

Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives

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MOEC Celebrates 50 Years of Special Education Part 8: Empowering Poems; Student Poets Add Personal Verses to 'Wishes on Wheels' Poetry Book



Thai-son Dang, 7, of Needham, read his poem aloud for the packed assembly. Speech-Language Pathologist Katherine Choi, at left, and TEC Campus School Program Director Meredith L. Faletra, at right, helped him as he recited his "Drum Poem." (Photo Courtesy Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives)

WALPOLE — Thai-son Dang, 7, of Needham, gently tapped on his drum. It was his turn to read, and his poem was set to music.

Feeling the rhythm, young Thai-son read his “Drum Poem” at the front of the assembly.

Thai-son and nine of his fellow students, who all utilize wheelchairs for mobility, contributed poems to the newly published book “Wishes on Wheels: Poems of Power and Possibility.” For most of the students, the project not only provided a first opportunity to write poetry and read it aloud, but also their first time speaking or performing before a crowd of their peers.

“Hear the beat of my drum,” Thai-son said, seated in his chair at the front of the room. “It goes pa-rum-pum-pum-pum. When you play, it sounds loud. It’s more fun

when you play with a crowd.”

The audience cheered their support for the novice poet.

“You can play it fast,” he said softly into the microphone. “You can play it slow. You can play with friends. You can play rock and roll. Do you like the drum? Oh, I like it too. It’s more fun when I play with you.”

Applause flooded the room. Thai-son glowed.

The Project

The Education Cooperative (TEC) Campus School students accepted a challenge posed by fellow wheelchair-user Matt Brown.

Brown, a Norwood native, was paralyzed from the neck down following a boyhood hockey accident. Now, he and his friend, Suzanne Galvin, a former third-grade teacher, have collaborated on the new book, “Wishes on Wheels,” featuring the poetry of Massachusetts students who rely on wheelchairs.

“We owe so much to our poets and the entire TEC School, for not only supporting the ‘Wishes on Wheels’ project, but also the Matt Brown Foundation,” Brown told the young poets and the audience. “When you hear our poets read their poems, I just want you all to remember that it doesn’t matter how we get around, it doesn’t matter how we communicate, we all have stories to tell.”

Last school year, Brown and Galvin reached out to TEC Executive Director Emily J. Parks and TEC Campus School Program Director Meredith L. Faletra. A partnership was quickly formed.

“We talked to your principals and administrators and asked, ‘Do your kids want to write some poetry for a special book about kids who use wheelchairs for their mobility?’” Galvin told the assembly on Sept. 16. “And automatically, lightbulbs started going off ... They could picture all the wonderful poems that would be coming out of your school. So we got together, you collaborated with your teachers, and together this really special book called ‘Wishes on Wheels’ came true.”

All book sale proceeds will fund the Matt Brown Foundation, which focuses on supporting and helping people and families impacted by paralysis.

“I want you to know that this book has made such a difference and such an impact already,” Galvin told the kids and TEC staff members gathered for the assembly. A week later, the book’s publisher, Little Dreamer Press, held a launch party to celebrate the poetry collection’s official release.

Finding A Voice

“This project provided our students with an opportunity to be heard, respected and recognized for who they are,” Faletra said. “The positive experiences were endless, highlighted not only by a published book and poetry recitations in a school-wide assembly and the community book launch, but by these children and young adults finding a true role model in Matt Brown.”

All 10 student-poets took turns at the front of the room, reading their creations aloud. Some utilized the help of a teacher and some spoke via electronic devices. Others used their best speaking voices to lift their poetic verse above the background noise and to the ears of a grateful audience.

“Sharing your voices and your hearts and your hopes and your wishes with us means more than you can know,” Galvin told the young poets. “We’ve learned what makes you feel happy, proud, loved, independent, strong and brave. You are all now officially published poets. And your words will be ... forever read by countless people. Your poems open hearts, awaken curiosity and make the world a better place, one poem at a time. Thank you for trusting us with your words, your hearts and your wishes on wheels ... Your powerful, heartfelt, creative and honest poems touched all of our hearts.”

