

# FEF FOCUS

Volume 22, Issue 1 Summer 2025

## President's Message

The articles in this edition of the *Focus* remind us that progress is built on purposeful investment in people, ideas, and the promise of a more equitable future. At the Florida Education Fund, we continue to cultivate a community of thinkers and builders who not only pursue excellence, but extend its reach into the world around them.

You will read how McKnight Doctoral Fellows are transforming challenges into purpose-driven scholarship. Dr. Joshua Peeples, a McKnight graduate and now professor at Texas A&M, leads research in artificial intelligence while mentoring students in ways that reflect the support he once received. Current Fellow Aria Deluna, whose work bridges entomology and molecular biology, investigates global health issues with precision and passion. Their stories reveal not just academic success, but a deeper understanding of knowledge as a public good.

This summer's *Focus* also highlights how our programming continues to evolve. The 2024 McKnight Annual Fellows Meeting offered a space where scholars presented research and examined urgent questions of technology, equity, and the future of doctoral training. Fellows explored how artificial intelligence will reshape their fields and how they must lead with both adaptability and clarity of purpose. Undergraduate research presentations and focused discussions helped build a stronger bridge into the graduate pipeline, reinforcing our commitment to preparation and access.

Fellows also connected this year with our youngest learners by visiting CodeMasters camps virtually to share their journeys into

research and higher education. These conversations helped elementary and middle school students see how early curiosity and interests can grow into meaningful careers.

You also will read here how that same commitment animates our pre-college initiatives. Our Centers of Excellence inducted a vibrant new statewide class of 856 Achievers and Believers, reinforcing academic excellence while fostering service and leadership. Among the inductees are students like Johnathan Chu, who began his Achiever journey quietly and developed into a confident, highly successful leader, recently recognized as Florida Achiever of the Year. Many new inductees have already embraced the kind of sustained dedication that strengthens their communities and futures.

At the same time, our CodeMasters program expanded elementary coding instruction, introducing Python and reinforcing computational thinking through a partnership with WEDU PBS. These developments are not just milestones; they are visible reflections of our mission.

Each story in these pages represents a single thread in a larger tapestry of change. Our Fellows and students are equipping others, shaping systems, and giving back in ways that multiply impact. That has been the essence of our work since 1987, and it's how we continue to empower possibility in every generation.



Dr. Lawrence Morehouse  
President & CEO

## 2024 McKnight Annual Fellows Meeting: Empowering Scholars to Effect Positive Change

Under the theme *The Scholar's Imperative: Effecting Positive Change in a Dynamic World*, the Florida Education Fund's 2024 McKnight Annual Fellows Meeting and Research & Writing Conference convened November 22-24 in Tampa. The event united doctoral Fellows, alumni, faculty, and national thought leaders



Dr. Brittany Hollister presents the Meeting's "Mentoring Up: Proactive Strategies for Successful Mentorship" workshop.

for a weekend of intellectual exchange, mentorship, and strategic visioning focused on equipping scholars to lead social and institutional transformation, an urgent imperative in today's shifting academic and societal landscape.

The gathering opened Friday with an inaugural NASA lun-

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## In His Own Words: MDF Alumnus and Artificial Intelligence Professor Dr. Joshua Peeples

Pursuing a Ph.D. requires grit. I have been a leader in my family since losing my father to lung cancer when I was 15 years of age. I still remember assisting him as he struggled to walk up the stairs in our home while I carried his air tank. This memory drove me every day to excel in my Ph.D. program and demonstrates that adversity can be a temporary status in one's life and career. In my dad's memory, I aimed to pursue a professorship at a leading university where I would work to advance the field of artificial intelligence and share my knowledge and perseverance to help inspire tomorrow's engineers. I looked forward to that first day of class as an African American professor, ready to motivate my students to appreciate the advancement and dissemination of science.



*Dr. Joshua Peeples explains his research.*

Early on in my undergraduate curriculum in electrical engineering at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), I sought out undergraduate research opportunities to build the necessary tools and gain experience in various research areas. I connected with Dr. Abidin Yildirim to serve as my mentor in the Signal Processing and Embedded Systems Laboratory (SPESL). My research with Dr. Yildirim focused on two projects: 1) a facial detection and recognition system to detect infants left in cars and 2) communication methods for autonomous vehicles. Through my experience in the SPESL, I learned what it takes to become an independent scholar as well as to work collaboratively with other students from various cultural backgrounds to achieve our goals. This experience further increased my desire to pursue my doctorate to solve complex problems to benefit society.

