

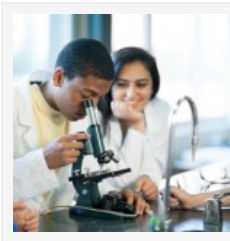
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## Back to School

### Understanding STEM education funders

By Doug Haller on August 13th, 2013 | Comments (1)



*This past spring a client dedicated significant resources in response to a national solicitation to fund STEM education. Two months into the proposal writing effort, sequestration forced withdrawal of the funds. As organizations lose faith in the ability of the national government to respond to STEM funding needs they increasingly turn to local corporate, foundation and government sources. **What do you need to know to initiate and sustain funding for STEM education in your community?***

STEM education funding comes from various sources: government, foundations and corporate sponsors. Currently, the federal government has restricted or eliminated new funding due to sequestration. Turning to other resources requires anticipating their expectations. Regardless of their motivations for investment, corporations, foundations and private investors want to support and invest in effective education efforts. To do this, they increasingly expect recipients to provide data demonstrating program efficacy.

### Rigorous evaluation

Last year the state of Iowa received approximately 40 requests for STEM education funding of which 25% meet Iowa's scale-up needs. Jeff Weld, executive director of the Iowa Governor's STEM Advisory Council, explains that "to separate the wheat from the chaff," his team used components of the Design Principles Rubric. The rubric is a tool produced by Change the Equation (CTEq) to improve decision-making by philanthropic entities. According to Weld, use of the rubric provided the council with the ability to quickly separate programs of promise from those less suitable for the state.

There are other mechanisms for evaluating the efficacy of a proposed STEM education program. In the spring of 2013, along with about 30 other volunteers from education and industry, I acted as a reviewer for the STEM in Action program that awarded about \$250,000 each to four of 29 applicants. Although we did not use the CTEq rubric, the review process was rigorous. Individually and in teams of three, we rated five proposals against an assessment tool aligned to the specific solicitation. To ensure parity across teams, staff from the department of education led all the volunteers through an evaluation of one proposal, modeling the process, allowing discussion, and providing clarity throughout.

### Philanthropic goals

Potential award recipients need to understand funders' goals. Scott Fast, executive director of the Accenture Foundation, explains that when weighing philanthropic options, industry takes into consideration corporate needs, long-term impact and the employee experience. About the employees, Fast notes that corporations often select local and national efforts that make the staff feel proud, excited, engaged and willing to donate their time. This may result in businesses seeking "signature" programs, one that demonstrates measurable success and wide local or national support. Once on-board, a company may want exclusive rights to support a program to demonstrate its philanthropic efforts. This works well for a few, proven programs but may hurt the potential for innovation beyond those programs. In response, Jeff Weld explained that his council may ask the state to set up a separate funding source designed to cultivate new and innovative approaches to improved STEM education, those efforts that have yet to acquire the foothold or data needed to meet rubric criteria.

### Crunch the data

Weld and Fast both emphasize the importance of data. Fast notes that corporations make decisions based upon data and expect their education partners to do the same. Fast, who has watched corporate philanthropy change with time, explains that donations and support now

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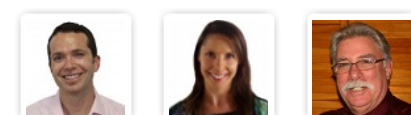
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come with expectations or specific outcomes, aligned to stated goals, and proven measurement methods. Discussions about the nature and depth of data collection expected and performed should be part of the conversation between donors and recipients. As a result, organizations receiving grants need to anticipate and set aside time and funds to perform evaluation — plan to budget 20-30% of your grant for evaluation. Evaluation often requires hiring a third-party to perform the quantitative and qualitative assessment of a program's impact — gathering baseline data, providing formative and summative feedback, and reporting on the change in abilities and attitudes of students and/or teachers toward STEM teaching and learning.

Corporations, foundations and states will continue to feel pressure to fund STEM education, taking up the slack, as federal efforts remain unclear and sequestration in effect. With increased requests, funders will expect more impact for their investment, requiring data and data-driven decisions from their education partners. Programs demonstrating lasting and effective change will likely receive more and more consistent funding as long as they have the data to backup their approaches and actions.

*Doug Haller is the principal of **Haller STEM Education Consulting**. Haller is an education consultant specializing in strategic planning and market analysis to drive design, development and sales of niche education products for clients in the for-profit, nonprofit, and education and public outreach fields. His creative approach is based on years of practical experience as an educator, instructional designer and education consultant. Check out his blog, **STEM Education: Inspire, Engage, Educate**.*

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