

## Connecticut Writing Project - Storrs

# Teacher, Writer, Researcher

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*News about the CWP and remarkable insights from CT's educators, writers, and activists.*

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### The Director's Corner

*by Jason Courtmanche (SI 99)*

Starting this year, the CWP will host a state-wide contest for the Scholastic Writing Awards. We're building the program as we speak, so it's a bit of a shitty first draft, to quote Annie Lamott, but we'll get there. Submissions open September 12, so be on the lookout for mailings and emailings and postings on the website.

The other program we're getting more involved in is Letters About Literature, which the Neag School of Education ran for several years before the CWP got involved two years ago. But this year, the Library of Congress decided that after 27 years, it was no longer going to support the program. However, the CWP, Neag, and the English Department have decided to continue to support the program, though now there will be no national level of the contest and no financial or logistical support from the Library of Congress.

Deepening our involvement in these writing programs for students accomplishes a variety of goals. Besides giving K-12 students real audiences and purposes for their writing, these contests provide ways for the CWP to work with a variety of groups in the fields of English and education. The *CSW* submissions will continue to be scored by K-12 teachers, as will the Scholastic Region-at-Large submissions. The Letters About Literature program has always involved undergraduate pre-service teachers, and will continue to do so, although taking on a larger role now means we will also be reaching out to Neag alums, ECE teachers, and CWP Teacher-Consultants. Scholastic prohibits us from using K-12 teachers to score writing from K-12 students, so we will be working with undergraduate and graduate students from UConn's Creative Writing Program to judge those submissions.

I'm excited about our new commitments to promoting K-12 student writing.

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## Celebrating Young Authors at the *Connecticut Student Writers Recognition Night*

by Alex Klein  
CWP Intern

Nearly two thousand entries were submitted to the 2019 *Connecticut Student Writers* magazine. The recognition night for those who were published or honorably mentioned in the 31<sup>st</sup> edition of *Connecticut Student Writers* took place at the Jorgensen Center for the Performing Arts on the evening of Thursday, May 16, 2019.

Jason Courtmanche began the ceremony stating, “If you’ve been here before for previous years’ Recognition Nights, then you know it’s gotten big.” Courtmanche noted that the theater “holds about 1,300 people,” but there were still “people standing in the back and people filing in to” seats in the mezzanine.

Courtmanche introduced the keynote speaker, Suzy Kline, who is a resident of Torrington, CT. Suzy Kline is the creator of *Horrible Harry* and *Herbie Jones*, two series of children’s books about two clever, troublemaking boys in elementary school. Kline was an elementary school teacher for twenty-seven years, and she has since published thirty-seven books in her *Horrible Harry* series alone. Therefore, she had plenty of advice to give to the aspiring writers in the audience.

“When I get the chance to talk to students, I like to start with this. If you remember anything from the thirty minutes of me talking, remember this. In my pocket, I always have a notebook.” Kline told the student writers that they all had stories brewing inside of them. Keeping a notebook around allows a writer to jot down the ideas that they could turn into full-length stories later. Kline offered an example from her own life: when she was a teacher, she noticed that her students were coming to class early. First five minutes early, then ten minutes early, then fifteen minutes early.

She discovered that “the reason the students wanted to get to class early was to hang their coats on the one purple hanger,” since all the



Jason Courtmanche (SI 99)  
(Photos Courtesy of Emily Cole)



Suzy Kline

other hangers were made out of wood. “So that night, in my notebook, I wrote down—what do you think?—purple hanger!”

Kline also explained the difficulties she encountered before getting published. “Before I got my first book published,” she said, “I got 127 rejections. When I first got a rejection letter with my name on it, I was thrilled.” If the students pursue careers as authors and take Kline’s advice, they will not feel discouraged by disappointing news from publishers. Rather, they will use criticism as a means to improve their writing, and rejection will seem less like a crushing defeat and more like an inevitable roadblock on the path to publication.

After the keynote speech, several student writers read their published pieces. It took a lot of courage for them to read their own writing to a crowd of over 1,300 people. The first of the thirteen authors was Aashi Thawali. Thawali, who finished kindergarten in the spring of 2019, read a nonfiction piece titled “My True Story,” which was about moving to a new house and spending time with her family. Next up was Saanvi Jahagirdar, a first-grade student who read her poem “Deep into the Sea.” Saanvi asked the audience to imagine that they were “born into the sea.” She told the audience to pretend they were a “stingray or a turtle” so they could “look at all the colorful creatures” underwater “and think of a rainbow.” She ended her story by asking the audience to “save and thank” Mother Nature for all of the beautiful environments and forms of life with which she provides us.

Andrew Alemany, a fourth-grade student, read “Dare to Dream,” a nonfiction story about the US Men’s National Team vs. Ecuador soccer match that took place at Rentschler Field stadium in 2014. In a much more somber, fictional story titled “Dreamers,” sixth-grader Rebecca Willett wrote about Keyshia Mason, whose mother died in a mysterious violent incident. Keyshia informs the reader that, since her mother’s death, she has become “a living shadow,” a girl who is “scared of light,” “scared of people,” and “scared of guns.”

Next was Autumn Munsell’s nonfiction essay, “An Open Letter to Colleges and Universities Who



*Marcy Rudge (SI 07) & Megan Murphy (SI 18)*



*John Martin (SI 18)*



*Kelly Andrews-Babcock (SI 05) & Jason Courtmanche*



*Jane Cook (SI 07) & John Martin (SI 18)*





Cover artwork for Volume XXXI of the *CT Student Writers* magazine  
(by Stella Mahlke)

“[Realizing my story would be published] was amazing. It was the best feeling in the world. ... I’m definitely going to submit something next year.”

– Kiersten Sipe (Grade 5)

Email Me.” Though the essay was not without humor, Munsell was frank and did not withhold her feelings of indignation and weariness. “In order to get a job and not die of starvation,” she said, “I must go to college.” Higher education, she claimed, is a “corrupt system” that encourages high-schoolers to send in their application dues despite knowing that a significant number of applicants have no chance of being accepted. Munsell wondered whether matriculating to a college or university would constitute “abetting an enemy of the youth” that turns the economic anxiety of applicants into a profit.

The Recognition Night reinvigorated some students’ interest in producing their own stories. Jacek Kuklinski (Grade 3) received an honorable mention for his story about *The Wicked Cyclone*, a ride at Six Flags. He said that he would like to submit a different story for consideration next year. He knew that the story was going to be about soccer players, but he was not sure yet if it would be fiction or non-fiction. He may have some competition from Max Rodenbusch (Grade 5), who received an honorable mention for his medieval story “*Didric’s Request*” and also plans to submit a story about soccer for next year’s *CSW*.

When Kiersten Sipe (Grade 5) found out that her nonfiction story “*Mom and Me*” was going to appear in the 2019 edition of *CSW*, she realized that it was the first time her work would be published for others to read. “It was amazing,” Kiersten said. “It was the best feeling in the world.” Kiersten stated that she would “definitely” send in another piece next year. “It will probably be about what it’s like to move so many times ... I’ve moved seven times to six different states. It’s tough.”

Those who are interested in buying the 31st edition of the *Connecticut Student Writers* magazine (or previous editions of *CSW* and other publications printed by the CWP) should visit the Connecticut Writing Project’s page on Lulu.com (<http://www.lulu.com/shop/search.ep?contributorId=1109866>).



## Abandoning the Formula: Multimodal Writing at Montville High School

by Réme Bohlin (SI 19)

Graduate Assistant Director of First-Year Writing

On a rainy Friday afternoon, I sat down with Susan Laurençot in her classroom at Montville High School. Laurençot has been a certified ECE teacher since 2015. I asked her what originally drew her to the ECE program.

“[ECE English] has freed me up to be more creative with my kids, and it has allowed me to make a case against formulaic writing.”

Laurençot participated in the Connecticut Writing Project (CWP) Summer Institute when she was first certified as an ECE teacher. During the CWP Summer Institute, she researched writing without a formula, and says this was a primary inspiration for the development of her ECE English course.

Currently, her course is interdisciplinary with ECE History. Titled “What Haunts Us,” the class explores the lingering consequences of major historical American events.

One writing assignment she shared with me asks students to consider one of those lingering consequences, what Laurençot calls a “critical issue,” from the expansion of the American West. This is a multimodal assignment, and student work gets posted to Laurençot’s blog [Raise Your Voice](#). Students also write a reflective piece in which they explain and defend their design and composition choices.

Laurençot explained that she wants students to be intentional when it comes to multimodal writing: “Don’t just add a photo because this is a ‘multi-modal’ project. Why did you add it? How does it enhance the reader’s understanding of your topic?”

She resists providing prompting questions in order to encourage students to move away from formulaic writing. Instead, Laurençot

“[ECE English] has freed me up to be more creative with my kids, and it has allowed me to make a case against formulaic writing.”

– Susan Laurençot (SI 13)

wants them to be motivated by their ideas, and more importantly their audience.

Typically, a student’s audience is their teacher. With a multimodal assignment like Laurençot’s, the audience is extended beyond the classroom with the use of hashtags. Each student has to research hashtags that define or target the audience they’re interested in reaching. For example, one student blog post titled “Feminism: How Centuries of Negative Connotation Continue to Haunt America” uses the hashtags #WomensReality, #EverydaySexism, and #IAmANastyWoman.

Another student wanted to challenge herself by giving a presentation in the style of a live TedTalk. The student’s critical issue was sexual assault against women, particularly native women as the class had read *Tracks* by Louise Erdrich. For her presentation, the student set a timer on the large smart board in the classroom without explaining why. During the presentation, the timer would go off and the student would reset it, again and again. At the end of the presentation, she asked the class if they noticed how many times the timer went off. According to the student, every time the timer went off another

woman was sexually assaulted in this country. It was a powerful performance, and an example of how multimodal encompasses the gestural, as well as the digital and analog.