Through the work conducted in Dr. Yildirim's lab and my undergraduate academic record, I was chosen for a research

experience at Michigan State University through the National Science Foundation (NSF) BEACON Center Summer Research

Opportunities Program. This ten-week program exposed me to the graduate lifestyle by placing me in the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department's Wireless and Video Communications Laboratory with Dr. Hayder Radha. The goal of my work was to improve on a lane detection algorithm for autonomous vehicles. At the end of the program, I earned a travel grant to present at the Emerging Researchers National (ERN) Conference in STEM hosted by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and NSF. Through this intensive experience, I developed an interest in machine learning and further cultivated my desire to go to graduate school to prepare myself for a career in academia.

Upon graduation from UAB, I chose to pursue my doctoral work at the University of Florida (UF) in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering under the mentorship of Dr. Alina Zare. During my Ph.D. studies, I developed and refined novel deep learning methods for texture characterization, segmentation, and classification. These methods can be applied toward automated image understanding and object detection.

While at UF, I earned several awards including the UF Graduate School Preeminence Award, Iva and Norman Tucker UF Transportation Institute Fellowship, UF Board of Education Summer Fellowship, McKnight Doctoral Fellowship, and NSF Graduate Research Fellowship. Outside of research, I served as a mentor for high school and under-

graduate students. I also co-led two summer courses on coding and machine learning for incoming freshman engineering students as a part of the Successful Transition and Enhanced Preparation for Undergraduates Program. Additionally, I was elected president of a new organization called the African American/African/African Diaspora in Electrical and Computer Engineering (A3ECE) and took part in other outreach activities.

Currently, I serve as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at Texas A&M University, where I lead the Advanced Vision and Learning Lab (AVLL). Our Lab focuses on developing algorithms in artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), and computer vision (CV) to address real-world challenges across domains such as agriculture, defense, and biomedicine. We aim to be world leaders in the AI/ML/CV community through innovative solutions, unique perspectives, and reproducible research.

Since joining Texas A&M in Fall 2022, I have earned several honors, including joint appointment as a Guest Scientist at Los Alamos National Laboratory in the Space Remote Sensing and Data Science group and selection as a U.S. Air Force



*Dr. Joshua Peeples with students in his Advanced Vision and Learning Lab at Texas A&M*

Summer Faculty Fellow and later as a Summer Visiting Scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Lincoln Laboratory. I teach undergraduate and graduate courses on AI/ML as well as a

# 2024 McKnight Annual Fellows Meeting: Empowering Scholars to Effect Positive Change

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cheon featuring senior agency leaders who outlined research and funding opportunities in aeronautics and STEM. Concurrent workshops addressed academic writing, financial fitness, preparation for comprehensive exams, dissertation development, and navigating NASA data systems. That evening's Opening Session included introducing newly selected Fellows and presenting FEF's annual awards by President & CEO Dr. Lawrence Morehouse and Executive Vice President & General Counsel Lyra Logan, Esq. The evening concluded with a book signing by Dr. Stephanie Evans of her *Black Feminist Writing: A Practical Guide to Publishing Academic Books*.



Exhibitors share information about opportunities at their institutions.

meaningful feedback from faculty and Fellows. This new initiative reflects FEF's strengthened commitment to building a robust pipeline to graduate school and academic careers by engaging students earlier in their scholarly development. These undergraduates also attended the Meeting's inaugural undergraduate-focused panel discussion, held that afternoon, which centered on helping them understand and prepare for the transition to graduate-level research. Together, these efforts add to the ongoing expansion of FEF's efforts to nurture future McKnight Fellows at the collegiate level.

Saturday offered a full day of plenary talks, breakout workshops, and fifteen concurrent McKnight Fellow research panels showcasing cutting-edge work across disciplines. A major highlight was the keynote luncheon panel, *The Future of Ph.D.s in an AI-Dominated World*, which sparked deep discussion about how artificial intelligence is redefining research methods and challenging the relevance of traditional doctoral training. Moderated by Dr. Daphne Simmonds, the panel featured experts from business analytics, ethics, and information systems who debated whether Ph.D.s are entering a new era of AI collaboration or facing obsolescence in both academia and industry. The session provided the audience with crucial insights on adapting their careers and scholarship in a world increasingly driven by automation and machine learning.

