When it comes to education, Dianna Wentzell EdD’10 has seen it all. She’s taught high school and middle school in the suburbs and served as an administrator for Hartford Public Schools and the Capitol Region Education Council. In the spring of 2015, she became Connecticut’s education commissioner. From the Common Core State Standards to differences among school districts, Wentzell has the expertise and experience to address any questions that come her way. And she says the University’s Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership program helped make it possible.

“What I really appreciated about the program was that it was cohort-based,” she says. “And it wasn’t only limited to people who were already in education. There were people from nursing, business, and other professions. That really appealed to me, and I would definitely say that was one of the real strengths of the program. I learned so much more than I would have in a straightforward kindergarten-through-12th-grade program.”

Wentzell also appreciated her advisor, Donn Weinholtz, professor of educational leadership in the University’s College of Education, Nursing and Health Professions, for being flexible and supportive while she worked on her dissertation.

“He let me meet with him every two weeks, instead of three, which for him meant more work,” she says. “He was great. He always was so prepared. We were a good fit. I would advise [those] trying to do advanced work to make sure their mentors and advisors are a good fit. There can be great people who just aren’t the right fit.”

Wentzell didn’t always plan to become a teacher. She majored in Russian studies at Mount Holyoke College. But when she graduated, she decided to explore education as a career and went on to earn her master’s in educational leadership from the University of Massachusetts. She started teaching the year she earned her degree.

Although she didn’t necessarily realize it when she was a child, Wentzell now credits her third-grade teacher for inspiring her to become an educator. She hopes to encourage the next generation of role models during her time as commissioner.

“I’d really like to shine a spotlight on education as a really exciting, engaging, and dynamic field,” she says. “It’s really hard work, but it’s fun work. It’s never the same thing twice. For people that really need a lot of stimulation, education is a great career.”

Wentzell’s daughter, Nadia, could be one of those people. She studied education before graduating in June 2015 from University High School of Science and Engineering (UHSSE) on the UHart campus. Wentzell had the pleasure of presenting Nadia with her diploma. Wentzell’s son, Charles, graduated from UHSSE in 2012 as the school’s first National Merit Scholar.

Wentzell, who has three other children, says today’s students may have future careers that don’t even exist today.

“The kids we’re teaching now are going to be in careers that haven’t been invented yet,” she explains. “I’m already seeing that happen. When I taught 30 years ago, we didn’t even have the Internet. Think of how many people have jobs in that field. They have jobs we couldn’t have imagined. [We have to think] a lot more about what skills are going to make our kids successful in whatever their future will bring so that they can be in the driver’s seat.”

Top, left to right: University President Walter Harrison; UHSSE June graduate Nadia Wentzell, her mother, Dianna Wentzell EdD’10; and UHSSE principal Matt Folan. Right: Dianna Wentzell EdD’10, state education commissioner.