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TOP STORY

Sauk City School wins national coding championship

JAKE EKDAHL jekdahl@wiscnews.com   20 hrs ago

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Five Shoreless Lake School Seventh Graders participate in the Moon Landing Coding Challenge hosted by Sphero and Center Houston.

SHORELESS LAKE SCHOOL/Contributed

When most people think about school competitions, they might picture a football game or a spelling bee, but five students from the all girls Shoreless Lake School in Sauk City became national champions Aug. 10 in a competition that tests a different set of skills: coding and robotics.

The girls, aged 12-15, traveled to Space Center Houston to compete with other teams in Sphero's virtual Apollo 11 Moon Landing Challenge, where coding, team coordination and problem solving skills were all critical.

The girls have also won the nation-wide Code Rush competition two years in a row.

"It also helps them to learn teamwork," said the girls' teacher, Father Miguel Galvez, "Nowadays, you don't have just a developer that develops software. You have a team of people working together to develop a very complex app (or) something as complicated as a robot."

Vickie Eberle, whose daughter, Cecelia was a member of the winning team, said coding has been a part of the curriculum for years.

"It was something that they did as one of their classes in school," Eberle said. "She seemed to really enjoy it… She has a lot of fun when she's doing her homework with it on the computer."

For Eberle, it can be unusual to see her daughter doing homework on a topic she, and many other adults today, never experienced middle school.

"I really don't have any idea what she's doing," Eberle said. "I see she's on her program and she's working on that. I see she's messaging classmates."

Cecelia said it can be a satisfying experience to find a solution to a challenging problem after struggling with it for a while. She also enjoys being able to coordinate with her peers.

Galvez said exposing students to coding at a young age can pay dividends later on.

"I realized it's something that should be taught from a very early age," Galvez said. "For many years, (coding has) traditionally been a field of men, (but) if you start teaching it from a very early age, girls actually love making things… they have creative skills and problem solving skills they can use for many fields."

For some of the girls, coding was taught even in elementary school.

On their trip to Houston, the girls got a tour of Space Center Houston and spoke with an astronaut. "They came back very excited about everything that they've learned," Galvez said.

Eberle said she feels the skills Cecelia has learned keep options open for her going forward. "It gives her another option, that if she really wants to pursue it, she can continue on," Eberle said. "Whatever vocation she's called to, she has that option."

Galvez said one benefit of robotics as an application to coding is it sidesteps a common problem teachers encounter: explaining how a subject can apply to a student's life later on.

Algebra teachers may struggle to persuade students memorizing formulas is worthwhile, but when a computer science teacher can display the power of coding by manipulating the appendages of a robot, it's hard not to "get it."

"(It) really helps the students understand what coding is for," Galvez said.

Going forward, Shoreless Lake School will have the distinguishment of being the alma mater of five national champions.

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