



CONNECTIONS

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Residency & Truancy Program Offers New Options to Schools



Residency and Truancy investigator Don Skewes, left, chatted recently with Voluntown Elementary School Principal Alicia Dawe.

A new, regional Residency and Truancy Pilot Program offers northeastern Connecticut school districts an affordable way to track and resolve student enrollment problems.

The new program, piloted since last fall by seven school districts and EASTCONN, provides the expertise of former law enforcement officer Don Skewes, as he investigates truancy and residency questions.

"It's been fantastic," said Voluntown Elementary School Principal Alicia Dawe. She said that Skewes's assistance had saved her district "many manpower hours."

"I think it's a fabulous idea and I'm just thrilled to have access to it," said Voluntown's Special Education Director Elaine Lee.

"Don [Skewes] is absolutely a follow-through guy. He has helped me solve three cases since mid-November. He's just very efficient."

Lee continued, "The positive outcome is that we're not taking in children that don't live in our district, so we're not using resources for students that aren't ours. It's very difficult for us to go out and figure out whether someone really lives here. Don helps us sort that out."

Districts that have used the new program include Ashford, Columbia, Eastford, Region 11, Region 19, Sprague and Volun-

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At the end of a busy school day, Mary R. Fisher Elementary School staff joined their Principal, Noveline Beltram, far right.

Leadership at Thompson's Fisher Elementary Brings Great Results to School Community

If you were to visit Mary R. Fisher Elementary School in Thompson, one of the first things you'd notice are all the cheery faces, bright halls, student artwork and welcoming signs. The building just radiates positive energy.

So, what makes it such an upbeat place?

The answer seems to start with school leadership.

During a recent roundtable with members of Fisher Elementary's leadership team, educators enthusiastically discussed their collaborative teaching strategies, school-wide activities that strengthen student and parental engagement, their students' academic successes and their confidence in the school's future.

Five years ago, the atmosphere was quite different in this small, preK-4 elementary school in northeastern Connecticut.

Following the 2008 release of disappointing CMT reading scores, Fisher Elementary was identified as a school "in need of improvement" by the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI).

The designation came as a shock.

"I think it truly shook us," said Principal Noveline Beltram, Fisher Elementary's buoyant, but no-nonsense, building leader. "It was a wake-up call."

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at www.eastconn.org and
Click on "Workshops, Events & Classes"

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town, in addition to EASTCONN.

"School districts are often forced to send out untrained staff to determine residency or handle truancy cases," said EASTCONN's Director of Education Services Thomas F. Cronin. "It's complicated and takes time. Proving residency or following through on truancy-related issues poses a serious challenge, especially in resource-scarce communities."

Since the fall, Skewes has handled and resolved a total of 28 truancy and residency cases for northeastern Connecticut districts. His services are available for a modest, per-pupil charge, based on a district's student population, Cronin said.

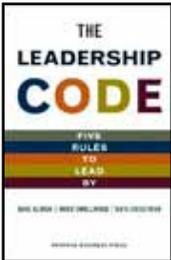
"My primary goal is to investigate and resolve these issues amicably by facilitating communication among students, families and schools," Skewes said.

With 25 years' experience as an officer and investigator for the Vernon and South Windsor police departments, Skewes was a crisis negotiator for the Capitol Region Emergency Service Team (CREST).

To learn more, contact EASTCONN's Thomas F. Cronin at 860-455-1512, or reach him at tcronin@eastconn.org.



EASTCONN Book Club Debuts, With Both Online and In-Person Meetings



EASTCONN invites northeastern Connecticut school administrators to join a new Administrators' Book Club to read literature that examines the core values of leadership.

Facilitated by EASTCONN's Coordinator of Professional Learning Amy Drowne, the group meets the last Thursday each month, and will alternate online and in-person discussions through June 27, 2013.

The January book discussion about *Leadership Code: Five Rules to Lead By*, by Dave Ulrich, will take place online, 3:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., on Thursday, Jan. 31, 2013.

For more information, or to participate, contact Amy Drowne, at 860-455-1591, or by e-mail at adrowne@eastconn.org.

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Area Leaders Share Concerns at URSA/NASA Legislative Breakfast



In December, EASTCONN hosted URSA/NASA's annual Legislative Breakfast at EASTCONN's Administrative offices in Hampton. Superintendents and 10 state legislators representing towns across northeastern Connecticut, including Senate President Pro Tempore Donald Williams and state Rep. Susan Johnson, above, attended the breakfast meeting where they discussed pending legislation and other regional concerns.



