

NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Comprehensive Needs Assessment School Final Report



**North Carolina School for the Deaf at Morganton
517 West Fleming Drive**

**Morganton
North Carolina
28655**

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PART 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

North Carolina School for the Deaf (NCSD), Morganton serves residential and day students in kindergarten through grade 12. There are 79 students enrolled from 47 counties across the state. It is an American Sign Language (ASL) community. The majority of students have profound hearing loss (90-110 dB) or severe hearing loss (70-80 dB). About 22% have a range of additional and complex needs. In recent years, an increased number of students enter without language exposure for periods of time from 5 to 14 years. The student population is 52% White, 22% Hispanic, 22% Black, 17% Multi-racial, and 3% Asian. All students are eligible for a Free or Reduced-price Lunch.

This school is in transition from Department of Health and Human Services to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction following the elimination of the central office for the three residential State schools. The NC School for the Deaf principal positions were eliminated by legislation effective August 25, 2010 (the first week of school), but the two staff members were rehired as temporary workers. The School Director was terminated during the school annual orientation week for all staff. There is an Interim Director in position. The hiring process to replace the interim superintendent for the three schools and the NCSD Director is in place.

PART 2: Overview

What the School Does well:

- Through a period of significant turbulence, the Interim Director has kept staff morale high and has successfully implemented change which benefits students. For example, the launch of Thinking Maps has been adopted by all teachers and they are used to accelerate student learning.
- The school has sufficient 21st century technology which provides the potential to remove barriers and accelerate learning for students who are deaf.
- There are good systems in place to identify students' strengths and weaknesses in reading and math on entry to the school.
- The Life Skills Program for students with complex needs in addition to their deafness gives them the skills required to live independently as young adults.
- Therapy is integral to the curriculum and resources are modified well to remove barriers to learning for the students.
- The learning environment is beautiful, clean, and well maintained.
- Strong links with businesses in the local community are used effectively to develop students' job readiness skills.
- The integrated art curriculum successfully develops students' language and math skills and builds their self-esteem.
- The effective interpreters provide quality support for the staff, students, and their families.

What the school needs to improve:

- Establish a clear vision and mission embraced by all stakeholders and develop and implement a flexible strategic plan with budgeted priorities, which are linked to professional development.
- Implement strong instructional leadership to support staff and hold them accountable for promoting high student achievement.
- Improve the quality of teaching and raise student achievement by:
 - using data to match work to students' needs, particularly to ensure sufficient challenge for higher achieving students;
 - regularly and frequently monitoring progress and realigning planning and instruction; and
 - ensuring that teachers consistently deliver reading and math programs so as to cover state standards with rigor and fidelity.

- Ensure that action is taken in the residential program to involve students in decision-making about their environment and that students are treated with dignity and respect.
- Ensure that all staff receives professional development and are competent in the use of American Sign Language (ASL).
- Improve communication with parents to build consistency across programs and assure regular information about student progress and timely information about residential activities are shared with them.

PART 3: Main Findings

The School's Overall Performance

The Interim Director successfully keeps staff morale high during a period of significant change as the school transitions from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). However, as a result of energy diverted on working to secure the support of the community for the future of the school, there has not been the necessary laser sharp focus on instructional leadership. Most teaching fails to provide sufficient challenge for students, particularly higher achieving students and impacts adversely on their achievement. There are teachers in the building who do not believe that the students can cope with a challenging curriculum which meets test requirements and state standards. Consequently, not all teachers deliver the curriculum with the rigor and fidelity required to accelerate student learning and raise their achievement. There are pockets of excellence. The integrated art program motivates student learning and contributes to the development of language and math skills. This program builds students' self-esteem as they see their high quality art work displayed throughout the school.

On entry to the school at whatever grade, students are tested and this provides the school good baseline data on the gaps students have in reading and math. Students who have not been exposed to language for five years or more are screened using a language free test to diagnose their cognitive ability and this is good practice. This baseline data is passed to the classroom teachers, but they do not use it effectively to differentiate their instruction and so fail to meet all students' needs. There is not a consistent system to monitor students' progress over time as teachers work in silos, developing a range of formative assessments. Although this is a signing school some staff members are not competent in the use of American Sign Language (ASL) and students' language development and academic progress are adversely affected as a result. Students say, "We are confused in lessons where our teachers do not sign." However, the school's interpreters are an asset and provide high quality support to students and their families.

