Excerpts from “STEM Guides” project decision-log

Contributed to the [third RPP Forum](#) by:

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**Context:** These excerpts are from the decision-log for an NSF-funded project called “STEM Guides” at the Maine Mathematics and Science Alliance. The project starts with the premise that youth and their families are often unaware of the STEM resources in their rural communities. We hire part-time community members to serve as human connective-tissue; they are called “STEM Guides.”

**Relationships to schools**

**Claim:** In our rural Hubs, schools have a broader role than just centers of formal education during school hours – they are major community hubs, the center of sports and extracurricular activities. Teachers are seen by youth as life advisors and also as the primary source of fun, hands-on activities in science (see baseline survey question about where would you go).

**Insights**
- Although they are seen by students as advisors for science and for life, teachers may not have time to be familiar with the STEM opportunities available online or locally.
- Teachers may feel threatened by Reach (as diverting the time and attention of their best students), or disinterested (having too little time to engage), or embracing (seeing it as a way to enliven their classrooms, bring in speakers, etc.)

**Decision:** We will work with schools and teachers because of their central role as community hubs, and because the teachers and principals can give us various forms of access to youth (e.g. lunchtime youth meetings, in-class presentations during RTI time, youth survey opportunities) and their families (e.g. PTA meetings, school science fairs). However, we will not relieve teachers of their science-teaching duties, or align our Resource Bank materials to standards or school-based curricula, because we want youth activities to be based on their own interests.

**Partnering**

**Synergy versus nimbleness**

**Tension:**
True joint ownership of the structure of the STEM Guides model creates bonding, shared vision, synergies, and greater opportunities leverage and scale-up. On the other hand, it
requires joint review and negotiating standards or meeting both sets at once, which may feel constraining and tedious.

- For example, our early model had STEM Guides and Supporters who could be employed by either MMSA or 4-H. This led to slow development of job descriptions, hires, PD, and materials, as both organizations did multiple round of review and revision. (Some specifics: 4-H staff are required to take a number of PD classes that are less relevant to the project (e.g. equity and diversity, safety), and also some of the project costs go to 4-H academic staff taking sabbaticals, or fringe benefits that the Guides aren’t eligible for because they work only part-time.)

- As another example, Teen Science Café unexpectedly insisted that we create a monthly blog as part of being in the network.

**Decision:**
All Lead Guides, Guides, and Supporters will be hired / sign up by MMSA. 4-H will contribute advice and select PD opportunities, and will provide summer temporary employees if needed on a short-term basis (e.g. for a “summer of science” 4-H program).

**Branding and credit**

**Tension:**
Ideally we wouldn’t care if we got any explicit brand-recognition of our project in the communities as long as youth are served and we are meeting our project’s deliverables and learning in the process. In fact, we want to leverage and partner as much as possible so that our dollars go as far as possible in helping youth. But at the same time there is pressure for us to have a recognizable brand: Our work as connective tissue depends in part on people knowing that we are the “go-to” place for STEM resources; otherwise our impact is lessened. In addition, our funders want us to characterize the impacts of our program and one obvious way to assess awareness is by asking people about the program by name. Our partners have their own pressures to brand the project – 4-H is now required to have both the 4-H and University of Maine logos on banners and materials related to the STEM Guides project. The STEM Guides project is funded by a combination of NSF and private funding, and both of these funders need to be acknowledged as well. Lastly, MMSA is the parent organization in which the STEM Guides project is housed, and it has its own pressures to be acknowledged. These issues play out in various contexts: banners and materials, websites and email addresses, business cards for staff members and volunteers on the project.

**Decision**
We will drop the Reach Center name as a project reference, and only have it as a funding stream for the STEM Guides project. This will remove the BH confusion and also will make it clear to the world that MMSA is the parent organization driving the work. Lastly, this makes the project parallel with other projects at MMSA.