

# **Dyslexia Awareness**

## **COLLABORATIVE KICKOFF**

**From Awareness to Action:  
Supporting Learners with Dyslexia**



**October 7, 2025, 5:30 p.m.**  
**UConn Waterbury, 99 East Main St., Waterbury, CT 06702**



## Kickoff Agenda

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| <b>Sign-In/Registration, Meet and Greet with Deon Butler, Light Refreshments, Gallery Walk</b> ..... | Please register and pick up your raffle ticket before entering the main meeting room.  |
| <b>Welcome</b> .....   | Kristin Allen, Associate Education Consultant, Office of Dyslexia and Reading Disabilities, Connecticut State Department of Education  |
| <b>Opening Remarks</b> .....   | Connecticut State Department of Education Leadership<br><br>Senator Cathy Osten, Deputy President Pro Tempore, 19th State Senatorial District  |
| <b>Industry Expert Keynote</b> .....   | Dr. Fumiko Hoeft, Campus Dean and Chief Administrative Officer of the University of Connecticut (UConn) Waterbury.   |
| <b>Panel: StoryCorps</b> .....   | Introduction by Cyndi Adams, Cooperative Educational Services (CES)<br><br><b>Moderators:</b> Cyndi Adams, Cooperative Educational Services (CES), and Lisa Gianni, Associate Education Consultant, Office of Dyslexia and Reading Disabilities, Connecticut State Department of Education<br><br><b>Concluding Remarks:</b> Lisa Gianni, Associate Education Consultant, Office of Dyslexia and Reading Disabilities, Connecticut State Department of Education |
| <b>Motivational Keynote</b> .....  | Deon Butler, former NFL athlete, widely esteemed motivational speaker, and author of the book, <i>The Gift &amp; Curse—One Man's Journey with Dyslexia</i> .   |
| <b>Closing Remarks</b> .....   | State Representative Kenneth Gucker, 138th District, Danbury<br><br>Kristin Allen, Associate Education Consultant, Office of Dyslexia and Reading Disabilities, Connecticut State Department of Education  |

***We invite you to stay afterward to network and connect with today's presenters and panelists.***

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## CT-DAC Speakers



**Deon Butler**, former NFL athlete, widely esteemed motivational speaker, and author of the book, *The Gift & Curse—One Man’s Journey with Dyslexia*.

At an early age, Butler struggled to read, spell, and comprehend. In middle school, he felt isolated, frustrated, and was bullied by his peers. Going into high school, Butler was determined to overcome obstacles and later graduated, all while reading at a fourth-grade level and earning a full-ride scholarship to Central Michigan University.



In college, Butler faced continued setbacks both in the classroom and on the football field. He was told by a professor that he would not succeed and struggled to read playbooks. Nevertheless, Butler pushed through the barriers by graduating again on a fourth-grade reading level and received a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to play for the Detroit Lions.

Throughout his collegiate and professional career, Butler learned to ask for help, go the extra mile, and used negative feedback to fuel success. Today, Butler spends time speaking with and motivating young future leaders across the country to thrive against all odds, redefining success in the midst of learning differences, and turning pain into great purpose.



**Dr. Fumiko Hoeft**, Campus Dean and Chief Administrative Officer of the University of Connecticut (UConn) Waterbury.

A physician and neuroscientist by training, Dr. Hoeft has dedicated over two decades to research in learning, dyslexia, early screening, resilience, and neurodiversity. She has earned prestigious awards such as the Society for Neuroscience Science Educator Award, honors from the International Dyslexia

Association, and the Connecticut Technology Council Women of Innovation Award.

Dr. Hoeft co-founded the Haskins Global Literacy Hub and revitalized it with new partnerships headquartered at UConn Waterbury, forging bridges with Yale School of Medicine and UConn Global. With more than 200 publications and over 300 talks, including TEDx and the White House, her work has been featured in *The New York Times*, NPR, CNN, and *Scientific American*. As a strong community partner, Dr. Hoeft champions initiatives that strengthen access to education, celebrate neurodiversity, and build a vibrant future for Waterbury and beyond.

## Student Ambassador Spotlight



**Kiersten Brearley** is a junior at East Lyme High School, where she is enrolled in a challenging course load that includes Advanced Placement Literature and UConn Early College Experience classes. A dedicated student-athlete, Kiersten is a member of the school's crew team and has earned her varsity letter for her commitment and performance. Beyond academics and athletics, Kiersten is an active leader and volunteer. She serves as Treasurer of the Key Club and is also involved in the Leos Club, Rotary Club, and Friends of Flanders, where she works as a teacher's aide after school. Her dedication to service and scholarship earned her a place on the High Honor Roll.

