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Alignment and Innovation:

EXCL's Recipe for Success from Pre-K through School-age

by Vincent D. LaFontan

Photo by Tina Reeble



aligned to the district's mission and goals. Our preschool teachers and after-school professionals are peers with district teachers and work under the same central office supervision and direction as all other school departments. We offer a continuum of care and educational services for preschool-age children up to seventh grade and additionally some Counselor-in-Training programs for high school students.

Of note, we offer full-day and half-day preschool, before-school and afterschool programs for elementary and upper elementary children. In addition, EXCL runs full-day summer camps, and short-term Enrichment Classes, which are

Our organization's culture embraces innovative ideas. The Farmington Public School system values innovation to such a degree that one can find the concept clearly outlined in our mission statement, which is a part of our district's overall "Vision of the Graduate." It states, "Problem Solving and Innovation: Students identify problems, analyze data, ask questions, utilize a variety of resources, think flexibly, make connections and seek practical, innovative, and entrepreneurial solutions to a variety of problems."

I believe our strong convictions come from our beliefs that children and youth embrace new ideas much faster than the adults around them. Children, also, see unique and creative angles to these ideas which, if cultivated and encouraged, will ultimately expand their learning and the depth of our overall school community.

The Farmington Extended Care & Learning (EXCL) department, celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, extends our school district's vision into the preschool, out-of-school, and summer times. As a department of the Farmington school system, our programs and services are

extended learning opportunities in the languages, arts, technology, and sciences offered throughout the district. We are deliberate in our practice and consciously align not only to our district's Vision of the Graduate, but also our own department's programs. Examples include making sure that our district-wide project-based learning annual events include all children in EXCL programs, from preschool to upper elementary, and making sure the annual theme — most recently Food, Family, and Fun! — is followed by all age groups across our district.

This programmatic alignment helps to provide some sense of familiarity for families across the district and helps to lower transitional stress for the children enrolled in our programs, who year after year go to new classrooms and

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EXCL Programs: A Parent's Perspective

Marti Rothe wasn't sure what to expect from the EXCL afterschool program when a friend urged her to investigate it before enrolling her son Ethan in a Montessori kindergarten. What she experienced during her visit to the program's elementary school and her first meeting with the Extended Ed staff blew her away, and she knew she'd found the right afterschool home for her son.

"I said, 'Yep, we're going to public school, I can't beat this,'" Rothe explained. "The extended kindergarten program paralleled what kids were learning in kindergarten itself. If they were doing a unit on animals, then EXCL had a unit on animals for the extended care kindergarten students. It was also a really warm and nurturing environment, which is something kids need at that age."

A few years later, she enrolled her younger son Tyler as well. Because Tyler hadn't attended a formal preschool, Marti felt he particularly benefitted from EXCL teachers who helped him develop strategies for success in kindergarten.

"There were so many things EXCL offered that were routine to them, but bonuses for us," she added. "They were open on snow days. They held vacation camp when I had to work. After a major storm in the Northeast when no one had power for days, EXCL opened at one of the schools that had power. It was amazing. They organized summer camps. You just wouldn't expect these things from an after-school program."

Over the years EXCL's offerings have expanded exponentially. They run enrichment programs for sciences, languages, and the arts. They hold an annual arts festival in which students are treated as legitimate artists, with their work featured in professional-quality exhibitions. An annual film festival screens student films created on iPads and iPods. The Invention Convention highlights group and individual science and technology projects. A fall dodge ball tournament attracts former students and families.

Rothe believes that one key to EXCL's success is its range of staff, from high school students interested in teaching careers to college-aged teachers-in-training, to certified educators. All bring unique talents and perspectives.

"The teachers have been a great support for me," Rothe noted. "If I asked them for help with challenges, my wishes were met. They also just let my sons express themselves and their interests. It's amazing."

In a letter to her district's school superintendent, Rothe shared an anecdote that beautifully illustrates her family's deep connection to Farmington's EXCL program. She wrote:

"I am sure that all of us have very clear memories of where we were, how we felt, and what we did on that tragic day of Sandy Hook. I recall leaving work as soon as possible, anxious to see my own children. I arrived at 4:30 pm, much earlier than usual, to pick up my older son from EXCL. He started sobbing when he saw me; I thought perhaps somehow the children had found out about the tragedy. Fortunately, that was not the case; he was sobbing because he did not want to leave EXCL early and instead wanted to stay for the floor hockey tournament. It was so comforting to witness the innocence of my son's world. The sadness of the day heightened my appreciation for the safe, secure, and happy environment EXCL provided for him."

