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MEd, is a transition instructor in the Vocational Education, Community Training, and Occupational Relations Program (VECTOR) in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. She has served on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Advisory Board for the Minnesota Department of Education and worked nationally through PEPNet to provide professional development in the area of transition. A recipient of the Shaklee Teacher Award, a national award to recognize outstanding teachers of children with disabilities, Palmberg received her bachelor's degree from Illinois State University and her master's degree from the University of Illinois. She has teaching experience and certifications in the areas of deaf/hard of hearing, learning disabilities, emotional/behavioral disorders, and developmental cognitive disabilities and is the mother of a deaf young adult.

**HIGH EXPECTATIONS +  
READING INTERVENTION PLAN =**

# Big Jump in Students' Reading Scores

*By Greta Palmberg and Kendra Rask*

*Our students had postsecondary dreams.*

**Leng** wanted a career in computers. Leng's postsecondary goal on his Individualized Education Program (IEP) was to attend a technical college, but his college placement score in reading was too low to be accepted for the coursework. The door to a computer degree was closing.

**Shayne** wanted to be a chef, and a job in a neighborhood restaurant fueled this dream. College placement testing revealed he did not have the reading skills required by the culinary arts program at the technical college. His reading score placed him at approximately the fourth grade level—not at the developmental level required for entrance into the program.

**Fadumo** wanted a career as a certified nursing assistant and took coursework in this field as part of her transition plan. She excelled in the hands-on portion of the coursework and passed the state's skills test. However, despite intensive supports, she was still unprepared to meet the reading and literacy requirements and failed the written portion of the state test. Fadumo wanted to develop the reading skills that would allow her to pursue a health career.

Leng, Shayne, and Fadumo were among our bright and ambitious deaf and hard of hearing students who lacked the reading skills to enter even the developmental coursework at our local technical college. Further, as with all the students in the



*Photos courtesy of Greta Palmberg and Kendra Rask*



**Kendra Rask**, BS, is an Intermediate District 287 special education instructor in the VECTOR Program. She serves as a classroom teacher as well as the postsecondary liaison for students who are seeking to pursue postsecondary education. She received her bachelor's degree in elementary education from Saint Cloud State University, an AAS in interpreting from St. Paul Technical College, and special education licensures in emotional/behavioral disorders and specific learning disabilities from Bethel University. Rask is a certified American Sign Language interpreter, National Association of the Deaf, Level 4 Advanced, and a proud CODA (child of deaf adults). She believes that high expectations empower and, by definition, improve outcomes for both the individual and our world.

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Vocational Education, Community Training, and Occupational Relations Program (VECTOR), the nationally recognized transition program that serves 18- to 21-year-olds in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, these students were running out of time. In a few short years, they would be 21 years old and no longer eligible for services. Precious minutes were ticking away.

VECTOR serves a variety of students with disabilities, about one-third of whom are deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf/blind. As part of what the federal government calls a “traditionally underserved population,” our students come from the homes of immigrants and refugees, homes in which there is only one parent, and homes where neither parent speaks English, or they experience other factors that make them educationally vulnerable. (See Figure 1.)

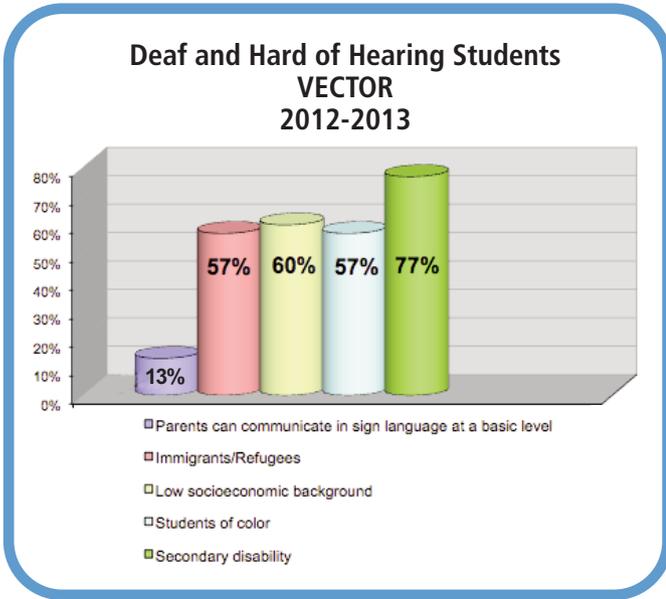
Since 1987, we have been customizing transition services for students who are deaf, hard of hearing, and deaf/blind. In the spring of 2012, the VECTOR staff for deaf and hard of hearing students teamed up to design the reading intervention that we knew was imperative.

Bringing reading research, transition program philosophy, and high expectations together would be critical. Our goal was to increase our students’ skills in meaningful, measurable ways that would allow them to read their college texts and benefit them over a lifetime. A reading specialist who was also a former interpreter confirmed that when a text is above a student’s instructional reading level, frustration sets in and it becomes difficult for learning to occur. This, of course, has implications for a student’s entire educational experience.