I asked Laurençot if students immediately embraced this kind of assignment, or if they were hesitant about moving away from the traditional essay. She laughed and said, “They’ve heard rumours, ‘Laurençot does not like formulaic writing!’ So they’re a little bit unnerved. Kids are like, I can’t write like that.” Laurençot acknowledges that it’s challenging for

some students to leave the formula behind, but also incredibly rewarding for student and teacher alike.

One change Laurençot would make to this assignment in the future is to encourage students to compose multimodally for all of their writing assignments. This year, students tended to see multimodal as a discrete assignment, instead of as a way to approach composition in general.

## The CWP Spring Writers Retreat Shows Why Creative Writing is Great for Teachers Too

by Alex Klein  
CWP Intern

The CWP hosts two Writers Retreats for teachers every year—one retreat in the spring and another in the fall. Each Writers Retreat is the length of one weekend, beginning early Friday afternoon and ending at 11 AM on Sunday. The retreats are all held at the Wisdom House Retreat and Conference Center in Litchfield, a lush property with forests, meadows, gardens, a chapel, and an art gallery. The most recent retreat began on Friday, May 17<sup>th</sup> and ended on Sunday, May 19<sup>th</sup>.

Each of the retreats is led by Danielle Pieratti (SI 14), an English teacher at South Windsor High School and author of the 2016 poetry collection *Fugitives*. Pieratti said that the Writers Retreats are a very “different experience” from the set of two-hour teacher-as-writer workshops that the CWP hosts throughout the year. The Writers Retreats, because of their length, “allow for a lot more exchange between participants,” meaning that the teachers have more time to share their thoughts on one another’s writing. Robert Pirrie, an 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade chemistry and physics teacher who participated in the most recent Writers Retreat, said that the feedback he received on his work was, “useful and positive as it always is.” He added that the “people who attend are generous and kind but truthful.”

“People who attend are generous and kind, but truthful.”

– Robert Pirrie (SI 14)

As valuable as sharing criticism is, attendees generally concur that the retreats are helpful mostly because they offer a weekend that is dedicated entirely to writing. It is not easy for someone to find time to read and write while balancing personal and professional obligations. Pirrie said that he is “not terribly motivated” to write most of the time, but he does not want to “show up emptyhanded” to a meeting with “[his] writing friends.” When he is conversing with teachers who write, Pirrie also finds motivation when he hears “someone say something out of the ordinary,” which makes his “brain start building stuff around that.” Though he does not “beat [him]self up if [he’s] not writing,” the “valuable insight” Pirrie gets from other teachers at the retreat does give him a reason to “pick up the pen again.”

Abby Djan, an art teacher at Odyssey Community School for grades K-8, expressed a similar view of the relationship between the retreats and her writing. Djan said that she “had forgotten that [she] had a passion for writing until [she] did” a CWP Summer Institute. These days, “the only time [Djan] write[s] is when [she’s] with CWP.” Like Djan and Pirrie, Pieratti thinks that “interact[ing] and learn[ing] from teachers at other schools” during the retreats has a positive effect on her work ethic. “I have often said that despite the time commitment, my work with the CWP actually makes me more productive because it inspires and motivates me professionally and creatively.” Moreover, Pieratti believes that the “amazing opportunities” to connect with other education professionals “ultimately [have] made [her] more effective as a teacher.”

Rarely can a group of writers all find a time and a place to work on their writing together and exchange feedback, so Pieratti makes sure to give the attendees as much freedom as possible to

**“The only time I write is when I’m with the CWP.”**

**– Abby Djan (SI 2015)**

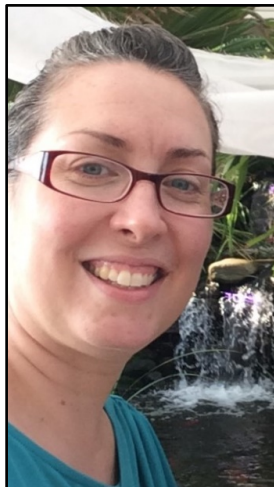
**“I have often said that despite the time commitment, my work with the CWP actually makes me more productive because it inspires and motivates me professionally and creatively.”**

**– Danielle Pieratti (SI 2014)**

work as they see fit. The retreats are “intentionally flexible, with no scheduled group activities or seminars,” though there is “a celebratory read-around and workshop session with refreshments on Saturday night. In addition, many opt to go walking or hiking in groups on Saturday afternoon, or to visit Topsmead State Forest, which is a short walk from Wisdom House.” The CWP has held Writers Retreats at Wisdom House in Litchfield since 1990, and Pieratti noted that the location is conducive to writing because of Wisdom House’s “dedication to learning and personal development, the flexibility of its work spaces, the fact that it provides three amazing



*Danielle Pieratti, CWP Writing Program  
Leader, Teacher, and Author*



*Abby Djan*



*Robert Pirrie*



meals a day, and the price.” Abby Djan agreed with Pieratti’s praise for Wisdom House. She said that the location of the retreat “absolutely” played a significant role in the process of deciding whether she would attend. The retreat “had to be affordable” and it had to be in a location where she could “commune with nature.” The seven teachers who attended the May 2019 Writers Retreat were all at different stages in the writing process. Djan’s proximity to nature at Wisdom House appears to have been a great benefit, as she “finished the rough draft of [her] book,” and will now begin editing. The working title of Djan’s book is *Just Miss* and it is “about [her] experience teaching high school in Willimantic.” In contrast, Pirrie knew that he was not going to “sit right down and write after getting back from the retreat.” For him, “writing is an avocation” and “not a vocation.”

Nevertheless, Pirrie and Djan were both driven to write when they attended the CWP Retreat and interacted with likeminded people. Pirrie, for example, has been reading since age four, but he did not think that he had any desire to write until he read *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott about ten to fifteen years ago. Djan, too, “had forgotten that [she] had a passion for writing” even though she “love[s] reading” and “the library was a very important place in [her] childhood and young adult years.” She rediscovered her desire to write only after she “did Summer Institute” with the CWP several years ago.



The greatest benefit of the Writers Retreat, perhaps, is that it offers teachers the ability to rediscover a part of their identities that has long been dormant. Pieratti was “lucky to have amazing creative writing teachers in elementary school, high school, and college who encouraged [her] and also nurtured a community in which creative writing was clearly valued.” It is no coincidence, then, that Pieratti went on to become an English teacher and has published a collection of poetry. By hosting the Writers Retreats, she creates an environment much like the one from her time in primary and secondary school – an environment where those who have not given the concept of creative writing too much thought may discover a vocation (or avocation) that has fallen by the wayside.



*The grounds of Wisdom House Retreat and Conference Center*

The CWP holds two writing retreats a year. To receive information about the retreats, please contact Danielle Pieratti at [dpieratti@swindsor.k12.ct.us](mailto:dpieratti@swindsor.k12.ct.us)

## Windham High School and Shaun David Hutchinson Turn Reading into a Party

by Alex Klein  
CWP Intern

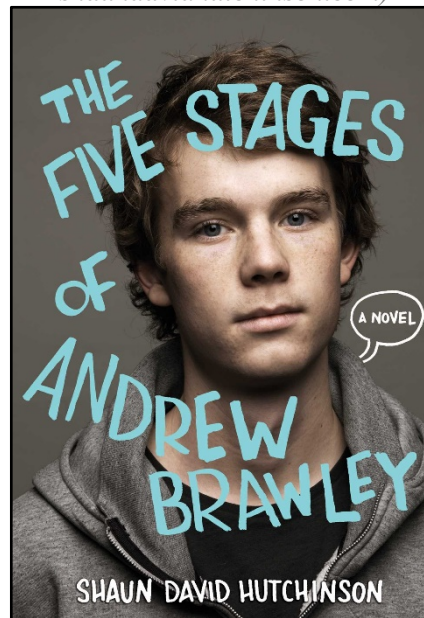
The Write Idea Writing Center at Windham High School hosted its eighth annual “Lock-in for Literacy and Culture” on the night of Friday, May 3, 2019. The event was twelve hours long, beginning at 7 PM on Friday and ending at 7 AM on Saturday, and it was open to all Windham High School students. However, those who wanted to attend were required to read a book by author Shaun David Hutchinson and submit a written response based on their reading. For every Lock-in for Literacy, the Write Idea Writing Center books an author of young adult literature to appear, and students were required to read and respond to a book by Hutchinson because he was the star attraction on the night of May 3<sup>rd</sup>.

I sat down with Dara Bowling (SI 10), the director of the Write Idea Writing Center, to talk about the event in more detail. Though she described the twelve hours teachers and students spent in the Windham High School gymnasium as a “long night,” the reasons to attend the Lock-in were myriad. Students were able to participate in Zumba classes, dance lessons, hairstyling and makeup tutorials, gym games, tattoo artistry, and a writing workshop led by Shaun David Hutchinson. For each activity a student completed, he or she would be given one to three tickets: one ticket for doing the activity alone, two tickets for doing the activity with a friend, and three tickets for doing the activity with someone outside of one’s friend group. These tickets could be entered in raffles for different prizes, including a bean bag chair, an ice cream machine, a digital camera, a mountain bike, and a tablet.

The purpose of the Lock-in was to promote, unsurprisingly, literacy. Each person who



Shaun David Hutchinson  
(Photos courtesy of  
[shaundavidhutchinson.com](http://shaundavidhutchinson.com))



A 2015 novel by Hutchinson



attended read either *The Five Stages of Andrew Brawley*, *We Are the Ants*, *At the Edge of the Universe*, or *The Apocalypse of Elena Mendoza* by Shaun David Hutchinson. There were eleven different options for the written response to Hutchinson's work. Students could, for example, write a traditional essay, write poetry inspired by their reading, or write a "final chapter" for their chosen book. Reading a book written specifically for young adults, developing a creative response to the reading, and meeting the author persuaded students not to associate reading with boredom and drudgery. For evidence of the positive effect that the Lock-in had on student literacy, one must look no further than Windham High School's 2019 literary magazine, which is dedicated to Hutchinson and features a number of written responses to Hutchinson's books.

