HARNESSING THE POWER OF ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

Vision Enhancement Center Open
Dear Friends,

The concept of addressing a student’s “wholeness” includes focusing not only on academic functioning, but also on components affecting the child’s well-being, including the social and emotional, behavioral and physical health of the child.

This edition of our Insights newsletter features stories that complement WPSBC’s efforts to address the “wholeness” of our students. From the debut of the Vision Enhancement Center that connects individuals with a menu of Assistive Technology to help compensate for vision deficiencies, to the ingenuity of our behavior support specialists that help our students develop emotionally, WPSBC remains committed to addressing all of the wide-ranging and ever-changing needs of our pupils.

Working diligently to reach new levels of self-sufficiency and self-confidence, our students are supported by an unmatched team of teachers of the visually impaired, health professionals, therapists and support staff.

Although we are certainly a team of “All Stars,” we are thrilled to turn the spotlight on our Physical Therapist Laura Dobrich, on page 6, who was recently honored with a prestigious national award.

The School community is also excited to announce a new member of our team as we welcome Barbara Noble Howard to our Board of Trustees. Originally from Johannesburg, South Africa, Mrs. Noble Howard graduated from Temple University and is the Executive Director of the Impact Young Lives Foundation.

The WPSBC team’s collective success is truly thanks to the encouragement and support from our “fans.” As always, we depend on the community’s generous assistance to help us capture a vision of independence for the hundreds of babies, youth and young adults from throughout western Pennsylvania that we gratefully serve.

Thank you for your consideration and interest.

Kind Regards,

Todd S. Reeves
Superintendent
From Our Perspective
Snapshots of School Life

Tamihya and Edin celebrate with medals after competing in a team triathlon event organized by our Physical Therapists (PT) in honor of National PT Month.

Transitional Program students Allana and Kaisha get patriotic while learning a lesson about voting and democracy.

Sixteen-year-old student Jessica inspects a job while on duty at Lavi’s Paw Prints, our on-site print and copy shop.

Ayden enjoys the warm embrace of Frosty the Snowman during the PTO’s sponsored “Winter Wonderland” holiday event.

Laura gets into the spirit of the “Lion King” and shakes a maraca during Drama Club.
For a child with a visual impairment, participating in everyday activities at home and at school can be a challenge. When faced with being unable to see the board in the classroom, participate in recess games or connect with friends on social media, children with visual impairments can fall behind in class, feel isolated or struggle socially.

However, with the effective use of Assistive Technology (AT) at school and in the home, that same child can experience significantly greater academic and personal success. But what is Assistive Technology for vision? The term Assistive Technology refers to a wide range of supports available for people with disabilities that vary from low-tech to high-tech. Low-tech devices may include a handheld magnifier or a reading stand that elevates the student’s reading materials, while a high-tech device may be an electronic magnification system or the use of specialized computer software.

Assistive Technology is any adaptive device that increases participation, success or independence for a student with a disability. Assistive Technology for individuals who are visually impaired (with and without additional disabilities) helps to increase their access to information and improve their overall academic performance.

In a time of enormous technological advancements, AT for vision has become an integral part of many students’ educational plans. Students are learning to access touch screen devices, use Bluetooth keyboards and switches, access the internet with voiceover controls and even read electronic documents with refreshable braille displays.

At the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children, we have a vested interest in the educational impact we can have on students with visual impairments both here at the school and in the surrounding communities. We recognize the importance and relevance of appropriate AT for our diverse body of students, which is why we have recently established the Vision Enhancement Center (VEC).

“The VEC is a collaboration of healthcare providers, educators, social workers and other specialists throughout Allegheny County,” said Beth Ramella, Director of Outreach and CVI Project Leader. “Our Mission is to help maximize the potential of children with visual impairment.”
The VEC has been made available, free of charge, for both enrolled and non-enrolled students to receive formal Assistive Technology evaluations with a wide range of available resources including low-, mid-, and high-tech solutions. Coinciding with the debut of the VEC is the appointment of Cecelia Manning as WPSBC’s new AT Specialist.

Manning’s role is to serve as a type of Assistive Technology matchmaker. Her job is to assess our students and evaluate which type of Assistive Technology tool is best suited for their individual vision needs. Alongside the student’s Teacher of the Visually Impaired, her goal is to improve the student’s use of AT in the classroom in order to ensure greater access to both academic and personal materials and activities.

As a Certified Teacher of the Visually Impaired and Orientation and Mobility Instructor, Manning previously worked as an instructor in WPSBC’s Outreach Department. Now, she is excited to begin her new role, matching students with equipment and tools that will help them both in and out of school.

“I’m passionate about making sure that all of our students have equal access to Assistive Technology and finding the best solution for each child,” said Manning.

Technology will continue to evolve and provide us with ever-emerging ways to access information. By providing the right equipment to compensate for visual deficiencies, we hope to empower our students with an education that fits their individualized needs and abilities.

For more information about Assistive Technology or the Vision Enhancement Center, please contact Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children at 412-621-0100 (ext. 379) or email ramellab@wpsbc.org.

Assistive Technology

Assistive Technology is defined as “any item, piece of equipment or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified or customized, that is used to increase, maintain or improve functional capabilities of a child with a disability.” Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

The WPSBC Vision Enhancement Center houses a wide array of basic to cutting edge Assistive Technology devices for students with vision impairment to trial in order to find the best solution for each individual child.

Low-tech AT: Abacus, optical magnifiers, monocular, telescopes, manual braille writers, slate and stylus

High-tech AT: CCTV, electronic magnifiers, electronic white boards, braille embossers and adapted GPS devices
A TRUE MVP(T)

WPSBC Physical Therapist Receives National Award

Congratulations to Laura Dobrich, who was recognized as the 2016 “Outstanding Related Service Provider” by the Principals of the Schools for the Blind (POSB) organization.

