

Youngsters “ON FIRE” about Dangers of Smoking

An innovative collaboration between CRT’s Community Health and Wellness Project and the fifth grade classes at Maple Street School in Vernon has had some very exciting results. The students spent six weeks learning of the dangers of smoking, and incorporating that knowledge into artwork, essays, and lessons they taught to other children.

The project was initiated by CRT Tobacco Educator Cyomara Fisher, who used graphic large-scale models like a plastic set of lungs (one healthy and one diseased) and “Mr. Mouth,” showing cancers developing from tobacco use.

The team included art instructor Andrew Minor and language arts teacher Barbara Brahany. Students looked at the ways that media portray smoking, from current movies, television and music videos to messages from the past – including a century-old ad that depicted Santa Claus enjoying a smoke.



Minor asked the students to illustrate the health, wealth and social costs of smoking. Although simple, the drawings are powerful: One child drew a gravestone with the epitaph, “I wanted to live for 14 more years.” The drawings were incorporated into a large mural (shown) which hangs permanently in the school; a second copy is traveling to schools and libraries, as part of CRT’s tobacco-prevention outreach.

Brahany built a persuasive writing unit around tobacco. “I have never seen students become so involved with a topic,” said the veteran teacher. “We had kids who were just sobbing, they were so worried about relatives who smoke. They dedicated their writing to specific relatives, hoping they could persuade them to quit.”

Each student’s essays and illustrations were professionally bound into a personalized, hard-cover picture book. Then the fifth graders visited the fourth grade classes to share their books and present lessons on what they’d learned; much of this was repeated to the parents who attended an evening showcase.

Both the teachers and the students felt that the teamwork was very worthwhile. “We really hope to do more of this,” said Minor, the art instructor. “The children are really engaged when they can see a reason for what they’re working on.”

The “travelling copy” of the anti-smoking mural is available for display in libraries, classrooms, etc. Please call 560-5689 to schedule a visit.



VISION

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Closing the Achievement Gap**

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Preparing our Community to Meet Life's Challenges

CRT VISION is a publication of the Community Renewal Team, Inc. a non-profit organization dedicated to reducing poverty. Programs throughout Central Connecticut help low-income and disadvantaged people and families become self-sufficient.

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



As the state's children were heading back to school this fall, Dr. Mark K. McQuillan, the Connecticut Commissioner of Education, issued a statement that should be a wake-up call to all of us. He announced that 40% of the state's schools had failed to meet the standards set under the No Child Left Behind law. That was 100 more failing schools in 2007-8 than in the previous year. In the vast majority of cases, he said, the problem was in elementary school reading.

A few months earlier, we had learned that the achievement gap between prosperous and low-income students is wider in Connecticut than in any other state. Again, the area of greatest concern for elementary school students was reading.

Numerous studies have shown that a child who cannot read well by third grade is unlikely to catch up at any point, and is at increased risk of dropping out of high school. Children who read poorly grow into adults with low literacy levels, affecting their ability to obtain and retain good employment, and support their own children's education.

So it comes down to this: When we fail to provide effective literacy education to our children, we are condemning them to fail – in their school work and beyond.

Policy makers have termed this a crisis, and are making early reading instruction their highest priority. The Commission on Children and the Connecticut Early Childhood Cabinet have joined the State Department of Education in examining what works in reading instruction, and seeking the funding to bring more of this into classrooms and into homes.

Community Renewal Team has a deep commitment to addressing these concerns, and is helping to launch children on a path to academic success. Our childcare and preschool classrooms provide a language-rich environment for more than 1,400 children. Family literacy is supported by a full-time specialist who works with parents to address their own academic challenges while reading to and with their children. CRT sends thousands of books home each year, so children can establish their own libraries.

We are also working in elementary schools, providing coaching and tutoring to children who are struggling with reading. We are an approved provider of Supplemental Educational Services under the No Child Left Behind law, offering targeted and intensive reading tutoring in six Hartford schools. Our in-school reading initiative, starting its 11th year, will be offered in seven Manchester and Vernon schools this year.