The Interim Director works diligently to make improvements but is hindered by the lack of a robust strategic plan with aligned priorities for funding. The school's uncertainty impacts adversely on driving ambition and the lack of a formal principal position this academic year results in important developments being left on hold. Despite the uncertainty, the director has successfully implemented the use of Thinking Maps across the school, which provides teachers with an effective visual tool to support them in their teaching. These Thinking Maps support students' learning. A committee structure is in place to engage staff in shaping a vision and mission, but as they wait for the new director position to be confirmed and the hand-over to the Department of Public Instruction to take place, no decisive action has yet been taken to shape the future direction of the school. Because of the uncertainty some teachers are reluctant to attend the Friday afternoon professional development sessions and these teachers fail to improve their instructional practices and meet students' needs.

There is no lead position to spear-head and manage the residential accommodation and this contributes to poor communication between the dormitories and the school. Students are not sufficiently involved in decision-making about their life and activities in the dormitories and do not always experience the respect they deserve. For example, they cannot put posters directly on the walls in their bedrooms because this will cause damage to the plaster, and no personal effects are displayed on desks and beds in

dorm rooms. Communication with parents is very inconsistent. It is better in kindergarten through grade 8 than in the high school. Parents of students with complex additional needs to their deafness are the most concerned. There is an attitude that these students will communicate messages directly to their parents when they cannot always do so. There is an abundance of technology which fits the 21st century, but it is not used sufficiently to remove barriers to learning for students who are deaf.

The school is very clean and the environment is attractive. The life skills curriculum well supports students with the most complex needs and successfully develops their independent life skills. Therapy is integral to the curriculum for these students and so they are able to access learning. Modifications to resources support students in accessing culinary arts and other practical and relevant curriculum programs. Effective use is made of the community to develop students' job readiness skills.

Dimension 1 - Part: Instructional Excellence and Alignment

Teaching and Learning

This area of the school's work is lacking.

The Interim Director models high expectations promoting her belief that every student who has the required expressive and receptive language must make a year's growth. However, due to the recent admission of an increased number of students not exposed to language for five years or more and the frustration of students not being able to access state tests through American Sign Language (ASL), not all staff embraces her high expectations. The teachers are overwhelmed by the increasingly complex needs of students admitted to the school and a few staff members do not believe that they can all achieve highly. As a result, expectations of high student achievement are inconsistent across the school. In the best lessons, Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals are used well to differentiate the instruction so that all students are challenged, probing questioning using ASL develops students' critical thinking, and the use of Thinking Maps accelerates their learning. However, this is not the case throughout the school. Most lessons, particularly in the high school, lack sufficient academic rigor; therefore, students, particularly higher achieving students, are not sufficiently challenged. The school's philosophy is one of signing, but not all staff are competent in the use of ASL and this causes confusion among students and slows their learning.

The modified reading and math programs are aligned to test requirements and state standards, but not all teachers deliver these programs with the rigor and fidelity required to raise student achievement. However, there are strong features within the curriculum. The alternate curriculum for students who are deaf and have additional complex needs is good. These students experience a curriculum which links therapy to their development of important life skills. For example, the occupational therapist works with the educational staff to modify equipment to support the students in accessing the curriculum. The integrated art curriculum well develops students' language and math skills.

The use of formative assessment is inconsistent across the school. Too frequently, teachers record mastery of completing worksheets as a compliance piece rather than the stepped gains students make in their learning. Insufficient use is made of lesson-by-lesson monitoring of student progress to immediately re-align instruction to raise student achievement. Teachers struggle with the nine week summative assessments in the context of working with students who are deaf and the system is not working effectively. Despite the school's focus on the development of rubrics, teachers do not use them consistently in lessons. Students are not always sufficiently clear about why they are completing tasks and often they do not know how to measure the success of their learning.

Teachers engage in professional dialogue during structured collaborative planning times. A good example is seen where the physical education teacher in the middle school meet regularly with the staff to discuss students' physical development, including those with gross motor skills difficulties. Here they use these opportunities to re-align their planning to raise student achievement. Turbulence and uncertainty this year has contributed to some staff being reluctant to attend the structured Friday afternoon professional development session. Nonetheless, the acting director has successfully used this regular collaborative planning time to launch the use of Thinking Maps across all three departments within the school. This visual model impacts positively on raising student achievement. Excellent technology with the potential to remove barriers to learning for students who are deaf is available but

not used sufficiently to raise their achievement. Computer labs are available in dorms as well as the academic classrooms. The new distance learning room has the potential to enable students to learn together with deaf signing communities throughout the world who have access to the same technology. Progress on this is limited because staff members do not have all the necessary skills to use this resource. However, training for staff in the use of this technology is planned. Good use is made of the community to develop students' job readiness skills as they have exposure to a wide variety of careers ranging from working in a vet's practice to the development of culinary skills in local restaurants.

Dimension 1 - Part II: Instructional Excellence and Alignment

Support for Student Achievement

This area of the school's work is emerging.

