

CONNECTIONS

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Pace and Communication Are Key to Ashford Progress



Ashford Principal Troy Hopkins, left, and Ashford Superintendent James Longo are making clear-eyed plans as they work with staff.

For small, preK-8 Connecticut school districts like Ashford, the effort to implement a host of state-mandated as well as local initiatives comes with big challenges, not the least of which is figuring out just how quickly to move staff and students along the path of change.

“Our biggest challenge is the challenge of pace,” said Ashford Superintendent James Longo. “The other challenge is to communicate our education vision ... and to bring that vision to life for everyone, including our teachers, students and parents.”

He credits the Ashford faculty and staff, as well as an enthusiastic and creative administrative team, for quickly tackling and successfully introducing big changes to staff and students.

The Ashford administrative team includes Longo, Principal Troy Hopkins and Special Education Director Donna Hartigan.

Hopkins, who became principal last fall, joined Longo recently to talk about Ashford Public Schools, which consists of one preK-8 facility, about 450 students and 45 staff.

“We are in the process of making major changes in school climate and culture, and it’s been very exciting,” Longo said, adding, “We want to create long-term, sustainable change and build capacity that will last well beyond our tenure.”

Ashford has many overarching goals, Longo said, which include implementing changes in school climate and collaboration (building capacity among faculty); implementing

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EASTCONN's Quinebaug Middle College Principal Gino LoRicco, in black, discusses graduation ceremony plans with students.

QMC to Enroll 9th-Graders In Pilot Program This Fall

For the first time, EASTCONN's Quinebaug Middle College (QMC) will enroll a small number of ninth-graders in a pilot program that is slated to begin this fall.

QMC has begun recruiting up to 20 incoming ninth-graders for the 2013-2014 school year, according to QMC Principal Gino LoRicco, who said that the school has just enough classroom space to support 20 new ninth-grade students.

Housed on the main campus of Quinebaug Valley Community College (QVCC) in Danielson, QMC currently enrolls 110 students, grades 10-12, from 17 northeastern Connecticut towns. At QMC, a magnet school for capable, non-traditional learners, students may earn free college credits in QVCC classes, while earning their high school degree.

“During this pilot program, we’re going to watch carefully to see how a small group of ninth-graders fares in the QMC embedded-middle-college setting,” said Tom Cronin, EASTCONN's Director of Education Services. “The QMC model provides students with more freedoms than students in a traditional high school setting, so these ninth-graders will have to prove that they can perform well academically, while meeting high standards of self-governance and responsibility.”

“QMC is designed to provide a more individualized learning experience than the traditional high school,” LoRicco said. “Since QMC is building a new addition to the school with its partner QVCC, there will eventually be room for a full ninth-through-twelfth-grade student population at QMC, should the

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curriculum and instruction shifts with a school-wide focus on writing (aligned with Common Core State Standards); and using data to inform instruction, assessment and intervention.

“We are also developing school and teacher leadership capacity,” said Hopkins, “which is critical. At the same time, we are working hard to make sure that we connect everything to a vision, so teachers don’t get overwhelmed and we can all support each other in a cohesive way.”

Ashford faculty has grown more confident about taking on leadership roles, Hopkins and Longo said, in part because of long-term, clear-eyed planning and in part because of professional development provided by EASTCONN staff.

“Ashford has shown the positive impact of strategic planning,” said EASTCONN Coordinator of Professional Learning Amy Drowne. “By having a plan in place for aligning initiatives around teaching practice and student outcomes, they are building a collaborative and collegial culture.”

Ashford teacher Jennifer Lindsay agreed, saying that leadership and capacity among Ashford faculty has grown.

“We all wear many different hats because we’re such a small district,” said Lindsay. “But we also have taken ownership of the changes that we are implementing here. [Ashford administrators] have given teachers a variety of leadership roles, including leading committees, which is good,” she said.

Other successful initiatives include a commitment to becoming a school that trains beginning teachers (they have four interns this year); providing a designated science instructor at every grade level; establishing school-wide teacher writing goals aligned with the CCSS; embracing new strategies for dealing with students’ behavioral problems; providing breakfast for all students, regardless of income; and data teams and data coaches, trained in collaboration with EASTCONN.

Longo said Ashford has benefited from other EASTCONN resources, including its CCSS Consortium; teacher evaluation workshops; the PreK-8 Principal’s Consortium; the Regional Staff Development Council; the Assessment Café (preparing for Smarter Balanced assessments); the Administrator’s Book Club; leadership coaching; and TEAM training.

