



# WEC Bulletin - Summer 2023

## Guest column: High marks to Monárrez in first year

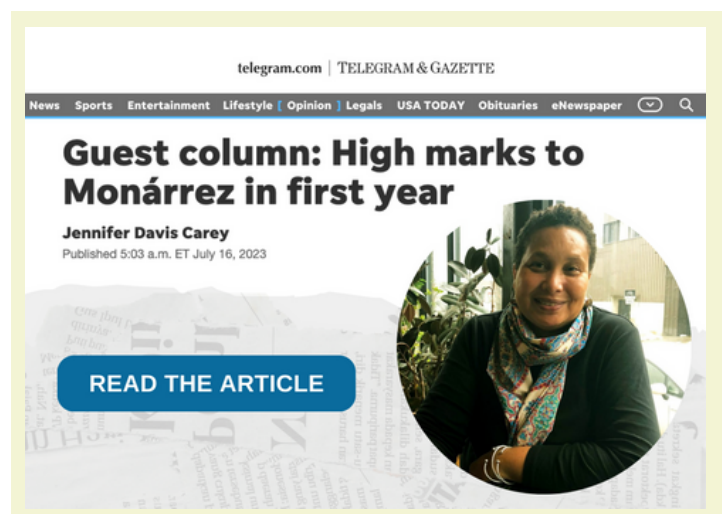
*This article was first published in the Worcester Telegram & Gazette on July 16, 2023.*

This month, Rachel Monárrez will reach her first-year milestone as Superintendent of the Worcester Public Schools. It has been a very good year — one in which much progress was made to ensure that our students receive the highest quality education in a safe environment in which equity is a value. Under her leadership, the groundwork was laid for a culture of openness, transparency, and engagement, recognizing that the work of education is a community-wide endeavor.

Dr. Monárrez, new to Worcester, new to the role of Superintendent, and the first Latina to lead our city's schools, entered the position with enthusiasm and a host of new ideas and perspectives that have invigorated teaching and learning across the system. Through community focused on-boarding developed by civic leaders associated with the Worcester Education Equity Roundtable, the Superintendent built bridges to the youth serving, arts, and cultural organizations that are an integral part of students' educational experience. In addition, her schedule included over 300 formal and informal school visits and community meetings, assuring the opportunity to hear firsthand what is on the minds of nearly 5,000 employees, and 24,000 students and their families.

In assembling her leadership team, she relied on current district leaders, but also brought in new voices. While criticism has been proffered regarding new hires at the district level (some of which were approved, but unfilled by the end of the previous fiscal year), these professionals lend considerable bench strength to accomplish the complex work of 21st century education. The positions signal an approach that draws on demonstrated best practices to advance excellence in K-12 education and build stronger partnerships with parents.

The Superintendent took several steps to make our schools safer places for our students. One was to shift school discipline from reactive and punitive to developmental approaches, reinforcing the value of self-control and encouraging commitment and hard work. Locating culture and climate teams in the schools supports kids in developing healthy peer-to-peer and student-adult interactions. We have already seen a concurrent decline in discipline referrals in our elementary and high schools as a result.



## (cont'd) High marks to Monárrez in first year

The district focused on providing more rigorous learning opportunities for our students. Recognizing that reading at grade level is an indicator of future success, the district selected a new reading curriculum to be delivered beginning in the 2023-2024 school year. The curriculum is grounded in research on the science of reading and considers history and culture in addition to comprehension skills. This sturdy foundation will advance academic excellence and cultivate young people as readers, critical thinkers, and critical consumers of information.

Dr. Monárrez and the School Committee also successfully negotiated two new educator contracts, expected to be ratified by the EAW membership this summer. The agreements will advance the continuing work to recruit, retain, and develop educators. The intense negotiations yielded bargains that put Worcester school salaries in line with or ahead of those of contiguous districts and recognizes the all-in commitment that educators of all titles offer each day.

Groundwork was laid for a new strategic plan that builds on and enhances the work of the 2018 plan while recognizing new approaches to teaching and learning for advancing excellence. As before, the plan will be a joint effort between the District, the School Committee, parents, students, and the community. This approach acknowledges the value placed by the current administration on the professional and lived expertise housed both in the community and among professional educators. It also affirms that for education in this century to be successful, the schools must engage in meaningful external partnerships to complement the work that goes on in the classroom—a premise fundamental to the current administration's orientation.

