



# “WE’RE MAKING SOME MAGIC HERE”

## HOW THE SOUTH ALLEGHENY SCHOOL DISTRICT TOOK FLIGHT

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“The best teacher in the world,” said Fred Rogers, “is the one who loves what he or she does, and just loves it in front of you.”

For Tim Rishel, a math teacher in the South Allegheny School District, the best teacher in the world was his father: a private pilot who occasionally brought Rishel along.

“Dad loved flying. He loved everything about it,” Rishel recalls. But while chartered flights were one thing, flying for fun was an extravagance — a kind of magic the family couldn’t afford. “Dad always wanted to fly more than he was able. It was just so expensive, and I kind of got the vibe that for me, being a pilot wasn’t an attainable thing.”

So Rishel forged a path of his own, teaching math at South Allegheny’s Middle/Senior High School. Flying’s allure, however, never quite wore off, and when COVID-19 brought the world to a halt, “I suddenly had all this time on my hands,” he says. “I thought, ‘If I don’t do this now, then I’m never going to do it.’”

Working with a private flight instructor, Rishel made his childhood dream come true, earning his pilot’s license in 2021. As he studied, he says, he discovered something interesting: an aviation curriculum for high school students.

Superintendent David McDonald remembers when Rishel brought it to school. “I could see the passion just overflowing from him,” he says. “It was so cool to me that [Rishel] had accomplished something he’d always wanted to do. And I thought, ‘How many kids in our district have dreamed of something similar? What if we gave them the same opportunity?’”

South Allegheny’s high school aviation course was born.

The district’s willingness to aim for the sky led it to join the Western Pennsylvania Learning 2025 Alliance, a regional cohort of school districts working together — and with peers across the country — to create student-centered, equity-focused, future-driven schools that prepare every learner for tomorrow. Led by local superintendents and AASA, The School Superintendents Association, the Alliance convenes

for workshops, networking, and professional development that helps districts like South Allegheny do what they do best: provide pathways for every student to pursue the passions that light them up.

“It’s been a great opportunity,” McDonald explains. “Not only is it invaluable for our staff to work with other districts and see the initiatives taking place [in Western Pennsylvania], it’s also a chance to show off what we’re doing and communicate what’s happening in South Allegheny.”

It’s a chance that districts like his don’t always get. In a region of haves and have-nots, “South Allegheny is a have-not,” says McDonald, noting that more than 70 percent of the district’s students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

At the same time, however, “We’re proving that our kids can get there from here. I can’t tell you how many people come up to us [at Alliance events] and say, ‘Man, you guys are doing some cool things there.’ We’re really proud of that.”

That pride extends far beyond the district’s aviation course. With an

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influx of pandemic funding and support from the Alliance, South Allegheny has transformed itself, offering computers for every student and hotspots for families without home internet service. (“We had a five-year technology plan,” McDonald says. “We did it in three months.”)

The district has redesigned its library as a media center; installed a recording studio; and even launched a full-blown broadcast production program, where students make live announcements and create content for their stadium’s video screens. Even students who aren’t on South Allegheny’s football or soccer teams now bring their families along to the games, showing parents and siblings the content they’ve created at school.

The aim, says McDonald, is to offer opportunities and resources that meet every student’s needs and provide pathways in workforce development. “You know that equity picture everyone uses, with the kids looking over the fence? Our kids are looking over the fence now.”

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Soon, they may be flying over it altogether. With a Moonshot grant from Remake Learning, Rishel’s aviation course is quickly taking shape, transforming a South Allegheny classroom into the district’s first flight simulator.

Rishel envisions students securing grants for private pilot training. But the course is about so much more than that, he says. “There are thousands of aviation jobs that don’t necessarily involve flying an airplane. If kids want to be engineers or technicians, we’ll prepare them for that, too.”

In the meantime, the simulator’s yoke, pedals, and radio stacks have supercharged students’ excitement — a feeling that increasingly pervades the South Allegheny School District.

“Nobody expected this,” McDonald says of the district’s momentum. “People are a little bit shocked. They come in and say, ‘Wow! I didn’t know this was here!’ Sometimes, it feels like we’re rubbing two pennies together. But we’re making some magic here.”

And magic, he adds, “is what our students deserve.”

