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Right: An activity leader explains game rules to children and parents during Fun Night at the annual Family Weekend Retreat.

blended outreach:

face-to-face and remote programs

By Diana Poeppelmeyer

The Texas School for the Deaf (TSD) has two missions. One is to provide educational services to deaf and hard of hearing students and their families on the Austin campus—this is the traditional, face-to-face, center-based service model. The other is to serve as a resource center for the state, providing information, referral, programs, and services to deaf and hard of hearing children, their families, and the professionals who serve them. That type of service, in a state the size of Texas, may be provided at great distances.

TSD's outreach department, the Educational Resource Center on Deafness (ERCOD), is responsible for spearheading these efforts. Despite the distances involved, ERCOD has historically mirrored the school's model of face-to-face service delivery. Consumers either came to us or we brought staff to consumers wherever they were located. Though we did have a few remote services provided through phone and/or e-mail support and a couple of distance learning classes, our standard operating procedure has been to bring people together for our mainstay programs such as the Family Weekend Retreat, Communication Skills Workshops, Discovery Retreats, and Summer Programs.

In 2004, a simple request for assistance became a catalyst for rethinking our approach to service delivery. A mother called and said, "I want in my hometown what you have at Texas School for the Deaf." Her family had just attended a Family Weekend Retreat, and she saw opportunities at our school that she wanted for her 18-month-old deaf son. What she wanted most and immediately was sign language instruction for her family. It was not readily available in her community so she was calling us for assistance. Though her family lived 260 miles from our campus, her request came at an opportune time for us to span the distance and fill this gap in resources through the use of newly acquired technology. TSD had just installed videophones across much of the campus, and we decided to experiment to see if we could meet this family's needs through remote service delivery. We set up a pilot project using videophones for one-on-one classes

Photos courtesy of the Texas School for the Deaf



between an instructor at TSD and the mother, father, and hearing sibling. Not only were we able to bring TSD services to their hometown—we brought them right into their living room! The pilot was such a success that the next year we expanded the program, called it Family Signs, and served 30 parents statewide. Unfortunately, after one year we lost our funding and the program was shelved while we looked for grants and alternatives. Last year the project was resurrected as Family Signs Powered by Skype and ooVoo, and 42 families in 38 cities and towns across Texas received in-home sign language instruction. The program remains a work in progress but has become, for us, an example of positive outcomes resulting from experiments with new models of remote service delivery.

The success of the Family Signs project and the concurrent explosion of new technologies and web 2.0 tools gave us new options for conquering the sheer size of Texas and the challenge of meeting increasing demands in an era of budget reductions. With only nine staff dedicated to outreach and an estimated 6,000 deaf and hard of hearing students in our state, we needed a new approach that allowed us to do more with less. Capitalizing on the abundance of widely available technological tools seemed to be our best prospect to help accomplish our outreach mission.

Consequently, in the last year ERCOD set a new goal of moving towards a blended model of service delivery in which half of our programs are offered remotely and half are offered face to face. Though we already had a number of programs that people could access from a remote location, we have just begun to envision the possibility of providing more remote services that are interactive in nature. With Family Signs as one prototype showing promise, we are paving the way for new directions in service delivery.

As we prepare to create more interactive remote services and resources, some of the questions we must ask ourselves are:

- Does our staff have the knowledge and skills to maximize the technology that is currently available?
- Do our consumers have the knowledge and skills to take advantage of what we offer?
- What technology tools are the most readily available, inexpensive, and easy to use?
- How many consumers do not have access to Internet-based resources?
- Do we have the infrastructure and equipment necessary on both our end and the remote end?
- Can we be nimble enough to keep up with changing technology and consumer preferences?
- Do on-line interactions have the same power to affect outcomes as face-to-face interactions?
- Can programs serving deaf and hard of hearing students work together to coordinate on-line opportunities and resources nationwide?
- What evaluation tools will help us determine which programs are most effective?

Though we don't yet have answers to all of our questions, we know we can't wait to proceed in the direction of offering more remote, interactive services. Technology is rapidly changing the way people communicate, interface, and interact, and programs providing educational services must keep up with these changes or get left behind.

