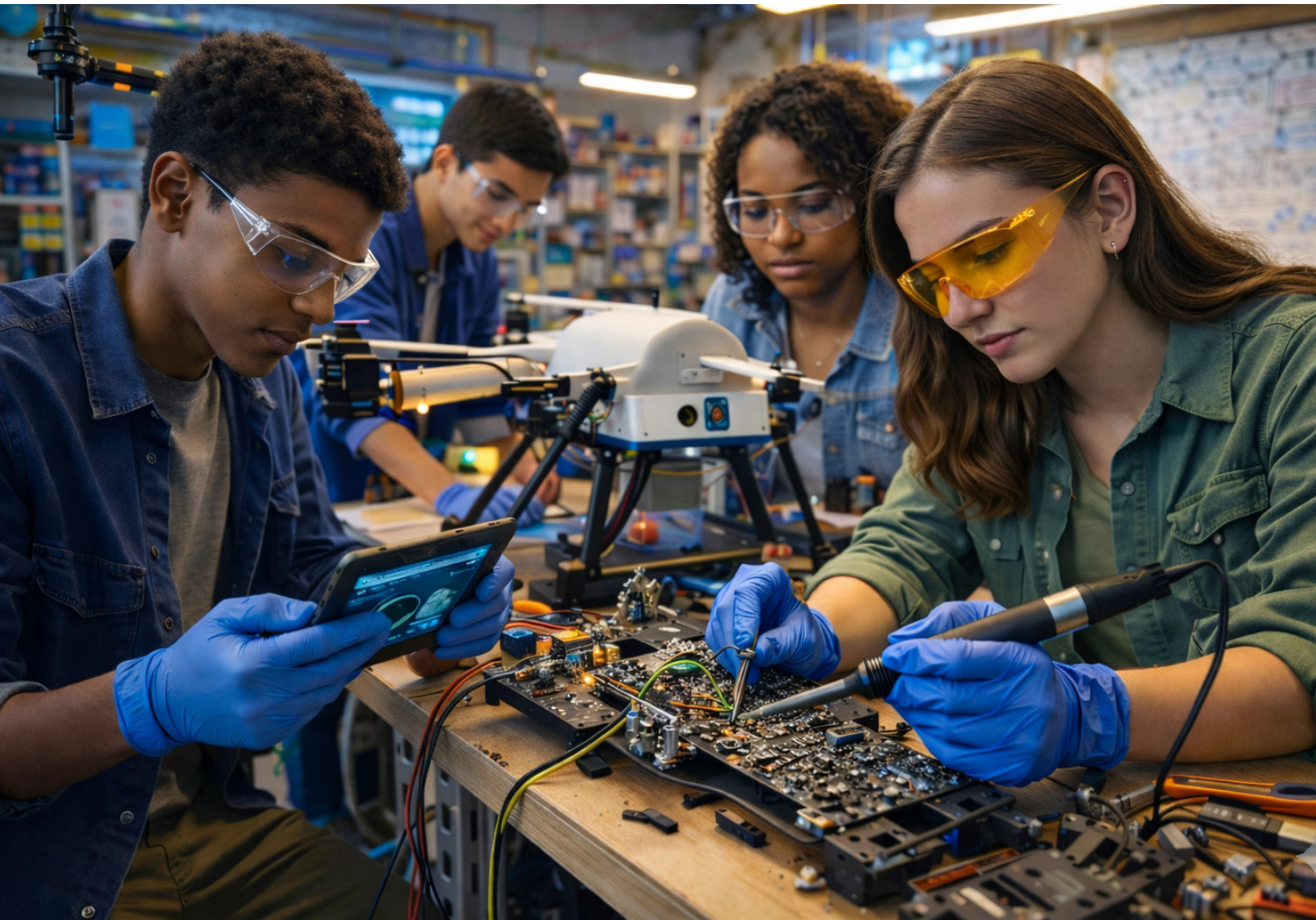
BROADER IMPACTS:

An Analysis of Media Coverage of the National Science Foundation

(January 2025–January 2026)

STEM Education



Analysis of Media Coverage

This analysis examines the sentiment and substance of media coverage of the National Science Foundation in over 3,800 articles published from January 2025 through January 2026. It explores how a range of media sources — magazines, newspapers, and other news outlets as well as television stations, radio stations, and university websites — have portrayed the agency's broader impacts and value amidst budget cuts and project terminations. While media coverage often focuses on the "Intellectual Merit" of scientific achievements, this analysis focuses on NSF's "Broader Impacts" — the tangible benefits to society that matter most to the public including improvements in daily life and stronger communities.

This series is organized around six key Broader Impacts dimensions:

- Economic Competitiveness and Innovation
- National Security
- STEM Education
- Workforce Development
- Societal Well-being
- Research Infrastructure

The findings illustrate that NSF remains a vital engine for maintaining America's strength, fostering innovation, and building a foundation for families to thrive across every state.

STEM Education

From the youngest learners to the innovators of tomorrow, NSF's STEM education research programs deliver tangible benefits to communities across the United States. NSF invests in partnerships between researchers and educators to design, test and scale education innovations in biological and physical sciences, computer science, mathematics, digital learning tools, AI literacy, and data science to bring quality programs directly to America's students.