The Lock-in was also intended to fortify bonds within the Windham High School Community. That is why students were rewarded for doing Lock-in activities with someone they did not know very well. Bowling said that the Writing Center always "tries to choose books and authors [for the Lock-in] that look into some

aspect of differentness—ethnic, religious, political, socioeconomic, or sexual diversity." Booking an author who explores such themes is a way to recognize and celebrate diversity within Windham High School's community. At the same time, the organizers of the Lock-in want to cultivate a feeling of unity. Every person who attended the event received a Lock-in for Literacy and Culture T-shirt and a water bottle. "The T-shirt is an equalizer," Bowling said. "If you're a teacher, you wear it. If you're a student, you wear it."

Bowling also made sure to convey the importance of the role the Writing Center's thirteen tutors played in organizing the Lock-in. "They do everything. They solicit donations, they set up a budget. Each Lock-in is the product of a year's worth of work. We give ourselves a nice, relaxing twenty-four hours after the Lock-in, and then we're off and running again the day afterward." The Writing Center's tutors were recruited in a variety of different ways. Some were recommended by Windham High School teachers, some were recommended by other tutors, and some candidates approached Bowling on their own. When they were not planning the annual Lock-in, the Write Idea Writing Center tutors were helping fellow high school students hone their writing skills. The tutors also wrote and designed a page in the *Willimantic Chronicle* once a month, meaning that they had to become proficient with Adobe InDesign, obtain royalty-free images, and understand the logistics of formatting images and articles in a printed newspaper.

The Lock-in for Literacy and Culture has become one of the most celebrated annual events at Windham High School due to the entertainment it provides and its overwhelming educational value. When I asked Bowling why it was important to encourage high school students to read fiction, she laughed. "It is important to



*The staff of Windham High School's Write Idea Writing Center*



encourage them to read everything. What part of your life is not led by writing? Recipes, textbooks, instruction manuals, editorials. Literacy is about enhancing your critical thinking. It goes beyond being an English teacher. The only way to connect to the stories of the people who came before you is through reading. Before video existed, that is. But understanding stories, whether they're written or told orally or in a video, is all about listening, understanding, literacy, and critical thinking. It is about common humanity."



*Willimantic Chronicle by WHS's Write Idea  
Writing Center staff*

## Tips and Tricks for Helping Elementary School Students Learn to Love Reading and Writing

*by Alex Klein  
CWP Intern*

In June of 2019, the National Writing Project hosted an advanced Leadership Institute focused on the subject of "Kid Writing" in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The goal of the Institute was to help Writing Project teachers from around the country understand how to best teach kindergarten, first grade, and second grade students how to read and write. The lessons given at the Institute were led by Eileen G. Feldgus, the author of *Kid Writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, a guide for early childhood educators who want to help their students become talented and gleeful readers and writers. I sat down with Kelly Andrews-Babcock (SI 05), a CWP Program Leader and reading specialist for Killingly Intermediate School, to talk about her experience at the Leadership Institute.

Each of the twelve teams that attended the Institute was composed of four members and represented a different Writing Project site. The Connecticut Writing Project team included

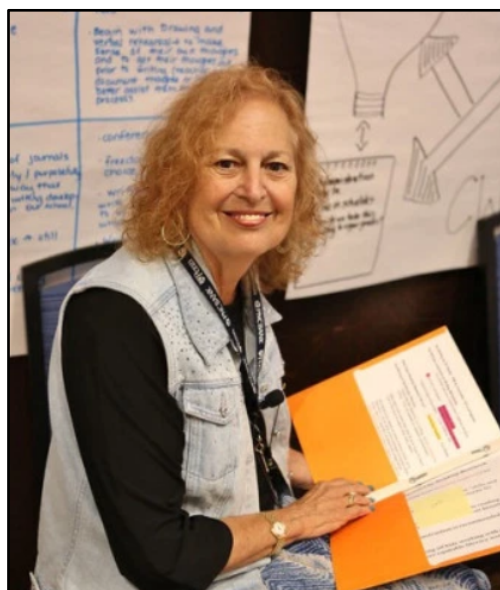
Andrews-Babcock, Erika Hanusch (SI 17), Kristine Kamara (SI 07), and Alison Campolongo. Hanusch is a fifth-grade teacher. She is also on the CWP Leadership Council. She will be relaying what she learned at the Institute to the principal of Windsor Locks' South Elementary School. Kamara is a Special Education teacher for kindergarten and first-grade students in Killingly. Campolongo, who is not affiliated with the CWP, is a second-grade teacher at a private school and will be sharing information from the Institute with the staff in her building. Likewise, Kamara and Andrews-Babcock will meet with the principal of Killingly Central School to discuss the possibility of creating a class based on the material presented at the Leadership Institute. Such a class would be based on the model for a children's writing workshop Feldgus provides in *Kid Writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. The goal of the workshop would be to teach students in kindergarten and first grade



From left to right: Kristine Kamara (SI 07), Alison Campolongo, Erika Hanusch (SI 17), Kelly Andrews-Babcock (SI 05)  
© Darryl W. Moran Photography and Penn Graduate School of Education

about phonics. I asked Andrews-Babcock what the term “phonics” meant, and she explained, “Phonics is the instruction of sounds and their association with letters. In the class, we would teach kids how to put sounds and letters together to create words and communicate. It would involve very explicit instruction on vowel sounds, digraphs, and diphthongs.” Diphthongs occur when two vowels combine to create a single sound. Examples include the words “sound” and “laundry.” Digraphs refer more broadly to any two letters that combine to make a single sound; an example would be the “th” sound in “mathematics.”

Personally, I did not learn about diphthongs or digraphs in elementary school. In fact, I never learned about them at all, so I asked Andrews-Babcock what exactly phonics-based education in first or second grade would look like. She said, “When you try to get kindergarteners to write, they’re not going to be able to spell a lot of words. Say one of them is trying to spell ‘beautiful.’ They only hear the ‘u,’ so they’ll



Eileen G. Feldgus, Ed.D.



probably leave out the ‘e’ and the ‘a.’ The key is to exaggerate the sounds in the word when you say it to the kids—‘bee-yoo-tuh-fuhl.’ We want them to associate the sounds with certain letters and to capture as many letters as they hear so the teacher will be more able to decipher their writing.”

It can be difficult for adults to figure out how to teach children what sounds are produced by each letter of the alphabet. When a child asks what the first letter of the word ‘cat’ is, the adult wants to help the child get to the answer without simply replying, “The letter ‘C.’” But how do they do it? While at the NWP Leadership Institute, Andrews-Babcock learned that, “The first thing you would want to do is tell the child to watch your mouth closely while you say ‘cat.’ Make sure to talk louder and slower than you would normally. Stress the sound that you want the child to pay attention to.” This tactic allows the student to associate the sound of a syllable being pronounced with the sight of an adult producing that sound. Ideally, this association of visual and auditory sensations will make it easier for the child to create a mental link between a sound and a specific letter. “If you’re working on the word

‘cat,’” Andrews-Babcock said, “and you ask the child what sound they hear at the beginning of the word, they’ll probably say ‘K.’ And that’s fine.” When a child is making the first steps toward literacy, the key is for them to understand which sounds tend to be represented by which letters. As their reading and writing skills become more advanced, so will the details that they are expected to remember.

“We want [kindergarteners] to associate the sounds [in words] with certain letters and to capture as many letters as they hear so the teacher will be more able to decipher their writing.”

– Kelly Andrews-Babcock (SI 05)



*Erika Hamusch (SI 17) and Kelly Andrews-Babcock (SI 05).*



All of that is well and good, but anyone who spends time around kindergarteners and first-graders knows that education needs to be *fun* and *playful* for it to be effective. In the words of Mister Rogers, “For children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.” Therefore, Feldgus recommends that teachers should make an effort to represent letters, words, and parts of words through costume pieces, props, and stuffed animals that can be found in the classroom. If a student needs to write a word that ends with the suffix “-ing,” Feldgus tells the child to retrieve a Burger-King-style paper crown that is kept in a specific location in the classroom. The crown, adorned with the letters “-Ing,” makes its wearer into the “King of Ing.” Through this game, children are rewarded for using words that will eventually become common in their writing. They also have an object that they can associate with certain letters, sounds, and words, an object they can reference if they have trouble remembering how to form the present participle. This game can be expanded by adding new props and characters. Feldgus’s examples include “The Wiz of Is” and “The Star of Are.”

Feldgus’s presentation outlined many other ideas for making writing workshops into exciting experiences for children. Andrews-Babcock said that Feldgus spent a lot of time during the Institute talking about “Word Walls,” which are “poster boards where you arrange words in alphabetical order. Specifically, you want to include words that kids are going to use a lot in their writing.” Andrews-Babcock said that, “It is very important, especially in kindergarten and first grade, that word walls and phonics lessons in general engage kids on an interactive level. Word walls should have velcro on them so that kids can pull the words off the wall, look at them, and rearrange them to make phrases or sentences. There are a ton of words that can go on word walls, but teachers should use a lot of sensory words. Sight words, hearing words. ‘See,’ ‘Saw,’ ‘Hear,’ ‘Heard,’ ‘Feel,’ ‘Felt.’ And words that have to do with talking, too. ‘Said’ is a big one. Kids are going to spell ‘said’ as ‘sed’ even into fifth grade. Correcting that is not so important early on, when you’re trying to get them to turn what they hear into words, but it’s still good to show them the right way to spell it from the beginning.”



*Feldgus addressing the crowd of educators from different sites of the National Writing Project*  
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Despite encouraging teachers and parents to moderate their expectations when it comes to things like the correct spelling of “said” in kindergarten, Feldgus also advocates pushing students to improve. At the end of every writing workshop, Feldgus says there should be a mini-lesson which, depending on the age of the children, ranges from five to fifteen minutes. These mini-lessons involve an adult reading the writing of one, two, or three children to the entire classroom. For each child’s writing, the adult should identify “two praises and one push.” In other words, the adult should describe two things that the child writer did well and one thing that he or she could do better. In kindergarten, the praising and pushing will revolve mostly around the correct formation of letters.