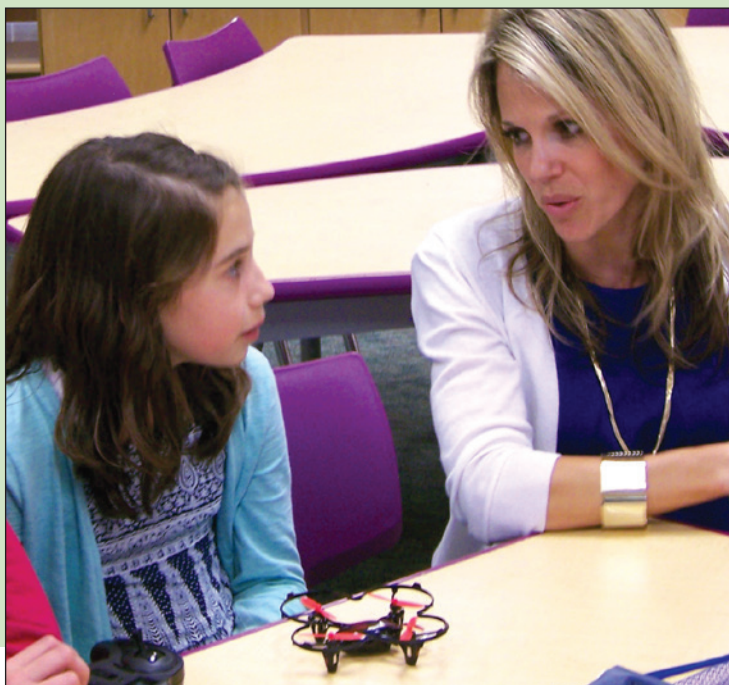


Photo by Jim Wike

new schools and have new teachers, but feel a safe, reassured feeling when they stay after school anywhere in our district because they know what to expect in EXCL. It is from this organizational structure and philosophical place that we boldly go where others may not be (yet).

EXCL's history of being out-front with new programming really started at the program's inception. Just the simple fact that a school system, itself, would create a school department to both meet the care needs of its parents and the extended learning interests of its students from preschool through upper elementary was progressive for the time. Today, many school districts visit Farmington to learn about our seamless school day/out-of-school time model, as well as our self-sustaining business model that supports our operations. Most importantly to note, however, EXCL owes its success to the thousands of families who have entrusted us with the care and extended education of their children over the years. This enrollment success and parental confidence in our programs has given us the latitude to always try new things and to keep a growth mindset within our programs. EXCL's annual themes give all EXCL sites a common start for each year, which leads to a cohesive feeling across a mid-sized suburban district.

Our themes over the past few years were Music and Poetry, Nature, and "We EXCL," however my favorite was Sparking Creativity. The themes are always fun and give each year a life of its own, however the Sparking Creativity theme really brought out the best in what EXCL team members do each day with children in our programs. Some of the highlights from that year included a full-day program entitled "Building the First Schools on Mars" (self-explanatory, good fun had by hundreds of children designing Martian elementary and upper elementary schools,) the design and painting of a life-size mural of fish and aquatic life that was sponsored and displayed on a local development site to beautify the area during construction, and then development of many new inventions showcased at a district-wide Invention Convention towards the end of the school year. This theme tied into our district's strategic objectives, was engaging and fun for the children and showcased our program to our community and beyond.

During this past school year our theme was Food, Family, and Fun. While Sparking Creativity may have been my favorite theme, Food, Family, and Fun was clearly a favorite of the EXCL Site Supervisors. The food aspect of this year's theme was a wonderful (and easily incorporated) thing for Site Supervisors to work with. The Union EXCL Early

Childhood Coordinator, Meghan Cameron, introduced a new food for the children to try each month as a part of their regular afternoon snack. This was a wonderful way to expose children to new healthy foods that they might not be familiar with, as well as a great way to incorporate the district's theme into an individual school's afterschool curriculum. Meghan shared her strategy with the other EXCL Supervisors who quickly embraced the practice, which led to most of the EXCL sites introducing new foods during snack to hundreds of children across the district. Meghan and her senior teachers took the theme one step further during EXCL's celebration activities, by dressing up as fruits and vegetables! The children loved the enthusiasm displayed by their teachers and again were immersed in this year's EXCL theme, a theme that clearly had real-life learning aspects and extended the children's learning time to include snack time as well.

Some of our greatest successes, recently, have been in the areas of technology and science. We were an early district to begin to coordinate and support First (Lego First Robotics programs for elementary and upper elementary) as we quickly realized how this type of afterschool program would tie into our district's robotics programs at the middle and high school levels, as well as our overall district curriculum themes. We were also early proponents of using video equipment and technology with children in AfterSchool, including running afterschool Youth Film Festivals. EXCL's District Coordinator, Bryan Zerio, has presented EXCL's practices in this area at the National AfterSchool Association's annual convention to standing room only workshops for a number of years. Most recently we ran the inaugural Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) afterschool enrichment class, focused on how to use an age appropriate mini photography drone safely.

Our UAV classes were fully enrolled and had waitlists. This was not surprising to us, as it seems as if every child wants a mini drone these days. Children see them in the news and they fly, so of course they would embrace a class about them. Children see the joy in this exciting new innovation and want to touch them. They want to know how they work, how they fly, how far they fly. They want to learn what else the UAV can do! Our goal is to harness this excitement and guide it in the right direction. UAVs — also known as drones — are getting a lot of negative press due to valid concerns about safety and inappropriate uses. This is not changing the fact that they are wildly popular and have real-life applications yet to be developed. Rhetorically, we ask, who will develop appropriate uses for this technology, but the students in school today?



Photo by Kevin Riendeau

The arts have long been one of our most popular program areas as well. We routinely offer classes in the dramatic and visual arts. Annually we offer children's theatre classes and a number of full theatrical productions. We also offer classes in the languages, crafts and hobbies to meet the interests and educational needs of children and families throughout the school year. In the summer, we provide camp opportunities in the areas of music, theatre, science, and recreation (including many educational field trip opportunities). We are always looking for that new idea, that new concept, tool or even toy that will assist us in expanding the learning opportunities in our district. Our desire to innovate has helped us meet our mission and always assisted us in keeping our programming exciting to each new generation of children that enters.