These investments extend far beyond formal classrooms. NSF's STEM education research investments also reach people where they live, through science and technology centers, museums, libraries, community centers and other local institutions. Investments in after-school and weekend programs, summer camps, exhibits, and other learning opportunities help citizens of all ages interpret scientific information and apply it to real-world decisions affecting their families, neighborhoods, and futures.

NSF's STEM education investments are often grounded in local needs and interests, rather than abstract scientific concepts. Elementary school students examine invasive species; middle school students conduct investigations on agriculture and water scarcity; and high school students participate in internships in emerging technology fields. After-school programs on computer science and engineering summer camps both educate young people and provide safe environments while caretakers work.

By connecting science to familiar settings and community priorities, NSF investments in STEM education spark interest and curiosity in young people and strengthen public understanding of emerging technologies and how they affect daily life. NSF investments in formal and informal education programs build the gateway for workforce development, economic stability and innovation.

Building the Foundation: NSF's Legacy in K-12 STEM Education

For over 70 years, NSF has served as a quiet backbone to the intellectual and human infrastructure that underpins modern STEM education. From the urgency of the Space Race to the demands of the AI era, NSF investments have worked to ensure that U.S. classrooms adapt to a changing world.

- **Reinventing Science Class:** Following the launch of Sputnik, the agency enlisted top scientists to strengthen U.S. scientific capacity by replacing rote memorization with instruction that was more like real science. New courses like PSSC Physics and BSCS Biology redefined high school science instruction with investigation and experimentation. By the mid-1970s, half of all U.S. high schools were using NSF-supported biology materials. NSF also invested in young learners with the Elementary Science Study (ESS) and Science Curriculum Improvement Study (SCIS) which brought together scientists, educators and psychologists to revolutionize elementary science education and set learners on a lifelong path of scientific discovery.
- **Teachers for the Future:** Recognizing that great education requires great educators, NSF has invested heavily in the teacher pipeline. The Robert Noyce Teacher Scholarship Program has directed over $1.2 billion to universities across 49 states, training thousands of new STEM teachers committed to working in high-need districts. This sustained effort has been a critical tool in addressing the nation's chronic STEM teacher shortage.
- **Computer Science for All:** NSF investments helped bring computer science to America's students from elementary classrooms through high school. NSF funds have supported many K-8 programs that introduced coding and computer science concepts to young learners while also playing a key role in the development of AP Computer Science Principles (APCSP), a course built specifically to broaden participation in computing. Since its national rollout in 2016, APCSP has grown in popularity, expanding access to tech skills for tens of thousands of students in both urban centers and rural towns.
- **Modernizing Standards:** As states moved to adopt the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), the Common Core State Standards for mathematics, or their own standards, NSF provided the research base for implementation. By funding collaborations between university researchers and K-12 districts, NSF aimed to help translate these new standards into practical, research-based effective lessons for millions of students.

NSF's commitment to providing America's students with rigorous STEM education has persisted and expanded. Over the decades, NSF investments have led to widely used and commercially successful instructional materials in mathematics, computer science, engineering and data science as well as programs that connect educators with business leaders to ensure American students will be prepared for a future workforce. NSF has also invested directly in local school districts, states and rural regions enabling local leaders to implement their own approaches to system improvement. Through sustained support, NSF investments have given urban and rural teachers, administrators and policy makers the support they need to make STEM education successful in the 21st century and beyond.

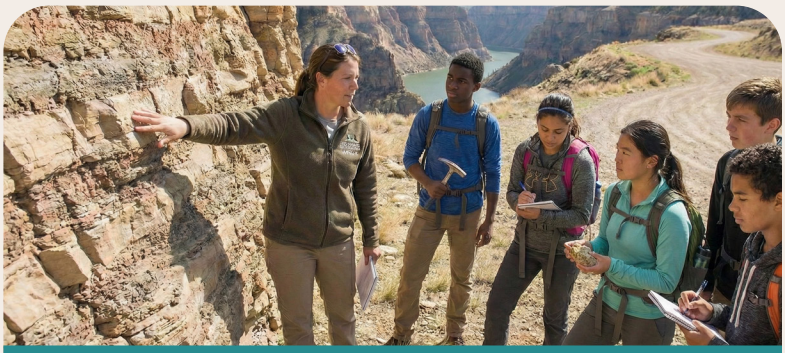
For more than 70 years, NSF has strengthened U.S. K–12 STEM education by improving instruction, supporting teachers, and expanding access to emerging fields like computer science.

Learning Beyond the Bell: NSF's Informal STEM Ecosystem

Most learning happens outside of school hours. For decades, NSF has invested in an "informal education" ecosystem—after-school programs, summer camps, library-based learning programs, museum programs, and television and online media—that bring science to Americans where they live, work, and play. By supporting STEM education efforts outside of formal classrooms, NSF has woven STEM into the fabric of daily life, making discovery accessible to families regardless of their background or location, and equipping them with knowledge to make decisions about their own lives and communities.

