



Insight

SPRING 2023 | Vol. 7, No. 1



The New England Center
for Children®
Autism Education and Research

SPRING 2023 Vol. 7, No. 1

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As spring arrives, we are excited to share the latest updates and developments happening at NECC, all of which will enhance our students' experiences.

In March, NECC began construction on an on-site state-of-the-art dental clinic, a joint venture with New England Dental Group that will provide our students with access to high-quality dental care, improving their overall health and well-being. We are grateful to the Children of Promise Gala attendees who helped raise a record \$1.29 million, making this project possible.

Also in March, the ITT cluster classrooms underwent a renovation, thanks to the help of labor union members. These updates will provide our students with a refreshed learning environment.

We are looking forward to the annual 5k Walk/Run for Autism, which is back on its traditional date of Mother's Day weekend. It is always wonderful to see our community come together and raise awareness and funds for autism research and education.

We are grateful for your continued support of NECC's mission and for helping to make a positive impact on the lives of individuals with autism and their families.

Sincerely,

Jared Bouzan, M.Ed.
Chief Development Officer

**OUR MISSION IS TO CREATE
A GLOBAL NETWORK OF
EDUCATORS, RESEARCHERS,
AND PROGRAMS SO THAT
THOSE LIVING WITH AUTISM
MAY LIVE FULLER LIVES.**

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The New England
Center for Children



NECC student artwork has been on display at the Solomon Pond Mall in Marlborough, MA. Thank you to Solomon Pond for allowing NECC the opportunity to show off our talented students!



Teacher Feature

SHAWN O'BRIEN

Sleep is an essential part of a healthy and productive life. For children who are growing and developing, beginning the day with a solid foundation of a good night's sleep is crucial. At NECC, ensuring that happens falls on the residential counselors.

"We often say that our goal is to set our students up for success, and fundamentally that starts with the residential counselors," shared Shawn O'Brien, director of residential services. "Getting a solid, age-appropriate night of rest so our students can be as engaged as possible is the best way to set our students up to learn. The residential counselors are setting the tone for the next day by creating an environment that is conducive for our students to get a quality night of rest."

O'Brien knows firsthand the important function residential counselors play in student success at NECC. He began his career at NECC as a residential counselor 24 years ago. "Part of my rapport with the residential counselors is that I was one of them, and that I understand the unique demands and challenges of the position. And like them, I was older when I found this career and came into the job with a lot of life experience."

While teachers usually come to NECC

as early career talent, residential counselors come at various stages of career and life; many are already established caretakers. In O'Brien's case, he took time off when his mother was sick, and after she passed a few years later, he was finally able to finish his degree. He was in the process of taking a job working with troubled youth when he saw an ad for NECC.

"I didn't know much about autism at that point, so I decided to apply to be a residential counselor rather than a teacher, to see what it was like," he said.

After a year working as a residential counselor, O'Brien moved into an administrative role, becoming a specialist and lead specialist before he was named director 18 years ago. The Residential Services department serves as a support system for the residential teams, both teachers and residential counselors. And while both those positions care for NECC students, they are very different.

"The role of the residential counselor varies from that of a teacher because teachers work on skill acquisition, while residential counselors are in more of a surrogate parent role, creating a nurturing environment for our students," O'Brien shared. "For

example, residential counselors are there to comfort the kids when they wake up in the middle of the night, whether it be from being scared or sick."

Sleep issues are a common challenge for NECC students, according to O'Brien, and if a student doesn't receive quality sleep, the likelihood of problem behavior increases. An uptick in these behaviors can lead to a disruption in students' daily programming.

"The data our residential counselors collect during the night and share with our nursing staff and clinicians is so important to creating a sleep program for our students," he said. "The feedback from residential counselors can be crucial in adjusting treatment programs to help our students get the most rest and be the most productive during the school day."

Having an impact on the students, even in the smallest way, is O'Brien's favorite part of his job. "At the end of the day, everything we do starts and ends with our students," he said. "We're all a team, and we need to maximize what we can do for our students to help them live their best lives. I love being part of the team that helps them be as successful as they possibly can be."



MEET THE ERGs

NECC Launches Employee Resource Groups to Enhance Staff Experience

As part of its commitment to creating an experience of belonging for all staff, NECC established several Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) to provide dedicated safe spaces of support, community, and learning for employees.