“It is very important, especially in kindergarten and first-grade, that word walls and phonics lessons in general engage kids on an interactive level.”

– Kelly Andrews-Babcock

Andrews-Babcock said that, as the students develop, the mini-lessons should become more advanced: “The lessons need to have meaning for all of the students. They should really be about concepts that most of the kids or a good chunk of the kids are struggling with. The lessons might be about spacing between words. When kids write, all of their words and letters will run together. Another lesson might be about how to use a word wall, or how to associate a specific letter with a sound and how to form that letter. Say that one of the three children who are chosen to have their writing read to the class wrote the ‘S’ in Superman incorrectly. Ask the class what sound they hear in ‘Superman.’ Model how to write that letter, and then put your model in a prominent place in the classroom. That way, you let everyone know where they can go to see the letter when they write it in the future.” The primary objective of reading and critiquing a student’s writing is to teach the class what the child did right and what he or she did wrong. However, a secondary objective of the mini-lesson is to motivate the children. By reading a child’s writing aloud with the appropriate kind of emotion, the adult signals his or her respect for the child. If the child feels respected and appreciated, he or she will be more likely to attend to what the adult highlights as an area for potential improvement.



*Kristine Kamara, Alison Campolongo, Kelly Andrews-Babcock, Erika Hanusch*

Feldgus's insistence that adults should play a pivotal role in children's literacy education surprised Andrews-Babcock when she attended the Leadership Institute. She said that Feldgus's paradigm for writing workshops is "different from a more traditional" model because Feldgus wants teachers to "get as many adults in a room as possible. The idea is for teachers to do a lot of work with parent volunteers. We should arrange schedules for paraprofessionals, have parents come in to assist during writing workshops, teach them what they need to look for in student writing, and specifically train them how to 'underwrite.'" Teachers and parents are meant to start underwriting when children are writing words with about seventy-percent accuracy. Underwriting occurs when an adult writes the correct form of each word below the words that the student has written. Children are told to write with markers and to draw a horizontal line through any letter or word that they want to get rid of. Since the crossed-out words are still visible and not erased, the adult can determine what the student's first attempt was and whether their mistake is recurrent or should be addressed.

Sometimes, adults will write out the correct form of a word or phrase for young

students long before the students are skilled enough to write with seventy-percent accuracy. I know that I did this during the bit of time I spent with preschool children. I did it because, when a child asked me what the first letter in 'love' was, I did not know how to help him without telling him the answer outright. The lessons that Eileen Feldgus imparted during the 2019 NWP Leadership Institute are valuable because they may give educators the ability to teach reading and writing to kindergarteners and first-graders while preserving the students' independence. Instead of telling the child that the first letter of "love" is "L," I could have asked the student to look at my mouth while I pronounced the word. I could have asked him if he knew other words that began with a similar sound. I could have asked him if he knew how to spell the name of his classmate, Liam. I could have made a word wall and asked him to help me find a word that had the same "L" sound in it. The value of the lessons given at the Leadership Institute has nothing to do with making the learning process harder for children. Rather, the value of the lessons emerges from their ability to get students actively engaged in the development of their identities as writers, readers, and learners.

## 2019 CWP Summer Institute

by Alex Klein,  
CWP Intern

*During the Connecticut Writing Project's annual Summer Institute, CT teachers of all subjects and grade levels are invited to the UConn-Storrs campus to work for four weeks on academic research and creative writing. The teachers who attend the Summer Institute arrive having read five assigned books, and they spend the four weeks studying research on writing pedagogy, listening to guest lectures, and working individually or in groups on their own projects.*

**Sarah Aceto** told me that she had no interesting facts to share. After a few moments of thought, however, she said that she spent the earliest years of her life growing up in a little house in the woods with no electricity. I do not think many other professionals working in the United States could say the same about themselves. Nevertheless, the lack of electricity may partly

explain why Sarah "never stopped" reading "as soon as [she] learned" how to do so. She "always read constantly" and "always loved writing" because it allows her to "think, create, figure things out, and connect with people." When I asked her what she was reading in July 2019, the answer was *Furious Hours* by Casey Cep, a



nonfiction account of Harper Lee’s investigation of the murders committed by Alabama’s Reverend Willie Maxwell.

Aceto enjoyed her experience at the 2019 Summer Institute because she was “excited to be in a group of other teachers who love writing, love the teaching of writing, and want to learn how to be more effective at both.” Her eagerness to learn is part and parcel of her approach to being an educator. Aceto teaches English to students in grades nine through twelve at ACT Magnet School in Willimantic. She likes to say that people should “always keep learning. Learning is the only way I manage. I have to keep open to new ideas that my colleagues or my students have. I have to listen because things can get terrible if you become too rigid and stuck in your ways.” This idea that teachers should be both conscientious and protean is what provides Sarah with the motivation to do her work. “I like to teach because every day is different. Every day is a surprise, and I love that.”

Respecting and being mindful of coworkers and students “goes with listening and being open. Teachers need to be curious, interested in what they’re doing, and always investigating things.” Correspondingly, Sarah needs her students to maintain the same sort of open and receptive mindset. Even if it is incredibly challenging “make enough time and energy for every student’s needs,” Sarah is determined to get everyone in her classroom to “take their lives seriously and value their choices and their creations.”

**Kyle Barron** is “obsessed with the outdoors.” He told me, “I love hiking, backpacking, gardening, and just being outside. It doesn’t really matter what activity.”

He “left a career as a tech writer and illustrator” to pursue a Ph.D. in “English, specializing in Rhetoric and Composition” because his original occupation didn’t provide that fulfillment. “I was working for a financial services company, writing manuals for ATMs. I



“I [was] excited to be in a group of other teachers who love writing, love the teaching of writing, and want to learn how to be more effective at both.”

– Sarah Aceto



gave that up because I knew [teaching] was what I wanted to do.”

I asked Barron what was so alluring to him about the concept of teaching. He said, “I think a lot of teachers romanticize what they do, and I’m guilty of it too. So, this might be a rosy view of things, but all I really want to do is educate and have a positive effect on society.”

Barron said, “I was excited to join the [Summer] Institute to learn about ways different instructors across subjects and grade levels approach the teaching of writing. I think it’s crucial for people teaching composition in higher education [...] understand how high school teachers approach the teaching of writing so that we can more seamlessly and effectively work with college students as they transition to the post-secondary environment.”

Regardless of what they learned about composition in high school, Barron expects his students “to be present.” He added, “Of course, I want them physically there, in their seats, but even more important is finding ways to invite everybody to be mentally present and engaged—they have to be present to learn what you’re trying to teach them, and if you’re successful in doing that, you might get them to see the material as more than a theoretical grade, beyond credits or part of a requirement for a diploma. My only other requirement of students is that they respect one another, including their unique ideas,

**Réme Bohlin** recently earned her first-degree black belt in Hapkido at Master Cho’s Martial Art School in Willimantic. When she isn’t sparring, Réme is teaching first-year writing or doing graduate work for her Ph.D. in English Literature at UConn. During the next academic year, Réme will be working “not as a teacher but as graduate assistant director of the First-Year Writing program.”

The CWP Summer Institute was, therefore, “very attractive to [Réme]” because she “wanted to learn about the pedagogy of writing as another way into the work” she is doing for UConn right now. At the Summer Institute, she researched “multimodal composing, specifically sound-writing.” She

“Basically, that means people should be able to teach, accept, and work with speech or writing that does not conform to the standard English format.”

– Kyle Barron

worldviews, and conversations. I think education is one of the few ways that we can affect social change and work towards achieving social justice, but respect is necessary if that is going to happen in a classroom setting.”

According to Barron, connecting with students is not as easy and will not produce the best possible results if teachers do not create a “welcoming” and “inclusive” space, and this can hold especially true for students who are English language learners. Therefore, he would recommend that “everyone, everywhere” read a book called *Translingual Practice* by Suresh Canagarajah. “Basically, that means people should be able to teach, accept, and work with speech or writing that does not conform to the standard English format. It is so much more beneficial for everyone if we are more accepting of different linguistic identities.”

“As a teacher, you’re always reacting to stuff instead of understanding why you’re making certain choices in the classroom [...] The Summer Institute is a space to think about why you assign a particular text or a particular writing assignment to students.”

– Réme Bohlin

said, “How exactly is writing a podcast different from writing a book or an article? You make specific rhetorical choices to tell a story orally and make use of your actual voice.”

Réme’s interest in multimodal composition speaks to her desire to explore why texts are written the way they are. She wants to look for the purpose behind certain texts as a way to make her teaching more purposeful and less haphazard. “As a teacher, you’re always reacting to stuff instead of understanding why you’re making certain choices in the classroom. And that’s what I think is so unique about the Connecticut Writing Project. The Summer

**Victoria Clarizio** did not mind the lack of a television in her home when she was growing up. Instead of watching TV, she would “imitate [her] parents sitting and reading a book, even before [she] could read.” She would “sit and stare” at the books without being able to decipher the words on each page. Silly though this habit may have been, it more than likely had something to do with Victoria’s early fascination with reading and writing. By the time she and her classmates were writing one-sentence stories about their weekends in first-grade, she was already intent on becoming a writer.

Clarizio teaches English, Writing in the Disciplines, Science, and Religion to students in grades nine through twelve at Imago Dei Classical Academy in New Britain. Imago Dei, as Clarizio explained it to me, is a “Catholic homeschooling cooperative.” The school is “for people who want a home school but also don’t want to do one hundred percent of the work at home.” Clarizio meets with her students twice a week and buttresses the education that they are receiving from their parents. Specifically, she teaches “the more advanced subjects in high school that parents can’t necessarily teach.” She has a “super-small classroom in terms of the number of students, so [she] get[s] to be pretty close to them. It’s like a community.”

Institute is a space to think about why you assign a particular text or a particular writing assignment to students.”

