First C3 Jr. coding challenge for elementary school students scheduled for Sept. 20
C Spire, Mississippi Children's Museum team up to spur more interest in IT-related jobs and careers

Jackson, Miss., (September 5, 2018) – C Spire and the Mississippi Children's Museum (MCM) are teaming up to offer the first statewide coding challenge involving elementary school-age children later this month designed to encourage and inspire students to pursue an academic degree or career in information technology and computer science.

The half-day C3 Jr. program on Thursday, Sept. 20 at the MCM in northeast Jackson will feature teams of up to four students each from 15 public and private elementary schools across the state competing for bragging rights and tech-related prizes. C3 Jr. will help kick off the 2018 Mississippi Science Fest in the LeFleur Museum District on Sept. 21 and 22.

Students, a teacher or sponsor from each school will use critical thinking and problem-solving skills to navigate an obstacle course and showcase their creative and technical abilities during the competition. C Spire has assigned employees with IT backgrounds and experience to help each team. Members of the top three teams will receive trophies and tech-related prizes.

"We're excited about partnering with C Spire to host the first statewide coding event for elementary age children," said Susan Garrard, president and CEO of the Mississippi Children's Museum. "This is a great way to kick off three days of focus on the importance of technology education, digital literacy and our needs in building a 21st century workforce in Mississippi."

Pepper, a four-foot tall humanoid robot from Softbank Robotics America with a tablet for a chest, also will be on hand interacting with students and other guests participating in the competition. 2018 has been designated as National S.T.E.M. Year by the National Science Foundation and Code.org to emphasize science, technology, engineering and math education in the U.S.

"Building on our highly successful C3 coding challenges for high school students, we're planning age-appropriate activities for the younger students who participate in the C3 Jr. program," said Carla Lewis, chief information officer for C Spire. "Hopefully, we can inspire and encourage them to seriously consider IT and computer science as an academic and career path."

Workers with a background in computer science are in high demand and short supply in Mississippi. Employers currently have over 1,200 unfilled job openings due to the serious shortage of trained, qualified IT workers, Lewis said. The average salary for qualified IT workers is nearly $69,000 a year, almost double the statewide average.

Nationwide, research estimates that there will be a shortage of over 1 million software developers in the U.S. by 2020. "For all we know, the inventor of the next big thing or innovative app or software may be sitting in a Mississippi classroom waiting to be inspired and encouraged to become a leader in the rapidly evolving digital economy," Lewis said.

The C3 and C3 Jr. programs can serve as important first steps to increase interest in computer science, according to Lewis. In 2016, only 16 students in the state took the AP computer science exam, but last year the number of students successfully completing the test grew to 105, according to Code.org, a computer science education advocacy group.

Lewis said the company-sponsored coding challenges and support for other public and private programs like the Base Camp Coding Academy and a recent partnership with the Mississippi Department of Education's Computer Science for Mississippi program are designed to help C Spire deliver on its promise to help create and retain more IT jobs in the state.

C3 and C3 Jr. are part of a broader C Spire Tech Movement initiative designed to leverage the company's technology leadership and investments to help transform its service areas. Other elements include creation of a state-of-the-art digital customer care platform, massive deployment of broadband internet for homes and businesses and other leadership initiatives to drive innovation and development of a 21st century technology workforce.

"We live in a software-defined world where coding and the internet strongly influence just about every aspect of our lives," Lewis said. "Computer science drives innovation and creates thousands of jobs throughout our economy, but we need to do more to encourage schools to offer courses and for young people to pursue IT and computer science as viable career choices."

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