



FROM THE CEO

Testimony: West Michigan Aviation Academy (WMAA) Where Education and Industry Take Flight

Chairman Kiley, Ranking Member Bonamici, and members of the committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to share with you how we serve families at the West Michigan Aviation Academy, located on federal airport property at the Gerald R. Ford International Airport, in Grand Rapids, MI. I am excited to share with you about the unique opportunities we are able to provide to students, and it is essential that I stress for you all that we are a not-for-profit, public charter school serving just over 600 students grades 9-12. Our students primarily choose us by word of mouth from family/friends, and come to us for our aviation focus, STEM focus, and our safe, professional and welcoming culture.

When it comes to career and workforce development, our hope is that we can serve as a model for the types of innovation and partnerships schools can leverage to create legitimate talent pipelines that have tangible value for both students and communities. As a school leader, I am proud to share with you that the West Michigan Aviation Academy, in our 15 years of operation, has

- Licensed 195 private pilots -- and, yes, we have high school students flying independently in school owned airplanes as part of their CTE state-sponsored educational program.
- Licensed 27 commercial drone operators, meaning that our students are gaining portable credentials beyond their high school diploma, licensed to make money in a highly sought after technical trade *before* they even graduate.
- Competed on the World Stage in Dallas for Vex Robotics, exposing students to coding, autonomous vehicles, the engineering process, teamwork, communication, and other professional life skills.
- Our upperclassmen built a carbon Cub EX-2 over four years, which was FAA certified as airworthy and was sold to replenish the funding for our CTE-certified course called Build-A-Plane course, which is focused on aviation maintenance. We are now refurbishing a 1975 Bellanca Scout and 233 Schweizer Glider, which will be used as part of our Summer Glider Program.
- At West Michigan Aviation Academy, 6% of graduates choose to serve in the U.S. military, a rate three times higher than the national average of roughly 2%.

When we see the national headlines about the worldwide demand for pilots and certified aviation maintenance technicians each exceeding 637,000 by 2036 and the pilot shortage in the US will reach 15,000 by 2026, it is validating to know that our school is making a difference in this sector. WMAA is educating students to enter industries with high demand.

Our Mission, Vision, and Values guide every decision we make. We believe that excellence begins with connection and high expectations. Each student is assigned a trusted adult in the building to ensure they are seen, supported, and known. We take a whole-child approach to support our students who come from 50 different middle schools, often with varying levels of preparation.

Additionally, we hold our students to high academic and personal standards:

- 26 credits required to graduate
- No D's allowed (grading scale: A–C, F)
- 100 hours of community service
- Mandatory job shadow experience.

These types of student achievements are only made possible by the innovative partnerships our academy has been able to leverage due to the creative thinking of our board and private industry. By sharing some of the unique things we have been able to do at our academy, we hope that we can serve as a model for *why* we need to stop working in siloes in education and *how* we can be more creative as a society to serve our communities *better*.

For example, one of the most unique aspects of our school is that we are located on federal airport property -- certainly you can imagine it takes a fair amount of relationship and trust building to convince an airport that bringing 620 students on site daily is a good idea.

But for our students and our program, this location *matters*. It provides us with

- Direct flight line access
- Storage and maintenance opportunities for our aircraft
- Police and fire service for our school
- Access to unique guests, like Coast Guard helicopters, Army Blackhawks, and Marine Corps Ospreys right on our school's ramp
- Real industry expertise right on our doorstep.

And, at the same time, there is reciprocity in our relationship with the airport. Our school regularly collaborates with the Ford Launchpad for Innovative Technologies and Entrepreneurship (FLITE), where industry start-ups gain access to the airport to demo their products before they go to market. Our students have helped test drones intended to scare livestock out of industrial areas and UAS software used to detect landmines.

Additionally, we own our hangar facility, where we conduct flight operations. But, beyond our school needs, this space also has *value* in this industry. Recognizing this, we have secured a private avionics business as a tenant, meaning our students are able to interact with industry professionals and this creates an opportunity for young people to visualize a future career path in a very concrete way...We have had two students move directly from graduation at WMAA to high-quality careers with Mayday Avionics. Similarly, we have students who work at aviation businesses who are also tenants at the Airport, both while they are in high school and after they graduate.

In addition to these highly innovative partnerships, we also have been able to establish collaborative partnerships well beyond the airport campus. With our post-secondary partners, West Michigan Aviation Academy maintains multiple articulation agreements with colleges and universities, enabling students to earn between 3 and 21 college credits through completion of designated Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. This allows students to fast track and save money on their college education.

Additionally, Grand Valley State University, our charter school authorizer, provides us with graduate assistants from their college of engineering, lending us additional expertise to assist with our most advanced courses. Even more importantly, they provide credits to our teaching team at a significantly reduced cost, so that we can help our teachers advance their degrees and their careers at pennies on the dollar. Also, by reimagining how we pursue dual enrollment, we have been able to bring university professors to teach specialty courses onsite such as advanced calculus and computer science.

It is also important to our school that we serve as leaders for our broader educational community. In partnership with our local Intermediate School District, Michigan Department of Education, and many aviation specific community partners we led the charge on writing the state's Career and Technical Education (CTE) standards for the Aviation General and Professional Pilot CIP codes. This was instrumental in both the integration of Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) Drone certifications for high school students as well as properly aligning FAA private pilot aircrew certification standards (ACS) with CTE standards within the State of Michigan..

- 2025-26: 189 CTE enrollments at WMAA engaging 143 students as well as 48 additional students taking advantage of CTE through Kent Intermediate School District programming. When you consider we have 291 juniors and seniors, this is 66% of our eligible students engaging with CTE programming this year.

It is my hope that by sharing this testimony with you today, that our academy might serve as inspiration to leaders of educational policy for what is possible in Career and Technical Education, so that we might continue to collaborate on how we help students transition from classroom to career by giving them access to real-world experiences and industry-specific skills while still at the very source of the economic pipeline..

I thank you all so much for this tremendous opportunity and for all your work to ensure that young people have exceptional opportunities to learn and grow across our country. If there are any questions I can answer for the benefit of the committee, I would be happy to share more about our school and our experiences.

¹ Pilot Outlook 2017-2018. Boeing Pilot Outlook. <https://www.boeing.com/commercial/market/pilot-technician-outlook/2017-pilot-outlook/>