

LET'S TALK STEM With Dr. Calvin Mackie Podcast Discusses Racial Inequities In Education With St. Jude's Kate Ayers

Ayers says the racial inequities in education amount to "a debt" owed to Black and Brown families that has impacted generations across the country

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Dr. Calvin Mackie, host of the Let's Talk STEM podcast, talks with Kate Ayers, director of STEMM education and outreach at [St. Jude Children's Research Hospital](#), about the challenges advancing science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education for Black and Hispanic students in Memphis.

“

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Kate Ayers

“We take a variety of approaches to addressing issues of equity and access to STEM learning experiences,” Ayers says. “A lot of our work focuses on developing school partnerships to offer afterschool programs within the school or hosting curriculum collaboratives to really work with the educators to co-create and integrate more science into the learning day. And that's especially true at the elementary school grade levels.”

Ayers leads the Cancer Education and Outreach Program at St. Jude, a community outreach program that increases diversity of the biomedical workforce by addressing inequities in K-12 STEM education. Ayers works with educators to co-create science learning modules that integrate cancer concepts into the classroom curriculum. In addition, Ayers established the St. Jude Science Ambassadors Program, which connects Memphis youth to diverse scientists to dispel misconceptions related to who scientists are and who can be a scientist. She is also a founding member and chair of the Memphis STEM in Medicine Ecosystem, a city-wide initiative aimed at addressing inequities in STEM education specific to the

Memphis area.

Ayers is frank in acknowledging that the education systems in Memphis and many other urban areas do a disservice to children of color.

Calling the inequities “an education debt,” Ayers says, “Let's be honest. There are Black and Brown children who have not been served by our education system. And that becomes generational, a generational debt has been accumulated.” She is not comfortable calling the disproportionate education levels between Blacks and Whites a gap. “It's not a gap,” she insists. “It's a debt that's owed. We have to work as communities to make sure that we are paying tribute to that debt that is owed to these communities that have not been served.”

Ayers praises Dr. Mackie's work advancing STEM education, especially in communities of color, saying, “I think the only way we can do that is exactly what you were talking about: through these ecological models of STEM development. When I think about the work that we're doing in the city of Memphis, I get very excited to think about the opportunities that we're working to provide. And it's not enough. There's nowhere near enough.”

Further, Ayers says, there are 92 elementary schools in the Memphis Shelby County School District and more than 70% of the students are living below the poverty line.

“Most are coming from Black and Brown communities,” she adds. “The history of our city is like the history of many cities in the United States. It is a history of racism, a history of classism. We had forced segregation, (then) forced integration that led to choice segregation. That history still lives with us today, and it's a living history...I think where we send our kids, how we raise our kids is very important. Obviously, I'm coming from a White community, a White member of the city of Memphis, but we send our kids to Memphis Shelby County schools, because my husband and I became aware that you can't just live in a bubble.”

Dr. Mackie, who launched STEM NOLA, his STEM education program in 2013, said that the disparities in STEM learning start at home before kindergarten. “You see why I'm so passionate

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LET'S TALK STEM
WITH DR. CALVIN MACKIE

INEQUITIES IN STEM EDUCATION

SPECIAL GUEST :
Kate Ayers
Director of STEMM Education & Outreach
St. Jude Children's Research Hospital

STEM
GLOBAL ACTION
inform • engage • inspire

Kate Ayers Joins Let's Talk STEM at
<https://youtu.be/QSN7BVxSqFw>

and committed to making sure that we get to parents and let them know they have a trusted partner in us, that will give them the information that they need.”

Ayers says there needs to be diversity in science and STEM because it is “for the most part still seen as a career for White children. But we don't want it to be just the career for White children.

And it shouldn't be. Science and STEM is a tool that we can use to care for our collective well-being, and we can use it as a tool to solve problems for our community.”

Dr. Mackie reiterates the importance of diversity in STEM, noting that he recently wrote an article for Forbes, entitled, “Diversity in STEM is a matter of Life and Death.” He maintains that White doctors and researchers are creating tools and innovations that don't work accurately with people of color. “The device that we use during COVID to measure the amount of oxygen people take in was inaccurate for people with high melanin pigmentation,” he says, adding that many Black people got wrong readings and some may have died.

A device that “is used to target cancer is inaccurate for people with different pigmentation,” he says. Citing the importance of having Blacks as researchers and doctors, he says sarcastically, “I'm a Ph.D. from Georgia Tech. I was a professor at Tulane for 12 years. If I'm working on something that otherwise can impact me, why would I release it knowing that it is inaccurate for me?”

Listen to more of their enlightening conversation at <https://youtu.be/QSN7BVxSqFw>

ABOUT [STEM GLOBAL ACTION](#)

Dr. Calvin Mackie founded STEM NOLA in 2013. The New Orleans non-profit is committed to expanding STEM education, especially in communities of color. In July 2021, Dr. Mackie launched STEM Global Action, a campaign and network pursuing STEM education for children, parents, and communities. His initiatives have impacted more than 125,000 students, 20,000 families and 5,100 schools across the U.S., and in five countries. Here is an archive of Let's Talk STEM with Dr. Calvin Mackie podcast episodes:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL_UPXIrgkzwsXFiefgOpgYIUNzD-T3iaw

The STEM Global Action website includes:

STEM Global Action Today, a newsletter with comprehensive articles on some of the most important issues related to STEM, and takes STEM Global Action Today (<https://stemglobalaction.com/stem-global-action-today/>), a newsletter with comprehensive articles on some of the most important issues related to STEM, and takes readers into the lives of STEM educators and their extraordinary students, who will be the STEM leaders of tomorrow.

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