

EDUCATORS IN SOUTHERN/SOUTHEASTERN OHIO JOIN FORCES TO ADDRESS CRITICAL STATE SHORTAGES: **PART I**

Led by faculty from Shawnee State University (SSU) and the University of Rio Grande (URG), a group of educators from Ohio's southern and southeastern regions have joined forces to identify viable options for



meeting the needs of students with varying degrees of sensory impairment (i.e., students with visual impairment, hearing impairment, or a combination of hearing-vision impairment).

Their work will be featured in a two-part series for the *OLAC Facilitators Hub*. Part I of the series, featured here, describes the needs being addressed by the group, touches on evidence in support of identified needs, and outlines how the work of the group has been facilitated by SSU and URG through a consortium effort called

Broadening Horizons. Part II – to be released in May 2017 – will address in more detail the substance of the group's work and how it can be used by school districts, institutions of higher education, and the state.

If Ever There Was a Sense of Urgency, This Is It!

"Districts and families in our part of the state are desperate. There isn't a week that goes by that I don't get a panicked call from a district asking for help in finding an interpreter, a teacher, anyone who can support a child with a hearing or visual impairment," explained Dr. Doug Sturgeon, Associate Professor in SSU's Department of Teacher Education and Principal Investigator of the *Broadening Horizons* project.

Sturgeon collaborates with Dr. Nanetta Fults, Assistant Professor in URG's Bunce School of Education and Co-principal Investigator of *Broadening Horizons*, which is funded through an incentive grant awarded to SSU and the University of Rio Grande from the Ohio Deans Compact on Exceptional Children.



The purpose of the two-year grant, issued in 2015, is to develop course content that can be used to increase the competence of teachers who are working as intervention specialists (IS) under licensure as an IS in the area of mild/moderate educational needs, moderate/intensive educational needs, and/or early childhood by allowing them to complete advanced

course work in sensory impairment¹. These intervention specialists² are already working in rural southern/southeastern districts and counties, and support children with varying disability conditions, including those with vision/hearing loss, despite having little or no preparation in sensory impairment.

From revolving door to knowledgeable ‘feet on the ground.’ “Schools are not prepared and they’re scared. Teachers will say, ‘we’ve never had a deaf kid in our building. What do we do?’” explained Abbey Weaver, teacher of the hearing impaired (THI) and the hearing impaired-deaf (HI-D) team leader for State Support Team Region 14, which serves districts, agencies, and families in Adams, Brown, Clinton, Fayette, and Highland counties. Jason Salmons, Lead Early Childhood IS for Wellston City Schools relayed the panic his peers felt when two children – both profoundly deaf – arrived at the building one day. “We had to serve these children even if we felt unprepared,” he said.

Weaver, who herself has a hearing impairment and holds IS licensure in the area of hearing impairment, spends a significant amount of time trying to recruit THIs to the region. “We’re in a rural region and we compete with urban and suburban areas to find capable individuals. I’ve spent months trying to hire someone for these positions and when you’re in a rural region, the cities and the state schools are going to get those individuals. We don’t want a revolving door with people coming and going; we want to train homegrown teachers who know the community in working with children with sensory impairments,” she said.

OHIO DEANS COMPACT – FOSTERING INCLUSIVE MODELS OF EDUCATOR PREPARATION, SUPPORTING AUTHENTIC P20 PARTNERSHIPS

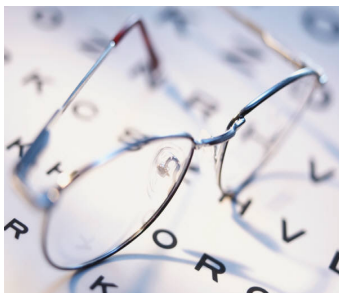
With a focus on Ohio’s system of preparation and ongoing personnel development, the Ohio Deans Compact serves as a forum for bridging theory to practice, fostering meaningful P20 partnership efforts, and identifying and responding to critical issues, such as personnel shortages that limit opportunities to learn for groups of Ohio students.

The Compact – an organization of representatives from the PK12 and educator-preparation communities – provides a channel for communication and examination of ideas among deans, associate/assistant deans; faculty; district and school leaders professional association representatives; national partners; state leaders; and others. It also provides opportunities for collaborative efforts to develop and implement innovative models of preparation.

