

Windsor Bridge Builders Nomination  
First Church Early Learning Center

Established in 1956, the First Church Early Learning Center has been providing Windsor children with high quality preschool and childcare for over 60 years. While this longstanding history is worthy of recognition in and of itself, it is the program's strong commitment to the town's School Readiness initiative that brings me to **nominate FCELC as a Windsor Bridge Builder.**

Through a competitive grant process, Connecticut's School Readiness program provides subsidized preschool for children who might otherwise not have such an opportunity. In 2000, Windsor received funding that allowed fifteen children to receive full day, full year preschool in community programs with a large percentage of their tuition costs being covered by a School Readiness grant. In order to qualify as a participating provider, programs had to be accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and fulfill many other mandates set out by the State.

First Church Early Learning Center readily accepted the challenges posed by the School Readiness requirements and welcomed six additional children and their families to their school community. In doing so, they took a significant step in creating a more diverse learning environment for all their students, both racially and socio-economically. By agreeing to accept the reduced School Readiness tuition allowance and implement a sliding fee scale for families, FCELC opened its doors to children who could not have afforded their program otherwise.

In the seventeen years since Windsor's School Readiness began, the State has implemented even more stringent quality standards and imposed rigorous reporting regulations on preschools receiving state funding. In spite of being a relatively small, independent program, First Church Early Learning Center has consistently risen to these new challenges and continued to demonstrate its commitment to serving a widely diverse group of Windsor children.

During this same time, the Windsor School Readiness Council has been forced to withdraw funding from two large corporate preschool programs because they failed to meet minimum State standards. As a result, those funds have been awarded to FCELC and they now serve thirty school readiness children and their families in their full day program while continuing to meet the State's increased expectations for quality preschool programs. Their willingness to expand in order to accommodate additional families with limited resources means that the First Church Early Learning Center is now even more reflective of Windsor's racial and cultural diversity.

One additional note as it relates to bridge building.....Aside from their commitment to Windsor's School Readiness initiative, FCELC has always demonstrated great willingness to include children with special needs in their program. They work collaboratively with the public schools to implement individualized educational plans and make accommodations and modifications for those children as necessary and appropriate. Their inclusive philosophy is of equal value to those children who do not have special needs but who begin, at a very young age, to develop an understanding and appreciation of all that their special needs friends bring to their world.

Lastly, while I consider their support for our town's School Readiness program to be primary in making this nomination, I value contributions that the First Church Early Learning Center makes to the larger Windsor community as well. By engaging their children and families in the types of activities listed below, they demonstrate the importance of community involvement and support the work of other bridge building initiatives at the same time.

Using resources from fundraising activities and/or donations from friends and families, FCELC has made contributions to:

- The Windsor Food and Fuel Bank (both food and monetary donations)
- The Windsor Shad Derby program
- Project Santa
- The Windsor Chamber of Commerce *Businesses Fueling Minds* program
- Windsor High School's Project Graduation
- Mary's Place
- A backpack program to benefit Sage Park Middle School

In summary, I am confident that the First Church Early Learning Center represents the type of bridge building mindset that strengthens communities and serves as a model for other organizations and individuals. Their dedication to educating Windsor's children for sixty-one years is made stronger by their documented commitment to creating a diverse and inclusive learning environment and their demonstrated belief that bridge building is best begun sooner rather than later.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of this nomination. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have questions or need additional information of any kind.