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RESPONDING TO NCLB IN ALASKA

a three-pronged, teacher-focused approach yields success

By Jennifer Sees

At the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year, we received news that the Alaska State School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ASSDHH) had met Alaska's Annual Yearly Progress as required by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) for the first time ever. This was incredibly exciting and worth celebrating since teachers had invested so much "blood, sweat, and tears" over the course of our first year. This is how we did it.

There is a rugged tenacity, a spirited individualism, an unconquerable work ethic, and an extreme passion for life that we feel is unique to Alaskans—and the teachers at ASSDHH are no exception. Our teachers accept and surmount unique challenges to bring our deaf and hard of hearing Pre-K to grade 12 students the best practices in research-based education. The ASSDHH is under the leadership of the Anchorage School District and is composed of seven ASSDHH teachers—three at the Pre-K/elementary level, one at the middle school level, and three at the high school level. Not only are teachers and their students housed in three different physical locations, but they are also responsible for reporting to two administrators—the principal at the public school where they are housed and Diane Poage, ASSDHH supervisor and Anchorage School District's director of Related Services.

Teachers serve between 40 and 50 students ranging in age from 3-21, many of whom have been diagnosed with multiple disabilities. Several of our older students come from rural villages and reside away from their parents at the Student Learning Center. In addition to these complex demographics, teachers face the Alaskan weather. Snow from October to April, often sub zero temperatures, and only six hours of daylight in the darkest months highlights and reinforces a physical, geographic, and professional isolation from deaf education programs and colleagues in the lower 48 states. As Kim Mongeau, a 21-year ASSDHH teacher, acknowledges: "Providing education to deaf and hard of hearing students in Alaska is like teaching on an island or in another world. We historically have been isolated not only geographically but also from one another."

In March 2010, we embarked on a journey to respond to the demands of NCLB. Knowing where to focus our efforts to increase student performance and achievement levels was time-critical, and we decided to rely on post-NCLB research in general education that attempted to pinpoint best teaching practices. We turned to findings that positively impacted classroom instruction and improved student achievement, findings from Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock's (2001) *Classroom Instruction that Works* and Marzano, Pickering, and Heflebower's (2011) *The Highly Engaged Classroom*, Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) *Understanding by Design*, Stiggins's (2001) "assessment literacy" efforts, and Washington State's Powerful Teaching and Learning Commission (see www.bercgroup.com, August

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Above & left: Clark Middle School ASSDHH students work in groups for hands-on science activities, including figuring out instructions, building a small vehicle, and assembling a battery-powered helicopter.

2010). We ultimately used Marzano's (2003) findings in *What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action* to focus on factors that most affected student achievement. Consequently, while the Anchorage School District simultaneously initiated a year-long strategic planning process for the ASSDHH, ASSDHH teachers were asked to embrace, with the support of a professional development coach, the following research-based, three-pronged approach:

1. Infusion of classroom-based teaching and learning practices
2. Insistence on individually tailored professional development
3. Implementation of student progress monitoring

Best Teaching and Learning Practices

Our first goal was to identify and communicate best teaching and learning practices that teachers could infuse and incorporate into their classroom instruction. We took several steps:

- We asked teachers to create their own individualized lesson plans for each of our students and held them accountable for filling them out daily.
- We established non-evaluative classroom observations and feedback sessions.
- We developed nine accountability measures based on a wide variety of research and intuitive understanding. (See Table 1.)

Year One

Accent on Professional Development

During the first year, we designed a course for college credit that allowed teachers to personalize individual instructional goals. They were held accountable for those goals during monthly reflections and classroom observations. Mongeau reflects: *"Although it is a difficult and humbling endeavor to honestly examine one's teaching practices after many years in the profession and to admit weaknesses due to lack of recent and specific professional development, the rewards of doing so far outweigh the feelings of inadequacy when the improvements to the professional and the subsequent benefits to the students' learning are so remarkably obvious"* (personal communication, January 3, 2012).

At the beginning of the next year, individual Teacher Growth Plans were created so that ASSDHH teachers could meet with both of their administrators as well as their professional development coach to articulate specific and personalized professional development, including curricular, instructional, and assessment goals. Additionally, classroom observation and feedback session requirements were reduced so that they

