



Thriving in Constant Change

WELLNESS WONDER, AND THE FUTURE
OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

★ 10th ANNUAL ★ TEACHER LEADER FORUM*



HOSTED BY

Southern Connecticut
State University

Thursday, May 21, 2026 | 8:30 AM – 3:00 PM

*Formerly: Teacher Leader Fellowship Academy Institute

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Program at a Glance

Time	Session	Activity / Description	Room
9:00 – 9:15 AM	Opening	Welcome & Opening Remarks <i>Betty Sternberg, TLFA Director, and Joslyn DeLancey, CEA Vice-President</i>	102
9:15 – 9:55 AM	Keynote	KEYNOTE: Thriving in Constant Change: Wellness, Wonder & The Future of Teaching & Learning <i>Brian Betesh, 2026 CT Teacher of the Year</i>	102
10:00 – 11:15 AM	Breakout 1	Cultivating Communities of Care and Connection	
		Session 1: Gratitude as a Micro-Practice for Teacher Resilience: Research, Reflection & Application <i>Speaker: Allyson Power, Spanish Teacher, Ridgefield Public Schools</i>	202
		Session 2: Leveraging Relationships: High School Connection Strategies for Academic Success & Collaborative Co-Teaching <i>Speakers: Mercedes McKelvie, English Teacher, New Haven Public Schools Matthew Mainieri, Special Education Teacher, New Haven Public Schools</i>	102
		Championing for Neurodiverse & Multilingual Learners	
		Session 3: Through a Parent’s Lens: Understanding the Whole Neurodivergent Student <i>Speaker: Lauren Tucker, Professor, Southern Connecticut State University</i>	203
		Session 4: Amplify, Don’t Simplify: Supporting Multilingual Learners in Accessing Grade-Level Text <i>Speaker: Jennifer Gold-Thomas, Bilingual ESOL Teacher, West Hartford Public Schools</i>	204
		Leading Responsible Tech and AI Use in Schools	
		Session 5: From Answers to Thinking: Teaching Students to Evaluate AI & Designing Assessments <i>Speaker: Kate Avcollie, Teacher, Plymouth Public Schools</i>	122
		Session 6: The Knowledgeable Human in the Loop – Why Expertise Still Matters in AI-Driven Classrooms <i>Speaker: Jess Gregory, Professor, Southern Connecticut State</i>	201
11:20 AM – 12:15 PM	Panel	Panel Discussion: "Influence Beyond Our Classroom Walls" <i>Moderators:</i> Betty Sternberg & Jeremy Visone, Professor, CCSU <i>Panelists:</i> Anthea Grotton, 1st Grade Teacher, Mansfield Rosanna Z. Wilson, School Psychologist, Windsor Adrienne Carter-Brown, Pre-School Teacher, Bridgeport Irene Glassman, Interventionist, Bloomfield Karen Drake, Assistant Principal, CREC Reggio Magnet School George Schott, Stamford High School Teacher, Neurodivergent Students	102

12:20 – 1:00 PM		Lunch & Networking	102
1:05 – 2:20 PM	Breakout 2 + Roundtables	<p>Cultivating Communities of Care and Connection</p> <p>Session 7: Improv-e Critical Thinking, Creativity & Connection in Your Classroom Speaker: <i>Jason Lussier, High School Social Studies Teacher, West Hartford Public Schools</i></p> <p>Session 8: Embracing Student Voice Can Cultivate Connected Classroom Communities Speaker: <i>Kimberly Hellerich, Professor, Sacred Heart University Formerly: High School English Teacher, East Windsor</i></p> <p>Championing for Neurodiverse & Multilingual Learners</p> <p>Session 9: Improving our “Equity Lenses” begins with “Looking Within” Speaker: <i>Deirdra Preis, Professor, Sacred Heart University</i></p> <p>Leading Responsible Tech and AI Use in Schools</p> <p>Session 10: Beyond the Screen: Responsible AI Use Without Screen Overload Speaker: <i>Christopher Gold-Thomas, High School Social Studies Teacher, East Windsor High School</i></p> <p>Session 11: AI & Human Evaluation: Exploring Reliability, Values, and Ethical Assessment Speakers: <i>Anne Frosh, Asst. Dean, College of Education, Sacred Heart University Sarah Bergers, Admin Assist., College of Education, Sacred Heart University</i></p> <p>Roundtable Discussions:</p> <p>There is Power in a Union: The Role of Labor in Cultivating Communities of Care and Connection Speaker: <i>Leslie Blatteau, Social Studies Teacher & Federation of Teachers President, New Haven Public Schools.</i></p> <p>Beyond the Brain Myths: Harnessing Cognitive Science for Inclusive Excellence Speaker: <i>Maureen Ruby, Professor, Sacred Heart University</i></p> <p>Making Language Matter: Championing Multilingual Learners through Purposeful English Instruction Speaker: <i>Janet Forbes, Instructor, Bullard-Havens Technical High School</i></p> <p>Teaching Executive Function Skills to Students with Autism through Project-Based Learning Speaker: <i>George Schott, Teacher for Neurodivergent Students, Stamford Public Schools</i></p>	202 203 204 122 201 102
2:25 – 2:45 PM	Closing	<p>Closing Remarks <i>TLFA Fellows & Betty Sternberg</i></p>	102

