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Professors build partnership between Chile and state

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STAMFORD —Alejandro Buschmann, director of the largest aquaculture college in Chile, is going to change the face of science education in his country, and he plans to do it with the help of a professor at the University of Connecticut's Stamford campus and a high school in Bridgeport.

"The main thing is that aquaculture is very important in Chile," said Buschmann, who is director of the I-Mar Center at the University of Los Lagos in Puerto Montt, Chile. Chile, he said, is the top producer of salmon in the world, outstripping Norway, but the country, he added, has several issues. One of those issues is the state of education in the country.

Buschmann means to improve that.

He began making strides toward his goal last week when he visited Connecticut.

Buschmann is a long-time colleague of Charles Yarrish, professor of marine science at UConn Stamford. The two men spent the last 15 years studying seaweed and other marine life together.

It was Yarrish, who sits on the board of the Bridgeport Regional Vocational Aquaculture School, introduced Buschmann to the school.

"I liked the model," said Buschmann, who then wrote a grant to El Fondo de Fomento al Desarrollo Científico y Tecnológico [FONDEF], a Chilean agency devoted to improving innovation in science, research and development in Chile. The grant will give Buschmann the funding to make changes to four environmental secondary schools in the area of Puerto Montt, where the University of Los Lagos is located.

Buschmann hopes to use the Bridgeport school as a model.

"We will use the environment of aquaculture to improve the capabilities and skills of our teachers," said Buschmann.

Part of those changes will be a faculty exchange program —Chilean teachers will be sent to Bridgeport and Bridgeport teachers will go to Chile to teach there.

According to Yarrish, who has visited Chile, the schools in the country are teaching science in a way which doesn't work — science is taught in short periods, and there is very little hands-on work.

"You can't teach science in that way," he said.

The program, he said, may change the entire educational model used in Chile.

"No one else in that country could have pulled it off," said Yarrish.

Yarrish became involved with the Bridgeport school when it opened in 1993 for reasons similar to Buschmann's — he wanted to see students with good foundations in marine science come to his university.

The exchange is expected to begin this summer.

John Curtis, principal of the aquaculture school, could not be reached for comment.,

Yarrish is thrilled with the program, which he says mirrors some of the programs the aquaculture school has done with China and South Korea.

"This is one of the most exciting projects," he said. "It's an inner-city school, half of the population is from Bridgeport and half are from six surrounding towns.... 34 percent of the school population are Latino... it shows the Latino students that the Latinos in South America really do some amazing things."