

Newport News students chat with astronauts aboard International Space Station



Denbigh High School Aviation Academy students chatted with Space Station Astronauts during a computer hookup. The students are asking questions about NASA and the space program to (Left) Rick Mastracchio and (Right) Mike Hopkins.

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NEWPORT NEWS — A hushed silence of anticipation fell over the room of 340 students at Denbigh Aviation Academy.

Then the words came through the loudspeaker: "Denbigh High School and Aviation Academy, this is Mission Control Houston. Please call station for a voice check."



"Station, this is Dr. Aaron Smith with Denbigh High School and Aviation Academy. Do you hear me?" the director of the school replied.



"Yes, I hear you loud and clear Denbigh High School," astronaut Rick Mastracchio said, joining the school for a live-chat from the International Space Station as it orbited the Earth.

The communications were made possible via a satellite downlink with the space station. Once established, Newport News Public Schools Superintendent Ashby Kilgore smiled and clapped as she sat in attendance at the school.

Students at the academy got to question Mastracchio and another astronaut, Mike Hopkins, for 20 minutes during the live-chat to learn more about the space mission and what life is like in space.

Among the questions asked by students: "What was it like to see the Earth from space?"



"Every time we look at the window, we see something more amazing and beautiful than I could ever imagine," Mastracchio said. "I think when you look at the Earth from this perspective you realize what a precious resource it is, and that we really need to take care of it."

"How much effort does it take to do tasks on the space station compared to here on Earth?" another student asked. The question was posed as Hopkins joined the chat, greeting the audience while walking onto the set upside down in comparison to Mastracchio. The students started to chuckle.

"There is no up or down, so you can put yourself in the best orientation for the job at hand," Hopkins said. The two floated the microphone back and forth between questions, showcasing the space environment.

Mastracchio told students that NASA will likely travel to Mars in the future.

"It's not a question of 'if' we'll go to Mars. I think the real question is 'when' will we go to Mars. It may take 10, 20, 30 years, but eventually we will go there," he said.

Mastracchio told students that if they were interested in the field, they should get an undergraduate degree in science or mathematics and go on to get a postgraduate degree. That message — and the event itself — is part of NASA's ongoing efforts to promote education in the disciplines of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM).

Zechariah Phipps, 14, a freshman, said afterward he was impressed by the live-chat with the astronauts. He got an opportunity to ask if the NASA astronauts lose weight in space (they do). "I thought it was amazing. It was actually really fun and intriguing to learn how they live their lives on a daily basis," he said.

Alton Hampton, an 18-year-old senior, said he thought it was great to learn about the career field. "It gives you an idea of how they do their job, what their goals are and what they require of you as an employee or an aspiring student," Hampton said.

"What a great opportunity for the students of Newport News," said Roger Hathway, director of Education for NASA Langley Research. "We're trying to help prepare students for the challenges of STEM in the future and help prepare the future workforce. This is the challenge of the nation. NASA, like so many other federal agencies, has stepped up to that challenge," Hathway said.

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