Teachers need to understand *why* they decide on certain assignments so that they can communicate with and convey their reasoning to students. “Students are inclined to think things are arbitrary. You have to be flexible and open. There’s always going to be the student who just wants to write the kind of writing that is necessary for their other classes. Teachers need to be able to explain the lifelong value of writing in different ways.”



Clarizio attended the 2019 CWP Summer Institute because she wanted to “improve the way [she] teach[es] students how to write.” She is currently in the process of earning her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. Because she did not go to school originally for education, she “would like to teach more writing” but her Master’s program does not require degree-seekers to “spend much time training how to teach.” Therefore, she thought that the Summer Institute would be a good place to learn more



about the “writing process” and “creative writing pedagogy.”

When it comes to the way she currently practices writing pedagogy, Clarizio said, “I rely on the Socratic Method. It’s about talking with my students. I just want to learn with them, and I want them to love learning.” Because she relies so much on back-and-forth communication in the classroom, Clarizio believes that it is imperative for students to “participate and be fully engaged in whatever they are doing. They need to try their best.” In exchange, teachers must, above all, be willing and able to “listen to their students. You have to listen to your students in the classroom. But in a less obvious sense, you have to understand their lives and what is best for them.”

**Amanda Flachsbart** claimed that she is “always bad at those icebreaker activities where you have to share something interesting about yourself” partly because she has “a horrific fear of public speaking.” Even speaking in faculty meeting makes her nervous. However, her fear does not “extend to teaching anymore.” She “used to get very anxious during the first week of school, but for some reason, the classroom is a platform [she] can handle.” It appears that students have helped Flachsbart grow as a person in the same way she has helped them grow.

Flachsbart teaches English to students in the eleventh and twelfth grades at South Windsor High School. She chose to attend the 2019 CWP Summer Institute because she thought the experience would “better [her] reading and writing instruction, open up the ways in which [her] instruction could change for the better, and give [her] some new ideas about pedagogy and [her] identity as a teacher.” Going into the Institute, she told me that her identity as a teacher was about helping students “be authentic and realize their potential as part of the world around them.”

By the time she was writing creatively in elementary school, Amanda knew that she had a passion for the written word. However, she noted that she “stopped writing creatively as [she] got older, which speaks to some of the problems with

“You have to listen to your students in the classroom. But in a less obvious sense, you have to understand their lives and what is best for them.”

– Victoria Clarizio



“Students stop wanting to write because they’re not allowed to write the fun narratives that they like.”

– Amanda Flachsbart

education. Students stop wanting to write because they're not allowed to write the fun narratives that they like." In the past few years, Flachsbart has "gotten back into reading and writing creatively." She said that she is a big fan of David Foster Wallace. I asked if she had read *Infinite Jest*, and she replied, "Yes. I always feel weird saying that because it feels like I'm bragging for having read it, but I love his essays too."

Unlike the choice to read a book over 1,000 pages long, like the *Infinite Jest*, Flachsbart cannot opt into or out of "the expectations set on" educators. "Even if I don't necessarily disagree with everything my school is urging me to do," she said, "there are still a lot of expectations that I did not set for myself. And a lot of the things that I am expected to get done are not the things I think are most valuable to get done. There is only so much time to go around."

Despite the difficulty, Flachsbart always makes an effort to foster relationships in the

**Kathrine Grant** has just completed her Bachelor's degrees as an English and Secondary English Education dual degree student and will be pursuing a Master of Arts in Curriculum and Instruction in fall of 2019. Frankly, if one is at all involved with the English department at the University of Connecticut, it is hard not to cross paths with Katie. During her time at UConn, she has been a student tutor at the Writing Center, political director of the UConn Future Educators, and State Chair of the Connecticut Education Association's Aspiring Educators Program. She led Senior English and American Literature classes at Manchester High School as a student-teacher and will be an interventionist at Buckley High School in Hartford this fall. On top of all of that, she has three corgis: Kassie, Sierra, and Eli.

By her own admission, Grant has "a lot of academic responsibilities," so she doesn't get a lot of time to read and write. "I'm definitely more of a reader than a writer," she said. "I got in trouble for reading instead of doing chores when I was younger. I don't read as much as I want to now. But, for education-related books, I love *Other*

classroom. "I like to see growth in students. I like to see and be a part of their growth and learning. But above all, I appreciate the relationships I form with students and the relationships that they come to form with one another." Cultivating an environment where these relationships can bloom requires "compassion for students" and "attention to each individual student. You have to understand that growth looks different for different people."

On the other side of the equation, students have to be authentic and care about their improvement if they want to get something meaningful out of English class. "They should understand what it means to receive an education, and what that means in terms of their responsibility to society. They have a part in bettering society, and they should know that what they do does matter on a bigger scale than their direct life."



"My role is to provide the tools [students] need to navigate their lives and speak their truth."

– Kathrine Grant

*People's Children* by Lisa Delpit. *More Than a Score* is a good one too. I'm also a huge dystopian literature person, so I love *Brave New World*, 1984, and *The Handmaid's Tale*."

While at the 2019 CWP Summer Institute, Grant and Rachel Ruiz researched student-teacher relationships. Specifically, the "two defining factors of" these relationships: "power and boundaries." Grant said, "[Rachel and I] are developing a framework for how to build those powerful relationships with all types of students from all types of backgrounds. Of course, in order to engage with different types of students, you have to be able to work with all types of people."

Grant's commitment to social justice is very much a part of her teaching philosophy. She thinks that teachers should realize that they "will never have all the answers about anything." It is the teacher's job, then, to "be committed to learning themselves." Grant said, "You should know that your students come in with a lot of knowledge themselves, and you should be ready to learn from them just as much if not more than they will learn from you."

**Shelbie Greene** "love[s] being a mom," though she thinks she's "not too good at it yet." Yet, she thinks that the skillsets she is developing as a mother and a teacher are complementary to one another. "I think I'm becoming a better teacher because I'm a mom and becoming a better mom because I'm a teacher. It's two-fold. One set of behaviors flows into the other." Greene's son, Loxley, is two-and-a-half years old. He would probably not be old enough to follow along if his mother were to read to him from the book that made her love reading and writing: *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman. "I was around sixteen and I picked up an old copy of *Leaves of Grass* at a Salvation Army," Greene said. "It was a fun summer."

Despite her appreciation of Whitman, Greene sometimes finds it difficult to control her

Her ultimate goal in the classroom is to "teach students how to be good humans and orient their critical thought processes around literature." She clearly exhibits the sort of respect for her students that she thinks should be expected from all teachers. "My role," she said, "is to provide the tools they need to navigate their lives and speak their truth."

As laudable as all of Grant's aspirations may be, there are undoubtedly issues in the profession that can hold teachers and students back from reaching their goals. "It really comes down to time," Grant said. "It's really hard to balance all the different expectations that we put on teachers. Just look at teacher pay. We are expected to teach well, yet there are teachers out there who have to take second or even third jobs. There are so many responsibilities and there is so little time. We want to give students free writing and reading time, lessons in socioemotional learning, and lessons in digital citizenship. It is really hard to do it all. But that doesn't mean you can't or you shouldn't try."





students' Songs of Themselves. She teaches English at Killingly High School, and she claimed that the 2018-2019 school year was her "most difficult year" because it was her "first year teaching freshmen." She hopes to help students build "connections" and "relationships" with one another in the classroom, but that hope is hard to pursue because she's too busy trying to get her "students to stay sitting down." Greene said, "My students have so much energy that could be used positively if I knew how."

This challenging aspect of teaching is part of the reason why Greene decided to attend the 2019 CWP Summer Institute. She wanted to "improve [her] ability to teach, specifically when it comes to teaching freshmen." While at the Summer Institute, Greene researched different ways to implement writing workshops in the

**Kim Niemiec** started playing ice hockey when she was thirty-nine. Both of her children played, so Kim found herself at a tournament with "a bunch of the hockey moms." In the stands, they started talking and asked one another, "Why should the kids get to have all the fun?" According to Kim, she and the other mothers "thought it would just be a fun way to get exercise and for us to connect. So, we made it happen." When she isn't playing left wing on the hockey rink, Kim is a Social Studies teacher at Wethersfield High School. In the 2018-2019 academic year, Kim taught International Studies to tenth-grade students and Advanced Placement Psychology to twelfth-grade students.

Niemiec is unique in that she was the only attendee of the 2019 CWP Summer Institute who was not an English teacher or a student training to become an English teacher. Because she was the only Social Studies teacher at the Institute, Kim was overwhelmed with "fears, doubts, and insecurities about not being a writer" on the first day. Upon speaking to her friend John Martin, who was scheduled to present on the Institute's first day, Niemiec felt much calmer. She learned that, regardless of how good or bad of a writer she

"I was around sixteen and I picked up an old copy of *Leaves of Grass* at a Salvation Army. It was a fun summer."

—Shelbie Greene

classroom. She said that she wanted the workshops to function as a way to help students "find a way to share, create, and be open about themselves. It's kind of corny, but I've always thought that learning should be fun and that English is a conversation. That's how I like to present it to students."



"In my classroom, I want students to learn more about themselves. Really, I want them to learn that 'different' doesn't mean 'bad.'"

– Kimberly Niemiec

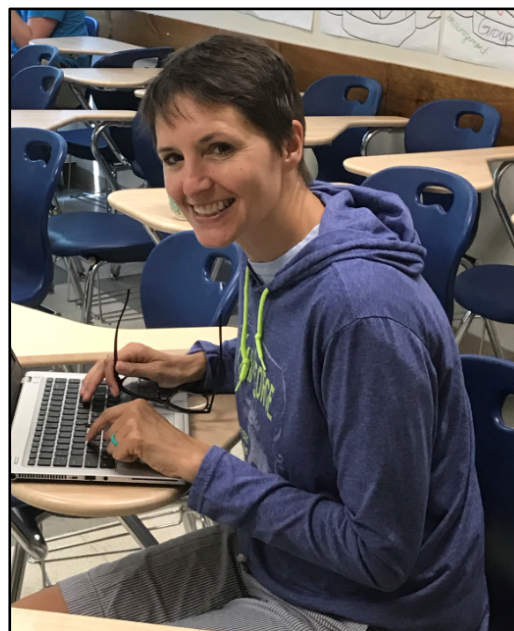
thought she was, the Summer Institute was also about looking at ways to become a better teacher. Niemiec “didn’t run for the hills after day one” because she could still learn more about what it means to be an educator even if she was not as ready to take on the Institute’s writing aspect.

