

CONNECTIONS

Education News From Northeastern Connecticut

volume 26, number 4

www.eastconn.org

June 006

Head Start on Display



Marcia Elliot, Principal of the Borough Elementary School in Stafford (left), Michelle Halloran Gilman, Senior Assistant to Senator Chris Dodd (center), and Elizabeth Aschenbrenner, Director of Early Childhood Initiatives at EASTCONN (right), observe a preschool classroom at the Borough School.

This spring, Michelle Halloran Gilman, Senior Assistant to Senator Chris Dodd, traveled to Stafford to tour the universal preschool program at the Borough Elementary School. The Stafford program is a fully integrated in-school program. Eighteen Head Start children attend preschool alongside regular education students and their special education peers. Children and their families access the combined resources of the LEA, Head Start, the Borough Family Resource Center, the Connecticut School Readiness initiative, as well as many other local community service providers. Stafford is a delegate of the regional EASTCONN Head Start program, which was recognized with a Program of Excellence Award in December from the Boston regional office of the federal Head Start Bureau. [See *Connections*, January 2006.] For more information about Head Start or any early childhood initiatives, contact Elizabeth Aschenbrenner at 860-455-0707 or [easchenbrenner@eastconn.org](mailto: easchenbrenner@eastconn.org).

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Joy of Reading Program Gains National Recognition

With a creative eye, energy to spare, and an optimist's outlook, EASTCONN's Donna Drasch helps teachers and their students give back to their communities with positive service-learning projects.

And now one of those projects is getting national attention.

Drasch leads EASTCONN's Learn and Serve initiatives, which help local teachers build strong service-learning programs that are integrated into their curricula. Previous editions of *Connections* have highlighted some of Drasch's service-learning projects, including the Pomfret Footbridge (November 2005), Cowboy Café (April 2005), and The Joy of Reading (January 2003).



A fifth-grade Joy of Reading student shares some special reading moments with her preschool "buddy" during a recent class visit.

Service-learning is an instructional strategy that creates opportunities for students to apply classroom lessons to real-life problems. Since being authorized by federal legislation in 1990, millions of students have participated in Learn and Serve-funded projects across the nation. EASTCONN is one of four recipients of Learn and Serve grants through the Connecticut State Department of Education.

See **JOY OF READING**, page 4

Calendar of EASTCONN Events



JUNE 2006

29 & 30 Fundamentals for Literacy Achievement:
Engagement, Responsibility, Standards,
Community

JULY 2006

10 iConn: Connecticut's Digital Library in Your
Classroom
11 Word Basics for Educators
12 Word Tips and Techniques
13 Excel Basics for Educators
13 Using Picture Books to Build Vocabulary and
to Notice Author's Craft
14 Excel Tips and Techniques

AUGUST 2006

15 Digital Images in the Classroom
16 Classroom Web Page — Who Needs One?
22 What Does This Have to Do with Me? Using
Picture Books and Technology to Make
Connections

SEPTEMBER 2006

19 Analyzing Formative Assessment Data Using
Excel
20 Helping Students Understand and Effectively
Use Science Data, Grades 3-6
21 Using Excel to Develop Templates
21 Literacy Leaders Network Cafe
* November 30 and February 8
22 Child Safety and Crisis Response Training
27* Using the CT Preschool Curriculum and
Assessment Frameworks
*and October 20
29 Nature of Light: A Little Light Magic

Note: Workshops fill up quickly. Please reserve seats early. EASTCONN workshops are subject to change. Please e-mail the EASTCONN Conference Office at conferenceoffice@eastconn.org for more information about any of the meetings and workshops listed here. Register online for any of the above workshops at www.eastconn.org. Click on Workshops.



Above, Mary Jo Chretien (center), a Speech-Language Pathologist with EASTCONN Related Services, welcomed colleagues to a regional workshop in Hampton. In a rural area like northeastern Connecticut, many Related Services providers work as the only professional in their discipline in a school building or district. New alliances were formed this year among Related Services staff in the region, thanks to a professional development grant from the New Alliance Foundation. Speech-Language Pathologists, Occupational Therapists, and Physical Therapists met on a monthly basis for training on a variety of relevant topics. For more information or to be added to the mailing list, contact Mary Jo Chretien at 860-455-0029, ext. 4023 or mchretien@eastconn.org.