PRESENTER GUIDE

Breakout Sessions & Presenter Bios — Listed Alphabetically by Last Name

Session Track Key:

Cultivating Communities of Care & Connection	Leading Responsible Tech & AI Use in Schools
Championing Neurodiverse & Multilingual Learners	Keynote Panel Discussion Roundtable Discussion

Kate Avcollie

*Educator & Instructional Leader; 2026 CT Teacher of the Year Semifinalist
Plymouth Public Schools*



Kate Avcollie is an educator and instructional leader focused on the intersection of AI, literacy, and thinking-centered instruction. A 2026 CT Teacher of the Year Semifinalist, classroom teacher and professional learning facilitator, she works with schools to design learning experiences that strengthen reasoning, writing, and discussion in an era where AI tools can generate answers instantly. Her work focuses on helping teachers make students' thinking visible through more robust instructional tasks, discussions, and assessments.

BREAKOUT SESSION

Leading Responsible Tech & AI Use in Schools | Breakout Session 5 | 10:00 – 11:15 AM | Room: 122

TITLE: From Answers to Thinking: Teaching Students to Evaluate AI & Designing Assessments That Matter

As AI becomes common in classrooms, students can generate answers quickly but often without evaluating accuracy or reasoning, and traditional assessments may not clearly show what students understand. This session focuses on shifting instruction away from restricting AI and toward teaching students to evaluate AI outputs while redesigning assessments to make thinking visible.

Participants will learn a simple framework that helps students clarify ideas, question accuracy and evidence, and extend their thinking. They will also explore how to embed these practices into assessments so students must explain and defend their reasoning. Through examples and collaboration, participants will identify gaps in passive AI use, practice guiding students to critique AI responses, and redesign tasks to require clear, visible thinking. Participants will leave with practical routines and assessment strategies that support responsible AI use while strengthening rigor and student ownership.

Sarah Bergers

Administrative Assistant

Isabelle Farrington College of Education and Human Development, Sacred Heart University



Sarah Bergers is an Administrative Assistant in the Farrington College of Education and Human Development at Sacred Heart University and a graduate of the Higher Education & Student Affairs Masters program at SHU. She is dedicated to supporting students, faculty, and staff through efficient operations and a student-centered approach.

BREAKOUT SESSION on next page.

BREAKOUT SESSION

Leading Responsible Tech & AI Use in Schools | Breakout Session 11 | 1:05 – 2:20 PM | Room: 201

AI and Human Evaluation: Exploring Reliability, Values, and Ethical Assessment

This session examines a pilot study on using AI to assess student work with reliability, fairness, and value alignment. Participants will explore how AI can reflect shared educational principles, along with its potential, limitations, and responsible uses in academic assessment. Co-presented with Sarah Bergers, Administrative Assistant, Farrington College of Education & Human Development, Sacred Heart University.

Brian Betesh (Keynote Speaker)

2026 Connecticut Teacher of the Year; 6th-Grade Social Studies Teacher

Rogers Park Middle School, Danbury Public Schools



Brian Betesh, the 2026 Connecticut Teacher of the Year, is a 19-year 6th-grade Social Studies teacher at Rogers Park Middle School in Danbury. Betesh has transformed his classroom into a student-centered hub where every child is empowered to shine. He co-founded a club (Park 21) to elevate school culture, co-created a project-based learning class, and launched a student-led podcast (Rogers That!) with over 150 episodes. Furthermore, he is deeply committed to designing student-centered spaces and acquiring resources to ensure an equitable learning experience for all his students.

