

# VSD Receives \$18,729 Grant

By Sarah Wetzel  
For the Plain Talk

A team of teachers have received a three-year grant totaling \$18,729 which will hopefully end up benefiting all teachers in the Vermillion School District.

Grace Benson, the district's Special Education director, appeared before the Vermillion School Board to report on the receipt of the grant and explain the details of it.

According to Benson, the federally-funded grant is being disbursed through the state.

"It's to help improve the learning outcomes of students with specific learning disabilities in the area of reading," she told the board last week. "We thought this was an important grant because we felt that not only would it help students with specific learning disabilities but if we build certain things into the curriculum it could certainly impact all the children and help build capacity in the area of reading instruction for our teachers. We were thrilled a couple of weeks ago to learn we were awarded the grant."

The grant will allow teachers to implement specific research-supported strategies and curriculum and for teachers to receive training and certification.

"We calculated everything possible so it would be no expense to the school district and our teachers and students would receive a wonderful experience with the grant," Benson said.

One of the main things to be implemented through the grant is the Peer-Assisted Learning system, or PAL.



SARAH WETZEL / FOR THE PLAIN TALK

Grace Benson, SPED director of the Vermillion school district recently reported a \$18,729 grant approved aimed at helping students with specific learning disabilities.

"It creates more experiences that eliminate or lessen homogeneous grouping," Benson said. "The students are paired with their peers in the classroom and they're paired at skill level so teachers identify what skills students need and then identify which students in the classroom could help them with these skills. It's a very powerful strategy. There's a lot of research that support it."

The kids are eager to do their part to help.

"We've seen at the middle school there's a lot of desire from students who want to be peer mentors and help their fellow peers with their school work," Benson reported.

Another component of the grant is targeted to families of kids with learning disabilities in grades K-3 according to Benson.

"We feel if we identify difficulties in a skill level at grade one we could really intervene in a more

targeted manner," she said. "We thought this would be wonderful and in alignment with the state's initiatives with TSS and as well as part of our school district goals."

"Another component of the grant was to continue doing our sessions that we've been working on in Title 1," Benson continued. "We are having monthly learning sessions to really show our teachers to be experts in teaching and mediating reading."

According to Benson, sessions are held for teachers each month to watch videos which break down reading lessons. Videos are paused and discussed frequently.

Benson said the sessions have allowed the teachers to gain many strategies including instructional rounds.

"It's a strategy based on a medical model where teachers watch an expert or master and they take notes," she said. "They get

to interview the teacher before the lesson and after they get to talk to the teacher and ask questions as to why the teacher did the lesson a certain way."

Benson said they are looking to increase the number of teachers receive this beneficial instruction.

"We'd like to take these sessions and book studies and expand that," she said. "That was another part of our grant that was approved. Mary Hulac will be starting. She'll be going to a coaching academy this summer and learn how to be a coach. Once she has this training she'll be certified and then next year we'll be able to offer the tool kit where we'll do surveys and the teachers will be able to pick areas in reading instruction they want to learn about and Mary will be conducting."

Benson said the grant provides for prizes and stipends for the teachers that attend.

Not only Special Education teachers are invited.

"If we were not an inclusive district we would not be addressing general ed teachers," Benson said. "Because our teachers are so inclusive and our students with disabilities are in general education classes we feel it's important they have all these tools in our tool kit and use them with all their children."

Amanda Nyhaug is another teacher who will be receiving training through the grant, particularly to become an expert on using data from assessments such as DIBELS to help students.

## Walmart Foundation Grants Available

The Walmart Foundation State Giving Council Program opened the application period for its second cycle of giving this week. South Dakota nonprofit organizations can apply for funding to support programs within the scope of the "Focused Giving" areas that include hunger relief, healthy eating or career opportunity. In order to be considered for grant funding this cycle, applications must be received by 11:59 p.m. central standard time on May 1, 2015.

Twice annually, the Walmart Foundation's State Giving Program looks for non-profit organizations best serving the needs of South Dakota communities. Grants range from \$25,000 to \$250,000 each. Eligible applicants must have a current 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status in order to meet the program's minimum funding criteria. Grant submissions are only accepted online at <http://foundation.walmart.com/>.

## Vermillion Area Blood Drives This Week

Sanford Health has put out an urgent request for blood donations in the Vermillion area due to the increase in trauma in the Sioux Falls area this past weekend.

In order to help facilitate donations in Vermillion there will be two additional opportunities to donate blood this week.

On Thursday, April 23 USD will hold a campus-wide blood drive from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. at the Muenster Student Center. Then on Friday, April 24 from noon-5 p.m. Sanford Vermillion Health will hold a blood drive.

Call 1-877-877-3070 for more information.

## Paula Damon To Speak At Library

The Edith B. Siegrist Vermillion Public Library is proud to host Paula Bosco Damon in our Artists & Authors series on Wednesday, May 6th at 7 pm.

