



President and Chief Executive Officer  
Please Touch Museum  
Philadelphia, PA

## THE SEARCH

Please Touch Museum (Museum or PTM) seeks a visionary, strategic, and exceptional organizational leader to serve as its next president and CEO (president).

Founded in 1976 by a Montessori educator, PTM is the only children's museum in the sixth largest city in the nation, Philadelphia, and has been voted a USA TODAY/10 Best Readers' Choice Top 10 children's museum four years in a row. Located in Memorial Hall, a National Historic Landmark and one of only two remaining buildings from the Centennial Exposition in 1876, the Museum's mission is to change a child's life as they discover the power of learning through play.

Today, the Museum welcomes 400,000 to 500,000 visitors annually, of which 30 percent attend for free or reduced admission. With two floors of fun, the Museum features over 15 permanent exhibits for children to engage with, as well as literacy, science, and creative and performing arts programs. PTM has a staff of 80 employees, and a point of pride for the Museum is that 66 percent of its staff identify as people of color and/or are members of the LGBTQ+ community. A leader in informal and early childhood learning, the Museum partners with regional colleges and universities on research studies. Noted as a standard of excellence in the field, it is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums.

The next president will join the Museum at a pivotal time. PTM is developing a comprehensive Interpretive Plan that will outline a strategic framework and implementation roadmap to enhance the play-based visitor experience for multigenerational learners across exhibits and programs. Last year, the Museum began a \$4.2 million marble floor renovation project in advance of the building's 150th anniversary celebration in 2026. Given that the building's celebration coincides with the 250th-anniversary celebration

of American independence and the 50th anniversary of the Museum, 2026 will be a momentous year for both the Museum and Philadelphia.

Reporting to the board of trustees, the next president will build on the Museum's strong foundation and momentum and lead the Museum through exciting projects, initiatives, and celebrations. They will work to ensure the long-term financial and operational sustainability of the Museum, build a best-in-class development strategy in partnership with the chief development officer, uphold the Museum's position as an innovative leader in play-based learning, and ensure that the Museum is an active contributor and catalyst in Philadelphia and beyond. Utilizing managerial expertise and emotional intelligence, they will partner with and support Museum staff, champion diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and accessibility, and crystallize the Museum as the third place of learning for families.

Please Touch Museum has retained Isaacson, Miller, a leading national search firm, to assist with this recruitment. Inquiries, nominations, and applications, in the form of a CV and cover letter, should be sent in strict confidence to the firm as indicated at the end of this document.

## ABOUT PLEASE TOUCH MUSEUM

### History

In the 1970s, Montessori educator Portia Sperr experienced the lack of museums and institutions in Philadelphia willing to host her five-year-old students for hands-on learning opportunities outside of her classroom. As a result, she gathered a group of idealistic families, and the idea for the Please Touch Museum was born. PTM was founded on a simple premise: to create a place where children could explore the world through self-directed curiosity and "learn through play." On October 2, 1976, the Museum opened its pilot program in the Academy of Natural Sciences, which only accommodated 25 children at a time and was staffed exclusively by volunteers. As word spread through town about a new children's museum, families waited in long lines to experience the Museum. Just like the children it served, PTM began to grow bigger and bigger.

By 1978, the pilot project had grown into a full-fledged museum of its own, expanding its hours and relocating to Cherry Street. During the next four years, the Museum consulted scholars from several disciplines to add intellectual content to its exhibits and developed culturally diverse programs designed for young audiences. As PTM kept growing, another move was warranted. By 1983, the Museum had purchased and renovated a building in the heart of Philadelphia's museum district. During this period, attendance and membership grew as the Museum emerged as a force in early childhood learning. PTM was accredited by the American Alliance of Museums in 1988, launched the first publishing award that honored books for young children and purchased the building next door to expand exhibit space. Even after expanding by 40 percent in 1995, the Museum still felt cramped as more and more visitors from around the world came to learn through play.

In 2002, the president of the Philadelphia Zoo recommended that the leadership team consider relocating to Memorial Hall in Fairmount Park, which had fallen into disrepair. In addition to serving as the main Art Gallery of the Centennial Exposition, the first World's Fair to be held in the United States, the building has been home to the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art (which would later become the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the University of the Arts), the Fairmount Park Commission and its recreation center, complete with basketball courts, boxing ring, tennis court, and swimming pool, and the Philadelphia Police Department Accident Investigation Unit. In 1976, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

On February 14, 2005, Please Touch Museum signed a long-term lease to occupy Memorial Hall, and the extensive restoration work to bring the building back to its original glory began later that year. On October 18, 2008, the Museum opened its doors to visitors. Memorial Hall is the current home of a children's museum dedicated to learning through play while preserving the history of Philadelphia's childhood. It is a city treasure, restored to its original purpose as a museum that offers all families a celebration of the timeless joys of childhood.

