



Each and Every Child

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When a student lacks access to communication

Those who are deaf/hard of hearing can face huge obstacles to education in Iowa

CHARLES CITY – Though the vast majority of students who are deaf or hard of hearing have no additional disabilities, an astounding percentage

of them are falling behind their peers in the areas of language and literacy skills. The problem? Lack of access to interpreters and limited access to daily

instruction from staff who are specially trained to teach the students.

While larger districts with deeper pockets can provide full-time access to interpreters, smaller districts are often left blowing in the wind, relying on services by itinerant teachers provided by their Area Education Agencies. While that’s sufficient for some students who are deaf or hard of hearing, it creates an educational barrier for others.

“We are talking about access to education,” said Jay Colsch, regional director for the Iowa Educational Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired and Iowa School for the Deaf. “If the student cannot communicate with teachers and their peers, how are they going to learn?”

It is estimated that the number of deaf and hard of hearing students in the



Photos by Iowa Department of Education’s Deborah Darge

Educators work with a student at an academy that’s for students who are deaf/hard of hearing.

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state is nearly 1,600. While the state offers full-time class instruction at its School for the Deaf in Council Bluffs, for many parents the notion of sending their child far away isn't an option.

And to that end, a state leadership team consisting of administrators from the Iowa Department of Education, Area Education Agencies, Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Iowa Educational Services for the Blind/Visually Impaired, Iowa School for the Deaf and the Des Moines Public Schools has developed a plan to create what's known as regional academies. Regional academies are designed to be dotted across the



When a student has access to communication, the education barrier evaporates.

state for the purpose of providing interpreters and full-time teachers of the deaf to students with hearing impairments. In addition, plans are under way to provide full-time teachers of the visually impaired and vision assistants (paraprofessionals) to students who are blind/visually impaired at various locations throughout the state.

The purpose of regional academies is to expand the continuum of services to students with sensory impairments by providing instructional services that supplement itinerant services currently provided by Area Education Agencies and Iowa Educational Services for the Blind/Visually Impaired.

At present, there's only one regional academy – North East Iowa Regional Academy – located in Charles City, and it currently only serves students with hearing impairments. But the academy, known by its acronym NERA, is the pilot.

"The AEAs provide support through itinerant teachers," Colsch said. "But they are limited with the time they can spend with each student and cannot provide full-time itinerant teachers. All too often I have been at IEP (Individualized Education Programs) meetings where the amount of service received is based on the availability of itinerant teachers, not based on what the student needs."

If the itinerant teacher cannot provide sufficient support – typically, itinerant teachers can spend no more than one hour a day, twice per week, with individual students – those who are deaf or hard of hearing are often staffed into multi-disability special



Jay Colsch

education programs.

"There is a seismic gap in the continuum of services" Colsch said. "If the amount of support from an itinerant teacher of the deaf/hard of hearing isn't sufficient, the student often is placed in multi-disability special education programs taught by special education teachers who have little or no educational background or experience teaching students with sensory impairments. Special education teachers are inclined to rely on instructional strategies that are effective with students with learning disabilities or cognitive impairments rather than evidence-based strategies that are specially designed for students who have sensory impairments."

Academic achievement data being collected by local school districts would suggest that the overall rate of progress among students with sensory

disabilities is not sufficient to keep pace with their non-disabled peers.

“Deafness does not preclude children from learning at a rate commensurate with their peers,” Colsch said. “But it does require that they are taught in a different manner.”

In 2013, only 39 percent of Iowa students who were deaf/hard of hearing achieved proficiency in reading as measured by the Iowa Assessments. Another study was conducted last year of reading proficiency among Iowa’s children in grades K-3 who are deaf/hard of hearing using FAST Assessment results and other measures of early literacy skill development. Preliminary results indicate that less than 30 percent of Iowa’s children with significant hearing loss achieved proficiency.

“Our state leadership team recognizes that we can’t embrace the status quo,” Colsch said. “There is too much at stake here. Regional academies represent a systems change that is much needed.”

Susan Rolinger, director of extended learning for the School for the Deaf and Iowa Educational Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired, said it comes down to the matter of the law for providing all students free and appropriate public education, known as FAPE.

“What is appropriate for a child who is deaf?” she said. “How you know something is appropriate is access – communication access. We have a communication plan for our IEPs. There is a reason for that. Now, if you have a student who is hard of hearing and they are falling farther behind, putting them into a special education room gets them in with a teacher with more hours dedicated, but it isn’t necessarily appropriate. The child needs education access, but the teacher doesn’t have the ability.”

In no way is the regional academy concept meant to impinge upon the work going on at the AEAs. Rolinger, whose daughter Madeline is deaf, thrived under the itinerant teacher model.



Susan Rolinger

“But many kids who are deaf and hard of hearing are at significantly higher risk of having behavior problems,” she said. “The regional academy offers a critical mass where students who are deaf and hard of hearing have access to education, access to communication. We’re not saying that every deaf or hard of hearing child should be educated at a regional academy. But there is a significant chunk of students who need more.”

