

Opening Statement
Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson
House Committee on Science and Technology

STEM Education in Action: Communities Preparing for Jobs of the Future

September 26, 2011

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm happy to be here in Texarkana to learn more about successful STEM partnerships in the region and to discuss the unique role of community colleges in both strengthening the local technical workforce and providing a pathway to continued education in the STEM fields.

We have a STEM education crisis in this country and we must do something to address it if we hope to compete in the 21st century global economy. Year after year, test after test, our students are lagging behind their international peers in tests of science and math aptitude.

The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) study found that less than half of our Nation's students are demonstrating solid academic performance and proficiency in science. This is a startling statistic when you consider the many recent reports warning that our competitive edge will be lost if we do not vastly improve STEM education in this country.

More and more U.S. companies are moving abroad because they can't find the highly skilled workforce they need here at home. A recent study estimates that in the year 2018, 8 million jobs in the U.S. economy will require a college degree in one of the STEM fields. If we want those jobs to stay in the U.S., and in Texas, we must continue to invest in STEM education for our future workforce.

The STEM education problem is a complex one that no one entity alone can solve. There is a role for all the key stakeholders, including federal and state governments, local school districts, higher education, informal education organizations, and industry.

The role of community colleges in particular is increasingly becoming a part of the national competitiveness conversation. Community colleges have an important role to play in preparing students for highly technical jobs upon graduation, and in providing a pathway for higher education in the STEM fields. For many students, community colleges can be more affordable and accessible than four year institutions. Additionally, community colleges are often highly diverse institutions with great potential to stimulate interest in STEM among historically underrepresented groups.

Many minority students with great potential for success in the STEM disciplines begin their postsecondary education in a community college. I'm interested in hearing from our witnesses today about the role they see community colleges playing in broadening participation in STEM and what experiences they've had in promoting diversity in local community college STEM programs.

We also know that community colleges face unique challenges, including issues of K-12 math and science remediation. I'm interested in hearing from our witnesses about how partnerships with K-12 schools and other efforts have helped to address this issue.

In reviewing the written testimony of the witnesses, I noticed that many of you have received federal grants and partnered with many of the federal agencies.

Especially in these tough budget times, it is critical that we continue to invest in federal programs that leverage resources locally and can be sustained long after the initial federal support. I'd be interested in hearing from our witnesses about what federal support your institution has received, what made you decide to seek out federal funding, and what impact federal grants and partnerships have had in helping to create and grow effective STEM programs in East Texas.

To truly tackle this STEM education challenge we need the involvement of all stakeholders and of entire communities. I look forward to hearing more about the great success you are having in this region, and to learning from your experience here in Texarkana.