In the following pages, you will be introduced to the work that we are doing to build children's literacy skills, confidence and enjoyment. You will also see the results of an innovative, program that used both persuasive writing and visual arts to introduce anti-smoking messages to fifth graders as well as an initiative that re-engages older high school youth.

CRT is bringing collaborators together to improve our children's education everyday!

Lena Rodriguez
President/CEO

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Bridging the Literacy Gap

CRT preschool and tutoring boost children's reading skills

By NANCY PAPPAS

In 2007, just 52.3% of the state's third graders scored at or above their grade-level goal on the Connecticut Mastery Test for Reading.

Even more alarming, the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that the state's achievement gap – the difference in demonstrated academic skills between prosperous and low-income students – is one of the largest in the nation. For instance, in that 2007 assessment of Connecticut third graders, only 23.4% of the children who are eligible for free and reduced price lunches reached their reading goal, while 65.1% of those from higher-income families managed to make the grade.

Unfortunately, the NAEP found a consistent pattern in both reading and math, across all grades and regions of the state. In fact, the achievement gap among Connecticut's fourth grade readers was 41.5%, the single highest in the country.

Connecticut's youngsters are drowning in a sea of reading material that they cannot decipher. Many studies have shown that if children do not become proficient readers by age eight, there is a greater likelihood that they will struggle throughout the rest of their school careers and into adulthood. Educators say that after the third grade, students should no longer be learning to read; now they are reading to learn. In other words, they must read and comprehend the material presented in language arts, science, social studies and even math.

A student who cannot digest the information in textbooks and other assigned reading falls farther and farther behind.

Employers say these students show up years later, as workers who cannot follow written instructions or prepare simple reports.

Because of these concerns, the Connecticut Commission on Children and the state's Early Childhood Cabinet have made reading success one of their primary goals for young children. The reading achievement section of a report called *Fine by Nine: All Children Healthy, Safe and Successful in School by Age 9*, prepared for the Early Childhood Cabinet and revised in May 2008, reviewed the high cost of reading failure, and the concentration of this failure among children from low income and urban families.

CRT is committing considerable resources toward giving children the right foundation – the basic building blocks – of early literacy.

The following articles provide a snapshot of some of the work we are doing in this critical area.





CRT's Early Care & Education provides A Great Start on a Lifetime of Learning

"Can you point to the 'F' on this chart? Let's all make the sound. Blow the air between your teeth and lips. FFFFF! Can we think of words that start with 'F'? Family! Father! Friends! And how about our friend, Faith? Her name starts with 'F' doesn't it?"

The three- and four-year-olds in Socorro Ramos' School Readiness classroom are making FFFriends with the letter F this morning. In the Story Corner, they're looking at a book, pointing to an alphabet chart, and considering their classmates' names. In the playground, they talk about footprints, falling, and running fast – and enthusiastically demonstrate each word.

A veteran teacher like Ramos, with more than 14 years of experience in CRT's Early Care and Education program, can make literacy immersion seem effortless. In truth, however, the techniques she models at the Douglas Street Center in Hartford take tremendous thought and intentionality.

Each activity, each transition, is accompanied by a discussion, a set of instructions, and often a song. There are laminated word labels on nearly every object in the room, in both Spanish and English. Storybooks are introduced with exploratory questions and read repeatedly with great enthusiasm, until the children themselves can fill in phrases.

This attention to language development in early childhood – one of the key predictors of later school success – is replicated throughout CRT's extensive Early Care and Education division, with 83 classrooms and more than 1,400 infants, toddlers and preschoolers. In Middletown, Portland, Clinton, Bloomfield, Windsor and Hartford, CRT's teachers are working to close the oft-cited achievement gap.

"We know that children do best if we surround them with a rich environment of words and experiences," says Deborah Cawley, the Assistant Director of Education in CRT's Early Care and Education (ECE) Division. "Unfortunately, many youngsters come to us from a language-deprived setting." For more than 20 years, researchers have found that children from low-income families enter kindergarten behind their mid- and upper-income peers in vocabulary, oral comprehension and other language skills.

To address this, researchers like Linda Campbell of Antioch University Seattle say that children "should be saturated with language in the classroom." Through these efforts, children with limited exposure vocabulary, figures of speech, reading role models

and conversations in Standard English can build a foundation in language arts. (New Horizons for Learning, Office of State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Olympia WA).