One of the most exciting advances this school year is the development of the new Sparks Academy scheduled to open at Wawecus Road School in the fall. The Academy will pilot new teaching approaches with an emphasis on technology and project-based learning. The best practices in 21st century learning that are refined in this setting will be incorporated into work across the District, and benefit all kids.

The waning pandemic, a visionary School Committee, inspired leadership in the District office, and increased funding, assure that we are at a point in this community to assure more rigorous and safe learning environments for our students. By doing so, we will secure a bright future for our young people and our community. It was a very good school year. With the expert and committed leadership at 20 Irving Street, we expect many more.



### Chris Acone joins the WEC Team

As Program Coordinator, Chris will provide support across WEC's diverse portfolio of projects. He joins the team after 10 years teaching first grade in Boston Public Schools. Chris is passionate about closing the opportunity gap in Worcester, believes that all students deserve quality in- and out-of-school learning experiences, and recognizes that it takes a village to help all children succeed.

*"I am excited and honored to work with such dedicated champions of educational equity."*

**Chris Acone**  
Program Coordinator  
WEC

## Principal for a Day brings local leaders into Worcester Schools

WEC's Principal for a Day program returned after a 2-year hiatus, inviting 25 community leaders to shadow WPS Principals at 13 participating schools. The program provides a unique opportunity for local leaders to learn about the challenges and triumphs of education in Worcester firsthand, empowering them to advocate for positive changes in the schools.

After the visit, participants and administrators gathered for a luncheon sponsored by The Hanover Insurance Group that featured a fireside chat focused on literacy education with Raphael Rogers, PhD of Clark University and Patricia Paugh, PhD of UMass Boston. The chat was facilitated by Noe Medina, facilitator of the Worcester Education Equity Roundtable.



*"The work that our educators do every day is transformational and I left wondering what I could do to help support them and our students."*

**Elizabeth Wambui**

*Director of Diversity, Inclusion and Community Impact  
Fontaine Bros., Inc.*

## June Event Series

On Thursday, June 22nd, WEC hosted a panel discussion, *Education Reform at Thirty*, to reflect on the genesis and impact of the landmark Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 in the thirty years since this transformational legislation was passed. Sue Mailman of the Worcester School Committee served as facilitator for an engaging discussion with a knowledgeable set of education leaders and advocates. Panelists included:

- Edith Bazile, Founder and Executive Director, Black Advocates for Educational Excellence
- Dr. Jim Caradonio, Past Superintendent of Worcester Public Schools, current Strategic Advisor, Blueprint Network Schools
- Tripp Jones, Founder and Principal, 21c
- Paul Reville, Former Massachusetts Secretary of Education, current Professor of Education Policy and Administration, Harvard Graduate School of Education
- Mary Tamer, State Director, Democrats for Education Reform



Later that month, WEC offered two events for parents as part of our ongoing community education and capacity building work supported by the The Nellie Mae Education Foundation. The events were facilitated by the Collaborative Parent Leadership Action Network (CPLAN), a parent-led advocacy organization that seeks to inform, inspire, and empower parents to advocate for a more equitable education for their children.



## Recent Happenings

### Reading Together

The 2022-2023 school year marked WEC's 10th year running the Reading Together program in partnership with the Worcester Public Schools! With continued funding from AbbVie Foundation, the Reading Together program visited over 1,280 students and their families in K-3 grade classrooms for quarterly reading-alouds.

Research tells us that the presence of a home library is linked to higher academic achievement, yet according to the Children's Literacy Foundation, 61% of low income families have no age-appropriate books in the household. Reading Together is combating this disparity by providing Reading Together students with their own copy of each book read throughout the program, along with resources for parents and caregivers to support reading in the home.

As with past years, Reading Together students are making significant skill gains in the areas of English language arts, engagement in learning, and communication:

- The percentage of students at or above grade level proficiency in ELA rose from 30% to 68%.
- Students made a 32-point percentage gain in engagement skills, with 65% demonstrating proficiency.
- Communication skills also rose substantially, from 27% to 62%.



