

CONNECTIONS

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ACT Principal Sarah Mallory, far right, observes a teacher's classroom practice, using an evaluation plan that includes portfolios.

Praise for ACT Portfolio-Based Educator Evaluation Pilot

Now in its second year, an innovative educator evaluation pilot at one of EASTCONN's magnet high schools has drawn praise from teachers and administrators alike, who say they are pleased with the program's results, and in particular, with its teacher portfolio component.

Two years ago, EASTCONN implemented professional portfolios as a new option within its Professional Learning and Evaluation Plan, which was designed to align with state requirements, and create pathways for the continuous learning and advancement of teachers throughout their careers. The EASTCONN Plan represented EASTCONN's commitment to incorporating current, high-quality research into the creation of professional learning opportunities that improve teacher practice and student outcomes. At the plan's heart are teacher portfolios, a tool that can help track professional progress over time.

Educators at EASTCONN's Arts at the Capitol Theater (ACT) arts magnet high school in downtown Willimantic chose to pilot the portfolio evaluation plan, which aligns well with the reflective, analytical and research-based components of Connecticut's TEAM program, which supports and helps retain new teachers.

"The original EASTCONN plan required a lot of filling-in of boxes and plugging-in of data that would be used to calculate a final, summative rating of a teacher's practice," said Toni Ryan,

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Videoconference Saves Time & Money, Eases Student Shyness



Here, Windham students who participate in an Interdistrict Grant meet their Brooklyn peers for the first time on a big-screen TV.

Take a group of enthusiastic fifth-graders being taught by devoted teachers. Next, add a lot of altruistic, community-minded activities. Add a dash of cool, new technology, and what do you get?

With a little luck, you get the enthusiastic response every teacher hopes for.

That's what teachers at Brooklyn Middle School and Windham's Charles H. Barrows STEM Academy experienced during a recent EASTCONN Interdistrict Grant program, when both schools used EASTCONN's new videoconferencing capacity to bring their fifth-graders together for the first time.

Nearly 150 fifth-graders who are taking part in EASTCONN's year-long Creating Community Builders Interdistrict Grant program were able to chat, ask questions, and meet peers from their participating sister school, using EASTCONN's high-quality video equipment and know-how to provide real-time interaction during students' first virtual get-together this fall.

"The videoconference went extremely well," said Lynn Paglione, who facilitates the Creating Community Builders grant for EASTCONN. "The teachers were impressed by the high level of student involvement and engagement. We all were. The kids were incredibly attentive in both schools. There was this wonderful, exciting energy that emerged. Students can't wait to see one another

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Ed.D., EASTCONN's Director of Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment and Accreditation.

"But we found that teachers didn't feel like they had a connection to the whole evaluation process. It was something they had to get through. With this pilot, teachers feel much more connected to the purpose of evaluation, and to their own desire to enhance their professional practice through an evaluation system. For our teachers, it's not about that number at the end, it's about 'What have I learned,' 'How did I improve my practice?,' 'How did I improve my students' outcomes?' and 'Where do I go from here?' The portfolio helps them answer those questions."

According to Ryan, teacher portfolios have helped create a sense of ownership among ACT teachers, as they build a professional repository of information related to their practice, and track the research they've done and the progress both they and their students have made over time.

"The portfolio evaluation process has allowed me to provide much more targeted feedback to teachers regarding goals that they have for their own practice and for their students," said Sarah Mallory, ACT's principal. "We're able to brainstorm and research specific instructional strategies to try in the classroom and they're able to reflect on these trials in their portfolios. This process encourages risk-taking, growth and reflection on the part of teachers and their students, and has the added benefit of creating an artifact (the portfolio), which teachers can use as a resource down the road."

"It results in a much richer conversation," Ryan said. "The observation moves away from an isolated data point, a moment in time, to something that has a very purposeful connection to an educator's professional goals."

"The portfolio was easy and useful," said ACT math teacher Marcia LoRicco, a pilot participant. "I collected work as I went along. At the end, I was able to look back on the work and write a reflection. It was all physically right in front of me, and I could see both my growth and my students' growth ... With the portfolio, I could go through the domain, step by step, and easily find what applied and what didn't. I did not have to click, link by link, to remind myself what I had uploaded," she said, referring to the traditional, platform-based evaluation process.

"I think that the use of portfolios has been extremely helpful in the evaluation process," said ACT science teacher Rebecca Weir. "It has helped me develop my questions better and given me an opportunity to see the research process and development of my goal. I think that it is also much better to actually be able to see the changes in student work instead of just quantifying data and putting it into a spreadsheet."

