Casting at schools for future anglers

By CLAIRE BESSETTE

Professional development took a twist last week at the Bishop School in Norwich, as 20 teachers and recreation directors from throughout eastern Connecticut hit the books and the gym to learn how to fish at the hands of a hard-nosed Nebraska pro.

"I'm tough," 34-year-old Katie Cole said with a smile. "I'm super tough."

After a four-hour morning classroom session, the group moved to the gym, where Cole lined them up and handed them fly casting rods. For a non-stop hour she drilled her students on how to cast their Velcro-fly lines toward her, aiming for the dozen or more stuffed fake fish scattered along the floor. She taught various fly-casting techniques, appropriate hand and finger positioning and how to pull in the catch.

Mentors from the Thames Valley Trout Unlimited sat along the sidelines offering tips and some light-hearted teasing to casting novices and veterans alike. But all are eager to work together in the coming

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months and years to bring a growing national pilot program to the region's schools.

Cole's father, Dana Cole, founded the Fishing Education Foundation and its signature National Fishing in Schools program in 2009. Through government and foundation grants from recreational, environmental and nature groups, the Coles travel to schools to train teachers in how to teach students how to fly fish. So far, more than 100 schools in 14 states participate.

Locally, the Thames Valley Trout Unlimited obtained a $30,000 grant from the National Recreation Foundation to offer the training program to schools throughout eastern Connecticut.

Wheeler Middle and High School in North Stonington and Norwich Free Academy—already participants in the Trout Unlimited program Trout in the Classroom—jumped at the chance to expand their science and physical education programs to include fishing.

By sending teachers to go through the program and become certified fly-fishing trainers, the two schools will receive all the materials the teachers used last week in their training program—rods and reels, 20 fake fish in the shapes and sizes of species they likely would find in Connecticut lakes and rivers, curriculum books and materials.

"I have no fishing experience," Wheeler PE and health teacher Carl Weber said. "My father and grandfather fished, but I never got into it."

Until last week, Weber caught many a fake fish with his line in the Bishop gym, and looks forward to teaching middle and high school students what he never learned as a youth. Weber hopes to start teaching fishing in collaboration with Wheeler science classes starting in fall, when it's warm enough outside to practice on the school lawn.

"Hopefully, it will progress the kids to the point where they would want to do it on their own," Weber said.

NFA recently launched a marine and environmental sciences program, and science teacher Seth Yarish hopes to get his fishing supplies in time to start teaching students as soon as this spring.

Both teachers would love to take students on real fishing trips, but they have to figure out how to do that with state-required fishing licenses. Yarish said he could apply for one-day free fishing derby licenses for students, but hopes for a more sustainable program.

"If kids get involved in fishing early on, it gets them involved in other outdoor activities," Tate said, "like hiking, biking and camping.

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Cole said the eagerness shown by eastern Connecticut teachers is why her father pursued the educational program.

"We had been working with teachers, and they said they always wanted to do this, but they didn't know how to approach it," Cole said.

The Fishing Education Foundation used the successful Archery in the Schools program as the model for creating Fishing in Schools. The foundation partners with state and federal agencies, such as Trout Unlimited, and other outdoor advocacy groups.

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