What follows is a description of our current programs categorized by which model of service delivery best describes their format.



Interactive Remote Services

Distance Learning:

- Two faculty at TSD teach American Sign Language (ASL) for foreign language credit to hearing and deaf students in 13 school districts throughout Texas.
- Two ASL storytellers at TSD connect with 70 mainstreamed deaf and hard of hearing students in 12 school districts throughout Texas.

Family Signs (www.familysigns.org) is a free sign language instruction program providing Texas parents of deaf or hard of hearing children with one-on-one classes through video technology.

Phone and e-mail support is provided for the approximately 2,000 calls and e-mails per year requesting information or referral. There are toll-free lines for both English and Spanish speakers.

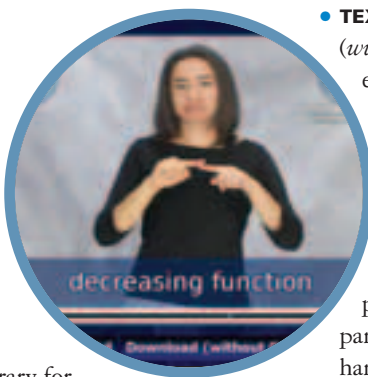
Non-interactive Remote Services

Resource Websites:

- **TEXAS DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING RESOURCES WEBSITE** (www.texasdbbresources.org)—A portal and resource website for Texas and national services with information for parents and professionals focused on the education of children who are deaf and hard of hearing. Resources for Spanish speakers included.
- **DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING TEXAS TRANSITION WEBSITE** (www.dbbtexastransition.org)—A collaborative work of the Texas Statewide Transition Team for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students focusing on resources for transition.

On-line Materials and Resources:

- **TEXAS MATH SIGN LANGUAGE DICTIONARY** (www.tsdvideo.org)—Videos of math vocabulary in ASL and Signing Exact English with English and Spanish captions. This dictionary was developed as a resource for teachers, parents, educators, interpreters, and students using the vocabulary from Texas state-adopted textbooks, curriculum, and assessments.
- **TSD ON-LINE OUTREACH LIBRARY** (www.tsd.state.tx.us/TOOL)—Free lending library for



Texas patrons containing videos and other materials focusing on issues related to education of deaf and hard of hearing children.

- **STATE OF TEXAS ASL REPOSITORY** (www.tsd.state.tx.us/outreach/star.html)—A peer-managed document repository for Texas high school ASL teachers. Teachers of ASL can post activities and lesson plans as well as share videos.
- **TAKE UP THE TASK** (www.texasdbbresources.org/perspectives/video-library)—On-line video and printed resources for parents offering guidance and suggestions for enhancing everyday family routines between parent and child.

Publications and Information:

- **THE LONE STAR QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF TSD** disseminates information statewide about the school and outreach services.
- **TEXAS EDUCATION CODE** requires that parents and deaf and hard of hearing students statewide receive information about TSD programs and resources at every annual Individualized Education Program meeting. For this purpose, ERCOD produces and distributes approximately 6,000 brochures every year.
- **THE TSD WEBSITE** (www.tsd.state.tx.us) provides information about the school, programs, and resources available to statewide stakeholders.

Face-to-Face Services

While ERCOD plans to expand our remote services, we also have every intention of keeping our face-to-face services going strong. Though much more expensive and labor intensive, these programs offer the greatest rewards as professionals, parents, and students collaboratively work together to accomplish the goals of education for deaf and hard of hearing children.

Services for Families:

- **STATEWIDE LIAISON TO PARENTS OF DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING CHILDREN:** The position belongs to a parent who responds to parent inquiries, develops family-focused resources, and represents the parent perspective on stakeholder groups.
- **TEXAS HANDS & VOICES** (www.txhandsandvoices.org): This organization was established in 2007 with ERCOD support. The Texas chapter of the national organization is dedicated to supporting families and their children who are deaf or hard of hearing as well as the professionals who serve them. This year, ERCOD is working with Texas Hands & Voices to establish a Guide By Your Side program that will focus on providing formal parent-to-parent support and access to deaf and hard of hearing role models.

