AVIATION MAINTENANCE PROGRAM TO PROVIDE SKILLED WORKERS

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The inner workings of aircraft have always fascinated Michael Cook. So much so, the 18-year-old wants to work on airplanes for a living.

The Booker T. Washington High senior wants to become one of the first graduates of George Stone Technical Center's new aviation maintenance program scheduled to start in January. Cook plans to enroll in classes next fall and graduate in a few years with airframe and power plant certifications that can guarantee him a job starting at $15 to $18 per hour.

Aviation maintenance technicians perform aircraft inspections required by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). They also service, maintain, troubleshoot and repair aircraft engines, auxiliary power units, propellers, rotor systems, power train systems, and associated airframe and systems-specific electrical components.

In the U.S., there are nearly 117,000 aircraft mechanics and service technicians who earn an average of $58,850 a year, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Florida has the third-highest number of aviation mechanics and service technicians in the U.S. – 10,360 – who earn $56,550 a year, the BLS reported.

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And with VT Mobile Aerospace Engineering expected to bring 300 new jobs with an average annual pay of $41,000 to Pensacola in 2017, there is a need for the highly-skilled workers in Northwest Florida. The company, a subsidiary of Singapore Technologies Engineering Ltd., will perform repair and maintenance of heavy-transport category aircraft, like passenger airliners and cargo planes.

Michael already knows of the demand for qualified technicians.

"My uncle has worked in the field for 30-plus years. He's been all over the world and now works in Japan. He's made a really good living," said Michael, who is enrolled in Washington High's Aviation Maintenance Career Academy. The career academy will give him a head start because the Escambia County School District and George Stone have an articulation agreement where high schoolers can earn clock hours toward certification. When Michael enrolls in the technical center next fall, he already will have earned 150 clock hours.

Bill Davis, who along with Kyle Cook are George Stone's aviation maintenance instructors, said a majority of the current workers are facing retirement in the next 10 years.

"The average age of someone working in the field is 54, so there's not only a high need for these trained in aviation maintenance workers in the U.S. but worldwide as well," he said.

Waiting list for classes

So far, more than 100 people are on a waiting list for the January classes. However, only 50 students will be accepted. The FAA limits classes to 25 students per instructor.

In order to qualify for the program, students must take and pass the TABE exam.

"Students enrolled in the program are required to meet the basic skills level – a 10th-grade threshold for reading, math, language," said Stephen A. Brooks, George Stone's assistant principal. "But the program can appeal to everyone – from those fresh out of high school to those 62 or older or even former military. There is no limit on the demographics."

The program initially will train students on airframe, which focuses on the airplane's mechanical structure – fuselage, wings, some electrical systems, etc. In fall 2016, the technical center will offer the power plant training where students will learn to work on engines, turbines, etc.

To earn an airframe certification, students must complete 400 clock hours of general study and 1,000 clock hours of training. Power plant certification requires an additional 650 clock hours. Tuition for the program is $2.89 per clock hour or $4,046 for the general study and airframe and $1,878.50 for power plant training. Students, however, are required to purchase tools, books and other supplies.

"The airframe component can be completed in about a year and a half, with the power plant taking another six months or so. ... And after a couple of years, an aviation maintenance technician can earn $25 to $30 an hour," Cook added.

Students who enroll in January must be veterans or pay their own tuition. The program will not be certified for Pell grant funding, until after FAA approval. An FAA inspection is scheduled for Thursday.

Students also will train on two donated airplanes – a Piper Cherokee from Ferguson Field and a

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T39 from the U.S. Navy. A Georgia man also donated a Lancair Air Legacy kit plane.

The program becoming a reality was a joint effort between the school district, City of Pensacola, FloridaWest Economic Development Alliance, Pensacola Chamber of Commerce and other entities.

The school district has already invested heavily into the program. Michelle Taylor, director of workforce education for the school district, said $500,000 in targeted funds and other workforce monies were used to establish the airframe training.

"We estimate approximately $1 million will be invested for both the airframe mechanic and power plant mechanic programs. Aviation maintenance education is particularly expensive because of the tools needed to instruct students," she explained. "For instance, if you're teaching students about jet engines, you must purchase jet engines and they cost upwards of $100,000 each."

The school district also spent $30,000 for computers for the Washington Career Academy where 22 ninth- through 12th-graders are enrolled. The academy started this year, the students were recruited during the 2014-15 school year.

"Our challenges are to continue to invest at the high school level and acquire equipment for students to get that hands-on exposure so they can understand what the work is really like," she said, adding the Career Academy is using an online curriculum.

"But the curriculum needs to be more than that so we are making plans to acquire actual tools. We know the best way to engage high school students in technical education is to put the tools in their hands, and have them practice and perform the task."

Taylor added VTMAE also wanted assurance there would be skilled workers to fill the new positions.

"VTMAE (representatives) sat down with school district employees and FloridaWest representatives and asked if we were able to make the commitment to provide training that would serve as a talent pipeline for them," she said. "And we said 'Yes,' because we know that bringing these skilled high-wage jobs to the area will benefit our students and our K-12 parents.

"Economic and workforce development work hand-in-hand to contribute to community development, and we know that a higher socioeconomic status correlates with higher student achievement."

Washington High School teacher, Kyle Cook, left, teaches students, Christian Shiver, center, and Nicholas Stinson, right, how to take precision measurements using precision tools during aviation maintenance class Monday morning Nov. 9, 2015. *(Photo: Tony Giberson/tgiberson@pnj.com)*

The deal to bring VTMAE here included $8 million in incentives from the city of Pensacola and $11.6 million from the Florida Department of Transportation. Construction is scheduled to begin in January on a $37 million VTMAE facility - a 160,000-square-foot building that will expand the company's presence on the Gulf Coast. The company's Mobile, Alabama, operation opened in 1991 and currently employs about 1,500 workers.

Longterm diversity

Scott Luth, CEO of FloridaWest Economic Development Alliance, described the aviation maintenance program as an educational investment that will serve as a catalyst for private-sector

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investment for the region. In addition to VTMAE's expansion, he noted there several other companies that need skilled aviation maintenance workers.

"We have a good concentration of existing companies that support aircraft maintenance and repair," he said, listing Heliworks and Marianna Air Motor in Pensacola and L-3 Avionics System in Tallahassee. "....Having an educated workforce will be instrumental to the long-term diversity of our economy."

Luth said the aviation maintenance program was the result of a gap analysis performed three years ago that looked at targeted industries for Northwest Florida.

"An airframe and power plant training program was one of those needs that resulted from that analysis," he said. "....Overall we're very fortunate to have an educational partner that is willing to make the investment to meet the needs of our private sector."

Taylor said the school district is dedicated to helping improve the local economy.

"Workforce education is driven by the economic needs of the community so we are committed to always providing the best possible opportunities for our students for future employment. We know when we bring a new business to the community, it will lift the standard of living for those employed in these high-wage high-skills jobs," she said.

By the numbers

117,000

Estimated number of aircraft mechanics and service technicians in the U.S.

$58,850

Average annual starting salary of aircraft mechanics and service technicians.

1,400 hours

Time required to earn an airframe certification.

650 hours

Additional time required to earn power plant certification.

15 NOVEMBER 2015

SOURCE: PNJ
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