It is a good thing that Niemiec stuck around, as she was able to put her knowledge of psychology to use on one of the Institute Fellows’ more unique research projects. Kim and her group investigated “the neuroscience of learning.” The specific subjects of their research were “neuroplasticity and growth mindsets.” Neuroplasticity, Kim explained to me, “is the semi-new idea that, essentially, intelligence is not set for a person at birth. When I was in a Psych class at UConn thirty years ago, I was taught that the intelligence of every human being is set at birth. My partner and I were interested in looking at the idea that our brains are anything but set from birth, and how our knowledge of this fact could help us change the way educators think about students’ intellectual growth.”

**Katie Pitts** is a dedicated Madonna fan. Although, she has seen Madonna in-concert many times, “the most exciting experience” she had with the singer occurred when she chased Madonna through Central Park and was knocked over by her bodyguard. “Because I got knocked over,” Pitts said, “I fell on Madonna. She jumped out of the way, but I did get to touch her arm. And she scoffed at me. And her bodyguard swore at me.”

Pitts’s story about Madonna is distinguished by a sense of candor and self-awareness that is reflected in her teaching. She teaches English to ninth-grade students at Rockville High School and has been working in the Rockville school district for ten years. Her success in Rockville may have something to do with what she calls her “laid-back” personality.

One of Niemiec’s central priorities as a teacher is to show students their inner potential. She wants them “to learn more about themselves,” and to learn that the things that make them “different” aren’t always “bad.” It can be hard to help each student grow when Kim gets a “crop of 150 new kids every year,” not to mention the “new crop of athletes” that she gets as a swimming and diving coach. “Making connections with all of those people” is a daunting task, but Kim does not let herself forget “that people matter more than anything else.” She said, “I had it a little backwards when I was younger because I was so worried about knowing the content. That’s especially a problem if you’re teaching a content-driven course with high test stakes, like AP Psych. You wonder how you’re going to teach everything, but what teaching boils down to is remembering that people matter more than anything, including the content.”



“If you teach ninth-graders or high-schoolers, I think you have to be ready to adapt. My laid-back personality works with that. I try to be ready to adapt to their high energy or their low-energy. Whatever it is that day.”

Though she has stayed in one district for ten years, Pitts’s ideas about teaching have not remained constant during that time. When I asked her if the passage of time has affected her teaching, Pitts replied, “Absolutely. As society changes, teaching becomes more and more important. I think that my job isn’t just about teaching a curriculum. It’s also about trying to occupy a positive role for kids to see. A positive authority figure. A positive something. With the way political issues are discussed and dealt with now, wherever we go people tend to be angry and unhappy. We need to have hope of something more, and encourage that hope for students.”

Encouraging students and helping them become their best selves is not always easy, but it is always worth doing. “Class sizes are getting a little out of control,” Pitts said. “And districts have expectations that we can turn teenagers into data points. But teachers have to truly care about kids. And we have to inspire and expect them to be kind, to believe in themselves, and to listen to others. Listen and try to see other perspectives. Developmentally, high-school students are still kids, but some of the viewpoints they have now will last for the rest of their lives. You know, I’m forty-seven years old and I have not forgotten

how some high-schoolers made me feel about myself years and years ago.”

Pitts believes that, if a teacher puts in the effort to help students believe in their talents and see other perspectives, then she can feel satisfied in the knowledge that she has “created a space for [students] that they feel comfortable in.” In this space, she tries to get her ninth-graders to be “excited about the work that they have produced. Lots of kids can produce work. But I want them to be excited about it. And I don’t mean that they have to do somersaults every time they write a paragraph. But the kids who are excited when they accomplish something might not be the kids that thought they could do it beforehand.” Creating a space where high-schoolers who doubt themselves can achieve and take pride in their achievements is one of the many things that Pitts finds rewarding about being a teacher.

“I think my job isn’t just about teaching a curriculum. It’s also about trying to occupy a positive role for kids to see. A positive authority figure.”

– Katie Pitts

**Rachel Ruiz** finished her undergraduate education at UConn in Spring 2019. In the fall of this year, she began her Master’s year in order to obtain teacher certification for the state of Connecticut. While she is not a teacher yet, Ruiz has been preparing for her career by student-teaching at Windham High School, and she will soon be interning at East Hartford High School. She came to the CWP Summer Institute “to learn how to be a better teacher and to better prepare the first day of teaching on my own.”

Ruiz is a bit worried about what the future holds in store for her. She did not mince words when I asked her what was challenging about being a teacher. “Everything about it is challenging. But the classroom management aspect is probably the hardest part. And, of course, being capable of accepting your own mistakes. It isn’t that teachers should constantly make mistakes, but it’s inevitable that something will go wrong. It’s all part of the process. And it’s easy to get into this ‘everything has to be perfect’ mind-frame, but that intolerance for messing up is



not compatible with teaching or life in general. It prevents you from being ready to react to your mistakes and do the best you can with them in the moment.” Ruiz’s attitude about slipping up is, in part, something she learned from one of her favorite books: *Let the Great World Spin* by Colum McCann. “I read it in high school,” she said, “and it stuck with me ever since. The world is always moving, and it’s going to move in directions you don’t like, but you have to find a way to deal with it.”

Maybe the inefficiency of a perfectionist mind-frame is what produced Ruiz’s laid-back teaching philosophy. “I try to think I’m just a very hands-off teacher,” she said. “I put a lot of time and effort into the lessons so that they can be as engaging as possible for the students. I want them to take the learning into their own hands and advocate for themselves.” Even though Ruiz is intent on giving her students as much independence as she can, she also wants to ensure that they all develop certain skills in her classroom. “It’s key for me as a teacher to balance that academic process of school with emotional intelligence. I make sure to teach students how to be the best they can be in a society.”

If a student is to learn how he or she should act as a part of society, then he or she needs to first learn how to act inside the classroom. What does Ruiz need from her students so that she can maximize the usefulness of their education? “They have to be nice to each other, of course,” she said. “They don’t have to be quiet. I love when things get loud and they’re talking about the literature. If the class is quiet, I need them to talk and laugh. I like big class discussions where they can just say their answer like it’s a conversation. I don’t want them to be afraid of getting something wrong or misunderstanding an idea, because regardless of what they say or produce I’m going to love helping them with what they’ve got. That’s why teachers need to be approachable and caring. Who’s going to want to learn in your class if they’re afraid of their teacher? Once



**“It’s easy to get into this ‘everything has to be perfect’ mind-frame, but that intolerance for messing up is not compatible with teaching or life in general.”**

**– Rachel Ruiz**

you’re approachable, then you can let your students know that you have really high expectations for them. Most importantly, I try to get them to focus on promoting positive images and ideas about themselves. I don’t like when students talk down about themselves. I want them to see what’s good about their identities.”

**Kim Shaker** is a teacher of twelfth-grade Early College Experience, College Prep, and Advanced Placement English at East Hartford High School. She taught for one year in Chelsea, Massachusetts before coming to Connecticut, and has been teaching at East Hartford High for the past seventeen years. She nurses a passionate love for U2 and claims that, “Anytime someone meets me, they’ll know what I think of U2 within the first few minutes of a conversation. Maybe before they know my name.” She has been to dozens of U2 concerts, has met the band several times, and “it’s been awkward every time. They do know me, if that’s a succinct way of putting it.” She applied to the 2019 CWP Summer Institute because Jason Courtmanche had asked her for years to do so. She also “had a lot of colleagues and friends do the Institute,” but found that it was “never the right time” for her to enroll until 2019.

I interviewed Shaker for this profile on the first day of the Summer Institute. At the time, she was considering research that would investigate her theory that we, as a society, are “moving out of the postmodern era.” She wanted “to look at how this shift is affecting us as a society of thinkers.” Shaker told me that she wanted to explore how the possible senescence of postmodernism “translates into the world of education.”

“Somehow, teachers need to figure out how to ask students for honesty, preserve their privacy, and still be able to take care of or help them if they are struggling with something.”

– Kim Shaker

According to Shaker, “the grading system that is almost ubiquitous in America is a little outdated, and it seems to be hindering rather than progressing the educational system.” The difficulties teachers face in helping their students add up to a challenging reality of being an educator. “We strive to foster each student’s personal growth in a setting that doesn’t always lend itself easily to that – the academic setting, the structure of a school. We have immensely growing class sizes and an increasing focus on test scores, student improvement scores, and teacher evaluation scores. These scores don’t always evaluate what is really important in terms of a student’s personal growth.”

Regardless of whatever difficulties she and other educators face, Shaker always gets “excited when students understand academic concepts. But when a kid says you’ve made a positive impact in their life, there’s nothing related to academics that can even come close to how rewarding that is.” Shaker’s expectation that students “foster the best parts of themselves” holds steady both inside and outside of the academic world. Nevertheless, she believes that education is a “means to the end” of getting students to discover who they are and who they would like to become. Therefore, educators must be honest and caring with all students. They need to “care for everyone, every student,” and they “cannot ask of students what [they] don’t ask of [them]selves.

connecticut  
writing project  
at storrs

**Arri Weeks**, a teacher of English, ECE Film Studies, and AP Literature at New Canaan High School, suspects that it was “no accident” that she took an early interest in film. She believes that the trajectory her career may have something to do with a specific filmgoing experience from her childhood. She told me, “I don’t go into bodies of water, especially big ones like oceans and lakes, because my aunt showed me *Jaws* at a young age and it traumatized me.” Significantly, Weeks thinks that this horrifying memory was part of what drew her *towards* film and not something that pushed her *away*.

