In the fall of 2012, Chris Willems of New Haven’s Metropolitan Business Academy, became the first teacher to teach Public Health 101: From Disease Prevention to Disaster Preparedness, a course designed for high school students. The high interest content, including topics like teen pregnancy and water scarcity, and its “blended” format, emphasizing online and experiential learning, appealed to Mr. Willems.

When interviewed last spring, he was upbeat about the course, noting, “Students really enjoy digging deep into these topics …like the EPA plastic ban in Connecticut. They like … getting involved in by first learning science behind the [plastic] ban and then how to use the legislative process to deal with it.”

Public Health courses are catching on in Connecticut and winning national praises. Newtown High School adopted the course in 2013, and in 2014, the U.S. News and World Report’s Annual Edition on Best Colleges named Public Health as a “…top degree that leads to a job.” Connecticut’s high school version of the course helps prepare students for the undergraduate degree, which is leading to better job opportunities.

What is Public Health 101 for high schools?

Public Health 101 was developed for Education Connection by a team of public health professionals and digital learning experts. Each of the eight units below prepares students for careers and volunteerism in public health, while raising their awareness of the connection between their personal health behaviors and the community’s health with opportunities for experiential learning and capstones.

- Unit 1: Protect, Prevent, Live Well: What is Public Health?
- Unit 2: Looking for Answers in all the Right Places: Public Health Research
- Unit 3: Got to Get a Message to you: Health Communication
- Unit 4: Risky Business: Social and Behavioral Health
- Unit 5: Catch Me If You Can: Disease Prevention and Control
- Unit 6: In a Not So Perfect World: Global Public Health
- Unit 7: Every Breath you take: Environmental Health and Public Health Preparedness
- Unit 8: Think Globally, Act Locally: Emerging Issues in Public Health and Careers that Address Them

A key component of the course is a cadre of talented public health professionals with degrees (Masters in Public Health) that few high school educators hold. The state’s two public health 101 teachers, Mr. Willems, and Susan McConnell of Newtown High, continue to be supported by classroom mentors from The Connecticut Public Health Association’s Mentoring Organization Registry (CPHA MOR).

CPHA is the state affiliate of the American Public Health Association. CPHA board members started the Mentoring Organization Registry (MOR) with seven public health organizations that agreed to lend staff to schools to grow the future workforce.

Today there are 34 MOR members including the American Cancer Society, Yale School of Public Health, University of Connecticut and Southern Connecticut State University MPH programs, the CT Department of Public Health, and 11 local and regional health departments. They provide experiential learning for teachers and students in all eight counties.

MOR member and health communications consult-
ant from Yale, Linda Bergonzi-King, worked with Newtown’s Public Health 101 teacher, Susan McConnell, who immersed her students in a challenging project just weeks into the course, the World Health Organization’s Hand Washing video contest. Bergonzi-King volunteered to guide the teacher and class in this early project, being careful to allow the students to create the message and the video.

Students began by researching the extent of disease caused by poor hand washing, then imbedded written facts into the video. They demonstrated cultural consciousness by counting to 20 in different languages while washing their hands. Public Health Wash Your Hands won them first place in their age group in this international contest. Susan McConnell has been impressed with student gains, noting, “...their cultural awareness has really been heightened because of this class and they have learned ...that they CAN make a difference.”

April 7-13, 2014 National Public Health Week is a time when the MOR makes a special effort to engage Connecticut schools in public health activities. Our goal is to reach 1,000 students through guest speakers at high schools and our Day at the Capitol, where students learn about key issues from experts in public and environmental health and about the process of advocacy.

The CPHA MOR has provided educators and students from over 70 CT schools with presenters, online materials and workshops on integrating public health into established courses such as biology, sociology, health and environmental sciences.

For internship manuals, resources and information visit CPHA MOR or contact Cyndi.Billianstern@cpha.info or Pamela.Kilbey-fox@cpha.info