Leslie Blatteau

President, New Haven Federation of Teachers

New Haven Public Schools



Leslie Blatteau has been a proud NHPS social studies teacher and union member since 2007. She began her second term as NHFT President in 2025. NHFT recently negotiated a three-year contract that raised wages, improved health care, and addressed teaching and learning conditions. NHFT's commitment to fully-funded and fully-staffed schools is part of an organized coalition effort in the city and state. She serves as the AFT-CT Divisional VP of PreK-12 and the Steering Committee Chair for Connecticut for All.

Roundtable Discussion | 1:05 – 2:20 PM | Room: 102

There is Power in a Union: The Role of Labor in Cultivating Communities of Care & Connection

What is the role of teachers unions in our shared goal of building communities that honor wellness and foster wonder? New Haven Federation of Teachers and coalition partners have been working to prioritize educator retention and wellbeing through organizing strategies. From the union hall, to the bargaining table, to classrooms where members show up every day, NHFT centers the voices of educators as they work to build a movement that fights for the schools students deserve. Union leaders will share concrete examples of strategies and programs that NHFT has developed to both improve working and learning conditions and address the broken school funding system in Connecticut.

Adrienne Carter-Brown (Panelist)

Preschool Teacher

Read School, Bridgeport Public Schools



Adrianna Carter-Brown is a preschool teacher at Read School in Bridgeport. Adrianna received her B.A. in Communication from William Paterson University and an M.Ed. in Inclusion Education from The University of New England. Adrianna has been a part of the BPS Early Childhood SEL team, receiving training from the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. Adrianna is also a founding board member of cARTie, Connecticut's first mobile art museum that provides enrichment to students in grades PK-2nd grade. Adrienne's years as a teacher, mother and community volunteer are all a testament to her passion for education and leading the next generation to a promising future.

Jocelyn Delancy (Opening Remarks)

Vice President

Connecticut Education Association



Joslyn DeLancey is the Vice President of the Connecticut Education Association and a proud public-school educator from lower Fairfield County. She serves on the CEA Board of Directors, the Teachers' Retirement Board, and has been a visible statewide advocate for educator voice, safe and supportive school climates, play and project-based pedagogies, and policies that strengthen public education. Joslyn has helped elevate issues impacting classrooms across Connecticut and works to build leadership pathways for the next generation of educators.

Karen Drake (Panelist)

Assistant Principal

Reggio Magnet School of the Arts, CREC



Karen Drake has more than 26 years' experience in education, having been a teacher, instructional coach, adjunct professor and administrator. She is the assistant principal of CREC's Reggio Magnet School of the Arts in Avon, where the theme is centered on the Reggio Emilia approach to education. She has a BA in elementary education from Boston College, an ME in curriculum and instruction from Fairfield University, and a sixth-year in educational leadership from Central Connecticut State University. Karen is passionate about international educational practices and has explored global approaches firsthand, including studying Finland's system and visiting Reggio Emilia, Italy, the birthplace of the renowned approach.

Janet Forbes, Ph.D.

Instructor & Teacher-Researcher

Bullard-Havens Technical High School, Connecticut Technical Education and Career System



Dr. Janet Forbes is a teacher-researcher with a master's degree in Bilingual and Multicultural Education and TESOL, and a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. She is an instructor at Bullard-Havens Technical High School, where she collaborates with academic and trade teachers to support Multilingual Learners through inclusive, future-focused practices. A two-time Fund for Teachers fellow, Janet studied Spanish in Costa Rica and researched English instruction in the German vocational education system, producing a short documentary. Her work is grounded in a philosophy that language learning thrives when connected to students' lives, identities, and educational pathways.

BREAKOUT SESSION on next page.

