interaction

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Wynne Watts Team:
the power of experience and innovation

By Janelle Emery and Mark Skolnick

The educational landscape at MESD's Wynne Watts school can be uneven, unsteady and replete with unexpected complications. Navigating this road, making headway and reaching a fixed destination is a journey of s-curves and speed bumps.

It is also a voyage with limitless rewards.

For the teaching team of **Dawn Rosenlund** and **Janet Briggs**, Wynne Watts is a stop along the trajectory of two remarkable lifetimes. Their fascinating paths to Wynne Watts are different, yet similar as they traveled trails of exploration, introspection, advocacy, study and service.

Their diverse life experiences enrich their daily interaction with students. Dawn and Janet teach students a subject matter, but they also polish frayed edges and mend damaged psyches. They replace suspicion with trust, substitute cooperation for hostility and drown self-doubt with confidence.

From EA to teacher

Dawn began as an educational assistant at Wynne Watts in 2008, rejoining Principal **Patrick McArthur** with whom she worked at Northwest Regional ESD. However, Dawn set her sights on a new goal: she wanted to have her degree by the time she reached the age 60.

She learned of a teaching degree program designed for educational assistants who work with children with special needs. Dawn recognized this window of opportunity and jumped through with her characteristic enthusiasm. She went on to Portland State University to earn her degree.

Friday, September 24, 2010, was a special day for Dawn. With Patrick's recommendation, she was officially hired as a special education teacher for MESD.

Those who work with Dawn are not surprised by her nontraditional path to teaching. As a veteran world traveler and outdoors woman, her life continues to be a huge adventure.

She began her career as an international union organizer for the UFCW and was a labor liaison with the Pilots and Building Trades unions. She met her future husband, a bush pilot who flew above the Artic Circle, when she was 30. They each sold their boats and bought a sailboat together. Their first trip was sailing to Tonga and Fiji. They sailed for nine years from Alaska to Africa. After she lost her husband, she returned to Alaska and became co-director of USSR People to People Program, working with American youth traveling in the Soviet Union. For eight years, she worked in the commercial fishing industry. In 2000, she moved to Oregon to be closer to her parents who needed her help and care.

Dawn Rosenlund prepares materials for her teaching assignment.

The perfect fit with Dawn

Janet Briggs' background is perhaps the perfect complement to Dawn's exploration on the high seas and life in Alaska. Janet has applied her intellect, wisdom and commitment to service as a nun (eight years), a teacher (seven years), a lawyer (20 years) and then a return to working with young people at Rosemont and Albertina Kerr in 2001.

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Wynne Watts

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Janet finds innovative ways to instill a love of reading and learning. Recognizing that students were more apt to read about topics that relate to their lives, she filled the school library with carefully chosen books. She and other staff add new books all the time which keeps students deeply interested in reading. Janet also expanded the library so it is available to students in a secure setting even during holidays and non school periods.

Outside the box thinking

According to Patrick, Dawn and Janet are a great team and are encouraged to think outside the box. They have responded with creative, customized curriculum and special projects. He also appreciates their style and work ethic. "Janet and Dawn are hard-working and humble," commented Patrick.

In turn, the team appreciates the support of their principal. "Patrick gives us the freedom to expand our vision," said Dawn. "Pat trusts us and has faith in us."

Janet (left) and Dawn make a perfect team for Principal Patrick McArthur.

One of their favorite projects uses poetry to help students express their feelings. Dawn and Janet sit with each student as they customize borders, fonts and art into their poems. The final product is a something the students can keep and treasure.

One poem that expresses the feelings of a 14 year old boy reads:

"I dream of a world where war
is just a card game.

Where childhood is a world
where nobody dies.

I dream of a world where we only get
in trouble for writing on the wall.

Where jail is where you go when you
get tagged in capture the flag."

Their teaching philosophy revolves around what is best for the students. "We are dusting off the way they learned in the past and re-charging the way they learn," said Dawn. "It's a place where we allow a kid to be a kid."