- **STEM on Screen:** NSF helped turn television into a powerful teaching tool by funding iconic educational media that defined generations. It supported "3-2-1 Contact" in the 1980s and "Bill Nye the Science Guy" and "The Magic School Bus" in the 1990s. These programs proved that rigorous science could entertain and captivate millions of children during after-school hours and promote science literacy. NSF's investment in "The Magic School Bus" continues with research on how the widely popular *Magic School Bus* book series became such a successful and enduring tool for helping young children understand and approach science. This project is a public-private partnership that brings together NSF-funded researchers, Scholastic, and Microsoft and will inform the next generation of educational media strategies to engage young learners at scale.
- **Museums & Exhibits:** If you have visited a science center, you have likely interacted with NSF-funded work. Through initiatives like the NISE (National Informal STEM Education) Network, NSF created a suite of "Nano" exhibits that traveled to over 250 museums across the country. From massive urban institutions to mobile rural museums, these investments help ensure that cutting-edge science is tangible and accessible to the public.
- **Libraries as Science Hubs:** NSF has transformed public libraries into community STEM centers. Projects like STAR Net have equipped thousands of libraries with science toolkits, telescopes, and training. This has enabled local libraries—often a heart of rural and underserved communities—to host stargazing nights and coding clubs at no cost to families.
- **Citizen Science:** NSF pioneered the movement to ask the public to participate in real research. It seeded platforms like Zooniverse, where over a million volunteers help classify galaxies and data online. It also supported eBird, turning birdwatchers' sightings into a massive environmental database. These projects blur the line between scientist and citizen, fostering a public that learns science by doing it.

NSF's informal education program extended learning beyond classrooms and into communities across the country. These projects strengthened community partnerships and developed understandings essential for community prosperity and the nation's future workforce. NSF's informal education program was eliminated in 2025 along with some of its already-funded work.



For decades, NSF's informal STEM investments brought science into everyday life through media, museums, libraries, and community programs beyond the classroom.

The analysis illuminated a two-sided story about STEM Education at NSF. Hundreds of grants were terminated and long-standing NSF funding programs were eliminated. At the same time that coverage warned about the loss of terminated NSF grants, remaining programs and new grants that focused on teacher support and AI were highlighted.

Forty-eight of the fifty states lost at least one grant from NSF's education directorate.

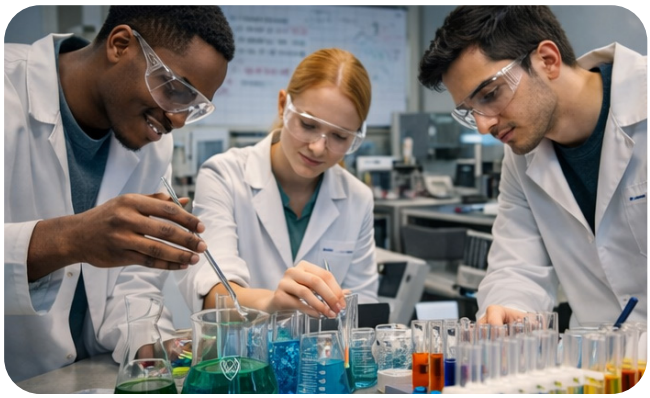
Almost twenty percent of the articles included in the analysis reported on NSF budget cuts alongside dozens describing grant terminations. According to *The Hechinger Report*, more than half of these terminations focused on education-related projects. According to a list of terminated grants released by NSF, among them was a grant awarded to the University of Georgia Research Foundation which focused on establishing a virtual network of elementary mathematics coaches in rural areas of the state. Another was a Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) grant awarded to a company in North Carolina that was developing a platform to generate personalized learning sequences to facilitate student interest. Forty-eight of the fifty states lost at least one grant from NSF's education directorate.

According to *Education Week,* in addition to grant terminations, there was a substantial decrease in the maximum amount available for STEM Education research grants from $5 million to $750,000. The change occurred as NSF eliminated four programs targeting K-12 STEM education and created a single K-12 program focused primarily on artificial intelligence. These changes constrain new education initiatives focused on other sciences and financially limit the ability to do large scale research studies on student impact and effectiveness.

At the same time, NSF made new investments in teachers through its STEM Teacher Corps program created in response to the 2022 CHIPS and Science Act. *KU News* described the "Midwest STEM Alliance"—a collaboration between the University of Kansas, Iowa State University and the University of Minnesota. Researchers at these institutions partner with local schools and districts to elevate the work of effective elementary science teachers and share it as a model. Lessons will focus on agriculture, water, pollution and other topics that affect the rural communities where the students reside.

Southern Methodist University also reported receiving a Teacher Corps grant to train K-8 teachers across Texas in engineering by establishing a network of expert teachers across the state and providing training and resources to dozens more. Similarly, Penn State reported on their Teacher Corps grant focused on elementary STEM teachers. Their "STEM Pioneers" program conducted in collaboration with West Virginia University and the College of New Jersey will reach teachers across the Mid-Atlantic region.

The analysis also showed reporting on other NSF investments in STEM education through the Robert Noyce Teacher Scholarship program that provides support for pre-service teachers. *Nevada Today* reported on a Noyce grant awarded to a partnership between the University of Nevada, Reno, Great Basin College and a community school district. Recipients of the grant will receive two years of support for their training to teach in a secondary education STEM field. Following graduation, they will teach in one of the rural high need districts in the state. Sam Houston State University in Texas received a Noyce grant as well, enabling them to support sophomores and juniors interested in STEM teaching careers.



This work has broad support. The National Science Foundation finds that 88% of U.S. adults agree that "science provides more opportunities for the next generation." According to ASTC, "9 out of 10 respondents believe federal investment in STEM education is important for future economic prosperity."