Roundtable Discussion | 1:05 – 2:20 PM | Room: 102

Making Language Matter: Championing Multilingual Learners Through Purposeful English Instruction

This session explores how the German vocational education system designs English instruction around students' future professional pathways. Based on field research conducted in German vocational schools, the presentation examines how English—taught as a second language—is intentionally woven across academic and technical disciplines to make learning relevant, practical, and career-connected. Participants will learn how English instruction is embedded within vocational content, aligned with workplace tasks, and supported through collaboration among subject-area teachers. Through concrete examples and excerpts from a short documentary produced during a fellowship, educators will reflect on how these approaches promote purpose, engagement, and student agency.

Anne Frosh, Ed.D.

Assistant Dean of Assessment and Accreditation

Isabelle Farrington College of Education and Human Development, Sacred Heart University



Dr. Anne Frosh serves as Assistant Dean of Assessment and Accreditation in the Isabelle Farrington College of Education and Human Development at Sacred Heart University. In this role, she leads accreditation and assessment initiatives, working with faculty and staff to strengthen academic quality, support continuous improvement, and advance student success. Her work focuses on using data-informed decision making to enhance programs and improve institutional effectiveness.

Sarah Bergers is an Administrative Assistant in the Farrington College of Education and Human Development at Sacred Heart University and a graduate of the Higher Education & Student Affairs Masters program at SHU. She is dedicated to supporting students, faculty, and staff through efficient operations and a student-centered approach.

BREAKOUT SESSION

Leading Responsible Tech & AI Use in Schools | Breakout Session 11 | 1:05 – 2:20 PM | Room: 201

AI and Human Evaluation: Exploring Reliability, Values, and Ethical Assessment

This session examines a pilot study on using AI to assess student work with reliability, fairness, and value alignment. Participants will explore how AI can reflect shared educational principles, along with its potential, limitations, and responsible uses in academic assessment. Co-presented with Sarah Bergers, Administrative Assistant, Farrington College of Education & Human Development, Sacred Heart University.

Irene Glassman (Panelist)

Literacy Interventionist

Metacomet Elementary School, Bloomfield, CT, and Reggio Magnet School of the Arts, Avon



Irene is a dedicated Literacy Interventionist at Metacomet School in Bloomfield, CT, bringing 27 years of experience primarily in kindergarten education. In addition to her classroom impact, she serves as the TEAM District Facilitator and collaborates with universities to manage student teacher placements. Currently in her second year as a Fellow in the Teacher Leader Fellowship Academy, Irene values the deep collaboration and professional growth the program offers. She holds a Sixth-Year degree in Educational Leadership and recently expanded her global perspective through a 2025 learning trip to Finland. Irene is committed to continuous learning to better support the evolving needs of both her students and her colleagues.

Christopher Gold-Thomas, Ph.D.

9th-Grade Social Studies Teacher

East Windsor High School



Dr. Christopher Gold-Thomas is a 9th-grade Social Studies teacher at East Windsor High School. His prior research focuses on the application of qualitative methods in studying school culture and climate. Currently, his research interests center on student online safety and the responsible integration of technology and AI in classroom settings.

BREAKOUT SESSION

Leading Responsible Tech & AI Use in Schools | Breakout Session 10 | 1:05 – 2:20 PM | Room: 122

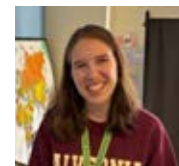
Beyond the Screen: Responsible AI Use Without Screen Overload

Recent headlines warn about the time and money schools spend on screens and their impact on student achievement. Research from the OECD's 2022 PISA data shows that more screen time and distraction often leads to worse educational outcomes. As educators, how can we prepare students for a digital world while protecting their attention and learning? Inspired by Jonathan Haidt's 2024 book *The Anxious Generation*, this session offers a collaborative space to explore teaching AI and technology responsibly, without overloading students with screens. Participants will leave with practical strategies to guide students in navigating technology and creating healthy screen-time boundaries.

Jennifer Gold-Thomas

Bilingual ESOL Teacher

Charter Oak International Academy, West Hartford Public Schools



Jennifer Gold-Thomas is a bilingual ESOL teacher currently working in West Hartford Public Schools. She works with students representing 14 different home languages to develop their academic language skills. Previously, she taught in a newcomer classroom integrating multilingual learners with grade-level peers. With a background in urban education, she is dedicated to removing educational barriers, including founding her school's Multilingual Parent Advisory Committee (MPAC) and helping launch an Adult ESL Program. She has also led district-wide professional development as part of the Instructional Framework Leadership and ESL Leadership Teams.

