

EASTCONN

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CONNECTIONS

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Educators explore group play at the fall conference.

Digging Into Play Attracts Teachers from Across State

It was a sight to behold: teachers from as far afield as Stamford and Danbury sitting cross-legged on the carpet, eyes and hands focused on ping pong balls, blocks, hula hoops, corks, beads and marbles, working collaboratively to create elaborate shapes of plastic, wood and foam, twisting objects into makeshift ramps, housing structures and spaceship command centers.

Play, play and more play was the subject of Digging Into Play, a fall conference for early childhood educators hosted by EASTCONN's Early Childhood Initiatives in Hampton.

The goal of the conference was to reinforce the idea that young children learn best through play, and that early childhood

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CLiCK Inc. and EASTCONN Awarded Food Vision Prize



CLiCK Executive Director Leigh Duffy (left) and Education Coordinator Chelsea Cherrier (center) with EASTCONN Director of Food and Hospitality Services Heather Plourde (right).

On a quiet, wooded stretch of road in Willimantic, the colorful headquarters of CLiCK Inc. serves as a gathering place for burgeoning chefs, entrepreneurs, farmers, foodies and others working along the region's challenging food pipeline.

Now, as a 2022 New England Food Vision Prize winner, CLiCK is partnering with EASTCONN to strengthen the food system in northeastern Connecticut. The roughly \$200,000 prize from

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classrooms should be places for children to explore, be curious, collaborate with peers and engage in activities that foster development.

"Through the pandemic, we learned that when children were coming back to programs, we weren't seeing typical play anymore," said Diane Gozemba, Director of Early Childhood Initiatives at EASTCONN. "We were seeing a lot more parallel play, where kids were just sort of in silos next to each other in playing, but playing by themselves."

Gozemba and her team wanted to reintroduce the idea of how teachers support children through play and to help engage them in playing with each other. "Ultimately we're social beings, but sometimes that needs to be scaffolded, modeled and supported," she said.

The single-day conference featured a morning workshop for all participants on constructivist teaching methods using open-ended materials, followed by a choice of three afternoon breakout sessions led by Gozemba and EASTCONN early childhood specialists Teresa Surprenant and Anne Marie Davidson.

Getting teachers to play together, Gozemba said, was "really about the adults going back and having those experiences



Participants at ECI's Digging Into Play conference.

In her session, Surprenant said participants focused "how teachers can really be purposeful in thinking about environments that enable children to really feel at home and comfortable in their settings and feel a sense of belonging."

Digging Into Play's emphasis on open-ended materials – many of which would not normally be considered playthings – was meant to counteract the idea that suitable toys typically only come from a catalog or store.

“Ultimately we're social beings, but sometimes that needs to be scaffolded, modeled and supported”

- Diane Gozemba, EASTCONN Director of Early Childhood Initiatives

and building upon something they did years ago. Adults really need to pause, to connect, to be truly present. When we're in the classroom with kids, we connect with them, and then we extend learning. That's really the role of teacher in my mind."

Surprenant, who led an afternoon session called "Creating Environments that Support a Sense of Belonging for Each Child," emphasized that while early childhood educators usually do understand the value of play, it's easy to lose sight of its importance.

"In the course of their day, they are feeling a pull because there are a lot of other things that they are expected to do," Surprenant said. "Sometimes play may lose some time in the day, and then also it's about the quality and the type of play."

When children play together, Surprenant said, they often seem peaceful. "They look engaged, joyful," she said. "You'll see that they have increased persistence and attention and focus. Play is their choice, so hopefully they're getting to choose which thing they want to play with and how they use materials. That really unlocks their ability to have to use their brain in different ways, to engage in divergent thinking."

"These are just collections of interesting things and recyclables and things that kids can just really think, 'Wow, what could I do with this?'" Surprenant said. "The teachers got opportunities themselves to play with those materials, and I think that parallel-play process was there for them, too."

Danielle Wilkinson, a teacher from Stamford who attended Digging Into Play, said she was looking forward to bringing what she learned back to her classroom.

"Honestly, I learned how to do a lot more open-ended play," Wilkinson said. "I didn't know how much you could do with a box. I've learned so much of what I can teach the kids when I get back."



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MORE DIGGING INTO PLAY
HIGHLIGHTS

...Food Vision Prize, from page 1

the Henry P. Kendall Foundation will expand processing capabilities, enabling more local farmers to supply local food to students.