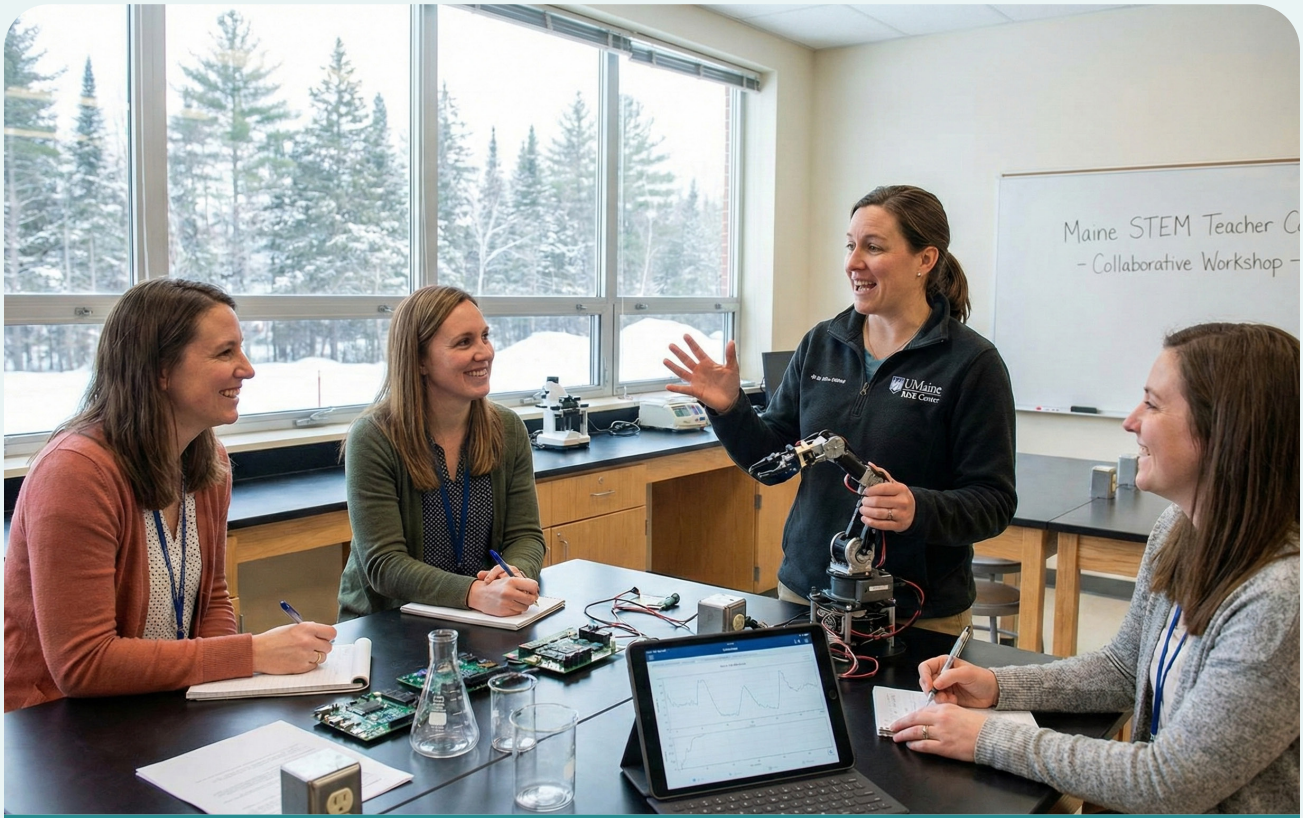
Transforming Teacher Support In Maine

Maine has a shortage of highly qualified K-12 teachers in STEM. Researchers at the University of Maine's Center for Research in STEM Education (RISE Center) are setting out to change that.

As reported in *UMain News*, project leaders will seek out the most skilled STEM high school teachers in Maine who "consistently ignite curiosity, raise achievement and engage students through innovative STEM teaching practices." The project will equip these teachers to coach and support teachers across the state. Members of the Teacher Corps will also help lead the "Associated Community of Teachers," a learning community that invites STEM educators across the state to participate in collaborative work they can immediately apply in their schools.

The University of Maine is only one of several partners leading the work. The project is a collaboration of UMaine, the Maine Department of Education and several regional school districts. Jon Doty, assistant superintendent of one of those districts noted, "In many smaller, rural Main schools, someone may be the only teacher teaching certain courses, so expanding the network of support to include statewide peers with the backing of the RISE Center will be critical."

Doty, recently named Maine's 2026 Assistant Superintendent of the Year, values his collaboration with UMaine: "Supporting STEM teachers through the Maine STEM Teacher Corps will be another UMaine effort that has a positive impact."



A University of Maine–led partnership is addressing Maine's STEM teacher shortage by building a statewide teacher corps that trains exceptional educators to mentor and support peers, especially in rural schools.