When I asked her if there was any book that she would recommend for everyone to read, there was no way she could confine her answer to a single title. First, she brought up *Educated* by Terra Westover. Regarding *Educated*, Weeks said, “I’ve been telling everyone to read it because it’s bananas. And you can quote me on that. That’s my critical review.” Then, Weeks said, “The book that changed everything for me in college was *Trainspotting*.” Of *Trainspotting*, Weeks said, “There’s a lot of philosophy and Kierkegaard in there. These characters are all addicted to awful things, but outside of that dark vision of life, everything is vapid consumerism. The book is very bleak but it showed me what art could be.”

The one quality that Weeks thinks all students and teachers need to exhibit is “curiosity.” Everyone needs to “come to class with a willingness to listen to ideas outside of their worldview. If teachers are to create engaged, critical thinkers, we need to get them to embrace learning for its own sake by having new experiences.”

The constant search for new ideas and new ways of thinking was what brought Weeks to the 2019 CWP Summer Institute. Weeks said, “For me, this was an opportunity to learn more about what is happening at the college level. High school teachers are always asking ourselves, ‘Are we preparing the kids for college? Is what we’re doing useful?’ I want to translate what I learn here into a plan for bettering students’ preparedness for the college experience.”



“[Teachers and students] need to come to class with a willingness to listen to ideas outside of their worldview.”

– Arri Weeks

Getting high-schoolers ready to begin college or their careers is by no means a simple task. Weeks said that she had some “really terrible teachers” in high school and “couldn’t wait” to leave. It wasn’t until college that education “really opened up for [her],” thanks to the work of the “amazing mentors and professors.” Because Weeks did not feel satisfied with her high school experience, she tries to prevent her students from feeling the same way.



## Where Are They Now? Catching up with Teacher-Consultants from Summer Institute 2018

By Alex Klein  
CWP Intern

**Kaylee Thurlow**, a UConn graduate, is an incoming educator who “will be teaching tenth and eleventh-grade English.” The book that she studied during the Summer Institute which she found most useful and memorable was *180 Days* by Penny Kittle and Kelly Gallagher. *180 Days* documents Gallagher’s and Kittle’s creation and application of a curriculum that emphasizes student engagement, literacy, empowerment, and independent and collaborative work inside and outside of the classroom. Thurlow says that *180 Days* showed her the importance of “instill[ing] an appreciation for reading and writing within [her] classroom,” but she still finds it challenging to help students understand “that writing is a process.” In other words, “It is imperative to me that writers go back into their pieces and continue to write to strengthen their abilities.”

Thurlow thinks that her “ability to write and teach absolutely improved after [her] time at the Summer Institute.” For Thurlow, reading and writing are inextricably tied to one’s real-world experiences. She wants to “authentically engage” and “support” her students “so that they may engage in the world around them” by “analyzing what they are seeing and communicating clearly and effectively to make their voices heard.” She appreciates her time at the Summer Institute because it gave her the ability to relate what she was learning to her “professional and personal interests and goals.” Moreover, the Summer Institute presented the chance “to be a continuous learner” and provided a model for Thurlow’s role as an educator whose primary goal is to create lifelong learners.

**Jordyn Meyenberg** finished her undergraduate degree at UConn just months prior



“It is imperative to me that  
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strengthen their abilities.”

– Kaylee Thurlow

to attending the 2018 Summer Institute. After finishing her four weeks with the CWP, she began her Master’s year to obtain teacher certification. Since then, she has completed her education and has been hired as a Grade 8 English Language Arts teacher in Coventry. She, like Thurlow, thought that *180 Days* was the most useful book assigned during the Institute. “The authors give

advice on how to develop a classroom centered on independent reading and creative writing,” and Kittle and Gallagher’s curriculum is laid out “in a really concrete way.”

According to Meyenberg, teachers should “create a safe, warm, and challenging classroom in which students feel comfortable taking educational risks.” Meyenberg is also focused on helping students use their reading and writing skills “to become contributing members of society.” She wants her instruction to reach “beyond the classroom and into the real world,” with “an emphasis on creativity and critical thinking.”

In Meyenberg’s view, that means “pushing back against the curricular overemphasis on analytical writing,” which is especially prevalent in “late middle and high school.” All forms of writing have “taken a back seat to five-paragraph essays on symbolism in the *Scarlet Letter*,” even though “fewer than one percent of students will decide to pursue” careers that require a familiarity with canonical texts. Meyenberg intends to offer her students an alternative approach to literacy in which they are “taught to write a variety of texts,” including “stories that they can share with their children, business proposals that they can send to their bosses,” and “menus that they can distribute at their restaurant.” For Meyenberg, literacy loses its value if it does not become applicable in real-life situations.

While she was at the Summer Institute, Meyenberg “collaborated with another teacher to complete a research project entitled “Celebrate Good Lines, Come On,” which aimed to make assessments of student writing more likely to bring about positive change. She and her partner envisioned a model in which students would be motivated to write through praise and “positive behavioral interventions.” Moreover, teachers would perform “one-on-one meetings” with students’ to discuss their grades on writing assignments. “[My research partner and I] realized that most students rarely look back at

**“Students should be taught to write a variety of texts: stories that they can share with their children, business proposals that they can send to their bosses, or menus that they can distribute at their restaurant.”**

**– Jordyn Meyenberg**

teacher comments when approaching new assignments,” so arranging face-to-face sit-downs would give students the formative feedback they need to avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

Making use of one-on-one conferences was an idea that Meyenberg fleshed out during her time at the Summer Institute. She says that her four weeks at UConn-Storrs showed her the potential of holding conferences (“both teacher-to-student and peer-to-peer”) to review a student’s written work. While at the Institute, Meyenberg also “learned a lot about how to create” and lead “effective writing groups,” thus “giving students a chance to improve and discuss their writing” in a classroom setting.

Personally, Meyenberg found the feedback that she received from conferring with other teachers at the Institute to be very helpful for her creative writing. She “repeatedly struggled with” developing her characters, and her “fellow-teachers did a great job explaining where [she] needed more character description.” During the Summer Institute, Meyenberg “grew as a writer because [she] had a community of teacher-writers who consistently inspired [her] with their writing and challenged [her] to dig deeper.”

**John Martin**, an editor of the CWP's annual *Connecticut Student Writers* magazine, also attended the 2018 Summer Institute. He is also featured in this summer newsletter for being chosen as Wethersfield High School's Teacher of the Year. Martin, who teaches English to students in grades eleven and twelve, researched "both multimodal and multi-genre compositional techniques with two amazing colleagues, Sophia Buckner and Kenzi Aitchison," while he was at the Institute. Multimodal and multi-genre composition techniques allow a teacher to help students analyze and create texts that involve different forms of communication, including the written word, audio, and video. Like Meyenberg, Martin tries to familiarize his students with a variety of texts. That way, their reading proficiency will be valuable when they read contracts or watch political advertisements, and not just when they are writing persuasive essays about whether or not Hamlet is insane.

Like Meyenberg, Martin found conferring with the other teachers who attended the Summer Institute to be an especially rewarding part of the four weeks. "The feedback I received from my peers was the most useful part of the entire program," he says. "To be part of a learning community of like-minded and ambitious educators and future educators was refreshing. To be able to participate in the process of creative writing and sharing it with a group was both nerve-wracking and fulfilling."

While he was at the Summer Institute, Martin spent most of the time allotted for creative writing on poetry, "mostly because of the constricted time frame in which we had to share." Since then, he has been "traveling between persuasive pieces, op-eds, media reviews, and poetry." He says that his writing is a "smattering of whatever I am writing with my students." In his classroom, Martin tries to get his students to broaden their communicative skills by expressing their thoughts and feelings in creative writing, which is something he did on his own as a teenager.



Martin says that he "had a really hard time" during high school and "turned to writing" to find solace. He initially found it difficult to merge his identity as a teacher with his identity as a writer and a reader. He "started to sacrifice parts of [his] own identity in favor of helping [his] students." However, the "CWP helped to rekindle that love for writing that I once had." On top of teaching students how to read and write, Martin "sit[s] down frequently" to "write with [his] students now, and [he] feel[s] closer to [his] students and to [his] content because of it."

"The feedback I received from my peers was the most useful part of [the Summer Institute]. ... To be able to participate in the process of creative writing and sharing it with a group was both nerve-wracking and fulfilling."

– John Martin



## Inspiring a Love for Learning: Profiles of Connecticut's Teachers of the Year

*By Alex Klein  
CWP Intern*

**Cynthia Dee** (SI 12) was named East Hartford High School's Teacher of the Year for the 2018-2019 academic year. During that year, Dee taught Health Science to students in grade eleven, Introduction to Public Health to students in grades nine through twelve, and Patient Care to students in grade twelve. Patient Care is, as Dee described it, "a clinical course that prepares students to be certified as health care workers." Dee, who retired at the end of the school year, worked to give her students the knowledge and professional hands-on experience necessary to begin their careers as nursing assistants.

East Hartford High School may have a population of well over 1,500 students, but Dee's approach to teaching nonetheless emphasized connecting to every student. "Establish relationships, set the bar high, and help students get there. I know it sounds simple, but it's not!" Teachers and readers will, more than likely, not struggle to imagine the difficulties one can face when trying to get to know one's students. "Education changes and adolescents are changing," Dee said. "The rise of social media and the ubiquitous cell phones have altered so many things – some positive and some not so much. Each school and district has unique challenges."

Despite these multifarious obstacles, Dee's goal when she was a teacher always remained the same: "The bottom line for me is to meet students where they are and help them get to where they want to go." Accept and work with students regardless of the hurdles and stumbling blocks and encourage them to figure out what sort of future they would like to pursue. "Finding the

"The bottom line for me is to meet students where they are and help them get to where they want to go."

– Cynthia Dee (SI 12)

place where you can connect with a student in order to move them forward" is, in Dee's view, the greatest challenge of being an educator, and one that must be faced in order to be as valuable as possible for a student's personal and intellectual growth.

