



A Formula for Engaging Youths in Aviation

Instructors should be on the front lines



I was the fortunate recipient of the NAFI/King Schools scholarship that was awarded at Sun 'n Fun 2017. Receiving the scholarship made me reflect on many things, including the need to grow the pilot population and the youths that I serve: how can more youths be channeled into the pilot community?

During the SnF Saturday night air show there was a toddler next to me. He was so excited, yelling “airplane, airplane” and pointing skyward. The sheer delight that this little guy showed for airplanes made me smile but also wonder what his parents would do to continue to ignite that avia-

tion spark in his soul. Would they move him on to some other interest because an air show is nothing more than a fun vacation activity? Would they channel his energy into pursuing some other “professional career”? Would they even recognize that his enthusiasm for airplanes could be the start of his lifelong career in aviation?

As flight instructors, we encounter youths of all ages who are wide-eyed and excited about learning to fly. Most of the time, the people we encounter are of licensing age or close to it. Most of the people we encounter have already thought about flying, have had an interest in airplanes or have come to us for some



By Terry L. Carbonell

sort of flight experience. But what about others who have never thought about an aviation career?

We have all probably at one time or another participated in career days, Boy or Girl Scouts days, Young Eagles flights or other single-day or part-day events. We have seen youths wide-eyed at their first flight experiences. But what is our conversion rate from first aviation introduction to flight student? Is a single experience enough for the flight bug to bite? While I am certain that the bug will bite some, my concern has always been that a single experience for many youths will get lost in the myriad experiences and opportunities that most are exposed to these days.

In law school, I learned that to make an impact on jurors you have to tell them what you are going to say, say it, then tell them what you said. The same theory applies to aviation education: We have to tell youths that aviation is a great career; then educate youths on the benefits and opportunities of an aviation career; then engage them in long-term aviation activities to reinforce the advantages of an aviation career.

So how does this all translate into cultivating students? What steps do you need to take?

First: Identify a youth group with whom you will work. There are many groups out there including the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, YMCA youth groups, church youth

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groups, Youth Challenge Academy, Boys & Girls Clubs, and local junior and senior high schools. Talk to the leaders of these various organizations and find someone who is interested in aviation or at the very least interested in offering young people a new and different program. It is best to find someone willing to own the program along with you; to be your primary contact and your primary herder of youths.

I have successfully worked with high schools in forming an after-school aviation club with a teacher or other administrator who is a pilot or just interested in creative STEM learning opportunities.

Second: Create a partnership with the organization you choose. They have the youths; you have the expertise. Consider adding local aviation business partners, FBOs, other aviation organizations and your personal network of aviation friends. Gather “stuff” to make aviation goodie bags to hand out at your first meeting. Companies often have promotional overruns or misprinted products that they are willing to donate to a worthy cause. The goodie bags that I deliver have all sorts of tchotchkes that are both aviation and non-aviation related (cozies, water bottles, fans, pens, penlights, paper pads, aviation career information, key rings, etc.). Some of my aviation partners/suppliers include AOPA — aviation career information; NACTA — excellent youth book on air traffic control; Continental Motors — coloring book about airplanes and pilots; state DOT — state aviation charts and books.

Third: Find or create a program tailored to your youths. Most of the time with those aged 10-16 you will be creating a pre-aviation or pre-flight training program. The *Youth and Aviation Adventure Guide* developed by Aviation Adventures is a workbook designed to provide information and develop skills that youths need to be prepared to enter into a flight-training program. Modules include geography, the phonetic alphabet and communications, time and time zones, basics of flight, aviation history, navigation and the compass, maps and charts, airports and airspace, types of aircraft, weather and aviation careers.

Depending on the group, you may not need to focus on some of the workbook activities. For example: Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts often learn how to use a compass as part of their merit badge programs. Select the topics that you will teach and develop a timeline. When working with the Boys & Girls Clubs, I typically set a six-month program where the youths work with the in-house staff to learn workbook concepts. I work with the staff to train them and provide books and activities for them. Then I create a full Saturday event with games and other fun activities once per month where they apply what they have learned throughout the month. The Saturday events include aviation games, navigation scavenger hunts, learning to fly RC airplanes, “flying the pattern” airport exercise, relay races, aviation movies, making and flying paper airplanes, visits to air shows or aviation museums, and career day. The program ends with first flights where each young person gets to fly in a small GA aircraft.

There are many other resources available on the internet: FAA, NASA, Weather Wiz Kids, state DOT sites, AOPA, PBS and the like. Look around and see what interests you because if you are excited, your enthusiasm will be infectious.

Your program can run any length and meet as often as you desire, but I recommend at least once per month where you directly interact with the youths. Other options are a vacation aviation camp, weekly after-school aviation club or anything that fits your schedule. The important thing is to commit and show up full of enthusiasm for aviation.

Not everyone you encounter will be interested in flying: Some may find great interest in other aviation careers. Make sure that youths know that *every* aviation career is an option, and that no matter what they are interested in, there is an aviation career that encompasses their interests. Make sure that youths know that flight training is within reach. Talk about the opportunities for flight-training scholarships and work partnerships with FBOs and flight schools to earn flight-training credit. Consider donating your CFI time to youths who participate in your program.

We, as flight instructors, are on the front line in the battle to interest youths in entering the aviation field. While not all will become pilots, the worst thing you will do is provide encouragement and hope to youths. You will demonstrate that they can have a fulfilling career in their chosen aviation discipline. You will open their eyes to new and different STEM concepts. You will inspire youths to succeed. You will take away far more from the program than you can ever imagine possible in self-satisfaction and pride for the accomplishments of the youths you have served.

There is no short-term solution to growing our aviation industry and pilot population. But we, as CFIs, must plant the seeds well in advance of harvest to cultivate the next generation of pilots. 🇺🇸

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