

## MINNESOTA BRINGS TOGETHER STAKEHOLDERS TO DEVELOP A PLAN FOR CHILDREN WHO ARE

# deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing



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*By Mary Hartnett*

With increased emphasis on accountability and access promoted by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, as well as the reauthorization of P.L. 94-142 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997, the inability of our state to identify the achievements and needs of our deaf and hard of hearing students was disturbing. While the media displayed test scores regarding the academic performance of students with and without disabilities, data regarding the academic progress of deaf and hard of hearing students in Minnesota, like so many other states, was relegated to parent-teacher narratives.

However, Minnesotans have a history of advocacy for children who are deaf or hard of hearing, and they demanded better. Past legislation resulted in mandates and funds for newborn hearing screening, acoustic standards for schools, hearing aid insurance coverage for children, parent guides, deaf mentors, establishment of a Hearing Aid Loaner Bank, appointment of a hearing loss coordinator for ages birth through 3, an advisory board for Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI), reporting of statewide test results for students who are deaf and hard of hearing, and special funds for a transition program for deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing students. A lot of work was happening, but could we work better and smarter?

Looking for answers, the Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans (MNCDDHH) and the Minnesota Department of Education co-sponsored remote participation in two National Summits on Deaf Education in 2009 and 2010. The summits were focused on improved outcomes for deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing students, partnerships, and collaboration. Summit participants asked the MNCDDHH to convene a Minnesota summit in 2011 to develop a data-driven statewide, deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing education improvement plan with specific, measurable, and timely outcomes.

*Photo courtesy of the Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans*



To ensure that all perspectives were reflected in the plan, an outside consultant was recruited by the Commission to facilitate the planning process. She painstakingly prepared for the 2011 meeting and developed a framework that allowed participants to jump in as soon as they arrived. Twenty-five representatives from five state agencies, nonprofits, advocacy organizations, the Deaf community, academia, parent organizations, public and private residential and day schools, and school districts across the state were invited to two-day meetings in both July and November.

These gatherings—replete with interpreters, Communication Access Realtime Translation, and assistive listening devices—represented a diverse and broad spectrum of state and community leaders focused on a single issue: the educational outcomes for students who are deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing. Would those invited be willing to come together to think

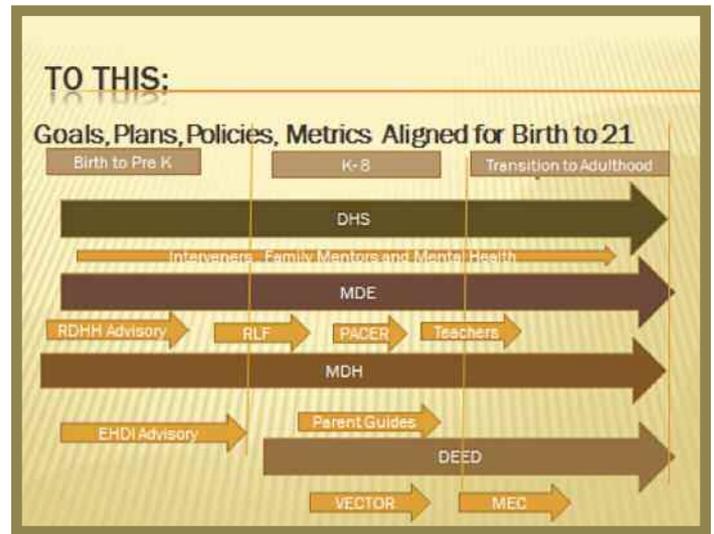
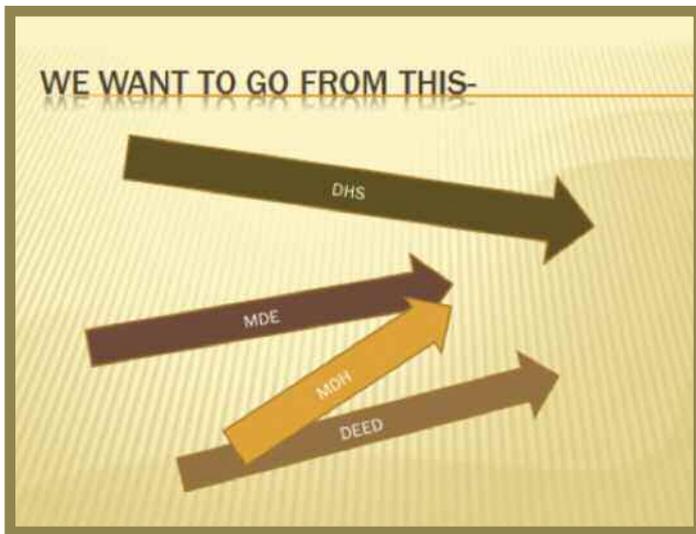
through such a tough and complicated issue? Could strong proponents of diverse programmatic and communicative approaches come together and forge a common vision? Could state agencies, each with its own federal and state mandates, funding streams, and data privacy laws, find creative ways to collaborate and maximize their resources for a common purpose?

Indeed. Every organization we invited was represented and fully participated. All were eager to build on past successes, identify barriers, and develop ways to collaborate. The attendees spoke from their hearts as well as from theory and practice. They agreed on a common purpose: to monitor and maximize learner progress for children who are deaf, deaf blind, and hard of hearing and to improve educational outcomes so that each student upon graduation is prepared to enter the adult workforce or continue his or her education as well as be a productive member of the

community.

