

CONNECTIONS

Education News From Northeastern Connecticut

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Beep, Beep, Beep....Click... *Virtual High School Classes Now Online*



Lyman High School's VHS science teacher Shelly Duchesne explains how she teaches an online course to students.

Now Connecticut high schools can stretch their classroom dollars and multiply their course offerings with the click of a mouse.

A new, discounted statewide membership in a Web-based classroom program is being offered through Connecticut's six Regional Educational Service Centers (RESCs). EASTCONN is one of the RESCs.

Virtual High School (VHS) is a new online service designed to expand the number and scope of courses that high schools can offer without needing specialized teachers or minimum-size classes. Through EASTCONN, the online classes can be purchased at a substantial savings over regular membership fees.

See **VIRTUAL HIGH SCHOOL**, back page

In this issue

- Virtual High School Now Online 1
- Nikita Grenier Wins Spirit Award 1
- Calendar.....2
- Volunteers—Vital Part of Classroom Success ..2
- Districts Collaborate with Terrific Results3
- Interdistrict Update.....Insert

Tenacious Young Plainfield Woman Wins Spirit Award

Nikita Grenier, a young mother and EASTCONN client, is one of 10 young people statewide to receive the Youth Spirit Award from Connecticut Voices for Children. The award honors young people from diverse backgrounds who have shown an extraordinary ability to rise above difficult circumstances and give back to the community.

The extraordinary Nikita was first referred to the EASTCONN Options program for out-of-school youth last year by Plainfield High School.

“Rarely have I met a student who possesses as much determination as Nikita,” said Cindy Chester, Options Case Manager. Nikita, who was an honors student and new mother, was struggling to find a way to transport her baby to childcare so that she could return to school. “Unfortunately, this kind of transportation does not exist in our area,” said Chester.



Nikita Grenier's indomitable spirit has helped her overcome daunting obstacles.

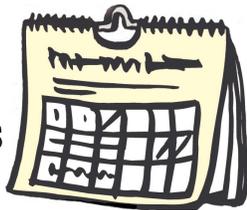
Based on Nikita's academic performance and determination, Plainfield provided a tutor, enabling her to complete the year and maintain her academic standing as an honors student. After finding a job while continuing her plan to return to Plainfield High School, Nikita became ineligible for the childcare subsidies she had been receiving and reluctantly made the decision to withdraw from school.

Nikita was again referred to Chester in September by the Plainfield Family Resource Center. Nikita was determined to complete her education, but because she was not yet 17 and not out of school for 6 months, she was not yet eligible for the GED program.

Chester had to think out of the box. “I hoped that with the right guidance and financial assistance she could be enrolled in college this semester,” said Chester. “I knew that Quinebaug Valley Community College (QVCC) would be the perfect location and atmosphere for Nikita. With their willingness to

See **NIKITA**, page 2

Calendar of EASTCONN Events



APRIL 2004

- 20 Math Council Meeting
- 29 Literacy & Technology: Using PowerPoint to Create an Electronic Book

MAY 2004

- 5 Improving Student Achievement at the PreK-3 Level: Tools and Strategies for Promoting Data Conversations
- 7 CT Data Warehouse User's Conference, Hartford Marriott, Farmington
- 12 Writing Professional Goals for Teacher and Student Growth
- 13 DynaVox 3100 Series and Beyond
- 18 Safe & Drug-Free Schools Conference, CSDE, Radisson Cromwell
- 19 Promoting School Cultures that Use Data

JUNE 2004

- 28 Technology as a New Literacy - CT Statewide Technology Conference, Water's Edge Resort, Westbook

EASTCONN workshops are subject to change without notice. Please E-mail the EASTCONN Conference Office at conferenceoffice@eastconn.org for more information about any of the meetings and workshops listed here. Workshop information is also available on our Web site at www.eastconn.org. Click on Workshops.

NIKITA, continued from page 1

consider students without high school credentials and Nikita's outstanding academic skills, I knew she would have a chance," Chester said.

Nikita "aced" her interview and placement tests at QVCC and was granted admission to the college.

Because federal student aid is not available to students under age 17, Chester hoped that Nikita would be eligible to receive support through the federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Youth Program. She submitted her paperwork for review. The WIA Board was similarly impressed with Nikita and approved her for the Quinebaug program even though she did not have the high school credential they usually require.

Today, Nikita is employed, attends college, has a driver's license, volunteers as a peer GED tutor, and happily parents her daughter Skylar. In her letter to the Connecticut Voices for Children Nikita said, "While I consider being a parent more of a privilege than an obstacle, it has made many things in my life more difficult ... [but] ... at this point in my life, I feel like doors are always opening for me with help from a lot of special people along the way."

Said Chester, "A lot of really good things happened because of who Nikita is, the advocates she has in place, and the way she has taken full advantage of them."