“These resources help us feel like we’re staying connected and sharing new ideas,” said Hopkins. “It’s a real help to have EASTCONN there, because they support us in so many ways.”

To learn more, contact EASTCONN’s Amy Drowne, at adrowne@eastconn.org, or reach her at 860-455-1591.



“So, this is a purple potato and this green, leafy stuff is kale??”
Students from different schools learned all about unusual veggies, while making new friends at an Interdistrict Grant Program.

Unusual Veggies, New Friendships Flourish at Interdistrict Program

Most of the second-graders in the Hartford classroom had never seen an artichoke before, nor had they any idea what kale was, or that leeks tasted like onions. And who knew that carrots, beets, rutabagas and potatoes grew underground?

As part of EASTCONN’s Interdistrict Grant Program, *Farming the Land and the Sea*, about 150 second- and third-graders from Hartford, Andover, Plainfield and Windham recently spent an engaging afternoon at the Expeditionary Learning Academy at Moylan School (ELAMS) in Hartford, learning all about state-grown produce.

But *Farming the Land and the Sea* is about a lot more than strange, new vegetables.

“The most valuable piece is getting the kids together,” said ELAMS second-grade teacher Lori Koplín. “Their new [interdistrict] friendships are just so amazing. They really don’t care what you look like; they are just glad to spend time with someone new and to eat with them. It’s such a great program because it doesn’t focus *just* on farming the land and the sea; it’s really about diversity and I’m really thrilled to be a part of it.”

“All our students have fun learning about where their food comes from, but it’s also a delightful discovery to make new friends from different backgrounds,” said EASTCONN Staff Developer Esther Soffer Roberts, who coordinates the grant.

Funded by the CSDE, the grant enables cross-district groups of second- and third-graders to increase their understanding of diversity, while increasing their academic skills.

During the vegetable activity at ELAMS, interdistrict student groups examined, categorized, sorted and drew their vegetables, finally recording and then discussing their findings.

“Many students, and even a couple of teachers, couldn’t identify the more unusual vegetables, like leeks, parsnips and jicama,” said Roberts.

When they are not meeting face-to-face, students from different schools are pen-pals, a revelation for Koplín’s students. “It was almost magical for my kids. To get a letter in the mail that is addressed to them is a wonderful, new experience.”

Learn more from EASTCONN’s Grant Coordinator Nancy Vitale at nvitale@eastconn.org, or reach her at 860-455-1568.

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EASTCONN Professional Notes



Nancy Whitehead

ference in April.

EASTCONN Adult Programs support person **Nancy Whitehead** has been honored by the Connecticut Association for Adult and Continuing Education (CAACE) with a 2013 Support Staff of the Year Award. Whitehead, who works at EASTCONN's Northeast Learning Center in Danielson, will receive her award at the CAACE Conference in April.



Steve Wapen

Education Center. Wapen's Oswego lecture is titled "Remembering United Nations Week, 1943 Oswego Celebration" and the Fort Ticonderoga lecture will explore "The Lost Rum at Oswego, 1756."

Human Resources Director **Steven Wapen**, who is also an independent historian, has been invited to present two history lectures this spring, the first in April at the H. Lee White Marine Museum in Oswego, New York, and the second in May at the Eighteenth Annual War College of the Seven Years' War conference at Fort Ticonderoga, New York, in the Deborah Clarke Mars



Debra Stipe

EASTCONN Early Childhood Specialist **Debra Stipe** will present a paper on "Oral Language" at the Goodwin College Literacy Conference in May. Stipe's presentation will focus on teaching experiences and strategies for developing children's oral language through conversation, open-ended questions and vocabulary development.



At EASTCONN's Hampton Conference Center, U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, center, met with a group that included EASTCONN Executive Director Paula M. Colen, far left, and EASTCONN Director of Early Childhood Initiatives Elizabeth Aschenbrenner to discuss mental-health-care challenges facing NE Connecticut.

I-BEST Pilot Offers GED and Technology Skills-Building



EASTCONN Adult Programs and I-BEST instructor Shelly LaDuke helps an I-BEST student master critical business skills.

EASTCONN is partnering with both state and federal funders to pilot a new skills-building program that will simultaneously prepare students for the GED and teach them critical business technology skills, so they can compete for higher-paying jobs.

This contextualized program, called I-BEST, is the first of its kind in northeastern Connecticut, and partners EASTCONN with the Connecticut State Department of Education and CTWorks, a federally funded program of the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board. EASTCONN administers I-BEST, an acronym for Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training.