Subsequently, the group developed the following tenets to guide all of the goals, objectives, and outcomes developed for this plan:

- Language and communication access is paramount.
- Literacy is the foundation of academic achievement.
- Communication competence is essential.
- Learners and their families have diverse and unique learning needs.
- Parents are critical to the success of children and youth.
- Children and youth have appropriate placements and programs that address their unique needs.
- A variety of technologies is available and used to support communication and student learning.



- Accountability for this plan is shared by all Minnesotan agencies that provide support to children and youth who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families.

The group plan resulted in 12 objectives that address critical components of development and education from birth to high school graduation. The goals and objectives are aligned with the goals of the National Agenda in Deaf Education ([www.ndepnow.org/agenda/agenda.htm](http://www.ndepnow.org/agenda/agenda.htm)), Minnesota’s State Performance Plan indicators for special education, and the goals of the state’s EHDI that are reported to the Center for Disease Control (CDC). For each objective, outcomes, measurable indicators, benchmarks, and responsible agencies were identified. Continuous data collection has the potential to provide Minnesota agencies with information to monitor the progress of its deaf, deaf blind, and hard of hearing children and youth. The plan was approved in November of 2011 and implementation began.

A steering committee was created in January of 2012 that has one representative from each state agency/funding organization, the University of Minnesota, and Minnesota Hands & Voices. The commission contracted with collaborative coordinators to keep the project on track. During the first six months of 2012, we sought and obtained approval

from the advisory committees or boards of trustees of all organizations, including The Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf, Northern Voices, the Metro Deaf School, the Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens, PACER, Minnesota Hands & Voices, MNCDHH, and the Newborn Hearing Screening Advisory Committee. Meanwhile, the steering committee contracted with the Minnesota Analysis Division to develop a reliable and valid survey for parents of deaf and hard of hearing newborns and children up to the age of 5 and a separate teacher survey for all age groups. Over 20 professionals participated in the survey development, including state epidemiologists, parents, and professionals in public health, vocational rehabilitation, and education. Two interpreter referral agency directors generously donated funds from their organizations for Target gift cards as an incentive to get a higher response rate from parents and teachers. The parent survey was distributed in November of 2012; we had a participation rate of 43 percent. Follow-up interviews with parents who did not respond have been conducted in Somali, Spanish, Hmong, and American Sign Language. The teacher survey was sent in February and March; we have a participation rate of 65 percent. The results of both surveys and an analysis of disaggregated data from the State Performance Plan, statewide high stakes testing, Part C and EHDI data reported to the CDC was analyzed

in time for the next summit in April of 2013.

The collaborative plan, now in its second year of implementation, focuses on identifying practices that are working and those that need to be implemented to ensure success for each deaf, deafblind, or hard of hearing student in our schools. In addition to the painstaking work of developing interagency agreements to share resources and information and the development of two statewide surveys, other progress has been made, including the development of:

- free software that can be used to monitor individual students’ academic progress (developed by the University of Minnesota); and
- a “Transition Tool Kit” (development of this kit was led by the Minnesota Department of Education).

We have met others who are interested in data and who we hope will work with us, especially the Minnesota Office of Higher Education that oversees the State Longitudinal Education Data System. We believe that the work that they are doing may help us to track student progress in another powerful way.

Collaboration—across agencies and interest groups—is complicated, messy, and hard. It can also be exhilarating. We’ve learned that we can never

## COLLABORATIVE PARTNERS

- MN Hands and Voices
- DeafBlind Technical Assistance Project
- MN Association of Deaf Citizens
- PACER
- Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans
- MN State Academy of the Deaf
- Northern Voices
- Metro Deaf School
- VECTOR-transition
- U of M
- DHS
- MN Dept of Ed
  - EHDI Coordinator
  - Part C Coordinator
  - Resource Center D/HH
- Vocational Rehab Services
- State Services for the Blind
- MN Dept of Health
- NE Metro D/HH
- St. Paul Public Schools



## GOALS

1. A) All young children who have hearing loss will maximize their communication and learning potential, regardless of the degree of their hearing loss, and will be able to begin kindergarten with communication, social, and early literacy skills at a developmental level similar to that of their typically developing hearing peers, or to the maximum extent appropriate for the individual child.  
B) All families will receive the supports they need to help their children develop and learn. *(Birth through 5)*
1. Children and youth who are deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing will be prepared to live independently as adults. *(K-8)*
2. Students will maximize their potential and involvement in the areas of employment, education and training, and independent living in order to become productive citizens. *(9-Graduation)*

communicate enough. We've learned that the more people learn about our plan, the more they want to help us with it. We've also learned that something powerful happens when dedicated educators, parents, audiologists, deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing advocates, administrators, and academics sit across the table from one another to have

learning conversations and to work toward a common purpose. We've learned that it's totally worth all the planning and the effort.

Our challenge now is to find data that are useful to parents and educators so they can help children be the best they can be and use the data to continuously improve our state system. We are

hopeful that will be the case with the continued implementation of Minnesota's plan for maximizing and monitoring the learning of our state's deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing children. We have come together to continue making progress for each of these children—and for their families and to improve the statewide system.

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Matt Rider has over 20 years of experience working within the deaf and hard of hearing community on mental health-related issues.

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