Diane M. Gozemba Joins Early Childhood Team as New Assistant Director



Diane Gozemba

Diane M. Gozemba has been named Assistant Director of EASTCONN's Early Childhood Initiatives. She will oversee EASTCONN's Head Start and Early Head Start programs across northeastern Connecticut.

"Diane's expertise in early childhood issues and education make her the perfect choice for this position," said EASTCONN Early Childhood Initiatives Director Elizabeth Aschenbrenner. "She will be a wonderful asset to our program."

Former chairman and coordinator of the Education Department at Mitchell College in New London, Gozemba has a master's in Infant/Parent Development and Early Childhood Teacher Education, as well as a master's in business administration. She received her undergraduate degree from Connecticut College.

"My goal is to help EASTCONN continue producing long-term, positive effects as we help prepare children for school and address the achievement gap in Connecticut," Gozemba said.

Contact Diane M. Gozemba at 860-455-0707, or at dgozemba@eastconn.org.

EASTCONN Professional Notes



*Mary Lou
Blanchette Smith*



Nancy Magnani

EASTCONN's Science Curriculum and Instruction Specialist **Mary Lou Blanchette Smith** and Grant Facilitator/Science Specialist **Nancy Magnani** will be co-presenters at the prestigious National Science Teachers Association's 2013 National Conference on Science Education, which will take place in San Antonio, Texas, in April. Smith and Magnani will co-present two workshops: "The Marshmallow Challenge: Using an Engineering Design Exercise to Get Kids Thinking Critically" and "Using LEGO Robotics to Introduce Technology to Primary Students."



*Barbara
Greenbaum*

Barbara Greenbaum, a creative writing teacher at EASTCONN's ACT arts magnet high school in Willimantic, has won the prestigious national 2012 Surdna Fellowship Award. Each year, 20 arts teachers from across the U.S. are chosen to receive the Surdna Fellowship, a grant program to support talented and committed teachers who help guide the artistic growth of high

school students. The award enabled Greenbaum to travel and write. She will use the rest of her award to purchase a laminator and book-binding machine for ACT writing students so they can publish their own works.



Good News!

Send us good news about your school or your teachers, and we will try to include it in our newsletter. Send suggestions to *Connections* editor Teddie Sleight at tsleight@eastconn.org, or call her at 860-455-1553.

Here is some good news we learned recently about EASTCONN-region teachers and schools:

■ Three area teachers were honored for excellence in 2012-2013 at the Danielson Rotary's 29th annual teacher-of-the-year awards ceremony. The Rotary acknowledged Killingly Intermediate School sixth-grade teacher Sara Schmidt; Brooklyn language arts teacher Gena Laplante; and H.H. Ellis Technical High School reading teacher Kristy Frye. Congratulations!

■ The *Norwich Bulletin* reports that Colchester's Bacon Academy has been listed on the College Board's third annual Advanced Placement District Honor Roll, a distinction that reflects Colchester's increased student enrollment in AP courses. In 2008, Bacon Academy had a total of 71 AP test-takers; in 2012, 333 students took AP tests. Colchester participates in EASTCONN's Project Opening Doors AP project.

Dr. Karin Hess Offers CCSS Expertise to NE CT Teachers



Area educators joined EASTCONN staff and Dr. Karin Hess, second from right, during a writing workshop in Hampton.

Preparing for the new Common Core State Standards for student writing, dozens of teachers from the EASTCONN region have been working with national assessment and curriculum expert Dr. Karin Hess to use Learning Progressions Frameworks to guide instructional decisions and unit planning.

"Because the new Common Core standards will not be implemented until 2014-2015, these workshops give teachers time to come up to speed," said Hess, a senior associate at The Center for Assessment in Dover, New Hampshire. Nationally known, Hess provides technical assistance to state Departments of Education, including Connecticut's, and to school districts across the country.

During the second of four workshops on teaching persuasive writing, 41 teachers got a head start on lesson planning and assessments for student writing. Held at EASTCONN's Conference Center in Hampton, the Hess writing session focused on instructional strategies and how the Learning Progressions Frameworks can be used to teach opinion and argument writing. Teachers were from Bolton, Windham, Region 8, Stafford, Killingly and EASTCONN.

Traditionally, persuasive writing instruction begins in middle- and high school, but according to Hess, the new standards require students to develop an understanding of persuasive writing in much earlier grades, using evidence-based, not just opinion-based, arguments.