Nikita and the nine other Youth Spirit Award winners will be honored on May 18. For more information about the EASTCONN Options program, contact Cindy Chester at 860-779-3770 or cchester@eastconn.org.

April is National Volunteer Month Volunteers are Vital Part of Classroom Success Stories

EASTCONN and northeastern Connecticut have untold dozens of volunteers who work cheerfully throughout the year to help make important educational programs work. Without their help, many programs would suffer.

Officials agree that EASTCONN's Head Start couldn't function without their volunteers. For example, EASTCONN's Head Start programs in Brooklyn/Killingly, Plainfield, Putnam, Stafford Springs, Vernon and Willimantic rely on volunteers to work in more than 150 instances each month.

"We're required to use volunteers in our program," said Cindy Torrence, EASTCONN's Director of Head Start. "We receive 80 percent of our operating costs from federal grants and must get the rest from local funding and volunteers. A great deal of it comes from volunteers."

While most of the Head Start volunteers belong to Head Start youngsters' families, there are also many community volunteers, board and policy council members and those who share their expertise in the classroom or with groups of parents.

"We have just finalized an arrangement with a dental hygienist who is going to provide free dental screenings for our children who do not have access to other dental screening services," said Torrence. Another volunteer provides budgeting training for Head Start families.

Volunteer opportunities are not limited to those with specialized expertise.

"We are always looking for volunteers to come in and read to the children," said Torrence.

Training is available for volunteers who are in the classroom on an extended basis. Each April, EASTCONN's Head Start program holds a volunteer appreciation event. This year, the April event recognized more than 50 of its invaluable volunteers.

And there are other volunteers who provide EASTCONN with priceless assistance.

EASTCONN has been engaged in a very successful partnership with the two regional Literacy Volunteer programs in northeast Connecticut for over a decade.

"This is a collaboration that really works!" enthused Mary Shinoski, Director of Adult Services at EASTCONN,

See **VOLUNTEERS**, page 3

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EASTCONN Districts Collaborate with Terrific Results

Collaboration is the name of the game as school districts work hard to expand and improve their grant funding, their curricula and their programs for students.

There is no question that regional collaboration is mutually beneficial, according to Mary Duncan, Union Superintendent of Schools.

“It is so hard for our small districts to get grants,” Duncan said. “When we collaborate, it not only improves our chances, it makes for a better program.”

Following a flurry of meetings, phone calls, and letters of support, districts in the northeast region are benefiting from 10 new grants, including seven funded through the Technology Literacy Challenge Fund (TLCF). Now, a new round of TLCF grants has just been announced and the region is once again gearing up to work collaboratively in response. In the last round of funding, all seven TLCF grants submitted by northeast area districts were funded.

“Only three districts in the EASTCONN region were eligible to apply for TLCF,” said Paula Colen, EASTCONN Deputy Executive Director, “and one of these was Union, the smallest school system in the state.”

Union submitted two grants. One of them, which also benefited 25 other districts in the EASTCONN region, will greatly expand the number of districts participating in the Connecticut Data Warehouse initiative, as well as provide extensive training for new and veteran members.

In another exciting collaboration, three curriculum and professional development grants were funded which will bring EASTCONN and the University of Connecticut’s CTEAMS (The Center for Technology Education to Advance Math & Science) together with schools in a joint effort to enhance teaching and learning opportunities for our state students.

In one of these collaborations, Plainfield, Colchester, Hebron, Putnam, Tolland and Windham will work with EAST-

CONN and UConn in the development of a standards and research-based K-5 science curriculum that will be an exemplary model for the state.

In another, Ashford will team up with EASTCONN and UConn to extend the work of the Connecticut K-3 Mathematics Blueprint by identifying effective teaching practices and defining professional development requirements.

“When we collaborate, it not only improves our chances, it makes for a better program.”

– Mary Duncan, Union Superintendent

Finally, ACES will lead a statewide K-5 Math Professional Development Grant, on behalf of the Connecticut Alliance of RESCs (EASTCONN is a member) with UConn as a partner. This grant will provide intensive summer institutes as well as opportunities to extend learning through online technology. “Not only will this provide a good way to build community electronically, it’s a great model for professional development,” noted Maureen Crowley, EASTCONN Director of Planning and Development, who engaged UConn as the higher education partner.

“There are many different ways to collaborate to bring resources and services to the region,” said Colen. “It is because of this region’s ability to work for the common good that quality programs are created that can be used by others. We’ve been working together for a very long time creating economies of scale. Now, more than ever, with resources being diverted to meet NCLB [No Child Left Behind] requirements, we must work collaboratively and cooperatively,” Colen said.

For more information about educational technology grant assistance, contact Jim Huggins at 860-455-0707 or jhuggins@eastconn.org. For more information about grant development, contact Maureen Crowley at 860-455-0707 or mcrowley@eastconn.org.

