



# Susan Stith

Vice President, Diversity, Inclusion  
and Corporate Giving, Express Scripts

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Growing up in a small town in Missouri, Susan Stith would often hear her great aunts – both school principals – say that they couldn’t educate a child until they first fed him. In many places, especially the city of St. Louis, where 42% of the child population lives at or below the poverty line, the problem is the same as it was 50 years ago for educators. It’s why Stith continues the fight waged by generations to level the playing field for every child.

A scholar-become-leader of diversity and inclusion in the workplace, Stith was asked by employer Express Scripts in 2011 to broaden her oversight to include corporate giving. “You really can’t separate the three,” Stith says of diversity, inclusion and philanthropy. “To have a diverse, inclusive workforce, you have to create job opportunities for all...and that starts with education. So, as a corporation we set out to impact educational outcomes, starting in our home base of St. Louis, and to finding the right educational partners.”

It was during a meeting with St. Louis Public Schools in 2014 that Stith was introduced to The Little Bit Foundation and felt what she describes as a “spiritual connection” with Rosemary Hanley, Little Bit’s Executive Director and Co-Founder. “Rose was walking the walk and echoing the message of my two aunts decades before...that a child can’t learn until he’s fed, clothed, healthy, prepared. We knew right away that we needed Little Bit as a partner in this initiative,” she says.

The initiative took shape in 2015 with the addition of several partners and the selection of a school – Nance Elementary in the Baden neighborhood of North St. Louis – to pilot the program, which would

be called the Nance Collaborative. “With 100% of the student population qualifying for free and reduced lunch, there were numerous reasons that students were missing the mark, so we had to be focused on the whole child,” says Stith.

Launched in the 2015-16 school year, the Nance Collaborative outlined goals around improving academics, attendance and behavior and a plan for working together to identify areas of need, advocating for and supporting the school administration, and providing resources and programs to improve the health and wellbeing of the school community. In the first year, school attendance increased by more than 10% and, in the second year, suspensions declined by 130 days and test scores and reading proficiency improved considerably.



The Collaborative meets monthly to review progress, talk about ways to further engage

families, teachers and the students themselves in the process, and identify areas not being addressed. For example, Stith says the Collaborative is looking to bring in a partner to address bullying among the sixth grade boys. The vision is to provide a model for success that can be adopted in other schools. "The framework and focus will be different at each school, based on their needs, but the idea of putting egos aside to work together for improvement is the foundation," she says.

Bringing people together is what Stith has been about since shifting her career to a focus on diversity and inclusion nearly 15 years ago. Recognized by the NAACP and other organizations for her work, she says it's simply who she is. "I really believe this stuff; that we can change hearts and minds." But it's not easy, she admits, as "it's an intentional step that requires time, acceptance and first understanding who we are in order to understand others."

It's a lesson she passes on to her two college-aged kids. "Never stop learning, growing and paying attention to what the needs are because curiosity will make you who you are," she tells them. In March 2018, Stith and her husband took their first trip to Haiti as part of Brace for IMPACT 46, a nonprofit founded by former Cardinals pitcher Kyle McClellan that's committed to community development in Haiti and North St. Louis. Giving the workers of an orphanage built by IMPACT some much needed relief, Stith's team took over their daily duties and spent time with the children, while her husband's team built bathroom facilities. Stith says it certainly was a learning experience and a trip they'll never forget, especially the two-mile trek up a mountain to attend church!

"There was such a joyful spirit among the people – it's hard to describe," she says. "We may be

separated by 2,000 miles, but I saw a lot of the same barriers the kids in our inner city face. What I want to see is that same spirit, and I believe we can bring hope to this place we all call home if we work together."