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Fix Science Education Now

By Alan I. Leshner

Comfort and familiarity with science and technology can no longer be a privilege only for the wealthy or the intellectual elite. In a democracy like ours, every citizen needs and deserves at least some level of understanding in these subjects, lest they be left behind as our society continues to evolve. A high-quality science education is now a baseline requirement for every student hoping to compete for jobs in the future.

Sadly, U.S. science education is in dire need of reform. Nearly a third of all fourth-graders nationwide (32 percent) and even more eighth-graders (41 percent) scored below basic achievement levels in science in the most recent assessment by the U.S. Department of Education. U.S. 15-year-olds ranked 21st among students in 30 developed nations in science, according to a 2006 study.

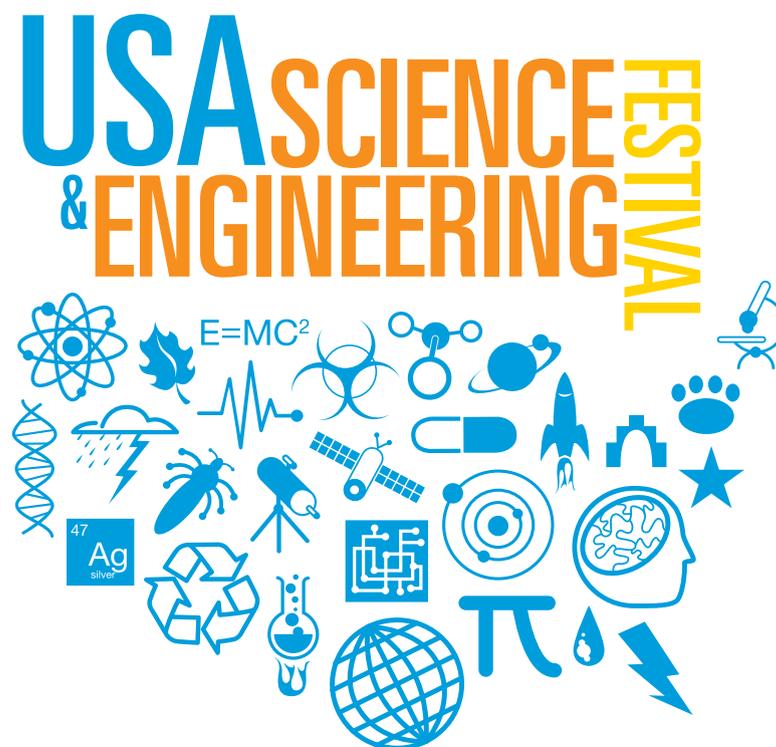
Fixing the U.S. science education problem will require a multifaceted, multi-level approach. Competitive pay for teachers should be our top priority. If we want to recruit and retain the best teachers, we need to reward them.

We also need to develop appropriate science-learning standards for all students nationally, at every grade level. No matter where they live, the nature of their career goals, or how much money their parents earn, all children need to master the same core scientific concepts. Efforts now underway to create voluntary, national science education standards — funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and involving the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, the educational group Achieve, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science — are an important step forward.

In the science- and technology-focused world of the future, we cannot afford to let anyone lag behind. Science literacy and scientific advances that promise to improve human welfare are keys to a better life for all of our children.



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