

Opening Statement
The Honorable Vernon J. Ehlers, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Research and Science Education
Committee on Science and Technology
U.S. House of Representatives
Beyond the Classroom: Informal STEM Education

February 26, 2009

Today's hearing is an opportunity to learn about the blossoming field of informal science education and research.

Informal science education takes place almost everywhere but in the classroom. The recent report from the National Academies on this topic highlights the difficulty in assessing the impacts of non-classroom learning on science knowledge, attitudes and actions. Clearly, formalized science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education can only go so far. Informal experiences shape how people view science and can help people get comfortable enough with science to want to spend their free time in places like parks, museums, and after-school activities. Informal science education has a unique platform to engage the public in science in ways that show it is not only fun, but also fundamental to the competitiveness of our country. These opportunities also reach many students and families who may not have received a high-quality STEM education through traditional classroom experiences or who have been turned off to science by earlier negative experiences.

One challenge faced by the informal science education community – and policymakers – is that inherently minimally-structured environments do not lend themselves to evaluation. I am particularly interested in how the federal agencies can support the necessary research and provide resources to informal practitioners about how to develop and manage successful programs.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today. Thank you for your attendance.