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Tech-savvy students flock to Robot Royale

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Alvaton Elementary fifth-grader Rhys Schondelmayer builds a light-up fi
Technology Department's 2024 SOKY Robot Royale at Western Kentucky

PHOTOS BY Grace Ramey / grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com

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WCPS Robot
Royale returns
for 4th year

Hundreds of local tech-savvy K-12 students flocked to Western Kentucky University for Warren County Public School's fourth annual Robot Royale event Thursday.

WCPS digital learning coach Adam Vincent said the program offers everything from coding challenges to Lego robotics to Sumobots competing to knock each other out of a ring.

"It's grown and grown and exploded this year into this event today," Vincent said. "We've got all kinds of different stations, all related to computer science, just to get kids interested in hands-on activities that they can explore."

Vincent said the event has outgrown the last two venues as more students participate. That's good news for employers and educators, Vincent said, as science, technology engineering and math fields are growing evermore important.

"There's all kinds of jobs out there in the world right now where people need those skills," Vincent said.

“These are just building blocks.”

Bryce Shuffett, Drew Roberts and Keaton Cloyd are sixth-graders in North Warren Elementary’s robotics club. All three are already eyeing careers in engineering and earlier this year won the Southern Kentucky VEX Robotics Regional Qualifier Competition for their Cyber Eagles team.

Jessica Roberts, a sixth-grade teacher and an adviser for North Warren’s robotics club, said while competitions are great, the Robot Royale gives students a chance to explore STEM in a casual setting and allows educators to scout opportunities to take back with them.

Caitlin Morris, a resource teacher and adviser of the club’s competitive Cyber Eagles team, said their tournaments also help prepare students for the reality of working with a team in a career.

“Some of the priorities are ‘gracious professionalism’ and ‘cooper-tition.’ That means you are building those soft skills through gracious

professionalism, like encouraging others, learning how to advocate for yourself,” Morris said. “You’re also cooperating while competing, so they’re learning a lot of those things that are important to the real-world setting that aren’t explicitly taught all the time.”

Morris herself studied robotics in high school and said the attention to K-12 STEM and robotics education has only grown since.

“We have a STEAM (science, technology engineering, arts and math) related arts class in our school, just trying to get kids interacting more with that type of thing,” Morris said. “We’re going to be around technology, so I feel like there’s been a real push for kids to learn at an earlier age to get those skills earlier on.”

Michael Justice, a youth initiatives director with Special Olympics Kentucky, is one of many people helping students access opportunities at a younger age.

Special Olympics Kentucky has spent the last two years exploring ways to support STEM education through grant funding and collaboration, partnering with over 100 schools statewide.

One of its biggest programs is Unified Robotics, which pairs special education students with general education students in robotics efforts to foster collaboration and empathy alongside STEM skills.

“What we see with that is it breaks down a lot of barriers and really opens up the world to a lot more understanding of each other, and it builds a lot of friendships as well,” Justice said. “That is really, at the very bottom line, what the purpose is of what we do, and honestly, it’s probably the most rewarding thing I’ve ever done.”

While many think of the Special Olympics as a physical sports-based organization, Justice said some kids simply have no interest. They want to “meet students where they are” by encouraging participation in e-sports and STEM competitions.

“We found that robotics and STEM was a great place to start because it combines that education with that curiosity,” Justice said. “But at the same time, we can still bring in that inclusion aspect of how individuals can learn, how different people’s minds work, and it’s also just a fun thing to do.”

Justice said the organization also offers up to \$1,500 for schools to facilitate unified STEM instruction and activities through their Unified Champion Schools program. Educators can inquire more by reaching Justice at mjustice@soky.org.

He added that events like Robot Royale gives them a chance to connect directly with students and, sometimes, get shown up by their skills.

“These events are always very humbling because I just know I know nothing,” Justice joked. “I mean, it’s incredible. I’ve learned things today.”

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