Local high school students hear from Connecticut Teacher of the Year

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"You want to become a teacher because you want to change the lives of others," Brian Betesh, the 2026 Connecticut Teacher of the Year, said to an auditorium full of high schoolers, educators and Quinnipiac University students Thursday, Nov. 5.

Betesh, a sixth-grade social studies teacher with 20 years of experience at Rogers Park Middle School in Danbury, Connecticut, gave the keynote address for the Quinnipiac School of Education Teacher of the Year Conference.

The event hosted around 80 students from high schools in East Haven, New Haven, North Haven and Waterbury in The SITE auditorium to discuss careers in education and the college experience at Quinnipiac.

High schoolers and Quinnipiac students alike listened as Betesh explained why he loves teaching, before the group was divided for the second part of the event. Half the high school students went on a tour of campus, and the other half engaged in interactive activities with Betesh before listening to and questioning a panel of Quinnipiac students from various majors and academic years. The two groups then switched places.

Betesh opened his speech by explaining his struggle to find one singular story that could illustrate why he loves teaching. He said he looked through a bag which contained "every card, every note, every message, every drawing, every sticky note, every photograph" that he had ever received from a student, parent or colleague in search of one student memory that stood out.

"I got about halfway through the bag, and I realized that the story was not coming," Betesh said. "I couldn't find one singular student memory that was going to inspire you guys. But what I realized… is that the story itself I wanted to share was the bag."

He explained how the bag represented 20 years of why he loved teaching. Through a PowerPoint, he shared countless photos of old memories with students, saying they illustrated the three main reasons he loved his job.

The first reason was "the experience we get to create with our students. There's nothing more meaningful to me today in education than that sentence right there," he said.

Betesh went on to explain some of the experiences he created for his students, ranging from cheese tasting to painting teachers' classrooms to letting students create and run their own election. He said that these were the types of experiences which have a profound impact on students in the long run.

He transitioned into his second reason for loving teaching, which was the impact teachers make.

Betesh emphasised creating a comfortable classroom environment by checking in on students, helping them become friends with each other and checking in on them when they have a bad day.

"You make them feel like they can be themselves around you," Betesh said. "You taught them to be confident, to be optimistic…You showed them that you value their work…You're patient with them even when they can't spell patient."

He moved on to the connections teachers build, his third reason.

"The core of this profession is not the content that we teach, but the people that we teach it to," Betesh said.

He gave examples of previous students he was now reconnecting with as adults, kids he taught in sixth grade who were now working as doctors, plumbers, electricians, city council members and personal trainers.

"So why do I love teaching? It's these three things," Betesh said. "To build connections that last a lifetime. These are kids that I had in sixth grade that I still see today, that I know I can count on, I can talk to, and I can go up to and share memories with."

Betesh claimed his experience was not unique, and said all teachers in the room probably had a memory bag of their own.

Michele DeGiacomo, a child development teacher at North Haven High School who was chaperoning the trip, would agree.

"I have a binder like that, so I was like in tears when he was reading the notes," DeGiacomo said.

Megan Pollard, an aspiring teacher and junior Math major in the MAT program at Quinnipiac, also has a collection of memories from her time as a camp counselor. She has accumulated drawings, cards and thank-you notes from parents. She plans to continue the collection once she has a classroom of her own.

Pollard says she wishes her high school had events similar to this one, and hopes such events become the norm for more schools in the future.

"In my high school there was no teaching class," Pollard said. "And that was the most frustrating for me, because I knew exactly what I wanted to do, and I was being stunted almost."

She said she felt that more teaching classes in high schools and a stronger effort to bring students to speaking events would effectively increase the number of teachers in the nation.

According to Betesh, there is currently a shortage of teachers country-wide as people increasingly leave the profession.

"There are a lot of difficulties and challenges that teachers face on a daily basis, and we compete against a lot of other jobs across the country," he said in an interview with The Chronicle. "So the more people that we can convince that this is still a noble profession, and that you can have an impact on kids' lives for many years to come, that's kind of always my purpose."

Tricia Vitelli-Harkins, who teaches intro to public ed at North Haven High School, said she feels Quinnipiac's event achieved exactly that purpose.



ANDREW YONG YOW/CHRONICLE

Brian Betesh, a sixth-grade social studies teacher at Rogers Park Middle School in Danbury, Connecticut, gives the keynote address for the Quinnipiac School of Education Teacher of the Year Conference.