BREAKOUT SESSION

Championing Neurodiverse & Multilingual Learners | Breakout Session 4 | 10:00 – 11:15 AM | Room: 204

Amplify, Don't Simplify: Supporting Multilingual Learners in Accessing Grade-Level Text

Stop simplifying the content; start amplifying the support. While many AI tools help differentiate by adjusting reading level, this does not provide multilingual learners with opportunities to learn about more complex text structures and academic vocabulary. This hands-on session introduces educators to text amplifying—a research-based approach that embeds intentional scaffolds directly into grade-level texts, such as chunking, visuals, cognates, and student-friendly definitions, making rigorous content more accessible without reducing complexity. By providing students with access to grade-level texts and adequate support, we enhance their comprehension, academic language development, and equitable access to the grade-level curriculum.

Jess Gregory, Ed.D.

*Professor & Chair, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Southern Connecticut State University*



Jess L. Gregory, Ed.D., is Professor and Chair of the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department at Southern Connecticut State University. With a foundation in science education and a doctorate in educational leadership, she teaches across administrator certification and doctoral programs. Her research explores inclusive practices, ethical leadership, academic integrity, and faculty development. Dr. Gregory has published widely, presents nationally and internationally, and leads initiatives on AI in education. A multi-award-winning educator, she is especially proud when former students return as aspiring school leaders, continuing the cycle of leadership, mentorship, and community engagement.

BREAKOUT SESSION

Leading Responsible Tech & AI Use in Schools | Breakout Session 6 | 10:00 – 11:15 AM | Room: 201

The Knowledgeable Human in the Loop: Why Expertise Still Matters in AI-Driven Classrooms

Artificial intelligence is rapidly entering PK-12 classrooms, offering new possibilities for efficiency, differentiation, and access. However, the effectiveness of AI in education depends not on the tool itself, but on the expertise of the educator guiding it. This session positions educators as knowledgeable humans in the loop—professionals who actively shape, interrogate, and refine AI to support meaningful learning. Participants will examine the competencies required to use AI responsibly, including disciplinary expertise and the ability to critically evaluate AI-generated content for accuracy, accessibility, and alignment to instructional goals.

Anthea Grotton (Panelist)

*Elementary Teacher (1st Grade)
Mansfield Elementary School*



Anthea Z. Grotton, first grade teacher, member of the Teacher Leader Fellowship Academy since 2018, and Mansfield’s 2024-2025 Teacher of the Year. She was Tolland’s 2014-15 Teacher of the Year and has been an elementary educator for 25 years. Anthea is certified with the Institute of Multi-Sensory Education, is an adjunct professor at the University of Saint Joseph’s and Cofounder of Achievement Unlimited 2, an education nonprofit that provides academic tutoring, parent education and advocacy, and mental health support for youth. She is a “master sea glass finder” and loves being at the beach, reading and laughing with her family.

Kimberly Hellerich, Ed.D.

*Assistant Teaching Professor of Educational and Literacy Leadership
Sacred Heart University*



Kimberly Hellerich, Ed.D. is an Assistant Teaching Professor of Educational and Literacy Leadership at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut. During her 25-year career in K-12 education, she served as a middle school administrator, returning to the high school English classroom as she pursued her doctorate. Dr. Hellerich was honored to be selected as a 2021 Connecticut State Teacher of the Year Semi-Finalist. She and student researchers co-authored a paper on student perceptions of effective instructional strategies, published in the November 2021 edition of English Journal.

BREAKOUT SESSION on next page.

BREAKOUT SESSION

Cultivating Communities of Care & Connection | Breakout Session 8 | 1:05 – 2:20 PM | Room: 203

Embracing Student Voice Can Cultivate Connected Classroom Communities

During this session, the presenter will share three different classroom-based activities that embraced student voice within her secondary English classroom in East Windsor, Connecticut. Using participatory action research with 9th graders, student voice informed instructional strategies implemented across all classes. Within 11th grade classrooms, students collaboratively identified standards and collectively developed rubric language in student-friendly terms. Two 11th grade independent study students initiated a Youth Participatory Action Research project focused on increasing student self-efficacy. Each activity will be framed along Hart's Ladder of Student Engagement.