Building a language-rich classroom is an intrinsic part of the research-validated Creative Curriculum, which CRT adopted for all of its preschool classrooms in 2000. The curriculum supports cognitive, reading and language development, as well as mathematics, social and emotional competencies, motor development and physical health. This approach meets the standards of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Connecticut Benchmark Standards.

Literacy experiences are intentionally built into the entire daily schedule, and touch upon all interest areas in the classroom. Children look for their own written names when they gather for circle time, and they move to other activities when the teacher holds up their first-name initials. The Word Wall highlights words the children have discussed during the day.

All of CRT's ECE staff receive in-service training on the Creative Curriculum, both at the beginning of their employment and at ongoing Professional Development days.

Managers and Education Coordinators are attending intensive monthly training, which they bring into the classrooms by coaching the teaching staff. A recent self-study undertaken as part of the Building Evaluation Capacity project of the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving showed that this training is useful and effective for classroom staff.

Each day includes reading aloud, storytelling and retelling, singing and movement games that teachers use to promote literacy learning. Teachers converse with the children and encourage their efforts at communication, in keeping with the National Reading Panel's endorsement of both direct and indirect acquisition of vocabulary.

One of the most popular spots in the classroom is the library area, with colorful books and a wide area of writing tools such as markers, chalk and boards, stencil kits, alphabet stamps, tactile letters (made from sandpaper, carpet, etc.) and clay-dough with alphabet cutters. Activities are primarily self-directed, so children try out their ideas about written language on their own. However, teachers interact with the children and engage them in various ways in order to bring the learning to the next level.

Thanks to a grant from the Rosie O'Donnell's children's foundation many classrooms have preschool computers, with software that reinforces literacy with storytelling, letter identification, and simple games. Children work in pairs, which encourages development of cooperative socialization. Additional computers will be added as grant funding is obtained.

It may not look like reading

Some of the most influential pre-literacy experiences don't look as if they have anything to do with reading. Walking field trips around the preschool, for example, help children relate to the rich details in their environment – including environmental print, such as STOP signs and gas station logos.

The dramatic play area gives children the chance to try on roles and adult occupations, which prepares them to recognize and relate to these characters in stories. If a child lacks the background and experiences referenced in books, "educators can build commonly shared background knowledge through real-world experiences, simulations, visuals or storytelling," says Campbell from Antioch University Seattle.

These real-world experiences are also a low-stress way for parents to support their children's language growth. "We like to see mothers talking to children up and down the aisle in the grocery store, looking at the signs and the numbers," said Assistant Director Cawley. "In the kitchen they can point out words on food packages, while they're putting away the groceries. Children are more engaged when they see the many ways that we use reading every day."

CRT has recently hired a fulltime Family Literacy Facilitator to design outreach and multi-faceted coaching. With a background in adult learning, she will encourage parents to address their own lifelong learning, while establishing a habit of reading with their children every day. Through partners such as Reading is Fundamental, First Book, Books to Dreams and others, CRT has been able to send

"starter libraries" home with each child. Family Service staff encourage parents to obtain library cards, and make regular use of their neighborhood libraries.



Veteran teacher Socorro Ramos uses the Word Wall to introduce letters to her students (above). Literacy fun is reinforced as children "read" books, and use the classroom computer, on the next page.



Targeting the Struggling Reader



Dante was a second grade student at a Hartford public school who would do just about anything to avoid reading aloud or answering a question about a story. He'd clown around. Start a fight. Leave his classroom without permission. He was spending part of every week at in-school suspension. His mother said there were some days when she would receive multiple phone calls from the school – not one of them positive.

But things started to turn around when she enrolled him in CRT's Early Winners, an after school tutoring program for struggling readers in kindergarten through third grade which is part of the national Supplemental Educational Services (SES) initiative.

For 90 minutes every week, a tutor worked with Dante and two other children, helping them to hear as well as see the building blocks of language. They talked about strategies for understanding stories. And they learned to generate their own questions about the text they were reading.

