

CONNECTIONS

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Arun Gandhi, second from left, and Aida Mansoor, center, called for understanding and peace during an EASTCONN forum.

Arun Gandhi & Aida Mansoor Advocate for Peace, Human Dignity

In May, EASTCONN welcomed two world-class activists who shared warnings and inspiring personal stories, as they called for new ways to resolve religious, political and cultural conflicts.

The forum, "Peace, Diversity and Human Dignity," was presented by EASTCONN's Student Services division, and drew nearly 100 participants. They heard presentations by Arun Gandhi, founder of the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Non-Violence and grandson of the legendary Mohandas K. "Mahatma" Gandhi, and by Aida Mansoor, a well-known Community Chaplain and former president of the Muslim Coalition of Connecticut.

As advocates for non-violence and respect for all cultures, races and religions, Mansoor's and Gandhi's personal insights captivated the audience, which included 30 high school students.

"Poverty, anger and ignorance are among the greatest threats to world peace," Gandhi said. "I don't think any country can live in peace if the rest of the world is living in poverty. The stability and security of any nation depends on the security and stability of all nations ... otherwise, a destructive cycle of resentment and anger among the poor threatens the entire world."

After himself experiencing prejudice and hatred under South African apartheid, Gandhi said his grandfather taught him about the importance of seeking non-violent alternatives.

"To build a culture of non-violence, we must first understand violence, and then work to find solutions." His grandfather taught him to practice mindfulness, which helped him transform his outlook and find peace.

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Willimantic's New Library Satellite Promotes Access to Love of Books

The Willimantic Public Library has opened a satellite location at Windham Heights, a housing complex on the outskirts of downtown, giving children and families greater access to learning resources and more than 2,000 book titles.

The brainchild of recently retired Willimantic librarian Gail Zeiba and EASTCONN's Carolyn Stearns, the library outpost opened last fall and is going strong, thanks to commitments from EASTCONN, the Vesta Housing Authority, which manages Windham Heights, and the Town of Windham.

"This was a natural next step in our efforts to meet the learning needs of kids," said Carolyn Stearns, coordinator of the EASTCONN-operated Community Arts Connection (CAC) after-school program at Windham Heights. "Many of our students had never been to the library before but we just didn't have enough funding to make trips to the downtown public library."

"Bringing the library to where the people are is an important thing," said Willimantic librarian Carlos Chuquizuta, who helps staff the new outpost. "We are reaching an entirely new population – a population that we don't often see at the Willimantic Public Library. It's very fulfilling."

"Children and parents in our community have more access to books to take home," said Mercedes Arroyo, Vesta Housing Authority Resident Service Coordinator. "Families are happy. Some of them don't have transportation to get to the public library in Willimantic, but here they can come more often."

In addition to residents of Windham Heights, the library serves nearly 70 elementary and middle-school students in the EASTCONN-run after-school program, which provides tutoring, homework assistance, creative activities, field trips, and more.



Willimantic librarian Carlos Chuquizuta is connecting Windham Heights children and families to a love of reading.

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Ashford Principal Troy Hopkins: Principal of the Year



Rebecca Aubrey: World Language Teacher of the Year

Ashford Educators Earn Big Awards

Troy Hopkins, Principal of Ashford School, has been named 2018 Elementary School Principal of the Year by the Connecticut Association of Schools (CAS).

An educator for nearly 30 years, Hopkins is completing his sixth year as principal of Ashford School.

"Being named principal of the year means great things are happening in Ashford," said Hopkins. "It validates the efforts of the whole school community to improve the educational experience for all of our learners, kids and adults."

According to a CAS press release, Hopkins has spearheaded a number of successful programs in Ashford, including the implementation of project-based learning and a STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) curriculum.

Rebecca Aubrey, the Spanish teacher at Ashford School, was named World Language Teacher of the Year by the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (NCTFL) and the Connecticut Council of Language Teachers (COLT). Aubrey has taught at Ashford School for five years.

"I am passionate about teaching cultural competency through a language that I love," said Aubrey, who is also the first-ever Connecticut teacher to be a finalist for National World Language Teacher of the Year, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' top teacher award.

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Students have daily access to the library, for recreational reading or research purposes.

"My favorite thing about the library is picking out books and then getting to save them until I want to read them again during reading time," said Joselin, a third-grader in the CAC program.

