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# Building and Maintaining Connection: Supporting Transition in a Rural State

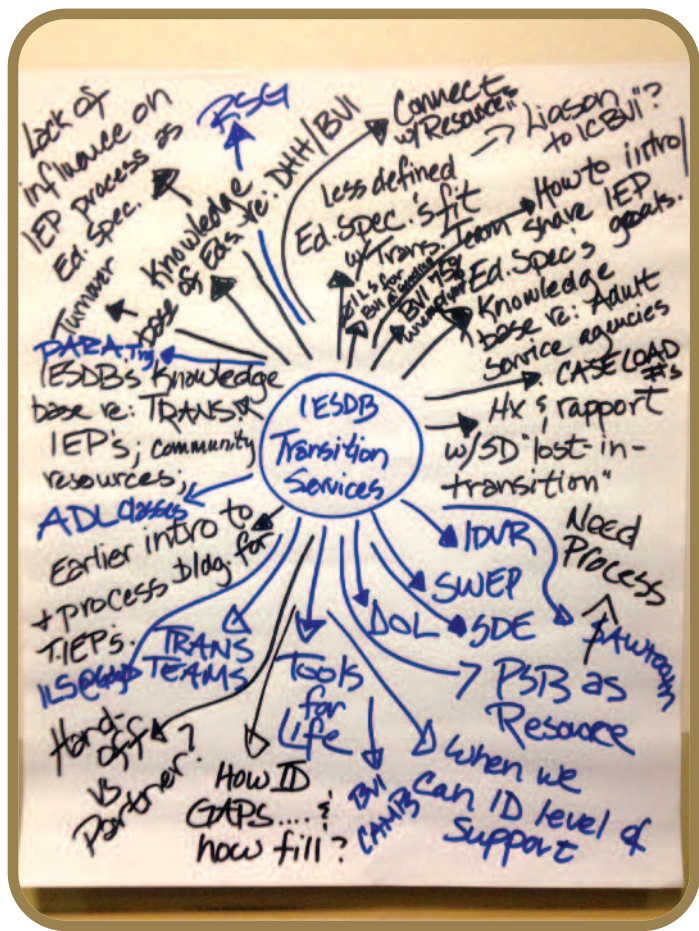
*By Ann Flannery, Paula Mason, and Janna Dunagan*

Deaf and hard of hearing students at Rocky Mountain High School (RMHS), a public school in Meridian, Idaho—and other deaf and hard of hearing students throughout our state—needed skills for the workplace. The demand was critical, and we knew change was needed. Co-authors Janna Dunagan, who teaches deaf and hard of hearing students, and Paula Mason, then the post-secondary transition specialist for the Idaho Educational Services for the Deaf and the Blind (IESDB), itinerant transition specialist, got together and brainstormed; we were soon joined by co-author Ann Flannery, who was at that time working with the Network Interpreting Service.

We settled on a six-week program that would bring in community members, cover a myriad of topics, and end with the school year—just in time for our students to move into summer employment. The timing was ideal; the information would be fresh and students would have confidence to secure employment and work more independently. Multiple partnerships were required; providers and teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students would have to work together.

First we formed a team, reaching out to a variety of individuals who care about deaf and hard of hearing students. The teacher of the deaf at RMHS and the support of her administration was a must. Parents were critical, and so were the individuals who would provide evening transportation for students who would need a way to get home from each workshop. We would also ask the companies who handle services—Sorenson Communications, the Network Interpreting Service, and Hamilton Video Relay—to participate. In addition, we invited the Idaho Department of Labor to

*Photos courtesy of Ann Flannery, Paula Mason, and Janna Dunagan*



**Janna Dunagan,** MS, works with deaf and hard of hearing students in Meridian, Idaho. She earned her bachelor's degree in American Sign Language/English interpreting from Western Oregon University in Monmouth, Oregon, and her master's degree in deaf education from Texas Woman's University in Fort Worth, Texas. For five years she taught at the high school level with a strong emphasis in transition planning. Now teaching in the Idaho Educational Services for the Deaf and the Blind preschool program, Dunagan has had experience in both the Listening and Spoken Language classroom and the Total Communication Program.

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partner with IESDB, a particularly fruitful connection as it led to additional connections.

Our team began to work together. No duties were formally assigned. Team members turned to each other for support and networking. As we planned and collaborated, someone would bring up an idea, someone else would volunteer to take on the task, and still another person would follow up. If a team member had an idea, we discussed it and the team member would work on it, bringing it back to the team to finalize details. This approach was successful because we were all equally invested in ensuring our students had great outcomes. We had a lot of trust in our team and its goals.

Once we established a schedule and settled on topics, we asked the Idaho Department of Labor to help us identify and secure presenters. Flannery and Mason contacted employees and

**Clockwise from left:** Outreach staff identify the services and partnerships in IESDB's public school transition supports; a self-advocacy workshop at the Department of Labor; students take part in a career chat at the Ready, Set, Go to Work summer camp.

businesses that they knew through previous experiences. Already supporting deaf and hard of hearing graduates in the workforce, Mason asked some of them to become mentors for our event. These deaf adults would share their rich experiences and wealth of personal stories with our students. Dunagan turned to her district and arranged the location and interpreters.