Dante flourished in Early Winners, thanks to the positive attention from an adult, uninterrupted small group instruction, a research-validated intervention, and a peer group facing similar challenges. In the report, *Put Reading First*, The National Institute for Literacy points out that "small-group instruction may be more effective than individual or whole-group instruction because children often benefit from listening to their classmates respond and receive feedback from the teacher."

In addition, "he was finally in a group of children who didn't laugh at him when he made mistakes," according to Julia Sapia, the certified teacher who supervises CRT's Early Winners program. He was encouraged, so "he really tried. He started concentrating on his work, and was truly a model in our program."

In just five months, Dante's scores on one of the standard reading measurements, the DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators

of Basic Early Literacy Skills) nearly doubled in the areas of oral reading fluency, word use and accurate retelling of a story. Nor was Dante alone in this. In the first two years of operation, more than 80% of program participants showed tremendous improvement, in most cases moving from the At Risk reading level to Grade Level or above.

It was an encouraging beginning for a project that many predicted would bring CRT only headaches and challenges.

A nationwide effort

CRT's Early Winners is a free tutoring service provided under the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). When a school fails to make what the federal Department of Education considers to be "adequate yearly progress" for two years in a row, parents can enroll their children with one of the approved SES tutoring programs, whose fees are paid by the school system.



Over the past six years, an increasing number of Hartford Public Schools have fallen into this category. In fact, during the 2008-09 school year, twenty of the district's elementary schools will be required to offer these compensatory services to their students.

The path to becoming an approved SES provider is not an easy one. The State Department of Education looks at the quality and the theoretical approach to instruction. Enrollment, assessment and reporting paperwork is mountainous, and monthly invoices for services must include a parent sign-off on hours and accomplishments for each child.

In Spring 2006, when CRT applied for approval, there were very few nonprofit agencies successfully providing SES in the state. A few had been discouraged by the daunting application, the paperwork, or the tight budget. Other programs had started off strong, but found they were unable to hire and retain enough tutors, or attract consistent student attendance.

But CRT was able to overcome these issues. In fact, at the close of their first year of operation, Early Winners managers were asked to put together a presentation for other providers, and to "mentor" two other organizations. The State Department of Education particularly complimented CRT on maintaining high student attendance, low tutor turnover and positive relationships with school personnel.

Here are some of the key factors that helped CRT succeed.

Choice of curriculum: CRT chose a well-researched intervention called Trophies from Harcourt Publishing which can be effectively delivered in weekly, stand-alone sessions. Ongoing assessment lets staff target areas where a child is having difficulty. Lessons are very prescriptive, and can be successfully taught by staff with no teaching background.

Program model: Early Winners groups two to three children of similar ability with a well-trained tutor who concentrates on one or two skills each session. It's a busy 90 minutes, designed to engage youngsters at the end of a long day. A typical afternoon includes reading aloud, work sheets, hands-on word-builders and educational games, along with snacks and supportive adult feedback.

Program location: Tutoring occurs in the school, eliminating the need for transportation. Staff meet children at the classroom door, which reduces absenteeism and encourages a quick exchange of information between tutor and teacher. The Program Manager builds relationships with administrators, teaching and support staff, who are often familiar with CRT's Head Start and School Readiness programs.

Staffing: Tutors with bachelor's degrees are trained, supervised and coached by a certified teacher, who models new ways to approach material, and helps some children individually. Tutor-child groups are maintained throughout the year, which builds trust and familiarity. Both children and parents have noted that the tutors seem patient, and have enough time to explain, repeat, and try multiple approaches.

The Faces of Success

Dante is just one of the many children who have found support in the Early Winners program. In two years of operation, the program has nearly doubled in size, growing from 48 to 85 children and from three to five elementary schools with six schools targeted this year. More than 80% of the children who

stayed in the program for at least three months moved from "at risk" to "works on grade level" in the DIBELS test. Other children surged ahead, scoring "above grade level" by the end of the semester.

That was the case with Lexus and Kali, two sisters in the second and third grade at Clark Elementary. "It seemed like their confidence, their skill level, shot straight up," said their grandmother, Deborah Fowlkes. "They always liked to read, but the tutors really helped them understand their books a lot more. Now they grab books as soon as they come in the house. You might say they've become little bookworms."