Jason Lussier

High School Social Studies Teacher

West Hartford Public Schools



Jason Lussier has been a high school social studies teacher for 14 years. He presented at the CEA in the fall of 2025 about the benefits of using improv techniques to foster creativity in the classroom. In 2024 he started participating in improv comedy at Sea Tea Theater in Hartford and instantly fell in love with the art of improv.

BREAKOUT SESSION

Cultivating Communities of Care & Connection | Breakout Session 7 | 1:05 – 2:20 PM | Room:202

Improv-e Critical Thinking, Creativity, and Connection in Your Classroom

The skills of critical thinking and creativity are at the core of improv comedy. These traits connect people in pursuit of a common goal: collaborative problem solving. Integrating the techniques taught in improv classes with academic content, participants will explore ways to create an environment that invites students to reframe failure as a necessary part of the learning process, take academic risks, and develop creative thought through collaboration. This session provides specific strategies to help students acquire the ability to unlock creative thought through divergent and convergent thinking. There will be a mixture of small group discussions, large group activities, and practical classroom activities.

Mercedes McKelvie, Ed.D. & Matthew Mainieri

High School English Teacher

New Haven Public Schools (Cooperative Arts & Humanities High School)



Dr. Mercedes McKelvie is a dedicated New Haven Public Schools English Teacher with eight years of experience and a recent SCSU Ed.D. graduate in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. Certified in both secondary English and Special Education, she works to create an inclusive classroom that promotes both academic and social-emotional growth.

Matthew Mainieri is an SCSU alumnus and special education teacher with four years of experience and PPT Chairperson at Cooperative Arts & Humanities High School in New Haven.

BREAKOUT SESSION on next page.

BREAKOUT SESSION

Cultivating Communities of Care & Connection | Breakout Session 2 | 10:00 – 11:15 AM | Room: 102

Leveraging Relationships: High School Connection Strategies for Academic Success and Collaborative Co-Teaching

Building strong connections and a sense of community is foundational to students' social-emotional well-being and serves as a powerful tool for effective classroom management. This session is designed for high school teachers and will explore practical, research-backed strategies for cultivating positive student-teacher relationships. Participants will learn how to leverage these relationships to significantly boost student work output, promote positive behavior, and foster a healthy, productive co-teaching structure. A core focus will be on emphasizing collaboration with special education staff to ensure these strategies support all learners. Co-presented with Matthew Mainieri, Special Education Teacher & PPT Chairperson, New Haven Public Schools.

Allyson Power, Ed.D.

*Spanish Teacher & Department Chair, World Languages
Ridgefield High School, Ridgefield Public Schools*



Dr. Allyson M. Power is a 22-year veteran teacher who has taught and led at both the middle and high school levels. She is a Spanish teacher at Ridgefield High School, where she serves as the Department Chair for World Languages. Inspired by her 2022 visit to Finland with the TLFA, Allyson seeks to cultivate a greater sense of community and happiness in educational settings. Her doctoral research examined the role of gratitude practices in supporting teacher well-being and professional flourishing.

BREAKOUT SESSION

Cultivating Communities of Care & Connection | Breakout Session 1 | 10:00 – 11:15 AM | Room: 202

Gratitude as a Micro-Practice for Teacher Resilience: Research, Reflection, and Application

Amid increasing workload demands and ongoing teacher shortages, resilience-building practices are essential for sustaining educators. This interactive session shares findings from a doctoral study examining how structured gratitude practices influence the well-being of World Language teachers. Participants will explore how gratitude can help teachers remain present, engaged, and connected in their work. Through guided reflection and discussion, attendees will consider how gratitude practices can support educator well-being while cultivating stronger communities of care within schools.

Deirdra Preis, Ed.D.

*Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership
Sacred Heart University*



Dr. Deirdra Preis is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Sacred Heart University who teaches courses in transformative leadership and social justice. A retired K-12 educator, she served for over 33 years in various CT suburban public school districts in teaching and administrative roles. Dr. Preis is also a K-12 equity consultant who develops and presents unique professional development to formal and informal leaders, supporting them in exploring systemic barriers to opportunity and replacing them with equitable practices.

BREAKOUT SESSION on next page.

BREAKOUT SESSION

Championing Neurodiverse & Multilingual Learners | Breakout Session 9 | 1:05 – 2:20 PM | Room: 204

Improving Our "Equity Lenses" Begins with Looking Within...