"She's helping us to be forward-thinking and start increasing rigor," said Danielle Grimm, a first-year, seventh-grade teacher from Windham Public Schools.

Maryann McGillravy, Killingly's language arts coordinator, attended with a team to work on vertically aligning their student-writing curriculum.

"This has been excellent," McGillravy said. "Not only do we get to see what [the Common Core changes are] supposed to look like, but working with other districts allows us to see what they're doing and what's working. The beauty of being here is that we can ask questions and hear the answer directly from the expert."

To learn more about Dr. Karin Hess and workshops on Common Core State Standards, contact EASTCONN's Coordinator of Professional Learning Amy Drowne at 860-455-1591, or at adrowne@eastconn.org.

Yet, while the CMT reading scores had delivered a stunning setback, it also helped drive the school in a new direction.

In 2008, Thompson's third- and fourth-grade CMT scores met goals in math, but were below goal in reading, with 67% and 61%, respectively, at or above proficiency. The NCLB goal was 79%, and Fisher had not made Average Yearly Progress.

"We were forced to ask some hard questions," said Beltram, who became Fisher Elementary's principal in 2008.

Beltram quickly created internal school improvement leadership teams that set goals and implemented improvements in school-wide curricula and culture.

"These leadership teams have been critical to our success," Beltram said. "Now, we have a whole school of leaders."

Of great importance to their school improvement was the professional development provided by internal and external education experts, who helped build consistency across curricula, Beltram said. In particular, EASTCONN's Kelly Doubleday Bush, a data specialist, trained teachers in the collection and use of student data to track progress. Other key specialists followed.

"Now, if we say it, we must have the data to back it up," said leadership team member Georgia Turner, a third-grade teacher.

Classroom subjects like math and English, which had been previously unaligned across classrooms and grades, began to connect vertically and horizontally in more consistent ways. Struggling students were identified early and got support.

"We learned how to use assessment tools," said team member Donna Weaver, a reading specialist, "and we finally had a common language."

Continued next column

By 2010, Beltram said, Fisher had "turned the corner," and by 2012, their CMT reading scores had jumped to 80.2% at or above proficiency for third-graders and 86.8 % for fourth-graders. She said they are positioned well for 2013's CMTs, but must keep advancing to meet 2015 School Performance Index targets.

Carolyn Mezzoni, a team member and kindergarten teacher, noted how helpful it's been for staff to attend EASTCONN's Common Core Consortium workshops. Beltram added that EASTCONN's Regional Councils have helped, too. "Through these councils, I feel like we're not so cloistered. It creates an



Mary K. Fisher Elementary School's Leadership Team members meet to chat, left to right: Carolyn Mezzoni, Andrea Krensky, Samantha Drobiak, Georgia Turner, Donna Weaver and Principal Noveline Beltram. Missing from photo are Leadership Team members Ellen Pratt, Micci Roy and Erica Connolly.

energy, a collegiality, and we bring that back to the entire staff."

A host of other changes have made the difference at Fisher Elementary, including a parent newsletter, a school-wide motto and original jingles that everyone sings. All students take at least one annual field trip, thanks to a high-powered PTO. Reading programs involve students and parents. A CMT Buddies Program builds school spirit in anticipation of the CMTs. A thriving health initiative engages students and staff in a daily, 10-minute walk around pre-mapped routes. Beltram and her team noted in particular that Assistant Principal Robert McKenna and the music, art and physical education teachers had made important contributions to Fisher Elementary's resurgence.

"We celebrate our greatness here," Beltram said. "It's one of the keys to our success. We celebrate citizenship, academics, art, music, health and safety, and student success. We focus on celebratory events like Memorial Day and Veterans' Day, helping make that home-to-school connection. We are a welcoming, open school community and parents have responded very positively." More than 200 parents volunteer throughout the year.

Every May, the school's popular student art showcase attracts hundreds, and so many families attend the annual winter music festival that the concert has to be presented in two waves.

"It's a great problem to have," Beltram said.

In the end, finding success at Mary R. Fisher Elementary School is really about leadership and teamwork, among administrators, staff, students, parents and the community.

"Believing in that vision, believing that we can do it, is important, both for the kids and the staff," said Beltram.

"Ms. Beltram has taken on a tremendous leadership role," said Thompson Superintendent of Schools Dr. Michael W. Jolin. "She has helped the school move forward in so many ways that it's tough to count them."

Learn more about school improvement from EASTCONN's Jim Huggins at 860-455-3038, or at jhuggins@eastconn.org.

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