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LEFT: Horizons at Westminster executive director Kathleen Devaney with a Horizons student last summer during the first year of the program. **RIGHT:** Horizons students arriving at Westminster School on a school bus from Hartford. They are welcomed each day by Horizons teachers, volunteers and staff.

Community over the mountaintop

Horizons at Westminster advocates for inner-city students

By Olivia Piper
Staff Writer

For the second year in a row, Simsbury's Westminster School has not become dormant over the summer months while its students are away on vacation. Instead, the campus is full of life, learning - and first and second graders, all of which are a part of the Horizons at Westminster.

Horizons is a national six-week summer enrichment program for low-income students, currently operating in 19 states, that focuses on reading, STEM, art, and swimming skills. Westminster began their branch of Horizons in 2018, and currently works with first and second graders from Hartford on reading, math, problem-solving skills, swimming, and the real-life application of knowledge. The objective of the program, which will eventually include students in 1st through

8th grade as the years continue, is to create a bridge for students that will help to carry them from one academic year to the next - supplementing their current academic skills and improving their confidence and connection to learning.

Though Horizons at Westminster only just concluded its second year of operation, the roots of the program run deep into the history of the school, specifically in their 18-year commitment to Hartford, as a part of the expansive program known as Westminster in Hartford. The aim of Westminster in Hartford is to create a mutually beneficial partnership between the town of Hartford and Westminster School that extends the core values of the Westminster community into the city (specifically the public school system) and also to create partnerships that engage with the perspectives of Hartford residents,

especially its students. Westminster in Hartford includes courses on civic engagement, civil discourse and public speaking for Westminster students, tutoring programs, a partnership with Hartford's Loaves and Fishes Ministry soup kitchen, a bridge to Hartford program that works to place students from Hartford-area public schools into independent schools (largely for post-graduate years) and a summer partnership with Covenant Preparatory School - an all-boys, tuition-free, private middle school in Hartford. According to Kathleen Devaney, Executive Director of Horizons at Westminster, as an outgrowth of the Westminster in Hartford program, Horizons at Westminster truly embodies both the spirit of Westminster itself as well as the partnership between the school and the city of Hartford.

"We have always thought that

it was important to value this partnership with Hartford and to extend Westminster's core value of community over the mountaintop. So over time, with different programs that we have had at Westminster, we came to learn about Horizons, and we thought that it was a great, long-term manifestation of all the different pieces that we have been building within this relationship with Hartford" said Devaney.

Though Westminster itself is a high school for students in grades nine through twelve, the Horizons program focuses on students in first through eighth grade. Though according to Devaney it was an adjustment to shift their mindset from teens to children, it was one that they were happy to make, as the benefits of students being able to begin a program like Horizons at such a young age are vast. Along with improving students' reading,



Submitted Photos

Clockwise: Students participate in a discussion with Horizons teacher Heather Kahn; As a part of expedition work, Horizons students, volunteers and teachers hiked to Heublein Tower in Simsbury; Taking advantage of the nice weather, Westminster School student and Horizons volunteer Francesca Bradley reads with Horizons students outside on the Westminster School campus; A Horizons student doing reading and spelling work.

math, and swimming skills, improving school attendance, and improving the high school graduation rate, the program allows these young students to carry their newfound academic skills and sense of confidence with them throughout their elementary, middle and high school years and beyond. In 2018, when Horizons at Westminster opened its doors to its first class of first graders, they were simultaneously making a commitment to these students, and those who have come (and will continue to come) after them, to add more teachers, staff, and programming each year in order to carry them through 8th grade. Though this commitment is a large one, Devaney says that Westminster is prepared and excited to make it, eager to find ways to enhance their partnership with Hartford long-term.

“We understand that this is a long-term commitment to these families and these students, and it has been incredible, and incredibly rewarding,” said Devaney.

A typical day at Horizons at Westminster begins at 7:45 a.m. when a bus picks up the Horizons students at the Moylan Elementary School in Hartford and transports

them to Westminster’s campus. Students are provided with breakfast and then taken into the classroom, where they are taught by experienced teachers, many of whom come from the Hartford Public School system, where they teach during the school year. Later in the day students are given lunch, and interspersed throughout the day are different

“We have always thought that it was important to value this partnership with Hartford and to extend Westminster’s core value of community over the mountaintop.”

