you know Regina Cooper, you know she is a pragmatic woman, and her choice was to replace the train. She gave me a budget of around around \$16,000. But little did we know that we wouldn't end up replacing it with an item designed for LIBRARY play...What we would discover is that there was an unnamed third option. A THIRD RAIL! HA HA HA, TRAIN JOKES.



This is a great time to be looking for library play structures! There's a new focus on early literacy, a new awareness that children learn through play, and lots of libraries have really awesome structures. Many of you guys probably have EXQUISITE features! What do you have that's cool?



If you've been following this area of design, you know there is one hot name right now: Burgeon. Library Journal's 2014 "What's Hot" list. This was 2014, guys!

I coveted a Burgeon piece with my hipster heart. I inquired about designing a custom train for us. They sent me back some options.



## PLA Bookmobile

Made on spec, we would  
get it after it debuted at  
PLA.

5 feet wide, 13 feet long!  
(I saw it IRL and it's about 5 feet tall,  
which they didn't say at the time.)

**\$40,0**

Plus \$1,800 shipping  
**00** \$2,300  
Installation



## What about a similarly sized custom train, though?

\$40,000 fabrication

\$10,000 design fee

\$2,300 installation

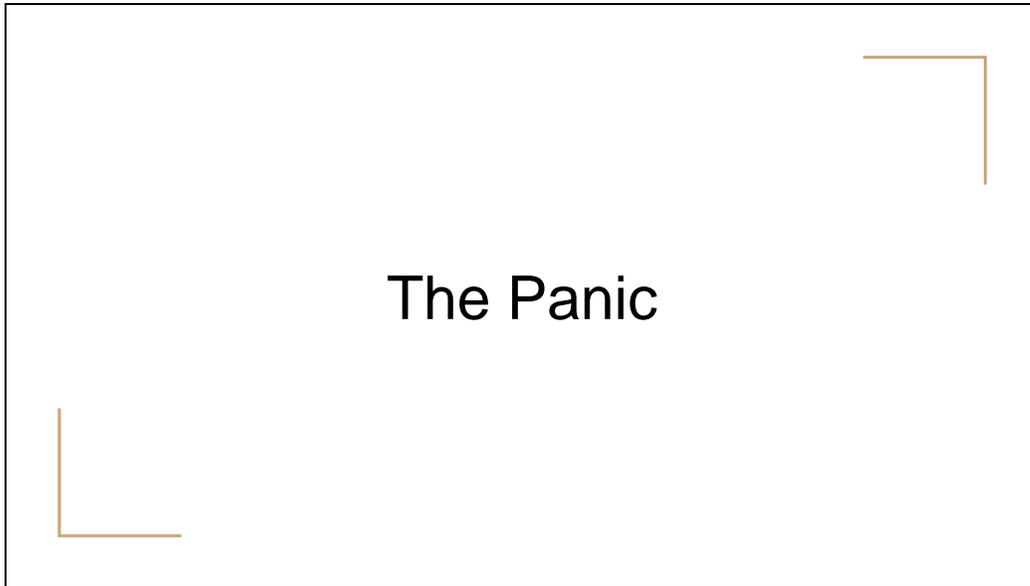
\$1,800 shipping

**\$54,100**

Remember, we were worried about breaking all the kids' hearts! What we wanted was A TRAIN. Not a much smaller car, not a slightly smaller bookmobile, a train. Well...it was pricey. Really pricey.

At this point my request had gone from "Hey, could I have \$4,000 to fix up the old train" to "I need 13X that amount to buy a custom hand-made hipster train." My director said No. And she gave me a budget cap: \$16,000.

She asked me to do some comparison shopping. And she suggested I look outside of library design companies.



So now the old train is rapidly disintegrating because we're not spending any more money on it. I don't have a new train lined up. My best options are too expensive. I have NOTHING. Forget kids crying. I'm crying!

In which I visit a local children's museum I have heard has a cool life-size car, and then I found out it's just an actual car. I can't replace the train with an actual train. So I moved on to Frantic Googling! And I came across this:

Slide 17



This is a custom train in Fort Meyers FL. Cool, right? It's made by Landscape Structures, a playground equipment company. It's too big for us, and of course, it's outside, but...this is a lot closer to what we actually want. I contacted the company to ask if they made a train similar to what we needed, and somewhere around our budget. They didn't, so they designed us one to our exact specifications, for free. FREE!

Slide 18



Look at this: The wheels turn. There are interactive color elements.



There's a steering wheel and a gear panel. There is a mirror on the inside. It encourages pretend play. This is like everything Burgeon was promising, but without the hipster markup!