Above, a creative writing class at EASTCONN's ACT in Willimantic produces prize-winning poets. ACT (Arts at the Capitol Theater) students were again well represented at the regional 2006 IMPAC- Connecticut State University Young Writers Competition. Chelsea Love (Windham) took first place in poetry for the second year in a row, receiving a \$100 prize. Love also won the Connecticut Writing Project and her work will be published. She plans to study creative writing in college. Other semi-finalists from ACT at this year's IMPAC Awards were Luke Benjamin (Lebanon), Anna Cordon (Coventry), Lydia Jones (Hampton), Hilary Osborn (Columbia), Katie Paul (Ashford), and Jared White (Windham Center). ACT writing teacher Lisa Taylor said that a class in contests, publication and portfolio will be offered next year to assist students in pursuing their creative writing. Contact ACT Principal John Mayer at 860-465-5636 or jmayer@eastconn.org.

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AP Grant Program Gains Momentum in Cities Across Connecticut



After only two years, *Project Opening Doors*, a federally funded program aimed at increasing the number of disadvantaged high school students enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, is having a positive effect in seven participating Connecticut cities, EASTCONN officials recently announced.

Since 2004, Connecticut has received about \$1.37 million in federal grant money for *Project Opening Doors*, a program intended to increase the number of AP and pre-AP courses offered in Connecticut *ERG I* districts. The *ERG I* districts include 21 comprehensive high schools in the cities of Bridgeport, Hartford, New Britain, New Haven, New London, Waterbury and Windham.

Project Opening Doors aims to increase by 10% both the number of disadvantaged students taking AP courses and exams, and the number of students receiving an AP exam grade of 3 or higher. The College Board sponsors the AP program, which offers students intensive, college-level courses and exams in high school. Scores on AP exams range from one to five and many colleges grant course-credit to incoming freshman who score three or higher.

The benefits of Advanced Placement have been well documented by the College Board, said Helen Weingart, EASTCONN's AP Grant Coordinator, who noted that research shows that just by taking courses, students improve their chances of succeeding in college. Other advantages are emerging as schools focus more on their advanced placement initiatives.

EASTCONN is collaborating with Jean Purcell at the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) to coordinate the statewide *Project Opening Doors* AP initiative.

"The last two years of intense work with our targeted districts has paid off," said Purcell. "We are beginning to close the achievement gap with some very small, but significant, steps."



Greg Walker, a consultant to the AP grant, directs teachers.

Based on the successful strategies implemented as part of the *Project Opening Doors* grant, the CSDE and EASTCONN have just learned that they have received another federal AP grant involving not just Connecticut, but all six New England states. [Note: Look for more information in the fall *Connections*.]

"Collaboration between the CSDE and EASTCONN has been a critical component in the success of this [*Project Opening Doors*] initiative," said the CSDE's Purcell. "Together, EASTCONN and the CSDE have provided resources, technical expertise, and encouragement to galvanize key stakeholders in the seven [city] school districts around this critical issue."



Teachers and administrators recently reviewed PSAT data used to identify students with the potential to successfully complete AP coursework, as well as to reveal curricular strengths and weaknesses.

The CSDE recently reported some exciting statistics to the Connecticut Board of Education on AP participation and student performance in the seven *Project Opening Doors* cities:

- The number of students in the cities of Bridgeport, Hartford, New Britain, New Haven, New London, Waterbury and Windham scoring three or better on an AP exam increased 11.6 percent, from 610 in 2004 to 681 in 2005.
- The percentage of exams scoring three or higher in those same seven city districts improved from 33.8 percent in 2004 to 34.1 percent in 2005. While this improvement was better than that recorded for the other districts in the state, the other schools reported 75.1 percent achieving a score of three or better.
- The number of tenth-grade students in those same seven Connecticut cities who took the PSAT grew from 584 in October 2003 to 6,145 in October 2004. In October 2004, 55.6 percent of tenth-graders in the seven districts took the PSAT compared to only 38 percent in the other districts.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: To obtain more Connecticut AP statistics, visit the EASTCONN Web site at www.eastconn.org, enter the Teaching & Learning Portal and click on AP].

Since its inception 50 years ago, AP has seen its student participation grow from 1,200 students for whom only three AP courses were available (in biology, chemistry and American history), to more than one million students, who today can choose

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Drasch and The Joy of Reading program, now in its fourth year, have garnered national attention. The program was highlighted in *Growing to Greatness (G2G) 2006*, a publication of the National Youth Leadership Council cataloging the state of service-learning across the nation.

Rich Cairn, author of a service-learning study at the state level, provided the Connecticut overview for the *G2G* publication. Cairn is at the Hampshire Educational Collaborative in Massachusetts.

"EASTCONN's Joy of Reading program enables schools to address students' fundamental academic needs through the exciting, hands-on, community-oriented method that is service-learning at its best," said Cairn. "Without the sort of help that EASTCONN provides, especially in these demanding times for schools, this kind of quality learning experience becomes all too rare."

The Joy of Reading was also showcased at the National Service Learning Conference and has been replicated in several schools.