On entry to the school students are rigorously assessed using the Woodcock Johnson III Tests of Achievement and, as appropriate, the Brigance tool. Students who have not been exposed to language prior to admission are given a language free test to establish their cognitive ability. Quality baseline reading, math, and science content data for each student is passed to the teachers. However, classroom teachers struggle to use this data consistently and effectively to write specific reading and math goals for each student, especially as they also have to align the state standards to their curriculum modifications. The school does not have a robust support system in place to help teachers to use this data in their planning nor is there effective monitoring to hold them accountable for doing so. Consequently, practice is inconsistent across the school. A few teachers do not believe that the students are capable of achieving highly and this impedes students' achievement in their classes. Some high school students feel that they are moved into Occupational Course of Study programs too hastily when they have ambitions to obtain a regular high school diploma and attend college.

Attendance is good and so students are at school and ready to learn. Those who miss the school bus on a Sunday night are called at home and if required, picked up by the school. Student retention rates are high because students' choose this school as it offers a signing friendly environment. Some students say that prior to attending this school an interpreter was always present when they socialized with their peers in their mainstream settings. Students greatly appreciate being taught through the use of American Sign Language. Graduation rates fluctuate yearly reflecting the cognitive ability of the groups of students year to year. Over the past four years 78.6% of students have graduated with a high school diploma reflecting flexible models open to them to acquire credits. Currently only 10% of students are on an academic diploma pathway. Despite students having IEPs, Personal Education Plans, and being served through remediation during the afternoons the graduation goal set for the year is running below target.

Two school counselors left the school this academic year, but one is due to be replaced. The school is effective in meeting students' health needs, including mental health needs and also in equipping students with job readiness skills through the curriculum. Through the school curriculum students' personal and social skills are well-developed. The structured character building programs are effective. Students with the most complex needs learn to live independently in a house where they shop, prepare meals, and do their own laundry. However, opportunities to promote leadership skills for most through their time spent in the residential dormitories are missed. Insufficient attention is paid to involving students' in decision making about how their time in the dormitories is best spent.

Individual Education Plans (IEPs) mandate a transition structure which involves parents. There is a focus on transition from grade 8 to the high school and the head of the high school attends all grade 8 IEP meetings. The school's psychologist is pivotal in working with parents as their children transition from the school, in some cases at the age of 20+ years. There is an emphasis on encouraging representatives from colleges to come into school to speak regularly with students. The school offers deaf studies classes in the high school, and through the school's partnership with Lenior-Rhyne University some college students work in these classes with students who are deaf. Some of these university students are deaf as well, and this provides an excellent role model for students within the school.

Dimension 2: Leadership Capacity

This area of the school's work is emerging.

The Interim Director has successfully steered the school through a period of uncertainty and change this transition year from the Department of Health and Human Services to NC Department of Public Instruction. She has kept the morale of the staff, worried about their jobs, high and harnessed the local community support for the future of the school. Never complacent, in an effective partnership with the former principal of the high school (a post deleted August 2010, but re-hired on a temporary contract) she has driven Positive Behavior Intervention Support which impacts positively on student behavior.

The current School Improvement Plan is under closure and a new plan in the context of the new school will be drawn up under the leadership of the new Director who takes position in June 2011. During this closure, the Interim Director has successfully implemented a Thinking Map model and is planning to implement the Failure Free Reading Program both of which have the potential to impact positively on student achievement. There is budget allocation for a dean's position to be filled. However, there is currently no such position for the leadership of the residential accommodation and this has an adverse impact on communication with parents and the oversight of the quality of service for the students beyond the school day.

Shared and bottom-up leadership reflects the leadership style of the Interim Director. All staff members are involved in decision making through a very active committee structure model, and they believe they have a say in shaping the direction of the new school. However, the Interim Director and former high school principal, together with the lead teacher of the middle and elementary schools do not want to shape a definite new and clear vision and mission statement before the new director takes up position. The ground work is well prepared for the transition.

The Interim Director serves as key in marketing the school, preparing the way for transition, and acting as instructional leader. This is overwhelming and she recognizes the importance of the NC Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) considering the creation of a principal position within the new structure to drive instructional leadership. Pressure of time, coupled with uncertainty of tenure for both the former high school principal and the Interim Director, has meant this year that monitoring of teaching and learning has not been sufficiently rigorous. They have a high profile across the whole campus, but because the lead teacher within the middle and elementary departments teaches an elementary class, she cannot be as visible and give the required support to staff. Teachers are encouraged and supported, but they do not consistently receive clear feedback on how to improve their instruction. In the context of direction from the NCDPI, the principal uses the Northwest Regional Education Service Alliance to

ensure that current school leaders are equipped with the job-related skills to move the school in a new direction by enabling them to regularly attend external meetings.