"We're building up our commitment to farmers through the processing program, and we're thrilled to have our educational partner as EASTCONN," said CLiCK Executive Director Leigh Duffy. "The beautiful thing about EASTCONN is that you are all over eastern Connecticut, so when you want the best bang for your buck getting healthy, nutritious food to kids, EASTCONN is the best option for us."

The Kendall Foundation, whose goal is to "create a resilient and healthy food system in New England that increases the production and consumption of local, sustainably produced food," announced the award in October 2022. Out of 24 proposed projects, CLiCK and EASTCONN's submission was one of eight winning entries.

As part of a previous grant, CLiCK recently launched a collaborative for eastern Connecticut farmers to develop an on-site food processing space. Once the site is built out, CLiCK will partner with EASTCONN to distribute food across the region under the Food Vision Prize grant.

Heather Plourde, Director of Food and Hospitality Services at EASTCONN, said many people don't realize the struggles rural communities have in securing fresh, nutritious food for area residents.



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AWARD AND PARTNERSHIP

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– Leigh Duffy, CLiCK Inc. Executive Director

"We don't have transportation, we don't have corner bodegas where you can run and go get something to eat, we have families without Internet, families with only one car – if a car at all – and live miles away from other people," Plourde said. "On a Friday, lunch is the last meal a student may get until Monday morning when they come back to our schools."

Ironically, food insecurity affects some of the very farmers producing food in eastern Connecticut. "They're barely able to survive," Plourde said. "They're on their own and support their own families. That's the reality that people aren't aware of."

CLiCK was founded in 2009 by Phoebe Godfrey, a UConn sociology professor with an interest in historical and institutionalized racism in the food industry, along with input from the Willimantic Food Co-op. Before coming to EASTCONN, Plourde served as one of CLiCK's founding members.

EASTCONN Magnet Schools Now Recruiting for 2023-2024!



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 is limited to 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). NEASC Accredited. Located in the historic Capitol Theater in downtown Willimantic. www.eastconn.org/act.



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, capable 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 degree, while continuing to earn their QMC high school diploma. With a STEM-focused and humanities-rich curriculum, QMC also offers small, rigorous classes, community service opportunities, and a unique, student-led governance structure. NEASC Accredited. www.eastconn.org/QMC.

Agency Professional Notes



Patricia Ann Proctor was recently appointed EASTCONN's Chief Financial Officer and will oversee the agency's Accounting/Finance Department. Patricia most recently served as CFO/COO of an on-site manufacturing company and has extensive professional experience working with not-for-profit organizations.



EASTCONN Executive Director Eric S. Protulis (pictured right) recently appeared on an episode of Brian Scott-Smith's ConnecticutEast podcast to discuss collaboration, building community partnerships and working with our districts and towns to better serve area residents. Listen to the full interview by visiting www.connecticut-east.com.



In November, EASTCONN'S Marketing & Communications Director Dona Prindle (pictured), along with EdAdvance's Devonna Dionne and CREC's Aura Alvarado, delivered a presentation called "A Post-Pandemic World for Schools: How to Leverage all the Resources your RESC has to Offer" at the annual CABA/CAPSS Convention in Mystic.



EASTCONN Director of Early Childhood Initiatives Diane Gozomba co-presented "Developing the Human Side of Coaching" with CT Office of Early Childhood education consultant Deb Adams at the Dynamic Coaching Systems Virtual Coaching Summit 2023 on Jan. 12.



After serving as a State-Certified Instructor for seven years, EASTCONN Transportation Safety & Training Coordinator Merrilee Bernhardt was awarded the title of Master Instructor by a panel of 30 DMV agents and 100 certified trainers. Merrilee was only one of only nine MIs chosen this year; she'll now serve as one of only 13 school bus/student transportation Master Instructors in the state of Connecticut.



Igniting Change Conference On October 19, nearly 350 educators gathered at the Connecticut Convention Center in Hartford to participate in the inaugural Igniting Change conference. The conference featured welcoming remarks by Connecticut's Commissioner of Education, Dr. Charlene Russell-Tucker, and inspirational keynote addresses by Principal Baruti Kafele and Dr. Richard Milner. Ten breakout sessions were led by local and national presenters on topics related to equity-centered leadership, inclusive school communities, culturally responsive pedagogy, and grading reform. Following the conference, approximately 80 educators from across the state have enrolled in professional learning pathways to deepen their knowledge and understanding of equity-focused practices and to plan for meaningful action in their schools and districts. The spring Igniting Change conference on April 5, also at the Convention Center, promises to be another exciting opportunity for networking and shared learning.



SCAN THE QR CODE FOR PARTICIPANT REACTIONS TO THE FALL CONFERENCE