Additional sessions throughout the day explored career pathways, publishing strategy, mentoring, culturally relevant pedagogy, and systemic challenges in academia. A second book signing took place Saturday afternoon, featuring Dr. Vernetta K. Williams, whose work on writing and scholarly voice provides Fellows with tools for both academic success and personal growth.

Undergraduate students considering graduate study participated in the Meeting's first-ever multi-university poster session, presenting their research and receiving



McKnight Alumna Dr. Antoinette Smith with undergraduate mentees from Miami

Saturday evening concluded with the annual Dialogue with the Exhibitors, a series of presentations by university representatives during dinner. This gathering offered Fellows a unique opportunity to learn about open faculty and postdoctoral positions as well as campus life and institutional culture at participating schools.

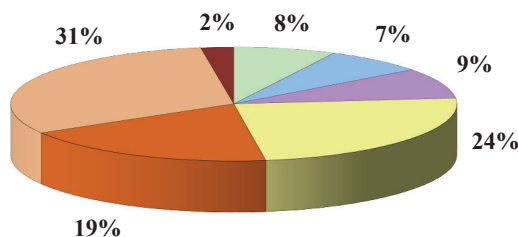


Dr. Rodney Ndum receives his McKnight jacket from Dr. Lawrence Morehouse.

The meeting concluded Sunday with the signature Jacketing and Awards Ceremony, during which new Ph.D. graduates were formally "jacketed" by Dr. Morehouse or a significant other, in recognition of their milestone achievement. The Ceremony also included presentation of the Dr. William R. Jones Most Valuable Mentor Award to faculty members nominated by Fellows for their outstanding guidance and support throughout the doctoral journey. This year, FEF awarded 13 Jones Awards, the most ever, recognizing the extraordinary impact of mentorship across disciplines and institutions.

As FEF continues to support excellence in graduate education, the 2024 Annual Fellows Meeting reaffirmed the organization's commitment to preparing scholars to lead, publish, and effect transformative change in a rapidly evolving world.

## McKnight Doctoral Fellowship Graduates (1,126)



### Discipline Breakdown

- Business (83)
- Education (81)
- Humanities (96)
- Social Sciences (273)
- STEM-Engineering/Computer Sciences (213)
- STEM-Health/Life/Physical Sciences (353)
- STEM-Mathematics/Statistics (27)

## In His Own Words: MDF Alumnus and Artificial Intelligence Professor Dr. Joshua Peeples

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fundamental course on probability and statistics. Beyond research and teaching, I am deeply committed to service and student advocacy within the University and the broader community. I have mentored over 30 students in my Lab,

many of whom have gone on to secure competitive internships and employment opportunities.

I have been blessed to achieve my goal of professorship and am forever grateful

to those who contributed to my journey. Special thanks to the Florida Education Fund McKnight Program for support and guidance along the way. I am proud to be an alumnus of the McKnight Doctoral Fellowship Program!

## From First-Gen to Frontlines: How MDF Fellow Aria Deluna is Advancing Global Health

Aria Deluna's journey to becoming a scientist began simply enough: sometime between middle and high school, she aspired to go to college, maybe to study veterinary sciences. She grew up in San Antonio, Texas, the youngest daughter with two much older sisters, and by the time of her birth, in a single-parent household.

Though both parents attended community college, Deluna was the first in the family to complete a degree. Having to navigate higher education on her own, she chose community college as the economically responsible way to start, and in three years, accumulated nearly the maximum transferable credits. She thrived academically, winning a Bridges to the Baccalaureate Undergraduate Scholarship that provided research training and mentoring and supported her move to the four-year Texas A&M University.

At Texas A&M, Deluna shifted her focus to entomology, immersing herself in related societies and activities while earning her bachelor's degree in the field. She won an NSF Research Experiences for Undergraduates (REU) Program award after her junior year. Later, while pursuing her master's in agricultural biology at the University of Tennessee, Deluna learned about research compliance through a Department of Veteran's Affairs project. It was a "very good experience," she says. "I learned about research from both sides, learned the importance of oversight, that research is done responsibly with a system of checks and balances in place." She also developed a proof-of-concept project for a biotech firm seeking sustainable alternatives to pesticide use.