Regardless of our good intentions, our lived experiences and cultural backgrounds influence our interpretations and beliefs about the potential of our students. Without intentionally reflecting on our strengths and limitations, we risk inadvertently preventing the very changes in practice and school culture needed to improve educational access for students with exceptionalities and multilingual learners. This session will engage participants in critical reflection on their identities and how they may operate consciously or unconsciously to influence their interpretations of their students' needs and behaviors.

Maureen Ruby, Ph.D.

*Isabelle Farrington Endowed Chair; Associate Professor & Director
Center of Excellence for Leadership & Innovation, Sacred Heart University*



Dr. Maureen F. Ruby is the Isabelle Farrington Endowed Chair of Social, Emotional, & Academic Learning, the Director of The Center of Excellence for Leadership & Innovation, and an Associate Professor at Sacred Heart University. A 2000 Connecticut State Teacher of the Year semifinalist, she has worked at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels as a classroom teacher and reading consultant. She received her Ph.D. in special education from UConn and completed a two-year fellowship at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence.

Roundtable Discussion | 1:05 – 2:20 PM | Room: 102

Beyond the Brain Myths: Harnessing Cognitive Science for Inclusive Excellence

To truly thrive in constant change, teacher leaders must distinguish scientific wonder from cognitive fiction. In this interactive session, we will dismantle prevalent "neuromyths" that inadvertently hinder the potential of neurodiverse and multilingual learners. By aligning leadership with evidence-based neuroplasticity, we move past outdated assumptions toward Communities of Care that honor how the brain actually learns. Participants will identify common cognitive misconceptions that impact instructional equity, evaluate classroom strategies through a lens of neuro-inclusion and linguistic diversity, and cultivate a "Myth-Buster's Toolkit" to lead peer coaching and advocate for evidence-based wellness.

George Schott, M.A.

*Special Education Teacher, Arbor Program for Neurodivergent Students
Academy of Information Technology & Engineering, Stamford Public Schools*



George Schott, MA Ed. Psych., MBA, has enjoyed a second career as an educator in the Arbor Program for Neurodivergent Students. An award-winning teacher, he has developed innovative project-based learning initiatives to teach executive function skills. He draws on over 40 years of corporate marketing experience (Citibank, Kraft Foods, Kellogg, Clorox), combined with sociocultural theory, to create authentic projects that engage students in team-based, hands-on learning.

BREAKOUT SESSION on next page.

Roundtable Discussion | 1:05 – 2:20 PM | Room: 102

Teaching Executive Function Skills to Students with Autism Through Project-Based Learning

Share learning from five years of practice in the Arbor Program for Neurodivergent students at the Academy of Information Technology & Engineering in Stamford, CT. Participants will: define executive functions in a way that students will understand and be motivated to learn; examine methods of teaching executive functions that promote academic and life success; consider ways to measure student understanding and mastery of executive function skills; and build a library of PBL projects for teaching executive functions. Note: George Schott also participates in the Panel Discussion "Influence Beyond Our Classroom Walls."

Sarhanna Smith (Panelist)

Principal

Read School, Bridgeport Public Schools



Sarhanna K. Smith is Principal of Read School, a PreK-8 school in Bridgeport. A proponent of educational equity and social justice, she is passionate about addressing the negative effects of trauma and poverty on children's development. Sarhanna was trained in social and emotional learning through the Yale Center of Emotional Intelligence and restorative practices through the International Institute of Restorative Practices. Sarhanna began teaching in 1994 in Washington, D.C. She earned a B.A. in Elementary Education from Harvard University, M.A. in Reading from SCSU, a Sixth Year Diploma in Educational Leadership and Executive Leadership Superintendent Certificate from UConn.

Ken Spero

President & Founder

SchoolSims



Ken Spero is President and Founder of SchoolSims, where he uses narrative, online simulations to help educators strengthen judgment, resilience, and decision-making. With more than 35 years in the simulation field, Ken pioneered the Experience Design Process to capture real practitioner experience and turn it into scalable learning. He has partnered with districts, states, universities, and national associations to enhance leadership pipelines, teacher preparation, and professional development. A former faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, Ken has dedicated his career to making authentic, deliberate practice accessible to every educator.