Kiersten is exploring colleges with a strong interest in pursuing a career in occupational therapy. Currently, she works at a pediatric OT clinic, gaining valuable hands-on experience in the field. As someone who has navigated the challenges of dyslexia, Kiersten has developed resilience, empathy, and an appreciation for the value of differences. She believes her experiences have helped her become more understanding and forgiving of others. She hopes to carry that perspective into her future career, helping others reach their full potential.

**Luca Bacile**, student ambassador, scholar, and athlete, is a proud 2025 graduate of Enfield High School and is entering his second year as a Student Ambassador. Diagnosed with dyslexia at a young age, Luca has spent the past decade transforming what was once considered a challenge into a personal strength. Through strategic learning approaches and the Wilson Reading System, he now reads above grade level and views dyslexia as a superpower that has shaped his resilience and determination. Outside the classroom, Luca is a dedicated athlete, playing football under Friday night lights and skiing the slopes during the winter months.

His early educational journey was marked by difficulty, as his elementary school lacked the resources and understanding to support students with dyslexia. With the support of his family, Luca was homeschooled for several years, allowing him to thrive academically through personalized instruction that focused on his strengths. He re-entered public school in eighth grade, shortly after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which added complexity to the transition. Nevertheless, Luca persevered, enrolling in rigorous coursework including AP Environmental Science, where he earned the prestigious Rachel Carson Award for excellence. His academic achievements also include the Presidential Education Award for maintaining a high GPA throughout all four years of high school.

Luca's commitment to kindness and community service has been recognized with honors such as the Rotary Club Kindness Award and the ShopRite Kindness Award, the latter of which included a donation to a local animal shelter. He is a member of the National Society of High School Scholars and actively volunteers with CT-DAC, advocating for disability awareness and inclusion. This fall, Luca will begin his studies at Asnuntuck Community College, with plans to hopefully transfer to Westfield State University to pursue a degree in the sciences while continuing his passion for football.



## Student Ambassador Spotlight

**Emmett Oppert** is a bright and compassionate tenth-grade student at Amity High School in Woodbridge, whose academic and personal pursuits reflect a deep love of learning and a profound commitment to inclusivity. With a particular passion for English, Chinese, and the arts, Emmet approaches each subject not merely as a course of study but as a gateway to understanding diverse perspectives and expressing his unique voice. His dedication to excellence has been formally recognized through the prestigious Superintendent's Award, a testament to both his scholastic achievements and his character.

Beyond the classroom, Emmett is a dynamic leader and creative thinker. He serves as the President of the Tabletop Game Club, where he fosters a welcoming space for students to engage in imaginative storytelling and strategic collaboration through games like Dungeons & Dragons. His enthusiasm for solo sports has led him to excel in fencing, a discipline that demands precision, focus, and resilience. Not only does he compete, but he also serves as a referee, demonstrating his commitment to fairness and sportsmanship.

Emmett's compassion shines most brightly in his work with children. He began as a volunteer at Camp Argo in Milford, where he supported young campers with special needs, and has since become a paid counselor entrusted with guiding and mentoring nine- and ten-year-olds. His ability to connect with students, especially those who face unique challenges, has shaped his vision for the future. Emmet aspires to become an English teacher, one who cultivates an inclusive classroom environment where every student feels seen, valued, and empowered.

He believes deeply in the importance of embracing individuality and fostering a shared understanding that differences are not obstacles to overcome, but strengths to be celebrated. Emmet envisions a learning space where students move in harmony with their disabilities. As someone who understands the experiences of students with dyslexia, he champions the idea

that neurodivergent individuals bring creativity, empathy, and positivity to any group. For Emmet, empathy is not just a virtue; it is a guiding principle that informs how he learns, leads, and lives.

**Eleanor Farquhar** is a senior at Hall High School and a passionate advocate for students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLDs) and Learning Differences (LDs). Diagnosed with dyslexia, she draws from her personal experiences to support others. She is also the founder of AT Insider, a YouTube channel and website that helps students explore assistive technology and develop self-advocacy skills.

Eleanor serves on the Connecticut Assistive Technology Advisory Council and the Connecticut Dyslexia Awareness Collaborative Committee, contributing a vital student perspective to statewide education and accessibility initiatives. She has presented at the "Tech Tools for Life" conference, sharing her insights on technology and learning.

She is also an accomplished public speaker and debater, serving as co-captain of her school's mock trial team and competing in Parliamentary debate. She has received multiple awards through the Connecticut Debate Association, including 1st Place Team and 1st Place Speaker at both novice and varsity levels.

In 2025, Eleanor was elected Governor at Connecticut Laurel Girls State and previously interned at the Connecticut Office of the Attorney General, where she worked on consumer protection and elder justice initiatives. She also tutors with Brilliant Detroit and volunteers on her local library's Teen Advisory Board.

