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TAKING FLIGHT IN PRINCE WILLIAM SCHOOLS

By Marianne Weaver

Drop into any school and the buzz is all about STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). According to the presidential report, “K-12 Education in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) for America’s Future,” STEM expertise is less a matter of innate talent than of having the opportunity and motivation.

In Prince William, that means introducing STEM to students as early—and often. A handful of local schools have turned to Manassas-based AviationEd. “Our goal for our students is to get them excited about learning through exposure to STEM through aviation concepts. We encourage them to apply their critical thinking skills through investigations and also provide career exploration opportunities,” said AviationEd co-founder Jackie Sulton.

Her husband and co-founder James E. Sulton, III, EdD, melded his background in education and aviation to create the business they founded in 2008 that serves students in Prince William, Loudon and Fairfax counties as well as the District of Columbia. Prior to his current job as an FAA air traffic control specialist, he was the principal of Oakland Aviation High School in California. The AviationEd curriculum is broken into four age/grade programs:

- Blue jays—Preschool,
- Robins—Kindergarten through second grade,
- Hawks—Third through fifth grade, and
- Ravens—Sixth through eighth grade.

Early Education Aviation

Ed begins reaching kids before they officially start school. In Prince William, preschoolers at St. Michael’s Academy (formerly St. Paul’s School) in Haymarket are engaged through learning and playing. “Aviation Ed helps our students think scientifically and apply the principles of hypothesis, observing and drawing conclusions to other aspects of learning,” said St. Michael’s principal Katherine Howe Evans, EdD. “The preschool classes build upon 3- and 4-year-olds’ naturally inquisitive natures through science experiments, interactive problem-solving games and hands-on activities.”

Elementary School

The Robins program, offered at both St. Michael’s and Bennett Elementary School in Manassas, is geared for students in Kindergarten through second grade. Students explore the growth of aviation from 1000 BC in China with kite-making all the way to space exploration with rockets. “The elementary classes direct students to build models and conduct scientific investigation into the mechanics of aerodynamics, meteorology and navigation. The children especially love to use the flight simulators,” said Evans. The Hawks program, geared for students in second through fifth grade, names students “junior aerospace engineers,” who learn about airplane parts, movements and controls.

At Bennett the aviation program is offered as an eight-week afterschool club. According to PTO president Amy Girard-Barfield, all 12 available slots were filled in each session, and the kids were more than a little excited to take their turn at the flight simulator. “My first grader gained a basic knowledge about aviation—what makes planes fly and how helicopters stay in the air. He really enjoyed the flight simulator.” said Girard-Barfield.

Middle School



Mary G. Porter Traditional School in Woodbridge offers aviation as an optional encore class to all sixth, seventh and eighth grade students. "Our goal is to show students how mathematics fit into real life situations—measuring distance, flight and weather. And they love it," said Principal Darci Whitehead.

Whitehead said she used her school budget to build the studio. "We had the monitors and the computers, so it was not expensive," she said, adding that they only need to acquire the choke and foot pedals. AviationEd supplies the software. "When you are flying that software, it's like you are in the cockpit."

And when students see the flight simulators in the studio, she said, they want to be a part of it. "The goal is to make STEM interesting," said James Sulton. "It is not about making students into pilots or air traffic controllers. This gives them an example of a STEM career field."

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