Today, as a McKnight Doctoral Fellow at the University of Florida, Deluna studies how *Vibrio cholerae*, the bacterium that causes cholera, interacts with the microbiome of chironomid midges, small aquatic insects that may

serve as environmental reservoirs for the disease. By combining molecular and computational biology techniques, such as 16S rRNA sequencing and comparative genomics, Deluna explains, she can analyze the composition of the microbiome and how it changes under different environmental conditions. This, she says, may lead to a better understanding of how *V. cholerae* survives



Aria Deluna at the lab

and proliferates in the environment. The role of insects as reservoirs is an aspect of a well-studied subject that may help scientists respond to cholera outbreaks in areas that lack access to the vaccines and medicines available in other parts of the world.

Beyond the lab, Deluna has led undergraduate research training courses through UF's College of Undergraduate Research and the Department of Microbiology and Cell Science. She has also served as captain of UF's insect trivia bowl team, competing at national meetings of the Entomological Society of America, and recently presented at Vibrio 2024 in Lima, Peru. These platforms have allowed her to grow as a scholar and mentor.

Mentorship, she says, is foundational. "McKnight has been instrumental in my success. Academia can be stressful. It's competitive and not always welcoming. But when you show up to McKnight events, you feel support and motivation. You remember why you're here."

She's now paying that forward. In addition to guiding lab-based projects and mentoring undergraduate students for course credit, Deluna helps students map out their next steps, apply for scholarships, and build confidence. "Students do their best work when they benefit. I make sure they get experiences that actually serve them."

*"McKnight has been instrumental in my success...when you show up to McKnight events, you feel support and motivation. You remember why you're here."*

*-- MDF Fellow Aria Deluna*

This summer, Deluna has stepped into a new arena with an internship at Kite Pharma in Santa Monica, California, a leader in cell therapy. As a Patient Safety and Pharmacovigilance Intern, she has helped evaluate safety data for CAR-T cell therapies, supporting regulatory reporting and risk assessment.

While her academic journey started with a love of animals and agriculture, it has evolved into a deeply human mission: to use science as a force for public good. "Whether it's reducing pesticide use, improving disease surveillance, or evaluating cutting-edge cancer treatments, I want my work to make the world better for everyone."

## McKnight Doctoral Fellows Bring Real-World Insight to FEF CodeMasters Summer Camps

This summer, students in FEF CodeMasters' code camps got more than just a crash course in programming apps, games, micro:bits, and drones. They also had the opportunity to learn from five McKnight Doctoral Fellows who visited virtually to share how their early interests and questions evolved into meaningful research and careers. These conversations helped students see how STEM can connect to their own lives in practical, inspiring ways.

The Fellows joined elementary and middle school campers via Zoom to talk candidly about the twists, turns, challenges and successes that led them to graduate study. Through interactive slides, personal anecdotes, and Q&A, they offered an engaging glimpse into what it means to pursue advanced education not just as scholars, but as people who were once curious kids with questions of their own.

Kory Lafontant, a Fellow in kinesiology from the University of Central Florida, kicked off the series with a dynamic talk that connected science, movement, nutrition and mindfulness. He explained how his research merges exercise science and behavioral psychology to understand motivation and performance. His message was grounded and relatable: "Listening, learning, and thinking, those are really important things when you're trying to grow." He encouraged students to reflect: "Be okay with asking questions. Be okay with not knowing everything."

Dr. Sayde King, who had just earned her Ph.D. in computer science at the University of South Florida, walked students through her journey from growing up in Boynton Beach to watching *Myth-Busters* and *CSI: Miami* to

eventually falling in love with computing during high school. Using a playful lie detection activity, she invited students to think critically and apply logic to real-world problems. "Life leads you in funny ways," she told them. "And it led me to where I am today."

Ansley Davis, a USF Fellow in applied physics, spoke honestly about what it's like to stick with something even when it's difficult. "Physics was hard for me, and I still picked it," she said. "Try something hard." She emphasized the importance of finding mentors, building confidence, working diligently and remaining open to learning from failure: "If you find something hard and you really enjoy doing it, it's okay to keep doing it."

Zena Rodhill, a Fellow in behavioral and community sciences at USF, described her work at the intersection of transportation, mental health, and public health outcomes. She showed students how research can improve lives at the systems level, whether that means helping people get to appointments or designing cities that support well-being. "I want you all to know that it's okay to not know everything," she said. "But be open to learning."