**Madeline Vallillo** is a standout senior at Fairfield Ludlowe High School, recognized as both an honors scholar and a proud recipient of the Falcon of the Month award. Her dedication shines through in every area she pursues—whether it's taking AP Psychology or AP Biology or she's sprinting down the track to earn her varsity letter, or commanding the room during mock debates. Madeline brings energy, focus, and leadership to

## Student Ambassador Spotlight, continued

everything she does, consistently giving her all and inspiring those around her. Madeline's passion for service shines through her work both locally and beyond. She mentors youth at the Wakeman Boys and Girls Club, serves meals at Operation Hope, and connects with seniors through Generations Connected Club. Her commitment extends to weeklong mission trips in the Appalachian region, where she supports underserved communities. Madeline's volunteerism reflects a deep dedication to making a meaningful impact. Madeline has lived her entire life with what she considers her superpower—dyslexia. She was diagnosed with severe dyslexia at a young age and placed in special education during elementary school. Supported by dedicated classroom aides and a relentless mother who advocated for her needs, she also received private tutoring and completed all twelve levels of the Wilson Reading System. These early challenges instilled in her a deep sense of perseverance and discipline. As she advanced through school, academic demands intensified. Freshman year of high school was especially difficult, marked by feelings of falling behind despite her best efforts. Still, Madeline remained committed to pushing forward. By sophomore year, she began taking honors classes, and in junior year, she enrolled in her first AP course—defying the doubts of others and proving her capabilities. She not only overcame the obstacles dyslexia presented, but she also grew stronger because of them.

**Cole Zebatakis**, a proud 2025 graduate of Tolland High School, has a passion for business and design that has shaped his academic journey and future aspirations. Throughout high school, Cole immersed himself in business education, completing several courses and earning membership in the prestigious National Business Honor Society. His talent and dedication were further recognized with a Creative Design scholarship—an award that reflects both his artistic vision and entrepreneurial spirit. This fall, Cole will begin his next chapter at the University of Connecticut (UConn), where he plans to turn his dream of owning an advertising agency into reality. Outside the classroom, Cole was a well-rounded student-athlete, participating in both basketball and golf. He also ran a successful sports media Instagram account for three years, combining his love of athletics with digital content creation. His eye for detail and visual storytelling led him to volunteer as a photographer and videographer for numerous school events, where he was entrusted with capturing key moments for the community.

Cole's journey hasn't been without challenges. As a dyslexic student, he initially struggled to understand how his learning differences impacted his academic experience. Over time, however, he came to see dyslexia not as a limitation, but as a unique advantage—especially in areas requiring creativity, innovation, and out-of-the-box thinking. He credits this perspective with fueling his passion for graphic design and media production.



## CT-DAC Committee Members

The Office of Dyslexia and Reading Disabilities is honored to partner with a diverse network of agencies and stakeholders from across Connecticut for our 2nd Annual Dyslexia Awareness Collaborative. This united effort brings together educators, advocates, researchers, policymakers, families, and community leaders—each playing a vital role in advancing understanding and action around dyslexia.

Together, we are committed to promoting awareness and fostering a shared understanding of the strengths and challenges associated with dyslexia. Through this collaboration, we aim to ensure that every student in our state has equitable access to timely identification, effective instruction, and the supports they need to thrive.

The partnerships represented here today demonstrate the power of collective action—when organizations align around a shared mission, meaningful change becomes possible. We are grateful to work alongside such dedicated partners in building a more informed, inclusive, and supportive educational landscape for all learners.

**Cyndi Adams** is a Teaching and Learning Specialist at Cooperative Educational Services (CES) who is passionate about supporting educators in implementing high-quality, research-based practices to meet the needs of each learner. She holds bachelor's degrees in mathematics and Elementary Education, a master's in Remedial Reading and Language Arts, is a certified Wilson® Dyslexia Practitioner, and CERI Structured Literacy Dyslexia Interventionist. In addition to the ODRD's Dyslexia Awareness Committee, Cyndi also serves on the Scientific Research and Practice Advisory, contributing to the development of Connecticut's Educator Competencies for Structured Literacy and Dyslexia.

**Kristin Allen** is an Associate Education Consultant in the Office of Dyslexia and Reading Disabilities. She is responsible for providing information and assistance to local and regional boards of education and the parents or guardians of students relating to the detection and recognition of, and evidence-based structured literacy interventions for, students with dyslexia, per PA 15-97. She also serves as a liaison with the Bureau of Special Education as well as SERC and the RESC Alliance. She is a Connecticut Teacher of the Year semi-finalist who firmly believes that learning to read is a civil right that all students should have equitable access to attain. For nearly two decades prior to joining the office, she dedicated herself to positively impacting the lives of students with reading and writing disabilities in her role as Special Education Teacher, Literacy Specialist, and former President of the Connecticut Chapter of the International Dyslexia Association (IDA). One of Kristin's favorite quotes, by the late Maya Angelou, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better," inspires her learning and her work with students, colleagues, and families. She holds specialized credentials in teaching students with dyslexia how to read and write, including certification as a Dyslexia Practitioner and Therapist with the International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council (IMSLEC) and IDA's subsidiary, and certification as an Orton-Gillingham Instructor with the Western Massachusetts Learning Center.

