

A nonprofit that 'fills in the gaps' at schools gets philanthropic boost

EDUCATION LAB Communities In Schools wins funding, recognition from MacKenzie Scott gift

Several hours into her day at Nelsen Middle School in Renton, Gena Woodke walked out of her little office to help monitor the boisterous lunchtime crowds. School counselor Tiffany Smith was waiting for her, laptop in hand. Could they make a call to a student's mom together? The student, who is homeless and staying with his family at someone else's home, has been absent from school a lot lately, an increasing problem among kids during the pandemic. And the mom hasn't been picking up when Smith calls. Woodke has had better luck — in part because, as an employee of nonprofit Communities In Schools, she has resources to offer that school staff don't: help with groceries, housing agency referrals, school supplies, clothing and more.

Woodke headed back inside her office with Smith. She's used to changing plans at a moment's notice, doing whatever is needed, from meeting with a student falling behind on classwork, to devising ways to make the hallways more welcoming, to picking up a banana peel splayed on the floor.

School staff have high praise for Woodke and the nonprofit she works for, Communities In Schools, a network of affiliates across the state and country that supports students and their families. "She's an incredible asset," said Nelsen Middle School Principal Steve Rencher, citing relationships Woodke has built at the school after just five months there.

In early February, Communities In Schools got an even bigger endorsement: a \$133.5 million gift from MacKenzie Scott, the billionaire philanthropist previously married to Amazon founder Jeff Bezos. The organization's Washington operations will get \$5.85 million, with \$2.25 million going to the state office and the rest directly to three of 15 affiliates. Woodke's affiliate is one of them, serving the Renton, Tukwila and Lake Washington districts. Another chosen affiliate supports Benton and Franklin county districts and a third works on the Key Peninsula in Pierce County.

Scott, famously closemouthed about her philanthropy choices, has not explained why she singled out those affiliates or landed on Communities In Schools for her largesse, said the nonprofit's Washington director, Erin McCallum. "This is the mystery and the magic about philanthropy," she said. Donors do research and come to their own conclusions.

"It's a very generous gift," McCallum said, adding considerably to Communities In Schools' Washington budget, which last year was \$12 million.

While lots of organizations support students, Communities In Schools is unique in having a full-time staffer inside many of the schools it serves, supplementing the work of counselors, social workers and other district employees, McCallum said. "We fill in the gaps."

Those vary by district. The Renton School District, for example, has staff in elementary schools who help students' families with basic needs (positions funded partly by Communities In Schools), but not in middle and high schools, said Jaime Greene, executive director of Communities In Schools of Renton-Tukwila. In those schools, Greene said, "it's us."

The Tukwila School District, in contrast, has employees who work with families. There, Greene said, the nonprofit's staff lean into helping students with social and emotional learning, in small groups and one-on-one meetings.

Communities In Schools says it sees a lot of improvement in academic performance, behavior and attendance among students in its caseload, who meet at least once a month with staff.

There were about 3,500 of them last year in Washington, the vast majority low-income and many English language learners or experiencing homelessness. Of those in kindergarten through 11th grade, 89% advanced to the next grade level and about the same percentage of students on the nonprofit's Washington caseload graduate in four years, McCallum said.

Woodke sometimes describes herself to students as "backup." "Counselors are doing so much," she noted. Three of them at Nelsen Middle School handle more than 900 students, 56% of whom are low-income and 15% English language learners.

Woodke, in contrast, works intensively with 40 to 45 students. The only criteria, she said, is that they have a need she can work on.

She assesses who might have one as she strides down the hallways. Thirty-three, with the tall frame of the former basketball player and coach she is, her long curly hair dyed neon-pink in front, she's the kind of adult kids gravitate toward. She looks for informal ways to talk and figure out what's going on with them.

Students frequently come to her office for snacks, Flamin' Hot Cheetos

being a runaway favorite. "It allows an easy foot in the door," Woodke said. She wants students to know, "If you need something, I am another body not tied to the school system."

This is key. She's not a disciplinary figure, which is not to say she's a softy, exactly.

"What is the rule about snacks?" she demanded of two boys who come looking for snacks during class time. They're available at lunch or after class, she said, as she has many times before.

Woodke has been striking up conversations with one girl recently, and learned she has not turned in a lot of assignments. She wants to add the student to her caseload, if the girl and her mom agree, and pulls her out of a class this afternoon to discuss.

Woodke called the girl's record up on her computer. "You have 30 missing assignments," she said. "What is it about you and math?"

"It's just so frickin' hard," the girl said. The teacher goes fast and she gets confused, the girl said.

"We need to come up with a plan," Woodke said. The student readily agreed, startled only when Woodke said they would meet to check in once a month.

"Once a month," the girl said. She wants once a week. That was fine by Woodke.

At another point in the afternoon, Woodke visited a leadership class. Her mission was to get kids involved in making posters that will brighten the

hallways and lead to more community spirit, though she slipped in motivational messages along the way. (There are two things you're capable of controlling, she told them, your attitude and your effort.) The students were so-so on the poster idea. "I feel like there's really no point," said one.

Woodke persisted. "We're going to do posters, even if collectively we don't feel like it would make a huge difference."

Gradually, the students' ideas start flowing, especially when she suggested incorporating a hot Cheetos theme, as in "I'm as good as hot Cheetos."

Could they use real hot Cheetos bags after eating the contents? What about doing an obstacle course in the hallways? Something with music? "So good," Woodke said after leaving class, pleased by getting the kids talking.

"You saw it was a slow roll ... Then you throw out an idea like hot Cheetos and they lose their minds."

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About the project

Education Lab is a Seattle Times project that spotlights promising approaches to persistent challenges in public education. The Seattle Foundation serves as fiscal sponsor for education Lab, which is supported by grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Amazon, Comcast Washington and City University of Seattle. For more, go to seattletimes.com/educationlab