



# Flying High at Aviation High Schools

Above, Sisters High School students on an aviation camping field trip; at right, student George Chladek after his first solo flight.

Aviation is part of the daily curriculum at these specialized high schools.

**L**ike millions of high school students across the country, Jake Lee is getting ready to head back to school. The rising junior at Sisters High School in Sisters, OR, will once again settle into the rhythms of the academic year: going to class, joining clubs, chatting at lockers and scheduling flights.

Wait – scheduling flights?

“We have the option to take a course called Flight Science, which prepares us to test for our private pilot’s license,” Lee explains. “Students in the program have access to training flights through the local airport, so when we’re ready we can schedule a flight.”

Lee is one of 58 students enrolled in Sisters High School’s aviation program. In addition to meeting every day for STEM-driven classes taught by a certified flight instructor, students are also able to procure simulator training and flight time on a Cessna 172.

Since much of the training is subsidized by local businesses, fundraising drives and private donations, students have the opportunity to earn their private pilot’s license at about half the cost of doing so at traditional flight schools.

“I’m constantly floored by this community and how much

they support us,” said Sheryl Yeager, who teaches the school’s Flight Science curriculum. “I think people realize what a special program this is.”

Adding demanding aviation training onto an already busy high school schedule may sound difficult, but Lee says the teachers go out of their way to help walk students through the process.

“It might seem a little intimidating at first, but the instructors are really enthusiastic and make it fun,” he said.

When Julie Benson started the program six years ago, there were five students in the course. Now it’s the largest activity program at the school and just received a new simulator donated by Central Oregon Community College.

“It’s been a complete success – we’re getting students who are transferring into Sisters High School specifically for the program,” said Benson, who along with her husband Benny owns Sisters Eagle Airport.

According to Benson, the next phase of the program is an airplane build project. The Outlaw Aviation Club (named after the school’s mascot) is currently seeking grants, donations and sponsors to fund the purchase of a homebuilt airplane kit, which the students will learn how to assemble as part of an aerospace engineering course.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JULIE BENSON



The curriculum at Sisters High School is just one of the many high school aviation programs across the country. From California to Alabama to the Northeast Corridor, thousands of students are enrolled in aerospace courses that help prepare them for in-demand job opportunities.

“Most of the technicians in the area graduated from our school and they’ll call us saying, ‘We have some open spots – can you give us graduates to interview?’” said Steven Jackson, principal at Aviation High School in Long Island City, NY.

Since 1936, the FAA-certified Aviation Maintenance Technical School has provided students from all five New York City boroughs with a traditional high school education while also preparing them for careers in the aerospace industry.

By successfully completing a series of technical skills rotations, Aviation High School students can earn a highly sought-after FAA A&P license by graduation. Additionally, 160-180 students gain entrance into the school’s fifth-year program, which provides additional training for students to earn their second license – a process that can cost up to \$50,000 but is offered for free by the city.

“It’s a great opportunity and the students compete hard to gain entrance into the program,” said Jackson.

By the time Aviation High School students are seniors, they’ll be spending nearly half their day on vocational training, whether through coursework or internships with local companies at LaGuardia or JFK airports. Despite that core focus, it’s not all wrenches, all the time.

“At the end of the day it’s still a regular school,” said Genesis Santana, a recent graduate currently enrolled in the fifth-year program to earn her A&P license. “We have clubs, athletics, pep

rallies, all the usual classes like English and social studies – but it’s also different because you’re tak-

ing up to four periods of technician coursework by senior year.”

It can be a lot to juggle, but Santana credits the rigorous curriculum and strict, FAA-mandated attendance and pass/fail policies with helping the students develop a strong work ethic.

“Balancing academics, aviation training, extracurriculars and your personal life teaches valuable life skills,” she said. “When you have that experience in high school, you’re ready for college or the job market.”

Whereas Aviation High School builds a high school experience around maintenance training, the new Wichita Public Schools Aviation Pathway program inserts technical training options into the school district’s standard curriculum.

Launching this year with about 250 students, the Aviation Pathway program allows students to pursue electives in two different pathways: aviation production, which focuses on aerospace engineering, and aviation maintenance. Students choose a focus before their junior year and take advanced coursework at both their high school and local tech college.

With the global aerospace industry needing millions of new pilots, maintenance technicians and other skilled professionals over the coming decades, high school aviation programs like these can offer students a head start into promising aviation careers.

“The aviation job market is wide open for these students,” said Sister High School’s Yeager. “Every day I’m grinding into them, ‘Hey, this is real – you can do this for a living.’ It’s just an amazing opportunity.” ❖