Once a commitment from selected partners had been secured, we developed a program. For six weeks, the students would remain after school once a week for three-hour sessions. A guest speaker would address a topic, and we would



That summer, we placed students in museums, libraries, Idaho Department of Labor offices, the Idaho Tax Commission, the Idaho Youth Ranch Distribution Center, the City of Boise Parks, and some local school districts. However, placements were not the end of our work. Cooperation with participating employers remained critical. The RMHS teacher and transition specialist from IESDB provided employers with hands-on support, and our post-secondary transition specialist educated employers about hiring and working with deaf and hard of hearing employees while our interpreters worked as job coaches. To ensure optimal outcomes with each placement, both the Idaho Department of Labor and our post-secondary transition specialist followed up with each student and his or her immediate supervisors to ensure both—employer and student-employee—were learning and growing throughout their work experience. In addition, our transition team checked in on the students as they worked.

This involvement proved crucial as issues arose that had not been addressed. For example, a student placed in the museum did not understand the importance of personal hygiene and clean clothes. After one-on-one direct instruction about this critical soft skill,

reinforce the speaker's message by engaging students in a teaching and learning activity. The hands-on experience following each presentation would allow students to take ownership of the information while putting it into practice. We came up with topics that ranged from services to be expected at the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, to interviewing “dos and don'ts,” to the importance of self-advocacy for students on the job.

Earlier collaborations had made finding excellent partners possible. Flannery, as IESDB's post-secondary transition specialist, had served on our Idaho State Department of Education's Interagency Council on Secondary Transition. This council, with the mission of promoting a framework that leads to quality opportunities for youth with disabilities, brings together individuals from agencies across our state. Having a seat at this table was a gift. It allowed Flannery to meet and work with partners who were knowledgeable, easy to approach, and quick to commit.

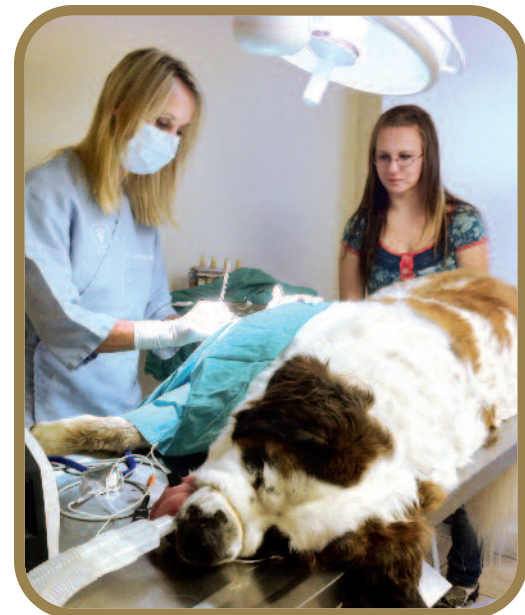
An agreement with the high school made possible access to a computer lab,

where our students could access and create profiles on the Idaho Department of Labor's job search website for immediate and future use. Partnership with Sorenson Communications resulted in the donation of a videophone, and Sorenson representatives joined our presenters to explain how current technology affects our lives.

Further, the Idaho Department of Labor was ready with funding to support youth in paid temporary positions. In fact, this department agreed to pay our youth for 40 hours a week for the eight weeks during the summer. The placements would be in community nonprofit organizations where employers were more than willing to provide positions for our students.

### **A Program Unfurls Teamwork Pays off**

So successful was the multifold collaboration that our “no frills” vision morphed into an elaborate success. When word got out, enrollment increased. One young person traveled from more than 100 miles east of Boise to join our group. Our partners were providing all that was needed.



the situation resolved and the job experience proved to be a great success. After the program was completed, three of our students were offered full-time, permanent employment with the agency for which each had worked in the summer: two with the Federal Tax Commission and one with the Technology Department with the Idaho Department of Labor.

### Reflections from a Rural State Cooperation Continues

Our project reflected the fact that in a rural state, extra work is required—and partnerships are critical. The distance between students, partners, and sponsored events can mean hours by car. Overnight with friends or late and early morning drives eat away at time and funding; it requires energy to keep the stamina and commitment. We face the challenges of families and agencies that manage daily without high speed Internet, making connection a constant challenge. At the same time, bare-bones school budgets make partnering and creativity even more valuable. Often it is the same group of six to 10 “get ‘er done” professionals who step up to ensure partnerships are maintained, tasks completed, and projects launched.

At the conclusion of this project, our partners—educators, deaf adults, agency representatives, interpreters—reported they had learned so much about

each other and the work of the Outreach Post-Secondary Transition Program. Students reported feeling more prepared to enter employment. They were ready to use the infrastructure that is there to assist them and to find individuals who could become their team to help them locate, interview for, and maintain employment, all while moving ever closer to living and working independently from their families.

The ramifications of this program continue. This summer we will have a Summer Work Readiness Camp at the Idaho School for the Deaf and the Blind with many of our same partners. Further, one of our partners, the Idaho Department of Labor, used our program as a stimulus to create “chat camps,” mini-workshops focused on work readiness skills for students with disabilities.



Those who invest in the transition of our students and their families must remain passionate and be willing to help each other with projects to ensure partners stay involved. We must continue to make the sacrifices of time, energy, miles, and resources that our families and students need. A well-developed sensitivity and willingness to aid our partners in the pursuit of their agendas while meeting the expectations demanded by our shared project is what brings us to success. We support our partners while being supported, and we serve as we are served. Such rural reciprocation is essential in supporting our deaf and hard of hearing students as they transition from school to higher education, postsecondary education, or the workplace.



**Left to right:** Youth employment outcomes happen readily when partnerships lead to job shadow experiences that grow into the needed hard and soft skills.