Roundtable Discussion | 1:05 – 2:20 PM | Room: 102

AI in the Classroom: Building Efficacy for Decision-Making

Building AI literacy goes beyond tools and tutorials. In this interactive session, participants engage in a realistic simulation that requires nuanced decisions about AI use in classrooms. Drawing upon learning design and experiential practices from healthcare and other professions, participants will apply a decision-making framework and structured debriefs to build confidence, strengthen professional judgment, and address AI and other complex issues impacting school culture and student learning.

Betty J. Sternberg, Ph.D.

Founder, Teacher Leader Fellowship Academy



Betty J. Sternberg is director of the Teacher Leader Fellowship Academy, hosted by Southern Connecticut State University's Office of Workforce & Lifelong Learning. The academy is guided by the theme of "Teacher Leaders as Enablers of Creativity, Collaboration and Innovation in the Classrooms and Beyond."

Formerly, Betty served as Connecticut's Commissioner of Education, the first woman to be appointed since the establishment of the position in 1838, as superintendent of the Greenwich Public Schools, where she was the first woman to serve in that position. Throughout her career, Betty has created and directed many "firsts" including Connecticut's Beginning Educator Support and Training Program (BEST), Connecticut Mastery Tests, Connecticut's Alternative Route to Certification Program and the Celebration of Excellence Program. The last of her "firsts," the Teacher Leader Fellowship Academy, represents her passion and fulfillment of a dream to create a safe space in which educators work together to build new networks to discuss, debate and share information in important educational matters.

Lauren Tucker, Ed.D.

Associate Professor of Special Education

Southern Connecticut State University



Dr. Lauren Tucker is an Associate Professor of Special Education at Southern Connecticut State University with expertise in accessibility, assistive technology, and artificial intelligence (AI). With an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership with a concentration in Assistive Technology, she has extensive experience as an educator, researcher, and consultant. Dr. Tucker's work emphasizes integrating AI to create inclusive learning environments and professional practices. As a passionate advocate for accessible theater, Dr. Tucker has collaborated with community organizations to design sensory-friendly and inclusive theater experiences.

BREAKOUT SESSION

Championing Neurodiverse & Multilingual Learners | Breakout Session 3 | 10:00 – 11:15 AM | Room: 203 Through a Parent's Lens: Understanding the Whole Neurodivergent Student

This interactive session invites teacher leaders to step into the professional parent perspective through the profile of 'Luna,' a bright, creative first grader with ADHD and autism. Participants will explore unique situations that families navigate daily: after-school meltdowns following 'good days,' sensory sensitivities, and the invisible emotional labor of coordinating services. The session emphasizes the importance of understanding the whole student beyond academic performance, including strengths, stressors, communication patterns, and home dynamics. Teacher leaders will examine practical collaboration strategies that position parents as partners and explore how accessible technologies can bridge gaps between school expectations and home realities.

Jeremy Visone, Ed.D. (Moderator)

Associate Professor of Special Education

Southern Connecticut State University



Jeremy Visone is a faculty member in the department of educational leadership & instructional technology at Central Connecticut State University (CCSU). Before working at CCSU, he was a teacher and building leader in the Newington Public Schools for 16 years. His leadership experience includes the secondary and elementary levels, and he most recently was the proud principal of Anna Reynolds Elementary School, named a National Blue Ribbon School by the United States Department of Education in 2016. Jeremy writes about teacher leadership, structures for educator collaboration and teacher evaluation. His most recent work is *Teacher Leadership Practice in High-Performing Schools: A Blueprint for Excellence* (2025, Routledge).



Rosanna Z. **Wilson** (Panelist)

School Psychologist and School Counselor

State of Connecticut Department of Public Health

Rosanna Z. Wilson is a Nationally Certified School Psychologist and a Licensed Professional Counselor with the State of Connecticut Department of Public Health. She has been a School Psychologist for 24 years in various urban and suburban school districts across Connecticut. Rosanna is also the Co-founder and Director of Education Advocacy and Mental Health Support for Achievement Unlimited 2, a local non-profit organization that provides academic tutoring, parent education and advocacy, and mental health support for youth. In her personal time, Rosanna enjoys outdoor activities with her family, watching college basketball, lazy days at the beach and reading.

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