President Barack Obama recently took another important step toward improving the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education of America's youth by announcing a major expansion of his “Educate to Innovate” campaign. Among the new programs announced by the President, the Youth Inspired Challenge, led by the Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC), stands out in helping young people become the innovative and creative thinkers needed to meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. Responding to the President's call to action, ASTC and its network of hundreds of science centers and museums have set a goal to provide 2 million hours of comprehensive science enrichment programs to young people, particularly women and underrepresented minorities, through afterschool and internship programs that focus on promoting academic skills and self-confidence through science learning. This new initiative also includes a special emphasis on strengthening the professional skills of STEM educators in our communities.

Endorsing the Youth Inspired Challenge, President Obama states that: “Our success as a nation depends on strengthening America's role as the world's engine of discovery and innovation. I applaud the Association of Science-Technology Centers and its members for lending their resources, expertise, and their enthusiasm to the task of strengthening America’s leadership in the 21st century by improving education in science, technology, engineering, and math.”

Research confirms that valuable science education and inspiration consistently takes place in non-school settings, such as science centers and museums, zoos, aquariums, and environmental centers. In these rich, spontaneous educational environments, millions of students — and their siblings, parents, or guardians — from diverse communities across America and around the world become “hands-on explorers,” experimenting with traditional to cutting-edge science. This interactive exploration helps understand and appreciate the process of discovering “why” and “how.” Real interests in science are cultivated and tested. Knowledge, self-confidence and leadership skills emerge through STEM activities in fun, stimulating, and nurturing environments.

To meet the ambitious science enrichment targets set by the Youth Inspired Challenge, informal science learning institutions in communities everywhere will need the strong support of community leaders, social support organizations, corporations, and individual citizens who share a vision for a generation of young people enthusiastically engaged in STEM-related studies and careers. I call upon leaders in all of these communities, public and private, to provide that necessary support for the Youth Inspired Challenge and, in so doing, bring enjoyment and accomplishment in science to an “inspired” generation of tomorrow's leaders.

Anthony (Bud) Rock is the chief executive officer of the Association of Science-Technology Centers Incorporated, an organization of science centers and museums dedicated to furthering engagement with science among increasingly diverse audiences. ASTC has nearly 600 members in 44 countries around the world. To learn more, visit: www.astc.org.