- **STATEWIDE LIAISON TO SPANISH SPEAKING FAMILIES:**

The liaison answers the toll-free line for Spanish-speaking parents, shares information and resources directly, and directs families to print and web resources that are available in Spanish. The liaison also attends our family-focused events and arranges for access through direct service in Spanish or through translation services.

- **FAMILY WEEKEND RETREAT:** ERCOD annually hosts families from across the state for a weekend of learning, networking, and relationship building at the TSD campus. Last summer, we hosted our largest group ever with 54 families (233 individuals) attending. In addition to parent workshops, Sibshops and children's activities are a standard part of our weekend offerings.
- **TRANSITION FAIRS FOR PARENTS:** Held at various locations across the state, these workshops give parents the information they need to navigate the transition from services under IDEA to postsecondary services, options, higher education, training, and/or work.

Services for Professionals and Pre-professionals:

- **BOTH ERCOD AND TSD STAFF OFFER WORKSHOPS** on a variety of topics including literacy, child development, technology for education, assessment, Deaf culture, transition, and others. The Communication Skills Workshop is our largest workshop endeavor. We offer three week-long camps for sign language immersion and instruction for ASL teachers, deaf education teachers, interpreters, interpreter aides, and parents of deaf and hard of hearing children in Texas. Last summer 521 individuals attended.
- **TOURS AND OBSERVATIONS:** ERCOD routinely plans tours and observations for police cadets, medical residents, and university students in fields such as deaf education, special education, general education, rehabilitation, social work, nursing, and counseling. We consider these opportunities critical for educating people about working with deaf and hard of hearing individuals and explaining the unique learning environment of center-based schools.
- **CO-SPONSOR OF THE BIENNIAL STATEWIDE CONFERENCE ON EDUCATION OF THE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING:** This biennial event is an educational and networking opportunity for professionals and parents across the state and typically draws between 700-900 participants.
- **INTERNS, STUDENT TEACHERS, AND VOLUNTEERS:** ERCOD actively seeks interns, student teachers, and volunteers through relationships with colleges or universities offering degrees related to the education of deaf and hard of hearing children. Students from Interpreter Training Programs



Left: Summer school students enjoy educational and recreational activities with staff.

(ITP) and pre-service deaf education students regularly get community service hours and experience by volunteering for our Family Weekend Retreat and Family Signs programs. ITP students also intern with our Interpreting Services Department and deaf education students do observations and student teaching on our campus.

Services for Students:

- **SUMMER PROGRAMS** is our largest student-oriented activity. Every summer we run two-, three-, and four-week programs for students from TSD and other programs statewide. Our goal is to enhance academic skills through a variety of enriching activities. Additionally, Drivers Education is offered for students 15 years and older.
- **DISCOVERY RETREAT** is a weekend event offered twice per year for high school students from mainstream or regular education programs. The goal of the retreat is to help students, from both oral and signing backgrounds, discover who they are and develop their leadership skills by interacting with peers in teambuilding activities. Typically 25-30 students attend each retreat.

Statewide Leadership:

- ERCOD staff members serve on a variety of state-level committees, advisory boards, work groups, and councils to represent our programs and promote interagency collaboration in developing and providing services to deaf and hard of hearing children. Examples of committees include the 0-3 Deaf and Hard of Hearing Leadership Council, Transition Networks, the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services Advisory Council, and Parent Networks.

Development and Public Relations:

- One final outreach area that has a unique role is that of development and public relations. One ERCOD staff member acts as the liaison to the TSD Foundation and works with the Foundation to find alternative funding sources, plan fundraisers, and establish business and community partners. The same person is responsible for spearheading efforts to promote TSD/ERCOD's image throughout the state as a provider of quality programs and services for deaf and hard of hearing students. We have too often heard that apart from the Deaf community and deaf education professionals, TSD is the state's best-kept secret. Consequently we work hard to create awareness of our programs with the public at large through public relations, media, and marketing efforts. Increased visibility enhances our chances to attract both individuals who can benefit from our services and supporters who can help us achieve our missions.