**L. Quiñones-Benítez, Ph.D.**, a New Haven resident since 1984, is currently a leadership consultant and a New Haven Board of Education member and chair of governance. She retired in 2019 from the New Haven Public Schools, where she previously held leadership roles, including as a Director of Instruction supervising schools, Director of School Counseling, and Director of the Multilingual Department supporting all schools, addressing the needs of multilingual learners (MLs), and overseeing bilingual/ESOL and dual language programming district-wide. She served over a decade as Principal of Columbus Family Academy (now F.A.M.E), a dual language school. During her tenure, she became a leadership coach supporting novice principals. Before that, she was



## CT-DAC Committee Members, continued

a curriculum/staff developer, Title I consultant, school counselor, PPT chair, and Adult Education teacher. Originally from Puerto Rico, she attended public schools and earned her bachelor's degree at "La IUPI" Rio Piedras. She holds a master's from the University of Pittsburgh and a doctorate in curriculum and instruction from UConn. In 2002, the American Education Research Association awarded Dr. Quiñones-Benítez the Best Bilingual Education Dissertation Award, and she was named an Illustrious Woman of Puerto Rico by its legislature. She has received the Elm/Ivy Award from Yale and the City of New Haven and the Heritage Award from the Board of Alders' Black and Hispanic Caucus. She is a founding past president of the Connecticut Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (CALAS). Dr. Benítez was appointed to the New Haven Board of Education in January 2022, and since 2023 has been supporting efforts in Puerto Rico as a consultant.

**Siobhan Brearley**, Bureau of Special Education (BSE) Call Center Specialist, is a former middle school teacher and administrator at a private school in Rhode Island. While taking a break from full-time work to raise her children, she worked part-time in the roles of instructor, tutor, and life coach with Thames Acade-my and Mitchell College students. Although she has experience working with a vast profile of students, addressing their strengths and needs, her focus became working with students on the autism spectrum and with various learning disabilities such as dyslexia and dysgraphia. Siobhan is trained in many evidence-based literacy programs based on the science of reading and is completing her certification in Structured Linguistic Literacy (speech-to-print approach).

**Dr. Judy Carson**, Program Manager for School-Family-Community Partnerships at the Connecticut State Department of Education. She develops programs and policies designed to help families and schools work together for student success.

**Claire Conroy, Ed.D** leads the Specific Learning Disabilities/Dyslexia initiative at the State Education Resource Center. She co-leads the Assistive Technology, Accessible Educational Materials, and the Universal Design for Learning Initiatives, and is also an Individualized Education Program Quality Trainer. Claire holds a bachelor's degree in Integrated Elementary and Special Education, a master's degree in Learning Design and Technology, and a Doctorate in Education. Additionally, she is trained at the Certified level in the Orton-Gillingham approach. Claire serves on the board of The Reading League – Connecticut chapter.

**Luke Forshaw** is proud to lead the Cooperative Educational Services Professional Development team. Before this role, Luke was a classroom teacher and educational leader with experience in both building and district service. He continues to teach graduate coursework in curriculum & teaching, leadership, and research design. Luke is a firm believer in the power of adult learning and is a champion for continuous improvement on behalf of students and families. Luke holds a BA in Psychology from Trinity College and an MA and Ed.D. in Curriculum and Teaching from Teachers College, Columbia University.

**Aimee Gauvin** serves as the administrative assistant to the Office of Dyslexia and Reading Disabilities and is an active member of the Connecticut Dyslexia Awareness Campaign. Before joining the Connecticut State Department of Education, she spent nine dedicated years supporting Windsor Locks High School as the Administrative Assistant to the Principal and the Guidance Department. Aimee earned her BA in Political Science and MA in Public Policy from Trinity College, and she also holds a Bachelor of Business Administration from Florida Technical College. She is a proud Coca-Cola Scholar and was honored with a General Assembly Citation for her exceptional academic achievements. In her commitment to community service, Aimee has volunteered with the Suffield Backpack and Meals on Wheels programs. She has also devoted time to helping first-generation immigrant children learn to read English, believing that literacy empowers them to understand their rights and navigate life in their new country.



## CT-DAC Committee Members, continued

**Lisa Gianni** is an experienced educator with over twenty years in public education, working as a classroom teacher, remedial reading specialist, and instructional literacy coach. She is currently an Associate Education Consultant with the State Department of Education in the Office of Dyslexia and Reading Disabilities, where she supports K-12 structured literacy professional learning initiatives and the CT educator competencies. She earned her master's degree in education from the University of Saint Joseph and her remedial reading specialist certification from Albertus Magnus College. Lisa is a National LETRS Professional Learning Facilitator, is Orton-Gillingham trained at the Associate Level and is a certified Structured Literacy Classroom Teacher through CERI/IDA. She was also an Adjunct Professor in the Remedial Reading Specialist advanced alternate program at Albertus Magnus College. Lisa is the President of The Reading League-Connecticut chapter and was a former board member of the International Dyslexia Association-Connecticut branch. She believes literacy is a fundamental human right and that with informed and supported educators, all children can become skillful readers and writers.