CRT Early Winners hopes to see more little bookworms, all across the city of Hartford. According to Dr. Paul Copes, CRT's Executive Director of Education, the program hopes to reach at least 100 children in the 2008-09 school year. "Reading is probably the most important skill that we can help students acquire. It shapes everything they do, throughout their academic career," he said. "If you can give them a strong foundation, they can do anything, and go anywhere!"

They really will be Early Winners.

To find out about CRT's Early Winners or to enroll a Hartford child, please call 560-5161.

Top Five Things Families Can Do To Encourage Children to Read

- ◆ Chat with children, even before you think they can understand. Talk about things you see from the car, what you're buying at the grocery store.
- ◆ Make up silly phrases, using rhymes or starting sounds in words. Help children experiment and make up nonsense poems.
- ◆ Point out signs, labels, logos and other "environmental" reading material. Play games where you watch for particular alphabet letters.
- ◆ Read three stories every night before bedtime, even if they are very brief. Repeat their favorite books until children can "read" them back to you.
- ◆ Get a family library card and establish a regular habit of attending story hours and picking out books.

Children Enjoy Working with RSVP Tutors

Low Cost and High Impact Program Uses Volunteers



The cafeteria at Skinner Road School in Vernon is buzzing, although it's very late for lunch. Instead of sandwiches, children are devouring books – from simple illustrated stories to adventure novels. They read the stories aloud to a buddy, who's likely to be ten times older than the student.

For ten years, CRT's America Reads program has served children who are having some noticeable difficulty with reading, but have not fallen behind enough to qualify for extra assistance from classroom teachers or reading specialists. Trained volun-



RSVP Director Mary Wilcox is a reading tutor in Vernon.

unteers from CRT's Retired & Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) are matched one-on-one with the first through third grade students for a full school year.

"These are the children who would have fallen through the cracks," says Coordinator Kathi Young, a retired elementary school teacher. "With a relatively small amount of assistance, they can move from 'at risk' to 'grade level' in their reading."

In addition to reading books and playing word games, the pairs spend time talking. They learn of each other's likes and dislikes, their families, pets and hobbies. Tutors bring in reading materials they know will spark their students' interest, from books about kittens or horses to brief articles from the newspaper. (Sports profiles and updates are particularly popular with some of the children.)

"I think the intergenerational relationship is as important as the actual tutoring," says Mary Wilcox, the director of CRT's RSVP program, and a volunteer at the Skinner Road reading program. "At the end of the year, the children write letters to their tutors, and they could make you weep, they are so lovely. The program helps the youngsters, and it's a wonderful social interaction for the seniors."

CRT's program started ten years ago in Vernon and expanded to Manchester during the 2007-08 school year, at the request of a School Board member. For 2008-09 the CRT program will bring more than 80 volunteers, ages 55 to 87, into seven elementary schools. Organizers say that the volunteers get as much out of this as the children, because there is great social camaraderie and the opportunity to interact with youngsters.

"We are really grateful to have had this program in our school for ten years," said Skinner Road school social worker Jim Oliphant, who has been the liaison to CRT for the full decade. "Because it's a weekly one-on-one time, it becomes very personal," he said. "The kids think of these people as their buddies, and they are having fun. Socially it gives that nurturing piece that the kids need. Of course, the scores also reflect the improvement that the kids have made. I think that it's a fantastic program."

A simple, powerful model

Researchers have identified five primary building blocks of successful reading instruction. One of these is fluency, the ability to read text accurately and quickly. A fluent reader has mastered the ability to recognize words and comprehend sentences at the same time. They automatically focus their attention on making connections among the ideas in a text, or between what they're reading and what they already know. So fluency supports another of the building blocks – text comprehension.

CRT's America Reads addresses a major obstacle to helping children improve fluency: the lack of practice time. The National Reading Panel found that "repeated and monitored oral reading improves reading fluency and overall reading achievement," and that it is "especially important for readers who are struggling [and] are not likely to make effective and efficient use of silent, independent reading time." (*Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read*)

Yet many classroom teachers can only find time for "Round Robin reading," with each child taking a brief turn at reading aloud. Pairing children one-on-one with volunteers gives them the time to read and re-read long passages.

