

Learning to Fly

*Technology and Generosity
Come Together in Aviation
and Avionics Program for
High School Students*

By Steven Nester



Some high school students in McKinney who stare longingly out the classroom window definitely have their heads in the clouds – but not like you'd think. These deskbound are scanning the sky for airplanes and wishing they could pilot one.

For them, the wild blue yonder is closer than ever before.

Through the efforts of educators, business people and industry veterans, high school students are climbing into the cockpit and learning to fly. McKinney ISD students have the opportunity to enroll in the district's Aviation and Avionics Program, a fledgling flight and avionics curriculum taught in all three McKinney high schools.

The goal is for students to earn their pilot's license or an FAA certificate in avionics upon graduation.

The program is a partnership between the school district and the Collin County Student Aviation Initiative, a non-profit organization founded by local businessman and pilot Frederick Mowery.

Mowery believes that young people's potential can be unlocked by showing them career opportunities in aviation. He so firmly believes this that he's financing

Above: The traffic control tower at Collin County Regional Airport provides an eye in the sky for students learning to fly. Below: McKinney North High School student Madison McLaughlin got to try her hand at co-piloting a plane.



the project with his own money, and for good reason.

When learning to fly, gravity might be the least of a student's problems. The prices of gas, plane rental and flight lessons are daunting.

"Learning to fly and the cost of operating and maintaining aircraft are not inexpensive propositions," says Mike Livezey, General Manager and Director of Corporate Marketing at Cutter Aviation in McKinney.

"The beauty of the MISD program is that it gives students who might not be able to afford it the opportunity to get into flying or avionics," Livezey says. "It also gives kids the chance to see if they really enjoy it or if they're cut out for it."

McKinney North student Arnold Tejocote is interested in avionics and flight technology. "This course will benefit me by helping me figure out what I want to do," he says.

Program Moves Ahead

This was the program's first year, and Mowery and his team are taking one step at a time. About 50 students completed the Introduction to Aviation Industry class offered in fall 2011, and Mowery expects more than 100 to enroll in fall 2012.

The program is structured to add a new course every year, allowing students to advance to the next level of study. The second year is planned to give students the choice of studying flying or avionics.

Avionics is a diverse field encompassing what happens on the ground – from aircraft repair and maintenance to managing transportation systems or the logistics of getting a bag from Point A to B.

"The ultimate goal is to create a program that graduates high school seniors with a pilot's license or an FAA certificate in avionics," Mowery says. "Both would enable students to enter the workforce."

It takes vision and courage to allow a teenager behind an airplane's controls, and although he sees the big picture from a mile up, Mowery's feet are firmly planted on the ground. In fact, the McKinney Aviation and Avionics Program began with the most basic of motives: to help a young person in need.

Making It Happen

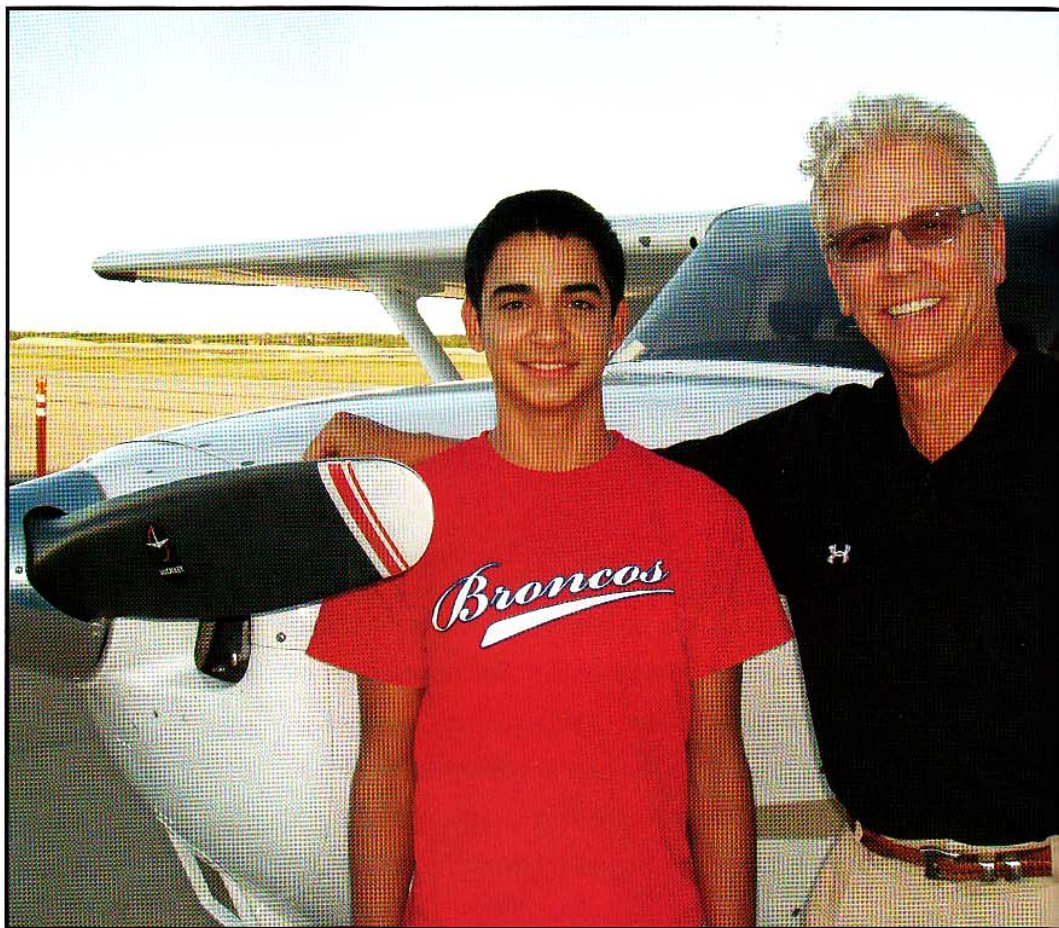
"A friend called me several years ago and asked that I take his grandson, who had rebellion issues, for a ride in my plane," says Mowery. "I said 'sure.' I let him hold the controls and I asked him, 'Do you think you'd like to do this?' He said he did.