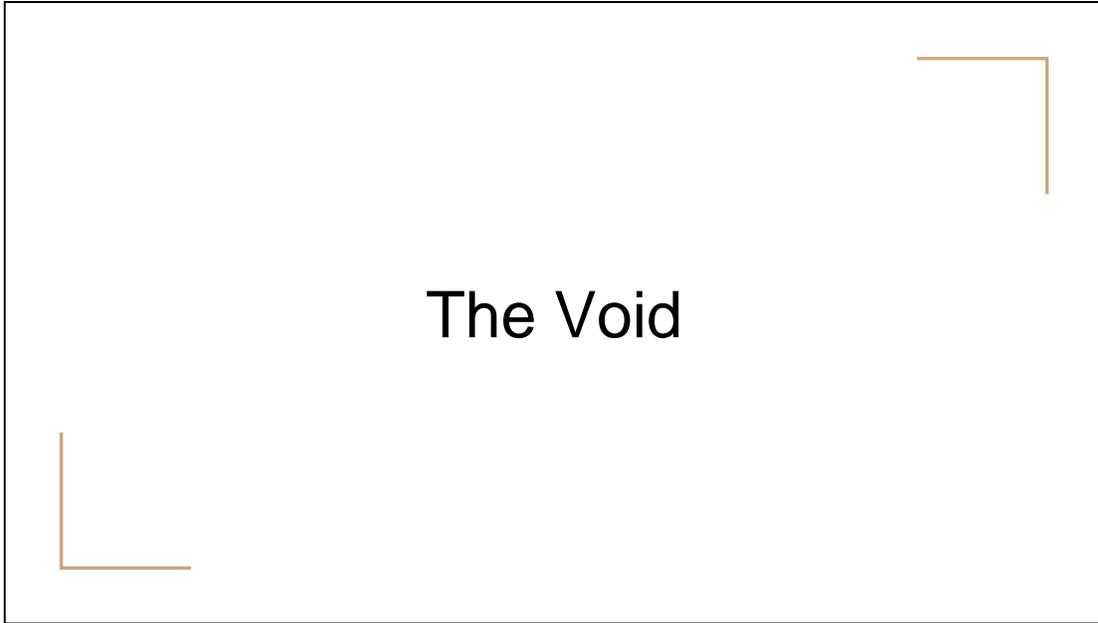
## Landscape Structures custom train

\$15,000 design and fabrication

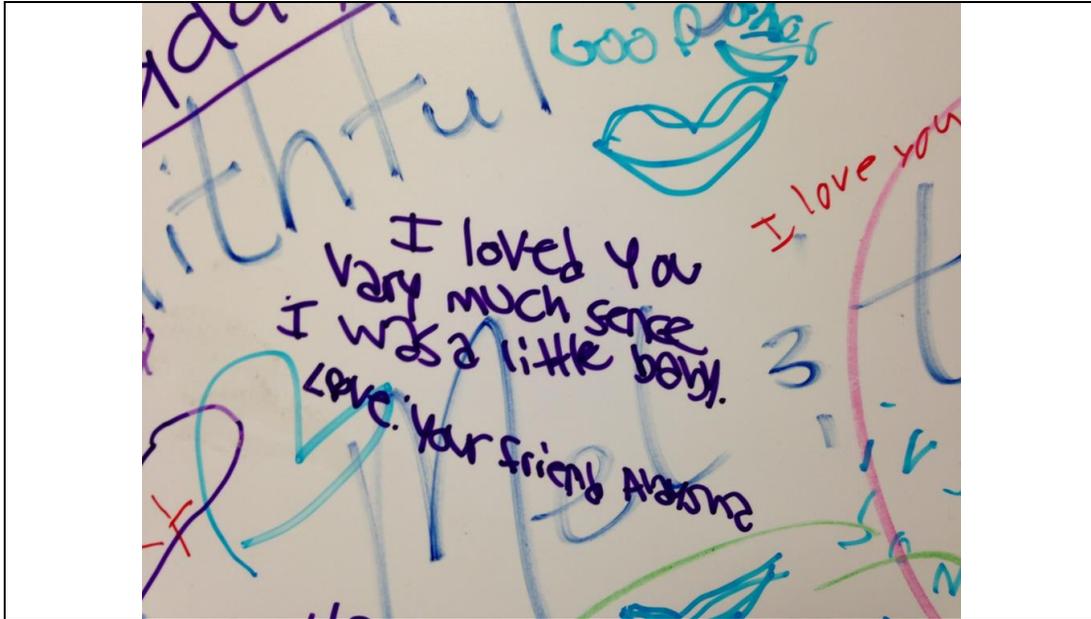
\$475 shipping

**\$15,475**

For that price we could have bought almost  $\frac{2}{3}$  of a Burgon "baltic birch" car!



Show sign and train signatures poster. We took our patrons' feelings seriously, because their feelings about us are what determine our value to the community.





