New and Notable

SPEECH DEPARTMENT
As technology advancements are filling our daily lives, so are these advancements expanding the world of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). To keep up to date with some of the most current AAC devices available to our students, the Speech and Language Department met with the local representative from Tobii Dynavox. Tobii Dynavox is the leading provider of touch based assistive technology, which pairs with Mayer-Johnson to provide interactive, picture communication symbols within its software. The department was able to see the most current devices on the market, the T-Series, as well as access and program the new software available through those devices. The T-Series devices offer improved portability and customization to meet the unique needs of our students and enhance their learning experiences.

Calendar of Events

July 6 – First Day of Summer Program
July 14 – 6:00 pm Altamont Location Family Night
August 4 – Altamont Location Overnight
August 11 – Altamont Location Overnight Rain Date
August 16 – Last Day of Summer Program
September 7 – First Day of School
September 22 – 1/2 Day – Early Dismissal for Staff Development
October 3 – School Closed – Rosh Hashanah

October 10 – School Closed – Columbus Day
October 25 – 1/2 Day – Early Dismissal for Staff Development
November 8 – School Closed – Agency Training Day
November 11 – School Closed – Veteran’s Day
November 24 & 25 – School Closed – Thanksgiving Recess
December 6 – 1/2 Day – Early Dismissal for Staff Development
December 23 - January 2 – School Closed – Holiday Recess
A Letter from the Director of Education

Cheryl Marcella,
Director of Education

In past issues I’ve written about topics like professional learning communities, peer coaching, and EdCamp sessions. All of these are vehicles for staff members to learn from each other, not in a top-down dissemination of information but rather in a dynamic manner between staff that generates enthusiasm and shared expertise. The result has been professional growth, not only of our staff from gaining new knowledge, but the support that we see from the staff that comes from helping one another learn. Thinking of questions and answers, helping others problem solve and developing strategies with teammates has been, and is, a catalyst for self-growth. This sharing has had a synergistic effect on our staff and their development as teaching professionals and it has been more than just the sum of its parts. It is having an impact on student growth and achievement which of course is our ultimate goal.

As an entire school community, we work towards our essential outcomes and it can not be done without the teamwork and collaboration I witness each and every day. It has been exciting to see staff stepping forward and sometimes out of their comfort zone to share their rich expertise rather than waiting for it to come down from supervisors or school administration.

It was also exactly what we were hoping would develop when we solicited everyone’s participation. At first, as might be expected, some people were a bit hesitant to respond to a new paradigm but in time they felt a shift in emphasis and responsibility and a real energy has developed.

I am happy to share with you some examples that have come from our learning together and collaboration in this newsletter. I am very proud of our staff and where our organization is in its development. I am also so grateful to all of you for the support and feedback you’ve shared to help us get to where we are. We are excited for new challenges and opportunities for growth and development for our students, families, and our staff.

I hope you enjoy your summer and can find some time to relax!

OUR MISSION
The mission of Wildwood School is to educate students with autism spectrum disorders, neurological impairments and complex learning disabilities by developing skills to live, work and recreate at their highest level of independence.

OUR VISION
To be recognized as a school of distinction rooted in best practice and innovation.
Creating Successful Transitions for People in their Homes

John Clausson,
Transition Coordinator

As the vocational and transition departments joined together this year, forming the Transition Readiness Department, we looked at how we could help prepare our graduates for a smooth transition into adulthood. Our goal was to develop a “simulated” day hab hub as a teaching tool for graduates to experience what post-graduation may look like. Our first group, comprised of graduates who reside in Rensselaer County, is fondly named “The Ren Hub.” Initially, these five individuals, all with personal goals and obstacles to overcome, participated in the hub in the beginning of the school year for an hour or two each morning. As the year progressed, the students began to participate in vocational experiences and expand on the amount of time they spent in their home community. Now, “The Ren Hub” is out for an entire day once a week.

Our goal was to provide meaningful activities, chosen by the students, to foster greater independence, community inclusion, relationship building and self-advocacy. Some of the ways that they accomplished this was by doing volunteer work, increased social interactions, travel training and hands-on learning experiences. The best part about this experience is that the individuals are part of their own community. They have made local connections and new friends while learning valuable work skills and what to expect as they graduate. These experiences helped to reduce some of the anxiety of transitioning into adult services, as well as taught the students that they can make their own choices and decisions about their lives and their future.

