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STARBASE Helps Build Future Aviation Workforce in Northland

It says something about the success of your industry — or perhaps the extent of the skills gap — when you're trying to recruit people a full decade before they'll enter the workforce.

In the past 10 years, aviation has added more than a thousand jobs to the Twin Ports economy. If that feat is to be repeated or even outdone in the next 10 years, then there will need to be a lot more people capable of filling those jobs.

That's why Duluth fifth-graders are now playing with robots and 3D printers at the 148th Fighter Wing every day. That, and because it sounds like a lot of fun.

"It shows a whole different side of those STEM skills and hopefully sparks that interest for them to continue on," said Charity Rupp, director of Starbase Duluth. "In a place where some kids, especially females, may be afraid to engage — 'math isn't cool,' or 'science isn't cool' — this puts it into perspective."

Getting local kids in a career pipeline before they graduate — and, as the trend goes, leave town — has been a big focus for the industry locally, along with boosting training for those seeking it.

"The Starbase program is an exciting and valuable opportunity for members of our community that bridges current aerospace-focused education courses with the growth in the industry," said Sue Boudrie, chair of the local Northern Aero Alliance.

State data show there were at least 200 high-paying openings in aviation and related fields in the region for the first half of the year, and firms like AAR Corp. and Cirrus are sparing no expense recruiting for growth in Duluth.

So where are the workers? There are plenty of potential candidates among working-age residents who don't have the right training (that's the skills gap), and there also are fewer unemployed people in the region than there have been in years. Many of the industry's future workers, then, are in high school, middle school and elementary school, where the opportunities to learn about such careers are on the rise.

Every week a different fifth-grade class is bused to the Air National Guard base for an

immersive experience in science, technology, engineering and math.

"Students don't look at it in the same way when they're there," Rupp said. "And as much as students are learning new processes, teachers might learn new approaches as well."

Starbase, a national program largely paid for by the Department of Defense, has long eyed a second Minnesota location outside the Twin Cities and first brought the classes to Duluth this spring before making it a permanent offering this fall.

"Duluth made the most sense for a lot of reasons," Rupp said.

And while the Duluth school district is the first to take part in Starbase, Rupp hopes to get Proctor, Hermantown and other schools sending their fifth-graders to the base in the future. The only cost to schools is busing, which some local firms have offered to help offset.

"My personal passion is hopefully to deliver this to some of the more rural school districts, because their access to resources can be more limited," Rupp said.

Any publicity is good publicity for aviation and STEM careers as a whole, especially as the Department of Employment and Economic Development is showing a statewide shortage of workers for skilled positions.

"What we've been working toward is having more of an engaged process with the community, and this is a great opportunity for the kids themselves," said Stacey LaCoursiere, public affairs officer for the Minnesota Air National Guard. "They get to see the direct role of the STEM field and how it plays into the military and these other fields."

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