Creating Gender Inclusive Schools that Support All Students

Guest Writer Erin McGurk,
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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,

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- participant, Creating Gender Inclusive Schools Workshop
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. "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

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Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other."

– John F. Kennedy

Plainville resident and National Honor Society member Michaela Tetrault.
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.

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.

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.
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.”

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.

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 sophomore year and more than two courses their junior and senior year, further increasing the amount of students graduating high school with their diploma and their associates degree,” adds Michaela. On February 24, the Education Committee passed House Bill No. 5003. It is now on its way to the appropriations committee. QMC scholars will continue to advocate for increased funding from the state and showcase the excellence that is occurring on their campus.