**Bryan Klimkiewicz** is currently serving in his eighth year as Special Education Division Director for the Connecticut State Department of Education. He leads a dynamic team that is responsible for ensuring that students with disabilities receive a free, appropriate education that prepares students for post-secondary education, employment, independent living, and community participation. Prior to his role at the CSDE, he served in a variety of professional roles at the local level, including Paraeducator, Residential Coordinator, Special Education Teacher (private and public school settings), Director of Special Education, Pupil Services Director, and Assistant Superintendent. He earned his bachelor's degree in Psychology from the University of Connecticut. His graduate work resulted in a master's degree in Special Education with a focus on intensive special needs, a sixth year degree in Educational Leadership, and Connecticut certification in Special Education, Administration, and Superintendent of Schools. Bryan is currently working on a Ph.D. in special education and continues to be inspired by the students he serves daily.

**Candice LaConti** began her first year as a middle school special educator, where she quickly found that many of her students couldn't read. Worse still, at that time, she did not have the tools or knowledge to help them. She went to graduate school to study how the brain learns to read and to acquire research-aligned strategies for effective teaching. After several years in the classroom, she went on to supervise graduate students throughout their practicums, mentor teachers, and facilitate professional learning. After 28 years as a literacy teacher, tutor, coach, and reading consultant, she currently supports districts throughout eastern Connecticut as an associate education consultant with the Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success.

**Elisa Laudati** is a school psychologist and educator with expertise in assessment, special education identification and the connections between learning, emotions, and executive functioning. She has supported statewide implementation of social-emotional learning, academic interventions, and trauma-informed practices through her roles in public schools, higher education, and as a consultant with SERC. Elisa currently leads training on IEP quality, multi-tiered systems of support, and inclusive instructional practices, with a focus on culturally and linguistically sustaining approaches. As a member of the Dyslexia Awareness Committee, she brings a strong foundation in reading disability assessment and a commitment to equitable student identification and support.

**Dawn La Valle**, Director, Division of Library Development, is a Certified Strategic Foresight Practitioner, a member of the Association of Professional Futurists, and a Disruption Navigator for Libraries. She is focused on fostering a more collaborative, innovative culture, transformative library services and solutions for libraries, and to instill 21st-century skill sets in the next generation of library leaders. The Division has launched several initiatives for CT libraries, including the EDGE Initiative, Growing Equitable Library Services (GELS), Transforming Museums and Library: Collaboration for Accessible Exhibitions, Collec-

## CT-DAC Committee Members, continued

tions, and Programs, health, and legal literacy initiatives, veteran and military families program initiatives. Regional and national projects include EXCITE: Transformation for Libraries and Transformation for Libraries: The Futures School, which were awarded IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program grants. She works with libraries around the country in Foresight Fueled Strategies and was proud to have served as a consultant to the Dubai Public Library System, in the framing of a strategy to re-envision the future state of libraries as 21st Century community anchors and innovation destinations.

**Dr. Veronica Marion** has served as the Director of the Connecticut Statewide Family Engagement Center (SFEC) since 2023. Under her leadership, SFEC works to strengthen student social, emotional, and academic outcomes by fostering meaningful partnerships among families, schools, and communities. Dr. Marion leads the development and implementation of comprehensive, sustainable family engagement initiatives that are seamlessly integrated into the culture of schools and communities. Prior to her current role, Dr. Marion held central office administrative positions in both Connecticut and Massachusetts. She previously served as co-coordinator of the Connecticut Parent Information and Resource Center (CT PIRC) and as an educational consultant with the State Education Resource Center (SERC). In these roles, she partnered with schools, districts, and families across the state to design professional development and parent education programs on topics including school-family-community partnerships, culturally responsive family engagement, and assessments of welcoming school environments. Dr. Marion's professional work reflects her deep personal commitment to children and families. In 2012, she supported her son, Trey, in writing *When Mommy Had Cancer*, a book inspired by their shared experience navigating her breast cancer diagnosis. Through his words, Trey offered hope and guidance to other families, sharing the emotions, lessons, and resilience that helped them not only endure but thrive. She also volunteers at Yale Smilow Cancer Hospital, where she has supported the Patient-to-Patient Program and the Annual Closer to Free Bike Ride since 2008.

**Dr. Athena McAlenney** is an Associate Education Consultant in the Office of Dyslexia and Reading Disabilities, working with educator preparation programs. She joined the office after 15 years as a professor of teacher education, preparing pre-service and in-service educators to teach reading. Dr. McAlenney began her career at Landmark School in Massachusetts, where she taught students with dyslexia and other language-based learning disabilities. She received her B.A. at Dartmouth College, M.S.Ed. at the University of Pennsylvania, and Ph.D. at the University of Connecticut.

