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A new aerospace engineering program in the Rockdale County Public Schools system could be the launching pad to many future careers in the aviation industry.

The new specialty program at Conyers Middle School will teach more than 100 students about different positions available in the aviation industry and raise awareness that there's a need to fill the positions, says Conyers Middle School Assistant Principal Anterro Graham, the program's project leader.

CMS had a long history with NASA as a NASA Explorer School, so as schools were shaping their specialty programs, an Aerospace Engineering focus for CMS, along with engineering focuses, was a natural fit.

CMS will have about 30 seats per grade for students not in CMS's district and about 60 to 70 spaces reserved for students zoned to go to CMS when it officially launches at the beginning of the next school year. The school is also completing a new 15,000 square foot wing, funded with more than \$6.8 million from the penny-sales tax for education, that will give additional classrooms, computer labs, manufacturing and design labs, and more. There are also plans for a possible hangar and video studio space in the back in the future.

"I think it's an opportunity to give these kids a chance to look at the world with a different lens," he said. "We're looking at creating a new curriculum that's truly project based and truly blending our core teachers and elective teachers together so our kids have a different learning environment."

Graham, who has background experience as a pilot for the U.S. Air Force, mechanical engineer and computer science engineer, envisions this program being a career pathway for students into different positions, like air traffic controller, pilots, drone pilots, mechanics and others, in the industry, which is losing thousands of jobs annually due to retirement, says Graham.

The plan is to get Rockdale County High School and Rockdale Career Academy involved to have students transition from CMS into a new phase of the program when they get to the high school level.

"We want to create a pathway for our students," he said. "I want to be able to tell parents of sixth graders if your child does this and does that then they could be successful in this field."

The school also has a partnership in place with The Covington Municipal Airport that will allow students to get a first-person view of the equipment used for aviation as well as see the day-to-day operations of an airport.

Airport Manager Vincent Passariello says that the school and students will have a 3,000-square-foot facility to use at their disposal. In there, students will be shown and can handle some of the parts used on a daily basis.

He says getting kids to see these types of things at an early age will help really help them get a sense of the business and spark interest.

“Many students at this age aren’t exposed to these types of industries,” said Passariello. “This is to promote interest in the area.”

Passariello adds that as the program progresses, student may be able to do internships at the airport while still in high school. These internships through the program could save a student time and money on higher education costs.

“I can very well see a path where, maybe with an extra two years of schooling, right out high school, (a student) can get a job in the field,” he said. “It’ll make a big difference.

Working with the Covington airport will also allow the school to become an official Civil Air Patrol Squadron, an auxiliary branch of the U.S. Air Force. Graham says that the school has already received a memorandum of understanding from the Civil Air Patrol to start a squadron.

The program has seemed to garner interest of the parents of the community already. At an open house on Dec. 16, nearly 150 people showed up to learn more about the program and aviation.

Delta Airlines, another partner of the program, had about six professionals from the industry come to the open house to talk to the crowd. The Delta experts were able to give students and parents an outlook on the jobs needed for the aviation industry as far out as the year 2025.

There was also a panel discussion towards the end of the event where people were able to ask industry experts their own question.

“There was an 11 year old that came to the microphone and asked ‘What kind of CO2 emissions are coming from the airplanes?’ Stop the madness! To have an 11 year old ask that, that’s what we want,” Graham said.

The school is also looking to partner with other businesses and community organizations. Graham says that this program can help aviation industry, but the skills that will be taught can be translated into other jobs and businesses as well.

“We really need industry in here with us,” said Graham, mentioning Baxter International in Newton County as another potential business partner for the program.

On top of finding more partnerships within the community, Graham is also looking for grants for the program to help fund new equipment for the program.

“Our mission for 2015-16 is to get collaboration going,” he said. “We’re applying for grants. It’s all about funds. You get the funds, it happens in 2015-16.”