

“Charting a Course for the Future of STEM in Afterschool”
Highlights from STEM in Afterschool Policy Convening

At the half-day STEM in Afterschool Policy Convening in May, participants discussed a wide variety of issues relating to STEM in afterschool. There is clearly a great interest in this space from diverse stakeholder groups for its potential to engage a diverse group of learners in STEM topics, fields and careers.

Two big messages stood out at the meeting: we need to define what quality STEM programs in afterschool look like and we need to be very clear about how success will be measured and how we show the impact of STEM learning in the afterschool space. Another loud and clear message was that while engagement and inspiration are worthy goals, they are not sufficient to warrant public funding of STEM programs in afterschool. There is therefore a need to articulate what afterschool programs are willing and able to deliver with regards to STEM literacy and competencies. This was emphasized by noting that corporations have been spending close to half a billion dollars a year in corporate STEM-related philanthropy, much of which is invested in the informal science education space. But it is not clear exactly what impact this investment has had and there is now an effort to optimize this through Change the Equation’s efforts.

More noteworthy points made at the meeting:

- In considering workforce development needs, agencies are seeing great opportunity in the afterschool space to provide rich resources through interactions between scientists, engineers and youth.
- Afterschool STEM is not about remedial training and homework help but much more. We need to define what that is.
- Impact assessment—we need to be able to show a return on investment in these tough budgetary times.
- Mentoring is a known best practice to engage and introduce youth to STEM topics and careers. How can it become more widespread?
- What skill sets and professional development is needed to build staff capacity and increase confidence to offer more STEM programming in afterschool? How do we innovate around professional development given the typically transient nature of the staff?
- How do funders of all types understand and become more sophisticated about what it is that afterschool time can do for education beyond standardized testing?
- How do programs scale and grow beyond the passion of one charismatic leader? And how do innovative and excellent programs reach all kids, not just the academically high performing kids?
- How can afterschool move the needle on engaging underrepresented populations in STEM fields?
- Should we be looking at the School Improvement Grants (SIG) as a funding stream for STEM in afterschool?
- How do we capture data and map how many children and youth are engaged in STEM programs in afterschool?

- We need to engage parents and other community stakeholders more in this issue.

Some of these themes were reinforced in the conversation with Administration officials. They stressed that they are very supportive of afterschool programs but want to know how to show learning progression in the afterschool space and how to put a real-world value on it. For example, would creating reward structures such as badges to mark milestones in learning be an option? The Administration wants to hear from participants but they need to clearly articulate the set of problems that they are trying to solve and the set of stakeholders who can be engaged. There was a clear call for actionable items—time to move away from a “think-tank” model to a “do-tank.”

The stage is now set for action. We must take advantage of this attention and interest in afterschool programs to ensure that afterschool programs are a meaningful partner in the Nation’s STEM education agenda.