

## Longfellow school Kick-off Celebration



Hundreds of parents, children and community leaders turned out at Longfellow School on a cool March evening to support a new school reform effort headed by UConn's Neag School of Education.

Teachers and other school officials said the large turnout for the kickoff celebration of the reform program, known as CommPACT, was an encouraging sign.

As many as 300 people jammed a cafeteria for an awards program while many more wandered among exhibits and activities in hallways and classrooms.

"This is amazing," fourth-grade teacher Mark Caplan said as he walked through a crowded hallway. "With the exception of one or two, I've seen all my students [here]. . . . I think parents are more involved. If anything, this is showing it."

Like many schools in poor urban neighborhoods, Longfellow has struggled with low academic performance and other problems, but teachers say they have noticed subtle improvements this year, including better attendance and fewer discipline problems among students and more cooperation among teachers.

Still, the project is in its early stages, and there have been no dramatic changes in curriculum or other major matters, staff members said. Many are still getting used to the idea of being given autonomy to take charge of their own school.

"It's almost been a feeling out process," said Principal James F. Adams. "We know we're supposed to get autonomy. We don't know where the boundaries are."

Among those at Longfellow's kickoff celebration was Bridgeport Superintendent of Schools John J. Ramos, who said the freedom to experiment under CommPACT is similar to that of charter schools. "It creates a tremendous opportunity for public education to duplicate the same characteristics and innovations that charters and others do," he said.

Leola Young, president of a parents' group at Longfellow, said she has noticed a difference at the school this year. "Teachers have more of an input," she said. Parents, too, she said, "have been able to speak up more about what they feel needs to be happening. . . . We do have those who are still skeptical, but there are more and more who are coming in and getting involved."