

Routes to Aviation Careers Start in Middle School

by ALLISON CHISOLM, CORRESPONDENT

If you traveled to the Worcester Regional Airport one afternoon in mid-January, you might have had to dodge a barrage of paper airplanes before reaching your gate.

Excited Worcester middle schoolers – a group of 20 boys and four girls in the Worcester Public Schools Aviation Career Exploration program – were testing their designs for loft (how long their planes remained in the air) and distance (how far they flew before landing).

Launched from the top of the escalators, planes soared across the entranceway, landing along the escalator handrails and rubber mats near the sliding doors.

The competition was fierce, even demanding a rematch for loft.

The winners? Two eighth grade girls, Ella Tivnan and Jewla Jean.

This group visits the airport once a month from November through June, bused from Sullivan and Forest Grove middle schools. Members of Worcester Aviation Career Exploration Club, a Scouting America program designed to investigate career options, the young people want to learn about aviation and potential jobs in the industry after graduation.

“All of the Worcester Public Schools students and families are really interested in career-connected learning, wherever they can get it,” said Dr. Emily Lehman Miller, Interim Administrative Director, Office of College & Career Readiness for Worcester Public Schools.

“Our stance on career-connected learning is early and often,” she said. “We are trying to be more strategic about pushing into middle schools ... and programs like this fill an area of need.”

Collaboration Makes This Work

The after-school activity represents a fortuitous collaboration of Worcester Public Schools (WPS), Scouting America, Massachusetts Port Authority (Massport), Atlantic Aviation, JetBlue, American Airlines and Delta Air Lines, with the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce bringing all the partners together.

This all began with neighbors talking over a fence.

David Garvin, Manager of Workforce Programs, had just started his job at the Chamber to address workforce shortage issues in Central Massachusetts. Creating a pipeline couldn't mean just finding adults to train for the necessary skills. He was convinced the process had to begin earlier.

Across the fence was Patrick Hanrahan, Director of Development for Scouting America's Heart of New England Council. Garvin explained his role as liaison between the Chamber, schools and local employers. Hanrahan mentioned the longstanding Exploring program for scouts in middle and high school.

“This is exactly what I want to do,” Garvin remembered thinking. “Let's start earlier, focus on an earlier age group in middle school.”

“It was a genesis moment,” said Hanrahan. “Scouting's best kept secret is the Exploring program. It's literally designed to be a hands-on, interactive career exploration program.” At its core, he explained, “it's a partnership between Scouting America and businesses looking to broaden awareness of career opportunities in their industry. Local school districts provide the third pillar.”

The Chamber was “very on board with this,” Hanrahan noted, and WPS was ready with the Office of College & Career Readiness.

At the Chamber's invitation, Massport soon joined the conversation as a key sponsor, as did the Worcester airport's fixed base operator, Atlantic Aviation, which emerged as a pivotal representative of the broader aviation business community.

“Our overriding goal was to get a sense of what success would look like for each stakeholder, and then design the program structure and curriculum to meet those objectives,” said Hanrahan.

Siting the program at Worcester Regional Airport would be ideal -- not too large, but with all the major components of an airport. Airport Director Andy Davis readily agreed, with one caveat.

“I knew I couldn't do it myself,” he said, “so I asked American, Delta, JetBlue and Atlantic Aviation, and their immediate responses were ‘Absolutely, what can we do?’”

Tapping their staff and their professional networks, the partners identified subject matter experts that generated the program's curriculum, supplemented with materials from Scouting America.

“I haven't come across a single ‘no.’ Everybody gets it,” Davis said. “There is a future demand for this – we need to fill aviation jobs.”



The industry currently faces a shortfall of approximately 32,000 skilled workers, including pilots, mechanics, and air traffic controllers, with forecasts predicting thousands more retirements each year through 2042, according to aviation data company OAG.

Testing Leads to Extended Program

After ongoing discussions through 2024, the program launched in January 2025, testing out a six-month series of interactive career exploration activities, from behind-the-scenes airport tours and hands-on simulations to aviation mechanic shadowing and pilot conversations.

This school year's offerings have included demonstrations of “pre-flying” with all the steps required before a private plane takes off.

AVIATION, CONTINUED

Parent and student surveys reported a significantly stronger understanding of, and interest in, potential career options in aviation. All respondents said they would recommend this to others interested in learning about careers in aviation.

That positive feedback led to this year's expanded eight-month program. Four students signed up for a second year, including paper airplane champion Tivnan.

"I like to look up at airplanes when I see them," she said. "If I think they're a cool aircraft, I'll look up on Flight Aware and see what kind they are."

Helyne Medeiros, area general manager for Atlantic Aviation at both Worcester and Hyannis airports, welcomes that spark of curiosity in young people. She has tapped many of her team members to lead program sessions for both years.

Plus, she's always eager to share her enthusiasm for a career she loves.

"I just want to educate youth about aviation," she said. "There's such a wide range of career opportunities available to them in the future." Many, she noted, do not require a college degree, and much training is provided on-site.

Reeling off a quick list, she noted jobs such as customer service representative, line service technician, maintenance technician, ticket agent, ramp agent, air traffic controller, flight attendant, operations and customer services managers, airport operations manager, engineer, pilot, and airport first responder.

Flight Dreams

"I want to be a pilot at 21," said Eddy Samuel Balcé Yero, a seventh grader at Sullivan Middle School. Daniel Irger, Forest Grove eighth grader, agreed, adding, "I want to learn about planes."

People often think first of pilots when they consider aviation careers, said David Bosselait, executive board president of Heart of New England Council, Scouting America, who participates in each session. But for every pilot position, there are more than 600 careers in the field of aviation, he said.

Last year's initial cohort of students included two girls who were ready to become aircraft mechanics. After hearing about a paid two-year apprenticeship program from a regional manager with American Airlines, Barbara Desmaris,

they were even more convinced, recounted Garvin.

Before the paper airplane flight contest at January's meeting, the students learned basic flight principles from American Airlines Captain John Silverberg, a 35-year pilot who has logged between 32,000 and 33,000 hours of flight time in his career.

After discussing definitions of thrust, lift and drag, Capt. Silverberg sat next to students taking turns at the controls of a desktop simulator for a Cessna 172.

He started his flying career at 14, he said, flying gliders at the Southbridge, Mass. airport. A commercial pilot mentored him and offered guidance on his career path. In turn, he encourages young people to embrace the variety of careers in aviation.

School-to-Career Choices

The Aviation Career program is expanding parents' understanding of their children's career options, too, said Dr. Lehman. "Research points out that about 80% of a student's choice about their post-secondary pathways comes from home."

Middle school students face future choices of high schools and academic directions, considering WPS has 32 career technical education programs and six innovation Career Innovation Pathways Programs.

"Anytime you can bring it to real life, the theoretical principles and the math behind how the world works come to life and make it a lot more meaningful for the students," she said.

Capacity limitations have meant that not every interested student has been able to participate in the aviation career program. The goal continues to expand it to more middle schools and add more industry areas.

"We know that Worcester public schools and local businesses together are better for Worcester," said Dr. Lehman.

"Workforce development remains the number one or two issue for Chamber members," said Garvin. "Access to talent matters. Exposing middle school students to career paths for local industries is a long-term play that could pay off in another five years."

If your company would be interested in supporting a career exploration program for your industry, please contact Dave Garvin at 508-753-2924, ext. 230.



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