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'Classroom in the Sky' project by Florida pilot includes key Wichita stop

By Molly McMillin
The Wichita Eagle

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As a student in Miami, Barrington Irving was a high school football standout.

But he gave up a football scholarship to the University of Florida to pursue a dream in aviation, an interest developed from a chance meeting with a United Airlines captain who asked him if he ever thought about being a pilot.

Irving, who had never met an airline pilot, told him he wasn't smart enough to fly an airplane.

The next day the pilot took him out to the Boeing 777 he flew and sat him in the cockpit.

He was hooked.

At 23, Irving became the youngest person to fly around the world solo – with the goal of inspiring young people.

Now 29, and the founder of nonprofit Experience Aviation, Irving plans to fly to seven continents streaming live lessons from the cockpit and conducting dozens of expeditions to bring hands-on learning to students.

Dubbed "Classroom in the Sky," the project is a way to encourage students to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering and math.

"What education is missing is engagement," he said. "That's why kids are bored in math and science. We have more than enough books. We have more than enough software."

Students need help making the connection between the books and real life, he said.

For the past three weeks, Irving has been in Wichita at FlightSafety in a 17-day course where he is learning to fly the Hawker 400 XPr and earn his type rating. He is planning to take his check-ride this weekend.

Beechcraft is donating the plane for use as a flying classroom and a lead sponsor of the project.

Flying a jet is a big jump from the single-engine Columbia 400 Irving flew around the world.

It's much more complex.

"Everything happens faster," Irving said. "It feels like going from a (Cessna) 172 to a space

Photos

« 1 of 1 »



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Barrington Irving, founder of Experience Aviation, has been spending time at FlightSafety for training in a Beech 400 business jet. Irving plans to fly to seven continents as part of his "Classroom in the Sky" project bringing hands-on experience to students on the ground. (Aug. 2, 2013)

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shuttle.”

Learning to fly the Hawker 400 XPr is a crucial stage of bringing the Flying Classroom to fruition.

The trip is planned for next year.

Irving is not an educator by trade. He majored in aeronautical science at Florida Memorial University.

He’s spent the past several years working with middle school and high school students in after-school and summer programs.

Students have tackled numerous projects, including building an airplane from scratch and a car that’s faster than a Ferrari. Next is a hovercraft.

“We’ve had tremendous success with our kids,” Irving said. Some have gone on to pursue careers in aviation and engineering, he said.

With the Classroom in the Sky project, he hopes to spur that kind of interest with many more students.

Irving has been working on the educational content of the program and how to deliver that content to the classroom.

He’s received lots of interest from school districts around the country who want to get involved.

National Geographic has also stepped up its involvement. (Last year, National Geographic named Irving an “Emerging Explorer.”)

The project will span three years. In the first phase, Irving and a co-pilot will fly in North America, Asia and Australia. The next phase will likely take them through Europe and Africa. The third phase will include South America, Central America and Antarctica.

About 80 percent of the stops have been selected. Some of the stops include:

- A stop in Okinawa, Japan, where life expectancy is longer than most other places in the world;
- Stops in Asia to explore how business aviation can revolutionize countries;
- Australian locations that aim to instruct about the balance of an ecosystem;
- A stop in the Philippines to study the movement of jellyfish at Jellyfish Lake. Scientists are studying the propulsion of jellyfish and how it might be replicated mechanically.

Students will be able to watch the flights and the preparation that goes into them, see what goes into flying into various places in the world and the collection of data.

The expeditions will look at what’s going on in the air, on the ground and in the ocean, Irving said. Experience Aviation has raised \$1.5 million of the \$5 million needed to fly to all the continents.

“My goal is to tackle complex math and science subjects that kids are bored with in the classroom, making it fun and interesting,” Irving said. “This is a great industry. We don’t have many students wanting to become pilots and engineers.”

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