

# HORIZONS

Views and Perspectives from  
WEST MICHIGAN  
AVIATION ACADEMY

Summer 2020

## Pivoting to Embrace the Next 10 Years

Dick DeVos started WMAA in 2010 because he had a passion for aviation and wanted to provide a unique kind of education. In many ways, this school was an experiment.

Ten years in, we know there is a demand for this kind of education. The demand is certainly related to our unique aviation curriculum. But it goes far beyond aviation. We have learned some important lessons over our first decade. Those lessons are shaping us as we pivot towards the future.

**1** We have developed a hands-on methodology for intellectually stimulating, content-rich learning. Much of that focus was initially centered on aviation because we knew there was a talent shortage. A bit to our surprise, we have found that students crave this kind of experience in other under-supplied fields, such as biomedical engineering and computer science.

**2** Students thrive in a school that expands their intellectual and vocational horizons. Even those students who don't intend to pursue an aviation career are stimulated by the exposure and the experiences they receive at WMAA. Biomedical teacher Kaitlin Peterson saw this in a student who put his CAD skills to the test in order to solve a workplace issue. "It's cool to see him take the skills he's learning and use them to be a leader and an innovator."

**3** Students embrace a culture in which they learn and practice self-discipline, self-motivation and resilience...skills that will serve them for life. As one parent noted on a survey, "Our students are waging a battle between internal and external motivation. We're pleased that, on most days, internal motivation is winning."

**4** The business community values and wants to invest in a school that helps fill the essential skills pipeline. We look forward to increasing our partnerships with local and national businesses in many STEM fields.

**5** Our staff and leadership team finds fulfillment in helping students discover their true talent. As teacher Andrew Lewis points out, "Teachers get into teaching for the kids. We all love our subject areas, but we're here for the kids."

CEO Nicole Gasper's first year at WMAA has been one for the record books! She says, "We continue to provide education that is aligned to our mission, vision and values. As leaders, we prepare for the unexpected, as it forces us to rapidly innovate and improve. Who knew that we could transition to complete remote instruction in a matter of weeks? This fall, we'll leverage whatever combination of learning methods fits the current need so that our students continue to thrive."

"We're harvesting the culture we've curated over the last 10 years. What we have is tremendous!"

Eric Fey, teacher



CEO Nicole Gasper



# “What Now?” and “What Next?”



*There’s no denying that COVID-19 threw a curve ball into the spring semester. Following are some of the top questions our donors have been asking us about the end of this school year, about our students, and about the future.*

**Q** How did WMAA decide to proceed this spring and what did you do?

**A** As you can imagine, there were not a lot of models available for us to follow! Several sources of input informed our direction. As a public charter school, we followed State of Michigan guidelines. We also sought input from our teaching staff. What would be best for students, and what would help keep them engaged in learning?

Ultimately, we chose to make an unbudgeted investment in a robust online learning system. We began online instruction on April 20, one week before the State deadline. Unlike most schools, we maintained our grading system at the strong encouragement of our teachers, while giving them the ability to extend grace when needed. Against all odds, our system worked phenomenally well. “Students picked up on our leadership,” notes teacher Eric Fey. “People look for a leader in times of crisis. WMAA has done a good job being a leader for these kids.”

## Online Learning Participation April 20 – June 4

-  552 students participated each week
-  Students predominantly maintained their overall grade performance through the 4th quarter



**Q** What’s happening with aviation?

**A** The world economy did not have enough pilots, engineers, and other STEM professionals before COVID-19. There will still be demand for these skills when the pandemic ends. WMAA continues to be essential and relevant.

That being said, we obviously had to make some adjustments this year. Students seeking a private pilot license would typically complete their flight instruction hours prior to graduation. That didn’t happen, but we’re not leaving these kids behind. Instead, our aviation staff will work this summer and get them in the air. We will honor our commitment to students who were on track to earn a private pilot’s license.

But we’re not stopping there. Thanks to generous support from the Frey Foundation, we will begin offering need-based aviation scholarships next fall. This will reduce the financial barriers that might keep some students from an aviation career.

## Aviation Continues to Grow

-  Class of 2020 students will resume flight training in June and complete private pilot license as alumni this summer.
-  Fall Student Registrations: 25 for Flight Class, 40+ for Build a Plane, and 20 for Unmanned Aerial Systems Ground School





## Q What have we learned from this experience?

A While none of us would ever wish for a repeat of this pandemic experience, there are some important lessons to be learned.

First, and perhaps most surprising, is that many students do well with remote learning. Many parents have repeatedly said things like, “My son has found success in working at his own pace and being able to work distraction-free.” Yes, they missed their friends and the camaraderie of school, but certain aspects were positive for many students.

Second, our teachers are completely committed to their students’ success. Teacher Natalie Burrow says, “We had to relearn how to do the craft of teaching. I’ve been constantly revising how I give my materials to the students almost every lesson. I am a new teacher after six years of experience.”

Third, while some subjects certainly translate to an online learning system better than others do, students can still learn. In fact, they want to learn! Caitlin Rykse shares a specific example from her English 12 class. “I had three students who, of their own volition, reached out and said, ‘We really miss class. We want to keep doing Socratic seminars. Can you give us some material?’ These three made me realize that students want to keep learning.”

And finally, we’ve observed firsthand that culture matters. We hold students accountable. We teach them to behave like ladies and gentlemen, to work hard and persevere. And that formative work is paying off. Teachers have noticed, but so have parents like this one, who said, “I have been more than impressed with how my child has taken on the responsibility of the online learning.”

## Q What will happen next fall?

A This is an excellent question that we are still working to answer. The State will help set our direction, and they’re not ready to answer, either. Here’s what we do know: WMAA will continue to offer excellent education. We will be ready to leverage live and/or remote learning in whatever combination fits best.

## Q How can I make a difference?

A **We need you to invest in quality education.** State funding for next year is, understandably, uncertain. We’re looking at alternatives to our fall Breakfast, and we have had to postpone our Gala until well into next year. This event provides more than 50 percent of the discretionary income we invest in enriching student experiences. We know that our unique educational model resonates with students and parents alike. Please make a gift (online or via the enclosed envelope) that will propel our students forward into the future!

**Thank you for your support!**



*“The WMAA teachers are absolutely fantastic. Their passion for their subjects makes classes unique and inspiring. They want you to love it the way they love it. That’s different from any other school I’ve ever attended.”*

(Kat Hogan, student)





WEST MICHIGAN  
**AVIATION ACADEMY**  
FOUNDATION

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## Please Invest in Quality Education

Our vision is to provide high-quality education, with a focus on under-supplied career fields, so students can explore and grow. We continue to invest in new classes, equipment and experiences that align with our mission to ignite a passion for lifelong learning.

We have an outstanding team of dedicated teachers, and a student body that's learning to thrive in an uncertain environment. Now, more than ever, your gift matters. *Please make a gift by July 30* to help us maintain the excellent programs and opportunities we provide to our students.

Northern Jet's business relies on pilots and technicians. For that reason, they are generously rebating to WMAA *1.5% of any Private Advantage Card purchases by our supporters through September 30, 2020*. The flight hours you purchase through this card can be used for business or personal travel anywhere in North America. When you make this investment, you'll benefit WMAA students while also saving money. Just let Northern Jet know you're a WMAA supporter when you call (616) 336-4800 to make your purchase. (Learn more at [northernjet.net](http://northernjet.net))

## Welcome!

The WMAA Foundation Board is pleased to welcome two new members. Peggy Koenigsknecht and Steve Johns will officially start their terms in July. You can learn more about them on our website.

### WMAA Foundation Contact Information

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