**Alissa Heizler-Mendoza**, Parent Engagement Coordinator for Decoding Dyslexia Connecticut (DDCT), began her advocacy journey while seeking support for her son. DDCT quickly became an essential resource, providing her with the tools and knowledge to effectively navigate the education system and advocate for his needs. Her dedication led to her appointment to the Task Force to Analyze the Implementation of Laws Governing Dyslexia Instruction and Training, where she played a key role in advancing legislation related to K-3 literacy screening. Alissa recently discovered she has dyslexia herself which has deepened her empathy and strengthened her commitment to supporting others.

**Caroline Messenger** began her career in 2000 as a seventh-grade teacher of English and Language Arts. She has taught ELA for grades six through 12. After 15 years in the classroom, Caroline became a director of curriculum and worked with K-12 teachers to develop and implement curriculum and build strong instructional practices. After 25 years as a teacher and district administrator, she currently supports districts throughout northwestern Connecticut as an associate education consultant with the Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success at the Connecticut State Department of Education. She holds a bachelor's degree in English, a master's degree in Oral Traditions, a master's degree of philosophy in the sociology of education, and has completed her administrator certification requirements at the University of Bridgeport. She holds state certification in English 7-12, TESOL PreK-12, and administration.

## CT-DAC Committee Members, continued

**Goviana Morales** is a Bilingual Parent Consultant at the Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center (CPAC) and the proud parent of five children, two of whom have disabilities. She is a graduate of Next Steps, COPAA, and LEND, and recently earned a degree as a Disability Specialist with a focus on Speech-Language Pathology Assisting. Goviana provides bilingual services in Spanish, and her areas of passion include language access, transition to adult life, and family engagement.

**Sarah Moon** is the Director of Special Services at LEARN her current work focuses on collaborating closely with districts, school teams, families, and community partners to provide quality special education programming and related services to students with complex communication, learning, social-emotional, and medical needs. Sarah leads and participates in several partnerships between the RESC Alliance and the Connecticut Bureau of Special Education. Through that partnership, Sarah provides speech and language technical assistance to school districts, facilitates bi-monthly Communities of Practice for school-based speech and language pathologists, and directly supports the Office of Dyslexia and Reading Disabilities initiatives. Sarah has an extensive background in school-based interventions and program development for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, Specific Learning Disabilities, Dyslexia, and Developmental Language Delays, pediatric feeding and swallowing, augmentative communication/assistive technology, executive functioning, and programming for students who are multiply disabled and/or medically complex.

**Dr. Ashley Oldham** is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Education at the University of Saint Joseph (USJ) in West Hartford, Connecticut. With a Ph.D. in Special Education from the University of Connecticut, she specializes in supporting students with learning disabilities, particularly those identified with reading disabilities. Her research focuses on developing effective interventions and strategies to enhance literacy outcomes for these students. In addition to her research, Dr. Oldham teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in special education and literacy. She is committed to preparing future educators to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities. Her work reflects a dedication to improving educational practices and outcomes for students with learning challenges.

**Miguel Pabon** currently serves as Assistant Superintendent of CREC Magnet Schools. In this role, Miguel is involved in all areas of district leadership, with a particular focus on Special Education and Pupil Services. Originally from Puerto Rico, Miguel has lived in Connecticut the majority of his life. He is a bilingual/bicultural educational professional with over 29 years of experience working in urban education. He began his career in Hartford, where he served as a bilingual school psychologist for 9 years. Since 2005, Miguel has held a variety of leadership positions in several school districts, including Hartford, CREC, Windham and Waterbury. In Hartford, Miguel held leadership roles such as, Coordinator of Psychological Services, Assistant Principal, and Special Education Supervisor. He also worked previously at CREC for 7 years, as a Supervisor of Special Education and Pupil Services of CREC Magnet Schools. Since then, Miguel has served as Director of Pupil Services in Windham and Waterbury. Miguel holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Connecticut, a master's and C.A.G.S. in School Psychology from Northeastern University, and a 6th-year degree in Educational Leadership from Central Connecticut State University. Miguel is also a member of the Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (ALAS) and the current President-Elect of the Connecticut Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (CALAS). He is a committed educational leader, who strongly believes in high expectations and equitable access for all students, especially students with diverse learning needs.