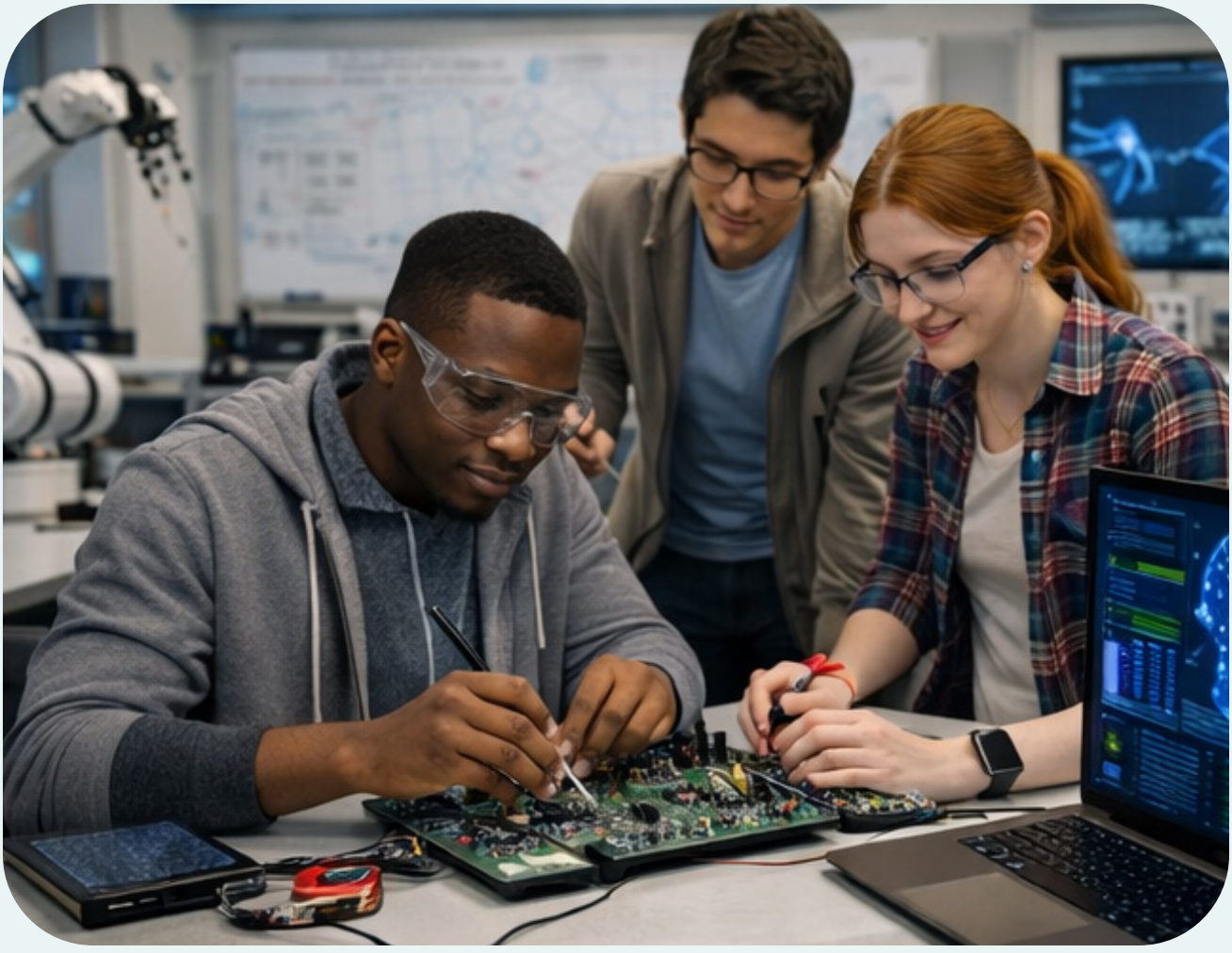
Empowering STEM Teachers in Microelectronics and Artificial Intelligence

Microelectronics and artificial intelligence are at the forefront of new and emerging technologies. The University of Tennessee Chattanooga reports that a new grant from NSF's Robert Noyce Scholarship program will ensure teachers are well prepared to introduce students to these fields.

The project, led by associate professor of electrical engineering Dr. Raga Ahmed, will engage twenty-four pre-service and practicing teachers from Southeast Tennessee and North Georgia over the next few years. Participants will spend six weeks engaging in a research project on campus, co-develop project-based lessons and receive additional support throughout the academic year.

To accomplish this, the University's departments of engineering and education have partnered with a community college and several regional school districts. The partnership is key in this work. Ahmed explains that she wants "...to make sure our collaborations are solidified and expand in the future."

Ahmed's teacher-centered approach is deliberate. "..high school and middle school teachers are the best and first place to start to reach the students." Dr. Stephanie Phlipp, assistant professor and interim director of STEM education in the University's school of education explains that when teachers say "This is what scientists do, this is what engineers do, they will now know that firsthand."



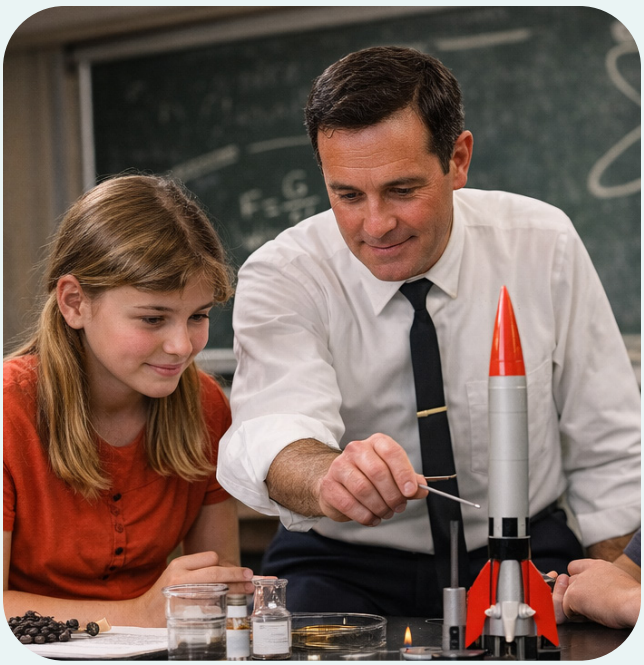
Montana Teachers Highlight Local Experience to Bring STEM Education to Life

The Science Math Resource Center at Montana State University is setting out to spark student interest in STEM.