VOLUNTEERS, continued from page 2

that coordinates with the Literacy Volunteer programs. The two literacy programs are located at EASTCONN’s regional Community Learning Centers in Danielson and Willimantic.

“We can’t always provide the one-on-one tutoring that some students need and Literacy Volunteers can,” said Shinoski.

“We are always looking for volunteers to come in and read to the children.”

– Cindy Torrence, EASTCONN Head Start

“We provide Literacy Volunteers with instructional materials, offices in our building, consultation with our adult education teachers, and referrals of students in need of tutoring. In return, our adult education students get the individualized support they need to be successful in our programs.”

“This is an ideal partnership between two organizations whose missions are similar,” said Rosie St. Pierre, Director of

Literacy Volunteers in Willimantic. And like Head Start, Literacy Volunteers is always looking for tutors. No special skills are required and volunteers receive 21 hours of training and a certificate of completion before being paired with students.

Volunteer opportunities in local schools are as varied as the talents of the volunteers and the programs that they support. EASTCONN board member Valerie Downs is also a member of the Brooklyn Board of Education, a volunteer in the Brooklyn schools, and the coordinator of the PTO’s Teacher Appreciation Week. Downs noted that Brooklyn PTO volunteers are doing everything from fund raising to building playgrounds and a nature trail.

For more information about volunteer opportunities, contact Cindy Torrence, EASTCONN Director of Head Start at 850-455-0707 or ctorrence@eastconn.org; northeast area Literacy Volunteers at 860-779-3770; or Rosie St. Pierre, Director of Windham area Literacy Volunteers at 860-456-7620. For volunteer opportunities in local schools, contact the principal’s office.

VIRTUAL HIGH SCHOOL, continued from page 1

Headquartered in Maynard, Mass., VHS is a non-profit collaborative with over 6,000 students enrolled annually from almost 200 member schools representing 25 states and 20 countries. Currently, more than 162 individual courses are offered, including core, elective, advanced placement, and international baccalaureate courses. A summer semester is also available.

Different membership plans are available depending on a district's needs, from individual student enrollment to a full membership in which schools provide an online course and a local coordinator in exchange for 25 seats in any of the available VHS courses each semester.

Lebanon, which is in its second year with VHS, joined the program before the RESC consortium had been organized.

Sally Doyen, Lebanon Superintendent of Schools, began exploring VHS at the beginning of last year.

"We thought it would give our students access to a variety of courses at school that we otherwise never could have offered," Doyen said.

Lebanon joined as a full member, committing to training a site coordinator to support students enrolling in online courses as well as training a teacher to teach a biology course online. VHS provides comprehensive professional development to prospective teachers, whether he or she is teaching an existing course or developing a new one. Site coordinators also receive training.

Shelley Duchesne, a member of the Lyman High School science faculty, was selected as the online teacher of "Epidemics: Ecology or Evolution." She wanted to teach the online enrichment course because of the challenge of trying something new and because it gave her the opportunity to work with upperclassmen.

Duchesne estimates that it has taken about 180 professional development hours to modify an existing course and to

learn how to use the online technology. She had 20 students enrolled in her fall course and 16 are enrolled this spring. Her students are primarily from New England but also from New Jersey, Texas, Colorado and Washington. She's been especially busy this month coordinating class assignments with the many different school vacation schedules.

"Virtual High School does not go on vacation!" she notes.

"The class is very heterogeneous," said Duchesne. "It works very well for some students but not others. The students that do best are those that are self-directed and can stay focused on the work."

Coursework includes field trips, hands-on labs, computer projects, group projects, as well as individual activities. Duchesne recently mailed Petri film to students who needed to collect dirt samples and culture bacteria.

She is in touch with her students daily, monitoring progress and providing feedback and encouragement. An occasional "Netiquette" reminder is necessary, as well.

As the first year of full participation winds down, Doyen and Duchesne both see strong potential for VHS.

"It provides a tremendous opportunity for students to broaden themselves, not only in terms of knowledge, but to expose themselves to students all over the world," said Doyen.

She would like to see more Lyman students enroll in courses and hopes that as awareness increases and VHS offerings expand, more will take advantage of the program.

Duchesne suggests that it is important to promote and recruit students who could truly benefit from these courses, "especially juniors and seniors who are beginning to develop a passion or special interest and for whom we can't offer much else."

For more information about Virtual High School, contact Jim Huggins or Heidi Goldsher at 860-455-0707 or jhuggins@eastconn.org or hgoldsher@eastconn.org.



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EASTCONN, one of six Regional Educational Service Centers (RESCs) in Connecticut, has been serving the educational and training needs of schools, organizations, and individuals of all ages in northeastern Connecticut since 1980.

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