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Ellen B. Austin,

MS, an educational specialist consultant for Salem City Schools for children with hearing loss, serves on the Virginia Network of Consultants for Professionals Working with Children Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

Shira B. Brothers,

MS, program manager for Hearing and Vision Services in Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia, supervises itinerant teachers and educational audiologists and ensures students with hearing and vision loss have access to the curriculum.

Wanda B. Council,

EdS, is an education specialist for services to students with sensory disabilities at the Virginia Department of Education. She has worked in public schools as a speech-language pathologist, a special education instructional specialist, and a special education program supervisor.

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Nurturing the “Transition Village”: Virginia Supports Students Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

*By Ellen B. Austin, Shira B. Brothers, Wanda B. Council,
Ann W. Hughes, and Mary C. Nunnally*

It takes a village to raise a child—and the village must be coordinated, dedicated, and ready to respond. From time to time, it also needs to be nourished and enriched. In Virginia, we have worked to evaluate and nurture our village of professionals in schools, agencies, and communities to prepare our deaf and hard of hearing students for transition beyond high school.

Existing networks were strengthened in 2005 when a series of national meetings began. These meetings, called Summits, allowed representatives from state agencies, local educational programs, parents of students who are deaf or hard of hearing, and Deaf community members to convene and discuss the goals of the National Deaf Education Project, which established language and communication as the center of education for deaf and hard of hearing students, and to develop an action plan. The plan focused on goals from *The National Agenda: Moving Forward on Achieving Educational Equality for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students*.

As the Building State Capacity Summit evolved from the first Summit initiative, the Virginia Department of Education drew from gatherings of stakeholders and previously existing relationships among professionals to form a core team. Our team—representatives from the state vocational rehabilitation agency, the state Department of Education, the statewide deaf and hard of hearing technical assistance center, a local school division’s deaf and hard of hearing program, the university deaf and hard of hearing teacher preparation program, and parents of students who are deaf or hard of hearing—represented diverse perspectives. However, all of us recognized that students who are deaf or hard of hearing

*Photos courtesy of the Technical Assistance Center for Children
Who Are Deaf and Hard of Hearing*



need well-developed self-determination skills to achieve postsecondary goals, and we began planning specific activities to foster the development of those skills.

Activity for Students **Being Creative with Existing Resources**

First, we recognized and responded to research in the form of demographics. Students who are deaf or hard of hearing represent a small percentage of students who are identified with disabilities (Virginia Department of Education, 2016a). Considering our small population, we could not expect to develop enormous new projects. We had to be creative.

Therefore, we looked at an existing professional development event—the Opening Doors—Unlocking Potential Institute—and added an event for deaf and hard of hearing students who were at the age of transition, their parents, and concerned professionals. This event—Opening Doors to Life Beyond High School—was designed to promote student self-determination. We also provided activities that would increase the participation of students and parents in existing statewide transition programs and activities.

Nurturing Professionals **The Importance of Collaboration**

As we planned, we engaged partners from across Virginia. Looking beyond what was available locally, we sought out the expertise and resources from federal projects, including pepnet 2. Then as we implemented our plans, we also put systems in place to sustain the work we had initiated.

Above: Mary Nunnally explains vocational support available after high school to students at Virginia’s event, Opening Doors to Life Beyond High School.

Ann W. Hughes, MA, is coordinator of the Technical Assistance Center for Children Who Are Deaf and Hard of Hearing and the Virginia Network of Consultants for Professionals Working with Children Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing at the Partnership for People with Disabilities at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Mary C. Nunnally, MS, CRC, program manager of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Program with the Division of Rehabilitative Services, a division of the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services, is chief consultant to agency staff regarding policies, procedures, and agency practices related to the provision of vocational rehabilitation services for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.

The authors welcome questions and comments through Council and Hughes at Wanda.Council@doe.virginia.gov and awbhughes@vcu.edu, respectively.

Collaborative relationships may be challenging at first as team members get to know and trust each other. However, as collaborators work together, they begin to understand each other's strengths and depend on each other to carry out their work. Although there has been staff turnover in the different agencies and organizations, for more than a decade relationships among our state agencies have remained strong. We work as colleagues with our students, evaluating needs, assessing programs, and developing and implementing plans for enhancing and improving services.

Perhaps Virginia is unique in that we have had a network for professional development for teachers of students with disabilities since the 1980s. This network, known as the Training and Technical Assistance Centers, "provides training to assist schools in addressing accountability and improvement goals for students with disabilities" (Virginia Department of Education, 2016b). About 10 years ago, the Department of Education recognized that both special education and general education teachers needed support to address the unique needs of students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

In 2004, a distinct network for professionals involved with deaf and hard of hearing students, the Virginia Network of Consultants for Professionals Working with Children Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, was established and operates as part of the Technical Assistance Center for Children Who Are Deaf and Hard of Hearing (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.). It works to nurture and support teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing, speech-language pathologists, audiologists, and transition specialists throughout Virginia.



