

Chamber fostering youth-centered alliance *ECWIB, Children First Norwich pledge closer ties*

By JAMES MOSHER
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Norwich, Conn. — Three groups announced an alliance Thursday aimed at keeping young people in Eastern Connecticut and reversing stagnating wages.

The Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board, a government agency, will be working more closely with Children First Norwich/School Readiness Council, a quasi-government entity, group leaders said. The Greater Norwich Area Chamber of Commerce brought the two together at a breakfast event at Norwichtown's Courtyard by Marriott hotel called "Today's Peanut Butter & Jelly will be Tomorrow's Bread & Butter." The chamber will also be trying to better link business owners with young students, said Nancy Gray, chamber director of membership services and development.

"Today was about connecting the dots," said Gray, following speeches by ECWIB executive director John Beauregard and Children First Norwich representative Ron Ward.

The new strategy was demonstrated Thursday by honoring high-achievers at schools including Stanton, Huntington, Greeneville, and Thames River Academy.

"We need a group effort to bring attention to our children," Ward said.

Beauregard, in narrating a slide show that detailed bleak employment and workforce demographics, seconded Ward's sentiments.

"It starts with parents and has to be woven into a system," the ECWIB director said.

"We need to create life-long learners whose skills and knowledge will fuel our regional economy." That can be accomplished through a system that includes a change from the "industry/occupation" mindset to one primed toward "clusters of competencies" and talent development, Beauregard said. Eastern Connecticut has the lowest average wages of any of the state's five regions, he said. This has caused a "brain drain," acutely felt by high-tech employers like drugmaker Pfizer Inc. and military contractor Electric Boat Co.

"The gap (between Eastern Connecticut and the rest of the state) is getting slightly worse and we need to focus on that," Beauregard said.

Norwich Mayor Benjamin Lathrop, in attendance with City Manager Alan Bergren and Alderman Mark Bettencourt, called Beauregard's presentation "powerful."

"The statistics don't lie," the mayor said. Yet he expressed optimism about the new chamber-sponsored alliance.

"These kids are the future," Lathrop said. "We have to remember that."

Employers and others have to readjust thinking to see developing people as a "continuum," said Ward, who chairs the Norwich Community Enhancement Program, an offshoot of Children First Norwich.

"It's not an easy story to tell," he said.

The chamber's chairman, Bob Reed, viewed honoring youngsters as an antidote to some of the foreboding trends in Beauregard's analysis.

"Our future looks bright with the young people we saw today," Reed said.