

EDUCATION

Montgomery student's STEM program takes flight in underserved schools



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Key Points

- The program uses low-cost materials to build and fly drones, making STEM education more accessible.
- FlightNJ has partnered with a nonprofit and received funding to provide drone kits and workshops to schools.
- The initiative is expanding to more schools in New Jersey and aims to reach classrooms in over 30 states.

Rahul Anand has always been fascinated by making something out of nothing. Leftover materials, scraps really, have always held his attention.

The 16-year-old Montgomery High School junior is the founder of FlightNJ, a student-led STEM education initiative focused on bringing hands-on drone, electronics, and aerospace learning to schools across the state.

I've seen what scraps can do, Anand said.

"As a child, scraps were all I played with. I carved leftover cardboard boxes into my own version of Thomas the Train," he said. "More than anything, I was fascinated with building, with creating. I'd salvage frayed wires and dead LEDs from broken toasters and discarded clocks, laying them out on my bedroom floor to assemble my first circuits. I was captivated by the act of making something

from nothing, by the quiet movement when disorder gave way to function. That resonated with me."

These creative experiences, such as when his first quadcopter lifted off, its frame held together by wooden skewers and its motor mounts cut from Bic pen caps, led to Anand knowing what he wanted to do with his life. And he wanted to share that feeling.

That was the origin of his story – a deep, rooted passion for building and creating, specifically with low-cost materials. It was during a school Youth in Government conference where Anand noticed a lot of attention given to the subjects of education disparity and bettering the situations of people in underserved communities.

"So, when I got home from the conference, I felt this was a way I can share what I love most – share my passion to the world," he said. "I could get these drone kits to underserved areas. I could work with students, teach them the basic engineering principles of the drone, teach them how to fly, and establish a connection with the science teachers at the school, so that any materials that I can get in the future I can give directly to the school."

And Anand felt he was not alone in his love for creating something out of nothing.

"I figured that this is an issue that a lot of students are passionate about, and a lot of students want to get involved in," he said. "At the Youth in Government conference, students from the underserved areas weren't present, so I really couldn't get their opinion. I thought the best way to get their opinion on this and figure out how much they like this idea was to meet them face to face."

The FlightNJ project is relatively new. Anand came up with the concept in the spring 2025 and by June had contacted 50 established nonprofit organizations

with a proposal for a drone-crafting program built entirely from low-cost materials for students in underserved New Jersey counties.

One – Marie Hubley Alcock, founder of Tomorrow's Education Network – responded. They formalized a fiscal sponsorship to bring FlightNJ to students who are often underrepresented or under-resourced.

Since then, Anand also was awarded \$400 by the Contribution Project, which is sponsored by Cornell University, to work on this project. With these funds, he has built multiple drones and prototypes and bought multiple kits for use by students attending the program.

Thus far, Anand has connected with the Fedcap School, located in West Orange, and presented his first outreach program to approximately 50 students on Dec. 22 during school hours.

"With every group, I went through the basics, electronics, and all the parts of a functional drone, in addition to actually flying the drone with the students,' Anand said. "FlightNJ was integrated with the actual science program at the Fedcap school, so FlightNJ operated in place of students' science classes."

After weeks of pitch decks, planning, and persistence, Anand walked into his first classroom at the Fedcap School. That day, 10-year-olds taught him more about scraps than he ever learned alone, Anand said.

"A boy who rarely spoke because of his speech impediment began explaining controller components. No one interrupted him," Anand said. "Each student took turns flying the drone, beaming with smiles as they marveled at the buzzing magic rippling against the painted sky. When someone smiles with such passion, knowing you played a part in their journey toward finding happiness, you cannot help but smile with them. And maybe even shed a tear."

Anand described the experience as "truly amazing." He found it meaningful and insightful, having made a "real world impact."

"I have learned that magic is not manufactured," said Anand, who is continuing to look for donations and supporters for FlightNJ. "It comes from within, from a willingness to learn, to fail by learning, and to endure the occasional splinter from fractured wood. Too many young people never discover that feeling because passion and career paths are often imposed rather than nurtured. I see it as my duty to cultivate what is too often denied."

Anand is expanding the program to another West Orange school as well as sites in Camden and Newark. He has connected with officials from the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA) to reach schools across five additional states.

"I selected resource-limited districts where I hope to train educators, and raise funds to buy and deliver materials directly," said Anand, who hopes to pursue either materials, structural or civil engineering in college. "By the end of high school, I aim to support classrooms in over 30 states. I don't consider this as something I'm required to do. It's kind of something that makes me feel good about what I'm doing. I don't see a stopping point, so definitely throughout high school and college, I plan to keep continuing doing this. I'm excited to see where this takes me."

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