Launching Horizons at Westminster

More Than Language Learning

Soar Together to Support People and Programs
The Westminster program is part of the national network of Horizons’ award-winning, tuition-free, academic and enrichment programs serving low-income public school students on the campuses of independent schools, colleges, universities and charter schools across the country. Currently, Horizons has 55 sites operating in 18 states and serving about 5,800 students.

After deciding to launch a Horizons program, Westminster established a partnership with Moylan School to enroll students. Moylan is a neighborhood choice school within Hartford Public Schools that serves students in prekindergarten through fifth grade. This year’s group of first-graders will participate in Horizons at Westminster year after year, through eighth grade. And every summer, another group of approximately 15-17 students from Moylan and other Hartford schools will be added to the program.

Eighteen first-grade students from Hartford arrived at Westminster in a yellow school bus June 25 with tremendous anticipation about their first day in a six-week summer learning program. They were members of the inaugural class of Horizons at Westminster, a new program designed to boost educational achievement and broaden access to opportunity for low-income students.

The Westminster Bulletin
Horizons National Network of Programs

On a national level, Horizons is recognized as a transformational community-centered program proven to close the opportunity and achievement gaps for low-income children. One hundred percent of Horizons students come from low-income families, with two-thirds of the students admitted to the program performing below grade level, including some who lag a year or more behind. The program’s focus on literacy and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) programming is designed to inspire students to learn, achieve and experience greater academic success.

Horizons programs are not an extension of the school year. The Horizons project-based educational model is designed to inspire a lifelong passion for learning, using a combination of high-quality academics with cultural enrichment and confidence-building activities. All Horizons affiliates embrace the same educational philosophy and customizable curriculum.

Every Horizons program includes swimming instruction, breakfast and lunch, field trips, recreation, arts and an overall emphasis on family involvement. Students begin their participation in Horizons as early as prekindergarten and return year after year; some affiliates serve students through high school. In addition to offering the summer program, Horizons provides additional support to participants throughout the year.

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“Horizons is founded in the belief that all children should have the opportunity to fulfill their dreams, and that is not the case in our country right now,” said Lorna Smith, chief executive officer of Horizons National, last spring at a presentation to the Westminster Board of Trustees. “Starting in kindergarten, low-income children are losing two to three months of reading and math skills.”

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“My daughter Kathleen Devaney ’19, ’22 is the Executive Director of Horizons at Westminster, and she is passionate about this program. She recently shared with us the image of her having breakfast in Armstrong Dining Hall, ready to board the bus at Moylan School, and faculty member Scott Stevens ’07, ’09, ’12 greeting students as they arrive at Westminster.”

Top, Executive Director of Horizons at Westminster Kathleen Devaney P’19, ’22 with a student having breakfast in Armstrong Dining Hall; above, students getting ready to board the bus at Moylan School; and, above right, faculty member Scott Stevens P’07, ’09, ’12 greeting students as they arrive at Westminster.
skills during the summer break. That accumulates year after year, so by the time they are in fifth grade, they are very far behind. It is a problem that is very difficult or impossible to rectify by the time they get to high school.” Horizons addresses the problem by bringing children in when they are young. “Not only do our students not lose that two to three months of reading and math skills, they actually gain,” she continued. “In six weeks of the summer session, they learn eight to 12 weeks of reading and math skills. They are going back ahead of where they left school in the spring. It makes a huge difference for their trajectory.”

Horizons students boast a 97 percent high school graduation rate (compared to 76 percent for low-income children in the U.S.) and an 87 percent college matriculation rate.

By design, Horizons programs exist on independent school, college, university and charter school campuses rather than in neighborhood public schools. These facilities not only offer new surroundings, resources and relationships, they offer the opportunity to learn in a new environment, helping to increase engagement and promote social and academic growth.

**An Enriching Day at Westminster**

The newly established Horizons at Westminster program took place five days each week from June 25 through Aug. 3. A chaperoned school bus picked up the first-graders outside of Moylan School at 7:45 a.m. and transported them to Westminster to begin their day with family-style breakfast in Armstrong Dining Hall. Following breakfast, the students attended class in Armour Academic Center taught by experienced and dedicated teachers from Moylan School: Heather Kahn and Noreen Trenchard, and Erin Doyle Luciano, who served as a reading specialist.

Most mornings, the curriculum involved studying math, including whole group instruction, small group work and some individual tutoring. This academic work was followed by swimming lessons at Hibbard Aquatic Center three days...
a week, where the students quickly progressed in learning to swim and to feel comfortable in the water.

Later in the morning and after lunch, the students often were involved in project-based work on STEM-related subjects and English language arts in whole group instruction, skills blocks and lab work. Book club discussions about a book they had read together and “read aloud” time with volunteer tutors were regular curriculum components. Throughout the day, the students also worked on community-building skills.

As a part of their expedition work, the students visited Simsbury Public Library Monday afternoons for readings given by Children’s Librarian Hilary Kennard P’19 and to check out books. Other enrichment activities included field trips to Flamig Farm, Roaring Brook Nature Center and a STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) fair at the Horizons program at The Ethel Walker School. Brian Kleinman of Riverside Reptiles also brought a live reptile and amphibian presentation to Westminster. And thanks to Spike Lobdell ’75, P’07, who founded New England Science and Sailing Foundation (NESS) and serves as its president, the students learned about biomimicry from a NESS employee, which aligned perfectly with their expedition on birds.