Kids are in crisis

Teaching in MESD's program at Wynne Watts is not for everyone. The children, ages 6-17, are often suicidal, coming from a traumatic/violent situation, are in danger of harming others and are experiencing uncontrollable and dramatic changes in behavior. The educational staff must be constantly aware of the restrictions of working within a locked psychiatric setting. Ordinary objects such as long pencils, are prohibited, as are metal objects, string and many other items. Their classroom environment can change drastically at any moment and each day new students in crisis may arrive.

"We have to respect the kid's space. We always give them a chance to adjust before they can come out of their comfort zone and be able to trust us," commented Janet.

By combining their talents, Dawn and Janet are giving students maximum opportunity to succeed. "It's very important that we set up an environment that is supportive to the kids," said Janet. "Our goal is to make today a better day than the kids had yesterday."

When Janet was asked what she likes about working with Dawn, she replied: "The best thing about working with Dawn is we have synergy. We balance each other out. The kids think we're sisters"

Food-filled backpacks ensure a weekend of nutrition for families at Harrison Park School

By Mark Skolnick

On a recent Friday afternoon, MESD School Nurse **Carol Hill** drew a crowd of excited children who gathered near the main office at Harrison Park School in Southeast Portland. On three carts sat 25 orange backpacks stuffed with an array of nutritious food. The children's families have all signed up to receive some extra food over the weekend and, one by one, students arrive to receive their bounty.

Although the backpack project is Carol's brainchild, she is quick to point out that she's had plenty of support from others who understand the importance of good nutrition in a school where 87% of students qualify for free and reduced meals.

Referring to her weekly list, Carol and school secretary **Vicki Penfield** match names with numbered packs and begin the distribution. Harrison Park (formerly Binnsmead) is a K-8 school so the recipients range from kindergarteners to older students.

On this day, a few of the very youngest students are almost dwarfed by the bursting-at-the-seams backpacks.

"Lean forward so the pack doesn't tip you over," Carol reminds the smaller ones.

With the straps securely placed over their shoulders, the children head back down to the hall, delighted that they will be bringing home the food to their families.

Carol started the project last year when she realized that many students were not getting enough food to eat during the weekend. So she came up with a powerfully simple plan: why not distribute food to needy students each Friday so their families could be assured of having healthy and balanced food available in their homes.

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"The thing about this project is that it is doable," she said. "I know it makes a difference because students have told me that it means they will have something to eat over the weekend."

Carol, a lifelong Portland area resident, used her network of local contacts to build support for the project. As she developed the idea, she mentioned it at parties and gatherings of friends. People jumped at the chance to pitch in with donations.

At a restaurant one night, Carol ran into old friends – **Tim Boyle** and his wife of **Columbia Sportswear**. During a "what have you been up to" conversation, she mentioned the project to the Boyles and the next day her phone rang. It was Tim asking if he could help. He told her he had backpacks that she could use and soon the sturdy packs showed up at the school.

Using the packs donated by Columbia Sportswear, and purchasing food with community donations, Carol and a few volunteers fill the backpacks each Friday. The backpacks contain peanut butter, jelly, pasta and pasta

Stacks of food await school nurse Carol Hill and her volunteers.

This year the entire project has been underwritten by Nike through their donation of $10,000. Their gift will purchase food and allow the program to expand to more families.

Last year Carol had 693 backpacks sent home. She has a list of about 200 families who receive food and she rotates the distribution so that each family can benefit in turn. The students return the backpacks on Monday so she can get ready for the next distribution.

Carol and her husband shop each Saturday and Vicki gets the bread on Thursdays. Two volunteers from Oregon International Air Freight come each Friday to fill the back packs.

Carol, who splits her time between Harrison Park and Mt. Tabor Middle School, is now in her 22nd year as a nurse at MESD. But her enthusiasm for this kind of "value added" project is infectious. While she could retire at any time, it's clear that for her, school nursing is a mission, as well as a job.