"His family had financial difficulties, and flying is not a cheap venture for anyone. So I said to the young man, 'If you really want to fly, we'll find a way to make it happen, but you have to show up for every lesson,'" Mowery recounts. "'You have to get your grades up in every subject and can't test positive for drugs or alcohol.' And you know what? He agreed."

"I saw the maturity level rise in him," Mowery continues. "The student's probation officer called me and asked what I did to him. His dress and behavior changed. It occurred to me that I gave him something to live for. And then I thought, 'How many

lives I could change by teaching kids how to fly?' Then I knew that this should be offered in school."

This positive story got even better when Mowery proposed the idea of a flight and avionics program to Dr. J.D. Kennedy, McKinney ISD Superintendent. Kennedy endorsed the program, and his foresight, excitement, and willingness to take a risk helped get it off the ground.



Bryan Bingham from McKinney Boyd High School is among the McKinney ISD students enjoying the flight and avionics program sponsored by the school district and a non-profit group founded by businessman and pilot Frederick Mowery.

With Kennedy's blessing, Mowery got busy. He assembled a team, starting with long-time friend and retired Marine Corps pilot Alejandro 'Brick' House, who serves as the program's senior flight instructor and ground school coordinator. Next came flying instructors and pilots. A classroom instructor teaches at one school per lesson, with the other two schools in attendance via video feed. The three classrooms are monitored by MISD teachers Faith Trimble, Alyssa Bryant and Gerald Ashton.

Curriculum Benefits

To devise a curriculum, Brick teamed up with McKinney ISD Coordinator of Career and Technology Education Keva Boughner. Brick wrote the curriculum while Boughner made sure the lessons complied with state and district guidelines.

"The program fits right in and complements the regular curriculum by giving students a new perspective on math and science," House says.

He says that flight programs in Texas secondary schools were once fairly common, "but unfortunately many are no longer implementing them." In fact, he says, the Texas Education Agency currently has a flight and ground program that many high schools used in the past.

The rejuvenation of aviation and avionics in high school is welcomed by industry insiders.

Greg White, President/Owner of Select Avionics at Collin County Regional Airport, thinks the program could give students firm footing in the job market.

"If a student comes out of a program like the MISD one, he or she could go to work for me," White says. For students "with basic knowledge of aircraft and avionics components and how they integrate together, we could put them in a position that would give them on-the-job training that will help them work toward their FAA certificate."

Collin County Regional Airport Director Ken Wiegand has high regard for the program as well.

"The aviation industry is exciting and filled with opportunities for anyone looking for a challenging career," he says. "MISD has accepted this aviation curriculum and is discovering how popular it is, as evidenced by the interest students have shown."

There is much to be done before the program reaches its goal of becoming a four-year, self-sustaining program, but officials say the effort will be worth it. For now, Mowery is busy raising money and planning for the future, which includes expanding the program into other school districts. For those who want to assist, the non-profit accepts donations mailed to its West Virginia Street office.

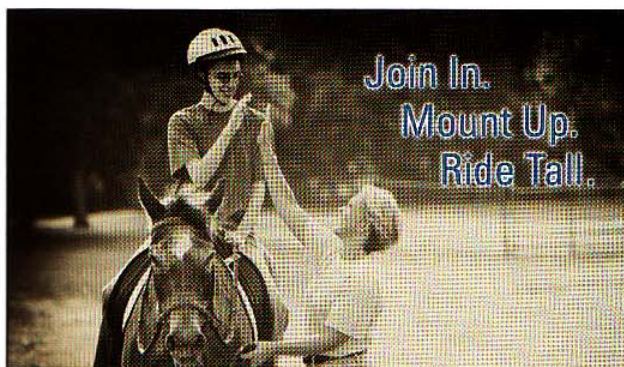
Meanwhile, staff members have wasted no time getting students in the air. Students and instructors performed flyovers during the fall 2011 homecoming, cruising over a Ron Poe Stadium packed with classmates and their school's football team.

"What I see in kids when we get them in the air is the full spectrum of emotions, usually smiles from ear to ear," House says. "Some students have to warm up to the idea of piloting a plane, but when we hit the runway and taxi to a stop, most kids are still on cloud nine."

Mowery is excited that the program focuses on kids and putting them on a path to success.

"A mile of highway gets you a mile down the road, but a mile of runway gets you anywhere in the world," he says.

About the author: Steven Nester is an educator and freelance writer who hosts Poets of the Tabloid Murder, a mystery author interview show that can be heard on public radio.



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