## Today

Driven by its mission to "Change a child's life as they discover the power of learning through play," PTM is recognized locally and nationally as one of the best children's museums in the United States and consistently ranks as a Top 10 Children's Museum in the country by USA TODAY/10 Best Readers' Choice Awards. Each year, the Museum welcomes 400,000 to 500,000 visitors, and 30 percent of visitors attend the Museum for free or reduced admission. In 2023, over 123,000 were visitors through the Community Benefit program, including over 23,000 school group visitors, which demonstrates PTM's commitment to the community and city of Philadelphia. As a celebratory space in the region, the Museum also hosted over 40 private events and welcomed over 8,000 private event attendees last year.

With two full floors of fun, the Museum features over 15 permanent exhibits ranging from the Albert M. Greenfield Makerspace studio dedicated to open-ended exploration and prototyping to a 3,650 square-foot Food & Family exhibit presented by GIANT where children can explore an immersive, open-ended learning landscape with three interconnected zones: a shopping market, a hybrid home and industrial kitchen, and a neighborhood festival area. As one of a handful of children's museums in the country maintaining artifact collections, PTM maintains an extensive collection of more than 25,000 historic toys and games and integrates artifacts into its exhibit spaces.

The Museum also manages programming across literacy, science, and the creative and performing arts. Initiatives such as Kinder Launch, a program for both children and adults, funded through Vanguard Strong Start for Kids Program, The William Penn Foundation, and the Department of Education, demonstrate the Museum's commitment to being the third place of learning, with aspirations of replicating the program in the city of Philadelphia and beyond; Play Builders is a pilot program focused on social-emotional skill-

building for three years olds. Throughout the year, PTM celebrates diverse communities through special events, is committed to accessibility, hosts special exhibits aimed at cultural understanding, and is committed to access for all through its Community Benefit program.

To understand the power of play, the Museum hosts leading-edge child development research studies in partnership with regional colleges and universities like Villanova University, University of Pennsylvania, Yale University, and Carnegie Mellon University. Partnering with Villanova, the Scientific Thinking and Representation (STAR) Lab studies the development of scientific and imaginative cognition in children. Housed within the department of psychology, the Leonard Learning Lab at Yale studies how young children learn and how learning environments influence their motivation to learn. With Penn, researchers in the human development lab at the Graduate School of Education study cognitive development and children's theories of mind; meanwhile, the researchers at the Child Development Labs and Changing Brain Lab study cognitive development focused on understanding children's learning and motivation. Working with Carnegie Mellon, the Human-Computer Interaction Institute investigates the relationship between computer technology, human activity, and society. At its core, PTM is a leader in helping uncover and understand how play helps us learn.

The most recent strategic plan, Please Touch Museum 2024: Elevating Play Learning Together builds upon the Museum's commitment to engage and partner with the community, offering unique experiences and programs that advance the power of learning through play, and sets PTM apart as a world-class leader in early childhood learning and development. The plan developed a vision statement that is broad and aspirational: "A world where all children are creative, compassionate, confident, and curious," along with four values to underpin its bold mission and vision: curiosity, engagement, community, and excellence. It also articulated four goals to guide the Museum, including three externally focused "impact" goals to address the positive influence that PTM has on its visitors, community partners, and childhood learning and development field at large, and a "foundational" fourth goal focused on building the Museum's internal strength, resiliency, and adaptability.

In Winter 2024, Please Touch Museum began the Memorial Hall Floor Renovation, a \$4.2 million project to renovate the marble flooring in Memorial Hall in advance of the building's 150th-anniversary celebration in 2026. The marble has been removed one tile at a time and replaced with tiles that closely match the original in appearance and origin, coming from quarries near the originals in France, Spain, and Italy. PTM remained open to visitors for the duration of the project, allowing families to view the construction and renovation work up close.

## The Future

The Museum has completed 50% of its comprehensive and visitor-focused Interpretive Plan, a critical and foundational task in developing a museum experience that effectively communicates clear messaging to its intended audience, ensuring maximum meaning-making and learning impact. Once the new president

and CEO is in place, the core team will continue to work with an external firm in the museum industry and engage diverse stakeholders, including staff, neighborhood community members, museum members, and board members. Ultimately, this plan will serve as a roadmap for the future, giving those in leadership the ability to make decisions with thoughtful intention and ensuring that the Museum continues to be relevant, relatable, and inclusive.

2026 will be a momentous year for both the Please Touch Museum and the City of Philadelphia. Memorial Hall will be celebrating its 150th anniversary, which coincides with the 250th anniversary celebration of American independence and the 50th anniversary of the Museum. Philadelphia will also take the world stage and serve as one of 16 host cities during the FIFA World Cup 2026, the world's most-viewed sporting event. To commemorate this historic year, Please Touch Museum will welcome visitors to Philadelphia and strategically highlight the museum to new audiences.