In some ways, Carol's personal philanthropy is reflective of her school health colleagues at MESD. These are the things that MESD school nurses do…finding children health insurance, getting them free vision and dental care, providing immunizations and expanded health screening, securing community resources to help families in need. And if providing a little extra food for the weekend ensures that children come to school on Monday with a smile and full belly, then Carol may just keep on nursing for a long time to come.

sauce, chili, macaroni and cheese, juice, bread and healthy snacks. Sometimes they also include vegetables grown in the school's garden. Carol also includes a flyer with a list of community resources available for needy families.

MESD's Medicaid team navigates the bureaucracy and districts reap the benefits

The Medicaid Team (left to right) Eric Gustafson, Helen Hayes, Wendy Chase, Bridget Moriarty, Eric Dunphy, Karen Lapeyre, Sandra Peterson, and Lucy Wojcicki.

There's gold in them thar hills is a well-worn catch phrase that originated during the gold rush of 1849. But a modern day interpretation may be: "Thar's money for schools in Medicaid reimbursement."

Like the search for precious metals, extracting reimbursement from Medicaid takes perseverance, technical know-how and a lots of old fashioned hard work.

Over the past decade, MESD facilitated claims totaling in the millions of dollars for a variety of customers through the Medicaid Administrative Claiming (MAC) program and the Medicaid School-Based Health Services Billing program.

Through relentless attention to detail and persistent training of district staff, MESD has tapped a wellspring of funding for schools and county health departments.

None of this would be possible without the leadership of supervisors **Sandra Peterson and Eric Gustafson** and their team of **Helen Hayes, Lucy Wojcicki, Karen Lapeyre, Bridget Moriarty, Wendy Chase** and **Eric Dunphy.**

Two flavors of Medicaid claiming

There are two types of reimbursement that MESD provides: **Medicaid School-Based Health Services** processes claims in Early Childhood Special Education, Functional Living Skills and Nursing services provided to Medicaid eligible children. **Medicaid Administrative Claiming** is a population-based program that recovers funds tied to services that school or health department staff coordinate as part of their daily jobs.

Sandra, Lucy, Helen, Karen and Bridget are the team who facilitate the school based billing program. Lucy (now retiring) does the MESD component and Portland Public Schools. Her work generates two-thirds of all the dollars. Helen does all the other districts which is extremely tedious because they all are different. With staffing changes, both Bridget and Karen will soon assume new responsibilities for the program.

MESD is a quite fortunate to have Sandra, according to **Beth Baynes**, director of Health and Social Services. Sandra is Oregon's foremost expert on the school-based component. With over 30 years of experience in the field, Sandra is a gold mine of Medicaid history and knowledge.

Sandra clarifies the complex system so even a casual observer can understand how it works.

"The school based health services, from Medicaid's perspective, is an opportunity for schools to recover federal funds for specific student services," Sandra said. "So we first identify the student. The child has to have an IEP and that becomes the authorizing document instead of physician's prescription in the outside world of health care. In the special education world, it is the IEP that identifies those related services such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech, nursing, delegated health care, audiology and licensed clinical social worker. All those individuals are dually licensed in the education world, not as educators, but as medical professionals. We can recover some of the service time they give to each student who is Medicaid eligible."

The process and basis for Medicaid Administrative Claiming (MAC) Program is completely different, explained Eric Gustafson. The genesis of MAC began a decade ago.

"In 2001 (former School Health director) **Barbara Neely** came to us with an idea," Eric recalled. "Linn Benton Lincoln and High Desert ESDs were doing MAC with an all-paper system. Barbara asked if there was a way we could scan the papers."

