



Wednesday, November 10, 2010

### How I See It

## Need for STEM education starts early

By Jackie Jenkins-Scott, president of Wheelock College

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At a time when competition for jobs is at an all-time high, it is crucial for our schools to begin teaching the subjects of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM, as early as possible.

Pre-K would be a great place to start. However, that can't happen without providing STEM training and support to our teachers.

A report released earlier this year by Wheelock College's Aspire Institute advised that elementary school teachers receive specific training in science and math. That report also recommended the establishment of a Greater Boston STEM Educator Consortium to collaboratively pursue goals, practices and funding for preparing skilled PreK-6 STEM educators. The report was commissioned by the John Adams Innovation Institute of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative.

National organizations and local agencies want to start teaching STEM at the Pre-K level to prepare U.S. students for competition with their peers in foreign nations. Developmentally appropriate strategies can ignite sparks of interest in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and can improve the odds for our youth when it is time for them to compete in the global job market and, as important, in a world where science and technology is revolutionizing the way we live.

With the assistance of faculty from Wheelock College and other organizations, such strategies are already under way at the kindergarten level at the Haley Pilot School in Boston. Children are discovering that science can be fun by cultivating a garden, building robots, investigating tide pools, and enjoying nature.

Students from the United States fall behind in math and the sciences compared to students in China, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Russia, England, and the Netherlands. Several researchers state that a key factor for this discrepancy is that education in these subjects does not start at a young enough age in the

United States.

We have seen some government action, both local and national, over the past year pushing the initiative in the right direction. Last October, Gov. Deval Patrick created the STEM Advisory Council. On Sept. 28 of this year, the STEM Summit

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in Sturbridge was hosted by the Governor’s STEM Advisory Council, the STEM Business Leaders’ Coalition and the University of Massachusetts.

In January, President Barack Obama announced a \$250 million initiative that will help train more than 100,000 teachers and prepare more than 10,000 new educators in the next five years. He also called on the 200,000 scientists who work for the federal government to help by speaking at schools and participating in hands-on projects to help stoke young children’s curiosity in the sciences.

Teaching STEM education at an earlier age will ensure foundation knowledge and skills, as well as foster long-term interest and higher-level study in the four subject areas in later years. Currently, most states, including Massachusetts, only require that middle school and secondary-level educators complete specialized training and obtain licensure as math and science teachers. This learning context must change, just as the environment in which our children learn in is changing.

Online courses for in-service education for teachers are now in development at Wheelock’s Aspire Institute. That type of work must move forward at a rapid pace, and it will require support and collaboration on many fronts to ensure high-quality STEM education in the future.

*Jackie Jenkins-Scott is president of Boston’s Wheelock College, a private institution with the public mission of improving the quality of life for children and their families.*

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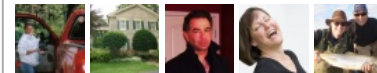
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