Nadege Nau, a USF Fellow in anthropology, brought cultural depth to the discussion. Her research explores Haitian

*"Don't be afraid to be the only one who looks like you in a room. Your voice matters, and your ideas are valuable."*

*-- MDF Fellow Ansley Davis*

identity through music, education, and migration, and she explained how her heritage has shaped the questions she asks. She urged students to talk with their families and pay attention to the stories and traditions around them. "Ask questions about your history," she said. "Your culture, your background, that's valuable knowledge."

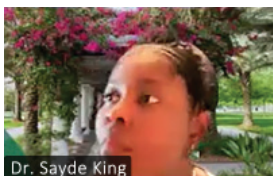
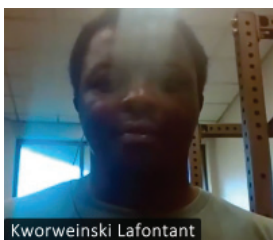
To ensure the talks were relevant and interesting to younger students, each speaker referred to a presentation guide developed by FEF. The format helped Fellows distill their research into interactive talks that made complex ideas approachable without sacrificing substance. Whether discussing exercise, software development, physics modeling, community health or migration, the Fellows focused on connection, meeting students where they are and pulling them forward.

For the students attending FEF's summer code camps, these conversations weren't just about advanced study or careers. They were about possibilities. The Fellows made clear that there's no single path to success and that interests as diverse as baking, music, weather, and video games can evolve into meaningful gateways toward serious academic work.

In sharing their stories, the Fellows helped students imagine themselves not only as coders, but as thinkers, builders, problem-solvers and communicators capable of helping shape the future.

*"You don't want to have regrets in life. You always want to try and do your best."*

*-- MDF Fellow Nadege Nau*



## Tampa COE Inducts Strong New NAS Cohort

In February 2025, 24 exceptional students in grades 5 through 8 at Mt. Calvary Seventh Day Adventist Junior Academy were honored during the Tampa-area Center of Excellence (TACOE) National Achievers Society (NAS) induction ceremony. Hosted in the school chapel, the ceremony welcomed families, educators, and supporters in a celebration of achievement and growth mindset.

The program spotlighted NAS's core values of scholarship, leadership, service, and character and featured a formal presentation in which eligible Achievers, students who met NAS criteria of high grades and strong conduct, received official NAS jackets. Believers, selected for their strong potential and determination, were also inducted and will grow alongside Achievers through year-round programming.



Mt. Calvary Principal Francine Brown with Achiever (top) and Believer (bottom) inductees.

This induction marked the beginning of a new partnership between Mt. Calvary and the TACOE, aimed at preparing students for ongoing scholastic and personal development. "Seeing our students recognized by NAS affirms that their dedication and academic excellence are making a lasting impact," says Principal Francine Brown. "Our partnership with FEF and NAS has provided a meaningful boost to our students' confidence, both in their studies and in themselves."

Through this collaboration, students will engage in academic and social-emotional enrichment, college-preparatory workshops and campus tours, leadership training, career-focused excursions, community service projects, and Brain Bowl academic scholarship competitions.

Prior to and after induction, the new middle school Achievers and Believers practiced weekly for and competed at the State Math Brain Bowl. In April, the whole group also participated in the "Future of Flight" field trip, where they explored pilot training, traveled through space in a planetarium, and traced the evolution of flight at the Museum of Science & Industry.

During the 2024-2025 school year, 856 students were inducted into NAS statewide. They all will continue advancing through a robust schedule of enrichment activities at their respective COE's and connect at the NAS State Summit in March 2026.

## 2025 Tribble Award Winner Johnathon Chu

Johnathon Chu's journey with FEF's National Achievers Society (NAS) began on December 9, 2018, at the Atlantic Coast Center of Excellence (ACCOE) in Broward County, where he was inducted as a quiet, reserved middle school student. Seven years later, he stands as a confident and capable young leader. In March 2025, he earned the prestigious Dr. Israel Tribble, Jr., Florida Achiever of the Year Award due to his remarkable growth, academic excellence, and dedication.



Johnathon Chu

As the 2024-2025 NAS President at the ACCOE, Johnathon recently graduated from South Broward High School with a 5.22 GPA. Throughout his time in NAS, he actively engaged in leadership, academics, and service efforts that also earned him the title of ACCOE Achiever of the Year, a testament to his outstanding contributions and embodiment of NAS values.

Johnathon also served as captain of ACCOE's State History and Culture Brain Bowl team, having competed every year from seventh through twelfth grade. This experience sharpened his critical thinking, teamwork, and comprehension skills. "Not only did it strengthen my reading and comprehension skills, but it also taught me the importance of responsibility," he reflects. "I realized I couldn't expect success without being prepared."

