

CONNECTIONS

Education News From Northeastern Connecticut

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Summer 2016



EASTCONN Teaching & Learning staff enjoyed a meditative yoga session, sponsored by ECHIP, at a recent work retreat.

Yoga, Anyone...? ECHIP Wellness Options Grow

Eastern Connecticut's first regional employee health insurance collaborative is actively promoting healthy lifestyles for members with on-site classes, health fairs, wellness seminars, and other programs that encourage employees and their families to make healthy choices.

The collaborative, called the Eastern Connecticut Health Insurance Program (ECHIP), enables members to stabilize and manage their costs. ECHIP's 4,000+ members include employees of EASTCONN, and both the municipalities and school districts of Coventry, Tolland, Putnam and Plainfield. ECHIP towns and districts have saved an average of 10% yearly on their insurance costs since the collaborative began in 2012.

"ECHIP is running so smoothly that we can think proactively about ways to help employees and their families become even healthier," said ECHIP Administrator Larisa Carr, who manages ECHIP for the collaborative.

"If we can all hold the line on insurance claims because our employees are making healthy lifestyle choices, then our insurance renewal rates are lower and we keep our premium costs in check," Carr said. "It's a win-win for everyone." All ECHIP members and their families have access to free, online, health

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Taking Big Steps to Bring GED Students Back to Class



Producing new cable-TV ads, featuring real GED students, is just one strategy EASTCONN is using to boost GED enrollment.

A precipitous decline in GED adult student enrollment across Connecticut – and nationwide – appears to be reversing, as GED numbers begin slowly moving upward in what educators hope is a long-term trend.

Communications and information campaigns that are being used to bring students back to the GED classroom in Connecticut seem to be working, although not quickly.

The national GED exam, which adult students can take to earn a high school diploma, was once offered exclusively as a paper-and-pencil test. But it was revamped in January 2014, shifting to a new, computer-based, online-only format, featuring content aligned with the Common Core, which many said made the test more rigorous.

"Almost immediately in 2014, GED enrollment, not only at EASTCONN but across the country, dropped off," said Richard Tariff, EASTCONN's Director of Adult Programs. Tariff is also president of the Connecticut Association for Adult and Continuing Education (CAACE), the statewide adult education advocacy group.

Teachers reported that for many prospective GED students, the idea of taking a computer-based test and meeting the demands of an updated curriculum were too daunting.

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In eastern Connecticut, the decline in numbers and anecdotal surveys of adult students supported that conclusion.

“For example, between 2011 and the end of 2013, we had an average of 113 adults per year earn their GED through EASTCONN,” Tariff said. “In 2014-2015, only 12 students earned their GED through EASTCONN. That’s a huge drop. But things are starting to improve. In 2015-2016, EASTCONN will award GED diplomas to 40 adults, so we’re optimistic that those numbers will continue to grow.” [EASTCONN also offers other pathways to a high school diploma that are not connected to the GED test.]

Different regions of the state report similar experiences.

Lawrence Covino, Director of Bristol Adult Education, said that a significant drop in Bristol’s GED graduates following implementation of the new GED test. “We went from 79 graduates in 2013-14 to 22 in 2014-2015,” Covino said, adding, “But we are up to 29 in 2015-2016.”

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) reported that from January 1 through April 30, 2014, statewide, there were only 241 GED test-takers, with a pass rate of 40%. In 2015, during that same period, CSDE reported that the number of test-takers had jumped to 528, with a pass rate of 54%, a marked improvement. Earlier this year, the GED Testing Services, which oversees the GED test, announced that the passing score for the GED exam would be lowered, also improving test-takers’ ability to earn their diplomas.

Nationwide, in 2013, about 800,000 adults took the GED test and nearly 560,000 passed. But in 2014, 248,000 people nationally took the GED test, and just 86,000 passed, according to data from GED Testing Services. [Note: More recent data was not available at press time.]

“We still have a ways to go,” said EASTCONN Assistant Director of Adult Programs Kristin Hempel. “But we feel that our information campaigns in the EASTCONN region are having a positive impact.”

Other good news? Enrollment in EASTCONN’s Spanish GED seems to be holding steady. Nevertheless, GED information campaigns will continue to be aimed at the EASTCONN region’s English speakers and Spanish-language adults, Hempel said.

EASTCONN joins other Connecticut Adult Education programs that are using a variety of information campaign strategies.

