NEWS RELEASE
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The LES Lab, a state-of-the-art community-based science laboratory, opens on the Lower East Side

A new kind of STEM space creating access to scientific inquiry for students from NYC's public school District 1 and beyond, in partnership with NYC's Department of Education, the New York City Council and University Settlement

NEW YORK CITY – Lower East Side Lab, a $3 million+ state-of-the art facility which seeks to build educational equity by creating access to scientific inquiry for students in New York City's School District 1, has begun welcoming students into programs and to conduct research, the Lab announced today.

Set on the Lower East Side (LES), a historically immigrant, working-class Manhattan neighborhood, the LES Lab is a state-of-the art community-based laboratory embedded within a Title 1 New York City public school.

The culmination of a more than 8-year community planning process, the new science center features:

- A **750+ sq. ft. lab space**, outfitted with a scanning electron microscope and other advanced research tools
- A **student lounge** featuring a full-size skeleton of a bottlenose dolphin
- An **atrium** fitted with immersive science displays
- **Programming** developed in partnership with a dozen community-based organizations.

Housed in a beautiful renovation of one of East Side Community School's ("East Side") existing wings with access from East 11th Street, and funded by 3 million+ from the New

York City Council, the LES Lab opened with a kickoff event on September 25, 2026. Photos are available here.

"We know that nothing inspires a lifelong passion for science like personal, inquiry-driven, hands-on experiences and consistent mentorship," **said Sarah Weisberg, LES Lab Co-Creator** "But many of our young people on the LES, particularly Black, Spanish-speaking, female, and low-income students, are shut out of the science-based opportunities that are rapidly expanding in NYC and beyond. The LES Lab exists to close that gap. After 8 years of planning, seeing the space open is a dream come to life. We thank all our amazing partners, and particularly our City Council champions Carlina Rivera and Harvey Epstein, for helping us make it a reality."

"The vast majority of young people, and particularly those in low-income communities, rarely if ever have access to authentic STEM inquiry, or to the research-grade tools that facilitate it," **said Gabrielle Rodriguez**, **LES Lab Program Director**, who will lead the build-out of programs at the lab in collaboration with partners. "I'm passionate about building equitable access to real scientific research for NYC's current and next generation because I know that when everyone is welcomed as valid members of the scientific community, it will supercharge the discoveries we need for the 21st century."

Funding for the LES Lab Program Director role comes from a grant from Restore America's Estuaries and its Long Island Sound Community Impact Fund secured through University Settlement, the innovative social services and advocacy organization which has long operated NYC Beacon and SONYC after-school programs at East Side. "Exciting young people's curiosity, bridging equity gaps in science education, finding creative new responses to the threats of climate change – the LES Lab braids together so many vital direct responses to our neighborhood's needs right now," **said Melissa Aase, Chief Executive Officer, University Settlement.** "We are thrilled to be part of such a creative community-based endeavor, we welcome Gabi to the US team, and we would like to particularly uplift the leadership of our Beacon Director **Dakim Duncan** throughout the Lab's development process."

"We've created the LES Lab as a new kind of STEM space because we know that traditional science classrooms don't support students in fully developing curiosity-driven research projects," **Weisberg continued**. "The lab is not a classroom, though it is able to support and host whole classes of students during the school day; it contains research-grade laboratory equipment but is also accessible to participants without formal scientific training; and it supports novel research which is driven by the interests and questions of youth and community."

"One important way the Lab will work to counter historic iniquities that persist across NYC public schools is through our unique approach to partnership," **Weisberg continued.** "We're leveraging the resources and leadership capacity of our host school (East Side) to benefit students across District 1 and beyond. The partnerships we're cultivating with D1, with vital community institutions like University Settlement, and with our many STEM

partners will drive create potentially life-changing access to science experiences and mentorship for young people from diverse backgrounds across Lower Manhattan."

"The opening of the Lower East Side Lab reflects years of persistence and collaboration, resulting in an incredible opportunity," **said Kristine Mustillo, Deputy Superintendent, New York City Community School District 1**. "Students across the Lower East Side now have a space where they can test, question, and create side-by-side with their peers and expert mentors. The future scientists, engineers, and astronomers of tomorrow will trace their beginnings right back to this floor. We cannot wait to see what our students bring to life in this space."

"I am grateful to announce the opening of The LES Lab, a brand-new state-of-the-art laboratory facility serving District 1 students," **said Harvey Epstein, New York City Council Member.** "This space converts part of a public school building into a community science lab, allowing students to work side-by-side with professional scientists, bolstering professional development opportunities and strengthening neighborhood partnerships. This lab shows us what's possible when we use public funds to think differently about our public spaces. Thank you to NYCPS District 1 leadership, our founding partner schools, former Council Member Carlina Rivera, and to all of the local science community organizations for making this possible."