Going forward, it is the hope of the Transition Readiness Department that all of our graduates of 2017 participate in one of these “simulated” day hab hubs to experience new and exciting community opportunities.

Celebrating Healthy Choices with Cassandra Kubinski through Song

Beth McLaughlin,
Music Therapist

This spring, our good friend Cassandra Kubinski returned to Wildwood to conduct workshops with our students in a special song writing project. As part of our HEAL initiative, (Healthy Eating, Active Living), our students have worked very hard learning about nutrition and exercise and its impact on their health and well-being. To this end, they have been trying new foods and engaging in new movement opportunities.

To celebrate this accomplishment, Cassandra wrote a song chorus for us called “Healthy Choices.” The students then helped write four verses reflecting the healthy choices they’ve made this year around food, exercise, coping with stress and trying new things. Cassandra then recorded the song with Mark Ahola, music therapist, in the NICK, our own recording studio.

In recent weeks, Mark has been working with the high school students to learn the song and record it with Cassandra’s master track. The final recording is nearing completion and will be available to listen to on our school website by early summer. We are so grateful for Cassandra’s continued friendship to Wildwood and generous sharing of her musical talents.
Wildwood Artists in the Community

Karli Powers,
Art Teacher

It has been an exciting year for the Art department and our wonderful student artists we have here at Wildwood. As one of our many goals, the department strives to connect the students with the community through art and in turn connect the community to Wildwood.

This year students participated in four various public exhibitions throughout the Capital Region and beyond. Elementary students had their work published in Skribbler’s Magazine, a non-profit children’s magazine serving the Capital Region of Upstate New York, developed to encourage creativity and literacy in young artists and writers between the ages of 4 and 12 years old. Their work can be seen in their printed publication as well as their online E-zine. Also, artists from program levels, elementary through high school, participated in collaborative projects for the Martin Luther King Jr. Fine Arts and Essay Display this past January at our state capital. The intermediate students submitted a peace quilt that was chosen to be featured in multiple shows this coming school year!

As a collaboration between the art department and Wildwood Foundation, twelve students were chosen to participate in an Integrated Arts Show at the Albany Barn. This show was part of a two month long process of Wildwood artists working with community artists to create work. The students’ work was used as inspiration for the community artists to produce a piece themselves that were then displayed together at the show. This event was part of Albany’s First Friday when galleries around the city showcase work for the community to enjoy.

The final event involved all program levels displaying work at the Autism Expo in Saratoga Springs. Every April, this art exhibit showcases the beautiful work done by talented individuals with autism from around the Capital Region. It is always an amazing event highlighting the many gifts of our students and raising awareness for children and young adults with autism. It was a banner year this year for our Wildwood artists and I could not be more proud.

Undisputed Champions

Tom Schreck,
Director of Communications

For the fourth year, young adult students participated in the Undisputed Champions boxing program. The program is a physical education elective held at Schott’s Boxing, a professional boxing gym in Albany. The class is led by former pro boxer and current Colonie Police officer, Javier Martinez and Wildwood’s director of communications, Tom Schreck. Patti O’Mara, adapted physical education instructor, helped coordinate this year’s class.

The non-contact boxing program features all the rigorous workout exercises professional boxers use without the sparring. The Wildwood fighters push their fitness limits and learn proper boxing techniques during the ten week program. This year community volunteers included retired world contender, Gary Wilcox, and trainers Mike Rives, John Campana, Nancy Neidowski-Welsh, Mark Wheeler and MMA trainer and Wildwood staff member, Patrick Brooks. The program received support from the International Boxing Federation, Everlast and the professional boxing community.

The students worked hard to earn their t-shirts emblazoned with “Undisputed Champions” on the front and the motto “Knocking Out Limits” on the back. The day the class was awarded their shirts, Time Warner Cable News did a feature story on the program.
A Collaborative Approach to Professional Learning

Carrie Giufre,
Professional Development Specialist

The primary focus of an effective professional learning community is student learning. In order to ensure that optimal student learning is taking place, it is essential for our staff to continuously develop and grow professionally. Since we are dedicated to our professional learning communities, we believe the best way to enhance our professional growth is through collaboration and learning from each other. Two ways in which we do this are by designing staff development days that focus specifically on collaborative learning and through implementation of our peer coaching program.