Project leaders have been funded to bring place-based education to learners across the state. "Place-based" education means that they will adapt science lessons to include examples that students know. Suzi Taylor, director of the Center explains that not many students have been to the Grand Canyon, but "looking at erosion in Bighorn Canyon or a site near their school instead could be more familiar and a way for kids to connect to the lesson."

This $675,000 four-year project came from NSF's now eliminated DRK12 program. Participating teachers will have a 2-day training at MSU in the summer and then complete on-line trainings in the coming three years. They will also receive STEM materials for their classrooms.

This project is a collaboration with the University of Hawaii at Manoa and the Maine Mathematics and Science Alliance where project leaders are making similar adaptations based on local examples. One of the leaders at the MSU Center explains, "by focusing on locally significant place-based phenomena, the project aims to engage and inspire young learners while empowering teachers to create more relevant and authentic learning experiences."



Addressing the Teacher Shortage in Mississippi

There are more than 500 vacancies for STEM teachers in Mississippi according to the Mississippi Department of Education. The Center for Mathematics and Science Education at the University of Mississippi announced that it is setting out to collaborate with the Department of Education to remedy that.

With a new STEM Teacher Corps grant, they will establish the Mississippi STEM Education Alliance to focus on developing more mathematics teachers throughout the state. n the story from the e University of Mississippi's *Ole Miss News*, *Julie James,* the Center's assistant director explains, "Research over the last several years has shown that data literacy and statistics are the next big need in education."

They will identify top teachers in each of the state's congressional districts and train them to share their expertise with others. Through online and in-person training, their goal is to have an additional 100 teachers in the next four years. Simultaneously, they will develop a high school data science course.

James explains that when there is a data and statistics class, it is usually an advanced placement (AP) class that only a small percentage of students take. Their course "...would be open to all students and prepare them for their careers."

Empowering Parents as the First STEM Educators

While parents intuitively know that reading to children builds literacy, many lack the tools to foster early math skills. With “math anxiety" common among adults, early STEM learning often takes a backseat to reading in the home.

Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh's Parents Promoting Early Learning (PPEL) lab are working to change this dynamic. Supported by NSF funding, Dr. Melissa Libertus and her team are demonstrating that building a STEM mindset doesn't require flashcards or worksheets—it can happen in the grocery aisle or the kitchen.

The project identifies how simple interactions—like sorting items by size on a conveyor belt or discussing shapes while playing with puzzles—build a child's foundational understanding of quantity and space. The stakes are high: early math proficiency is one of the strongest predictors of later academic success. By tracking children from toddlerhood through elementary school, this work is creating evidence-based strategies to help parents plant the skills “kids will need 20 years from now" to succeed in a technical world.

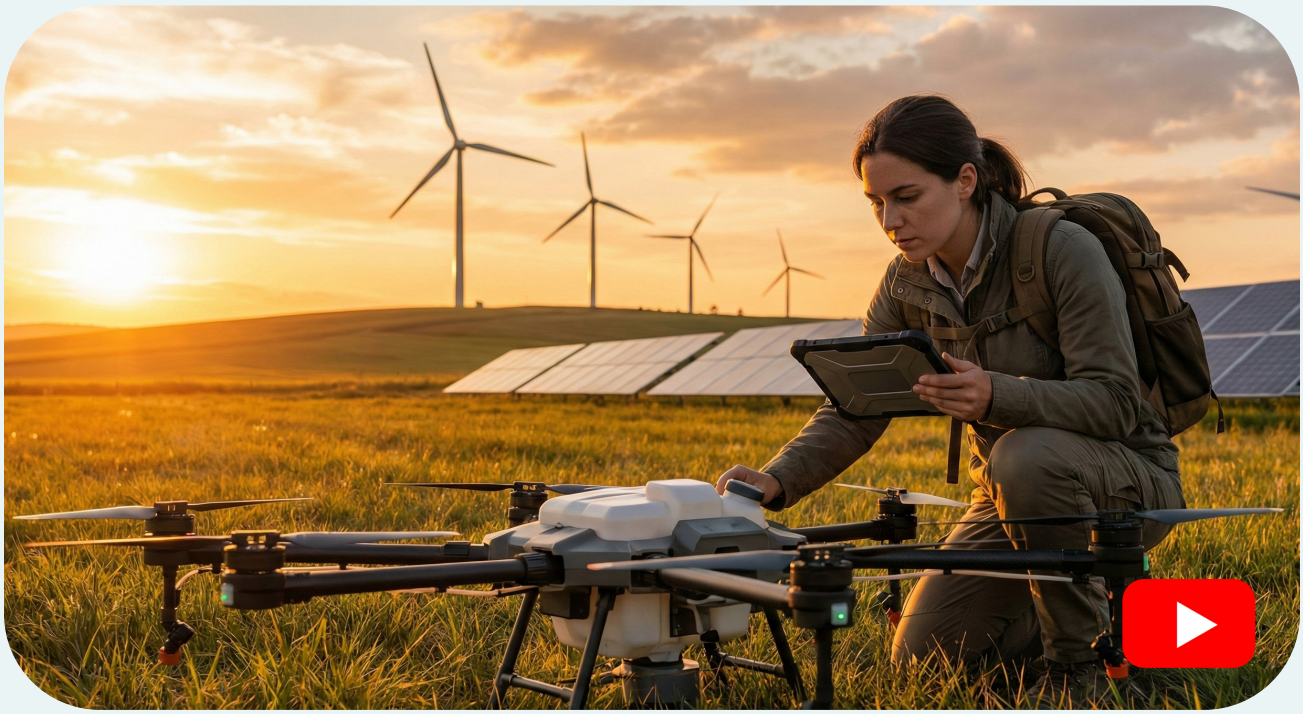
NSF-funded researchers are showing parents how everyday interactions can build early math skills and STEM confidence—without worksheets—laying a foundation for long-term academic success.

