

# CONNECTIONS

*Education News From Northeastern Connecticut*

volume 34, number 4

[www.eastconn.org](http://www.eastconn.org)

June 2014

## Personalized Learning Forum Draws Region's Educators



*During a break at the Personalized Learning Forum, keynote Nicholas C. Donohue, left, chats with Nellie Mae Education Foundation board member Dudley N. Williams, Jr., who is also the Director of Corporate Citizenship and Diversity at GE Asset Management.*

As schools across the nation work to create engaging learning environments and implement strategies that produce positive student outcomes, educators are reimagining schools where personalized, student-centered learning is the goal.

"If we expect our students to move forward and keep up with the demands of our changing, globalized world, we need everyone performing at much higher levels," said Nicholas C. Donohue, President and CEO of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, the keynote speaker at EASTCONN's Personalized Learning Forum in late May. The Foundation is New England's largest education-focused philanthropic organization, and a proponent of personalized learning in public schools.

"We have to move from a batch-processing model in schools, to more customized models, which will have a better chance of helping all kids succeed," he said. "The alternative is to remain satisfied with incremental gains ... As a society, we can't afford to let that happen."

Donohue, a former New Hampshire Commissioner of Education, was joined by administrators from Wallingford and Windsor Locks public schools, who shared their experiences with implementing personalized learning models in their own school systems during presentations at the day-long Forum.

Donohue said that while a student-centered, competency-based approach to learning is not a new idea, a renewed

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*It may be fun, but it's also real work that supports their executive function, as children investigate the details of flying on an airplane.*

## Focus on Executive Function Enhances Math, Literacy Skills

More than 1,000 preschool and kindergarten children across Connecticut are benefiting from teaching strategies that focus on supporting and developing youngsters' executive function, marking a fundamental shift in the way early childhood teaching takes place.

"The critical importance of executive function to school and life success is being recognized," said Elizabeth Aschenbrenner, EASTCONN's Director of Early Childhood Initiatives.

"The compelling research also demonstrates the significant impact of executive function on the development of children's literacy and math skills," she said. "Results of the executive function support strategies that EASTCONN and its Head Start programs are implementing clearly demonstrate that young children have made real gains in executive function, literacy and math skills."

Everyone uses executive function skills as they self-regulate behavior, make plans, keep track of time, finish tasks on time, juggle projects, evaluate ideas, engage in group dynamics and seek help when needed.

Children and adults with executive function challenges may have difficulty controlling their behavior and attending to tasks, planning projects, telling stories or communicating in an organized way, memorizing, initiating activities or generating ideas, or retaining information while using it.

Thanks to grant funding from the CSDE and the Office of Early Childhood, Aschenbrenner and EASTCONN staff have

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emphasis on the tenets of those ideals, combined with an interest in producing concrete, measurable student outcomes, is sweeping the nation's schools.

EASTCONN Teaching and Learning Education Consultant Jim Huggins agreed.

"Because of ongoing concerns about student achievement, the need for rigorous academic standards and the expectation that all students will be college and career ready, it's becoming clear that current high school graduation requirements will change," said Huggins.

After being approached by area school districts that wanted to learn more about personalized learning, 14 north-eastern Connecticut districts took part in a monthly series of EASTCONN-sponsored Think Tank sessions to investigate personalized learning and ways to implement it.

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***"If we expect our students to move forward and keep up with the demands of our changing, globalized world, we need everyone performing at much higher levels." - Donohue***

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In a student-centered learning environment, student learning is standards-based, competency-based, customized, non-site-specific (i.e. taking place anytime, anywhere) and involves students taking ownership of their learning. In other words, learning is the constant; time and place are the variables.

"In traditional schools, student learning is measured by a GPA, or a grade in a grade book," said Huggins. "With personalized learning, it's all about taking a competency-based approach, with schools assessing what students know and are able to do, and providing them with multiple assessment opportunities and performance tasks that they can complete to demonstrate mastery of standards."

Huggins continued, "Technology can play an integral part in personalized learning, too. We need to provide students with multiple learning pathways."

How does personalized learning apply to educators?

"Educator reflection and self-assessment are more critical than ever, as educators seek professional learning opportunities that help them grow and improve in their practice," said Huggins.

Starting next fall, Huggins said EASTCONN will offer a series of events, seminars and conferences around personalized learning, in collaboration with other partners, including the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS), the New England Secondary School Consortium and the League of Innovative Schools, all of which promote the implementation of personalized learning in schools.

