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[Home](#) [Newsroom](#) [Press Releases](#) [New Research from SRI International Yields Insights into Science Offered in California's Afterschool Programs](#)

New Research from SRI International Yields Insights into Science Offered in California's Afterschool Programs

Comprehensive study of elementary school programs provides recommendations for improving informal science education

MENLO PARK, Calif.—September 24, 2014 – A new research study from SRI International provides insights into how publicly funded afterschool programs that offer science can strengthen learning opportunities for elementary school students and encourage interest in science. The five-year project, funded by the National Science Foundation, is the most comprehensive examination to date of science in California's Afterschool Education and Safety (ASES) program.

The Afterschool Science Networks (ASN) study looked at randomly sampled afterschool programs across California to examine the features of science offerings, including the curricula and materials used, and how afterschool programs are supported by partners such as science museums and community-based organizations.

"Afterschool programs have the potential to engage students in informal, hands-on science activities that support positive youth development and offer access to quality learning experiences that may not fit into the regular school day," said Ann House, Ph.D., senior researcher in SRI Education's Center for Technology in Learning and project director for the ASN study. "Until now, little data has been available about how much science is offered in afterschool settings. We now have a more complete picture of best practices for informal science learning and recommendations for improving and extending science offerings for children across California, and nationwide."

The study produced key findings in five areas: science learning opportunities, science program and site characteristics, partnerships, networks, and instructional materials. Major findings include:

- A large majority of afterschool program sites offer science (87%), though popular activities such as arts, sports, or tutoring are provided far more often.



- A little less than half of sites (48%) provide opportunities for students to participate in science once a week or more.
- Less than a quarter of sites (22%) provide students with opportunities for deeper science experiences, where students can ask questions, explore issues, and discuss work with peers and afterschool program staff.
- Most sites (63%) have a partner who supports science programming, and these are most often community-based organizations or school districts.
- Across the state, sites report that most partners were local (within 50 miles).

The study also identified key characteristics of sites that provide strong learning experiences for their students: designated staff members who are responsible for science, even if they are not science experts; staff members who are knowledgeable about science or afterschool activities and youth development; and external partners who can provide additional support and resources.

Based on the study findings, SRI Education researchers provide recommendations in four important areas to help afterschool providers offer deeper science learning experiences.

- Staff: expand the vision for science with clear learning goals, improve staff capacity through professional development, and select supportive learning materials.
- Program: prioritize science with a designated staff member in charge, organize and prioritize blocks of time for science, support collaboration between afterschool staff and school staff, and build capacity through partnerships with outside organizations.
- Policy and funding: encourage programs to develop clear and ambitious goals for science, support the development of partnerships and networks, and provide adequate funding for staff development.
- Research: conduct partnership research on the impacts of partnership and networks, study implementation of afterschool science learning activities, study outcomes for adults and youth involved in afterschool science, and design research on instructional materials.

Findings from the study were shared at the 2014 California STEM Symposium in San Diego. A summary of the findings is available.

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