Arranging an Activity for Teachers Using Existing Networks

Teachers wanted specialized training closer to their workplace, but the number of teachers and related professionals in each school division was too small to justify this. As a team, we considered various options: Would school divisions support a professional development opportunity that was not part of their own programming? Could online training be available? How might we build a face-to-face component?

The solution developed quickly. We realized that we could tap into content that was already developed by pepnet 2, our federal partner. Pepnet 2, funded to increase the education, career, and lifetime choices available to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, already had a model that we could modify and combine with our existing professional development activities. Each week, participants would read articles about evidence-based practices and discuss the material with each other. Continuing education credit, useful for re-licensure, would be available.

We structured program requirements and timelines in a way that was responsive to the participants' time but maintained fidelity to the undertaking. Ann Hughes and Shira Brothers developed rubrics to address each phase of the plan. These included:

- overviews of content and learning objectives;
- timelines, including beginning/ending dates;
- requirements for each phase;
- time needed to satisfy CEU requirements; and
- a tracking system to measure and verify participation.

Understanding our managerial structure was key, and obtaining administrative support was the first step in making our vision a reality. Wanda Council followed a well-established practice of meeting with the director of the Office of Special Education Instructional Services for approval to share the idea with the statewide Special Education Council. Following this approval, Hughes shared the plan at one of the monthly Special Education Council meetings and showed a video that featured Cathy McLeod, the pepnet 2 principal investigator, recognizing the work that the team had done and offering her support. The response from the Special Education Council was extremely positive; the council saw value in providing targeted professional development to teachers of students who were deaf or hard of hearing. This support was vital; the strong collaborative interaction among our team members fostered increased administrative support and trust.

Sharing information with teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students followed a similar approach. We made sure that all necessary protocols were followed. After receiving approval to invite teachers to participate, the long-standing relationships between the team members and teachers made recruiting easier. We had already established mechanisms for communication, and educators had confidence that professional development

provided through the Technical Assistance Center would be of high quality and relevant to their needs.

Collaboration continued. Early in the first phase, pepnet 2 staff worked with participants to ensure they understood how to use the online learning system. Three training sections were set up, each with 23-24 participants. Team members participated in different training sections, using their observations to see areas of strength and identify additional professional development needs.

In the first phase, 71 participants read relevant research about transition and discussed if and how the reading reflected on their practices. In the second phase, 20 participants joined in reading and discussion. In the third phase, 31 participants pursued a more hands-on approach. These individuals joined an online discussion of Map It: What Comes Next, a training available through pepnet 2. Although Map It is designed for student use, the participants in the online discussion focused on transition planning and how to use the Map It curriculum more effectively.

Increasing Awareness; Effecting Change Sustenance for Our Village

All participants engaged in selected activities over a period of several months, a commitment much greater than that of participation in a workshop or a conference session. The extended involvement allowed teachers to think about the implications of what they read and discussed and to reflect on ideas expressed by their colleagues and perhaps use them in their everyday practice.

This was probably the first time that our educators had the opportunity to experience a learning event of this magnitude that focused exclusively on the transition needs of deaf and hard of hearing students. Professionals who often feel alone in their practice and grow tired of explaining and re-explaining their role to general education coworkers were invigorated by the opportunity to develop a community and share their thoughts with peers.

Here is what we learned:

- Big ideas don't work without a lot of preparation.
- Knowing how to work within a system is critical. A top-down, bottom-up approach allows us to respond to educators while we increase administrative support.
- Developing a rubric helps organize plans and makes it easier to communicate with decision makers.
- Forming a broad-based team widens problem-solving

ON THE READINGS REQUIRED FOR DISCUSSION:

**“These articles
have forced me to
look toward my
students’ futures
even more.”**

potential. With colleagues who represented different agencies and organizations, our team had a broad base, and multiple perspectives, and we were able to envision a comprehensive plan and think “outside of the box” to find solutions.

As a group, the Virginia team worked to increase awareness, to be the agents of change, and to influence the successful transition of our students. We continue to believe that students who are deaf or hard of hearing can develop and utilize self-determination skills, and that these skills will allow them to be successful after high school. Through the collaborative efforts of our state team and pepnet 2, our

teachers and educational and vocational specialists are better able to address the needs of students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Note: Pepnet 2 has transitioned to the National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes (NDC) as of January 1, 2017. Visit the NDC website: www.nationaldeafcenter.org.

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