While swimming lessons and field trip activities were often mentioned as favorite activities, so were lessons in reading and STEM, as well as time spent with teachers and volunteers.
Adding to those experiences, Brian O’Donnell ’66 came to campus Monday mornings to teach the children how to play chess, and faculty member Grant Gritzmacher played the guitar for the students on Fridays after lunch, which was also ice cream day.

Numerous Westminster students, alumni, faculty, and staff volunteered to help with the students. They extended greetings during arrivals and departures, provided math and reading tutoring, and helped with family-style breakfasts and lunches.

Before boarding the bus for their return to Hartford each day, the students gathered with their teachers and volunteers in a circle to share their favorite part of the day and to sing a goodbye song. While swimming lessons and field trip activities were often mentioned as favorite activities, so were lessons in reading and STEM, as well as time spent with teachers and volunteers.

Building on Prior Work
Kathleen Devaney P’19, ’22, who previously served as assistant head of school at Westminster, assumed the role of executive director of Horizons at Westminster July 1. She will continue to teach, coach and advise Westminster students and have overall responsibilities for Westminster’s civic engagement programs. Working with her on Horizons at Westminster this past summer were Westminster faculty member Todd Eckerson P’09, ’11, ’17, ’21, who serves as senior director of Westminster in Hartford — formerly Westminster Crossroads Learning Program in Hartford (WCLP) — and staff member Mary Eckerson P’09, ’11, ’17, ’21, who, at the time, served as assistant director of Horizons at Westminster and assistant director of Westminster in Hartford. This fall, Mary assumed the role of kitchen manager with Loaves and Fishes soup kitchen in Hartford.

Establishing a Horizons program at Westminster is an extension of the nearly two decades of work Todd and Mary have been doing in Hartford since establishing the Crossroads Cooperative Learning Program (CCLP) and its successor, WCLP. They also initiated current Westminster in Hartford efforts, such as a partnership with Covenant Preparatory School and its Summer Academy at Westminster School (SAWS) that ran concurrently with this summer’s Horizons program; a School Year After School Tutoring program; volunteer work at Loaves and Fishes soup kitchen; Spring Break in Hartford; the Bridge to Hartford initiative; and a civic engagement and civil discourse curriculum for all Fourth Formers which
includes speech writing and public speaking as a part of the curriculum.

“Horizons at Westminster is a natural outgrowth of all the partnership work that has been done previously in Hartford,” said Kathleen. “The goal of Horizons at Westminster is to develop relationships with families in Hartford and to help the students we enroll close the summer slide in reading and math, and increase their involvement with books and learning over the summer. We hope to grow that relationship into an eight-year commitment as the students move from first through eighth grade during their summers at Westminster, and we involve them throughout the year in some Saturday academies or after-school tutoring.”

“Horizons is a way to deepen the work begun by CCLP and WCLP and ensure that it continues at Westminster in the future,” said Todd. “Great schools have an obligation to do things like Horizons, especially in this day and age.”

Kathleen, Todd and Mary credit Moylan School Principal Christine McCarthy for helping to make Horizons at Westminster a reality. Christine is in her fifth year at Moylan and has worked for Hartford Public Schools for more than 15 years.

“I am all about opportunities that will benefit our students,” said Christine. “Often my team and I are seeking out opportunities and looking for partners who can support our work and our students, like our partner, Boys & Girls Club Hartford. In this case, the opportunity was brought to me. I listened to what Horizons was all about and saw the value. There is no way that I was going to say no. It was never about if we were going to do it, it was just about working out the how, or the logistical pieces. I knew our students could benefit greatly from this partnership.”

Christine sees many benefits for the students participating in Horizons at Westminster. “Just the experience of attending a program outside of Hartford, on this beautiful campus, is an amazing opportunity for our students,” she said. “Being immersed in a culture and tradition of excellence and service to others is something that will have lasting effects on our students. They are receiving high-quality academic instruction in a small group setting for six weeks. They are playing chess with mentors, learning to swim, going on amazing field trips, and working with Westminster students, staff and faculty. They are truly being accepted as part of the Horizons at Westminster family.”

She thinks the students will also have an impact on other students at Moylan. “I believe that the confidence these students are gaining through the Horizons program will carry through to the school year,” she said. “These students will grow to be leaders among their peers, and that will have a tremendous ripple effect at our school.”

In anticipation of the start of the Horizons program at Westminster, some Westminster students, under Mary’s direction, began tutoring students at Moylan School this past spring. “When we decided to begin this program with Moylan, we thought we would try to establish a presence in the building,” said Mary. “On Wednesdays, I brought a few Westminster students over to tutor kindergarteners and first-graders with their reading. We even met some of the children who participated in our Horizons program over the summer. This was part of our School Year After School Tutoring initiative that also involves tutoring at Covenant Prep.”