The satellite's book collections include children's stories, young adult fiction, biographies, parent-teacher and bilingual selections. A new parenting skills section is in the works.

"An interesting development is watching students begin to curate the young adult section," said Stearns. "They developed an interest in these books far beyond what I had expected."

Shelves and books were donated by the Willimantic Library and a grant purchased a laptop/scanner used to

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"Because we live in a culture of violence, we tend to respond to every situation with violence," he said. "But when you have control over your mind, you can use your energy constructively and then share non-violence across the globe, among all races and religions."

Aida Mansoor's presentation explored the facts about Islam and the Muslim religion, as she clarified misperceptions and identified false narratives that incite hatred and fear, but that are rampant across mainstream Western media and the intranet.

"Why must we choose a group we love to hate?" she asked. "There is so much misinformation out there. It's important to educate ourselves about the Muslim faith and Islam and to dispel the myths and misinformation."

Distressingly, acts of terrorism that are attributed to Muslim extremists are often reported as though the extremists are devout, practicing Muslims, she said.

"In fact, the main pillars of the Muslim faith direct us to love God and love our neighbor," Mansoor said. "Not everything a Muslim does is based on religion, and not every Muslim is religious. Violence is about issues of control, not issues of religion."

Mansoor's presentation was by turns serious and humorous, as she underscored the challenges facing practicing Muslims in America today.

"We all need to know the facts. We need to break down walls. We need to learn how to bring communities together. We desperately need to know. We should rejoice in our diversity."



Aida Mansoor got a chance to chat with attendees, following her presentation outlining facts about Islam and the Muslim faith.

catalog new books.

Two days a week, the library is staffed by bilingual Willimantic librarians, offering the same features as any public library, including free library cards valid at any library in Connecticut.

"We've created ease of access for families," said Stearns. "They can avoid taking public transportation into Willimantic, it's easy to take out books ... and there is a level of comfort for Spanish-speaking families."

She added, "This location has created greater understanding and a bridge between the satellite and the main library branch."

"If given access to books, most kids will begin to enjoy reading, and they may read more often," said Chuquizuta. "Plus, kids are the future. Exposing them to the library here will help keep libraries alive."

Contact Carolyn Stearns at cstearns@eastconn.org.

"Kids are the future. Exposing them to the library here will help keep libraries alive."

Editor/Writer: Teddie Sleight, Director of Marketing & Communications, tsleight@eastconn.org
Writer: Kerry Markey, Marketing & Communications Specialist, kmarkey@eastconn.org
Graphic Designer: Angela Dean, adean@eastconn.org
EASTCONN Administration: Gary S. Mala, Executive Director, gmala@eastconn.org
EASTCONN, 376 Hartford Turnpike, Hampton, CT 06247, 860-455-0707 Fax: 860-455-0691

EASTCONN Connections

Windham Magnet School Lottery Goes Paper-Free for the First Time

EASTCONN has partnered with Windham Public Schools to support the district's Charles H. Barrows STEM Academy magnet school lottery this year, moving a complex paper application process to a simpler, online platform for the first time.

"We are very pleased with how the lottery went this year," said Superintendent of Windham Schools Dr. Patricia Garcia. "It took a team effort."

With input from district staff, EASTCONN's Technology Solutions division developed a software portal to accept online applications, communicate with families and run the official lottery. The process served 516 applicants.

"The new online platform made our lottery process go from good to great," said Garcia.

"There are numerous benefits to this new process," said EASTCONN's Director of Technology Solutions Andy DePalma. "Applicants saved in postage and communication was consistent across the board. Families could reference the platform for lottery updates, instead of calling to check their status."

"Windham families were better informed," said Garcia.

"Information was more accessible and timely - parents were receiving immediate responses using the online platform. We could resolve issues much quicker."

Going paper-free eliminated manual entry of paper applications, which allowed the data validation process to begin earlier.

"The online application allowed for more cross checks in the data," said Garcia. "We could pinpoint issues electronically, that manually we were unable to do."

**"The new online platform made our lottery process go from good to great."
- Dr. Patricia Garcia, Windham Superintendent**



Windham Superintendent Dr. Patricia Garcia, left, meets with EASTCONN's Andy DePalma and Kerin Griffin to discuss the lottery.