Slide 24



They let us install it ourselves!





Look at this! It looks exactly like the mock-up!

Immediate improvements: It's open on top, so no more kids getting trapped. Parents immediately noticed this feature. The floor is not carpeted-- its' designed to be outside, so any spills, pee or otherwise, can be quickly wiped up. It's not slippery.

Slide 27



Ha ha, it's a manual transmission train. Look at that fun steering wheel!

We were thrilled. But the important thing is the patrons' reaction. We were very worried. But!

Slide 28



Here is the first kid through the train!

Slide 29



Look at those kids playing! Look at that mom safely supervising!

Slide 30



Look at this adorable baby! Wow, what a cutie!

Slide 31



The old train didn't have any cool features for very early learning.

Slide 32



And look. Stolen from instagram



Benefits: Durable. Custom designed. \$16,000. Learning through play-- playgrounds have known this for YEARS!

The real benefit has been that we don't have to tell kids "Get off the train" 30 times a day. That's great for morale! It is really life-changing to get to say Yes. Not only is it good for staff, it's good for our patrons. For many kids, that was their ONLY interaction with library staff. Hearing No. I don't want to tell kids no. Libraries should be about expanding minds, and you do that through saying Yes, AND. Yes, and..."

Yes, you can play on the train, and let's find you some books about trains!

Yes, you can play on the train, and, oh, are you a train princess? Wow!

Yes, you can climb up and there and wow, you're a good climber. Do you want to find some books about animals who are good climbers?

At the risk of sounding too Mr. Rogers-- I want to kids to know that I like them just as they are. I like them as KIDS. Climbing, pretending, jumping, imagining, rambunctious kids. Yes, you can play on the train and yes we can find you some books and yes using your imagination is good and yes I can help you use your imagination and your body and your mind in the best way you can.

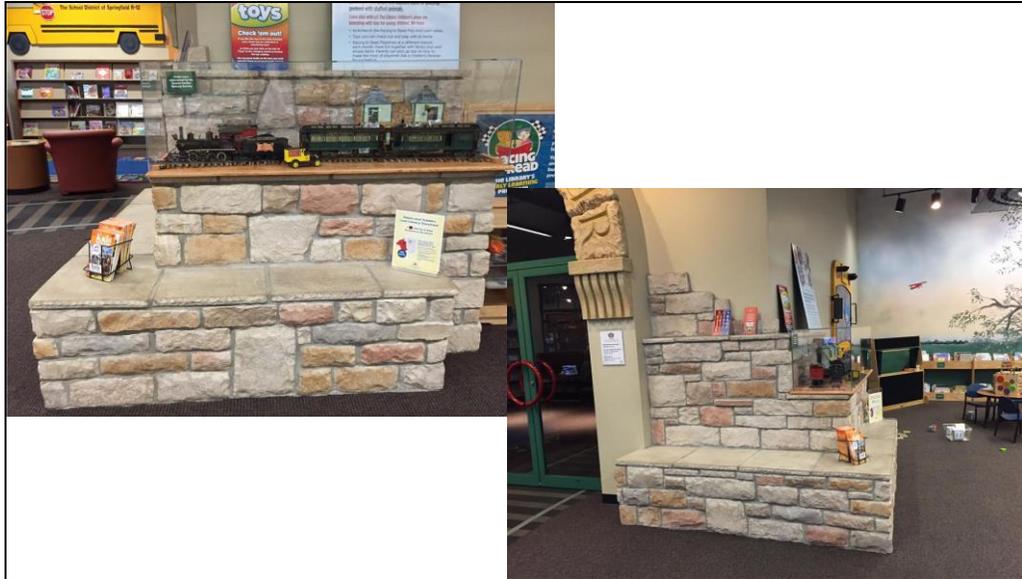
## Mixed messages



Really, it all boils down to mixed messages. What does a feature look like to kids? The train looked like a climbing feature, so we put in a climbing feature. But we're not CRAZY. We don't just say yes ALL the time. Just as much as we're reasonably able :)

Here's a feature we had that sent mixed signals. We had this cool rock wall display. Now...put on your "I'm 4 and the world is my playground" glasses. Does this look like giant stairs to you? Of course! We were constantly telling kids to stop climbing the wall! It's made of sharp rocks, and it's about 5 feet tall, so a fall from the top (onto the sharp rocks) would be really really bad! We couldn't think of a way to make it safer. I asked if we could remove it. But we came up with a better solution.

Slide 35



We permanently mounted a display case that makes it unclimbable.

And look, it has a really interesting and cool model train inside!

Slide 36



Now we don't have to tell kids No, get off the rocks. Now we see kids peering into a display case, mesmerized by tiny little trains, learning and growing, and having a great time at the Library Station, the train library.