Rural Middle School Students Grounded on the Path to STEM Careers

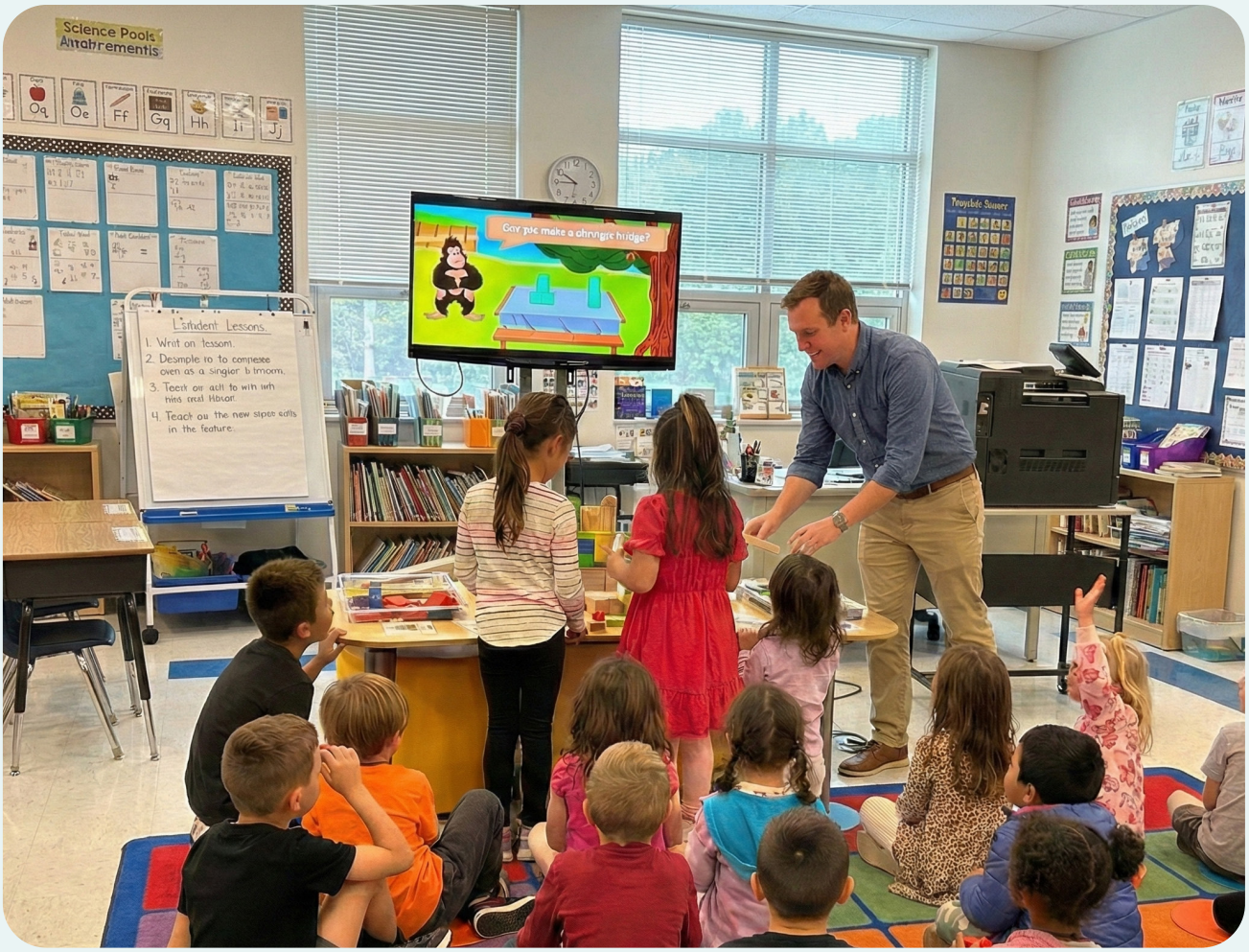
Drones were hovering in classrooms at the Kearsarge Middle School in New Hampshire. This school and dozens across the country were using the "Take Flight" curriculum when the grant supporting this project was terminated.

The "Take Flight" program provided curriculum and professional development to teachers and students. The curriculum focuses on real-world problem-solving scenarios students could address using drones. Teachers were using it with their full classes while also benefitting from features designed to increase girls' confidence and interest in STEM careers. As students solve problems in pursuit of their "missions," they gain technical skills and learn about applications of drones to problems such as easily transporting organs for transplant or bringing resources to people in hard-to-reach areas.