District	*2009-10 Medicaid School Based Billing Services net revenue claimed*	*2009-10 MAC net revenue*	*Total MAC Revenue 2002-09*
Centennial	$ 75,546	$ 143,823	$ 3,683,603
Corbett	n/a	4,799	59,125
David Douglas	168,763	203,876	6,702,702
Gresham-Barlow	162,964	123,052	4,350,145
Parkrose	66,166	25,966	2,169,236
Portland	407,879	529,394	12,622,728
Reynolds	442,687	79,843	3,619,275
Riverdale	n/a	9,416	322,672
Total	**$1,324,005**	**$1,120,169**	**$33,529,486**

Using his technology background, Eric reasoned it would more efficient if MESD could eliminate the paper and do it all online. By the winter of 2002 the program was off and running with schools in Multnomah County. Eventually, Eric and his team enlisted additional customers including Eugene, Clackamas ESD and Union Baker ESD. As word spread, MESD began providing the service to numerous county health departments as well. A few years later the state of Alaska got on board. Now, according to Eric, MESD has 200 customers.

The software being used is called Medisync, which was developed by an outside contractor (Gene Neely, Barbara's husband). There are two components of the tool. First, it allows a random sampling of staff to log in and take a survey. Then there is the administrative tool which takes the data from the surveys and generates a claim. "We store salary and benefit information from all these districts and then we multiply the salary and benefit times the percent of time spent in eligible activities times the Medicaid eligible percentage in that county," said Eric.

This sounds straightforward, but with so much money at stake, how does Eric know the system can pass accountability benchmarks with state officials?

"We did everything with the Department of Human Services," he explained. "They said 'this is ok, you can do it this way,' so when we were writing this we were in constant close contact with DHS to make sure that what they want is in the system. They really endorse our system. They were the reason we got all these other customers because they told others 'If you want to do this program you need to go though MESD.'"

The system has a series of built-in checks and balances. If Eric spots something unusual, or the district or the state see something that doesn't look right, they can question it. Any anomaly can be flagged. "If we get audited it's already been looked at five times," Eric said.

Recently a number of MESD staff went to a Medicaid conference back east. What they learned validated their pride in the MESD's system. "We went to the conference and discovered that the systems used in other states were things we were doing years ago. We are pretty far ahead of everyone else," said Eric.

MESD helps customers recover costs for any kind of administrative function related to the Oregon Health Plan. This may include getting children on Medicaid, getting them to the doctor, or other administrative functions that are related to Medicaid service provision.

Eric Dunphy and Wendy Chase are indispensable members of the MAC team. Wendy keeps track of records and is the liaison to the districts. She manages staff training which is tracked by the administrative tool, and collects cost pool information - salary and benefits - from each district. Eric Dunphy does the programming and makes modifications as suggested by DHS.

Medicaid School Based Billing started by President Reagan

The availability of the school based program was initiated by President Ronald Reagan in 1988, recalled Sandra. "President Reagan was convinced by a mother with a child who was medically-fragile who asked: 'My child is receiving Medicaid, why can't the school bill for service?'" He was convinced that Medicaid should be a "prior resource" to education, Sandra said. In 1988 it became part of the Medicaid Catastrophic Health Act. "That one little sentence made a huge difference," said Sandra.

Each participating school has to be a certified Medicaid provider. This began in Oregon in 1990 and Sandra was an outreach person for the Medicaid agency. Her job was to get the schools up to speed and it wasn't easy.

"First we had to convince them that this was a funding stream. In order to get reimbursement, they had to agree to participate and be recognized as a provider. The districts had to get a contractual agreement with the state and get a provider number, just like dentists or other medical professionals," said Sandra

Sandra said that 44 states participate in the direct billing program, but not as many take advantage of the MAC. Although it seems like a no-brainer to tap this funding source, the paperwork and documentation can be daunting for districts. To overcome resistance, Sandra tries to convince partners that it is worth the effort. "You have to have a cheerleader in there and you have to have someone to go to help you through the hard part. If we didn't do this for our districts, they wouldn't do this. They can't devote the time or the personnel for this. We do the training for all the medical professionals who work for the districts. Medicaid pays for many of their people just by billing."

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