EASTCONN’s efforts include: cable-TV ads; revamped Adult Education Web site pages, which are newly translated into Spanish; GED TV ads at Windham DMV’s waiting-room; social media campaigns; direct mail and Internet outreach to former and current students; newspaper ads; referral-incentive initiatives; in-person outreach at schools and community events; bilingual materials distribution regionally; and the addition of a bilingual adult education outreach specialist who will connect with Windham’s Spanish-language community.

But will GED numbers ever rebound completely?

“I don’t think the number of GED students will increase to their pre-2014 levels,” predicted Bristol’s Covino.

“Also, the improving economy tends to pull people away from school and into the workforce. I think [Adult Education’s] focus on workforce and employability will help draw more people into our programs. It’s no longer just about the high school degree, it’s now about the whole person”

Learn more about EASTCONN’s GED program from Kristin Hempel at khempel@eastconn.org, or 860-423-2591.

EASTCONN’s Annual Meeting



Connecticut’s Commissioner of Education Dianna Wentzell delivered the keynote address to 60 EASTCONN board members, staff and students during EASTCONN’s annual board meeting in late May. Attendees strolled around, reading colorful programs and services displays, chatting with colleagues and board members, while enjoying hot and cold appetizers. Once the public meeting got underway, talented drama students from EASTCONN’s Arts at the Capitol Theater (ACT) arts magnet high school treated everyone to a performance of a scene from the play, “The Dining Room.” Executive Director Paula M. Colen introduced Commissioner Wentzell, who gave a well-received talk, after which Colen celebrated a number of long-time agency employees. The EASTCONN board also sat for its annual photo, joined by Commissioner Wentzell. See more photos on EASTCONN’s Facebook page.

Professional Notes



Toni Ryan, Ed.D.

Toni Ryan, Ed.D., EASTCONN's Student Services Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, presented "Humanitas: Using the Liberal Arts for Liberation in Educational Leadership Degree Programs" at the late-spring Naugatuck Valley Community College conference, "The Role of the Liberal Arts in Higher Education and Democracy."

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programming, as well as flu-shot clinics, and health fairs, Carr said. Members can also participate in health-risk assessments on a new employee ECHIP Web site.

"Each ECHIP member has to figure out what health programs work best for its employees," said Carr, "and everyone reports that voluntary participation in wellness programs is solid and growing."

At EASTCONN, ECHIP supports a range of activities, including yoga classes, lunch-'n-learns and seminars on topics like cancer, diabetes, sleep, stress reduction and healthy-cooking. EASTCONN has offered health fairs and incentivized walk/bike/run/paddle challenges, and will do so again in 2016-2017.

Plainfield employees participate in health fairs, walking and wellness activity-tracking, as well as yoga classes, said Darlene Hill, who coordinates ECHIP initiatives for Plainfield. "We believe with the right motivation, knowledge and tools, staff will succeed at maintaining a healthy lifestyle," she said.

Beth Bauer coordinates Coventry's programs, including health fairs, yoga, Weight Watchers subsidies, cooking and nutrition demonstrations and free access to town kayaks. A fitness challenge is in the works. "Wellness is a key component of our health insurance program," said Bauer. "Our goal is to prevent what is preventable and diminish the negative impact of illness when it can't be prevented."

Tolland cuts insurance premiums by up to 3% for employees who meet certain wellness criteria, according to Michael Wilkinson, who coordinates Tolland's initiatives. "Tolland sees wellness programs for employees as an integral part of our overall health insurance strategy," he said. Tolland offers wellness classes, cooking sessions, health screenings, online lunch-'n-learns and exercise programs.

Putnam subsidizes Weight Watchers memberships, health fairs, walk/bike/run/paddle challenges and yoga. They also partner with Day-Kimball Hospital on wellness programming.

To learn more, contact Larisa Carr at lcarr@eastconn.org, or at 860-455-1546. Visit www.echipct.org.

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Adult Programs Celebrates Move to New Danielson Facility