EASTCONN hosted numerous application events at locations throughout Windham to assist individuals with using the online portal, offer Spanish translation services and answer lottery questions.

"We were delighted to be able to support the future success of Windham students through this lottery and hope to expand the use of these services and software to other programs and districts," said DePalma.

EASTCONN's Technology Solutions division provides member districts with a comprehensive array of services that support and enhance the implementation of technology in teaching and learning. They also offer schools customized, cloud-based software solutions for data collection and analysis.

Learn more from Andy DePalma at adeplama@eastconn.org.

Aspiring Administrators Enroll in New 092 CCSU/EASTCONN Program



Teachers are able to pursue their CCSU Sixth-Year Certificates thanks to a new partnership between EASTCONN and CCSU.

On a recent spring evening after a long day of teaching, a small cadre of determined educators arrived at EASTCONN's Hampton Conference Center to continue their own professional learning.

Led by EASTCONN's Dr. Antoinette Ryan, the group explored topics like how to design more powerful, teacher-centered professional learning, develop teacher leadership and plan for instructional improvement.

Eleven educators are enrolled in northeastern Connecticut's newest Sixth-Year Certificate in Educational Leadership program,

the result of an EASTCONN partnership with Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) Department of Educational Leadership, Policy and Instructional Technology.

The CCSU Sixth-Year Certificate is a post-master's program for experienced teachers who seek their Intermediate Administration and Supervision 092 Certification, which will be issued by CSDE. In Connecticut, 092 Certification is required for any educational administrative position. The CCSU/EASTCONN program is taught in person at both EASTCONN and CCSU, as well as online.

"Apart from the rigorous academic aspects, the amount of learning this group gets from one another is really what makes this kind of cohort work," said Ryan, EASTCONN's Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, and a professor at CCSU. The CCSU/EASTCONN 092 collaboration was established to provide easier, regional access to a high-quality 092 program.

The two-year CCSU/EASTCONN 092 program concentrates on leadership issues that are unique to small, rural school districts, Ryan said. Cohort members are from Killingly, Lebanon, Plainfield, Sprague, Stafford, Sterling, Windham, and EASTCONN magnets.

"Professionally, I have learned a tremendous amount about leadership in terms of how to lead staff in the change process, how to supervise and evaluate staff, and how to keep student growth at the forefront of our decision-making," said Jill Shamback, a reading specialist at the Sterling Community School. "Along with the professional growth, this program at EASTCONN is very convenient. I also really enjoy the opportunity to connect with other professionals in the area to discuss similar issues that we face. The professors have been very responsive to our needs."

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EASTCONN's Annual Board Meeting Features Student Speakers

About 70 people attended EASTCONN's Annual Meeting in May, featuring presentations by EASTCONN magnet high school students, and recognition for employees whose contributions to the agency and lengths of service have been exceptional. Led for the first time by EASTCONN's new Executive Director Gary S. Mala, the meeting began with a convivial welcome, as EASTCONN executive board members joined staff to hear a reading by an Arts at the Capitol Theater (ACT) award-winning student poet, and a personal story of success from ACT's student body president. Quinebaug Middle College's (QMC) valedictorian shared details of her inspiring personal and academic journey, while another QMC student presented his student team's award-winning Eastern Advance Manufacturing Alliance (EAMA) video, highlighting a local manufacturer. Afterward, the EASTCONN executive board convened for its annual business meeting.



Professional Note

Kristin Hempel, EASTCONN's Associate Director of Adult and Community Education Programs, has been invited to represent Connecticut at the New England Literacy Resource Center (NELRC). The mission of the NELRC is to strengthen adult literacy services.



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"The best part of the 092 program has been the sense of fellowship and community I have experienced," said Bethany Pomerantz, a social studies teacher at EASTCONN's Arts at the Capitol Theater (ACT) magnet high school. "I have learned so much from my professors and the other cohort members. The program has greatly broadened and enhanced my understanding of the field of education, adult learning and student learning."

"Since I have been enrolled in this program, I have felt my confidence increase," said Betty Wengloski, a special education team leader for Windham Public Schools. "I am applying my new learning in my role as a Special Education Team Leader. Having a cohort in close proximity to my school district is just one of the many positive reasons why this program is working for me."

To learn more, contact Dr. Ryan at tryan@eastconn.org.