"At the Lab, students conduct real experiments using the same kinds of instruments professional scientists rely on, from imaging specimens in microscopic detail to testing water samples from local waterways," **said Joseph Vincente, Assistant Principal at East Side Community School and LES Lab Co-Creator.** "This hands-on access transforms STEM from a textbook subject into a lived, discoverable practice for our young people on the Lower East Side and the broader NYC community."

At launch, LES Lab programming partners include:

- Hitachi Inspire STEM Education Outreach Program
- BioBus, Inc.
- Lower East Side Ecology Center
- Solar One
- City Parks Foundation
- Works on Water
- Learning Undefeated
- City Island Oyster Reef
- NYC First Robotics
- Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES)
- NYU Mindhive
- Girls Who Code
- Common Ground Compost
- Cooper Union Engineering STEM Outreach
- Loisaida Center

- Brooklyn Robot Foundry
- WE ACT for Environmental Justice

The LES Lab features a Hitachi TM4000 Series tabletop Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM) provided by Hitachi High-Tech America, Inc., technology which is typically only accessible in university and industry labs. By partnering with the Hitachi Inspire STEM Program, the Lab is empowered to put this rare opportunity directly in the hands of NYC public school students and the Lower East Side community. The Lab also features compound and stereo microscopes, PCR and DNA extraction tools, water quality sensors, and environmental monitoring equipment.

The LES Lab has been awarded highly-competitive funding from Restore America's Estuaries via its Long Island Sound Community Impact Fund (LISCIF). This funding will support 14 high school students to work year-round (September 2026-June 2027) as paid STEM interns. Designed in collaboration with Dr. Giovanna McClenechan of Stony Brook University, the internship will allow participants to conduct their own research projects while also developing hands-on activities that they will then lead for 50+ middle school students. Interns' research and the activities will focus on exploring the ecology of Long Island Sound's salt marshes, and how these marshes protect against sea level rise and promote resilience and sustainability.

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About Lower East Side Lab (LES Lab)

The Lower East Side is a historically immigrant, working-class Manhattan neighborhood. Despite rising development pressure, it remains anchored by public housing, tight-knit blocks, and a deep tradition of community organizing and mutual aid-- yet many of its young people, particularly Black, Spanish-speaking, female, and low-income students, are shut out of the STEM opportunities rapidly expanding elsewhere.

Lower East Side Lab (LES Lab) exists to close that gap. Our mission is to directly combat this inequality by inspiring and challenging K-12 students across NYC DOE District 1 and beyond to explore STEM pathways through community-driven programs and events. Rooted in the neighborhood itself, our state-of-the-art research and technology lab brings hands-on, real-world scientific exploration to local kids and families while aiming to develop the next generation of scientists, engineers, and mathematicians. We place special emphasis on reaching minority, female, and low-income students, equipping them with the skills, confidence, and experience they need for the jobs of tomorrow, right where they live. Learn more: www.leslab.org

About NYC Community School District 1

Community School District 1 brings students and educators together for inclusive 3K – 12 learning environments on NYC's East Village & Lower East Side.

We are committed to continuous improvement in providing equitable and accessible learning experiences through a culturally responsive and anti-racist approach to meet the needs of our diverse community of learners. Our community is dedicated to collective ownership and personalized learning that fosters student agency and independence.

We value joy, equity, collaboration, and innovation and strive to live these values across all learning settings and modalities. As a result, our students will be adaptive leaders, change-makers, and empowered members of our modern digital world.

Learn more: www.district1nyc.com

About University Settlement

University Settlement partners with 40,000+ New Yorkers in Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn every year to build on our collective strengths as we achieve healthy, stable, and remarkable lives.

For 140 years, we've fought poverty and systemic inequality by building highly effective social services in collaboration with our neighbors.

Established in 1886 as the first Settlement House in the United States, we bring the values of our movement into the 21st century by meeting New Yorkers where they live, listening deeply to all perspectives, and creating space for responsive cooperation.

Joining with our neighbors to make stable foundations where people of all ages can grow and pursue their dreams, we build community strength.

We infuse a commitment to civic engagement, equality, and communal action into each of our programs, which include early childhood education, youth development, healthy aging, mental health and wellness, housing advocacy and benefits assistance, English classes for adult immigrants, community centers, and the arts.

#NYCisUS. What can we do together? Learn more at www.universitysettlement.org

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