Dimension 3: Professional Capacity

This area of the school's work is emerging.

Staff members are well qualified and experienced. All staff members satisfy the requirements to be qualified in eligible areas and 21% of staff members are deaf. These staff members are exemplary role models for a deaf community. However, there are a number of positions vacant. Even though there is a 10% budget cut this year, there is a priority plan to recruit a qualified high school science teacher, a school counselor, and a dean to lead the residential service. Although well qualified in subject expertise there are a few teachers lacking competence and confidence in using American Sign Language. The school is in transition and two senior leadership positions are temporary posts. Review evidence demonstrates that it is an unrealistic expectation for the Interim Director position to double up with the key instructional leadership role. The school has interpreters for the deaf who are greatly valued by students and their parents. There is also a Spanish interpreter to support Spanish speaking families.

Most staff members keep abreast of professional development linked to students' needs and driving student achievement this year. Most staff members have gained confidence in the use of Thinking Maps in their lessons. Refreshing honesty pervades a transparent staff keen to improve their instruction. They say, "We are currently learning how to use Thinking Maps and want to continue learning how to better use them in our classroom instruction." There are numerous and varied opportunities for professional development for teachers from multiple sources in spite budget reductions. Therefore, teachers are reflective and instruction shows signs of improvement.

The interview for the director position against an agreed job description with the NC Department of Public Instruction has taken place and the new director takes up position in June 2011. The Interim Director recognizes that restructuring related to the launch of a new School Improvement Plan will take place once the director is firmly in position. However, the Interim Director continues to drive developments during this difficult transition period. Teachers have been moved to different classes to best match their skills to students' needs. Research linked to students' needs is a continuing process. Following research about deaf students not exposed to language and from different cultural backgrounds where English is not the language of the home, assessment tools to diagnose their needs on entry to the school have been refined.

Dimension 4: Planning and Operational Effectiveness

This area of the school's work is emerging.

The School Improvement Plan coming to closure as part of the transition does not have funding allocated to priorities. Staff members are not actively engaged in the budget allocation process, but to date their requests for supplies have never been turned down. The budget is a line-budget, which lists staff costs and unit costs per student clearly. However, staff members do not see the budget and never ask to do so. There is not a culture of evaluating spending in terms of outcomes. For example, \$12,524.74 is allocated to professional development, but there is no formal evaluation of the impact of this on student achievement. Funding for technology runs at \$2,011.80 per student, but there is no evaluation of this spending on student achievement. For example, the roll out of the new reading program is funded, but there is not a long-term strategic flexible and funded plan.

Teachers are skillfully moved around the school to better meet student needs and programs. They respond positively to these moves made within licensed regulations. Instructional time is maximized and aligned well to student needs, but a comprehensive data analysis is not clearly reflected in all schedules and plans. The school grounds and buildings are maintained to a very high standard. The learning environment is beautiful with high quality displays of student art work. Every area within the complex of buildings is clean, and the flower beds are colorful and a joy to behold. There is sufficient high quality 21st century technology including an exceptionally well-resourced conferencing suite. However, the technology is not consistently used by all staff to accelerate student learning. There is an ongoing program of training linked to the roll out of new technology, yet not all staff members are confident in the use of the rich technology resources within the school.

Dimension 5: Families and Communities

This area of the school's work is emerging.

Parents say that since the Interim Director has been in position (August 2010) communication has improved and that they feel much more welcome at the school. However, they remain as they say, "Guarded because of our past history." Although significantly improved, glitches in communication with parents remain, particularly in respect to the residential service. Parents learn about residential activities at very short notice and this causes them significant inconvenience. Communication between the residential accommodation and the school is not always smooth and effective. Parents summed this up by saying, "At times the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing." The school's website is satisfactory and with the recently acquired new camera technology within the school it has the potential to be a high quality site showing school classrooms and hallways in action. Parents feel that they still at times need to fight to be listened to, but that this is getting much better. However, some still believe that their ideas for improvement are not heard.

Parents receive the mandated report cards. Overall, communication about students' programs and week-by-week progress is stronger in kindergarten through grade 8 than in the high school. This reflects the use of Friday folders sent home each Friday from kindergarten through grade 8 classes. Parents of students in the high school with complex needs over and above their deafness are the most concerned. They have been told that their children will convey important messages to them, but they do not all have the capacity to do this effectively and consistently.

The Interim Director has very successfully harnessed local community support. Upon threat of closure the local mayor became actively involved in campaigning for the school. The local press gives detailed and thorough coverage of the school and all media coverage is very positive. Local businesses provide a wide range of job placement opportunities for students. Community links are evaluated in terms of their effectiveness in enhancing student learning. Community links are a very significant strong feature of the school.