

# Colchester School Board Okays New Benefits Consultant

by Katelyn Kelleher

The Board of Education approved the selection of a new employee benefits consultant at Tuesday's meeting.

Lockton Companies was chosen after a rigorous selection process for both the town and the school board, Board of Education Chairman Ronald Goldstein said.

Board of Education Vice Chairman Donald Kennedy said Lockton was clearly the first choice for himself, Goldstein, Superintendent of Schools Karen Loiselle-Goodwin and First Selectman Gregg Schuster. "Each time we meet with them we walk away impressed with their expertise," he said.

Loiselle-Goodwin said Lockton came highly recommended from other superintendents.

The selection process started with a request for proposal, which was narrowed down to six companies that were interviewed. Lockton was the best choice with regards to the budget and health of staff, Kennedy said.

The consulting services will cost the town \$58,000 annually.

"We are now paying for service as opposed to a strictly commission-based arrangement," Goldstein said. "We have the ability to hold them accountable to certain standards."

Kennedy said health insurance claims for April were "a lot better" than the last few months. "\$388,000 in claims is a lot better than \$600,000," he said, pointing out that November, January, February and March each had a single high claim. "This was an incredibly dif-

ferent and bad stretch of time and hopefully we'll start to work our way up."

He thanked staff and administration for their creativity in working around the budget freeze due to the high health insurance claims.

\*\*\*

Also Tuesday, the board authorized Loiselle-Goodwin to sign a five-year memorandum of understanding between the Department of Children and Families and the Colchester school district.

Last year, DCF was granted permission to place a social worker within Colchester's schools. Social worker Mike Riske was placed in the school in January and he and program manager David Silva attended the meeting asking to extend the partnership for the next five years.

Colchester Elementary School Principal Jackie Somborg said she "can't imagine DCF without Mike in the building."

"He is just so invaluable to staff, administration and to mental health workers," she said.

Director of Pupil Services Katherine Shaughnessy also attested to Riske's help. "We've been able to problem-solve on such a real level that it's so helpful for me," she said. "Before, it was always picking up the phone and hoping you don't get voicemail."

Bacon Academy Principal Jeff Mathieu added Riske helped him work through a situation involving a homeless student.

Both Goldstein and Board of Education

member Bradley Bernier admitted they were skeptical at first of DCF placing a social worker in the schools, but after having one, they are starting to come around. "You've enlightened me and I think enlightened the board," Goldstein said. "DCF does not need to be feared or shunned."

Bernier said he was absolutely against the idea last year. "I'm slowly being won over," he said. "I think it was based a lot on the old face of DCF. Seeing the new face of DCF and seeing how it's worked in the past year, you're winning me over. Still skeptical, but you're winning me over."

\*\*\*

The board voted to apply for the \$15,000 William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund Literacy Partnership Proposal to improve literacy from age three to grade three. Loiselle-Goodwin said the grant was only available to urban districts last year and would help the town's preschoolers. "We still know we have more work to do [with the children in preschool]," she said. "We can see that kids make amazing progress over time in our school system, but we're still struggling with our early childhood piece and we believe we can do more."

Loiselle-Goodwin added receiving the grant would allow for an opportunity to work with experts in the field "so that we can continue to see improvements in student performance."

The board approved a research proposal for

University of Connecticut graduate student Melissa Collier-Meek to distribute a survey to teachers on intervention implementation in schools. "It can be helpful for professional development in the future or for considering the different resources available," Collier-Meek said. She added that she would share the research results with the school district.

Three field trip requests were approved. The Academy Cafe trip to the Culinary Institute of America and an eighth grade Newport, RI, mansion tour will be no cost to the Board of Education. The Bacon Academy senior trip to Block Island will cost \$425, however, because the number of staff needed to attend cannot be covered by other staff within the school, Loiselle-Goodwin said. She added despite the budget freeze, the schools are still trying to make important trips happen.

Bacon Academy students Laura Hahn and Joshua Kvasnik were recognized for receiving Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE) Student Leadership Awards recognizing leadership and academic achievement. Both students are heavily involved in organizations and volunteer work both inside and outside of the school.

The Bacon Academy foil team was also recognized for winning the Eastern Connecticut Conference championship and several students were recognized for their achievements in the Connecticut Scholastic Arts Competition.