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Literacy Program Helps Bridgeport Teachers Better Understand and Teach Core Standards

Karen C. Waters, *Sacred Heart University*

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Karen Waters talks with Bridgeport teachers during the workshop.

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As demands on teachers increase and government and parents alike clamor for greater clarity, measurement and results, ensuring that teachers understand and can rise to evolving educational requirements and standards is more critical than ever. Achieving these requirements becomes even more difficult in school systems that serve challenged student populations. So to help neighboring schools in Bridgeport, Sacred Heart University's CT Literacy Specialist Program, under the guidance of Karen Waters, director of the advanced reading certification program, recently hosted an interactive staff-development event aimed at closing gaps and helping teachers enhance their skills.

Called "Navigating the Common Core: The Shifts, Text Complexity and Close Reading," the workshop has been designed to help teachers better understand the standards and utilize specific strategies that address student needs, Waters says. The Common Core standards were adopted by 44 states across the country and are part of a national movement to provide a consistent framework for what students in K–12 should know at the end of every grade level in English/language arts and math. This common learning, theoretically, helps better prepare them for college and for entering the workforce.

The six-hour training included 30 teachers from Columbus School and their new principal, Steven Douglas. Other SHU guests included Jim Carl, dean of the Isabelle Farrington College of Education, and Ann Clark, chair of the Education Leadership Department. The event established the beginning of a formal partnership between Bridgeport Public Schools and Sacred Heart University, Waters points out. Earlier in the spring of 2014, Columbus School applied for and was awarded a School Improvement Grant from the CT State Department of Education. The grant proposal identified specific areas of professional development required by the staff as part of the overall initiative to advance student reading achievement at Columbus School.

Prior to joining SHU in 2006, Waters was an educator in Bridgeport for 31 years, where she taught grades four through six, served as a reading specialist for 25 years and was an elementary school principal before becoming director of Literacy for Bridgeport. Those experiences prepared her to help others better understand the complexities, challenges and rewards inherent in teaching diverse students.

“Within the next year all students at the elementary and secondary levels across the country will be assessed on the extent to which they have demonstrated mastery over rigorous national standards,” says Waters. “We provided useful opportunities for teachers and administration to grapple with the standards first-hand and acquire an improved understanding of content and how to design lessons addressing the CT Core Standards. “

At the end of the day, Water says, Douglas and assistant principals Christina Moore and Mary Beth Williams reported that teachers were enthusiastic about using the strategies they learned to create their own lessons addressing the standards in the classroom. The teachers appreciated the resources and new instructional methods and left more confident about how to use these resources in their individual classrooms.

“Embedded within the SHU mission is the importance of giving back and reaching out to the community,” Waters concludes. “Bridgeport is in our own backyard and is certainly a district in need of resource personnel and support. I will always feel loyal to the school district in which I spent much of my educational career, and I am humbled and honored to be able to work with teachers and administrators on behalf of SHU and help them prepare for this academic year.”