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HOMESTEAD - SOUTH DADE

## Students using tech to learn about agricultural economy in South Dade school program

BY DAVID GOODHUE

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Faith Denise Ariel Chapman, left, 9, fourth grader, and Courtney Faith Nelson, 9, third grader, watch the robot they programmed travel the pathway at the Fab Lab launched at the Phicol Williams Community Center in Homestead on Wednesday, Jan. 17, 2024. CARL JUSTE [cjuste@miamiherald.com](mailto:cjuste@miamiherald.com)



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Courtney Faith Nelson and Faith Denise Ariel Chapman, both 9 years old, studiously scanned their electronic tablets while sitting on the floor of Phicol Williams Community Center in Homestead Wednesday morning.

In front of them was a taped maze. The Primer Microschools students were entering calculations into the computers to help their baseball-shaped robots successfully traverse every corner of the course laid out before them.

For each move the robots made, the students had to enter a new line of code. The exercise was equal parts computer understanding and solve-as-you-go adaptation to fresh obstacles.

“My favorite part is where you can learn the calculations, and it helps you grow your brain because you’re learning the calculations of where it needs to go and where to turn and what the speed is,” Courtney explained.

The task certainly seemed difficult to many of the tech-deficient adults in the room, but Courtney, Faith and the other children, like 10-year-old Abraham Rodriguez, sure had a handle on things.

“It’s only difficult if you’re a starter,” Abraham said, as his robot scooted along the course like BB-8, the orb-like droid from the “Star Wars” movies.

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The roughly 30 students demonstrating their skills had been immersed in coding, not only with robots, but also 3-D printing through Fab Lab Miami, which provides students in underserved communities hands-on instruction in digital fabrication and science, technology, engineering, arts and math learning — called STEAM, collectively.



Fourth grader Fernando Gallo, 12, left, places the small robot on the floor while programming it to run a specific pattern as part of the Fab Lab launched at the Phichol Williams Community Center in Homestead, Florida on Wednesday, Jan. 17, 2024. Carl Juste [cjuste@miamiherald.com](mailto:cjuste@miamiherald.com)

### **FIRST LAUNCHED IN LIBERTY CITY**

Fab Lab was launched in 2020 at the Belafonte TACOLCY Community Center in Liberty City with funding provided by non-profits like The Children’s Trust, the Key

Biscayne Community Foundation, Himan Brown Charitable Trust, Fa Bene Foundation and the Miami Foundation for a Greater Miami.

The Liberty City students were in Homestead this week because a new Fab Lab is being launched there that will focus on agriculture and agricultural technology — fields in demand in the farm-driven economy of Homestead, Florida City and the Redland.



Corey King, 8, third grader, and a pair of fourth graders - Aaliyah Washington, 10, center, and Jada Ivory, 10, right - create three-dimensional shapes with the help of computers as part of the Fab Lab launched at the Phicol Williams Community Center in Homestead, Florida on Wednesday, Jan. 17, 2024. Carl Juste [cjuste@miamiherald.com](mailto:cjuste@miamiherald.com)

“Well, tech is obviously the way of the future. Miami-Dade is a beautiful community, but the south sometimes gets neglected in terms of funding programs. And, to be able to bring a state of the art hub to South Dade, to Homestead, really focusing on agriculture and agri-science, which is the industry down here, it really ties in well,” James Haj, CEO of The Children’s Trust, told the Herald.

The Phicol Williams Community Center Fab Lab was started with a \$225,000 investment from The Children’s Trust, the Kirk Foundation, the Frederick A. DeLuca Foundation, the Key Biscayne Community Foundation and the Ocean Reef Community Foundation.



Most of the students who will be taking part will be middle and high schoolers, but organizers are also hoping to attract elementary school children as well, said Ximena Nunez, director of communications for The Children's Trust.

Haj said Fab Lab will soon open a third location in north Miami-Dade County.



Small ball-like robots are stored in the case waiting to be programmed by students as part of the Fab Lab launched at the Pichol Williams Community Center in Homestead, Florida on Wednesday, Jan. 17, 2024. Carl Juste [cjuste@miamiherald.com](mailto:cjuste@miamiherald.com)

Icilda Humes is chief of staff at Gangs Alternative, a Homestead non-profit aimed based at providing children with educational and economic opportunities to keep them away from life on the streets. She was excited at the prospects for South Dade

students as she watched the Fab Lab kids demonstrate what they had learned through the program.

“It’s going to give so many opportunities to Black and Brown children who now don’t have these types of opportunities,” Humes said.

Fab Lab teachers are trained in how to instruct the technology offered to the students by staff at Florida International University, said Brian Schriner, dean of the school’s college of communications, architecture and the arts.

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“Technology will never replace great teachers, but, in the hands of great teachers, technology is truly transformational,” Schriner said addressing attendees at the launch of the Homestead Fab Lab.

Many of the people who will be teaching at the Homestead campus are Gang Alternative staff, Humes said. As more young people are focusing on trades instead of four-year colleges and universities, Humes said programs like Fab Lab get students on a path to success when they enter the professional world.

Watching the students figure out their assignments with the robots and 3D printers, Humes said she was encouraged that the lessons seem to prepare them with the types of impromptu problem-solving skills employees need in the office, lab, out in the field and on construction sites.

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“It’s really critical thinking. It’s trial and error. This gives me more hope for the next generation of the workforce,” Humes said.



The Fab Lab was launched at the Phichol Williams Community Center as part of the expansion of the Fab Lab at Belafont TACOLCY Center in Homestead, Florida on Wednesday, Jan. 17, 2024. Carl Juste [cjuste@miamiherald.com](mailto:cjuste@miamiherald.com)



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