**Michelle Pranger** is a Special Education Teacher and Literacy Interventionist in Redding, CT, where she has worked for over 17 years. With over 20 years of experience working with diverse learners, she brings both expertise and a genuine passion for helping every student succeed. In Redding, she teaches structured literacy, providing targeted interventions that support students with dyslexia and



## CT-DAC Committee Members, continued



other language-based learning differences in becoming confident, skilled readers. She is the creator of Decodify, a structured literacy card game designed by educators and structured for success. Michelle developed the game to keep her middle school students engaged and excited about literacy. Carefully designed to complement any research-based literacy program adopted by schools, Decodify is a hands-on, multisensory tool grounded in the five pillars of literacy. She now uses it weekly as a fun, evidence-based way to reinforce decoding, morphology, spelling, and comprehension skills, fostering both joy and

confidence among her students. Michelle holds a master's degree in special education from Hofstra University and is certified in the Wilson Reading System. She is also trained in the Seeing Stars® program and the Preventing Academic Failure (PAF) program. In addition to her classroom work, she served as a contracted literacy consultant for Newtown Public Schools. As a member of Connecticut's Office of Dyslexia and Reading Disabilities committee, Michelle advocates statewide for high-quality structured literacy implementation. Inspired by her Jamaican heritage and the teachers who shaped her, she is passionately committed to equity in education and strives to empower every child to unlock both literacy and confidence, and to experience the joy of learning.

**Allison Quirion**, Founder of Decoding Dyslexia Connecticut (DDCT), brought her legal expertise into the education policy arena after recognizing significant systemic gaps in support for students with dyslexia. For over a decade, she has been a driving force behind impactful legislative efforts in Connecticut. As Co-Chair of the Task Force to Analyze the Implementation of Laws Governing Dyslexia Instruction and Training, she led the development of critical recommendations to address key implementation challenges. Allison has also held positions with the International Dyslexia Association and currently serves as a specialist at the University of Connecticut, where she advances literacy initiatives and mentors graduate students.

**Deborrah Ramirez** recently retired after 35 years of working as a high school counselor for several school districts in Connecticut. She was the School Counseling Director for both Berlin and Windsor Locks High Schools. In these schools, she developed and implemented a school counseling curriculum, working with hundreds of students in grades 9-12 and their families, guiding them through their academic/personal-social/, and post-secondary journeys. Deborrah has coordinated and facilitated countless parental evenings/events, been a 504-case manager and has assisted students who have been identified through the PPT process. She has served on Leadership Teams, SRBI Committees, School Safety Committees, and grading and reporting committees, and has been a member of a NEASC visiting team. Additionally, she has been a Site Supervisor for School Counseling Interns. Deborrah has also been the PSAT, SAT, AP, and SSD Coordinator for multiple districts, the UCONN ECE Site Supervisor, and the Tunxis & Asnuntuck Community College CCP Site Supervisor. Deborrah will now be switching gears a bit in her semi-retired part-time position as a school counselor at St. Paul's School, where she will be working with students ages 3-13 with a particular focus on Social-Emotional Learning. Having the opportunity to work with the CT-DAC, she hopes to gain a stronger perspective in her understanding of dyslexia and how the committee will work together to help bring more awareness to the challenges dyslexia presents for students and their families, as well as work to provide students, families, and schools with resources and supports to help students meet with success in their future.

## CT-DAC Committee Members, continued

**Clarisa Rodrigues**, is a consultant at SERC, specializing in initiatives related to literacy, dyslexia, transition, family engagement, and supporting multilingual learners. She earned her Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from the University of Connecticut and is a former special education teacher. With a strong focus on educational equity, Clarisa works to implement effective strategies that support diverse learners, enhance teacher practice, and empower families in their educational journeys.

**Ann R. Smith, JD, MBA**, serves as Executive Director of African Caribbean American Parents of Children with Disabilities, Inc. (AFCAMP), a Hartford, Connecticut, nonprofit assisting Black, Latino, and underserved families for over 24 years. Providing resources, training, and advocacy, AFCAMP promotes family and youth voice to improve outcomes for children and families involved in systems including special education, juvenile justice, children's behavioral health, and child welfare. Pursuing equity fuels AFCAMP's work to reform systemic policies and practices that proliferate disparate academic, justice, and health outcomes for children and youth of color. Ann serves in multiple roles, including Tri-chair, Connecticut Children's Behavioral Health Plan Implementation Advisory Board, Member, Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance Steering Committee, and Member, Connecticut Dyslexia Awareness Campaign Committee.

**Ron Smith** is a retired Early Childhood Special Education Teacher whose career reflects a lifelong commitment to education, advocacy, and community empowerment. He began his academic journey with a BA in Fine Arts from Bowie State University in Maryland, followed by an MA in Early Childhood Education from the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut. Later, he deepened his understanding of human services by earning an AA in Human Services Administration from Catholic University of America. Ron's teaching career spanned diverse settings—from New Opportunities Waterbury (NOW) and UCONN Storrs in Connecticut to multiple sites within Washington D.C. Public Schools. His passion for education extended beyond borders when he traveled to Ethiopia as an English Language Teacher through the International Foundation for Education and Self-Help (IFESH). Beyond the classroom, Ron served as a Congressional Black Caucus Intern for Representative Gary Franks (R) of CT in 2005, gaining firsthand experience in policy and advocacy. He also interned as a Substance Abuse Counselor at Andromeda Transcultural Health Center in Washington, D.C., reflecting his dedication to holistic support and recovery. Currently, Ron is training as a Peer Recovery Coach through the Connecticut Workforce Job Centers. He continues his lifelong learning as a student at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at UCONN Waterbury. His volunteer work includes contributions to DC Advocacy Partners, TASH, and the Department of Developmental Disabilities, underscoring his enduring commitment to inclusion and equity.

