



Pictured left to right, part of the close-knit instructional staff at the Piney Ridge Center for Waynesville R-6: Mary Millsap, Maribel Miller, Dagmar Lambert, Kim Amodio, Luis Martinez, Robert Switzer and Teresa Rowland.

Teachers build up kids after trauma knocks them down

PHOTOS AND STORY BY SARAH KOHNLE

A squirt of hand sanitizer, a dollop of fragrant lotion. It's all part of transition time as students from the adjacent residential facility make the short walk across the fenced courtyard to the school building. Each student is greeted by principal Kim Amodio. She offers hand sanitizer and lotion as she looks each person in the eye.

"Coconut?" A student guesses as she smells the lotion and rubs it in her hands.

The simple interaction not only appeals to some students' need of sensory stimulation, it helps students recognize they're being seen as individuals, worthy of love, full of potential.

"We greet them at the door, gauge how they are doing. We set the tone to let them know we are switching gears here. 'We are at school; we are going to be positive,'" Amodio says.

Waynesville R-6 is under contract to provide K-12 education to Piney Ridge Center, a privately run residential treatment facility for youth in southern Missouri. Residents stay for a couple of weeks to a couple of years, depending on insurance coverage. The facility has about 100 residents, with 85-90 of them attending the Waynesville school. Youth outside of Missouri are admitted, too. For out-of-state kids to arrive at the door of the Level 4+ institution, they have been refused by multiple facilities in their own state.

"Many of our children are in state custody, having been in multiple foster or residential placements. They have extreme behaviors including aggressive, self-harming or boundary issues," Amodio says.

For many of the residents, the atrocities they've witnessed are hard to comprehend, Amodio says. Some have been victims of abuse, have witnessed abuse or even murder, some have been exposed to alcohol or drugs in utero. In addition, the students have had beyond regular stress. They've wondered what their next meal would be, if they would be able to sleep in their bed without worrying if they're going to be touched inappropriately. Will they even have a bed? Will Mom get beaten? Will a parent be on drugs?

As Mary Millsap, who teaches math says, "there's an old saying: kids come to school to learn. Our kids come to school to be loved."

In addition, Waynesville educators agree that the students know their school is a safe place. And not always in the obvious ways.

"I tell the kids I'm here to protect them. It could be simple like in a storm and they are freaking out," middle-school teacher Teresa Rowland says.

She retired in June after 13 years at Waynesville and 14 as an educator, after serving 20 years in the military.

The students attend class from 8-11 a.m., break for lunch, and return at 12:45 until 3 p.m.

Classrooms generally have more than 15 students, except in the K-5 elementary classroom, where three students – fifth and sixth graders – are enrolled for the fall. However, students aren't limited by grade levels. Corey Vinnedge, elementary teacher, also provides intense reading and math intervention for middle school students who test more than two grade levels below their level. And middle schoolers who test above grade level take advanced math in the high school class for high school credit. The transition is easier because everyone, from the principal, seven teachers, seven paraprofessionals and the secretary, knows the background of each student, and can talk to kids in other classes or duck into a classroom to assist. It's not just "Mrs. So-and-so's" classroom.

"The bottom line is the students. I don't care whose student it is, middle school, high school. None of these people would hesitate to step up. We know the history of each kid," Rowland says.

The close-knit staff eats lunch together onsite every day, to talk about the morning and strategize. The time also helps teachers process the heavy burdens the children carry.

"I really think it's our together time that helps all of us keep it together for the kids," says Amodio.

In addition, the staff meets once a week at lunch with therapists from the facility. They talk about what's coming up with the youth, like perhaps a court date, or an anniversary of a death, or a change in medication.

"We take time to know the students. We have those days where we know they have had a hard night (at the facility), so that morning we have to regroup everyone, and adjust the class. Sometimes we have to modify, and sometimes we have to roll with it. I might not get all 11 units done at the high school, but I will get eight or nine," Maribel Miller says.

