

## **Deaf Education Reform in Colorado – the Train is Moving**

Cheryl D. Johnson

The Colorado Department of Education, in collaboration with the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind, established a Deaf Education Reform Task Force, which met regularly throughout the 2000-01 and 2001-02 school years. The Task Force addressed the following missions:

- Analyze the changing demographics and needs of children who are D/HH in the state of Colorado
- Improve educational outcomes for D/HH children
- Recommend an effective communication-based service delivery system for D/HH children in Colorado.

Four years later, progress towards a statewide service delivery system continues.

### **Why are we doing this?**

Performance of deaf and hard of hearing students has been notoriously and historically substandard. The continued cycle of poor outcomes is simply unacceptable as these are individuals who have the same cognitive ability and potential as their hearing peers. Until we figure out an educational system that will result in parallel achievement, we continue to fail these children/youth.

### **What Have we Accomplished?**

#### **Phase I**

The first phase of the reform effort consisted of the work of the Deaf Education Reform Task Force. In its 2002 report, *A Blueprint for Closing the Gap: Developing a Statewide System of Service Improvements for Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing*, the Task Force made recommendations based on the tenants that all deaf and hard of hearing students should

- receive services that are based on the individual communication needs of each child/youth.
- have services that are based on high academic standards and achievement expectations.
- have full access to all components of their educational environment.
- have access to programs that include a “critical mass” of deaf and hard of hearing peers to promote social and communication opportunities as well as an array of support services.

The recommendations of the Task Force were:

1. Colorado should implement a coordinated statewide regional education system as an educational option that will effectively and efficiently meet the needs of D/HH children.

2. D/HH students should have access to quality academic and extracurricular programs that are communication-driven. Criteria for establishing these programs should be implemented.
3. Communication-driven programs serving D/HH students should be subject to on-going assessment to assure full access, student achievement, and high standards.
4. On-going training, mentoring, and a full spectrum of professional development activities should be implemented statewide to support and improve proficiency for specialty providers, general educators, administrators, and families.
5. The Colorado Department of Education should collaborate with national and state agencies and higher education programs to recruit, train, and encourage retention of staff providing services to D/HH students.
6. A system of community and parent education that leads to meaningful involvement that will result in full access and collaboration so that each child will have opportunities to maximize potential and achieve high standards should be implemented.
7. Colorado should develop and implement a funding system that will provide sufficient resources for a quality education for D/HH children.

The Task Force developed goals and a timeline for implementation of a statewide regional system of education and support and recommended that the program begin with a pilot program in one region. It further recommended that the pilot should be maintained in accordance with a new statewide system and should be coordinated by a regionally-appointed advisory council working with the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind. The report stated that it would be critical that the pilot program reflect the unique characteristics and needs of its region while, at the same time, adhering to the high standards and basic tenants upon which the statewide system is founded. (adapted from *A Blueprint for Closing the Gap: Developing a Statewide System of Service Improvements for Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing*, p.3-4).

In addition to the Task Force Report, another significant change occurred in 2001. The state's early intervention program, *Colorado Home Intervention Program* or CHIP, moved from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment to the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind. This model program had been administered through the state health department since the early seventies. Because the focus of the program was more educationally than health-based, and because our vision supported a seamless birth to age twenty-one program for deaf and hard of hearing children and their families, this move resulted in another significant step toward achieving a statewide deaf education system. The correlation between early identification and early intervention in children with hearing loss to improved outcomes later on requires that we maintain this emphasis on early intervention.

## **Phase II**

In order to proceed with the directives of the Task Force Report to establish a pilot regional program, three “next steps” were determined: develop program and service standards, develop an accountability plan, and develop an administrative structure and funding mechanism to support regional programming. Under the guidance of the Phase II Implementation Task Force, workgroups were established in June of 2003 to begin on these goals. As of March 2004, drafts of the *Colorado Quality Standards for Programs and Services* and the Accountability Plan are complete and will be presented for approval to the Implementation Task Force in May. The task of the funding workgroup has been more difficult. While this workgroup is continuing to explore a variety of options the Colorado Department of Education committed to setting aside federal dollars to support a three year pilot regional program.

Proposals for regional programs and services for deaf and hard of hearing children will be reviewed this spring and the selected region will be notified. The pilot program will consist of a three year project with the first year dedicated to planning followed by implementation and data collection during years two and three. CDE/CSDB will support the selected pilot with funding and technical assistance. The selected regional pilot will be required to adhere to the overall philosophy of regionalization as defined in the *Closing the Gap* report including

- adherence to the Colorado Quality Standards
- adherence to the Accountability Plan (Demographic information, parent input, school-based indicators, student-based indicators)
- annual project evaluation
- annual fiscal report

Another activity of Phase II has been the development of a video, *A is for Access*. The purpose of this video is to describe the unique characteristics of communication access for deaf and hard of hearing students. The video will be targeted to general education and special education teachers as well as parent and consumer groups. Watch for it this spring.

## **What is Next?**

It is hoped that through the pilot program process, we will learn two things. First, whether a statewide system of regional programming has the potential to support the tenants upon which these recommendations are based (e.g., programs/services that are communication-driven, have high standards, have a critical mass, and provide full access). And, second, to determine if the implementation of the *Quality Standards* that are based on those tenants result in improved outcomes for the students. An aggressive accountability plan will guide the evaluation of both of these hypotheses.

Once data is available that supports improved achievement, communication, and social outcomes, the Implementation Task Force and the funding workgroup are

confident that we can address deaf education reform, including the necessary funding to restructure our system, with the Colorado legislature.

### **References**

Colorado Department of Education (2002). *A Blueprint for Closing the Gap: Developing a Statewide System of Service Improvements for Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing*. Denver: Author. [on-line]  
[www.cde.state.co.us/cdesped/sd-hearing-htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdesped/sd-hearing-htm)

Colorado Department of Education (March 2004). *Colorado Quality Standards for Children and Youth who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing – DRAFT*. Denver: Author.