

SMALL NUMBERS AND BIG SPACES CALL FOR A

Team Approach in North Dakota

By Pam Smith and Bambi Lambert

Preparing deaf and hard of hearing students for transition is a unique challenge in North Dakota, a rural state in which the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction has identified only 32 transition-age students as “deaf” or “hearing impaired.” Additional students who are deaf or hard of hearing may be being served via 504 plans in the schools, but there is no data available which indicates this. Collaboration among schools, the school system, and various state agencies is mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Services for deaf and hard of hearing students may be limited, or unavailable, as indicated by parents and educators across North Dakota.

In the face of these challenges—low numbers, limited services, and a rural environment—North Dakota educators and the pepnet 2 team were determined to find ways to ensure and assist with the successful transitions of students who are deaf or hard of hearing. The team began by developing a survey. The survey was disseminated to more than 500 agencies and providers across the state and garnered a 23 percent response rate; it gauged the needs that service agencies experience and asked respondents to identify problems in helping deaf and hard of hearing individuals transition from school to postsecondary education or the workplace.

Respondents indicated that providers’ experience with individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing was infrequent, and that they felt somewhat ill-prepared to provide services due to the fact that they were unable to communicate fully and effectively. The greatest need for deaf and hard of hearing students, as stated by providers, was the lack of or inability to schedule certified interpreters. More than 80 percent of respondents reported lack of interpreter services as their number one concern. At present, only 17 interpreters are certified by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf in our entire state, and 12 of those interpreters work in classrooms.

Photos courtesy of Pam Smith and Bambi Lambert

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Clockwise from above left: Lambert in the classroom; the pepnet 2 North Dakota team; entertainer Keith Wann with students at the transition Summit.

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The second biggest problem, as indicated by our survey results, was lack of information about the needs of those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

After an analysis of this survey, our North Dakota team developed a plan to address the needs of providers across the state while maintaining a focus and emphasis on the transition of youth who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Planning for a Summit

Key state and national agencies were identified and invited to participate in planning and presentation at a two-day transition Summit. Invitations were extended to the members of the state Transition Communities of Practice, to supporting agencies and programs, and to the president of the North Dakota Association of the Deaf and others active in the Deaf community. The Summit was an event with keynote speakers and breakout sessions designed for students, parents, professionals, and interpreters. Topics addressed included advocacy, the Individualized Education

Program (IEP), employment, agency/community supports, legal rights/responsibilities, and audiological trends. Participants left with a portfolio of helpful transition resources to take back to their homes and schools.

We were fortunate that our team members worked so well together. Each of us was determined to create the best experience possible, and all of us had the support of our home agencies and schools. We figured out who would organize which events and which organizations would foot the bills. We collaborated to provide food, transportation, and lodging for student workshop attendees and their families in addition to the speaker fees. Even though we were spread across the state, our team met weekly at times to ensure planning and implementation continued smoothly. We set goals and did whatever we needed to do to achieve those goals. Working hard and consistently was key to our success.

The transition-aged students who attended the Summit were given a pre-test at the start of the Summit and a post-test three months later.

Results indicated that the attending students initially had limited knowledge of the components of the IEP itself as well as limited understanding of the IEP process. Following the Summit, their knowledge had increased: students were able to identify their disability and needed accommodations, and they demonstrated greater knowledge of the IEP and confidence in the transition process.

The Summit was not all work. With the support of pepnet 2 and our sponsoring agencies and in support of Deaf Awareness Week, Keith Wann, a hearing son of deaf parents and a comedian who entertains internationally in American Sign Language, performed for more than 200 enthusiastic community members. Wann's performance created a rare opportunity for adults who are deaf to get together with each other and deaf and hard of hearing students and their families for an evening of fun, camaraderie, and outstanding entertainment—and for us to attract more individuals to our event.

Following the Summit, the North Dakota team developed a presentation focusing on the transition needs of students who are deaf or hard of hearing in North Dakota. The presentation included audiological considerations, educational considerations and assessments, vocational rehabilitation information, pertinent assistive technology considerations, communication access, and relevant services available statewide. This presentation has been shared virtually via videoconferencing to statewide agencies and in person at statewide conferences.

Responding to the feedback from the survey and Summit, the team compiled a portfolio of informational resources to address the transition needs of students who are deaf or hard of hearing. The portfolios were then hand-delivered across the state to case managers of each student identified as having a primary or secondary disability of hearing loss as

well as to other case managers who were referred to our team as serving individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. The portfolio included all aspects of transition, from information about postsecondary programs, to training programs, to employment, to independent living options, to social security and vocational rehabilitation services; it was intended to inform and educate not only the case managers but students and their parents as well.

From working as a team as we developed, disseminated, and evaluated

an assessment of needs and resources in our state, to collaborating as we planned and structured a statewide conference and subsequent presentations, joining forces through pepnet 2 has been critical. Through working together as a team, and with individuals throughout the state, we are more effectively meeting the needs of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing throughout North Dakota as they transition to postsecondary programs or the workplace.

Collaboration Calculations: Lessons from North Dakota

By Pam Smith and Bambi Lambert

The following strategies proved helpful in enabling deaf and hard of hearing students to use the resources available to effectively transition from school to postsecondary study or the workplace.

- **Identify** the roles and responsibilities of each team member involved in the student's transition—whether educational, training, or workplace—as well as independent living.
- **Empower** students to take ownership of their goals:
 - o Always involve students in the IEP process.
 - o Gradually release responsibility to the student through activities that require self-disclosure and self-advocacy.
 - o Regularly share the student's progress with the rest of the team.
- **Engage** local, regional, and state agencies:
 - o Educate agencies and providers of the service needs of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.
 - o Provide professional resources.
- **Encourage** students to self-advocate and communicate with their support network throughout the transition process and into postsecondary, employment, and independent living options.
- **Establish** and maintain meaningful connections on the national, state, and local levels with agencies, providers, parents, schools, and other entities. This enables enhanced postsecondary outcomes for all students in North Dakota who are deaf or hard of hearing.