Ryan said EASTCONN's ACT evaluation pilot still requires teacher observations. But teachers can ask observers to focus on specific aspects of their practice that are related to their portfolios. Post-observation conferences provide a forum for discussing aspects of the professional practice rubric, and for reflecting on goals.

Learn more about the ACT portfolio pilot from Toni Ryan at tryan@eastconn.org.

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Northeastern Connecticut students who will be high-school age in 2017-2018 can apply now for seats in EASTCONN's magnet schools.

Recruiting Under Way for EASTCONN Magnet High Schools

Arts at the Capitol Theater (ACT) and Quinebaug Middle College (QMC), EASTCONN's magnet high schools, are recruiting students for 2017-2018.

Both magnet high schools are designed for non-traditional, motivated students who are independent learners, and for whom the hometown high school experience just isn't enough.

At ACT, located in a beautiful, working theater, students with a keen interest in Creative Writing, Acting, Theater Production (costume and set design, lighting and sound), Audio/Video studies and Dance attend small classes in a rigorous academic learning environment infused with the arts. Students may take free, for-credit college courses at ECSU and QVCC in Willimantic.

At QMC, housed on the campus of Quinebaug Valley Community College (QVCC) in Danielson, students choose from a STEM and Humanities-rich high school curriculum in a college-campus setting. They take free, for-credit QVCC classes, side-by-side with college students, while earning their high school degree in QMC's state-of-the-art classrooms and labs. Students may also take free, for-credit UCONN courses, while earning their high school degree.

Contact ACT Principal Sarah Mallory at 860-465-5636, or at smallory@eastconn.org, or visit www.eastconn.org/act. To learn more about QMC, contact QMC Principal Gino LoRicco at 860-932-4040, gloricco@eastconn.org, or visit www.eastconn.org/qmc.



Dan Rothstein: Teaching Students How to Ask Effective Questions, March 27, at EASTCONN



Dan Rothstein

Educators from all content areas are invited to attend the Connecticut Conference on Leading Student-Centered Learning Through Effective Questioning with presenter Dan Rothstein on Monday, March 27, 2017, from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., at EASTCONN's Conference Center, 376 Hartford Turnpike, Hampton.

In partnership with EASTCONN, Rothstein, of The Right Question Institute, will lead a day-long session on best practices in questioning, during which educators will learn a simple strategy for teaching students how to take charge of their own

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learning by asking, refining and using their own questions to drive learning. Participants will work closely with Rothstein, co-author of the best-selling book, *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions*. Educators will explore how this questioning strategy is stimulating student curiosity, increasing student engagement, promoting deeper learning and helping to build democratic habits of mind.

Workshop fee of \$125 per person includes breakfast and lunch. Fee for district teams of 3 or more is \$99 per person. Register by March 20. Contact Paula Hanlon to register your team, at phanlon@eastconn.org, or 860-455-1589.



A Shiny New Classroom for Plainfield Early Head Start Kids

Plainfield-area families and children who participate in EASTCONN's Early Head Start program have access to a bright, new learning environment, following renovations to the Early Head Start classroom in Plainfield's Early Childhood Center.

"High-quality learning environments support young children so they can become successful learners, and this newly renovated space expands the number and quality of safe, healthy, interactive, engaging learning opportunities in our Early Head Start program," said Anne Sousa, EASTCONN's Assistant Director of Early Childhood Services. Sousa oversees EASTCONN's Early Head Start and Head Start programs.

The Early Head Start classroom's new maple furniture, reading areas, books, cribs, age-appropriate equipment and learning materials are now featured in an airy, spacious classroom that allows children to move easily from one activity to the next. Among student favorites? The tiny couch and reading area, the small-scale ladder and slide, and the "sensory table," where children explore the properties of different materials, like snow.

EASTCONN runs Head Start and Early Head Start in Plainfield, and in both Windham and Tolland counties. Early Head Start serves pregnant mothers, families and their children, from birth to age 3. Head Start serves families and children from ages 3 to 5. Both programs provide a continuum of services that include those related to education, health, nutrition, dental, mental health, school readiness and other assessments and supports. Learn more about Head Start and Early Head Start from Anne Sousa at asousa@eastconn.org.



Intently focused Early Head Start students explore the properties of snow in their new classroom, with help from their delighted teacher.

Opening of Adult Education & Employment Center Celebrated



Federal, state and local politicians joined EASTCONN and area business leaders to officially open the American Job Center East.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony at Tyler Square in Willimantic, attended by esteemed state, federal and local officials, recently celebrated the opening of Connecticut's first co-located American Job Center (AJC) and adult education program.

The co-location of AJC and EASTCONN's Adult Programs division at Tyler Square provides the region's adults with one-stop access to free education, employment and training programs.