The Compact’s initiatives are grounded in a commitment to social justice and equity. In particular, the Incentive Grant (IG) program provides funding to institutions of higher education in the state to design/develop preparation models that are based on inclusive pedagogy and incorporate authentic partnerships with PK12 partners.

For more information, go to www.ohiodeanscompact.org.

This dilemma is not unique to SST 14. Like SST 14, neighboring SSTs (e.g., SST 15, SST 16) experience the same challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers who are credentialed in the areas of hearing impairment and visual impairment. Once employed, such teachers often work in an itinerant capacity, traveling from district to district across the county to support school personnel and children. SST 14, for example, employs five HI-D itinerant teachers – one assigned to each of the five counties in the region – to serve more than 125 children.



Weaver serves as one of the five THIs and is responsible for 12 schools in four districts in addition to serving as Team Leader. She explains: “I need a point person each time I go into a school because I can’t stay there day in and day out; I really need someone with some foundational knowledge to be my feet and eyes on the ground so when I leave that building I know the child is still being taken care of and they’re going to catch and address different issues. I’m an hour away so if I’ve got to turn around and drive two

¹ Linking course work to an advanced credential, such as an endorsement, will maximize the benefits of this effort, but an endorsement does not yet exist. State officials are currently considering options for creating such a credential.

² Intervention specialist is Ohio’s term for special education teacher.

hours to change a battery in a hearing aid as I've had to do, it's time I'm taking away from visiting other schools. I have to know 12 principals, multiple intervention specialists, drama teachers, tech coordinators, track coaches, etc. so having a connection with someone in and part of the building that doesn't change every two seconds, because I age up with the kids, is essential in making my job effective."

Dr. Megan Trowbridge, Autism and Low Incidence Consultant and Team Leader for SST 14, agrees that investing in building the capacity of homegrown educators is a far better strategy than spending significant time recruiting specialists who leave for urban/suburban posts. "Having the endorsement would build the capacity of ISs that already serve children day in and day out. We're not looking for someone from the outside to come in. I would prefer to have ISs that are currently in the classroom do this work with support from their HI and VI specialists who can't be in the buildings every day."



SST Region 14 currently employs one TVI who is serving 48 children with visual impairments in 17 districts across the five-county area. The SST has been trying for some time to hire a second TVI with no success. Because of the drastic shortage in personnel statewide, and the scarcity of those willing to work in rural areas like those served by SST 14, some children are seen by the TVI one time per year, while others might be seen twice per week.

"When one teacher begins to learn how to meet a student's needs, for example, through technology for a student with a visual impairment, that understanding immediately starts seeping into other teachers' awareness and they're more willing and better able to meet children's needs. There's a hope, a comfort level, a willingness to include a child because of a lack of fear that typically permeates the culture when they don't know how to address a child's needs. This kind of hope spreads; it's a win-win that benefits all!"

Wilma Erwin
Special Education and School Improvement Consultant
SST Region 15

Jennifer Jones, Student Services Director for Clinton-Massie Local Schools (Clinton County) is also a mother of two children with visual impairments. "Services are very limited for my children because they have low vision as compared to some children with more significant impairment. With only one TVI in the region, they're toward the bottom of the list. It would be a tremendous help if we could have more of the teachers already working in buildings better prepared in order to increase the services provided, especially for children with more mild impairments," explained Jones.

As the parent of a daughter with mild hearing loss, Brown County Educational Service Center (ESC) Supervisor of School Improvement/Psychologists Dayne Michael shares Jones' concerns. "The challenge comes from my daughter falling in that place where she definitely needs some support but doesn't necessarily require a more intensive type of service. Instead of pulling that expert in and taking her away from providing more direct services to children with intense needs, an IS in the classroom with some basic

knowledge and skill could help my daughter get back on track and could provide basic hearing aid and battery maintenance, which would free up the THI,” he said.

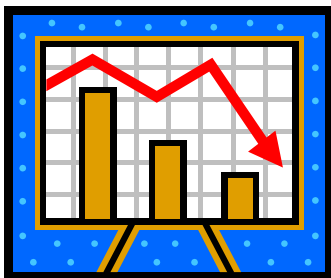
Emily Maginn, a TVI and the only certified orientation and mobility specialist (COMS) serving the South Central Ohio and Ross-Pike ESCs, agrees stating “one of the things this will address is raising awareness among teachers so that other teachers know what to look for. For example, a child in third grade might need more support but teachers may not recognize that need because the child gets Bs and Cs. But what if the child could get As with the right support?”