Using an objective measure of reading skills, the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment (F&P), CRT's Coordinator has found that students in the program improve markedly in reading competence between fall and spring. Scores rose at a rate ahead of what would be expected from classroom instruction alone.

At the same time, students showed improvement in an Attitude Toward Reading scale, administered at the beginning and end of each school year. At the end of the year, more children showed stronger positive reactions to the statement "I like to look at books." Fewer students agreed with the statement, "I think reading is hard."

Many researchers believe that motivation is as important as skill building in learning to read. In an article entitled *When Children Read Because They Want To*, Laura Colker, Ed.D., wrote "Being an engaged reader is strongly correlated with reading achievement. In fact, engagement in reading can compensate for low achievement due to socioeconomic status or parents' educational level." The article goes on to stress the importance of presenting children with material in which they are interested. They are more likely to push themselves to understand the material, and will have a broader context of background knowledge that relates to the reading. (www.rif.org, downloaded July 2008).

A simple model can affect both children's motivation and their reading skills, for a very small investment. Since the actual services are delivered by volunteers, the Vernon program costs about \$4,500 per year. Most of that is for a small stipend for the coordinator, who recruits and trains the volunteers, works closely with the schools, and supervises each tutoring session.

That's just \$90 dollars per child per year – a very small investment for a really positive outcome.

"We know that we are changing children's lives by changing their attitudes toward their school work," Young said.

To find out more about the CRT America Reads program, or to volunteer as a tutor, please call 896-1101.



Arthur Plante, top, and Kathie Angelica, center, joined the CRT reading program when it opened. Kathi Young, bottom, is both a tutor and the program coordinator.



Greater Hartford & Mid-State RSVP allows volunteers over 55 to follow their passions, and find meaningful ways to give back to the community. This program has more than 670 volunteers who are working in approximately 70 locations, from Bradley Airport's Ambassadors' Desk to the hospitals, schools and the local Consumer Hot Line. For more information about how to get involved, please call the RSVP office in Hartford at 760-3087 or 3088.

CHAMPION OF EDUCATION

Dr. Conrad Mallett has improved education for thousands

One of the longest-serving and most dedicated members of the Community Renewal Team Board of Trustees is Dr. Conrad L. Mallett, Sr., President Emeritus of Capital Community College and an educator of note for more than a half-century. Since joining CRT's Board in 1989 he has served in numerous capacities, including four years as Chair and Interim Chair. While he was chair, CRT developed the state-of-the-art Ritter Early Care and Education Center in Hartford, where over 100 children learn and play every day. Also under his leadership, the Agency started Fresh Start, a residential substance abuse treatment program for female ex-offenders and their children. As the current Vice Chair of the Board's Planning and Assessment Committee, Dr. Mallett continues to be instrumental in choosing CRT's programs and initiatives, and determining the effectiveness of those programs. In Spring 2008, he was honored on the occasion of his 80th birthday.

Reflecting on the tremendous energy he has invested in education and anti-poverty work, Dr. Mallett said, "I grew up as a black child of a single mother, during the Great Depression in Houston Texas. I know the problems of the oppressed poor from personal experience. I have watched discrimination and poverty blight and curdle the lives of hopeful and vibrant children. I am happy to support CRT in its strong and effective efforts to ameliorate the problems of poverty and help poor people, regardless of race, creed or color, to gain positive independence."

Dr. Mallett began his academic career in 1957, teaching in the Detroit Public Schools. Although he spent a period in the Detroit Mayor's Office supervising housing and anti-poverty programs, he was drawn back to education as the key to transforming a community. He held administrative positions at Wayne State University, Wayne County Community College

and the Community College of Baltimore. The last 12 years of Dr. Mallett's career were spent as President of Capital Community College, where he was a leader in supporting the arts, economic opportunity, social justice and education. He raised the profile of the college in the Greater Hartford area and brought the community into campus life. When the college relocated to the former G. Fox Building on Main



Street in Hartford, the art gallery facing the street on the first floor was named for Dr. Mallett.

