North Star Aviation Focus Program helps students' dreams take flight

Sydney Miller first planned on going into auto mechanics, but after a few high school aviation courses – she changed her mind. “I never really considered aviation as a career, but now I can’t wait to learn more.”

Logan Skrdlant, headed for Iowa Western this fall with hopes of majoring in aviation mechanics, was transformed after his sophomore year and a field trip to Duncan Aviation. “I thought to myself, ‘Yeah, this is a place I would love to work.’”

Trinity Hamilton chose the University of Colorado-Boulder for a profession in aeronautical engineering – thanks to the hands-on aviation learning at Lincoln Public Schools.

All three Lincoln North Star High School seniors graduated this spring – after participating in the Aviation and Technical Education Focus Program – and are all planning on careers in aeronautics.

“I’m super excited that we have been able to create a program for kids that connects them to college … that sets up students for success,” says Amanda Woodward, a teacher at the North Star Focus Program.

North Star began offering courses in aviation during the 2019-2020 school year with a focus on helping students identify the best aviation track for them, as well as exposing them to a variety of potential aviation-related careers.

Woodward said she has loved watching the program evolve and improve. “We have gradually been able to offer more courses in line with what is happening in the industry,” she explained. “We are sending students to colleges across the country.”

North Star offers courses that range from Power Mechanics to Aviation 1 and 2, offering everything from a broad overview of how airplanes fly – to hands-on experiences in aviation mechanics.

“I started flying as a kid with my uncles, they even let me take the controls,” Woodward said. “I’ve had an interest in airplanes for as long as I can remember.”

She is particularly grateful to Duncan Aviation and community partnerships that help support this focus program. “If it wasn’t for Duncan, a ready and willing partner located right in our backyard – providing donations, mentoring, internships, bringing me parts of airplanes – we could not make this work.”

And now the focus program will expand further, thanks to an Aviation Maintenance Technical Workers Grant – and additional support from Duncan Aviation, the Boys and Girls Club of Lincoln/Lancaster County, and LPS.

Woodward explained that the program had reached a point when it could no longer serve all students interested in the aviation courses. “We were limited in space and equipment … but a new building and facilities will provide more lab and hands-on opportunities.”

Meantime, the North Star seniors are all grateful.

Sydney: “I had worked on small engines, lawn mowers and snow blowers, but after the courses and the Duncan apprenticeship, I became very invested in aviation.”

Logan: “I grew up on a farm and had worked with engines, so I took Power Mechanics on a whim … and found I loved the enjoyment of getting to work on plane engines.”

Trinity: “I learned so much in high school, all the basics of aeronautics, but also the differences in engines, airplanes … It got me into the idea of mapping in engineering.”

** The airline industry predicts a world demand of 754,000 new airline technicians by 2037. The global aviation maintenance technician workforce will need to add almost 38,000 new technicians annually to meet that projected demand.

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