

# Local businesses see value in supporting education

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Overlaid photo by BRIAN GRIFIN



General Electric Commercial Finance, above, and the Fat Cat Pie Co., right, were honored recently by the Norwalk Education Foundation during a breakfast presented by the Greater Norwalk Chamber of Commerce. The breakfast was held at Fat Cat Joe on Wall Street in Norwalk.

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Hour Staff Writer

**NORWALK** — Local businesses are partnering with nonprofit organizations and schools to make sure the achievement gap narrows — ensuring not only a more equal educational playing field, but also securing an employable work force that could one day benefit the city and the state.

Connecticut's achievement gap — the discrepancies in test scores between many low-income and minority children and middle-class white children — is the widest in the country, according to Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now, a 2-year-old nonprofit organization that aims to close the state's achievement gap. From nonprofits to educators to company executives, a wide array of individuals and groups are calling for an end to the differences in test scores, and there are numerous businesses in Norwalk that are attempting to battle the achievement gap with everything from swimming to increased funding for Connecticut Mastery Test preparation.

"In our after-school activities, there is an educational piece in them. For example, programs in the arts and humanities, like creative writing, improves skills in English and grammar, which addresses the achievement gap," said Debbie Greenwood, the Norwalk YMCA's executive director. "In physical education and nutrition, they're taught about things such as measurements, which means they're learning about math, which again addresses the achievement gap."

Many of the YMCA's programs that advocate both fun and learning are funded by local businesses, such as Stew Leonard's and General Electric, Greenwood said.

Stew Leonard's gives the YMCA financial support for programs such as swimming, which Greenwood said aims at bettering test scores.



"It's more than a gym and swim program. When kids are doing laps and swimming, they're understanding mathematical movement," Greenwood said. "When children are introduced to a physical education program, they're trained to move their eyes from left to right, as they do reading. That helps them not skip lines when reading a book. Movement education improves math and reading skills."

With corporate dollars, Greenwood said they're able to continue providing programming that's "fun or relaxing" for students while still emphasizing the achievement gap — without the students even necessarily knowing it. This, in turn, Greenwood said, will benefit the companies by creating an environment in which all students, regardless of socio-economic status, can do well in school — making it more likely that they will become productive members of the economic world.

"It all comes full circle," she said. "It's amazing what can happen."

Before it comes full circle, however, results of state tests will need to narrow. According to 2006 CMT results, the standardized tests submitted to the federal government under No Child Left Behind, results, 52.7 percent of eighth grade black students reached proficiency in math and reading — meaning the students were able to read and write at grade level.

Approximately 53.7 percent of eighth-grade Hispanic students attained proficiency, compared to 88.9 percent of the state's white students.

Norwalk's students did more poorly than their state counterparts, and 47.8 percent of eighth-grade students who are black reached proficiency in math. About 59.5 percent of Hispanic students attained proficiency, compared to 84.5 percent of white students. Students fared slightly better in

reading, with 55.2 percent of black students, 60.5 percent of Hispanic students and 85.4 percent of white students reaching proficiency.

According to ConnCAN, many high school graduates will reach only ninth-grade skill levels by the time they graduate, leaving it difficult to believe they will be prepared to join the work force or succeed in college.

To help boost these standardized test numbers, EMCOR Group Inc. gave the Norwalk Education Foundation a three-year grant last year that pays for such programs as the "Saturdays in Action" program at Norwalk's middle schools, which prepares students academically for the CMT.

"Much of our programming is focused on the achievement gap," said Lauren Rosato, NEF executive director. "There's a need to fill that gap and still

