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NEWS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

Alachua County Public Schools launching new STEAM program in City of Alachua schools; includes devices for all students in participating schools

All kindergarten- through 8th-grade students attending schools in the city of Alachua will be provided with either a laptop or an iPad under a new STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics) initiative that will be in place for the next school year.

Teachers are already receiving devices and training to help implement the new I.A.M. STEAM program. (I.A.M. stands for Irby Elementary, Alachua Elementary and Mebane Middle, the three participating schools.) The training is focused on incorporating the devices into their lessons and helping students learn to use them effectively. For example, students will be taught to navigate the Internet safely and how to access digital learning materials at home.

“We are thrilled to have this opportunity for our school and community,” said Heather Harbour, principal at Alachua Elementary School. “Our students will gain experience in research, problem solving and critical thinking. They’ll also be able to develop and practice their digital literacy and citizenship skills.”

Students will receive their devices in the fall of 2022. Those at Irby will receive iPads, while those attending Alachua and Mebane will receive laptops. The students will be able to take the devices home to complete homework and other assignments, and those without Internet access will also receive hotspots.

Another key element of I.A.M STEAM is a new biomedical magnet program at Mebane Middle. The magnet will be open to students from throughout the district, starting with 6th graders, although other students at the school would be able to participate in individual courses. They will begin by studying forensics, which involves the use of science to examine and analyze evidence from crime scenes. In later grades students will study such topics as biomechanics (the science of the movement of a living body), prosthetics (artificial devices to replace missing body parts), infectious diseases, cloning and other subjects.

Hands-on learning activities will be a big part of the curriculum. For example, the forensics course will wrap up with the investigation of a mock crime scene. The biomechanics class will include the programming of a robotic hand.

“STEAM learning will provide opportunities for our students to view the world through a different lens,” said Mebane principal Manda Bessner. “They’ll learn to put to use their imagination and creativity as they tackle modern day issues in science and medicine.”

Mitch Glaeser, president of the Alachua Chamber of Commerce, says the new magnet and the I.A.M. project are great fits for the community. Alachua is home to a strong and growing biotechnology industry, which Glaeser has helped develop and promote. The Chamber will be providing additional support for the program, such as purchasing covers and cases for the devices and providing classroom speakers and field trips.

“We’re excited about the collaboration between the business community and the schools,” he said. “This initiative is an important element of a long-term strategic plan, a shared vision for creating opportunities in technology and biotechnology for our students,” he said.

District staff say students will be able to build on what they’ve learned as they move up through the community’s schools. Santa Fe High School already has a highly-successful biotechnology magnet program.

“We want to provide students with a seamless transition from one grade level to the next and from one school to the next,” said Kevin Berry, the district’s director of curriculum. “Throughout their education they’ll be developing skills that will serve them well in STEAM or any other field.”

The district is currently working on a plan to provide devices and internet access to students in other parts of the county who don’t currently have them. In the next few weeks, families will be asked to respond to a survey about their student’s needs. The goal is to provide devices and access to students who need them for the upcoming school year.