

# CONNECTIONS

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*Chromebooks are prepped and ready for use, after performing well on field-tests for the new, online Connecticut Administrator Test (eCAT).*

## CAT Exam to go Digital by 2016

By the end of 2016, Connecticut educators who aspire to become school administrators will take the high-stakes Connecticut Administrator Test (CAT) online, thanks to a successful partnership between the state Department of Education (CSDE) and EASTCONN.

Candidates who successfully complete the CAT, and are recommended by their higher education institution, earn their Intermediate Administrator (092) Certificate, which qualifies them for district positions ranging from assistant principal to assistant superintendent. Since its inception in 2001, the CAT has been a pencil-and-paper, six-and-a-half-hour test. Most CAT test-takers are teachers who are enrolled in Sixth Year education programs.

"We're very pleased and excited about this next, logical phase for the CAT test," said Debbie Siegel, who directs the CAT program and is an EASTCONN education specialist. Siegel worked closely with CSDE colleagues to oversee the online-CAT development team and EASTCONN's Technology Solutions staff in order to collaboratively design the new online CAT.

"In an age of incredible advances, in which most people are no longer using hand-written tests and technology is infused throughout our educational world, it just makes sense to move to an online version," Siegel said.

"EASTCONN and the CSDE have been slowly rolling out the eCAT, including field tests, to ensure efficacy of administration and

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## ECHIP: A Regional Health Insurance Success Story

Now entering its fourth year, the Eastern Connecticut Health Insurance Program (ECHIP) continues to fulfill the promise of long-term savings as both its town and school district members reap the rewards of regional collaboration.

"ECHIP continues to be an excellent example of regional efficiencies, as well as true collaboration between towns and boards of education," said Steve Werbner, Chairman of ECHIP and Tolland Town Manager. "Tolland this year has seen the lowest percentage increase in its health renewal in at least the last 10 years, which can be attributed in large part to the cost-savings provided through the purchasing power of the ECHIP organization."



*During its recent annual meeting, the ECHIP board discussed the year ahead, health insurance renewal numbers and several exciting new initiatives that will benefit the collaborative's members.*

The Town of Tolland and Tolland Public Schools are among the founding members of ECHIP, Connecticut's first self-insured health insurance collaborative, made possible by state legislation passed in 2010. Public Act 10-174 allowed municipalities and boards of education to join forces to purchase employee health insurance. Working with Cigna, ECHIP was officially launched in 2012 with members that included EASTCONN, as well as the towns and school districts of Coventry, Putnam, Plainfield and Tolland.

The collaborative was the first of its kind in the state.

Altogether, the ECHIP health insurance collaborative represents more than 4,000 school and municipal employees. Over the last three years, aggregated health insurance renewals have resulted in an average savings of between 1% and 7% for ECHIP members, according to ECHIP Administrator Larisa Carr.

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"It has been a wonderful partnership, as all of our ECHIP members continue to experience year-over-year savings against regional medical insurance trends," said Carr.

Putnam Public Schools Superintendent William Hull was matter-of-fact about the good things that have come to his district because of ECHIP.

"ECHIP has allowed us to control our health care costs," Hull said, simply. "For the past two years, we have had zero-percent increases in our costs for medical insurance."

Coventry's Finance Director Beth Bauer said ECHIP membership has given her town a distinct advantage.

"Joining with ECHIP has given the Town of Coventry the ability to reduce costs and to collaborate with other communities on wellness programs," said Bauer. "We have come further as a member of the partnership than would have been possible alone, and are looking forward to continued progress."

Ron Lussier, Board of Education Business Manager for Plainfield Public Schools, said Plainfield schools have also benefited.

"... We find ourselves in the unique position of being able to offer a reduction in health insurance premiums to our employees," said Lussier. "Through the effective actions of employee awareness and wellness programs and health/risk assessments, our employees have helped maintain manageable utilization rates. This translates directly into healthier individuals and saves our district money."

"EASTCONN is very pleased about the expanding number of cost-saving initiatives that ECHIP continues to pursue in areas that include dental, student accident insurance and pharmacy coverage," said EASTCONN Executive Director Paula M. Colen.

As a result of ECHIP's success, Werbner, Hull and Carr were invited in May to present information about the collaborative to the Connecticut Legislature's MORE Commission Sub-Committee on Municipal Efficiencies.

"It was an exciting opportunity to share information about ECHIP's success as a regional, cost-savings strategy for both schools and municipalities," said Carr. The MORE Commission is investigating regional efficiencies that may save Connecticut taxpayer dollars.