"This day is really a landmark," U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal told a group of more than 80 people who attended the ribbon-cutting on a blustery, chilly day. "It's a major breakthrough for workforce training and opportunity in eastern Connecticut ... and is the first truly integrated workforce training establishment in the state. This place will open doors and create a vision for fulfilling the American dream. It's a partnership of federal, state and local governments."

"A job is the best social program," said U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney. "It gives you dignity and provides you with a way to support yourself and have a future for your family. That's really what this Willimantic job center is all about."

"This is an opportunity for all of us to maximize our local and regional state resources to bring free, high-quality programs and services in adult education, employment and training to the Willimantic region," said EASTCONN Executive Director Paula Colen.

"The programs inside this building will be able to change lives for folks in the greater Willimantic region," said John Beauregard, President and CEO of the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board, which administers the AJC.

"This facility exists because we all believe that we must provide education and job services to our community in a single facility, nurturing adults and their academic needs so they can secure future employment," said Rich Tariff, EASTCONN's Director of Adult Programs, who acted as master of ceremonies for the ribbon-cutting.

Among the guest speakers were EASTCONN board Chairman Herb Arico, state DOL Commissioner Scott D. Jackson, state Sen. Mae Flexer, state Rep. Susan Johnson, Windham Mayor Ernie Eldridge and the Windham Chamber of Commerce's Diane Nadeau. Tours of the facility and a luncheon followed the ribbon-cutting.

In 2015, as a cost-saving measure, the Connecticut Department of Labor (CTDOL) announced it would close half of its 12 American Job Centers statewide, Willimantic among them. Learn more from EASTCONN's Rich Tariff at rtariff@eastconn.org.

EASTCONN Wins CABA Awards

Several of EASTCONN's publications and communications materials have earned an award in the annual Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABA) communications awards contest.

EASTCONN has earned three first-place awards and three honorable mentions in CABA's 2016 Bonnie B. Carney Award of Excellence for Educational Communications contest.

Each year, school districts from across Connecticut are invited to enter examples of their publications, materials and online strategies to communicate more effectively with their schools and communities. The 100-plus school publications that earned a 2016 CABA award this year were on display at the annual CABA/CAPSS Conference, held in November in Mystic, Conn.



EASTCONN's Northeast Regional Program, a clinical day treatment school for K-12 in Killingly, celebrated its official opening this fall.



Last fall saw the official ribbon-cutting of EASTCONN's Mobile STEM Laboratory, which is open to all schools in the region.



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again on screen and in person." Four classes from Brooklyn and three from Barrows participated in the videoconference.

EASTCONN's Creating Community Builders grant, funded by the Connecticut State Department of Education, promotes service learning as a civic and cultural responsibility. All year, students connect with sister school pen pals and collaborate on projects that will improve life in their hometown communities. Students keep journals, read related books and discuss the broader social implications of service learning. They are also bused to each other's schools.

"The videoconferencing was a very valuable experience," said Brooklyn fifth-grade teacher Enrica Desabota, who is Brooklyn's point teacher for the grant. "It gave students from two different schools ... the opportunity to get to know each other. Students were, and continue to be, very excited and look forward to meeting up ... because they feel that they have already made a connection."

"The video conferencing was a great way for the students to 'show off' their school," said teacher Ann Pronovost, Barrows's point teacher. "Many students were excited to be on camera and it seemed as though they were also engaged in the back and forth nature of the questioning. It was a nice way to initiate a first meeting."

Interdistrict Grants connect children from different schools and communities to build tolerance and increase their academic success.

"As we face serious state cuts to our Interdistrict Grant funding, high-quality videoconferencing is an effective tool for facilitating student interaction," said Nancy Vitale, who coordinates EASTCONN's Interdistrict Grant programs.

"Videoconferencing eases the shyness that many kids experience when they meet face-to-face for the first time," she said. "It also creates transportation savings and fewer disruptions to the school day, because kids don't have to leave their classrooms." Funding cuts had delayed students' first face-to-face meeting until mid-year.

"Teachers were eager to use this technology tool with their students," said Kerin Griffin, a specialist with EASTCONN's Technology Web and Media Services. She taped students at Barrows, while EASTCONN's Tom Schenking oversaw Brooklyn's media needs.

"Just the process of being able to see their peers on screen was exciting," said Griffin. "The kids were so well-behaved and engaged. To bring this technology to life for kids was a neat experience. They all took turns, were respectful, and asked really great questions."

To learn more about Interdistrict Grants, contact Nancy Vitale at nvitale@eastconn.org. Learn more about EASTCONN videoconferencing services from Kerin Griffin at kgriffin@eastconn.org.

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