

Op Ed

Toddlers adore science. Something wiggles back and forth with no apparent explanation? Wow! Free falling through the air, only to be decelerated in the nick of time? Awesome! Anything without apparent explanation fascinates babies. They crave situations with no explanation and they ask over, and over, and over again for its repeat, so that they can analyze and determine the cause.

And then, one day, this loose interpretation of a scientific experiment loses its sparkle. Teenagers sulk about the difficulties of math and science. It's boring or, even worse, impossible. It doesn't captivate them anymore like strokes of paint and auto-tuned melodies. STEM falls flat. So flat, in fact, that many people don't even know what "STEM" means (it's an acronym for "Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics"). This is a serious problem. In order for STEM to flourish, it needs to be attractive to youth. Kids need to care, and it's almost impossible to get kids to care once they deem something uncool.

As it stands today, STEM just isn't cool. Teenagers don't express themselves through mathematics like they do with their classroom doodles. Children don't fight over who's going to be the lead engineer like they do with the lead of a play.

So, it's important that we anticipate and fight the war before it even begins. Funneling funding into secondary and post-secondary education isn't the answer, because it's targeting a student minority. The only students capable of taking advantage of these opportunities are students who are willing to pursue them. And that percentage is frighteningly low, because by the time kids reach high school, they've already tossed STEM onto the ever-growing pile of the uncool.

I'll let you in on a little secret: STEM *can* be cool. It can be enticing, dynamic, and challenging in an approachable way. It can be just as beautiful as a song on the radio and just as fulfilling as an overflowing sketchbook. It can be all of those things, but we need to teach people to see it.

But not just people. We need to teach children. Somewhere between early childhood and the preteen years, the mystique fades into frustration and dismissal. That's the area that needs to be targeted; a chain is only as good as its weakest link.

So how do we convince children that STEM is as cool as I've promised? We give them the opportunity to experience it firsthand.

Elementary schools release their students significantly before the end of the work day. Then the kids are separated into their respective areas: daycares, babysitters, afterschool programs. Parents are desperate for these types of programs. So why not have the government fund one that gives kids a chance to explore STEM?

An afterschool program that cycles through various aspects of the STEM world would be an incredible benefit to both the students and their parents. Interactive science experiments, simple robotics demonstrations, circuit designs, and more: it would be cool. What child isn't completely captivated by a robot? What kid wouldn't squeal at rainbow flames from various heated elements?

What's more, the funding is already there. The government's investments in STEM education are in many cases overlapping and redundant, which leads to some areas being saturated and other areas being underfunded. Primary education is one of those underfunded areas, and it doesn't have to be that way. If our government managed these investments more efficiently, afterschool programs like this could become a reality.

It might seem like a complicated project, but it's really quite simple: we organize the investments into groups based on their investment goals and target audiences. This management structure would be much more effective than the one we have now, which spreads responsibility across several federal agencies, none of which has STEM education as its sole priority. With just a little bit of managerial reorganization, funding could easily be redirected toward an afterschool program for STEM enrichment.

Between the existence of funding hidden in the current budget, and the huge benefits for science in America down the line, there's no reason not to make this program a reality. It would offer students a way to discover STEM on their own terms: no homework, no exams, just the excitement and wonder of exploration.

STEM *can* be fun. Children just need the opportunity to interact with STEM in a fun way. English has storybooks, music has Disney songs, and painting has doodles; STEM needs this.