Paula Bosco Damon is an award-winning writer whose works have won numerous honors, including First-Place in National Federation of Press Women, South Dakota Press Women and Iowa Press Women writing competitions. In the 2009, 2010 and 2011 South Dakota Press Women Communications Contests, Paula has earned eight first-place awards. In 2011, the writer was ranked third among columnists nationwide for her creative non-fiction in the National Federation of Press Women Communication Contest. Her stories breathe life into mundane day-to-day experiences and skillfully deconstruct some of the most complex life-altering moments into a language and narrative with universal appeal. Her work has been described as thought-provoking, whimsical, comical, lyrical and entertaining. Paula writes a weekly column for the Vermillion Plain Talk and the Carroll Times Herald titled "My Story. Your Story." A popular keynote speaker, she has conducted readings of her work to audiences in New York, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Nebraska and South Dakota.

Free and open to the public.

The Edith B. Siegrist Vermillion Public Library is located at 18 Church Street in Vermillion. For more information call the Library at 605-677-7060.

## French Toast Breakfast Planned

The St. Agnes Youth Group is having a French Toast Breakfast Fundraiser Sunday morning, May 3, 2015 from 9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. at the St. Agnes gym.

This Breakfast Fundraiser is for the St. Agnes youth group summer trip to Valley Fair and a Twins baseball game in June. For more information contact Ray Hofman at 624-6457. There will be a free will offering taken at the door. Catholic United will have matching funds for this project.

## Coach

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a.m. and then we'll usually just kind of wrap-up practice from the day before."

Williams and her coaching staff will discuss the previous day's practice and decide if they are prepared for that night's game before watching film on the opponent.

"I'll watch some last minute things, what they like to do for their baseline in-bounds plays, things like that," she said. "We spend quite a bit of time watching film. I think a lot of people don't understand that me and my coaching staff, in particular, spend a lot of time watching film."

In the hours leading up to the game, the team has a shoot-around practice in the afternoon at a time when all the players are available, meaning the time can change depending on the day.

"That's kind of our last little tune-up before our game that day," Williams said. "During that time we do a lot of focus stuff, we walk through some of the other teams strategies, what they're going to try to do and how we want to guard and defend them."

After those practices, Williams gets a little time to go home to prepare herself while the rest of the team has a pre-game meal about four hours before tip-off.

If tip-off is at 7 p.m., Williams will finish up the night and get home around 10 p.m. after speaking with her team and with the media.

"Depending on how the game goes, at 10 p.m. when I get home; I may watch the game film once, I may not watch it at all, I may watch the game film four times and take 10 pages worth of notes

depending on the outcome of the game is or how I felt our team performed," Williams said.

On days where the team does not play a game, most of the day is spent watching film and cutting it into segments to show the team.

"We'll have broken down the film and put some good plays, bad plays, things we can do better and things we can learn. We'll try to have about 30 minutes worth of film with our team," Williams said. "It may take us 15 hours of watching film and pulling out the clips to come up with 30 minutes of film that we're going to show our team."

Planning for a two-hour practice will often take longer than the practice itself.

"It's really important to me that we're spending time really debating the best way to identify what we need to work on and brainstorming new, effective ways to get us to get what we want done in practice," Williams said.

Somewhere between all that, she has to find time for recruiting and continue making some calls to coaches or prospects after practices.

"When I get home at night, I may have to make two or three phone calls to recruits where I'm actually working on developing relationship with players that we're trying to convince to come be a part of the program," Williams said. "If you think about it, (recruiting) is

a regular, every day, ongoing thing."

The women's basketball program at USD has 15 full-ride scholarships to hand out every year, so the coaching staff has to decide which prospects are the right fit for the team based on skill set, work ethic and, most importantly, attitude.

"It's just nuts," Williams said. "We'll evaluate thousands of recruits for the 2015 class to identify maybe 30 that we're very serious about. Some of those, they rule us out and some of those we rule them out as just not being the right fit. Eventually, we get it down to where we signed four kids in the early signing period in this class and we'll try to sign one and maybe two more."

It's important for Williams to choose the right players for the team even if all 15 scholarships aren't used.

Williams played college basketball at the University of Nebraska where she was a math and biology major. Though her dad was a high school coach while Williams was growing up in Spearfish, she never planned on coaching as a career of her own.

"I knew my college basketball playing career was coming to an end and I just wasn't ready for basketball to be out of my life," she said.

Williams went to the University of Nebraska at Kearney and worked as a graduate assistant coach

while she earned her master's degree in sports administration. She went on to be an assistant coach at the University of Texas at San Antonio, Oklahoma State University and University of Tulsa earning her first head coaching job at Rogers State University before landing at USD where she's been for the last three years.

When she's not coaching, Williams like to spend time being a mom to her two daughters.



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