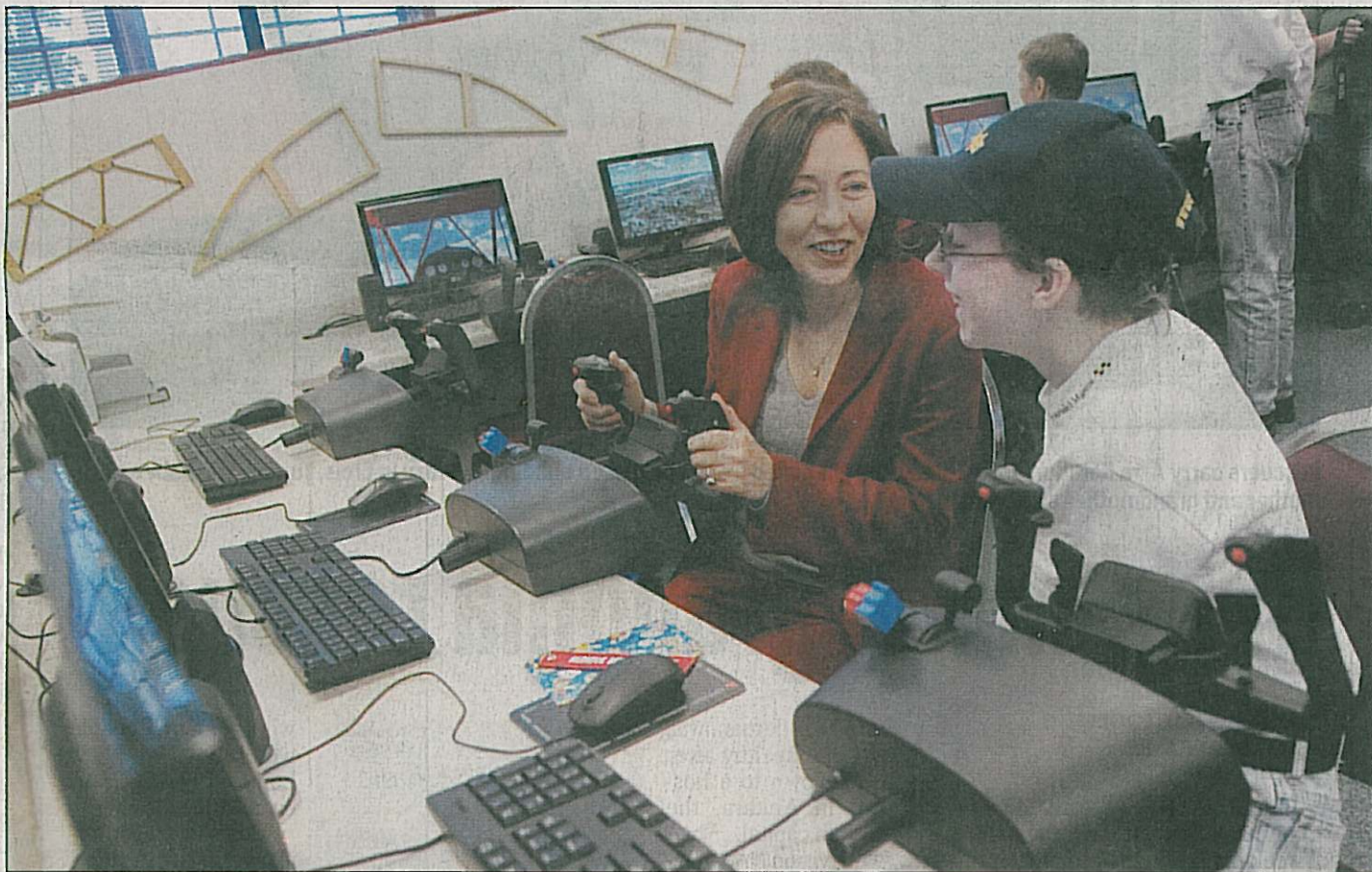


Senator: Don't leave aerospace up in air



MATTHEW GINN for The Columbian

Pearson Air Museum volunteer Kaya Galbraith, 13, guides U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., on a simulated flight Tuesday from Portland International Airport to Troutdale, Ore. Cantwell visited the Vancouver museum for a discussion on how to maintain U.S. competitiveness in aerospace manufacturing.