Initially, the I-BEST pilot is being offered to 12 participants, ages 17 and older, who will take classes at EASTCONN's Northeast Learning Center in Danielson. Through I-BEST classes, students will obtain national certifications in need-to-know general computer skills, as well as in social learning platforms like Edmodo and software applications like Microsoft Office, Quickbooks and Adobe, among others. Students will also be expected to job-shadow.

"I-BEST will prepare students to take the GED exam, even as they are learning the technology skills necessary to land higher-paying jobs in an office setting," said Richard Tariff, EASTCONN's Director of Adult Programs.

"I-BEST will also prepare students to enter college or qualify them for additional vocational training," Tariff said.

Students must be referred to the I-BEST pilot program by CTWorks, Tariff said.

"Our ultimate goal is to provide students with crucial skills, so they can meet the demands of today's workplace," said Tariff.

To learn more about I-BEST, contact EASTCONN's Assistant Director of Adult Programs Suzanne Cimochofski at 860-779-3770, or at scimochofski@eastconn.org.

Brooklyn Superintendent Berry Receives Prestigious Award



Dr. Louise Berry

Longtime Brooklyn Superintendent of Schools Dr. Louise Berry has received the New England Board of Higher Education's David C. Knapp Award for Trusteeship for her significant contributions to an institution of higher education in Connecticut.

Berry received the award in Boston at the NEBHE ceremony in early March.

"Oh, it's wonderful," Berry said of the Boston ceremony. "I'm very pleased. It was so impressive and it was done very nicely." Family joined her to celebrate. The certificate hangs in her office, but she laughingly describes her medallion as "too heavy to wear."

Berry and her late husband, Richard, helped found Quinebaug Valley Community College. She was appointed to the Connecticut Board of Trustees for Community Colleges in 1991. In 2004, she was appointed chairman of that board, a position she held until Gov. Dannel P. Malloy dissolved the board and created a joint Board of Regents. Berry was a trustee for 20 years. She continues to volunteer with the QVCC Foundation.

In 2009, Berry was honored with the Outstanding Superintendent Award from the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education. She has been superintendent of Brooklyn schools since 1982 and an educator for more than 50 years.

ACT Video Makes Top 10 in DMV Contest for Fifth Year in a Row



Screen shot of Dimitris Sfakios, rapping about safety for DMV

For the fifth year in a row, EASTCONN's arts magnet high school is a Top 10 finalist in Connecticut's Department of Motor Vehicles' Teen Safe Driving Video Contest.

The DMV's annual contest invites Connecticut's high-school-age students to create a public service video warning against dangers that affect teens' safety behind the wheel.

The contest's 2013 theme is "Teen Safe Driving: Are you in?"

Gov. Dannel P. Malloy and state Attorney General George Jepsen were among the 25 judges who chose the 10 DMV contest finalists, among them a video by EASTCONN's Arts at the Capitol Theater (ACT) in downtown Willimantic.

ACT is the only school in Connecticut to make the Top 10 each year since the contest began five years ago.

"I applaud these students for their great work and their commitment to safety," said Malloy in a press release.

The state DMV received 128 entries from high schools across Connecticut. DMV officials will announce five winners in mid-April. The high schools of the five winners will share \$15,000 from Travelers. The videos will be seen on television, Web sites and across a variety of social media.

This year, ACT's video depicts ACT student Dimitris Sfakios, of Willimantic, rapping his original song, while viewers watch dangerous situations caused by distracted teen drivers. Other ACT students involved in making the video include Tyler Mainville, of Tolland; Kelsi Johansen, of Coventry; Kevin Kissane, of Willimantic; and Patrick Blair, of Tolland.

See all the videos at www.youtube.com/teensafedriving12. The video with the most clicks earns its school an extra \$1,000.



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pilot be successful."

By eighth grade, many students already know that they prefer and/or excel in smaller, non-traditional learning environments like QMC, said LoRicco. "That is the student population we want to enroll in this pilot program."

Currently under construction, the 2014 completion of a 45,000-square-foot addition to QVCC will increase the classroom spaces available to QMC students. Once finished, the QVCC addition will enable QMC to expand its enrollment to 225 students, including ninth grade if the pilot succeeds.

EASTCONN administers QMC for nine partner districts in northeastern Connecticut, but students from non-partner districts may enroll, LoRicco said. QMC also has slots available for 35 incoming 10th-graders for next fall. There are waiting lists for QMC's 11th and 12th grades.

To learn more about QMC's 2013-2014 ninth-grade pilot, or to apply for QMC's 10th-grade class, contact Principal Gino LoRicco at 860-412-4100 or at gloricco@eastconn.org. QMC applications are due by April 30, 2014.

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