This is just one of the many honors that Dr. Mallett has received over the years for his work, dedication and innovation, including the George A. Athanson Humanitarian Award for Service to the Community. This fall will mark the tenth year that CRT has presented The Dr. Claudia and Dr. Conrad Mallett Scholarship Award to CRT's early childhood professionals who are pursuing Associates Degrees at Capital Community College. CRT established this scholarship in 1999, to commemorate Dr. Mallett's 10th anniversary on the Board and the many contributions that he and his wife, a longtime educator in West Hartford, have made to the community.



"CRT is fortunate to have a dynamic individual such as Dr. Mallett on our Board," said Lena Rodriguez, President and CEO of CRT. "His energy, and his continued role in our community, enrich all of us."

The latest tribute to that energy is the Conrad and Claudia Mallett Window to the Future, located in the College Welcome Center, the gateway for entering students. A dedication is planned for December 11, 2008, and funds are being collected for the college's Conrad L. Mallett Scholarship Endowment Fund, established in 1993. Further information is available from John H. McNamara, Director, Institutional Advancement, Capital Community College, (860) 906-5102.

Youth Make Strides Towards Jobs & Future

Four of the teens who proudly received their diplomas at last June's Cromwell High School graduation might never had made it to the ceremony, if not for a program called "My CDs," or the Middlesex Youth Career Development Service.

This new collaboration between the Community Renewal Team and the Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce, funded by the Workforce Alliance, uses a grounded, real-world approach, financial incentives and academic credit to attract and retain high school juniors and seniors who are at risk of dropping out of school. This is the first time that academic credit has been awarded for an employment prep course offered by a community-based organization. The program started in 2007-08 in Cromwell and Portland, and will expand in the 2008-09 academic year.

Students meet one period each day, four days per week, with an instructor/advocate who moves seamlessly from a Customer Service Curriculum to the Adkins Life Skills Series to re-teaching some of the math or vocabulary that has stumped the students. "One day we're working on resumes in the computer; another day we're talking about dating and marriage," says instructor Len Piexotto, known in school as "Mrs. P."

The academic component includes real world – and sometimes humorous – exercises. A recent assignment was to create a plan for spending \$1 million, using advertising and math worksheets to back up the budgets. While it seemed like fun, it was part of a remediation program that has produced an increase of at least one grade level in math and language arts for each of the participants. The academic credits earned in MyCDs helped students graduate on time.

Students vote with their feet, and attendance in this program is remarkably high, even among those who frequently cut other classes. "Sometimes you hear guys saying, 'What's the point of school anyway?' But with Mrs. P, you always knew that what we did was going to make sense," says Daniel Pantanella, one of those June graduates who is now attending trade school in heating and cooling. (Pictured here.)



There are many opportunities outside of the school day, as well. Students like Ernesto Vargas, who hopes to become a barber, are placed in job shadowing, internship and summer work programs, coordinated by the Chamber.

Cromwell High guidance counselor Louis Bronk credits the My CDs program with setting Daniel, Ernesto and a dozen other participants onto a positive path. "Daniel was one who really didn't know what he wanted to do next," says Bronk. "Mrs. P helped match him up with a field that would interest him,

and where he could really succeed. With Ernesto, he knew where he wanted to go, but he didn't necessarily have the resources to get himself there."

Flexible funding from the Workforce Alliance means that CRT can help students over some of the hurdles in their post- high school transition. The program paid for Drivers Education for Daniel, so he could get a license, and covered his first tuition payment at the trade school. There will be money for Ernesto's application fees and his barber tools. Participants can "earn" up to \$1,200 by meeting goals such as completing their pre-employment portfolios. Funds are released only to a third party (such as a school), after consultation with the student, parents and instructors. Other legitimate expenses include clothes for interviews, a car insurance payment, or school application fees.

By the close of the first year, participants demonstrated increased academic accomplishment; improved school attendance and behavior; completed a course in Customer Service, prepared a resume and practiced interviewing; most obtained summer and/or part time employment. A letter from Cromwell High principal Barbara Miles confirmed that the students who had been at risk of not meeting their graduation requirements remained in school and met their goals. After a successful year at Cromwell and Portland high schools, the My CDs program is expanding into Middletown in the current academic year.