Chalkbeat reported that at the time this grant was terminated, more than 1200 students and 30 rural middle school teachers across ten states were using the curriculum. Additionally, the research team had promising early data showing that the program helped students who previously weren't interested in science or mathematics envision a possible career in STEM.



This *Yankee Chronicle* video interviews teachers and students at a middle school in New Hampshire regarding the drone flying program.



AI as a Hands-On Learning Partner

At science centers in Atlanta, Philadelphia, and San Jose, a new kind of exhibit is transforming how children learn physics. Developed by Dr. Nesra Yannier and researchers at Carnegie Mellon University with NSF support, **NoRILLA** (Novel Research-based Intelligent Lifelong Learning Apparatus) moves beyond passive screens. It uses "mixed reality" technology—combining physical block-building with an AI-powered gorilla that provides personalized, real-time feedback to guide students through scientific concepts like stability and balance.

The results of this NSF-funded innovation are striking. Research indicates that these AI-infused exhibits generate four times the engagement of standard displays and improve students' problem-solving skills by tenfold. Crucially, the AI acts as a scaffold rather than a replacement for educators, prompting questions that encourage deeper thinking and collaboration. As schools and museums across the country adopt these tools, NSF investments are proving that AI can be a powerful partner in education, helping the next generation master the critical thinking skills necessary for the future STEM workforce.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- NSF is an architect of America's STEM talent pipeline, building the educational infrastructure—from K–12 curricula to teacher training—that fuels national innovation and workforce readiness.
- Investments reach beyond the classroom, creating a nationwide ecosystem of informal learning in museums, libraries, and after-school programs that connects science to local community needs.
- Deep cuts to education funding threaten this foundation, with recent grant terminations and program eliminations dismantling critical support systems for students and teachers across 48 states.
- Retreating from STEM education undermines future capacity, as the loss of initiatives—from rural teacher networks to youth technology programs—weakens the workforce pipeline essential for U.S. competitiveness.
- Sustaining U.S. STEM leadership requires robust educational support, ensuring every community is equipped to participate in and drive the industries of tomorrow.

Conclusion

For 75 years, the NSF has led federal investments in STEM education, a mission this analysis of 3,800 articles confirms is essential to U.S. competitiveness. Coverage highlights that a robust educational infrastructure—spanning K–12 curricula, informal learning in libraries, and targeted support for rural America—relies on the Directorate for STEM Education (EDU) to drive evidence-based practices and increasingly vital AI literacy. Media reports warn, however, that scaling back these programs threatens to erode the pipeline of future talent needed for advanced manufacturing and data-driven careers. Ultimately, the coverage suggests America faces a stark choice: decisively invest in the STEM education that powers our future, or risk falling behind in an increasingly technical world.

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Dr. Jeanne Century is the founder of Outlier Research & Evaluation at the University of Chicago and a Senior Research Fellow at the University's Data Science Institute. Century's work has almost exclusively focused on advancing equity in education primarily through applied research collaborations with leaders in large and small urban school districts. During her nearly 38-year career, Century has been the principal investigator of numerous federal and foundation research grants focusing on a range of topics including inquiry science instruction, computer science education, STEM schools, sustainability of reform and data science education. Century's primary research focus is on understanding, measuring, and supporting education innovation implementation, spread and endurance through implementation science and component-based research approaches. Century has also conducted numerous evaluations on out-of-school and in-school programs, district and state reform efforts, higher education, teacher preparation, and civic leadership. In addition to research, Century has developed instructional materials, supported professional learning efforts for teachers and administrators and has provided technical assistance and strategic planning for leaders at the school, district, and state levels. Century also has policy experience at all education system levels including serving on a Presidential transition team where she was responsible for STEM education as well as the U.S. Department of Education Agency Review.

Dr. Eric M. Tucker is the President and CEO of the Study Group. He has served as President of Equity by Design, Superintendent and Executive Director of Brooklyn Laboratory Charter Schools, CEO of Friends of Brooklyn LAB, Cofounder of Educating All Learners Alliance, Senior Research Scientist at UCLA Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST), Cofounder and Executive Director of InnovateEDU, director at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Executive Director and Chief Academic Officer of the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues, and Founder of the Rhode Island Urban Debate League. As an entrepreneurial, strategic, and impact-focused leader, Dr. Tucker has 25 years of experience building catalytic partnerships in education, securing over $300 million of investments for enterprises and initiatives that have transformed outcomes for diverse learners and educators. Dr. Tucker has expertise in measurement and assessment system innovation, inclusive and advanced R&D, analytics, and human infrastructures for improvement. Dr. Tucker co-edited The Sage Handbook of Measurement and the Handbook for Assessment in the Service of Learning, Volume I, II & III. He earned a doctorate and a masters of science in measurement sciences from the University of Oxford and bachelors degrees from Brown University.

About the Study Group

The Study Group exists to advance the best of artificial intelligence, assessment, and data practice, technology, and policy; uncover future design needs and opportunities for educational systems; and generate recommendations to better meet the needs of students, families, and educators.

Date of Publication

February 2026

Citation

Century, J. & Tucker, E. M. (2026). *Broader Impacts: An Analysis of Media Coverage about the National Science Foundation (January 2025–January 2026): STEM Education*. The Study Group.