The Joy of Reading is a literacy program whose participating fifth-graders prepare lessons and read aloud to preschool "buddies." The program is intended to strengthen each preschooler's language and literacy skills, while improving the fifth-grader's reading fluency, comprehension skills and self-esteem.

"My students take what they are doing very seriously because they know it is having an impact on the real world."

— Nicole LaRochelle, Windham

Nicole LaRochelle teaches the fifth- and sixth-grade looping class at Windham Middle School, where she has collaborated with Drasch on The Joy of Reading for four years.

"Students take their role as 'teachers' very seriously," LaRochelle said. "They are rarely absent on visiting and planning days and put a huge amount of effort into their book selection, projects and questions."

"My students take what they are doing very seriously because they know it is having an impact on the real world," LaRochelle said. "They never ask, 'Why do I have to do this?'" This year, 45 students are participating in LaRochelle's Joy of Reading program.

LaRochelle enthusiastically describes Drasch's upbeat, collaborative approach.

"She is amazing!!" LaRochelle said. "She is full of great ideas and is a constant positive force in my classroom... Most of all, she is always there, by e-mail, phone or in person, to help problem solve and offer encouragement."

Drasch attributes the success of the project to the dedication of staff, administrators and especially the students at Windham Middle School.

"In service-learning, the student learns how to translate classroom knowledge and skill into real-life situations," said Drasch, "while also giving something back to the people, organization, or community."

For more information on service-learning contact Donna Drasch at 860-455-0707 or ddrasch@eastconn.org.

Workshops Can Boost Teachers' Science Skills

New and renewed emphasis on science achievement, both nationally and at the state level, has educators scrambling to boost their own science skills. And EASTCONN is responding to help teachers in a variety of ways.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) reports that long-term trends show a significant decline in U.S. student completion of national science and engineering degrees, relative to other countries.

NCLB has imposed new requirements for academic content standards in both science and assessments. Connecticut published revised science frameworks in October 2004 and the Science Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) will be administered in the spring of 2008 to fifth and eighth-graders statewide.

In the *2000 National Survey of Science and Mathematics Education*, Horizon Research reports that "fewer than one-third of elementary teachers reported feeling very well qualified to teach each of the science disciplines," and "almost three-fourths perceive a substantial need for professional development to deepen their own content knowledge."

Now, EASTCONN is offering teacher support with numerous upcoming workshops and presentations.

Summer training begins on June 8, 2006, when a full day of workshops will help prepare teachers for "Implementing the Connecticut Science Framework: Curriculum Embedded Performance Tasks." This fall, EASTCONN will also offer science teachers a series of workshops to help create lessons aligned with the standards that can be taught in a regular classroom with easily obtainable supplies. Teachers will leave with yearlong standards-based packets and the ability to re-create inquiry-based science labs in their own classrooms.



Middle school students hone their scientific problem-solving skills.

Also, watch for news of a presentation this fall by Doug Lewellyn, author of the nationally acclaimed publication, *Science as Inquiry*.

For more information about EASTCONN's science conference and workshops, go to www.eastconn.org and click on "workshops" or e-mail your questions to conferenceoffice@eastconn.org. For more information about how EASTCONN can support your science initiatives, contact Bruce Storm at 860-455-0707 or bstorm@eastconn.org.

EASTCONN's Northeast Challenge School: Putting Research Into Practice and Modeling Success

by Maureen Crowley, Director of Planning and Development, EASTCONN

"It's hard to leave – I mean where else will you see students and teachers playing football together in the rain and mud, and having a blast. Staff have really helped me figure out who I am. They taught me to have faith in myself; to look at the positives – and then to just go out there and do it."

— Michael, a Northeast Challenge School senior



Northeast Challenge School teacher Erica Michalski takes a break with Michael, a graduating senior, during a recent senior project practice session at EASTCONN's Hampton facility.

Michael's comments underscore components that are crucial to effective teaching and learning practice at the high school level.

Working with the School Redesign Network at Stanford University, EASTCONN is helping to facilitate conversations about improving the learning culture within high schools. While the Stanford research indicates that there is no single "right way" for schools to be designed, common features associated with better schools are clear. On a visit to the Northeast Challenge School, an alternative high school in Brooklyn, Conn., several of these research-based positive features were evident.

Teachers and students of the Northeast Challenge School agree that the quality of the personalized learning environment is critical. Stanford researchers say that the problem with many high schools is that teachers are isolated, have too little time and see too many students.

With the assistance of Nancy Vitale, EASTCONN's Curriculum-Integration Specialist, Northeast Challenge School teachers have cultivated a strong sense of community and collegiality through common planning days, close collaboration and curriculum development. Each year, the teachers (with student input) choose a unifying curricular theme and weave it throughout each academic discipline.

