

Say This, Not That



Many of the **common arguments** that STEM education advocates use don't help advance people's thinking about STEM learning and why it matters.

Strategic communicators make intentional choices about what to emphasize, and what to leave unsaid. While the following recommendations might seem counterintuitive, the research supports them!

USED TO THIS?	TRY THIS INSTEAD!	WHY?
STEM	Science, technology, engineering, and math—the subjects collectively known as STEM.	STEM is a meaningless acronym to most—let people know what subjects make up STEM skills and learning.
Out-of-school time	Programs that meet afterschool, on the weekends, or during the summer	Disrupt the assumption that kids can only learn “real” skills during traditional school hours and provide rich examples to expand conceptions.
To remain competitive in a global economy...	To build our shared prosperity...	Global competition cues up unproductive narratives about America's best days being behind her. Point them towards the future and frame STEM learning as a shared good and societal responsibility.
U.S. can't fill STEM jobs, so they go overseas.	The sector is growing – let's grow with it.	Don't alarm the audience with a skills crisis. Combat the sense of fatalism and focus on the opportunities ahead.
STEM degrees lead to high-paying careers.	Innovation drives the economy.	This orients the audience towards the collective benefits, rather than individual gain.
Afterschool STEM works to end race and gender inequities in education and the workforce.	We work to ensure all kids no matter what zip code they grow up in have access to STEM learning opportunities.	Framing issues as important “because of” or “for” a specific group can lead to divisive reasoning about disparities between groups. People often assume that providing STEM resources for one group necessarily means taking them away from others.
Afterschool keeps the academic clock ticking.	Exploratory, supportive, flexible settings let kids learn in a different way.	Focus on the unique contributions of afterschool and summer learning, and show how they complement formal education within a broader learning ecosystem.
Let me tell you this inspiring story about Jamal...	Widen the lens to talk about the community, contexts, or collective actions that help students succeed.	Don't feed the public's belief that willpower and personal choices are the main determinants of success by offering a narrow focus on individuals who “beat the odds.” Give examples of programs that are improving outcomes for all children.