Embedding support, building collective capacity. “The goal is to provide the support needed so that all children are taught in inclusive settings where they have access to academic content. If practicing ISs had the endorsement, the support would be embedded,” offered Trowbridge. Weaver agreed, stating “if everyone has study hall, assuming they have a study hall, at the same time, which child do I remove from instruction in core content? I have to prioritize which kid gets that sweet time; it’s a balancing act and I often wonder, ‘am I doing more harm by pulling kids out?’”



Wilma Erwin, Special Education and School Improvement Consultant for SST Region 15, which serves Ross, Pike, Scioto, and Lawrence counties, described

the negative impact of removing children from their home school in order to send them to a county unit staffed by a teacher hired by multiple districts. “The child has to get up earlier to get to class and it takes children away from their peer groups. Wouldn’t it be better to provide the teachers who are already embedded in the home school where they’re already serving the children with the knowledge they need?” When one teacher begins to learn how to meet a student’s needs, for example, through technology for a student with a visual impairment, that understanding immediately starts seeping into other teachers’ awareness and they’re more willing and better able to meet children’s needs. There’s a hope, a comfort level, a willingness to include a child because of a lack of fear that typically permeates the culture when they don’t know how to address a child’s needs. This kind of hope spreads; it’s a win-win that benefits all!” she added.



An Acknowledged Statewide Need

In awarding an incentive grant in the area of sensory disabilities [defined as visual impairment, hearing impairment, and dual-sensory impairment (aka combined hearing-vision loss)], Ohio recognized that there are not enough teachers in Ohio to meet the need, especially in rural areas and especially in southeastern Ohio.

For example, in the case of visual impairment, the Ohio State School for the Blind (OSSB) reported in 2014 that about 344 of the 400 children served in the OSSB outreach program (86%) required services of a TVI, but 241 (70% of 344) were not served. The situation was similar in the area of visual impairment in that only about half of the 98 licensed TVIs in Ohio at that time actually worked as TVIs and, of those that did work,

most were employed in Ohio's eight main urban areas. OSSB (2014) also reported that of the 49 practicing TVIs, 20 (41%) were expected to retire by 2017. The Ohio State University reported in 2013 that the entire southeastern quadrant of the state had almost no access to services.



The vast majority of students with sensory impairment are served in general education environment with some support – as described above – from THIs or TVIs working in a variety of capacities, including as itinerant teachers. Educators understand that the effect of sensory impairment on language development, social interaction, mobility, and prospects for a fulfilling life indicate the need for some level of support, irrespective of the educational environment in which the child is served.

However, in a July 2016 survey of district and ESC superintendents conducted by the Buckeye Association of School Administrators (BASA), the majority of district and ESC respondents indicated that it is extremely difficult to find and employ TVIs and THIs. Consider these results:

- 70% of ESC respondents indicated that it is extremely difficult for the districts they serve to employ fully licensed TVIs
- 61% of ESC respondents indicated that it is extremely difficult, and another 25% indicated that it is difficult, for the districts they serve to employ fully licensed THIs
- 71.4% of district respondents indicated that it is extremely difficult to employ TVIs
- 50% of district respondents indicated that it is extremely difficult, and another 29% indicated that it is difficult, to employ THIs
- 75% of ESC and district respondents indicated that it is much harder to find TVIs as compared to other ISs
- 52% of ESC and district respondents indicated that it is much harder, and another 33.3% indicated that it is harder, to find THIs as compared to other ISs

A mixed methods study to examine national context and district experience in Ohio, which was conducted by WordFarmers Associates in 2016, supported the BASA survey results, indicating that Ohio educators are not confident that they can address the needs of students with sensory impairment. In fact, the study reinforced that the most critical personnel shortfall is access to qualified staff in the area of sensory impairment.



ON EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

Further, Ohio's preparation pipeline delivers proportionately fewer qualified staff than pipelines in most other states. Researchers recommended that in order to reach the national average, Ohio would need to offer seven preparation programs – three more than currently exist in the state at The Ohio State University (i.e., preparation programs leading to licensure in IS: VI, IS: HI, and orientation and mobility) and Kent State University (preparation program leading to licensure in IS: HI).

Adding to the overall urgency is the fact that Ohio had two other programs – a program leading to IS: VI at the University of Toledo and a program leading to IS: HI at Bowling Green State University – that have both been eliminated. “These programs are closing; the writing is on the wall,” said Weaver. “And, in most special education preparation programs, there might be a paragraph for vision and a paragraph for hearing. They just touch on them, they’re invisible disabilities, they aren’t the focus, they aren’t on programs’ radar, and that continues to be true,” she added.