Colsch comes back to offering students a free and appropriate public education.

“During IEP meetings, the concept of an appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment must be considered,” he said. “Least restrictive environment isn’t a specific place; it is a learning environment where the child can receive an appropriate education with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. If a child is the only one who is deaf or hard of hearing, their communication needs must be addressed in an environment where learning is not restricted by lack of communication access. Placement in a regional academy is less restrictive



Students who are deaf/hard of hearing in Iowa make far less progress than their peers. Regional academies are designed to end that.

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than placement in a child's home district, general education classes and multi-disability special education programs where they don't have access to effective communication with their peers."

As for Rolinger's daughter, Madeline is attending the Rochester Institute

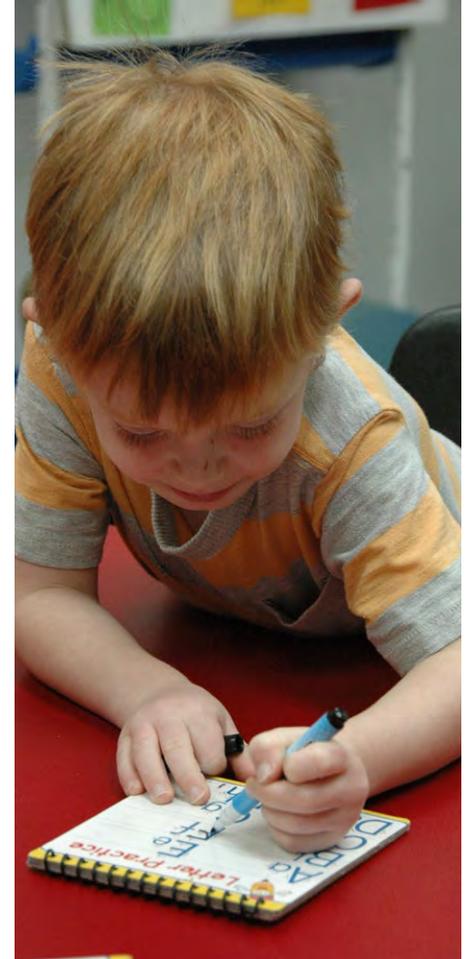
of Technology in Rochester, N.Y., where she is studying public policy with the goal of becoming a disability rights attorney.

"She has critical mass for the first time in her educational career," she said. "There are 1,200 deaf and hard of hearing students there. You can

imagine she loves it."

Rolinger considers her daughter lucky to have thrived in the mainstream. But she worries about those who don't.

"Let's not wait for them to fail before we send them to the regional academy," she said.



Teacher Jessica Menchak teaches at the North East Iowa Regional Academy. Here, she works with one of her charges, who is making the same kind of academic progress as his peers.



Save the date!

The Iowa Department of Education will be holding a special education symposium June 11 and 12. Put it on your calendar and make plans to attend! Details will come later.

Heather Howland tip

The special education team uses group coaching cycles to learn about and implement instructional practices and explore resources/materials. We meet once a week to plan instruction and review data. The instructional coach visits each classroom 2-3 times a week to observe, model, co-teach and provide support. There are opportunities built in for peer observation and reflection. On average coaching cycles last 4-6 weeks.



Teacher Leader Heather Howland, Janesville CSD

Cooperative teaching? Check this out

When it comes to cooperative teaching, both co-teachers play equally important roles. Five planning themes have been identified by co-teachers who considered themselves to be effective co-planners:

- confidence in partner's skills;
- design of learning environments for both the educators and students that require active involvement;
- creation of learning and teaching environments in which each person's contributions are valued;
- development of effective routines to facilitate in-depth planning; and
- increased productivity, creativity, and collaboration over time. Participants in collaborative programs agreed that the time required for planning does not decrease during the year, but the quality of instruction continues to improve.

Courtesy Teacher Vision

Tips for student engagement in the IEP process

Before

- Throughout the school year, particularly as students come closer to transition age, parents and educators should speak with the student about the contents of their IEPs. Putting the contents into student-friendly terms can help students become more conversational about their IEPs. Students should be taught what an IEP is, their rights and the importance of their participation in the IEP process.
- For student-led IEP meetings, help the student prepare well in advance. It's normal for students to be nervous but practicing by using a script or other support can help them relax and take an active role during the meeting.

During

- Using their script or other aids, students will share their strengths, interests, and preferences and also provide input into various aspects of the IEP, as appropriate.
- Engaging other members of the IEP team by assigning specific questions to ask the student can make the meeting seem like less of a presentation and more of a conversation.

After

- Students should continue to be a part of the IEP implementation and planning process. Engaging them in activities that look at their goal growth, transition plans, appropriateness of accommodations, etc., on a long-term basis can increase their investment in their own plan.

Courtesy Keystone AEA

Have a tidbit you'd like to share? Send to jim.flansburg@iowa.gov.