The five ERGs were formed after being identified by staff via a survey as areas where they would appreciate unique support. ERGs are a pipeline for employee feedback as a way to improve the work-life balance at NECC. Each ERG has a leader or co-leaders who act as a liaison between the group and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) director, schedule meetings, facilitate discussions and initiatives, and receive ongoing training for professional development.

“The groups are voluntary, based on similar life experiences, identities, or challenges in the workplace,” said DEI Director Fatou Njie-Jallow. “The benefits are belonging, inclusion, support, engagement, and a safe space to learn and practice allyship. The groups align their purpose and objectives to the organization’s larger DEI strategy.”

BLACK & BROWN

Lead: Zalika Tyrell, clinical, residential program coordinator
Sponsor: Kaaron-Marc Dick, director of information services

According to Tyrell, this ERG was created to serve as a place where NECC’s Black and Brown community can have their voices heard and learn from each other through engaging activities and educational discussions. “I believe that Black and Brown staff could greatly benefit from having a space to share ideas for growth with individuals of similar background and lived experience,” shared Tyrell.

She said that because ERGs are staff-centered, it will help lead to solutions for improvement, not just within the Black and Brown communities but across all groups at NECC. “I am hoping that our ERGs will foster community, cultural awareness, and humility as we navigate the workplace and interact with staff and students of all backgrounds,” she said.

INTERNATIONAL STAFF

Lead: Taran Kohli, level 2 teacher
Sponsor: Meghan Reidy, director of compliance

This ERG is designed to assist staff who come to NECC from outside the United States, a position Kohli was in as an international student five years ago. He says the group will help staff upon arrival, during the “settling in” period, to ensure they are faring well and on an as-needed basis.

“This ERG will consider cultural differences and try to fill all the gaps between the organization and staff. I want to make sure everyone feels welcomed to this great organization,” Kohli shared. “NECC caters to a diverse group of people, and it might be difficult for some people to share their ideas or problems if there isn’t a good structure to be heard or meet others with similar backgrounds. I believe ERGs can serve as a comfortable place for staff.”

LGBTQ+

Leads: Kaya Chokshi-Fox, behavioral health technician; Kiah Lyons, level 2 teacher
Sponsor: Nicole Gardenier, MS, CAGS, BCBA, LABA, executive director of ACE®; Maureen Kelly, Ph.D., BCBA-D,

LABA, assistant clinical director

The LGBTQ+ ERG values safety, transparency, and support for the LGBTQ+ community, where individuals can feel comfortable and confident with their identity and expression.

“Everyone deserves to feel safe and heard within the workplace, and this ERG is giving our LGBTQ+ community a chance to be heard,” said Lyons. “It gives NECC a chance to listen to its people and make choices and changes according to our needs.”

Chokshi-Fox believes this ERG is fundamental. “I know I’m not the only person who has experienced being ostracized at my place of work for the sole reason of how I identify and whom I love. At NECC, I have felt the potential for a real sense of belonging, and that is something I want to grow and share.”

WELLNESS

Lead: Diego Coyle Diez, core shift manager; Taylor Collins, MS, BCBA, program specialist

Sponsor: Amy Geckeler, MS, BCBA, LABA, executive director of global consulting

The Wellness ERG aims to create an environment where staff can express concerns and work together to develop a viable solution to benefit all staff. Coyle Diez shared that he wants to find out what issues are challenging employees and formulate potential solutions while also having fun.

He believes that the Wellness ERG is essential because while every company has its challenges, NECC staff might face more than most due to the nature of the job. “These challenges take a toll on employees at NECC, and if not targeted, they can become a negative aspect of working. By providing a safe setting where employees can express these challenges and work together to find potential solutions and awareness, we can hopefully bring a sense of relief to everyone,” he added.

WORKING CAREGIVERS

Lead: Lauren Himmighoefer, MA, CCC-SLP, BCBA, LABA, speech-language pathologist; Kim Ruscitti, associate director of communications

Sponsor: Heather Morrison, MS, BCBA, LABA, director of administration

According to Himmighoefer, the Working Caregivers ERG is intended to help NECC understand and address how to make the workplace one where caregivers can have the same career opportunities as non-caregiving employees. And it’s not just for working parents – it’s designed to support anyone in a caregiving role (e.g., aging parents, spouses, grandparents,

siblings, etc.) who face challenges balancing work and caregiving responsibilities.