On March 15th, school staff participated in a full day of professional learning. All of the activities on the day’s agenda had two things in common: teaching our essential outcomes and learning from each other. So in other words, the focus of the day was to have discussions and share resources related to the instruction of our essential outcomes with each other. We did this through two activities that were new to our staff: a “professional learning playground” and roundtable discussions. The professional learning playground was an opportunity for staff to share instructional tools (apps, visuals, materials, etc.) used within their classrooms to teach essential outcomes, as well as to try out instructional tools of others. Staff walked away with so many resources that they never knew existed. The roundtable discussions were informal conversations in which small groups of staff from across all program levels sat down with each other to discuss and brainstorm strategies for teaching a specific essential outcome skill (e.g. strategies to teach a student to wait). The conversations were productive, full of expertise and beneficial to everyone who participated. We hope to continue creating similar learning opportunities and utilizing our best resources... our staff.

This year we began the implementation of our peer coaching program. Over the course of the past ten months, twenty four peer coaches have attended a six hour initial training, as well as monthly support meetings to refine their skills as a coach. They have been dedicated to using these skills to help peers reflect on current practices, expand upon and refine skills, and solve problems. We have had very successful collaborations between our peer coaches and their learning partners. Our goal is to train another round of coaches at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year. We hope to see this program continue to be a valuable resource for all of our staff.

Wildwood Essential Outcomes

When a child leaves Wildwood School, he/she will be able to:
- apply academic concepts of ELA and mathematics to real life situations. (Academics)
- complete activities of daily living. (Activities of Daily Living)
- functionally communicate wants, needs, preferences, and feelings. (Communication)
- use a socially appropriate coping strategy to self-regulate. (Emotional Coping)
- cope with unexpected changes and difficulties. (Problem Solving and Flexibility)
- manage their personal care and hygiene. (Hygiene)
- use the knowledge he/she has gained about self and others to develop and maintain personal and professional relationships. (Social)
- make decisions for him/herself. (Self Determination and Choice Making)
- demonstrate awareness of their environment to reduce the risk of experiencing or causing injury or danger. (Safety)
- maintain personal wellness and a healthy lifestyle. (Health and Wellness)
Carolee Wilson, one of Wildwood School's very first and most popular teachers, was known as an innovator. Long before terms like person-centered and wholistic were employed, Carolee made sure her classroom practiced both of these tried-and-true Wildwood School priorities. Her individualized and creative teaching style reached even the most challenging and resistant students. Several years ago, Carolee passed away and her family began a scholarship to recognize excellence and creativity in new Wildwood School teachers. This year the Carolee Wilson Award was presented to Lauren Wager, a promising new teacher.

Lauren began her career at Wildwood School in October 2012. She started as a teaching assistant in our youngest classroom, and then went on to become a teacher. Lauren taught at the Intermediate level for one year before moving to the Elementary program level. She is currently finishing her second year within the Elementary program. Lauren is the teacher to six students in classroom 3 this year, ages 7 through 10. Lauren's thoughtfulness in implementing curriculum and lessons that meet her students where they are at does not go unnoticed. She differentiates instruction for a wide range of learners and ensures that all students are moving forward. Lauren creates systems within her classroom so that materials stay organized and so all times of the day are accounted for. She encourages her teaching assistants to assist her in various groups throughout the week so that students can be exposed to different types of materials. Lauren believes in community generalization and works with her students to develop skills at school and then practice them in the community.

Lauren is also a strong advocate for safety at Wildwood School. She is a member of the safety committee, and has taken it upon herself to pilot a safety bracelet program for her students in her classroom. She attends workshops and advocacy trainings on how to help students stay safe, as well as teaching them what to do in emergency situations.

Lauren's leadership skills have been further refined this year as she works with her program level to develop elementary activities that all students and families can participate in. She also helped her students host magnet and bake sales to raise funds for an elementary end of the year trip.

Lauren's desire to make her students as independent as possible; create safe opportunities for them to generalize their skills; and collaborate and share with her colleagues are just some of the examples of why she was chosen for the Carolee Wilson Award for Teaching.

Thank you for everything you do, Lauren! Congratulations!