"Even just listening to Brian's speech and just what inspires him, I think that alone sparked even more curiosity in the room and more of a desire to pursue the career," Vitelli-Harkins said.

Some high schoolers at the event agreed with that sentiment.

"His stories were so motivating for me to want to become a teacher," Appolonia Daley-Blackwood, a 10th-grade student at Waterbury Career Academy, said.

She says her biggest takeaway from Betesh's talk was the importance of leaving an impact on students as a teacher and seeing how you affected them later in life.

"When I teach elementary school students, I want them to come up to me as, like, lawyers, and say, 'Yo, I remember you miss,'" Daley-Blackwood said.

Daley-Blackwood agreed that these kinds of events can help inspire more students to want to teach, helping to correct a teacher shortage that she says has a complex cause.

"In my view, the teacher shortage is not being caused by people not wanting to be teachers. It's being caused by students," she said. "Students are struggling, and teachers don't know how to form the main three topics that Brian touched on."

A 12th-grade student at Waterbury Career Academy, Jayden LeVasseur, said she feels like students engaging with Betesh's speech is a step in the right direction.

"I think a lot of teachers complain about the teacher shortage, but they never really show how much they love their jobs, and I think today really just showed that they do really make a big impact," she said.

Aside from just learning about teaching, many of the students came to the event for a chance to hear more about Quinnipiac and college in particular.

Vitelli-Harkins explained how for many of the students, it was their first ever college tour and they seemed to be really enjoying it.

She and DeGiacomo both believe that some of their current high schoolers may end up applying to Quinnipiac as a result of the event. They explained how many of the students who came were juniors and seniors trying to figure out their future plans.

"Two of the kids I brought (to the event) last year are here," DeGiacomo said.

The conference gave high schoolers a chance to hear from a panel of Quinnipiac students, as well as the two state semifinalists for Connecticut Teacher of the Year, teachers Deisha Quiñones and Jane Sarnowski. The panelists spoke about resources that helped ease their transition to college and some of the programs Quinnipiac offers.

"Our goal in organizing this conference is to inspire high school students to consider careers in education and to expand early college access through the program," Judy Puglisi, Quinnipiac School of Education's community outreach coordinator, said in a press release from Quinnipiac University.

When speaking on the overarching purpose of the event, Betesh highlighted the necessity of leaders in the education field telling people how great it can be to teach.

"Any chance I get to get in front of these kids to kind of validate what they are thinking… telling them all the positives of it cause the world will give them all the negatives of what teaching has to offer…I've relished every chance I've had," he said.

Betesh wrapped up the address expressing hope that students in the audience will one day fill up their own bags with memories, and voiced his excitement that so many students are pursuing careers in education.

"I'm excited that you guys are traveling down this route in what I think is one of the greatest professions in this world," Betesh said. "So thank you."

EVENT from cover

and Dragons Club and the Lightsaber Club.

Quinnipiac provided an official statement to The Chronicle regarding the event.

"The university is committed to providing an environment where all recognized student organizations have the opportunity to express their perspectives and engage in meaningful dialogue," Associate Vice President for Public Relations John Morgan wrote. "The university's decision to permit a student organization's event does not constitute an endorsement of the views or opinions expressed by its speakers. We administer our event and speech policies neutrally and consistently across all recognized student organizations. We remain committed to applying our policies fairly and consistently while supporting the ability of all student groups to engage and express their views."

Some students who were dissatisfied with the event hope that they'll be acknowledged by the university.

"I think it would be remiss for the university to not speak upon the harm that was caused by this event," senior psychology and film, television and media arts student and outreach coordinator for Students for Social Justice Marjae Beasley said.

Regarding long-term changes, some look towards rule changes, specifically with the university's policies on outside speakers.

"We're not here to bash the faith," senior behavioral neuroscience student Victor Constanza said. "We're more about we don't want hatred, or at least pipelines to hatred to be allowed on campus."

The Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) also provided a statement to The Chronicle, stating their goals in inclusion and acceptance on campus.

"The Gender and Sexuality Alliance support people of all religions, races, and identities," The Gender Sexuality Alliance wrote in a statement to The Chronicle. "This includes Christianity, as some of our members are Christian themselves… Our support towards our members now is more crucial than ever. We were devastated by some of the comments and statements made both online and in-person by our fellow Quinnipiac students. We only wish to be accepted for who we are."

While the result of this recent controversy is unknown, conversations between students and university officials will likely continue.