Rowland recalls when she first started. Classes were separated by gender, and up until five years ago, the school itself was housed in the facility. She credits Amodio, a relative newcomer, with a lot of the changes. The current school is modeled after other schools in the district and they are working to make the students feel part of a school community and the district.

They've incorporated what they call Tiger Time (after the Waynesville Tigers) as homeroom in each classroom. Teachers and paraprofessionals take time to look at grades, celebrate birthdays, and establish goals for education and behavior. Amodio says Tiger Time is like family time, where the staff checks in with the students.

Since students are not able to leave campus easily, educators bring the world to them with virtual field trips or classroom guests. City officials and business professionals have stopped by to share information. Thanks to a lower census in elementary school, the younger students have been able to visit the Waynesville Elementary School library with teacher Corey Vinnedge to check out books.

"Many of these kids have never been to a library, so it's a good opportunity for them to be a part of that mainstream environment," Vinnedge says.

He helps them prepare for mainstream life in other ways, too. If the students meet their behavior goals for the week, they get to eat lunch with him on Fridays. Those meals are special, Vinnedge says, because they sit together, take turns speaking, using manners and working on conversational skills.

"If we have a Friday coming up with no school, or a half day, they'll ask me if we are going to do lunch on Thursday."

He uses "self and match" with the students. They rate their behavior and then he rates it. If the ratings match, the students get extra points; less if they don't.



Lotion helps ease transition time for students and staff.



The school is just a short walk across the courtyard from the facility where students reside 24/7.

Amodio says what they do is beyond academia.

“We show them what their life could be like. And that’s way more important than education.”

They try to give them some of the typical school experiences, like decorating a float for Homecoming or cheering on the Waynesville Tigers from the sidelines. Since Waynesville school staff is not allowed to transport residents, they arrange for facility staff to accompany them.

Students are also able to participate in commencement. Three graduates participated this year and nine in 2017. Amodio says they held a senior lunch and school board members came in to congratulate the graduates. The school presented photo books to the graduates, which one student said were the first photos she’s had of herself since she was 9.

Amodio says the school needs to grow in the area of community involvement, so the students can participate instead of observe.

“Our goal is to show our students a side of society they have not witnessed in the hope of breaking a cycle of abuse,” Amodio says.

The staff is invested in the students around the clock. One student is moving

to another state in October, the day before he turns 18. He only needs three and a half credits to graduate, but his insurance wouldn’t pay beyond that date, Amodio says. She and other teachers are working hard to help him recover academic credit during and after school because they fear it might be the only education he gets.

“We can only control what we know right now,” she says.

Life outside of the school building for the kids at Piney Ridge means life inside of an institution. For that reason, interaction with school staff doesn’t stop when school doors close.

On the weekends, teachers offer students such things as remediation and enrichment in math and reading, leadership class, preparation for the ACT and school credit recovery. Because the students have been moving around, perhaps from foster homes or facilities, many of them have failed classes, Amodio says. Sometimes their school records are spotty. Rowland recalls one instance when they dug up records and discovered a student was really a ninth grader, not a middle schooler as enrolled.

Weekends and holidays are also devoted to regular, family-type activities, like watching movies, making crafts or

just hanging out with the students. Often the time includes home-cooked meals or desserts, a big treat for the students whose diet consists of institutional food 24/7.

“This is beneficial since it strengthens relationships with school personnel, it brings them to a safe and calm place, and provides them with additional opportunities to witness appropriate relationships and interactions,” Amodio says.

Dagmar Lambert has been at the Piney Ridge school for 20 years, teaching high school for the last 10 years. She says she keeps coming back because she feels like she makes a difference.

“I found over the last 20 years, that kids rise to your expectations. These kids have been made to feel so stupid and unwanted, and they just never really tried. But when you expect a lot from them, you get a lot back,” Lambert says.

The teachers all stress the need for connection: connection with each other and connection with the students. Sometimes education takes a back seat.

“I think our school is a strong argument for relationship before rigorous development,” Amodio says.