Did you know?

■ The aerospace industry in Washington employs 83,700 people, more than a sixth of the nation's aerospace workers.

Cantwell seeks ways to draw students to field vital to state

By TOM VOGT
Columbian staff writer

Apprenticeship programs could help attract the state's next generation of aerospace employees.

Establishing pathways between the school system and the aviation industry could provide routes to careers.

And real-world exposures and career explorations could spark an interest in aerospace among even younger students.

Those were among some of the talking points Tuesday morning when U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., hosted a roundtable discussion at Pearson Air Museum in Vancouver.

Cantwell met with representatives of regional aerospace employers and science educators on ways to maintain the nation's competitiveness in aerospace manufacturing.

The aerospace industry in

Washington employs 83,700 people, representing more than one-sixth of all aerospace workers in the nation. However, a big share of them soon will be — or already are — eligible to retire.

"Employers are looking on their shop floors and seeing a lot of gray hair," said Laura Hopkins, with the Aerospace Joint Apprenticeship Committee.

Cantwell:

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There are 18 aerospace or aerospace-related companies in Clark County, employing more than 1,000 workers.

Cantwell and Hopkins got some local perspective Tuesday from Mary Margaret Evans, an executive with Insitu, a Bingen-based unmanned aerial vehicle company and Boeing subsidiary; Laureano Mier, manager of the Pearson Air Museum; and Anne Kennedy, with Educational Service District 112.

Following the roundtable, teenagers who have taken part in Pearson Air Museum's aviation summer camps helped Cantwell and others on the panel navigate local airspace on flight simulators.

"It was fun. She got the hang of it pretty well," said 13-year-old Kaya Galbraith, who oversaw Cantwell's simulated flight in a Piper J-3 Cub.

"I had good coaching," Cantwell said, although the senator acknowledged, "I had a bumpy landing."

In a more detailed debriefing, flight coach Galbraith explained: "She accidentally tipped it on its nose."

The state's aerospace industry has to be wary of a similar fate, the panelists said during the roundtable discussion.

Washington — particularly the Seattle area — still is seen as the world's industrial leader. However, Cantwell said, "Our competitiveness is at stake."

A big part of the challenge consists of building a 21st-century workforce, which will require a major investment in education and skills training. It's not just replacing retiring workers: The

state's aerospace employers also must have workers who can produce the next generation of aircraft, using the newest technologies and the latest in composites that went into the Boeing 787.

Demand also is expected to increase, with Boeing projecting its customers will want 33,000 commercial aircraft over the next 20 years.

Evans, vice president of corporate operations for Insitu, said the UAV manufacturer hires from 80 to 100 new employees a year, from shop-floor fabricators to — yes — rocket scientists.

In its Gorge communities, Insitu offers job-shadow opportunities for middle-schoolers. Insitu continues up through the education system with internships for 60 college students and grad students — and then hires 10 of them a year.

At ESD 112 and Washington State University Vancouver, Kennedy works

with science, technology, engineering and math, or STEM, programs in 30 Southwest Washington school districts.

We have to get really good at creating pathways so companies and schools can work together, Kennedy said.

"Kids often want a reason to learn, and they can find that in the real world," Kennedy said.

Pearson Air Museum, the site of the discussion, also can play a role, said Mier.

"It's a place where students can come on field trips, where Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts can work on their aviation badges," said Mier, who also is education programs coordinator at the air museum.

Apprenticeship programs can provide a direct path to a career, Hopkins said. But getting younger people in the workplace quickly, next to industry veterans, also can forestall a looming brain drain. When the old-timers clock out for

the last time, they will take invaluable experience with them.

"Our goal is to capture that knowledge before they retire," said Hopkins, who is an aircraft mechanic as well as a pilot. "We have to get (knowledge) transferred before we lose it."

Clark College will be tapping into that process, said Genevieve Howard, dean of workforce, career and technical education.

"We are looking to align our second-year machining program with apprenticeship standards," said Howard, who was in the audience. "We've had two interns at a Boeing production site in Portland. Hopefully, we can build on that with more apprentices, too."

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