

AT CONGRESSIONAL BRIEFING, DR. CALVIN MACKIE DETAILS PLATFORM FOR INCREASING STEM COMPREHENSION IN MINORITY COMMUNITIES

New Orleans Non-Profit is Expanding Community-Based STEM Initiatives and Programs to other Areas of the Country to Create More Job and Career Opportunities

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Outlining a platform to increase STEM careers in urban and minority communities, Dr. Calvin Mackie, founder and president of [STEM NOLA](#), told a congressional briefing that children must be exposed to science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education at an early age and K-12 teachers need better preparation to be more effective. Dr. Mackie also asserted that parents and communities must prioritize STEM education because it will fuel quality jobs for their children - today and in the future.



Dr. Calvin Mackie

His analysis was delivered at a virtual briefing for congressional aides on May 12, which was sponsored by the STEM Education Coalition. James Brown, its executive director, opened the panel discussion acknowledging, "We've all struggled" with how to expand STEM diversity and inclusion. He said the purpose of the briefing was to provide different perspectives on diversity in the STEM fields.

As other participants focused on increasing STEM education among women, the incarcerated and the formerly incarcerated, Dr. Mackie discussed the challenges elevating and engaging STEM in communities of color. Data shows that roughly 20% of whites and students of color declare

STEM subjects as their majors entering college, but nearly 40% of minority students changed their majors and more than 20% left school without earning a degree. As a result, while Blacks, Native Americans, Alaska Natives and Hispanics collectively form 27% of the population, they account for only 11% of America's science and engineering workers.

At the congressional forum, Dr. Mackie traced part of the problem to the nation's failing public education system. He noted that society celebrates "the best schools" that always have the best teachers. "I always asked the question, 'If that is the best school with the best teachers, why aren't the best teachers at the schools with the most challenges?'" Dr. Mackie called for creating incentives for good teachers to work at schools in challenged areas. "We'll do that (incentivize) in any other industries, but in education, we seem to believe somehow that the problem is going to solve itself. We need to marshal the resources to the places that need them the most."



Child learning STEM skills.

In low-income, low-resource communities, 40% to 50% of math and science teachers get less than 35 hours of professional development a year, said Dr. Mackie, who earned a Bachelor of

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Dr. Calvin Mackie

Science degree in Mechanical Engineering from Georgia Tech as well as a Master's Degree and Ph.D. "We have to strengthen the pipeline of professional development and make sure that the teachers ...have the background and the training that they need." STEM NOLA helps train teachers and ensure that children are not intimidated by STEM education by introducing it at home and in their community.

In 2014, Dr. Mackie launched STEM NOLA to increase STEM awareness among parents and the community, while providing a variety of programs that allow students in

grades K - 12 to have fun as they learn about STEM. It began when Dr. Mackie taught STEM skills to his children from his garage on Saturday mornings, and neighborhood kids poured in to join them.

Thanks to sponsors, such as Entergy, he created STEM NOLA and brought STEM into New

Orleans communities with hands-on programs at churches, schools and community centers. When COVID-19 struck, he adjusted and expanded virtual offerings so the learning would continue. In the last seven years, STEM NOLA has impacted 65,000 students, 17,000 families and 5,150 schools. With major corporations negotiating to sponsor initiatives, STEM NOLA programs are expanding to new areas of the country. The non-profit is rapidly growing and will soon re-brand to STEM Global Action, with a formal announcement in the coming weeks.

Dr. Mackie emphasized that the STEM education process must move beyond the schools where “we are already behind.” He said that by the third grade only 15% of New Orleans students have scored above average in math. “If you’re already behind in second and third grade, it’s going to be even more difficult to take those fundamental STEM courses” when you get to high school. Their strategy is to meet with “kids where they are” bringing the programs into communities and educating children and adults.

“We educate the parents and the community all at the same time, (that’s) what we’ve done at STEM NOLA,” he told the congressional briefing. “We have built a high functioning STEM community...we focus on kids from the cradle to 12th grade...We have (STEM) college students we pay...deploying them out into the community. Then, we surround those college students with STEM professionals, skilled men and women and teachers. We have vertical mentoring. At any point, a kid can see him or herself at a station in life and know what is possible.”

The distinguished panel also included Dr. Pam Buffington, director of rural STEM initiatives, EDC; Shelley Gretlein, vice president of portfolio business software strategy, National Instruments; Dr. Roberta Rincon, associate director of research, Society of Women Engineers; and Dr. Eden Badertscher, an acclaimed research scientist.

Ms. Gretlein strongly agreed with Dr. Mackie about the need to engage children at early ages. “Don’t wait until high school,” she said. “We have to expose them...to coding and engineering and math and make it fun and make it hands-on.”

Dr. Mackie cautioned that all children today are going to face three options. They are going to take something, break something or make something, he said. “And if we don’t give our kids the education, the skills, the inspiration to make something starting from the cradle” they will find themselves in the criminal justice system. Our children need pathways toward quality jobs and careers, he said, noting that STEM skills can contribute to their success.

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