



Submitted photo

Blue Ridge administrators and local supporters gathered for a ceremony awarding the \$125,000 grant last week. From left are HCHF Board of Directors Programs and Grants Committee Chairwoman Stephanie Edwards, Blue Ridge School Principal Teri Walawender, BRS social worker Erica Smithdeal, HCHF Executive Director Robin Tindall, BRS nurse Danielle Rice, Jackson County Public Schools Assistant Superintendent Jacob Buchanan, Blue Ridge School Education Foundation President Carl Hyde and Blue Ridge Early College Principal Brandon Pendergast.

Blue Ridge School renews health worker contracts

BY CARTER GIEGERICH
Staff

Student health is a critical focus area for any school, particularly in the midst of a surge in cases during a worldwide pandemic. Safeguarding students' physical and mental health is a top concern for administrators, teachers and families alike.

Thanks to a grant provided by the Highlands-Cashiers Health Foundation, students at Blue Ridge School and Early College will once again have two full-time staff members dedicated to providing those resources on campus for at least the next year.

"This is our second year with these positions," said Blue Ridge School Principal Teri Walawender. "We applied last year and hired, in mid-October, a nurse and a social worker."

The school has been working with Danielle Rice, the BREC nurse, and Erica Smithdeal, the school's social worker, since that time.

The grant, totaling \$125,000, fully covers the salary and benefits for the two positions. Walawender said the impact this funding has on students, staff and families cannot be overstated.

"We have been able to take a huge burden off the shoulders of several other staff members as a result," she said. "Our classroom teachers are able to get support in a way they have not had previously. Our teachers, faculty and administration were just pitching in to take care of things that couldn't get done. In the time we've had these positions as full-time, we've been able to support families in ways we couldn't imagine before."

This additional workload for teachers was a motivating factor in awarding the grant to the school, according to HCHF Executive Director Robin Tindall.

Within a year of placing the full-time staff at BREC, Tindall said there were noticeable positive results from the new positions.

“More than 500 visits to the nurse occurred in less than five months, with the vast majority returning to the classroom. This correlates with a significant decrease in absences,” Tindall said. “It was also very encouraging to see the onset of preventive education programming in vaping and tobacco use. After the first year it was clear that our grant investment in this project was yielding a high return.”

The immediate benefits to children who have reported to the nurse feeling ill or dealing with minor injuries have been readily apparent, Walawender said, but the positions have also had longer-term positive impacts in the community, especially through the work Smithdeal has done with families at Blue Ridge.

“That includes restoring water and heat

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to homes. Our social worker has been instrumental in that, and in helping with repairing household appliances and just building relationships so people know we're here to help them resolve problems," Walawender said. "After a year of her being here, people call on their own and say 'I'm having a tough time, are there any resources?' She's such a phenomenal networker, and she's able to go out and access resources that would take the rest of us quite a while to do."

Members of the school's administration, HCHF and the Blue Ridge School Education Foundation gathered on Dec. 6 at the school to award the grants. The Blue Ridge Education Foundation also presented \$100 Ingles giftcards to each of the 57 employees at the school as a holiday gift during the ceremony.

Future funding

While these positions have quickly become a vital part of the BREC program, the funding keeping them in place remains tied to the support of grants from HCHF. Carl Hyde, president of the Blue Ridge School Education Foundation, said he hoped to see Jackson County Public

Schools begin to transition at least part of the funding for the positions to their annual budget in order to make the nurse and social worker positions a permanent part of the staff at the school.

"What we want to try to do is make sure we can continue to receive some donations to the foundation and get them into the budgeting process for the school system to support these two functions," Hyde said. "I'm sure the health foundation is happy to help us over time, but that can't be sustained forever. Everybody really needs to have skin in the game – Jackson County Schools, our foundation and the health foundation need to all have skin in the game to support how important these two functions are."

Walawender echoed Hyde's views on the positions' importance to the school, saying she hoped to see funds allocated in a way that preserves their roles without unnecessarily impacting other key staff members at the school and throughout the district.

"We need to look at creative funding, and look at ways to keep those things that are vital. We need to access resources any way we can," she said. "We can't give up teaching positions or assistants or custodians – every position is vital. We're just working on identifying any possible funding that might help us."