Wheels and Wishes

Lexi O'Malley, 20, of Walpole, wrote a love poem to her gait trainer, a device she uses to exercise and walk unaided.

“Sparkly hot pink gait trainer,” she said, her eyes choosing words from a digital display and an electronic voice pronouncing each verse. “Flying down the hallways

... Step. Step. Step. Independence, fast and freeing. Flying down the hallways. Focus and concentration. I feel strong.”

Trinity Elias, 18, of Norwood, followed suit, writing about her motorized power chair.

“It’s purple,” she said, reading her poem. “I like the color of it. I like to use it a lot indoors. I need help getting through the doors. I can’t do it myself. I feel happy and more comfortable using it.”

Later that day, she cruised the TEC Campus School hallways in her purple power chair, waving to friends and fist-bumping staff.

“With this project, our students embraced poetry as a meaningful way to express their voices, share their experiences, and talk about what is important to them,” Parks said. “Our educators welcomed this project with enthusiasm, providing the support needed for students to use their skills, take risks and express themselves.”

Across Massachusetts, educational collaboratives are embracing the arts and teaching students who are faced with incredible challenges how to be heard.

Now, after a half-century of special education in the Bay State, since Congress enacted legislation mandating all children with disabilities have access to a free and appropriate public education, the once voiceless are receiving the tools they need to speak out, loud and clear.

"It is heartwarming to see what our students are capable of when challenged to go beyond what is expected," said Joanne Haley Sullivan, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives (MOEC). "This is a true testimony to the progress and vision we have made since IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) was passed in 1975."

About “Wishes on Wheels: Poems of Power and Possibility”

"Wishes on Wheels" captures the voices and hearts of children in Massachusetts and New Hampshire who use wheelchairs to support their independence and mobility. All profits from sales benefit the Matt Brown Foundation, a 501(C)3 providing support and assistance to groups, individuals and families living with or recovering from illness or injury, with a particular emphasis on paralysis. For more

information, visit mattbrownfoundation.org. To purchase the book, "Wishes on Wheels," click [here](#).

In 2025, the Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives (MOEC) is celebrating the 50th anniversary of special education with a series of feature stories that will help to tell the untold stories of collaboratives to help educate the public about what collaboratives do and how they have evolved to serve the needs of our most vulnerable students over the past five decades.

In 1975, Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) to ensure that all children with disabilities have access to a free and appropriate public education. Congress changed the name of the law to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), in a 1990 reauthorization — and IDEA was again reauthorized in 2004.

MOEC is the professional organization representing the Commonwealth's educational collaboratives. Massachusetts Collaboratives are a statewide network of educational service agencies that work together with school districts and schools to implement direct educational services and programs to students and adults, develop programs and services to enhance school districts' operating efficiency, and provide high-quality professional development and technical assistance.

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Thai-son Dang, 7, of Needham, poses for a photo with his new hero, Matt Brown. One of Dang's poems is featured in Brown's new book, "Wishes on Wheels." (Photo Courtesy Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives)



TEC Campus School Program Director Meredith L. Faletra introduced Matt Brown, at left, and 10 young poets who read aloud to the audience. (Photo Courtesy Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives)



TEC Campus School Program Director Meredith L. Faletra greets Trinity Elias, 18, of Norwood, who wrote a poem about her purple power chair. (Photo Courtesy Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives)



Trinity Elias, 18, of Norwood, laughs with Teacher's Assistant Amanda Melone before reciting her poem, "My Power Chair." (Photo Courtesy Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives)



Lexi O'Malley, 20, of Walpole, reads her poem with a little laughter and assistance from TEC Special Education Teacher Evelyn "Evie" Abbott. (Photo Courtesy Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives)



Music Therapist Mara Herrera helped Thai-son Dang read his "Drum Poem" at the TEC Campus School. (Photo Courtesy Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives)

A message from Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives (MOEC)

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