TABLE 1.
Elements of Good Teaching

Alaska State School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

ELEMENT	GUIDING QUESTION FOR TEACHERS
Identifying and Communicating Student Objectives	Are you clearly identifying and communicating a maximum of three Grade Level Expectations student objectives prior to instruction?
Personalized Learning (to include differentiated instruction)	Are you taking into account diverse learner needs and working to fulfill each individual student's potential within his or her appropriate zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86) by intentionally addressing and meeting specific student needs?
Student Engagement (interest and participation)	Are you creating an interactive, risk-taking classroom atmosphere that produces attentive, interested, and involved students?
Variety of Teaching Delivery (methods/strategies)	Are you teaching and sharing information, promoting learning, and facilitating exploration by using an assortment of instructional approaches that reflect current brain-based research and honor a diversity of learning styles?
1/3, 1/3, 1/3 Model of Instruction	Are you structuring your lessons to equitably embrace whole group, small group, and individual instruction?
Maximizing Instructional Time (and purposefully managing the clock)	Are you adhering to prescribed time chunks that allow you to intentionally maximize your instructional efforts by using the entire class/lesson time?
Chunking Information	Are you prioritizing your lesson content into reasonable amounts of information, allowing for individual and group processing time, and graphically organizing content so as to promote long-term retention?
Use of Informal and Formative Assessment	Are you consistently checking for and monitoring student understanding and providing documented evidence that students have or have not mastered specific teaching objectives?
Providing Closure	Are you planning adequate time to review and summarize the lesson so as to complete the circle of learning that was initiated with the introduction of the student objectives?

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ways for us to brainstorm solutions, compare materials, practice strategies, and support and validate one another's efforts" (personal communication, January 3, 2012).

Over that two-year period, our efforts shifted purpose. Teachers implemented formative assessments within their classes and submitted samples of students' formative assessments monthly. Marzano's (2010) *Formative Assessment and Standards-Based Grading: Classroom Strategies that Work* provided guidance, and we were fortunate enough to send a contingency of five teachers to Fairbanks for a Marzano group-led conference on common assessment. Our focus was comprehension and appreciation for how formative assessment not only demonstrates whether students actually learned what they were supposed to have been taught, but provided a guide to inform future classroom instruction.

After familiarizing our teachers with the idea of non-negotiable teaching elements during the first year of our intensive research-based approach, we provided support for expanding teachers' repertoire of specific classroom instructional methods and strategies in the second year. Our whole group approach to faculty meetings was altered by scheduling a monthly collaborative Book Study—similarly offered for college credit—devoted both to building high standards of quality teaching and collaborative collegial relationships. Throughout the 2011-2012 school year,

occurred quarterly.

Given our remoteness in Alaska, we have used technology to seek out and build "small group" connections with peers in deaf education in the lower 48 states. In fact, we facilitated two different "meet and greets" over the course of the last two school years—one with a K-8 literacy specialist from the Maryland School for the Deaf, Columbia campus, and one with content experts in language arts, math, and science from the Model Secondary School for the Deaf in Washington, D.C. We hope that our teachers will be able to establish long-

term, professional, small group connections with these deaf education colleagues who face similarly high expectations for student achievement.

Mongeau affirms the importance of these opportunities: "*The opportunities through technology and through our commitment to meet have been invaluable as*



we read, discussed, and applied information from the following three books: *Evidence-Based Practice in Educating Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Students* by Spencer & Marschark (2010); *Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement* by Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001); and *The Strategic Teacher: Selecting the Right Research-Based Strategy for Every Lesson* by Silver, Strong, and Perini (2009). We have additionally used this opportunity to re-familiarize ourselves with the 6+1 Trait Writing Model.

Ongoing Challenges

Implementation of Student Monitoring

Like teachers in the other states, Alaska's teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students continually improvise, adapt, and overcome challenges posed by their state-adopted general education curriculum as they work to fulfill NCLB requirements and improve teaching. As we work towards personalizing and differentiating grade-level expectations in Alaska, we have decided that one of the most important ways we can help our teachers successfully demonstrate student growth is to develop and use a Student Learner Profile to monitor and track student learning.

The main purpose of the Student Learner Profile is to document and showcase evidence of student achievement using pre-post assessments, Grade Level Expectations checklists, best work, and portfolio submissions. We believe that creating this type of database will prove vital in our standards-based era. Our hope is that the Student Learner Profile will not only equip us with the ability to improve our vertical alignment efforts, but also provide us with the means to show, with quantifiable data, that our students are indeed closing the gap. Indeed, our mission has always been to “gain as many ‘years’ as possible” with each year of instruction for our students who often perform below grade level. With the creation of the Student Learner Profile, ASSDHH teachers have the

resources to document, track, and adequately communicate these authentic strides. Now, regardless of where our students perform relative to the grade level of their hearing peers, the Student Learner Profile will help us prove to national, state, and district level entities—as well as to parents and our local community—that our deaf and hard of hearing students are indeed learning, improving, and achieving.

As Alaska's teachers of deaf and hard of

hearing students persist in responding to NCLB requirements, we will continue to rely on current research to inform our best teaching and learning, professional development, and student progress monitoring. We will also maintain our established commitment to a communicative, collaborative, respectful learning community dedicated to quality-focused deaf and hard of hearing student achievement.

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