**316**

**CLASSROOM VISITS**



**1,281**

**STUDENTS ENGAGED**

**5,124**  
**BOOKS DISTRIBUTED**

*Dr. Jeanne Esler, PhD.*



### Dr. Jeanne Esler signs onto trauma training facilitator team

This summer, WEC welcomed a new member to our facilitator team: Dr. Jeanne Esler, PhD. Dr. Esler is a licensed Clinical Psychologist and a member of WEC's Board of Directors. Dr. Esler is also the President and Co-Founder of the Esler Family Foundation—a philanthropy with a mission to improve racial and gender equity in communities nationwide. WEC is thrilled to have Dr. Esler's expertise on this critically important training topic.

Understanding Trauma Sensitive Practices (UTSP) is an evidence-informed series for teachers and other educators and staff in the education and youth development ecosystem. Using concepts of child development as a foundation, the series focuses on cultivating the skills and tools to support sound social and emotional development in young people and to provide them with the resilience to meet personal challenges.

## MCAS Series Attracts Nearly 250 Registrants

Throughout the Winter, WEC hosted a 3-part series on the MCAS, Massachusetts' standardized test, to answer key questions about its purpose and the impact of planned changes on student success:

- Part 1 provided a history of the MCAS and an analysis of Worcester's 2022 results, followed by a panel of local and state education stakeholders discussing key equity issues.
- Part 2 featured a live debate between Dr. Martin West, a Harvard Education Professor and Board of Elementary and Secondary Education member who led efforts to raise MCAS passing scores, and Edith Bazile, Founder of Black Advocates for Educational Excellence, who opposes the planned increases.
- Part 3 included a presentation by Jack Schneider, Executive Director of the Education Commonwealth Project, exploring innovative assessments that could be used to evaluate student learning and school quality.

Collectively, the MCAS series attracted nearly 250 registrants and generated productive dialogue between the community and the district about more holistic and complementary student assessment methods.

## Woo-Labs: Building Skills for Life



*Above: Woo-Labs Host Partner Cindy Landry of the YWCA poses with a student and her mother at the first annual Project-Based Learning Showcase in June.*

Led by WEC, Woo-Labs is a coalition of partners providing 1,300+ students annually with hands-on project-based learning in out-of-school time to promote their academic and social-emotional growth. Woo-Labs' 11 Host Partners target Worcester K-6 grade students experiencing persistent gaps in opportunity and achievement. WEC supports program capacity building by providing Host Partners with extensive professional development, support implementing a joint measurement-for-improvement data system, and a local college student, called "Hanover Fellow," to help implement key Woo-Labs activities.

# Woo-Labs: Building Skills for Life

## School Year 2023-2024: Expanded Reach, Enhanced Learning

Over 600 students from across the City experienced the power of Woo-Labs this school year, a 50% increase from last year.

Our 11 partners crafted 17 hands-on projects that allowed kids to see themselves as change-makers in their communities (see more below).

Our 11 highly-trained college students collectively served over 2,000 hours at partner sites, building affirming relationships with kids and implementing high-quality project-based learning.

Partners and Fellows clocked over 30 hours engaging in meaningful, targeted training opportunities to improve their practice. Training included two year-long series:

- A 4-part Project-Based Learning Workshop with The STEM Center at WPI
- A 6-part Racial Equity Community of Practice with the Trauma, Resiliency & Racial Equity Training Institute



## Considerable Program Impact

Together, these investments in capacity-building are facilitating substantial student skill development. Woo-Labs students consistently demonstrate meaningful gains in social emotional competencies such as critical thinking, communication, engagement, and initiative, as measured through a research-based pre-post survey.

Programs are also providing ever-better learning opportunities, as indicated through significant improvement on third-party observations in metrics such as program organization, structure, and the social emotional environment.



Above: Guild of St. Agnes students created an Animal Magazine after researching their favorite creatures.

*"I feel privileged to be a part of the [Racial Equity training] group and have gained power in my voice from participating."*

**Cherisa Hernandez**  
Program Coordinator  
Black Excellence Academy





# Woo-Labs: Building Skills for Life

## A Joyful 1st Annual PBL Showcase

In June, students and partners from Woo-Labs programs all over the City convened at the YWCA of Central Massachusetts to celebrate their fantastic PBL work over the school year. Students proudly presented their projects to each other as well as other guests such as the Mayor, received awards from The STEM Education Center at WPI, and earned prizes for their dedication to the projects.

