

New Glastonbury math director brings 'big ideas'

By **Steve Smith - Staff Writer**

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Glastonbury schools' new math director, Caroline Quinn-Alger, said students can better reach Common Core Standards by learning concepts. Photo by Steve Smith.

Caroline Quinn-Alger, the Glastonbury school district's new director of mathematics, said she hopes to find ways to make math "relate" better for students. One of the projects she has already begun is to re-work the Algebra I curriculum, aligning it with the Common Core Standards.

Quinn-Alger was a middle school and high school teacher in Region 15, in the western part of Connecticut, for 29 years. She and a fellow teacher were the curriculum leaders for the K-5, and 8 through Algebra I and Algebra II curriculum in that district. She said she is excited to work in Glastonbury with the whole K-12 district and to be working closely with the teachers.

"The focus is much more on, 'what's the big idea' of what we are teaching to students," she said. "It's not just

that we're teaching to the standards, but that we are going about it in a purposeful way." In Algebra I, for example, she said the teachers will be focusing on the behaviors of different functions and how they will be able to help make predictions.

"If they keep that big idea in their mind as they are teaching, then things start to make sense for students," she said. "That interweaves with real-life problems, and makes things more relevant."

Math in Focus will be implemented this year for first- through third-graders, and starting in 2014, for fourth- and fifth-graders. The program is based on Singapore Math, which was studied by the authors of the Common Core Standards, after looking at successful international programs. Quinn-Alger said the American company has adopted the program for Singapore, and adapted it for American teachers.

"The curriculum is very much based on number sense and has lessons that go from concrete, to pictorial, to abstract thinking so that the kids develop real number sense," Quinn-Alger said. Visualizing relationships between numbers, rather than simply memorizing equations, creates a quicker and deeper understanding, she said. "That's what builds fluency. This builds a concept first of part-part-whole. If you spend a long time with that, then subtraction is really easy."

The same sort of concepts will be applied to the Algebra I curriculum, and next the Geometry and Algebra II studies will be looked at. "It's building that same kind of conceptual understanding," Quinn-Alger said. "The skills are just a part of it."

Quinn-Alger said she hopes to get into the classrooms as much as possible and that she likes the shift in the common core, which applies standards, but allows leeway for teachers to "bring the art back to teaching."

"How you get there, as an individual teacher in the classroom, is up to you," she said. "I want teachers thinking about what situations they are creating in the classroom to allow students the opportunities to think."

Quinn-Alger said her main focus is still getting acquainted with everyone, but the administrative office has been most welcoming so far. "My personal goal for this year is to learn about the families and the schools and the district this year. I have so much to learn about what goes on here," she said. "It's been wonderful. Everyone's supportive, and there's a lot of laughter. It's a very happy place to work."

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