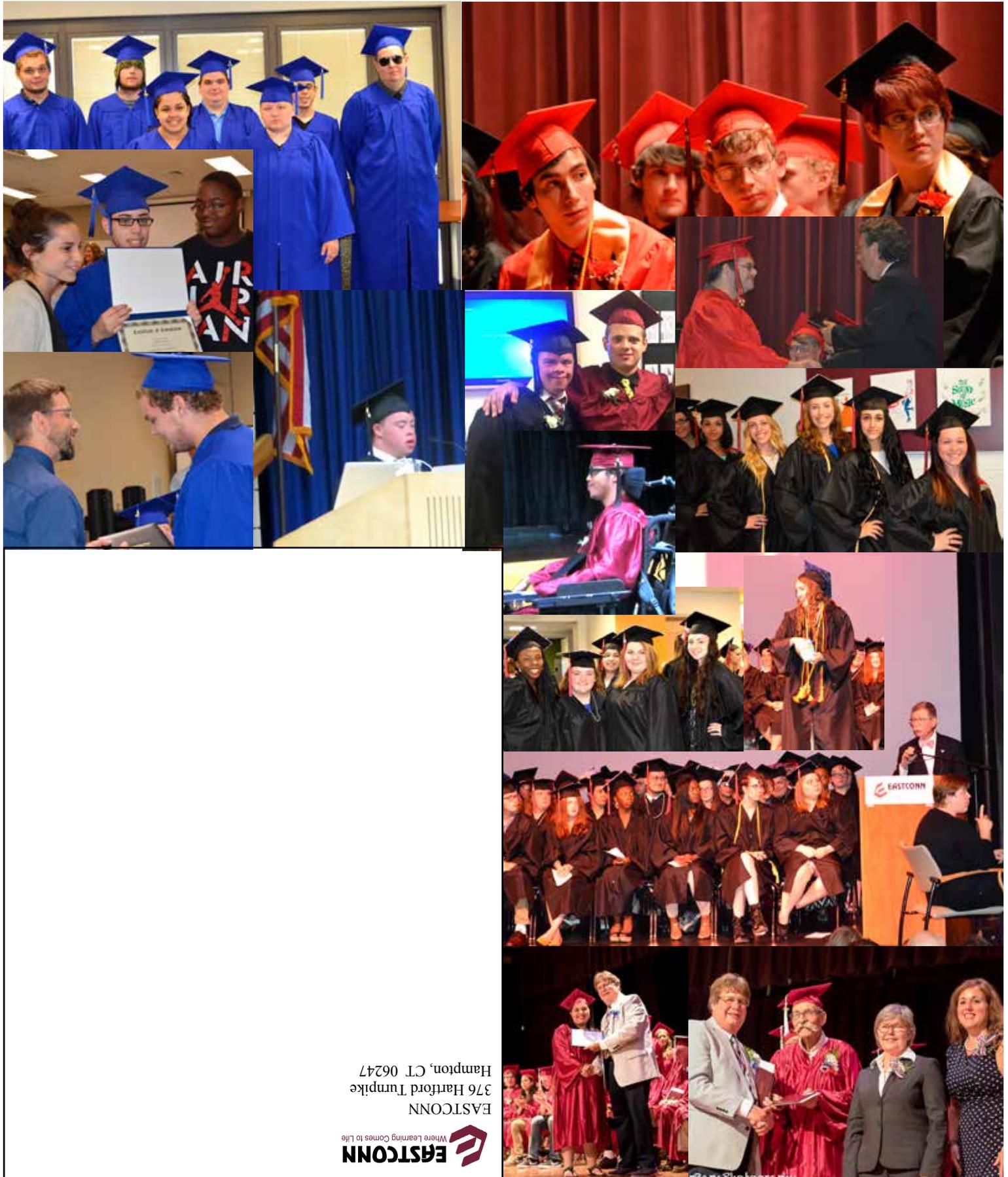


On a blustery, chilly day in May, nearly 80 people attended a ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate the opening of EASTCONN's new Adult Programs facility at 524 Westcott Road in the Danielson section of Killingly. Joining the group to share congratulations and confirm the importance of adult education in northeastern Connecticut, were numerous school, local and state officials and dignitaries, as well as EASTCONN administrators, including Executive Director Paula M. Colen, EASTCONN Adult Programs Director Rich Tariff and EASTCONN Executive Board Chairman Herb Arico. Among the speakers were Killingly Superintendent Kevin Farr. Tours of the building, and a light buffet luncheon, followed. Below, welcome ribbon-cutting guests mingled in the Westcott Road site's entrance and main lobby. Learn more about EASTCONN Adult Programs from Rich Tariff, at rtariff@eastconn.org, or 860-779-3770.



Congratulations to all of EASTCONN's 2016 Graduates!

Students representing EASTCONN's magnet high schools, Adult Programs, and special education programs celebrated their successes during graduation ceremonies in June. Depicted below are graduation photos from EASTCONN's: Clinical Day Treatment program; Regional Transitions Services group; Quinebaug Middle College magnet; Arts at the Capitol Theater (ACT) magnet; and Adult Programs.



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