–Kathleen Devaney

enrichment activities, mainly swimming, which takes place in Westminster’s on-site swimming pool three times per week. Additionally, students go on field trips each Wednesday, to local sites like Flamig Farm and also take weekly trips to the Simsbury Public Library. The vast amount of professionals, Westminster student volunteers and local community volunteers that interact with the Horizons students throughout the

program is further proof of the spirit of community and partnership that guides the program. Local students from Westminster, as well as adult volunteers from within the Farmington Valley community, are mainstays at Horizons, where they work in advisory roles: helping the students get from place to place around campus, assisting in the

classroom and during field trips and activities as well as in the pool. Samantha de Kanter, a Sophomore at Westminster spent her summer working as a volunteer with both the first and second graders in the Horizons program. According to de Kanter, she has found that the program has not only been beneficial to the students but to her and the other volunteers and staff members as well.

“After the first week or so I found that I really enjoyed spending time with the kids and helping them out. It felt like I was doing something to help these kids, and I have had the best time working with them, teaching them, and reading with them,” said de Kanter.

In addition to their academic pursuits, the students in Horizons at Westminster take swimming lessons on-campus three times per week, which provides them with eighteen swimming lessons over the course of the summer. According to Horizons National, the swimming aspect of the program increases student confidence and self-assuredness, while also teaching students a life-saving and life-long skill. Additionally, for many students in Horizons at Westminster, the swimming lessons that they take as a part of the program are the first swimming lessons they have ever taken, as many do not have access to this instruction outside of the program. Samantha de Kanter says that the swimming lessons, which she often assist with, are her favorite part of the program, as they are clearly a student favorite and provide a daily dose of fun



Submitted Photos

Horizons students take swimming lessons at Westminster's Hibbard Aquatic Center, where they learn how to swim and feel comfortable in the water.

while also imparting important skills.

"Swimming is my favorite part of the day because the kids have such a great time in the pool and they always get so excited every time they go, even though they've been doing it for weeks already, and I think that's pretty cool to see them being able to do that," said de Kanter.

In addition to many volunteers, Horizons at Westminster employs multiple teachers who spend their days doing hands-on work with the students in order to improve their math, reading, and overall academic skills. Many of the teachers involved with the Horizons program at Westminster are current teachers in the Hartford public school system, specifically at the Moylan Elementary School. According to Devaney, this partnership creates a sense of trust for the families and allows the teachers involved in the program to track students' progress far beyond the end of the summer. Erin Doyle Luciano who teaches in the Hartford Public School system during the school year worked as the second-grade

teacher for Horizons at Westminster this summer has been involved with the program since day one. Luciano says that the program is something she is proud to be involved with, due to its ability to increase student learning and to deepen the academic support system for the students who are able to be involved.

"Anything that would be beneficial for our students is important to me. The opportunities that are provided in this program are really exciting, and it is great to see them during the summer as well as during the school year," said Luciano.

In every aspect of Horizons at Westminster, partnership is what shines through and truly buoys the program. In everything from the creation of the program itself to the daily interactions that students have with adult and youth volunteers, teachers, and staff, a sense of community and a strong link between Westminster School and the city of Hartford consistently takes center stage, ensuring that the students in the Horizons

program are receiving the absolute best education possible in a way that is thoughtful and well-rounded. Though the program is still in its early stages, Devaney says that thanks to the dedication of everyone involved, Horizons at Westminster is already producing positive outcomes for the students that attend.

"The students get tested on their academic progress during the year and they have all made significant strides in their reading and in their math, and the students are happy to be here. They love the program, and we had 100 percent re-enrollment at the end of last year, which I think speaks for itself," said Devaney.

Those interested in learning more about Horizons at Westminster and Horizons National can do so on the Westminster School website or at www.horizonsnational.org. Additionally, those interested in volunteering for Horizons at Westminster or in supporting the partnership can contact Executive Director Kathleen Devaney at 860-408-3006. **VL**

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