

Building Success from the Middle

THERESA EBERHARD ASCH
SECRETARY, BOARD OF TRUSTEES



“ Making sure that all eighth-grade students have attained the knowledge and skills that put them on target to becoming ready for college and career is the single most important step that can be taken to improve their college and career readiness.”

That bold conclusion, in a report on college readiness by the nationally respected education organization ACT, succinctly highlights the importance of taking steps sooner, rather than later, if we are to successfully improve the prospects for students to survive and thrive when they arrive at college. Having spent many years as a middle school principal and elementary school teacher, I could not agree more.

The report’s findings state “we must focus on getting more students on target for college and career readiness by the end of eighth grade so that they are prepared to maximize the benefits of high school,” noting that “eighth-grade achievement is the best predictor of students’ ultimate level of college and career readiness by high school graduation – even more than students’ family background, high school coursework, or high school grade point average.”

In other words, we can’t wait until high

school to put college on students’ radar screens. The effort must include providing the guidance and courses necessary to build a solid foundation in the middle school grades (and even earlier) as well as demonstrating to students, especially those in less-than-optimal circumstances, that college is within their reach, and attainable.

That is no small undertaking, but as someone once said, nothing worth doing ever comes easily. It explains why the Connecticut State University System, which includes Central, Eastern, Southern and Western Connecticut State universities, is devoting time, energy and resources to develop partnerships with middle and high schools across Connecticut.

CSUS, as Connecticut’s largest university system, is clearly focused on Connecticut students. Ninety-three percent of CSUS students come from Connecticut, and nearly nine in ten graduates stay in the state, contributing to our state’s economic well-being and quality of life.

Thus, the strength of Connecticut’s future lies in the soundness of our education system, not only at the post-secondary level, but throughout the education continuum. Residual benefits, such as a reduction in the

“we can’t wait until
high school to put college
on students radar screens”

Building Success from the Middle

number of students requiring developmental courses before beginning their college curriculum, an increase in student retention and graduation rates, and reductions in the time to graduation (and thus the cost of one's degree), all flow from stronger preparation.

In fact, CSUS is an active participant in a statewide initiative, KnowHow2Go, which specifically targets middle school age children, offering them critical information and encouragement regarding college readiness. Beyond that, the CSUS universities collaborating in programs that regularly bring middle school students to university campuses. Some examples:

- Western brings area middle school students to the university to participate in math and science activities as part of the school's Exploration Academy, which exposes the students to science, technology, engineering and math.
- More than 1,300 New Haven eighth-grade students participated in a career exploration program held at the university, stressing goal direction, decision making, and post-high school planning.
- Eastern hosted more than 1,000 middle school students in June 2009 for a day of programs run by faculty and staff highlighting various aspects of college life.

In addition, interactions and connections between local teachers and university fac-

ulty in varied disciplines build bonds that benefit the students in a myriad of ways.

Whether in the sciences or business, engineering or language, mathematics or writing, there is no question that solid preparation can make an enormous difference. We do a disservice to our children, if we do not prepare them adequately to succeed in college and establish a solid foothold in the 21st century economy.

Dr. James Comer, one of the nation's leading education experts, argues convincingly that the preparation must begin at the pre-kindergarten level, and continue through elementary school. Given the increasing recognition of the importance of what comes before eighth grade, his work is underscored.

Colleges and universities cannot do it alone, nor can high schools or middle schools. The good news for Connecticut is that the pieces of the puzzle are out there, we need only work together to put them in place.

■ *Theresa Eberhard Asch is Secretary of the Board of Trustees for the Connecticut State University System. She taught elementary school in Brookfield for 14 years, and was assistant principal of Whisconier Middle School in Brookfield for 16 years.*

This article was published on October 4, 2009

CONNECTICUT POST The News-Times The ADVOCATE



Connecticut State University System
Central | Eastern | Southern | Western