## Leadership

Melissa Weiler Gerber, an accomplished leader with 25 years of CEO experience and extensive board service, was appointed as the Museum's interim president and CEO in January 2025. Weiler Gerber is the founder and principal of CollectivePromise, a consultancy dedicated to advising organizations undergoing transitions, and joins the Museum after concluding a 14-year tenure as president and CEO of AccessMatters in 2024. She previously served as executive director of WOMEN'S WAY and as senior staff attorney for the Homeless Advocacy Project. She will lead PTM while the Museum conducts its presidential search, with the goal of filling this position by the end of 2025, if not sooner.

The Executive Leadership Council (ELC), Senior Leadership Team (SLT), and Management Team (MT) represent the leadership groups at the Museum. Tasked with stewarding the Museum's mission, vision, values, diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and accessibility (DEIBA) commitment and guiding its strategic planning and growth, the ELC is composed of the entire C-suite: the chief executive officer, chief growth officer, chief people and culture officer, chief operating officer, chief development officer, and chief learning officer. The SLT stewards the Museum's financial and operational performance, and the MT manages the day-to-day operations of the Museum and Memorial Hall.

The Board of Trustees currently includes 15 voting members, along with ex-officio and emeritus members. There is also a Community Advisory Council, composed of 35 local leaders, which meets monthly for substantive conversations designed to increase understanding about how the Museum can partner with its surrounding community leaders and organizations. The board is actively engaged with the president and executive leadership on key strategic questions and is deeply invested in the long-term success and health of the institution. Crucial to the relationship with the City of Philadelphia, the Community Advisory Council assists the president in determining avenues of partnership with the local community.

## Staff

Please Touch Museum's staff is focused on changing a child's life as they discover the power of learning through play. PTM has 80 employees with 66 percent of its staff identifying as people of color and/or are members of the LGBTQ+ community. The non-professional staff voted to unionize in March 2023 through AFSCME Local 397 (District Council 47), and in November 2024, the first collective bargaining agreement was approved.

## Finances

For FY2024, the Museum's annual operating budget is approximately \$13.5 million. Earned revenue from admissions, memberships, programs, special events, and other sales provides about 60% of the museum's income, with the remaining provided through contributed revenue such as grants, fundraising, and other philanthropic support. The PTM's endowment is approximately \$4.2 million.

## ROLE OF THE PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Reporting to the Board of Trustees, the president provides overall leadership, vision, and oversight of the Museum and its staff, uniquely serving several critical stakeholders equally well. They will work to secure the Museum's position as an innovative leader in children's informal education and early learning, ensure that the Museum is an active contributor and catalyst at all levels, and ensure the operational and financial requirements of the Museum, including serving as the chief fundraiser for the institution. The president is PTM's representative and advocate to the local community, thought partner to the Board of Trustees and Community Advisory Council, and ambassador to supporters of the broader arts and culture sector and children's museum community locally, nationally, and internationally.

The president's direct reports include the chief growth officer, chief learning officer, chief operating officer, chief people and culture officer, chief development officer, and executive assistant to the president and CEO.

## KEY OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The president and CEO will address the following opportunities and challenges:

### **Strategically, innovatively, and thoughtfully lead the Museum**

This is an exciting time for the Museum as it continues its work on the Interpretive Plan that will reimagine spaces and experiences at PTM and ensure the Museum is leading the field in innovative approaches to informal play-based learning. The next leader will help complete this project, giving them a critical role in shaping the future of how visitors will engage with the Museum. With the planned commemoration

activities in 2026 and opportunities for strategic visioning, the president will continue to amplify PTM's impact and presence on a national scale while deepening its local connection and support. The president will be responsible for charting an energizing and unifying path forward for the institution while ensuring that it continues to change a child's life as they discover the power of learning through play. The president will leverage the critical opportunities through the development of a new strategic plan for the Museum that sets a new vision for the future, building upon the success of the current plan. The president will provide decisive and collaborative leadership, lead with authenticity and transparency, build trust, generate buy-in, and connect with and inspire the diverse stakeholders that comprise PTM.

### **Augment philanthropic support and steward resources**

With the acknowledgment of past financial challenges and the pandemic, there has been tremendous work done to position the Museum where it is today. However, there is a need to continue to ensure operational and financial stability to advance the mission. Given this context, the next president will be thoughtful and creative in stewarding existing resources and solidifying a sustainable business model. They will also have a track record of leading successful fundraising initiatives with a strong ability to grow contributed revenue in a way that emphasizes people and relationships. An effective and strategic storyteller, the president will generate excitement for sophisticated donors about a wide variety of projects and initiatives. The Museum's relationship with Philadelphia is of critical importance, and the next leader will leverage existing ties and develop new ones.