To be a valuable resource for one's students, certain expectations must be met. Above all, Dee believes that teachers must possess "knowledge of your subject matter followed by patience and flexibility." Conversely, Dee expects "students to be present and to do their best. I expect students to use their voices. I expect students to play an active role in their education and what is happening in the classroom. I value honesty and integrity over excuses." The student and the teacher must both be interested in developing a skillset if it is ever to be accomplished. Once this collaborative effort pays off, Dee experiences what she thinks of as the best part of being a teacher: "The growth that occurs right before your eyes ... academically, behaviorally, and socially."

**Dara Bowling** (SI 2010) teaches at Windham High School, and when I went there to talk with Dara Bowling about WHS's 2019 Lock-in for Literacy Night, I believed that the event was the only thing we would talk about. However, when I checked in at the head office, an office administrator asked me if I was there to talk to Bowling about winning the Teacher of the Year award. I had to bring up the subject during my conversation with Bowling, as she did not proffer the information herself. Evidently, it had just been announced that Bowling was the Teacher of the Year for Windham High School and Teacher of the Year for Windham's school district. Of course, Bowling was not interested in resting on her laurels. The day I spoke with her, she was planning to stay at school until late in the evening to help students make up their final exams.

Bowling teaches English to grades nine through twelve at Windham High School, but she has also been a teacher and administrator at Willimantic's Temple Bnai Israel Religious School for well over a decade. I asked her if working in different schools had ever changed the way she thought about being an educator. She told me that "You can have a ten-minute span of time that completely alters your perception of being a teacher, so yes. Once your perception of what it means to be a teacher stops changing, I think it's

"Being a teacher is about responding to students' needs and the community's needs, which are all fluid, so if your self-perception as a teacher is not fluid, you're not doing your job."

– Dara Bowling



*Dara Bowling holding up the t-shirt from Windham High School's 2019 Lock-in for Literacy Night*

time to go. Being a teacher is about responding to students' needs and the community's needs, which are all fluid, so if your self-perception as a teacher is not fluid, you're not doing your job."

If it sounds like Bowling has high expectations of herself as an educator, that is because she does. But her expectations are grounded in basic and universal principles pertaining to the importance of helping others. "In terms of what I expect from students, the most important expectations go both ways. I expect things like fairness, preparedness, honesty, integrity, understanding; I think teachers have a right to expect that from students, but the same is true of the reverse. Students have a right to expect that from teachers, and if you cannot offer that to your students, you should not expect it in return."

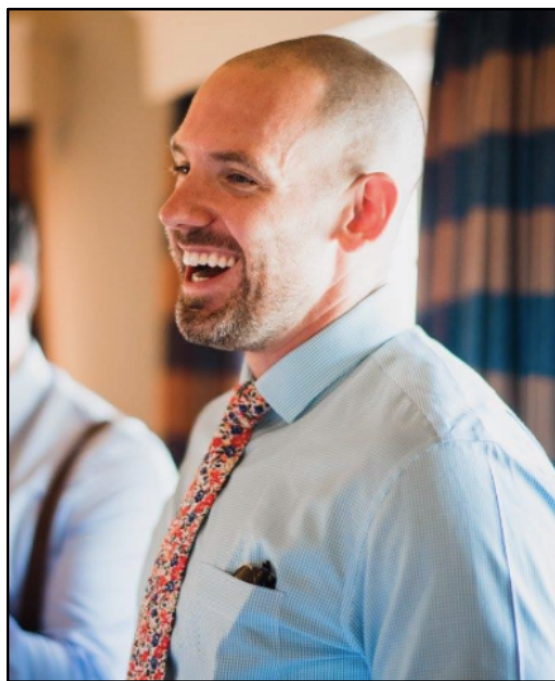
It only took a second or two for Bowling to answer when I asked her what she most cherished about being an educator. "The lightbulb," she said. "The look on a student's face when they get what you're telling them. It isn't always immediate and it isn't always directly related to academics. It may be when a graduate

student comes back to Windham and says ‘I understand what you meant when you told me that I had to pick my future or else my future would pick me.’ I am an English teacher because of an English teacher I had, Carol Jonaitis, who was actually part of the Connecticut Writing Project before Jason [Courtmanche]. She called me out on some pretty serious misbehavior and she may have saved my life.”

Bowling did not need any time to think of what was most difficult about being an educator either: “Funding. Especially in Windham, which has a high level of poverty. Historically, we have a difficult time passing a budget every year. It gets to the point where, some years, we have gone to referendum as many as seven times. Absenteeism is a huge problem, and so is the span of time during the first two weeks of the year when you don’t know students’ names. There is so much power in knowing and saying someone’s name, so when you don’t know it, you’re left just kind of flailing around. But it all pales in comparison to funding. If we don’t have the budget, if we are underfunded, then everything else really suffers. Then we can’t provide students with the activities, programs, books, and resources that they need.”

**John Martin** (SI 2018), a leader of the Connecticut Writing Project’s Youth Programs and an editor of the *Connecticut Student Writers* magazine, was named Wethersfield High School’s 2019 Teacher of the Year. Martin, who has been at Wethersfield High for six years, teaches Journalism, American Literature, and Public Speaking for students in grades eleven and twelve. To get an idea of what makes a Teacher of the Year, I asked Martin to describe his teaching philosophy, and he said that he tries “to simply give [his] students what they need.” To effectively teach, he “builds a relationship with each student” so that he can better understand “what makes them tick” and how he can help “make them a stronger reader, writer, and thinker.”

To improve a student’s critical thinking skills, it is important to first establish honesty and



trustworthiness. That is why Martin “tr[ies] to create an atmosphere in [his] classroom that denotes it as a safe space physically, emotionally, and intellectually.” The students can assume that they will not be under attack or judged harshly in the classroom, but that does not mean that they will never be guided into uncharted territory. Martin asks his students to use the safe space of his classroom “to take risks, to make mistakes,” and then to “find a way through them.”

None of this is possible without communication. Martin likes to tell his students that he is “an okay teacher” but “an awful mind reader.” If there is a problem, the only way to solve it is to get it out in the open. Martin trusts his students with the responsibility to be forthright about their concerns. In return, he aims to make himself worthy of their trust, as building a foundation of mutual understanding is “the only way [teachers and students] are going to learn from each other.” Martin believes that a “personal relationship with every student” is vital. “Teachers have to understand their students.” Knowledge of one’s audience allows the teacher to make adjustments for ability and for “interest and temperament/emotionality.”



Building relationships with students is something that Martin takes seriously. If he were invited to speak in front of a large conference of educators, he would say that it is a teacher's responsibility to "get to know your students. Greet them on their way in. Ask them how their day is. Find out what their favorite music is and listen to it. Find out what you can do individually to help that student. When your classroom is no longer a class of thirty students and instead the class of Lexi and Caleb and Val and Malvina and Isaac, it becomes a lot easier to teach and to teach well."

Though Martin thinks of building a rapport with students as a serious and very real obligation of educators, it is also the key to making teaching and learning enjoyable. "Kids want to have fun, and reading and writing are fun." A classroom where the teacher knows his or her students and where the students know their teacher is one that can make reading and writing fun "on a daily basis," thereby "foster[ing] young readers and writers" who "actually want to read on their own."

Building a classroom that makes reading and writing fun requires "humility and humanity," so the attitude the teacher puts across must be genuine. Martin claims that, when he started teaching, he thought too much about "who [he] wanted to be as a teacher" and felt he was putting on a "persona." As he has "grown into this career," he has learned to concentrate on "who [he is] as a teacher" rather than a vision of "the teacher [he] want[s] to be." That means offering students "the best possible but true version" of himself. Martin said, "If I want my students to be authentic, I have to be as well."

Encouraging authenticity in students is the starting point for what Martin thinks of as the greatest reward of teaching: "seeing my students move on at the next level." Martin loves to see "a student succeed, whether that is in a university, technical, military, or occupational setting." It is even better when "a graduate comes back to tell

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**– John Martin**

[Martin] how they are utilizing little tricks and skills" he taught them years earlier. Teachers give students advice and help them build upon their own skillsets. In a way, teachers "make students, learners, and young adults." As such, Martin's greatest pleasure as a teacher is witnessing "the great work that [students] do with our guidance and help."

Therefore, Martin finds it disheartening when the public views teaching "as a hobby or simply a backup plan," which implies "it is not" something to be "valued in society." He wants teachers to "do a better job of singing [their] own praises" by "highlighting" the support provided by educators which allows students to do "great work" and pursue their own life goals. However, Martin thinks the greatest challenge of teaching is adapting to the changes of the modern world. The rapid innovations in the field of technology have made "our ways of communication" nearly "unrecognizable," and young people are "thrown ... into the deep end with the entire thing without any sort of guide to handling it." Finding ways to make technology an asset for education rather than an impediment "will be one of our largest challenges."

## The Connecticut Writing Project (CWP)

The CWP-Storrs, one of the oldest sites of the National Writing Project, was established at the University of Connecticut in 1982. Since 1986, the site has benefitted from funding from the Aetna Endowed Chair of Writing. Through its annual Invitational Summer Institute, the CWP offers opportunities for professional growth to teachers in all disciplines who recognize the worth of using writing as a means of learning any subject matter. Improving writing skills improves thinking skills and this leads to higher levels of achievement in all areas. In addition, the CWP offers professional development services to schools and school districts, and a variety of opportunities for students to publish their writing.

### Connecticut Writing Project

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#### Dates to Remember!

First Annual Connecticut Literary Festival 10/5

Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, Submission Deadline 10/14

ECE English Fall Conference 10/25

Letters About Literature, Entries Open 11/1 (tentative)

Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest Ceremony 12/15 (tentative)

NWP Northeast Regional Sites Conference, Proposals Due 12/1

Scholastic Writing Awards Submissions Deadline 12/12

Scholastic Writing Awards Region-at-Large Judging 12/23-1/10

Letters About Literature, Submissions Deadline 1/10 (tentative)

*Connecticut Student Writers*, Submissions Deadline (1/27)