“This ERG was developed to provide a network of support and resources to fellow employees who face the unique challenges of being a working caregiver,” shared Himmighoefer. “It is an avenue for us to build solutions, advocate for needs to advance in the workplace, and contribute to the success of NECC’s mission and core values.”



**ZALIKA
TYRELL**



**TARAN
KOHLI**



**KAYA
CHOKSHI-FOX**



**KIAH
LYONS**



**DIEGO
COYLE DIEZ**



**TAYLOR
COLLINS**



**LAUREN
HIMMIGHOEFER**



**KIM
RUSCITTI**

Acts of Generosity

LOCAL LABOR UNIONS HELP RENOVATE ITT CLASSROOMS

In March, members of LIUNA Local 609 and Painters and Allied Trades DC 35 and Local 48 donated their time and resources to renovate the two large ITT classrooms. The workers spent many hours repainting the classrooms, repairing items in the space such as doors and ceiling tiles, and installing new equipment.

"These classrooms take a lot of wear and tear and because of the pandemic and the subsequent focus on the staffing crisis, we had not brought in a fresh set of eyes for some time," said Jared Bouzan, MEd, chief development officer. "The union workers helped to renovate and refresh the space to be more bright, cheerful, and welcoming to students and teachers."

When Bouzan reached out to Jamie Merloni, the training director for New England Laborers' Training Academy based in Hopkinton, for help with renovating the ITT rooms, Merloni, a member of Local 609, immediately connected him with Wendall Gardner, the president of LIUNA Local 609.

"We are always eager to help with projects within our community, said Gardner, adding that they have been involved in a number of projects like this one, such as

school playground builds and handicap ramp builds. "Another reason that we were eager to help with NECC is that my oldest son has autism, and many of our laborers who showed up to help have children, siblings, or family members who have either autism, disabilities, or other developmental delays."

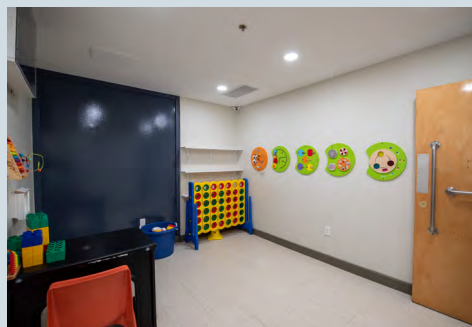
Gardner said the teams were excited and enthusiastic about taking part in updating the classrooms. "Many of the members who joined these efforts were grateful to take part in a project that would enhance the lives of all who attend," he said.

In addition to providing the labor, the unions raised more than \$6,000 for the renovations by reaching out to the local building trades they work alongside with on construction sites every day, including LIUNA Local 609, Massachusetts and Northern New England Laborers' District Council, Framingham-Newton Building Trades Council, and Sherwin Williams generously donated paint and supplies for the project.

"Many were happy to donate to the cause as soon as they heard about the project," Gardner shared. "Aside from monetary donations, we also had many

trades donate their time and skills to work on the project, such as the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades Local 35."

"We are so grateful to the Labor's and Painter's Union members and to Armand E. Sabitoni, LIUNA general secretary-treasurer and New England regional manager, for donating their time, expertise, and funds to bring these classrooms back to life," added Bouzan. "Their incredible generosity allows us to focus our valuable resources on important educational and extracurricular programming for our students. This renovation makes a world of difference to the students and teachers who spend their days working and learning in these spaces."





YOUR GIFT, YOUR IMPACT

When you give to NECC's Annual Fund, your gift provides students the opportunities to be a part of the community and to have fun outside of the classroom. Throughout the fall and winter, students enjoyed their annual apple picking trip to Tougas Farm, participation in the Special Olympics soccer program, a visit and a gift from Santa, Elsa, and Frosty, bowling at Apex, a sensory-friendly performance of a local production of *SpongeBob the Musical*, and much more!



STATE-OF-THE-ART DENTAL CLINIC ON CAMPUS

This spring, NECC began construction on a state-of-the-art dental clinic inside the school in Southborough. The project is a joint venture with New England Dental Group (NEDG) who will provide on-site dental services for NECC's 121 residential students as an expansion of the Smigel Supersmile® Dental Program.