Werbner, who is a member of the MORE Commission's Municipal Efficiencies Sub-Committee, summed up Tolland's feelings about ECHIP.

"We look forward to working closely with the members of ECHIP in future years to further improve offerings to members, with the continued goal of maintaining affordable benefit plans for our employees," he said.

Lussier added, "The Plainfield Board of Education looks forward to many more years in partnership with other members of the collaborative. I believe we have only scratched the surface of the good things to come out of our relationships in ECHIP."

To learn more, contact Larisa Carr at [lcarr@eastconn.org](mailto:lcarr@eastconn.org), or at 860-455-0707. Visit ECHIP's Web site at [www.echipct.org](http://www.echipct.org).



Larisa Carr, Administrator of the Eastern Connecticut Health Insurance Program (ECHIP), a regional health insurance collaborative of which EASTCONN is a member, recently met with U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney to discuss the Affordable Care Act and its effects on insurance costs.



## EASTCONN's Annual Meeting May 26, 2015, Hampton



Executive Director Paula M. Colen facilitated EASTCONN's Annual Meeting, which featured keynote speaker Harriet Feldlaufer, Director of Early Care & Education for the CSDE's Office of Early Childhood, as well as examples of student work, a student-poetry reading, program displays and lots of great food and conversation.

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# Dr. Yong Zhao Inspires QMC Student Leaders to Think Bigger



QMC students who attended Dr. Yong Zhao's presentation in April brainstormed ways they can implement his ideas in their own school.

When author Dr. Yong Zhao recently presented education strategies for inspiring students' leadership and creativity in schools, there were nine eager EASTCONN Quinebaug Middle College (QMC) students in the audience, soaking it all in.

As he discussed student-focused learning environments that will foster tomorrow's leaders, Zhao told the region's educators during an EASTCONN workshop that he was delighted to have QMC students in attendance.

"They are the future," Zhao observed. Zhao is an internationally recognized educator, author and innovator. His EASTCONN workshop focused on concepts from his latest book, *World Class Learners: Educating Creative and Entrepreneurial Students*.

After Zhao's presentation, QMC students were so engaged that EASTCONN educators were determined to keep the conversation going. They wanted students to examine Zhao's insights, as well as their own, and consider ways to weave them into QMC's student-centered culture and curriculum.

Led by Toni Ryan, Ed.D., EASTCONN's Director of Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment and Accreditation; Amy Drowne, Director of EASTCONN's Center for Educational Leadership (CEL); and QMC Principal Gino LoRicco, QMC students met several days after Zhao's workshop to discuss what they'd learned.

"Our goal was to encourage students to expand on Dr. Zhao's ideas, to think creatively, and to take a leadership role in developing or enhancing their learning environment at QMC," said Ryan. "The QMC learning model already supports the creation of independent, well-rounded students who actively manage their own educational plans. We wanted them to take it a step further, by also thinking as leaders, in more global, entrepreneurial terms."

QMC students brainstormed ideas for stimulating individual creativity and an entrepreneurial spirit among their peers.

"That initial meeting was a validation of the work that is already being done at QMC," said Drowne. "It was a lively exchange of ideas."

Zhao believes that American schools must prepare students for the future by encouraging them to think globally and actively seek entrepreneurial opportunities and careers that are sustainable in the face of rapid shifts in society and technology. He also emphasizes the importance of community service.

"We need to expand on the individual student learning idea," said Amber Gardiner, a QMC freshman. "We should allow students to have more control over their own learning and create more op-

portunities for independent study."

"When I heard Dr. Zhao, I got all kinds of different ideas about how to get more people involved in activities that can have a bigger impact," said Raina Tessier, a junior, who is leading efforts at QMC for "Teens for Jeans" and Nepali earthquake relief.

"I remember him talking about the importance of doing things, of being well-rounded and participating in community service and in the arts," Tessier said. "It was inspiring. We have to use our creativity to influence leadership potential in other teens."

One student suggested that QMC establish an on-site resource room, or incubator, where students could work on individual projects or creative endeavors. Students agreed that they'd like to attend more non-graded classes in areas of individual interest, and that their QMC peers should more proactively build courses of study that focus on their personal, long-term aspirations and interests.

"When the kids returned from Dr. Zhao's workshop, they were inspired to work in leadership roles on advocacy and fund-raising for worthy causes," said LoRicco.

"A lot of people talk about 21st century skills," LoRicco continued. "Promoting creativity in our students is exactly what's going to translate into 21st century skills. When we give students an opportunity to have a say in what they're doing and learning, that produces creative greatness."