**Jennifer Stewart** is entering her 26th year in education, with a career that began as a general education teacher before transitioning to special education. After working as a special education teacher, she advanced into administrative roles within the field, ultimately becoming a Special Education Program Coordinator. Throughout her career, Jennifer has had the privilege of working in various school districts and currently serves in Greenwich Public Schools. Her core belief is that students are always the top priority, and she is dedicated to ensuring they receive the services and support they deserve.

**Jennifer Zabetakis**, Communications Manager for Decoding Dyslexia Connecticut (DDCT), is a passionate advocate and parent of two children with dyslexia. Her firsthand experience navigating the education system inspired her deep commitment to supporting other families and advancing systemic change. In her role at DDCT, Jennifer amplifies the voices of parents, educators, and students, working to raise public awareness and drive legislative reforms that promote equitable access to education. Her work in outreach and communications plays a vital role in building informed, empowered communities for those impacted by dyslexia.

## Agencies Our Committee Members Represent

**Connecticut Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (CALAS)** actively engages in policy discussions and advocacy efforts to advance Latino education. We support initiatives that enhance bilingual education, increase teacher and administrator diversity, and ensure culturally relevant curriculum development. Through strategic partnerships and collaboration, CALAS plays a vital role in shaping policies that impact Latino students and educators. Through our unwavering commitment to advocacy, leadership development, and community collaboration, CALAS continues to drive meaningful change and equitable opportunities for Latino students and educators across Connecticut.

**African Caribbean American Parents of Children with Disabilities (AFCAMP)** is a grassroots organization founded in 2001 that serves a diversity of parents, youth and families. As a voice for systems change, AFCAMP educates, trains and supports parents and youth to become active participants in their education and care, and advocates for policy and program reforms that promote equity and equal access to culturally and linguistically appropriate services within multiple child-serving systems in Connecticut.

**The Connecticut Family School Partnerships (CFSP)** brings together the expertise and resources of five diverse educational and family advocacy agencies (CREC, AFCAMP, CSDE, CPAC, SERC) committed to developing a Connecticut family engagement model that creates a culture of full, equal, and equitable partnerships between families, schools, and community partners to elevate student success.

**Connecticut Council of Administrators of Special Education (ConnCASE)** is a professional organization dedicated to promoting professional leadership, exploring common issues, and developing improved services for exceptional children.

**Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center, Inc. (CPAC)** is a statewide nonprofit organization that offers information and support to families of children with any disability or chronic illness, ages birth through 26. The Center is committed to the idea that parents can be the most effective advocates for their children, given the confidence that knowledge and understanding of special education law and its procedures can bring.

**Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE)** operates under the notion of one agency, one voice. Grounded in the vision of *Every Student Prepared for Learning, Life, and Work Beyond School*, the Connecticut State Department of Education is dedicated to advancing equity and excellence across all schools. Through strong leadership, high-quality assessments, and data-driven decision-making, CSDE strives to ensure that every student has access to the opportunities, resources, and support needed to reach their full potential.

**Decoding Dyslexia Connecticut (DDCT)** is a grassroots movement driven by Connecticut families, teachers and advocates concerned with the limited identification and access to educational interventions for dyslexia and other language-based learning disabilities within our public schools. They aim to raise dyslexia awareness, empower families to support their children and inform policy-makers on best practices to identify, remediate and support students with dyslexia in our public schools.

**Regional Educational Service Centers (RESC Alliance)** In the 1990s, Connecticut's six RESCs formed the RESC Alliance to create greater access to resources and savings for all Connecticut public schools. Today, the RESCs collaborate to deliver an ever-growing variety of education resources and services that schools and communities couldn't otherwise afford. The RESC Alliance also advocates at the state legislature for laws that address and respond to the education needs of all Connecticut residents.

**State Education Resource Center (SERC)** supports educational equity and excellence by providing professional development and information dissemination in the latest research and best practices to educators, service providers, and families throughout the state, as well as job-embedded technical assistance and training within schools, programs, and districts. Over the years, SERC has offered initiatives that support the achievement of all learners, with the belief that programs are most effective when general education and special education do not function as separate systems, but are united. Make sure to check out the SERC Library, which offers a comprehensive collection of resources for educators, families, and other stakeholders, including tests, instructional materials, online journals, and reference and research materials.







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