To learn more, contact EASTCONN's Jim Huggins at [jhuggins@eastconn.org](mailto:jhuggins@eastconn.org), or reach him at 860-455-1569.

**View the EASTCONN Events Calendar  
at [www.eastconn.org](http://www.eastconn.org)**

## Ribbon-Cutting Ceremony Opens New Chapter for Quinebaug Middle College



Administrators and staff from EASTCONN, EASTCONN's Quinebaug Middle College (QMC) and Quinebaug Valley Community College (QVCC) joined past administrators, legislators and area leaders for a late-May ribbon-cutting ceremony that officially opened QMC's 45,000-sq.-ft. addition on QVCC's Danielson campus. QMC is a middle college magnet high school administered by EASTCONN for school district partners across NE Connecticut.



## Washington Post Ranks Coventry Among CT's Top Public High Schools

Congratulations to Coventry High School, which has been ranked 8th among Connecticut's top public high schools by the *Washington Post*. Only 9% of the nation's nearly 22,000 public high schools made the Post's 2014 list of top 2,000.

Last year, the *Post* ranked Coventry High School at 13th. The *Post* ranks schools by a Challenge Index Score, calculated by taking the total number of Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate and Advanced International Certificate of Education tests given at a school annually, and dividing by the number of seniors who graduate.

"This meritorious achievement reflects not only the continued expansion of the Advanced Placement Program at Coventry High School, but also the positive culture in [our] schools ..." said Coventry Principal Michele Mullaly.

Coventry High School was among the many successful high schools that participated in EASTCONN's Project Opening Doors AP Program.

### **EASTCONN Connections**

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## Professional Notes

EASTCONN Adult Education staff presented at April's Connecticut Association for Adult and Continuing Education (CAACE) Conference. One EASTCONN presentation on contextualized learning and technology integration in I-Best will also be presented to Rhode Island practitioners.



Leduke



Cimochoowski



Santiago



Olderman



Tariff

Adult Education teacher **Shelly Leduke** joined Adult Programs Assistant Director **Suzanne Cimochoowski** and their students to present "Integrating Basic Education and Skills Training [I-BEST], How to Motivate and Inspire." Leduke and Cimochoowski also co-presented "Self-Paced Technology Curriculum for Nationally Recognized Certificates." **Braulio Santiago** and **Carole Olderman** presented "Academic and Domain Specific Vocabulary for ESL Students Aligned to Common Core." EASTCONN Adult Programs Director **Rich Tariff** and Cimochoowski presented "There is a Future! Collaborating With Your Workforce Board."



Stearns

EASTCONN Interdistrict Grant staff developer and professional storyteller **Carolyn Stearns** has earned two prestigious storytelling awards: the Barbara Reed Award at the 33rd Annual Connecticut Storytelling Festival and Conference at Connecticut College; and the 2014 National Storytelling

Network ORACLE Award for her Northeast Regional Service and Leadership.



Stipe

In May, EASTCONN Early Childhood Specialist **Debra Stipe** and Jay Logee, a Preschool Teacher in Putnam, presented "Supporting Executive Function Skills Through Mature Play" at the Early Childhood Investigations Conference at Eastern Connecticut State University.



Lefevre

EASTCONN Quinebaug Middle College teacher **Suzette Lefevre** and two QMC students presented at the Magnet Schools of America National Conference in Hartford in May. They presented on a QMC project called "Don't take the Marshmallow," which focuses on delayed gratification.

## Expanding Technology Services, a Lava Lamp & The Internet of Things...

So, what do the "Internet of things," a lava lamp and the "Maker culture" have to do with one another?

If EASTCONN's Technology Solutions Director has anything to do with it, the region's schools will soon find out as he oversees an expansion of technology services and related educational opportunities to better serve EASTCONN's member districts.

"Right now, we're vigorously increasing our ability to support the technology needs of our LEAs," said EASTCONN Director of Technology Solutions Andrew DePalma. He is inviting area educators to join the conversation about the latest technological developments during EASTCONN's Technology Council meetings, open to all, free of charge.

Among the subjects they will explore this year? The Internet of things and the "Maker culture."

"We're entering a new era, which includes the Internet of things, where, essentially, anything can be connected to the Internet," explained DePalma.

