



Shoreline Academy Expands Learning In New London

By Jenna Cho

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New London - For a science unit on the life cycle of plants, Jennings Elementary School's second-grade teacher Cheryle Mullaney and special education teacher Barry Fargo decided to bring the concept alive.

Students worked in groups to retell the story of a plant's life cycle. One group created a clay animation video they called "Farmer Fred's Sunflower." Others put together a short play, dissected and mounted plants for display, compiled a book of strange-looking plants and documented an experiment on plants in a PowerPoint presentation.

Giving students an opportunity to learn and exhibit their knowledge through hands-on projects is key to students' ability to learn and succeed in school, these teachers believe. But in public schools, finding the time, freedom and resources to drive classroom lessons home with such projects is difficult.

Shoreline Academy, a school-within-a-school planned for this fall at Winthrop Elementary School, will give five elementary school teachers the unique opportunity to prove they can nurture student success even in cash-strapped, urban school districts such as New London's.

"There's so much talent here in New London," said kindergarten teacher Jeanne McDowell. "And kids don't always get credit for the talent that they have."

The academy will include one class for each grade level K through 3 and focus on instruction combining the use of arts and technology and relying heavily on hands-on projects.

Next year Winthrop is expected to be housed in the portable building on Cedar Grove Avenue currently occupied by Jennings Elementary School. The Winthrop school building will be expanded to become a magnet school, and construction is expected to commence this fall.

Shoreline Academy is one of eight CommPACT schools selected from 13 proposals. Two are planned in Waterbury, two in New Haven, two in Bridgeport and one in Hartford.

New London's CommPACT school is the only school-within-a-school; the others are existing schools being converted to CommPACT schools. All CommPACT schools have made five-year commitments.

"We're trying to develop smaller communities of learners that meets the needs of the kids in a more direct, intimate way," said New London schools Superintendent Christopher Clouet.

New London has already begun to create pockets of school communities, with its Dual Language Arts Academy at the middle-school level and the Science and Technology Magnet High School.

The CommPACT project, a word emphasizing the expected partnership between the school and its community, parents, children and teachers to drive the schools' success, is the result of new, and unprecedented, collaboration.

Involved in making CommPACT schools a reality were the state, University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education, American Federation of Teachers Connecticut, Connecticut Education Association, Connecticut Federation of School Administrators, Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents and Connecticut Association of Urban Superintendents.

CommPACT schools are similar to charter schools in that the schools are being created by groups of people with specific ideas for schools in mind, Clouet said. Unlike state charter schools, CommPACT schools will still function under their individual school districts.

"It's to highlight good teaching, good instructional practice, and to remove any barriers that might be found in a more traditional setting," Clouet said.

Teachers, not administrators, will decide how to run Shoreline Academy. In fact, it was a specific group of teachers currently at Jennings - Jeanne McDowell, Carolyn Rowbotham, Cheryl Mullaney, Michael Podeszwa, Patricia Passaro and Barry Fargo - who, upon learning of CommPACT schools, developed the idea for the academy and presented the plan to Clouet.

"I was very impressed with their skill level, and their experience and knowledge level, and then of course their enthusiasm level," Clouet said. "So it was a green light all the way."

The small staff and school will help teachers move forward with a unified vision of how the school should function, McDowell said.

"When people have the same vision, it makes for a very positive atmosphere," she said. "That can trickle down to the children. It just seems like it would be a really, really rewarding experience to work with the parents, the children, all together, just to showcase the New London kids' talents."

The autonomy granted to teachers - to dictate everything from what their lesson plans will look like to what their work hours will be - means that while the teachers are still part of the union, they'll have more flexibility than currently granted under their union contracts, Clouet said.

And teachers won't be operating in isolation. A true partnership, parents and community groups are expected to get involved every step of the way.

Students and parents interested in the school can submit an application with the school district by June 12. If there is more interest than seats available (24 per class for kindergarten and first grade, and 28 per class in second and third grades), the academy will determine its student body by lottery.

At the information session, several parents handed in their applications on the spot. Melissa and DeVon Robinson, whose daughter Amara will enter first grade in the fall, said they were sold on the "outside of the box" approach to education and on the quality of teachers who will lead the academy.

McDowell is Amara's kindergarten teacher this year.

DeVon Robinson said he liked that the academy demanded more parental involvement.

"Where it's not just dropping them off and picking them up," he said.

Heather Heath, whose daughter will be in third grade next year, said she was excited that the school district recognized that not all students learn in the same way.

Her daughter, Rosalee Nicholson, not only loves to learn, she also "loves to sing, she loves to dance, she loves to climb and run," Heath said. "And to include everything that she is and teach her all that, I think she'll be able to shine."

The idea for CommPACT schools, headed by a group called Connecticut Alliance for CommPACT Schools, developed out of longstanding discussions on how to close the achievement gap and how public schools in the state could better provide for children in urban areas.

The CommPACT schools are modeled after the Boston Pilot Schools, which were created in 1995 as another option in the public school education system. More CommPACT schools are planned for coming years, and if successful, these schools could become a model for all public schools.

The Connecticut state legislature last year passed a law allowing for the creation of CommPACT schools and allocating \$500,000 of state education money to the Neag school, which will help support the CommPACT schools.

Because CommPACT schools are a reorganization of existing resources, the schools won't require additional expenses from their school districts.

Neag created the Institute for Urban School Improvement to oversee the CommPACT schools and allocated \$200,000 of its own funds to support the CommPACT schools. The school is essentially playing "a convening role" in the effort, said Gene Chasin, director of the Institute for Urban School Improvement.

Neag will provide staff who will regularly visit the schools. They will help the schools get started and offer assistance on what "evidence based" practices, or instructional methods proven to have yielded desired results, should be utilized in the schools.

Neag will also help teachers develop student data and track individual students' progress so as to better target specific students' needs.

"We're trying to build the muscle of the school, if you will," Chasin said.