Plans for the clinic were unveiled at the 2022 Children of Promise Gala, which celebrated NECC's global impact and raised a record \$1.29 million, a portion of which is helping fund the renovation. NEDG committed \$100,000 to the project.

"Going to the dentist is stressful for lots of us, and when you consider the additional challenges children with autism face, it can lead to oral health disparities," said Jessica Sassi, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA, executive director of NECC Southborough. "I really believe this is a quality-of-life issue for our students, not only getting them the dental care they need but doing so in a context in which they are comfortable."

Years ago, researchers at NECC developed a lesson plan to teach students to tolerate a dental visit by breaking down the procedure into steps. Today, this life-skill curriculum is used all over the world through the ACE® ABA Software.

While preparing students for dental exams through this desensitization protocol has been beneficial, getting students to dental appointments is currently time and resource intensive. Staff and students need to travel an hour each way to visit a dentist who specializes in treating patients with special needs.

NEDG offers a full breadth of dental services for enhanced care in its nine locations throughout Massachusetts and New Hampshire. The group's commitment to ensuring members of its community—including individuals with autism—receive high-quality dental care has been a driving force behind its involvement with NECC.

"As a supporter of NECC, New England Dental Group hopes to bring more awareness throughout the community to the importance of oral hygiene," said GT Thiagarajah, director of operations at NEDG. "We look forward to removing the barriers children with autism face when going to the dentist. It's very important that every child and adult receives proper oral hygiene, and this will ensure NECC students won't suffer underlying health issues due to lack of proper dental care."

The Smigel Supersmile® Dental Clinic operated by New England Dental Group is slated to open in fall 2023.



TWO NECC SUPPORT STAFF RETIRE



This year, NECC bid farewell to two valuable members of its support staff as they entered retirement.

Chris Lovell, who joined the Food Services team at NECC in September 2017, retired in early March. Over the last several years, her congeniality, and her compassion and love for the students was evident. During her time working in the “front end” of the café, her favorite part of her job was getting to know the students, staff, and her colleagues, going above and beyond for the students and noticing the little things they might need. Lovell’s positive attitude and team-first attitude will be greatly missed.



Paula DeSimone served as the face of NECC’s front desk as its receptionist for ten years before retiring at the end of December 2022. Whether juggling incoming calls, assisting staff questions, or welcoming guests and visitors, her friendly and warm nature made everyone feel welcome. Like Lovell, DeSimone’s favorite part of the job was the students, in particular seeing the faces of the proud parents and families at their graduation celebrations.

The entire NECC community wishes them both all of the happiness in their retirements!

NECC STUDENTS HAVE BALL WITH SPECIAL OLYMPICS BASKETBALL

Throughout the months of February and March, NECC students participated in Special Olympics Basketball. During their gym sessions, students took part in basketball skills and games, while APE/OT/PT staff served as coaches and provided instruction for these skill-building activities.

Special Olympics, which allowed NECC to join virtually, once again waived the age requirement for athletes this season, enabling all NECC students the opportunity to play. Participants received awards after their successful completion of the season.

Also, this season, NECC expanded its Special Olympics basketball program by introducing a pilot basketball team in which select athletes scrimmaged against the local Hopkinton Special Olympics basketball program. The NECC Knights had a great time in their game against Hopkinton on February 15 and did a fantastic job.

A special thanks to “Coach Sean” Cooke for organizing and making sure the event ran smoothly, as well as the rest of the APE/OT/PT team for making the season a successful one.



SCIENCE ENRICHMENT RETURNS TO NECC

For nearly 20 years, the Academic and Education departments have collaborated with educational coordinators to sponsor six-week science enrichment units that culminated in a Science Fair for NECC students. However, the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the school's priorities, and science enrichment units were put on hold. This January, after a three-year hiatus, science enrichment returned to NECC, albeit in a reimagined form.

"Over the past two years, we frequently discussed whether it was feasible to ask education coordinators and teams to bring science enrichment to our students amidst all they were dealing with," shared Dominique Maribett, MEd, BCBA, LABA, reading and education specialist. "This year, rather than hosting a science fair, we piloted a different presentation in the hopes that we could provide opportunities for our students to access this content."

A series of science enrichment groups were open to all NECC students and took place in the Student Library throughout the month of January. Students learned to think like scientists by asking questions, making observations, collecting data, and sharing the results of their observations. Specifically, students focused on observing weather and temperature, watching a plant grow, and exploring the physics of buoyancy.

