

Denbigh Aviation Academy students start airplane project

The students will build a 750 pound two-seat plane with materials donated by the Eagle's Nest Project



From left, Aviation Academy students Peyman Banihashemi, 16, Elizabeth... (Sarah Pawlowski, Daily...)

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NEWPORT NEWS — Excitement filled the air at the Denbigh Aviation Academy in Newport News Tuesday morning, as more than 100 students, school staff, parents and guests gathered to launch a two-year project to build an airplane.

Juniors and seniors who attend the four-year program in Newport News Public Schools will build a 750-pound, two-seat aircraft. The students will work on the project during class, on Thursdays after school, and on a handful of Saturdays throughout the year. The goal is to give students a variety of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math, or STEM, skills and to inspire interest in aviation careers.

The first shipment of aluminum sheets and fasteners and other parts to build the wings and tail of the airplane arrived in August. Students spent the first few weeks of school learning basic skills to get them started, according to Aaron Smith, the academy's administrator.

Students are required to apply to participate in the project, and so far 30 have expressed interest, he said. Overall, he expects more than 100 students will get to work on the project, with seniors graduating this year and younger students joining the project next year.

"That's what this is about," he said. "To get as many kids involved as possible," he said.

The first participants will be selected within the next couple of weeks based on their experience, interest, grades and initiative, Smith said.

"The characteristics you want (for) successful employees," he said.

Elizabeth Huber, 17, said she's excited to participate because it will give her experience for a future career in mechanical engineering.

"This would help with getting hands-on," she said.

Huber and three other students were invited to cut one of the ribbons securing the boxes of parts at the ceremony. They said they feel challenged to finish the plane in just one year because they're the only participating aviation school.

The academy received the kit from the Eagle's Nest Projects, which donates kits to schools to build airplanes. The Aviation Academy is one of eight schools with kits, and the first on the East Coast, according to school officials. The

Newport News students think they have an advantage over the other students because their course work allows them to work on the project during class.

But Huber, a senior this year, said if they don't finish it in one year, she'll be back because some students will get to fly the plane when it's completed.

"I want to be the one to fly it," she said. "I'll come back."

Pawlowski can be reached by phone at 757-247-7478.