Amodio says the turning point was when they quit focusing on behavior and

focused on the child as a whole. That's when they really started seeing things, she says. They saw changes in kids who were angry or resentful, as well as a bit resistant, when they arrived.

"By the time they leave, they are smiling," Amodio says.

Among the success stories is a recent student who was once told he wasn't college material. He graduated in two years from the University of Missouri-St. Louis with honors and a scholarship to study in Germany.

The teachers know they are always being watched, not just by security cameras, but by students. It's how they learn.

"When they see us at our human moments, that's when they learn compassion," Amodio says. She was on the receiving end when her mother died and students wrote sweet condolence notes.

Part of the modeling is learning how to recover from mistakes. Because many students come from a world where a mistake could trigger abuse, the teachers are transparent and admit when they've botched it.

"When I make mistakes, I tell them. I let them know it's ok to make mistakes. We stop to discuss it and move on," Rowland says.

It's not just the students who are learning or being motivated. The faculty and staff say they've gained a lot from their students.

"When you see these kids who have no regard for how wonderful they really are... when you get to see them, and see their talent and their strength, it's so humbling and it's inspiring," Amodio says.

Each year they get closer to mirroring other schools in the district, to help students ease back into conventional life and school once they move on from Piney Ridge. For the new school year, that means more help for high-achieving students in literature and creative writing and in math for lower-achieving high school kids, and adding driver's education information.

"At the end of the day, they're just kids born into a world they didn't pick," Maribel Miller says.

She encourages them to use their background as pivot points and tells them: "Don't let this define you. Move on, grow from it." ●



Educator Corey Vinnedge

Unique setting creates close-knit group

Educators at the school for Piney Ridge, a residential treatment facility in Waynesville, are a close-knit group and act as a surrogate family to the students. And they love what they do.

"For kids, we are their family. Not only are we work family, we are family to these kids. And I think that's what binds us," says Mary Millsap, who teaches math.

Outsiders are surprised to hear there's very little turnover in what appears to be a pressure-cooker environment. Millsap says she's had people ask her how she goes to work every day. Her response has been surprise, "Like, what do you mean? We're showing the community that they are just kids."

Luis Martinez says the paraprofessionals who work there want to get on as full-time teachers. He just made the transition from para to fulltime this fall.

"I have been blessed in my life to have worked here. It's not a work family. It's not my family. I don't know what it is, but I know when I leave, this is what I will miss. I love all of these people," Teresa Rowland says. Rowland was with the school for 13 years before she retired this summer.

The teachers are so connected, they often finish a sentence or a thought of a colleague.

"I enjoy the people I work with. This doesn't seem like a job. It seems like part of my life, part of my family. We support each other. We're probably closer than some families," Dagmar Lambert says.

"This is our therapy," Millsap adds.

"And it's free," Lambert says.

"We can vent to each other. We know exactly what's needed, what's going on," Millsap says. She says their personalities are so different, it allows them to work together.

"We are so diverse here, all walks of life. There is someone here who can touch a student. At lunch we might mention a student and someone can identify," Maribel Miller says.

Luis Martinez, who teaches English/LA, explains that "at other schools, they might talk about their weakness. Here we don't. We might say, 'hey, this is what I'm struggling with.'"

"It's not a competition where we fight for recognition. I don't feel that here. We all work as a team," Lambert says.

"Never a feeling of trying to one-up," Millsap adds.

Rowland says Principal Amodio pushes the teachers to be the best they can for the kids, and Miller points to the calming influence Amodio has on the students.

"It's the difference between being a boss and being a leader," Lambert says of Amodio.

Amodio, in exchange, talks fondly of the faculty and staff.

"These guys roll with every single thing, and laugh. We know these kids are going to be a hot mess, maybe they just had a few hours of sleep, and the staff rolls with it. They're compassionate and fair. They meet the needs of the kids whose needs are so extreme. There's not a better group of teachers, paras, secretary. It's 110 percent buy in," Amodio says.