Last year, for example, the Roaring Twenties was chosen and using the classic book, *A Farewell to Arms*, the teaching team found ways to excite student learning – through science lessons on medical emergency procedures, medicines, and

amputations, nursing skills and field experiences. Teachers and students immersed themselves in a multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural, Roaring Twenties experience. This cooperative learning culture resonated with students. As one student put it, "I like all of these teachers. They work together, like a team. In each learning center, here, we know that the teacher cares about our success."

Besides the small, personalized environment, teachers and students note that the hands-on, project-based approach, a robust component of the Program, is significant to successful learning outcomes. Over time, students have built log cabins and footbridges at the region's nature trails, conducted authentic science experiments, managed a greenhouse, and continue to oversee a salmon project. Much of the learning is coordinated and integrated across all disciplines, with each project acting as a learning-mediator:

"We all love science here," Michael said. "Our science teacher [Kevin Segar] – I don't know – no one's like him. We do experiments, projects that take us out into the world to study what's going on in our ponds, lakes, vernal pools. So we do experiments outdoors, indoors; talk about them, explore and read about environmental problems. We meet with guest speakers. Then we go through the cycle again – more research, more discussion; watch a movie – share our information with others. It's always interesting the way our teachers pull this together."

Stanford's Redesign Network talks about adaptive pedagogy as a central feature for learning success. Adaptive pedagogy involves using multiple instructional strategies, different pathways, to support learning. From whole class lectures to guided inquiry, small group work, projects, and experiments, students benefit from a variety of rich learning opportunities. Starting with where students are and helping them make sense of their learning is key.

Maintaining continuous relationships, including advisory and counseling ones, is another cornerstone of the Redesign Network's learning principles. Building relationships with students over four years insures that teachers have a profound understanding of each student's skills, strengths, needs, interests, hobbies, etc. Students need to feel that every teacher is invested in helping them meet high expectations. Counselors provide both a weekly class and individual sessions for students during their senior year.

In the end, there's a great deal to be said for the power of effective practice in helping students realize their potential. Each May, the Northeast Challenge program's graduating students present their senior projects to the public.

Michael selected the study of alternative high schools as his senior research project. "You know," he said; "this project started out as a way for me to say thank you to the program and my teachers. But my senior project advisor helped me see the bigger picture, helped me think through what a research project should be . . . I've learned that alternative schools aren't for everyone

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from among 35 different AP course subjects.

At the Wilbur Cross School in New Haven, AP Coordinator Linda Powell said her district was successfully using AP as a tool to promote conversations within and across departments.

“A strong AP coordinator is key to success,” noted EASTCONN’s Weingart. “With a small investment you can get a huge return,” she said.

Districts with coordinated AP initiatives are seeing an immediate impact on the numbers of students enrolling, the numbers taking the exams, and the numbers passing the exams, officials said. A strategy used by many schools is an outreach program for parents and students to help them understand the benefits of taking an AP course. Another strategy is coordinating data analysis from a variety of student assessments, including CAPT, to get a clearer picture of student preparation for AP courses.

For example, Windham, one of the *Project Opening Doors* districts, used Vertical Teaming to determine that students in grades six through 10 were under-prepared in geometry. As a result, Windham used a mini-grant to purchase Geometer Sketchpad software to help tackle the problem.

A variety of different strategies are being employed across Connecticut to affect AP enrollment and test outcomes. Participating high schools are eligible for mini-grants to address specific local needs; new AP teachers can be mentored by an experienced AP teacher for the first three years; Virtual High School (VHS) allows students access to courses that they might not otherwise be able to take; professional development specific to content courses is available along with Summer Institutes; training in Writing Strategies is available to all teachers, while districts may also use Vertical Teaming, a curriculum-focused approach aimed at evaluating the academic rigor in grades six through 12. Other professional development opportunities are targeted to administrators of AP project schools that are working on school improvement.

For more information about Advanced Placement contact Helen Weingart, EASTCONN AP Project Coordinator, at 860-455-0707 or hweingart@eastconn.org.

NORTHEAST CHALLENGE continued from page 5

– but this Program, I don’t know. I think an awful lot of kids would benefit...I’m nervous about leaving here. But it’s going to be okay; the teachers here told me that I can come back. I’ll always have their support. It makes a big difference to me, knowing that.”

As the research illustrates, personalized, continuous relationships, in robust learning environments that feature high standards, performance-based assessment, authentic curriculum and collaborative planning and professional development, are important components for success. At the Northeast Challenge Program, there is clear evidence of the success of these features in practice.

To learn more about the Redesign Network and high school redesign research, call or e-mail Bruce Storm, EASTCONN’s Deputy Director, at 860-455-0707, or bstorm@eastconn.org. To visit the Northeast Challenge School, call or e-mail Denise Davis-Resonina at 860-779-5618 or dresonina@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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