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OPINION AND COMMENTARY

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OPINION

## Mark Robinson's stance on science hurts NC girls

BY SANDY MARSHALL

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*The author is founder and CEO of Project Scientist, a non-profit that ignites girls' confidence in their abilities in science, technology, engineering and math.*

Do N.C. elementary school students need to stop studying science so they can focus on the basics?

Lt. Gov. Robinson proposed that curriculum change in his forthcoming book, according to reporting from The Observer. Robinson writes that elementary schools should "demand proficiency in reading, writing, and math in grades one through five.... We don't need to be teaching science." Last week, Robinson told television station CBS-17 that he wasn't saying science should be cut from the early grades, but reading and math should take priority.

I'm glad the lieutenant governor has refined his position, if that's the case. But he is not alone in thinking science is incidental for North Carolina's youngest students. The opposite is true. Young children don't need less science in class. They need more.

I've seen why science needs to be taught imaginatively at the highest level to our youngest generation. We will need every great mind we can attract to STEM disciplines. Think of the challenges such as climate change our children will face in their lifetimes – challenges that will require knowledge of science to solve.

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Project Scientist offers summer STEM programs and after-school STEM clubs to girls as young as 4 because stereotyping begins early. When we ask participants at the start of our programs to draw a scientist, most depict men in lab coats. Science education in grade school helps girls from all backgrounds realize that science is for them, too. That discovery can inform their sense of self forever.

STEM jobs also tend to pay well and can provide a pathway out of generational poverty for under-resourced students if we cultivate their interest early. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported this year that STEM occupations pay an annual mean wage of \$100,900. For non-STEM jobs, that figure drops to \$55,260.

Adults have a strong stake in nurturing students' passion for STEM. There is a serious need for more STEM talent in North Carolina and our nation as jobs are changing. In manufacturing alone, a Deloitte study predicts our nation will need skilled workers for 3.5 million jobs by 2025, but more than 2 million of those jobs will go unfulfilled due to lack of properly educated and trained candidates.

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We are leaving the talents of half the population untapped when it comes to STEM. Only 28% of U.S. science and engineering jobs are held by women. Girls and women "are systematically tracked away from science and math throughout their education," according to the American Association of University Women, due to stereotyping, limited female role models, and other factors. The trend isn't likely to change if a girl has no opportunity to try hands-on experiments until middle school.

Students who study science learn important lessons beyond the subject at hand. Making mistakes in science is not only okay, it's inherent in the scientific method of discovery. Students learn from what didn't work, hypothesize about what will, and test their assumptions. The process helps build a growth mindset in which students don't fear failure because they know it can enhance their knowledge and lead to something better.

**At Project Scientist, I've seen young girls love learning about brain science, climate change, space and more. They often tell us they want more science in school. I say bring it on. "The basics" today include science.**

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