"It was so nice to be able to share this science education with our students once again," said Maribett. "Those who attended seemed to really enjoy learning about the topics and we look forward to more science enrichment programming in the future."



ERLAND HELPS STRIKE OUT AUTISM



In March, members of Erland Construction, Inc. stopped by to present NECC with a check for \$20,000, which was raised through Erland's Strike Out Autism Bowling Night on February 9. This was the fifth year Erland hosted this bowling event to raise funds and awareness for autism and NECC. It is always a fun evening for all, including for the NECC students who are able to attend. Erland is a longtime supporter of NECC and was recently announced as the presenting sponsor of the NECC 5K Walk/Run for Autism on May 13 (see back cover for more information on how to register!).

INTERNATIONAL STAFF BOOST SOUTHBOROUGH STAFFING



For the last couple of years, the COVID pandemic and a national staffing shortage have burdened NECC staff and restricted the availability of extracurricular activities for students. While NECC's staff count has been slowly increasing, this fall, the Center received an influx of help in the form of international staff.

"It's been huge," said Kaitlyn Shea, MEd, SHRM-CP, assistant director of talent acquisition. "The addition of teachers has not only eased the workload of our current staff but has enhanced the culture and community at NECC. International recruiting also enables NECC to visualize and live our mission of creating a global network of educators."

Prior to COVID, NECC focused its visa sponsorships on individuals in Canada and Mexico, however, after receiving employment interest throughout the pandemic from international applicants, NECC's recruiting team worked to instate an H1b visa sponsorship. The H1b visa is a nonimmigrant classification that applies to people who wish to perform services in a specialty occupation. Working with children with autism falls under that classification.

Since September 2022, NECC has been able to recruit teachers

from 13 countries, with 16 new teachers already working in Southborough and 34 more engaged in the hiring process.

The flow of qualified staff can be credited in part to the help of Linda Bailey, MS, BCBA, LABA, NECC's new assistant director of international talent acquisition. In this role, Bailey, who is based at the Mohammed bin Rashid Center for Special Education operated by NECC (MRC-NECC) in Abu Dhabi, is making connections with universities and their alumni in order to expand NECC's recruiting pool.

"Because there has been so much interest in the U.S. and abroad, it's been helpful to have someone in a different part of the world. She is able to do more on-site recruiting events and meeting with applicants at a wider range of times, given the time difference," said Shea. "Linda is able to help us more with our global outreach and making those important connections that are important for building relationships."

Though Bailey is new to this role (October 2022), she is not new to NECC. She was hired as a teacher on Saddle Hill Road in 2008 and moved to the Abu Dhabi program in Summer 2009, where she served as a teacher, lead teacher, and then program specialist before transitioning to the role of graduate studies, internships, and BCBA mentoring in 2016. Because of her unique position in Abu Dhabi, Bailey is also working on increasing the number of international staff transferring from MRC-NECC to Southborough.

"We have been working to make the transition for our international staff as smooth as possible," added Shea. "Overall, our new staff members are very happy to be working on their teams and are happy having this experience working at NECC. We are world-renowned, and they value this opportunity to train with the best of the best. This is why when these staff return home to visit family, they share their experiences and spread the word about NECC. These staff referrals have been an important part of our international recruiting."



In February, Chris Evans, MEd, professor of practice and graduate program director for Simmons University, visited MRC-NECC. She met with NECC staff in the United Arab Emirates who are enrolled in the Simmons master's degree program and observed all UAE practicum students teaching within their classrooms. Pictured: Evans (second from left) with many of the students from UAE cohorts 1, 2 and 3, along with their mentors many of whom are Simmons alumni, and Bethany Raffanello, Simmons University program supervisor/adjunct professor.



The New England Center
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UPCOMING EVENTS

- 4/17 Boston Marathon
- 4/27 NECC Art Show
- 4/29 Autism Acceptance Day at WooSox
- 5/13 NECC 5K Walk/Run for Autism
- 6/5 Carlos Placido Dunkin' Golf Classic
- 8/20 Falmouth Road Race
- 11/10 Children of Promise Gala

REGISTER NOW | 5.13.23



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[NECC.ORG/5K](https://necc.org/5k)

