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SALLY RIDE SCIENCE

Sally Ride Science partners with SDUSD to offer free STEM classes for children of military families



(<https://sallyridescience.ucsd.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/SDUSD-partnership-scaled.jpg>)

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By Margaret King

The pandemic has disrupted school routines for everyone. But for children with parents in the armed forces, the disruptions come on top of ongoing educational challenges that can arise when a mother or father is deployed or a family has to relocate to a different city.

To enrich the academic experience of students from military families, the [San Diego Unified School District](https://sandiegounified.org/) (SDUSD) has partnered with Sally Ride Science to offer free online classes on engaging topics ranging from coding and design to oceanography and space science.

The program is funded by a five-year grant that the school district received from the [Department of Defense's Education Activity](https://www.dodea.edu/index.cfm) office. The grant aims to improve the proficiency in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) of children of military parents, including students with moderate to severe special needs, said Michele Einspar, program manager for the school district's Office of Children and Youth in Transition.

Military life can affect children's school performance in different ways, Einspar noted. "If they have a parent or guardian who has been deployed, there can be stressors associated with that," she said.

"The biggest challenge is when they make a permanent change of station, when they move across the country. They can encounter barriers in making friends and just adjusting to a different environment. They can lose a little academic progress. But we're here to smooth that transition."

'Serving those who serve'

Sally Ride Science was cofounded by America's first woman in space in 2001 to inspire students of all backgrounds in STEM. In 2015 Sally Ride Science became part of UC San Diego under the direction of [UC San Diego Extension](https://extension.ucsd.edu/).

Extension Program Manager Megan Lancaster said Sally Ride Science's mission is "in perfect parallel" with the goals of the grant received by the school district. "Through this partnership, Sally Ride Science is humbly honored to support children of military parents, including those with special needs," Lancaster said. "By providing these students with educational enrichment opportunities, we aim to give back to these military families who have sacrificed so much for us and our country."

Morgan Appel, assistant dean of Extension's Education and Community Outreach department, said Extension has "longstanding and steadfast commitments to serving those who serve."

“We understand that part of this promise involves attending to the academic and socioemotional needs of children of military parents in holistic and contextually sensitive ways,” he added. “Our partnership with San Diego Unified School District, individual schools and families provides unique opportunities to better understand these needs and to cultivate engagement and success in STEM learning. We could not be prouder of our work together.”

Focus on military communities

Under the partnership with the school district, Sally Ride Science presented the first week of classes Nov. 16-20 to students from six elementary schools in communities with large military populations – Angier and Jones elementary schools in Serra Mesa, Chesterton Elementary in Linda Vista, Dewey Elementary in Point Loma, Kate Sessions Elementary in Pacific Beach and Mason Elementary in Mira Mesa.

The program wasn't limited to military families; all third graders in the participating schools were invited to enroll in the free workshops. Eighty-six students took part, more than half of them from military families. Students could choose from eight classes, including Android App Design, Creative Programming with Scratch, Makerspace Lab, Trash to Treasures and Slimy Sea Creatures.

The week-long classes, consisting of daily 90-minute Zoom sessions, were scheduled while students were on break from their regular classes. Program organizers plan to offer another session of classes the week of March 22, during spring break. This summer, the goal is to allow third graders from the program to take part in the Sally Ride Science Junior Academy, which offers dozens of online workshops on a broad range of STEM topics.

The program isn't limited to students from military families. Brittany Syz said her son, Crosby, 9, enjoyed Scratch Programming so much that he took another coding class right away.

Ultimately, after pandemic restrictions ease, program organizers plan to transition to in-person classes.

Getting kids and parents involved

During the November session, Sally Ride Science instructor Ellen Stone taught a class called “Tiny Houses,” where students learned about the movement toward small, sustainable dwellings and then built models of their own tiny-house designs.

In spite of the limitations of online instruction, the students reacted enthusiastically to the design project, Stone said. “I go into a class wondering, is this going to be hard for them to understand? They always amaze me with how quickly they can adjust and really have fun with it.”

On the last day, students presented their models to the class. “They really liked sharing their tiny houses and all the work that they had done during the week,” Stone said. “I posted pictures of all their tiny houses and said, ‘Look, you created a tiny-home village.’” The students decided to call their village Tiny Town.

While the students were engaged in live Zoom sessions, their parents would sometimes join in. “The parents were all really excited about it,” Stone said. “I think they wanted to take the class, too. It was great to see that excitement at the parent level. They seemed really grateful to have this additional resource.”

Brittany Syz is the mother of Crosby, 9, a third grader at Kate Sessions Elementary who took part in the program. He signed up for Scratch Programming because he wants to build his own video games, Syz said. The class was a hit, she added: “My son was so into it that he is now taking another coding class.”

Both children and parents at Kate Sessions welcomed the change of pace, Syz said. “It was great having something to fill my child’s time that is fun and engaging, and it also gives me another hour to get some work done,” she said.

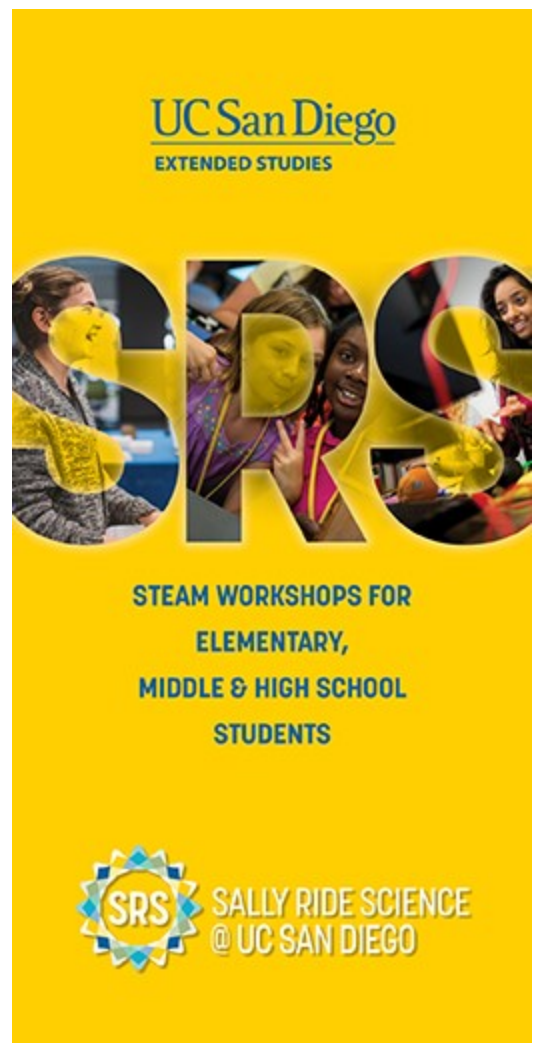
Syz is active in the school’s Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO), which raises money for school programs. “In a time of COVID, fund-raising for schools has been difficult,” she said. “Offering these classes free is a huge benefit for these public schools. What a wonderful opportunity for our kids.”

Students in the Tiny Houses class created models of their own sustainable dwelling designs.

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