To demonstrate how the Internet of things can work, DePalma is building a sensor-connected lava lamp that can soon be viewed, 24/7, on the Internet.

"Students, classrooms and anyone who has a device can watch the lava lamp, turn it on and off remotely, measure temperature fluctuations and read light measurements, arguably turning the lava lamp into an online lab," said DePalma.

"So, I've taken an arbitrary object, like a lava lamp, and put it on the Internet and we can go anywhere we want with it, talk about it in any context in the classroom and measure all kinds of things related to it."

Council discussions will also explore the "Maker culture," which encourages do-it-yourself, technology-based inventions and prototyping in electronics, 3-D printing, robotics, arts and crafts, and more.

"These aren't ideas of the future," DePalma said. "They are happening right now. The challenge for our districts is to manage their technology needs, but also take advantage of these new technologies and share them with students in their classrooms."

At the request of EASTCONN's districts, DePalma said he is also planning to offer technology-related courses on topics like statistics (a refresher), micro-controllers in the classroom and "scratch programming," to help participants manage the latest in education-connected technologies.

For administrators who want to better define and manage their district's technology needs, DePalma said EASTCONN can help them create customized planning documents with an eye to the future, as well as assist them with their district's internal computer and network challenges.

To find out more about EASTCONN's Technology Council and other technology offerings, contact Andrew DePalma at 860-455-1620, or reach him at [adepalma@eastconn.org](mailto:adepalma@eastconn.org).



Lava Lamp, anyone?

# EASTCONN Annual Meeting



The 2014 Annual Meeting featured a talk on Personalized Learning, program displays, acknowledgements and agency presentations, including the Friend of EASTCONN award given to Connecticut Senate President Pro Tempore Donald E. Williams, Jr.

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received training and coaching from Dr. Elena Bodrova, a senior research scientist at McREL and co-developer of *Tools of the Mind*. Now in their third year of using teaching strategies that support executive function skills in preschoolers and kindergartners, EASTCONN's early childhood staff have trained educators in EASTCONN's Head Start/Early Head Start programs and public school districts across the region to incorporate those strategies into their daily classroom practice. Staff have trained and coached educators in EASTCONN Head Start programs in Killingly, Plainfield, Putnam, Stafford and Windham, as well as early childhood teachers in Vernon, Enfield, Ansonia and Derby. The list of interested districts and early childhood programs continues to grow.

Aschenbrenner said that the earlier teachers intervene to boost executive function development in youngsters, the better the outcome.

"Today's children do not necessarily have the same play experiences we did. Playing with children of different ages, making and playing by rules, using creativity and imagination were integral to our free time. Not so much now, as children spend more time with TV, electronics, scheduled activities and a concern for safety when playing outdoors," she said.

"We're using a combination of specific strategies around language, literacy and numeracy with executive functioning, as well as helping children gain more specific background knowledge, so kids can comprehend what they're reading," Aschenbrenner said, adding, "There's a very strong correlation between vocabulary and reading comprehension. Our education system hasn't kept up on the importance of oral language, speaking and listening and it hasn't had the same type of focus on intentional vocabulary development as it has on word decoding and reading fluency."

For example, Aschenbrenner said that when children hear about people flying on an airplane, for those who have never flown, the vocabulary of taking a trip on a plane may have no real meaning, no context.

"So, we study and learn about those contexts," she said, "using informational text, virtual or actual field trips and guest speakers, and then work to create hands-on learning scenarios, like helping them work together to plan and build a plane, its instrument panel or an airport scanner out of cardboard. Children get very excited about it and choose to play different roles. These experiential, mature, or play activities occur around a complex series of tasks, creating new vocabulary and helping them incorporate new concepts, while promoting positive social interaction. While having fun, they're also doing real work and developing their executive function skills."

EASTCONN Early Childhood Specialist Sheri Lambert, who also coaches Head Start/Early Head Start teachers on executive function, said she has seen children become more engaged in learning since implementing the new strategies.

"Teachers report that children look forward to many of the activities, and they actually request them!" Lambert said. "One favorite is the 'freeze dance,' where children dance to music while a position card is held up, addressing both working memory and inhibitory control. Children love this strategy-within-a-game and so do the teachers."

Learn more by contacting EASTCONN Director of Early Childhood Initiatives Elizabeth Aschenbrenner at [eeaschenbrenner@eastconn.org](mailto:eeaschenbrenner@eastconn.org), or at 860-455-1501.

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