While the Museum resides in a stunning and historic building owned by the city, upkeep is costly. In addition to fundraising, the president will work with government officials and museum staff to explore additional sources of revenue.

### **Advance and enhance Museum operations**

Since reopening in 2021 after over a year of closure during the pandemic, the Museum has rebuilt its capacity and operations. In this greater moment of change and planning for the future, assessment of policies, procedures, operations, and infrastructure will be necessary to effectively achieve new strategic goals. The president will bring strong business acumen and understand financial requirements, board recruitment, and nonprofit governance. They will emphasize implementing best in class leadership structures as well as innovate with respect to technology. Along with their leadership team, they will lead and drive efforts to ensure that staff and visitors experience PTM as an operationally sophisticated administrative unit.

### **Partner with and support museum staff**

The creative and diverse PTM staff are vital to the operation and success of the institution and are passionately committed to the mission and work of the institution. Therefore, the next leader needs to be attuned to the internal culture and needs of the museum staff. The president will be responsible for



creating and maintaining a nurturing, empowering, and supportive environment for all staff. They will promote a collegial and respectful climate in which the staff can flourish and will support retention efforts, especially in a post-pandemic era. As the new president sets forth the planning and visioning for the next phase of the Museum's future post-pandemic, a people-focused approach will be a priority.

### **Champion diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and accessibility**

The president must be a tireless champion of diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and accessibility. They will advance these core aims across all aspects of the Museum and empower senior leaders to embrace the continuous work of advancing these ideals internally and externally. They must lead in a manner that encourages and promotes respect, inclusion, and high morale. Given the incredible diversity within the sixth-largest city in the nation, it is imperative that the next president extends their roots to major constituents across the city and invites the surrounding communities to the Museum with an eye toward access. PTM is a welcoming community space, and the president must embody that spirit in their own approach and actions to further the values of the institution.

### **Crystalize the Museum as the third place of learning for families**

PTM plays a unique role in the lives of children and families. As the lead institution for the power of learning through play, the Museum is an informal learning environment and a third place, along with home and school, essential to a child's development. Therefore, it is important for PTM to amplify its voice on early childhood learning in Philadelphia and beyond. Their existing research partnerships with multiple renowned universities around social-emotional learning, early learning environments, and cognitive development already place the Museum as essential to the children's education ecosystem. The next president will be a compelling advocate who understands the power and important responsibility of this learning institution and will ensure the flourishing of children locally, nationally, and internationally.

## **QUALIFICATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS**

The successful candidate will possess many, if not all, of the following professional qualifications, skills, and experiences:

- Deep passion for the mission of early childhood learning and serving children and families;
- An appetite for and proven ability to oversee successful fundraising in comparable organizational contexts. Ability to deepen existing relationships as well as cultivate new sources of funding;
- Extensive experience with financial management and administration and understanding of financial operations; an ability to facilitate both short- and long-term strategic directions with financial ramifications;
- A track record as an effective champion of DEIBA in and throughout an organization;



- The ability to inspire and coalesce a variety of internal and external stakeholders toward common goals and a compelling vision;
- A creative, deep, and curious thinker who can engage with complexity, utilize data, and make difficult decisions;
- Demonstrated ability to develop innovative ideas and effectively implement them;
- Exceptional communication skills, including the ability to actively listen to, connect with, and inspire families, staff, community partners, trustees, political leaders, and potential partners;
- Familiarity with a unionized workforce is welcomed;
- Demonstrated success in leading and motivating a team, fostering cross-departmental collaboration, communication, and collective and individual accountability;
- Willingness to take a calculated risk; a change agent;
- A desire and ability to embrace the Philadelphia community, build partnerships, identify opportunities, and expand the Museum's reach within the region.

## COMPENSATION

The anticipated salary for this position is between \$275,000 and \$310,000 annually, commensurate with the successful candidate's experience.

## APPLICATIONS, INQUIRIES, AND NOMINATIONS

Screening of complete applications will begin immediately and continue until the completion of the search process. Inquiries, nominations, referrals, and CVs with cover letters should be sent via the Isaacson, Miller website: <https://www.imsearch.com/open-searches/please-touch-museum/president-and-chief-executive-officer>.

Please note that the hire must have PA Act 153 clearances (PA criminal history, FBI fingerprints, and PA Child Abuse) completed prior to hire. All employees are required to have COVID-19 vaccination and flu vaccination as a term and condition of employment.

Jackie Mildner, Partner | Search Co-Lead  
Ryan Leichenauer, Managing Associate | Search Co-Lead  
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*laws. This policy governs all aspects of employment, promotion, assignment, discharge, training, wage & salary administration, employee benefits, application of policies, and other terms and conditions of employment.*