

CONNECTIONS

Education News From Northeastern Connecticut

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Creating Gender Inclusive Schools that Support *All* Students

Guest Writer Erin McGurk,
Director of Talent Development, EASTCONN

Welcomed. Seen. Valued. Celebrated.

Educators across eastern Connecticut are committed to ensuring that every student in our region feels this level of support and respect at their schools every day. This year, EASTCONN has launched a number of programs designed to support educators in creating schools in which every student feels safe and welcome, including students of all orientations and genders.

EASTCONN has supported a number of districts by providing direct professional learning opportunities for both administrators and teachers. In these workshops, educators learn more about the steps schools can take to create inclusive schools for students. This training is based on two key ideas:

- All students deserve a safe, supportive school environment free of bias-based behavior.
- Addressing anti-LGBTQ+ bias in schools makes schools safer for ALL students regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity or expression.

Facilitators help to clarify terminology and language, such as the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation. (Not sure? Gender identity has to do with how you see yourself, while sexual orientation relates to who you are attracted to.) School personnel learn specific, age-appropriate strategies to address hurtful comments, how to respond to a student coming out to them, and ways to support the families of these students.

This winter, a new initiative resulted in a partnership between EASTCONN and Welcoming Schools, a branch of the Human Rights Campaign organization. In early February, more than 40 educators from across the state participated in a session on Creating Gender Inclusive Schools at the elementary level. Participants discussed how to disrupt gender stereotyping and were introduced to texts and activities that affirm and empower all students. One participant noted, "Language matters. I want to review our language used within the building and start there to impact the start of change."

Later in February, a group of secondary educators participated in another session with Welcoming Schools, with a focus on Supporting Transgender and Non-binary Students. In this session, facilitators guided participants in developing strategies to support students in navigating self-advocacy,

“ Language matters. I want to review our language used within the building and start there to impact the start of change.”

- participant, Creating Gender Inclusive Schools Workshop

Learning Together: Russian and Ukrainian Students

Guest Writer Kristin Hempel, Director of Adult and Community Programs, EASTCONN



Ukrainian and Russian students study English together at EASTCONN's Northeast Learning Center in Danielson.

EASTCONN Adult and Community Programs have been serving English Language Learners (ELL) throughout northeastern Connecticut for decades. These learners come to us from around the world for many different reasons and their histories and experiences vary. This year, our students come from Afghanistan, Cambodia, Brazil, Panama, Jamaica, China, Peru, Honduras, Turkey, Pakistan, Spain, Venezuela, Guatemala, and more. While all work hard to learn English, they face different social, economic, and political challenges as they strive to navigate their daily lives, their expectations for their futures, and their relationship to their homelands.

This fall, EASTCONN Adult Education in Danielson had a visit from one of our ELL graduates, Vera Kustov, who immigrated in 2001 from Kazakhstan. Through her church, she met a group of 5 Ukrainians and 4 Russians who, as recently arrivals, spoke very

little English. Vera knew from her own experience that their first step needed to be to enroll in EASTCONN English classes

Now close friends, they came from different cultures and their journey to CT has taken them through a variety of European and North American countries. An accountant, a homemaker, a construction worker, a civil engineer, and a teacher, they share their stories, their hopes, and their fears as they continue to invest all that they have to create a new life for themselves and their children.

"We came here because we lost our life. It is a very terrible situation. We lost our home, our work. We cannot go home. There is nothing to go home to and it still isn't safe."

"We worry about our children. They are sensitive and suffer more – adaptation is harder and longer."

"We come to learn English because we have to do. We learn English to make a new life. We need to do this for our children. Coming to class helps you to feel safe and not sad."

The group is appreciative for all the help they are getting from so many. They have experienced tremendous support and they want to give back to the northeastern Connecticut community which continues to be so generous.

When asked about the dynamics within the class, given that some are Russian and some are Ukrainian, the response is clear: they are all here because they don't want to be a part of the violence. Some were escaping being invaded and some were escaping being forced to go to war. Vera shares, "When the war started I was just ashamed for Russia... honestly, Russian and Ukrainian people who came here live together, attend the same church, we don't see any reason to fight."

QMC Student Leadership in Action

Guest Writer David Brown, Quinebaug Middle College Principal

Quinebaug Middle College (QMC) is a democratic learning community founded on the campus of Quinebaug Valley Community College (QVCC) in Danielson, CT. Since its founding, our middle college program has embraced student voice and choice, providing individualized college-career learning pathways, college dual enrollment, and experiential learning opportunities for young adults in northeastern Connecticut. With up to 180 students and 25 faculty (7:1 student-faculty ratio), QMC is a relatively small, personalized environment that immerses students in democratic principles and values, leadership and community, and builds foundational skills for college success.

On February 3, ten QMC scholars voluntarily embarked on a mission to support and call for the implementation of Connecticut General Assembly House Bill No. 5003, which supports funding for magnet schools. One student, Michaela Tetrault (Plainfield resident) swept into action, recruiting peers, gathering relevant information on the bill, and drafting testimony to present to the appropriations committee.

“Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”

– John F. Kennedy



Plainville resident and National Honor Society member Michaela Tetrault.

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EASTCONN Magnet High Schools Now Recruiting!



