

# High School Science Teachers Named Airborne Astronomy Ambassadors – Will Fly on NASA’s SOFIA Aircraft



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## PRESS RELEASE

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February 26, 2019, Mountain View, CA -- The SETI Institute has partnered with 14 school districts in eight states for the 2019 NASA Airborne Astronomy Ambassadors (AAA) program. The AAA program is a professional development opportunity for high school science teachers designed to improve science teaching & learning and increase student STEM engagement. The SETI Institute has managed the AAA program since its inception in 2011.

AAA participant teachers receive training in astrophysics and planetary science, content and pedagogy. Their training includes a week-long immersion experience at NASA’s Armstrong Flight Research Center Hangar 703 in Palmdale, California with participation in research flights onboard NASA’s Stratospheric Observatory for Infrared Astronomy (SOFIA). The program culminates in classroom delivery of a SOFIA science-oriented curriculum module. Impact on student STEM learning & engagement will be measured by WestEd education evaluators.

SOFIA is a highly modified Boeing 747SP airliner fitted with a 2.7-meter (106-inch) telescope and using a suite of seven cameras & spectrographs to study celestial objects at infrared wavelengths. SOFIA operates during 10-hour overnight science missions at altitudes between 39,000 and 45,000 feet (12-14 kilometers), above more than 99 percent of the water vapor in Earth’s atmosphere that blocks infrared light from reaching ground-based observatories.

“NASA’s SOFIA observatory provides a fantastic opportunity for teachers to better understand and appreciate the research process by interacting with scientists and mission crew members,” said Dr. Dana Backman, AAA program Principal Investigator. “The teachers can then take what they learn back to their classrooms, schools, and school districts, conveying the value of scientific research and adding real-world content to high school learning environments. The AAA’s first-hand experiences also can illuminate the wide variety of STEM career paths available to students.”

The school districts participating in the 2019 Airborne Astronomy Ambassadors program are:

Anaheim Union High School District, California  
Clark County School District, Nevada  
Cobb County Schools, Georgia  
School District Five of Lexington and Richland Counties, South Carolina  
Fayette County Public Schools, Kentucky  
Harmony Public Schools, Texas  
William S. Hart Union High School District, California  
Manteca Unified School District, California  
Muscogee County School District, Georgia  
Norman Public School District, Oklahoma  
Northside Independent School District (San Antonio), Texas  
Santa Ana Unified School District, California  
Washoe County School District, Nevada

The 28 teachers selected from partner districts as 2019 Airborne Astronomy Ambassadors are listed and pictured below:

Berkil Alexander, Kennesaw Mountain High School, Kennesaw, Georgia  
Heidi Anderson, Locust Trace AgriScience Center, Lexington, Kentucky  
Kathryn Baugher, Norman North High School, Norman, Oklahoma  
Nikki Bisesi, Hillgrove High School, Powder Springs, Georgia  
Stephanie Brady, Norman High School, Norman, Oklahoma  
Daniel Burleson, Rancho High School, Las Vegas, Nevada  
Melissa Conway, Spring Hill High School, Chapin, South Carolina  
Clay Elliott, Oxford Academy, Anaheim, California  
Anna Estep, Chapin High School, Chapin, South Carolina  
Joshua Gagnier, Santa Ana High School, Santa Ana, California  
Sandra Hightower, Century High School, Santa Ana, California  
Lauren Malik, William Howard Taft High School, San Antonio, Texas  
Terrence Martin, William Howard Taft High School, San Antonio, Texas  
Philip Matthews, Kennesaw Mountain High School, Kennesaw, Georgia  
Dawn Minnick-Trujillo, Las Vegas Academy of the Arts, Las Vegas, Nevada  
Kim Nguyen, Oxford Academy, Anaheim, California  
Melissa Pagonis, John Paul Stevens High School, San Antonio, Texas  
Luther Richardson, Columbus High School, Columbus, Georgia  
Ashley Rosen, STEAM Academy, Lexington, Kentucky  
Anne Schnabel, Tom C. Clark High School, San Antonio, Texas

Aaron Shoolroy, Reno High School, Reno, Nevada  
 Kathryn Smith, William S. Hart High School, Santa Clarita, California  
 Megan Smith, Lathrop High School, Manteca, California  
 Mickey Smith, Earl Wooster High School, Reno, Nevada  
 Laura Solomons, Columbus High School, Columbus, Georgia  
 Season Stalcup, Wheeler High School, Marietta, Georgia  
 Tyler Thompson, West Career and Technical Academy, Las Vegas, Nevada  
 Kevin Warren, Norman North High School, Norman, Oklahoma



**Aaron  
Shoolroy**



**Anna  
Estep**



**Anne  
Schnabel**



**Ashley  
Rosen**



**Berkil  
Alexander**



**Clay  
Elliott**



**Daniel  
Burleson**



**Dawn  
Minnick-Trujillo**



**Heidi  
Anderson**



**Joshua  
Gagnier**



**Kate  
Baugher**



**Kathryn  
Smith**



**Kevin  
Warren**



**Kim  
Nguyen**



**Laura  
Solomons**



**Lauren  
Malik**



**Luther  
Richardson**



**Megan  
Smith**



**Melissa  
Conway**



**Melissa  
Pagonis**



**Mickey  
Smith**



**Nikki  
Bisesi**



**Philip  
Matthews**



**Sandy  
Hightower**



**Season  
Stalcup**



**Stephanie  
Brady**



**Terrence  
Martin**



**Tyler  
Thompson**



(Figure 1) NASA's Stratospheric Observatory for Infrared Astronomy, SOFIA, during a day-time test flight over the Sierra Nevada with the telescope door open (aft of the wing). (NASA)



(Figure 2) A group of Airborne Astronomy Ambassadors plus their flight facilitator at the educators' console onboard SOFIA. (NASA)

## About the SETI Institute

Founded in 1984, the SETI Institute is a non-profit, multi-disciplinary research and education organization whose mission is to explore, understand, and explain the origin and nature of life in the universe and the evolution of intelligence. Our research encompasses the physical and biological sciences and leverages expertise in data analytics, machine learning and advanced signal detection technologies. The SETI Institute is a distinguished research partner for industry, academia and government agencies, including NASA and NSF.

## About the Airborne Astronomy Ambassador Program

The SETI Institute's NASA Airborne Astronomy Ambassador Program was one of the 27 organizations from across the United States selected by NASA for cooperative agreement awards to implement a new strategic approach to more effectively engage learners of all ages on NASA science education programs and activities. Selections were made by the agency's Science Mission Directorate (SMD) in Washington, DC, through the Science Education Cooperative Agreement Notice. Selectee activities will support Earth science, astrophysics, planetary science and heliophysics. AAA is funded by NASA SMD NNX16AC51A.