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## **Newport News Aviation Academy students to build full-sized airplane**

### **Juniors and seniors will construct the plane using materials donated by the Eagle's Nest Project**

By Sarah J. Pawlowski, [spawlowski@dailypress.com](mailto:spawlowski@dailypress.com) | 757-247-7478

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NEWPORT NEWS — It was like Christmas morning for a handful of teachers and mentors at the Aviation Academy.

After nearly six months of planning and waiting, the first shipment of aluminum sheets and fasteners and other parts to build the wings and tail of an airplane had finally arrived.

Opening up crates and taking inventory of the pieces was the start of an estimated two-year project. The academy's goal is for the juniors and seniors to build a 750-pound, two-seat aircraft they can fly.

"(We want) to get them interested in aviation and keep them in aviation," said Kent Stitt, the project's chief mentor.

Stitt, a retired Air Force officer, said he learned about the Eagle's Nest Projects, which donates airplane kits to schools, and thought it would be beneficial for the Aviation Academy. Eagles Nest officials visited the school in March and within days they agreed to donate a kit. This is the ninth kit they've donated, and the first on the East Coast, Stitt said.

The Aviation Academy is a four-year high school program in Newport News Public Schools, located behind the Newport News-Williamsburg International Airport. Students learn skills to prepare them for careers in aviation, electronics, engineering and technology.

When they come back to school in September, the students will each be assigned roles — from management to laborer — based on what courses they've completed at the academy. While none of the students or their teachers has ever built a plane, they've constructed projects, such as tool boxes and wings, that required similar skills.

The students will work on the project during class, on Thursdays after school and a handful of Saturdays throughout the year. While they've been told the project should take two years, Aviation Academy teacher Bill LaManque said he's hopeful they'll finish sooner since it's an aviation school, which can use more class time to work on it than a traditional school.

"We're hoping we can do it a little faster than they expect," he said.

After the airplane is finished and inspected by the FAA, the instructors said they hope to be able to use it to give the students flying lessons. But in order to do so, they'll have to raise money to pay for the fuel.

LaManque said officials at the Newport News-Williamsburg International Airport are interested in hosting public events to display the project.

"We've tossed around some open house ideas," he said. "The folks at the airport have been very helpful."

Aviation Academy Program Administrator Aaron Smith said he thinks the project is a great opportunity to encourage students to pursue Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) careers and give them a wide-range of skills.

"It's going to be a huge resume' booster, he said."

Smith said the project is a perfect example of how you make learning optimal by allowing students to participate in real-world experiences. He said aside from building the plane and learning to fly it, he's hoping to introduce other learning opportunities, such as a website and student blog. He said he thinks the blog would be an ideal way to introduce aviation to other students because they'll take more interest when they hear about the experience from their peers.

"That's how you hook kids in education," he said.

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