"Give ACT a try...schedule a Shadow Day. The most unconventional things are always worth a chance because they're often the most worthwhile and that is definitely what I found here."
 – Annabelle Brown, Grade 12



Arts at the Capitol Theater (ACT) This full-day, public, performing arts magnet high school for capable, motivated learners offers a college preparatory curriculum that's arts-integrated and standards-based. Taught by certified teachers and talented arts instructors from across the region, each grade includes about 35 students, who may focus on any of 7 arts pathways: Acting, Creative Writing, Dance, Integrated Arts & Management, Media Arts, Music and Technical Theater (sets, lights, costuming). Located in the historic Capitol Theater in downtown Willimantic, ACT is NEASC Accredited. www.eastconn.org/act.



"The community has been nothing but extremely supportive toward my goals within my educational and career goals. As a sophomore, I have taken three college classes and advanced my understanding of the medical field. The small, personalized classes allow more time with the teacher to dig deeper into the content than traditional high schools. I am a proud first generation college student and can't be happier at QMC"
 – Justice Henderson, Grade 10

Quinebaug Middle College (QMC): Located on the campus of Quinebaug Valley Community College (QVCC) in Danielson, this state-of-the-art middle college high school enrolls motivated learners, grades 9-12, who seek more control over their educational program. Qualified students may attend QVCC classes and earn free college credits toward an Associate's Degree, while continuing to earn their QMC high school diploma. With a STEM-focused and Humanities-rich curriculum, QMC offers small, rigorous classes; community service opportunities; a unique, student-led governance structure; and experiential learning opportunities for young scholars. NEASC Accredited. www.eastconn.org/QMC.

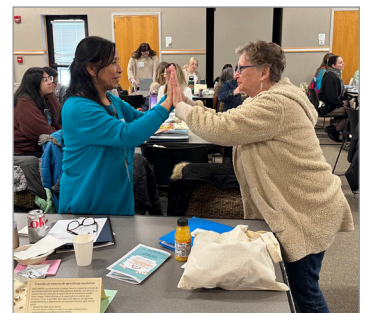
Early Childhood Professionals Attend the 9th Annual Infant/Toddler Conference



Early Childhood professionals shared their expertise during EASTCONN's 9th Annual Infant/Toddler Conference held in Hampton.

The 9th Annual Infant/Toddler Conference took place in early March at EASTCONN's Conference Center in Hampton. "Building Strong Relationships Between Families, Caregivers and Staff Members" provided 115 participants with shared learning around the implementation of the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework. Strategies for partnering with parents, ideas for structures and engagement, and many other opportunities and challenges to ensure the programs' value and support of all families were presented.

Keynote speakers were nationally recognized Early Childhood trainers Shaneil "PJ" Yarborough and Jenny Dura spoke on "Unlocking the Power of Strengthening Families." Heidi Madeira, Executive Director for the CT Association for Infant Mental Health, presented a session on the cumulative effects of working with children and families that may have experienced past or ongoing trauma.



Agency Professional Notes



In early March, EASTCONN PBC staff attended the 19th Annual CTABA Connecticut Association for Behavior Analysis conference at the Connecticut Convention Center. Staff offered a featured presentation, "Graph Smarter Not Harder: Using Google Tools to Enhance Visual Analysis of Data," presented by **Dr. Jennifer Connolly**, **Dr. Ravit Stein**, and **Dr. Taylor Thorne**. EASTCONN staff attended from CDT, Bridges, and PBC. The conference attracted over 700 attendees.



Diane Gozemba, EASTCONN Director of Early Childhood Initiatives, and **Teresa Surprenant**, ECI Specialist, were invited to present before the Keefe-Bruyette Symposium at the School for Young Children at the University of Saint Joseph in March. Diane presented "Promote Curiosity & New Learning through Playful Architecture Projects", and Teresa spoke about "Integrating Math Throughout the Day."



EASTCONN
Mindful Transformations
Day of Knowledge

Students from Ashford, North Windham, Putnam, and Willimantic recently came to EASTCONN in Hampton to experience Mindful Transformations. This Interdistrict Grant program brings together culturally and economically diverse students in grade 4 to participate in activities and workshops that help develop self-understanding, acceptance, communication, and goal-setting.

...QMC, from page 2

Not only advocating for herself, Michaela emphasized the importance of increased magnet funding on future generations and expanding college access to families in the region. She states, "increased funding helps students like myself financially, enabling us to take more college courses without having to pay the cost out of pocket, without financial debt." Michaela found her learning community at QMC with a focus on law and leadership. She is an active member of our National Honor Society and takes up to two college

courses at QVCC per semester.

QMC is a Title I school, supporting low-income families in the region. With increased unemployment creating barriers to college access, the school provides an opportunity for students to pursue their goals and interests, develop necessary workforce skills, and obtain college credit that will help them improve their chances later on in life.

"Increasing magnet funding will allow more students to take one or more college courses their freshman and sopho-

...Gender, from page 1

use of pronouns, and legal protections for transgender and non-gender conforming youth. Participants welcomed the opportunity to network with colleagues from across the state and to share strategies and resources that they are using in their schools and classrooms. Many acknowledged that this was the first time that they have been given an opportunity to learn how to support transgender and non-binary students. One participant remarked, "It's great that EASTCONN held this workshop! I have new ideas and strategies that I will be able to use tomorrow. I can't wait to talk to my colleagues about this!"

One new initiative just getting underway is the formation of a GSA Network for eastern Connecticut schools. GSAs (Gender and Sexuality Alliances) exist in many of the middle and high schools across the region, serving as an opportunity for students to connect in a safe space within their schools. The network will be a forum for connecting the advisors of these student clubs to share resources and ideas for activities, and to discover opportunities for bringing students together for social or educational events.

For more information, contact Erin McGurk at emcgurk@eds.eastconn.org.



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