Each year, POSB recognizes the contributions of remarkable individuals from around the nation who work with students with visual impairments through its annual awards program. Dobrich received her award in October at the meeting of the Council of Schools for the Blind (COSB) in Louisville, Kentucky.

Dobrich has worked at WPSBC for nearly two decades. She holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Biology from the University of Pittsburgh and Master’s and Transitional Doctorate degrees in Physical Therapy (PT) from Temple University. She has also obtained her Pediatric Clinical Specialist (PCS) Certification, which is the highest level of recognition for clinical practitioners. As a PT in our unique setting, Dobrich integrates services into the classroom, aquatic environments, as well as during orthotic and equipment clinics.

In addition to providing exceptional service on a daily basis as a Physical Therapist, Dobrich conceptualized, organized and inspired her colleagues to establish adapted Beep Soccer and Beep Baseball enrichment groups. Considering that 80% of the WPSBC student body is non-ambulatory and most could be described as medically fragile, the depth and breadth of accommodations, modifications and adaptations required to create a meaningful experience for each and every student is reflective of Dobrich’s impressive dedication.

Our adapted sports games are truly big events – complete with announcers, scorekeepers and popcorn for those sitting in the stands. It’s very special for our parents and grandparents, many of whom experience a family life that at times can feel constrained by the lack of caregivers for respite opportunities and other substantial challenges to normality.

“Dobrich’s capacity to engage students in physical activities adapted specifically for them surpasses the expectations, and often the hopes, of parents who are well-versed in the limits that medical professionals predict for their child, given the depth and breadth of their physical and sensory disabilities,” said Superintendent Todd Reeves.

Further, Dobrich extends her commitment by dedicating herself to other professional and school-related efforts from helping to pilot the new curriculum, to mentoring students and staff and representing the school and her colleagues at numerous local and national conferences.

But it’s her compassion and devotion to her students that make her exceptional. “When she works with her students, her personality and passion shine, as do the smiles on her students’ faces,” comments Julie Whitbeck-Lewinski, Director of Related Services. The entire school community congratulates Dobrich on this significant award and appreciates that she is on our WPSBC team!

When honored recently, PT Laura Dobrich thanked her students by stating, “Even with their many challenges, they are determined, resilient and generally happy, even though we ask them to work harder than we do every single day.”
Imagine a world in which you could not understand when your friend was feeling sad or when a classmate or colleague was angry. The ability to express and control our emotions and to understand, interpret and respond to the feelings of others is known as emotional intelligence (EQ) and can be vital to a person’s overall well-being.

For WPSBC Lead Behavior Therapist Jenifer Brander and Behavior Therapist Samantha Kostelnik, strengthening our students’ EQ has become a passion. Recognizing our boys and girls with visual impairment are not able to learn these skills and norms through observing like their peers do, Brander and Kostelnik have championed for adapted, age-appropriate activities to instill emotional development.

Since piloting a program in 2008 for WPSBC preschool students with vision impairment who were transitioning into their home districts, they have rallied other WPSBC staff members to incorporate lessons and strategies that promote self-awareness when it relates to positive emotional well-being. Tying in social interaction and self-determination concepts from the School’s curriculum, Brander and Kostelnik aim to help our students relate to others, express their feelings, feel safe in the world and learn to cope with emotions.

Understanding the importance of personal contribution can serve as a source of purpose and motivation. “We challenge the students to think outside themselves, how they can impact others and that it matters,” said Brander.

Going beyond typical role-play scenarios, activities are creatively designed to introduce often complicated subjects to students. Practicing “pay-it-forward” type lessons, students have organized an animal shelter drive, grown sunflowers and delivered them to residents of a local retirement home and play games encouraging social interaction.

“The students learn about themselves and how they relate to others by spreading positivity both in and outside the school,” said Kostelnik.

For the group of students in Instructor Kate Landon and Sara Georgalis’ classrooms, a collaborative lesson found them playfully passing a “positive attitude ball” that is covered in quotes, questions and words to live by like, “Name one special or unique talent that you have,” “What does ‘You can catch more flies with honey than vinegar’ mean?” and “Compliment someone next to you.” The activity leads to conversations about personal feelings, common frustrations and tactics to adopt a more positive attitude.

Now more than ever, all children need to realize that the world is a better place because they are in it. Brander and Kostelnik hope to continue to broaden their programming to include more students to ensure that each and every one of our boys and girls know this life-affirming lesson.
Mission Statement: The Mission of the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children is to be a leading educational facility and Outreach provider. The School offers a full range of exceptional individualized special education services fostering maximum independence for students with visual impairment, including blindness and other challenges, and provides support and resources to families and the community.

2017 Events Calendar

**APRIL**
- 5: CVI Clinic for Non-Enrolled Students
- 7: Parent Partnership Meeting
- 13-17: Spring Break
- 19: Grandparent Express
- 25: Vision Enhancement Center (VEC) clinic for non-enrolled students

**MAY**
- 4: Prom
- 13: Highmark Walk for a Healthy Community
- 29-30: Memorial Day Holiday

**JUNE**
- 7: Preschool/Kindergarten Promotion Ceremony
- 8: Senior Recognition
- 9: Last Day of School

Step up your support of WPSBC and join us at the 2017 Highmark Walk for a Healthy Community.

**Where:** Stage AE

**When:** Saturday, May 13

**5k Walk:** 9 am

**One-Mile Fun Walk:** 9:15 am

Can't make the event? Don't worry – you can register as a "Virtual Walker." All of the money raised by our walkers and donors goes directly to support our students!

Details and registration available online at [www.wpsbc.org](http://www.wpsbc.org)