A board of directors was formed for Horizons at Westminster that will serve in an advisory capacity. The members are former Westminster CFO Tom Earl P’93, ’98, ’03, ’06, Trustee Madeleine Ekholm P’19, ’20, and faculty members Todd Eckerson, Amy Stevens P’07, ’09, ’12 and Shannon O’Shaughnessy. As part of her responsibilities, Kathleen will be spearheading fundraising efforts to support the program’s operation.

“What was so inspiring is that, after we announced our decision to build this program, so many people at Westminster came to me and said they wanted to be involved with Horizons at Westminster,” said Kathleen. “There was clearly a community interest for involvement in this new initiative.”

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Coming Full Circle, Twice

When Westminster was looking for a school in Hartford with which to affiliate Horizons at Westminster, it considered Moylan School. With the help of former CCLP participant Eli Joseph, who serves as a behavior technician at Moylan, the partnership was eventually cemented.

Eli and his brother, Elijah, and sister, Joslyn, all attended the CCLP summer program held at Immanuel Congregational Church in Hartford when they were students at Hartford Public High School. Eli stayed in touch with the Eckersons in the subsequent years which took him to Kent School for a postgraduate year, Temple University to earn his bachelor’s degree, the NFL for two years, and most recently to Moylan to serve as a behavior technician. He also works in real estate and recently wrote the memoir “The Book of Eli: A Story of Purpose and Perseverance.”

Eli says being a part of CCLP years ago helped him gain more insight about school, taking the SAT and being in a position to go to a private school for a postgraduate year. “I don’t know how life would be without those two years at CCLP and a year at a private school,” he said.

Eli was unfamiliar with Horizons when Todd approached him about helping to find a school in Hartford with which Horizons at Westminster could affiliate. “If Todd is on board, I am on board, just knowing him,” said Eli. Eli facilitated the conversation about a possible partnership with Moylan Principal Christine McCarthy.

“Eli Joseph was the one who brought this opportunity to us,” said Christine, who was unfamiliar with Horizons previously. “If he did not have a relationship with the Eckersons, our school would not likely have been selected for this opportunity. When he introduced me to the Eckersons, I knew immediately I wanted to partner with them. They so clearly share our vision for our students. They and Kathleen felt like part of our crew right away.”

Eli helped smooth the transition for the Moylan students during the first two weeks of the Horizons program by providing a familiar presence to the students on the bus rides to and from Hartford and while they were on Westminster’s campus.

Another full-circle aspect of...
establishing the Horizons program at Westminster is that Horizons was originally created by the late George Stevens P’81, GP’07, ’09, ’12, ’16, ’19, ’21, former headmaster of New Canaan Country School, father of current faculty member Scott Stevens P’07, ’09, ’12 and his brother alumnus Jed ’81, P’16, ’19, ’21, and spouse of former Trustee Jill Stevens P’81, GP’07, ’09, ’12, ’16, ’19, ’21, a Westminster Fellow.

In 1964, George had the idea to open the campus of New Canaan Country School in the summer months to low-income students so they would be inspired through project-based academic experiences. He also envisioned a long-term commitment to the students. The program was eventually named Horizons, and it flourished. Today, Horizons at New Canaan Country School has grown from a summer program working with 20 students to a year-round program that serves more than 400 students in grades K-12 each year, primarily from Stamford and Norwalk, Conn. As Horizons grew into a national movement, it expanded within Connecticut as well. There are now Horizons programs operating at eight independent schools, colleges and universities in the state, including Westminster.

“Given my family’s long-term involvement and commitment at Westminster, the arrival of Horizons at Westminster seems just so right for the school and a natural extension of my father’s original vision,” said Scott. “I have no doubt that my father, an educator to his core, would be very excited for both programs. As kids, my two brothers and I lived on the New Canaan Country School campus, so our summer lives were always intertwined with the Horizons program as we interacted with participants, especially in outdoor activities. Learning to swim has always been an essential element of the Horizons mission, so I recall lots of fun afternoon pool time with Horizons kids as they worked to achieve that important goal. Over the years, I have enjoyed watching Horizons’ growth from afar, yet I never imagined that from its humble local origins it would become a national organization. I am quite sure that when my father, along with the New Canaan Country School’s progressive faculty and trustees, conceived the idea of Horizons, they had no idea of the program’s potential impact and success that would emerge in the 21st century at Westminster and beyond.”

Looking Ahead
Principal McCarthy visited Westminster during the summer to see the program in operation. The students welcomed her warmly, and she had a chance to confer with the teachers and Horizons staff. About her hopes for the future of Moylan’s partnership with Westminster, she said: “I feel 100 percent confident that this program will flourish. My greatest hope is that all of the families stay invested in Horizons and continue to send their children back each year. I know that if that happens, success for these students will follow. I believe that the crew at Westminster is invested in the success of our students, and I trust that they are putting 100 percent of their effort into creating a rich and sustainable partnership.”

Kathleen was delighted with how well Westminster’s first summer program for Horizons went. “It was a success on so many levels thanks to the work of our students and teachers, and our volunteers. We look forward to seeing our program and our first group of students grow and develop in countless ways.”