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For Immediate Release

STEM Pals: Connecting STEM experts to the community

Students explore new career opportunities through letter writing

AIKEN, S.C. – (April 30, 2024) – The long-lost art of letter writing is linking the next generation of scientists and engineers with Savannah River Site (SRS) experts. The Savannah River Nuclear Solutions (SRNS) “STEM Pals” program aims to demystify science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) careers, humanize STEM professionals and empower students to explore new opportunities.

Formerly know as “STEMulating Conversations with SRS Experts,” “STEM Pals” is a yearlong letter writing program with five schools in Aiken County. In January, SRNS Education Outreach personnel revamped the program – connecting 12 SRS pals with nearly 200 students.



Jackson STEAM Middle School students participate in a “Guess Who?” game to meet their Savannah River Nuclear Solutions (SRNS) “STEM Pal” for the first time. Cynthia Hewitt, SRNS Education Outreach Specialist, left, introduces SRNS “STEM Pals” Allison Flatt, Carla Wheeler, Colleen Davis, Sounisa Phadoungsyavong and Terry Wilder.

“The ‘STEM Pals’ initiative allows elementary and middle school students to ‘pick the brain’ of expert scientists and engineers,” said Cindy Hewitt, SRNS Education Outreach Specialist. “Exchanges happen pretty rapidly, with roughly one letter shared each week between SRS and participating schools.”

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Educators initiate the writing relationship by drafting a letter with students that contains questions on SRS careers and STEM-related topics. After months of exchanging letters, Jackson STEAM Middle School students had the opportunity to meet their experts face-to-face.

“My favorite part of the experience was reading the unique and thoughtful questions from each student,” said Allison Flatt, SRNS Mechanical Systems Engineer. “I am not here to make every student an engineer; but to inspire students to pursue higher education opportunities and find their true passion. I loved describing my role as a female engineer at SRS and getting to know each class on a personal level.”

Jackson STEAM Middle School educator Jennifer McMillian was amazed at how the letters quickly became a class favorite – allotting time each week for students to read and respond.

“My students have anxiously awaited the opportunity to meet their pals, after corresponding since January on different STEM topics,” said McMillian. It is a great way to incorporate writing into our curriculum while getting to know real experts in the scientific community.”

Letter topics often connect to classroom lectures, studies, field trips and local STEM opportunities.

“This opportunity has furthered our classroom discussions,” continued McMillian. “We’ve been able to respond to our ‘STEM Pals’ with class pictures and descriptions of our activities covering invertebrates, snap circuits and watersheds.”



SRNS “STEM Pal” Colleen Davis discusses engineering careers with students at Jackson STEAM Middle School.

Zoe Marshall, a sixth grade student at the school, benefited by discussing career opportunities with SRNS “STEM Pals” Victoria Ibarra and Anthony “Tony” Holm, both engineers.

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“Reading each letter from Victoria and Tony was something I looked forward to every Friday,” said Marshall. “It brought our entire class together, as we learned each other’s interests and perspectives. I would love the chance to continue this ‘STEM Pal’ relationship in the future.”

“We hope to inspire students in the community by exposing them to the unique careers available at SRS,” said Hewitt. “Our ‘STEM Pal’ initiative makes it easy for our employees to volunteer and broaden students’ scope of career possibilities as they advance through school.”

To watch the full SRNS “STEM Pals” reveal, click [here](#). To spark a pen pal relationship with an SRS expert, fill out an [interest form](#).



SRNS “STEM Pal” and Engineering Staffing and Development Manager Carla Wheeler waits to greet Jackson STEAM Middle School students after writing pen pal letters since January 2024.

Savannah River Nuclear Solutions, a Fluor and HII partnership company, is responsible for the management and operations of the Department of Energy’s Savannah River Site, located near Aiken, South Carolina.

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