Throughout his years in NAS, Johnathon routinely attended the annual NAS State Summit, which provided valuable networking opportunities, skill-building workshops, and inspiration for his future. "The Summit helped me feel confident about life after high school," he shares. "It gave me the tools, connections, and motivation to thrive."

*"NAS helped me become a stronger public speaker, a more effective communicator, and someone who can make decisions with confidence."*

*-- Johnathon Chu, Tribble Florida Achiever of the Year*

A dedicated volunteer through the years, Johnathon participated in numerous ACCOE community service projects that allowed him to give back and make a meaningful impact. He attributes much of his personal development to these experiences, which helped him grow as a leader and deepen his sense of purpose.

Above all, Johnathon credits NAS with instilling in him a deep appreciation for community service and leadership. "NAS helped me become a stronger public speaker, a more effective communicator, and someone who can make decisions with confidence."

## FEF CodeMasters and Tampa’s WEDU PBS Partner to Expand Early Coding Pathways

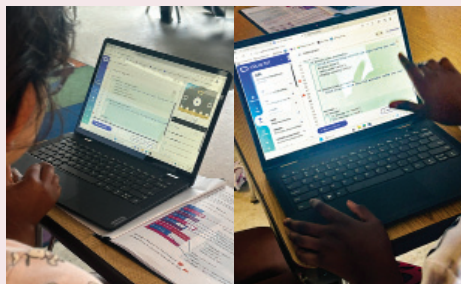
Last year, WEDU PBS, the primary PBS member station serving West Central Florida, selected FEF CodeMasters as a local partner in the national *Ready To Learn* Learning Neighborhoods initiative. The partnership, launched at the start of the 2024-2025 school year, brings computational thinking skills to students and families in East Tampa through the animated PBS KIDS series *Lyla in the Loop*.



*K-2 students practice decomposition by breaking puppet-making into smaller steps of designing, assembling, and adding details.*

The collaboration is part of a national effort to introduce young children to computer science concepts through age-appropriate, media-rich learning. *Lyla in the Loop* teaches key computational thinking skills such as sequencing, pattern recognition, decomposition, and logic, through storytelling, games, and other hands-on activities.

The initiative began with a national training in St. Louis, where FEF CodeMasters and WEDU staff helped preview and inform development of classroom toolkits and share strategies to support broad participation in early STEM learning.



*Upper elementary students compare familiar code blocks to Python text as they begin learning to program their micro:bits with Python.*

Building on that foundation, FEF piloted *Lyla* activities as warm-ups in its fall 2024 after-school coding classes at several East Tampa schools and parks.

The activities were especially well received by students in grades K-2, for whom they were designed. Prior to this, those younger students had begun to show signs of fatigue with repeated exposure to block-based coding across multiple semesters, even when it was applied to different code-and-play tools such as games, drones, and robots. The unplugged *Lyla* lessons offered a refreshing change while still reinforcing essential problem-solving and collaboration skills.



*K-2 students reinforce their understanding of sequencing by following different step-by-step recipe cards to build burgers.*

Thus, during summer 2025, to support the first rollout of text-based programming for upper elementary students, FEF CodeMasters expanded *Lyla* activities into all K-2 classes. While younger students kept building early computational thinking skills watching the *Lyla* cartoon and engag-

ing in hands-on play to supplement their block-based coding, students in grades 3 through 5 started learning to program micro:bits with Python, marking the program’s first time teaching text-based coding to elementary youth.

Throughout the partnership, WEDU has contributed technology, curriculum resources, funding, and staff development. FEF CodeMasters continues to field test new materials and provide feedback.

With the help of partners like WEDU, FEF CodeMasters continues to develop an intentional, age-aligned coding pathway that gives K-5

students fun, meaningful introductions to computer science, whether they’re just learning to recognize patterns or ready to write their first lines of code.

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### Upcoming FEF Events

- November 2025      MDF Jacketing & Award Ceremony, Tampa
- March 19-21, 2026      40<sup>th</sup> Annual Brain Bowl Competitions and Florida National Achievers Society Pre-College Summit

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*The FEF's mission is to strengthen the larger community by creating and implementing programs and services that lead to greater educational advancement for historically underrepresented groups.*

**For information on how you may support FEF programs, please call 813-272-2772.**

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