Dr. Yong Zhao presented a workshop to Connecticut educators focused on employing strategies for inspiring student leadership and creativity.

Ryan is collaborating with Drowne to launch a new Center for Student Leadership, based on the EASTCONN CEL model, which will develop students' skills in advocacy, community engagement and activism. EASTCONN's two magnet high schools (QMC and Arts at the Capitol Theater) will pilot the program.

During another recent meeting, QMC students agreed that their school was already supporting their individuality and creativity through its student-centered approach to learning.

"QMC is more than the average high school," said Rob Ciarlo, a sophomore. "Here, you're able to expand yourself and pursue your interests, instead of being a number in a computer. Here, we can pursue individualized learning and new ideas. Students can influence their future and learn things that they won't necessarily get in a classroom."

Learn more by contacting QMC Principal Gino LoRicco at 860-932-4100 or at [gloricco@eastconn.org](mailto:gloricco@eastconn.org).

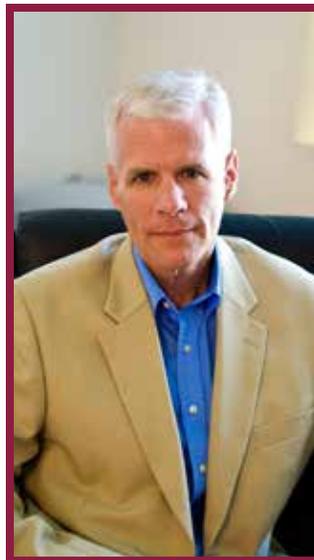
# U.S. News & World Report Ranks Putnam & Plainfield High Schools Among Connecticut's Best

Congratulations to the students, teachers and administrators at Putnam High School and Plainfield High School, both of which have been ranked by *U.S. News and World Report* as being among Connecticut's best schools.

The magazine's influential ratings have put Putnam High School at No. 44 among the state's 193 high schools, while Plainfield has been ranked at No. 46. The highly coveted and prestigious *U.S. News and World Report* kudos don't stop there. The magazine also ranked both schools nationally, with Putnam High School coming in at 2,007th and Plainfield High School at 2,330th — out of 19,753 high schools nationwide. Both high schools received silver medals from the magazine.

*U.S. News and World Report* based its rankings on test score analyses, student math and reading proficiency, student-to-teacher ratios, availability of AP courses, and the number of students who took AP tests and their scores. In addition, the magazine determined that both Putnam and Plainfield high schools had low achievement gaps and that they provided all students, regardless of whether they were college-bound, with equal access to educational opportunities

Visit [www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools](http://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools) to learn more.



## Save the DATE!

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scoring, regardless of response mode," said Dr. Amanda Turner, Education Consultant at the CSDE. "Using Google Chromebooks, Connecticut administrator candidates can enter their responses to each CAT module that mirrors the handwritten version of the test," she said.

Over the past year-and-a-half, Siegel has overseen the development and field-testing of the eCAT, which was first released in a small, controlled test in the summer of 2014. Use of the eCAT test has continued to expand during three state-wide CAT administrations throughout 2014-15.

"I'm very happy to report that there have been no differences in candidate performance between the handwritten and keyboarded responses. These results are critical for ensuring the fairness, reliability and validity of this new testing approach," said Siegel about the eCAT field testing. "We have taken samples of keyboarded responses and produced a handwritten version, and conversely have taken selected hand-written responses and produced keyboarded candidate responses. Each field test has been scored multiple times by independent scorers with excellent results."

The eCAT roll-out is taking place over a period of 18 months to ensure a successful implementation, Siegel said. She added that in its first year of implementation, 600 eCAT tests were administered, with plans to increase that number to 1,800 for the 2015-16 cycle.

Right now, CAT test-takers can opt to take either the paper-and-pencil or the online version, as available, Siegel said. By the end of 2016, all CAT candidates, with few exceptions, will take the online eCAT.

eCAT test-takers will keyboard their responses on computers at designated testing sites across Connecticut. Two of the CAT testing sites, EASTCONN and ITBD in New Britain, are currently equipped for the eCAT, with plans to expand to a third site in 2016.

"The collaboration between EASTCONN and the CSDE has been an integral part of this transition," said Turner.

"From the CAT development team and scoring director to the IT staff, EASTCONN has worked hard to make this a smooth and fair transition for all involved. EASTCONN and the CSDE will continue to collaborate as this transition expands."

To learn more about the new eCAT, contact EASTCONN's Debbie Siegel at [dsiegel@eastconn.org](mailto:dsiegel@eastconn.org).

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