

# PTS provides schools with special ed therapists

It supplies management services, too

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Diana Fongheiser (left) and Pam Hackett of PTS .

CONSHOHOCKEN — The state makes promises; the state needs to keep its word. A free public education for every child, even those with speech trouble or other impairments. It can be easier said than done, though. The [American Speech-Language-Hearing Association](#) has said that well over half of U.S. school districts have more jobs available for speech-language pathologists than they can fill. Among special education therapists, “there is always zero percent unemployment. The demand always far exceeds the supply,” Pam Hackett said. For the last decade [Pediatric Therapeutic Services](#), based here, has been filling the gap for local schools, providing special ed therapists along with management services to help schools run these programs efficiently and cost-effectively.

PTS founders Diana Fongheiser and Hackett each came to the table with a personal passion for the work. Hackett was born with a cleft lip and palette. She received speech therapy as a child and is a trained pediatric physical therapist. Fongheiser has a grown stepson with multiple disabilities.

Disabilities, children, personal passion ... in the business world these all become code words for amateurs at work. Not so in this case. The partners are not just filling a niche, but have crafted a business strategy that aims straight for their clients’ financial woes. PTS provides the muscle, with 130 contract therapists serving 50 programs in public and private schools. But that is just the beginning. The real heavy lifting comes in the effort to aggressively and intelligently manage these programs for the sake of better service and, yes, financial savings.

A school district can spend \$2,500 per student on a year’s worth of special education, Fongheiser said. A well-managed program can pare down the headcount to only those students who truly need the service, while also reducing the time students may spend in therapy. School administrators typically aren’t trained to manage therapy, while therapists don’t know the administrative side. “So there is no birds-eye view of program management, no vision for initiatives and certainly no ability to push that agenda through all the levels of bureaucracy in a district,” Fongheiser said.

“There is no one looking at the big picture of how a child enters into the case load and how they come off that case load,” Hackett said. PTS takes that long view, consulting with all players, “so that we have the right kids on that case load and so that costs are controlled as well.” To that end the business has developed its own financial dashboard, BudgetWatch, to track critical expenditures within a client’s program. “We can tell you how much a district spent on travel between buildings, if we need to. We know how much time is spent in meetings, we know how much time is spent on paperwork,” Fongheiser said.

By understanding how therapists use their time, PTS can streamline operations. Internally, PTS has a productive hierarchy. Between the partners and the practitioners there stands a line of middle management, the directors of clinical services. They oversee each program and guide the client through any managerial sticking points. “One hundred percent of their job is to be problem-solvers for therapists in school districts. They don’t carry any case load, they don’t generate a dime of revenue,” Fongheiser said.

Those are the services that have kept Casey Yarnall coming back over the past five years. As a supervisor of accounts in the West Chester Area School District, she has been tapping PTS for its personnel support and management expertise for five years. “They help problem-solve issues with many members of the team,” Yarnall said. “If a therapist and a principal don’t agree, they will step in to see if they can find some common ground. Maybe one of the parties doesn’t understand the situation, and PTS is able to shed some expertise.”

The business faces its share of challenges. In particular, school districts only budget throughout a part of the year. Miss the window and you’re out of the game for 12 months. As a result, PTS typically faces a two-year sales cycle. Careful budgeting and a solid book of ongoing business make the lag manageable.

Then there is that bit about passion, not to be overlooked. When we spoke, Hackett had just returned from 10 days in India where she worked in a school for children with multiple disabilities. “To those who much has been given, much is expected,” she said. “Diana and I share a passion for doing good in the world, and the fact we can be in business doing this: It’s an amazing life.”