We put other postsecondary coursework on hold and enrolled nine deaf and hard of hearing students in our newly-designed College Reading Readiness class. We increased the time students spent reading and selected a new text focused on academic reading in the college setting. We used an on-line program that included use of the Lexile system to measure text difficulty and to analyze students’ reading levels as the levels changed over time.

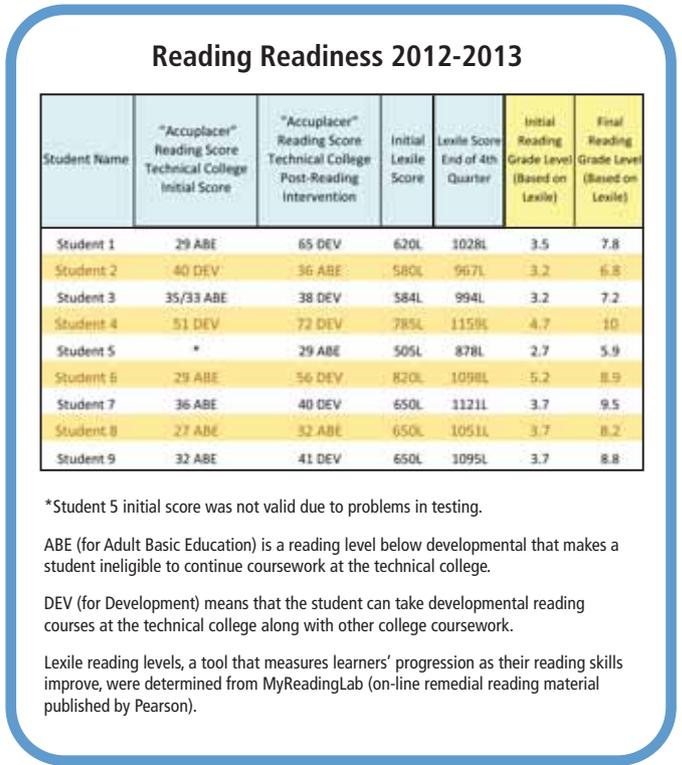
We also looked for ways to motivate our students and keep their expectations high.

Figure 1:



**Above:** In this chart, the demographics of the deaf and hard of hearing students in VECTOR reflect the program’s exclusive focus on those the federal government defines as “traditionally underserved.” **Right:** This chart shows the improvement experienced by students who undertook a reading intervention in VECTOR in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota.

Figure 2:



Motivation was inspired through a variety of strategies: students charted their reading growth; guest speakers spoke about college careers; and Howard A. Rosenblum, chief executive officer of the National Association of the Deaf, sent our students an encouraging letter. “Deaf and hearing people are equals,” he wrote. “The most important tool for equality is language. Improve your reading and writing, and you will be more powerful!” This became our class motto.

At the end of the year the students were tested, and the results showed a success greater than any of us had anticipated. (See Figure 2.) Our students had achieved unprecedented growth in academic reading. Every student increased his or her reading between three and five grade levels, and the class averaged a 394-point increase in Lexile scores. Six students had raised their scores enough to take college developmental coursework and pursue their postsecondary goals. Three other students committed to continue in the course another year. Just as importantly, our students became active learners, empowered and determined to hold themselves to a higher standard.

**And Leng, Shayne, and Fadumo?**

Leng increased his reading by five grade levels. A few weeks before graduating from VECTOR, he re-took the college placement test and increased his score by nine points. This nine-point difference was what he needed to enroll in developmental reading at a technical college. Today, he is an independent college student, taking three courses at the technical college and pursuing a computer career as a desktop support specialist.

Shayne increased his reading by more than four grade levels and his college placement test score by five points. He committed to a second year of intensive reading instruction and enrolled in secondary vocational culinary arts classes. His college goal is closer now, and he is determined to make it happen.

Fadumo increased her reading by four grade levels and her Lexile score by over 400 points. She increased her college placement test score by 36 points! This score not only elevated her to the developmental reading level at the technical college but allowed her to skip

the first developmental reading class altogether. She adjusted her goals when her reading scores improved. Instead of becoming a nursing assistant, Fadumo has decided to pursue a career in radiologic technology.

As news of the success of our program spread, we were asked to open another class, this time for hearing students. We agreed to do so—with the provision that the classes for hearing and deaf students remain separate—and we now teach two courses instead of one.

We had hoped that the College Reading Readiness course would result in reading gains. We saw our students become active learners, forge ahead multiple grade levels in reading, and gain college-ready skills. A pathway to college was opened.

We hoped for reading gains; what we achieved was so much more.

*The dedicated and amazing staff that devised and implemented the reading program for our deaf and hard of hearing students included: Dori Beach, Kayla Beccue, Kathy Manlapas, Donna Moe, Greta Palmberg, Kendra Rask, and Tina Sunda.*