Through this event, Broad Meadow students taught others about climate change through birds-of-prey board games, Boys and Girls Club students presented their made-from-scratch songs, and YWCA students showed off the cookbook they made to share their favorite family and cultural recipes with the YWCA community.

## Summer Learning in Full Swing

Learning is in full swing this summer at our 7 Woo-Labs partner sites!

750+ Woo-Labs students are hard at work on their PBL projects. YWCA kids are creating a pollinator garden at Camp Wind-in-the-Pines to counteract the effects of deforestation on the ecosystem; Guild of St. Agnes students at Granite Street are designing clean cities using computer modeling techniques to address the biggest issues they see in Worcester.

Huge thank you to The DCU for Kids Foundation, which donated over two dozen iPads and MacBooks to our Woo-Labs students this summer!



## Fellow Spotlight: Colleen Falconer

Guild of St. Agnes Fellow Colleen Falconer went above and beyond this year to ensure their students had the best possible experiences. In the fall, Colleen designed and facilitated a project where students researched their favorite animals and combined their findings into an Animal Magazine (see previous page). In the spring, they helped kids create Rube Goldberg machines to solve a pesky problem at their school: kickballs getting stuck on the roof at recess. To get kids excited about machine building, Colleen coordinated with a local Worcester band, OK Go, to visit the program and share their viral music video that featured a Rube Goldberg Machine.

In their spare time, Colleen single-handedly researched, devised, and implemented a highly successful pilot project to help Woo-Labs programs collect feedback from younger learners as well as created training materials on key education topics for the next cohort of Hanover Fellows.

# The Inaugural Ogretta V. McNeil Award

At a lively event at the DCU Club at Polar Park in late May, WEC honored greater Worcester leaders, Fred and Patty Eppinger and Jeanne and John Esler and their Foundations, with the first ever Ogretta V. McNeil Champion of Education Award in recognition of the impact their stalwart support of the work of education in our community has made on teaching and learning and the lives of children in the Worcester Public Schools.

At the event, family and friends, along with community and civic leaders, were treated to the music of the Burncoat Arts Magnet String Quartet. Also joining the gathering for the award presentation was Ogretta McNeil's son, the Rev. John Vaughn, who serves as Executive Pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.

Among those who know her well and those whose paths crossed hers, Ogretta V. McNeil was a force. After retiring from her position as Associate Professor at the College of the Holy Cross, Ogretta fully dedicated herself to Worcester's people and institutions. She served for 10 years on the Worcester School Committee; two of those as Vice Chair. She also held Board positions at The Ecotarium and The University of Massachusetts Medical Center Foundation and was a Trustee at the University of Massachusetts. Ogretta was also a Counselor at the American Antiquarian Society and a leader with the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, where she founded the Urban Division.

Ogretta served as mentor to many in the community—offering her wisdom and thoughtful criticism to nurture the next generation of leaders to continue the work of assuring the best for our children.

Consistent with Ogretta's outlook and work, The Eppinger and Eslers and their Foundations have focused their work on teaching and learning, equity, and democratic engagement. The Worcester Education Collaborative is grateful for the many ways that John, Jeanne, Fred, and Patty demonstrate that commitment through their presence and willingness to fully 'lean-in' in support of our kids and schools.





## Upcoming Events

### STAY TUNED FOR DETAILS ON OUR FALL EVENTS

#### **Worcester School Committee Candidate Events**

Learn more about the new redistricting in Worcester, explore key issues in the upcoming election, and meet the candidates running for School Committee in 2023.

#### **WEC's 14th Annual Meeting**

Join education leaders from across the region for WEC's annual event.

## Thank you to our steadfast supporters.



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Special thanks to the United Way of Central Massachusetts, which has housed WEC and served as its fiscal sponsor since our organization began operation in 2010. It is a special relationship—one that allows WEC to focus solely on its mission without the demands of attending to the structural supports that are vital to any organization. Many thanks to all of the United Way staff for these years of support and collegueship.