

Inside look at staff days

By Patricia Gay, pgay@theWestonForum.com Date: October 15, 2009

Every school parent knows that students have four days off each year for "Staff Professional Development" days. But what are these days? Do the teachers all get together for sun and sand at Sherwood Island or go shopping at the mall?

Absolutely not, according to Thomas Scarice, Weston's assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction.

On a Professional Development Day, while students enjoy the day off, teachers in grades Pre-K through 12 are stuck in school for the full day, attending programs and seminars designed to teach them new strategies and sharpen their skills and training.

This past Friday, Oct. 9, was a Professional Development Day in Weston. Topics of some of the programs included Smart Board training, oral language instruction, reading intervention, TV studio training, writing instruction, gender-based instructional strategies, Project Adventure training, language arts workshop, and assessment design standards and instructional strategies for numerous subjects.

Mr. Scarice is proud of the fact that the programs were facilitated by in-house personnel.

"We are building our capacity so we do not have to get outside experts. We have the experts on staff," he said.

Teacher enhancement Professional Development started in Connecticut in 1986 as part of the Teacher Enhancement Act.

The act was passed in an effort to improve teacher quality. In the early 1980s, Connecticut was not considered a desirable place for teachers. Most school districts offered low starting salaries with no uniform standards for assessment or new teacher training.

After the act was passed, procedures for teacher training and learning were improved, resulting in, among other things, the widespread practice of holding Professional Development training.

"We had approximately 230 staff members attend the programs and seminars last week," Mr. Scarice said.

Teachers were assigned to various programs based on their individual needs.

Some teachers received detailed instruction on how to use Smart Boards, the interactive whiteboard system installed in nearly every Weston classroom.

Others learned about best practices in teaching language arts, social studies, math or English.

Physical education instructors learned more about teaching Project Adventure, a challenging health and wellness program.

With the high school's new TV studio ready to start operation next month, some staff received training with the new studio equipment. The high school offers a videography course that teaches students how to work in a TV studio.

The plan is to tape shows for Channel 78 featuring student events and performances.

Another important focus was literacy in the elementary grades. "There are new standards in Connecticut, so teachers were taught the best practices based on workshop models. Curriculum instruction leaders helped

support the teachers as they went through the programs," Mr. Scarice said.

Goal

The proof, as they say, lies in the pudding. According to Jerry Belair, superintendent of Weston schools, Professional Development training wouldn't be useful unless it helped the students.

"Our customer is the student and Professional Development is geared to improving their learning. We believe that in order to do that, it is necessary for educators to be up to date on the latest advances in learning," Mr. Belair said.

He compared Professional Development with breakthroughs in medical technology.

"You wouldn't want a doctor performing an operation on you using techniques that were 20 years old when there was modern laser technology or something better available.

It is the same for teaching. We want our students to do well, not only on CAPT or CMT tests but in all their subjects, and the teachers need to be current with the latest advances in education," he said.

According to Mr. Belair, the Professional Development programs offered in Weston are consistent with current research and the best instructional practices.

The programs were designed to be challenging and thought provoking, and provide opportunities for staff to learn from their peers. "We believe all personnel can improve their performance," Mr. Belair said.

The staff members participating in Professional Development also earned continuing education credits which they need to keep up their teaching certification. "These are very demanding days for the staff, but they are well thought out. They give educators more tools in their toolboxes," Mr. Belair said.

Copyright, 2009, The Weston Forum