

# President's Corner

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**Kevin Sullivan, President and CEO of The Children's Museum**

Well, it's been a little over a year on the job, and I find myself thinking about why what we do here is so important.

Do you remember the first time you picked up a frog or chased butterflies in the woods? The first time you saw the stars come out in a planetarium sky? Wondering how a favorite toy worked? Your first science experiment? Remember the lasting joy of discovery and lessons learned? That's what we do for over 200,000 kids and families every year at The Children's Museum in West Hartford, at our Roaring Brook Nature Center in Canton, and in school classrooms all across the state

Moments of wonder and discovery come naturally to kids, but what happens when too few children really get to experience science? Sadly, we know the answer. Last year, 45% of all fifth graders failed the statewide science assessment, and the results were dismal in our neediest school districts. Most kids, especially girls, are turned off to science by middle school and then never take more than a few required courses from high school through college.

With the "No Child Left Behind" mandates driving more drilling in reading and math during school time, there is less time for hands-on

science in class and even outside of class through field trips or in-school science outreach. Many elementary and middle school teachers have little background in science and all teachers have too few opportunities to update their knowledge of science or even teaching science.

None of this is acceptable at a time when science skills are an engine of educational attainment, economic growth, and opportunity, or at a time when more and more of the decisions we make as citizens require us to be more science-informed.

As a new report from the National Research Council says so clearly, our schools cannot do it alone. See the report here: [www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=12190#toc](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12190#toc). That's why places like The Children's Museum are more important than ever. Whether it's our exhibits and animals, outreach to schools and youth groups, vacation camps or even birthday parties and camp-ins, it's all about science education linked to state science standards. The secret is we also do it in ways that are kid-sized, family-friendly, hands-on, and fun. Sometimes we call it "disguised learning." Our pre-schoolers, elementary schoolers and middle schoolers think it's just fun, but we know it is teaching and learning.

Unfortunately, science learning in non-school settings, where kids spend most of their time, is too often overlooked. Yet there is mounting evidence that non-school science programs feed the science interests of younger children, positively influence academic achievement and expand their sense of future science career options – especially when connected with parents at home and teachers in school.

Far more than supplementary enrichment, science museums and centers (especially those like ours that focus on younger children and families) offer the direct, hands-on experience of science that makes all the difference. The NRC report is a clarion call for a broader, deeper and more deliberate partnership between informal and formal science education. Younger children are constantly wondering, testing, experimenting, and discovering. It's the time when we have our best opportunity to engage, motivate and inform the natural scientists inborn in them. This is the stuff of real science and a solid foundation for more. This is our best chance to get it right from the start.

At The Children's Museum, we offer the trifecta of science learning: building on everyday and family learning; offering exhibits, natural environments and real experiences after school and out of school. And we help teachers freshen their science skills with real science and bring hands-on science back into our schools.

No wonder membership here (with benefits at children's museums and science centers across the nation), our programs and exhibits, our outreach to schools and youth groups, and donating to The Children's Museum, is such a great investment.

**the children's museum**

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