Broadening Horizons

The work group assembled as part of the **Broadening Horizons** project has developed content for five courses that can be used to prepare practicing ISs for an endorsement in sensory impairment if and when such an endorsement is created by the state. Courses include the following:

- Orientation to Deafness/Hearing Impairment
- Orientation to Blindness/Visual Impairment
- Instructional Methods and Supports for the Child with Hearing Impairment/Dual-Sensory Impairments
- Instructional Methods and Supports for the Child with Visual Impairments
- Instructional Methods and Supports for the Child with Multiple Disabilities Sensory Impairments/Dual Sensory Impairments (*for teachers with Mild/Moderate Licensure only*)



It is anticipated that 12 hours of coursework (i.e., four courses) would be needed for teachers that hold the Intervention Specialist: Moderate/Intensive Educational Needs license in order to earn the endorsement, and that 15 hours of coursework (five courses) would be required for teachers holding the Intervention Specialist: Mild/Moderate Educational Needs license.

A true team effort. The teachers, related services providers, administrators, and regional providers (SST and ESC personnel) that comprise the project work have worked diligently over the course of a year-and-a-half to develop what they believe would improve efficiency and benefit many children, their families, and the district and school personnel that support them.

“I’m a principal and have been an IS so I know there’s a concern around someone getting someone else’s job,” explained Roger Taylor, principal of West Union Junior/Senior High School in the Adams County Ohio Valley School District. “But practically speaking, ISs have to wing it now without any training. We do our best, but folks have been doing their best for years without training,” he added. Weaver elaborated on Taylor’s comment: “Right now, there’s no requirement in Ohio for Deaf children to be taught by a THI. You don’t even have to invite me to the table. I see this program as my gatekeeper to the table; it will create more awareness and capacity.”

Julie Mayo, former school psychologist and now Lawrence County ESC Special Education Consultant, also agreed with Taylor. “As a former school psychologist, I can see everyone run to the school psych or speech-language pathologist who are already overloaded when we don’t have the expertise on staff. Having someone on staff with some knowledge would be so valuable!” she added.

“The reality is that when you look at the coursework developed for a possible endorsement, you’ll quickly see that ISs are not going to be fluent in sign language for example. They will get foundational skills, instructional skills, which is the intent of the project. We don’t expect them to be the expert,” explained Trowbridge.

Trowbridge, Taylor, Mayo, and other members of the work group were selected by their districts, ESCs, SSTs, and/or county boards in response to a request for nominations issued to a 15-county region by SSU. The group met multiple times on a Friday evening and Saturday schedule to reduce members’ time out of district. Members worked in small groups (e.g., instructional planning group, key assessment of content knowledge group, fieldwork group), and spent considerable time reviewing Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) standards in the areas of visual impairment, hearing impairment, and dual sensory impairment (aka deafblindness).



As small groups developed draft products, they were sent to three external advisors – Dr. Lyn Ayer (Western Oregon University), Dr. Peter Paul (The Ohio State University), and Gail McGregor (University of Montana) – for review and feedback. Advisor feedback was then provided to the small groups and used to revise and/or refine draft course content.

During each work group session, Drs. Sturgeon and Fults engaged members as a large group, allowed them to work as small groups, and brought all members back together to provide an opportunity for groups to give each other feedback and to ensure coherence and cohesiveness in the overall work of the project. Sturgeon noted, “it’s OK that districts call me whenever a Deaf child walks through their door, but every school should have someone with some rudimentary knowledge. That’s what this project is about.”

Not a new problem. As early as 2006, needs associated with the current intervention specialist licensure model were identified by a cross-center committee of the Ohio Department of Education. Among the most pressing issues identified was the need to find ways to increase the pool of teachers able to support learners with visual and/or hearing impairments through changes in licensure or through the addition of other licensure options.

Part II of this feature will address the substance of the group’s work and how it can be used by school districts, institutions of higher education, and the state to meet this well-established and critical need.

References

WordFarmers Associates (2016). *Improving service to students with low-incidence sensory disabilities in Ohio: A mixed-methods study to examine national context and district experience*. Albany, OH: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.wordfarmers.com/publications.html>.

For More Information

For more information about the work being facilitated through the Shawnee State University and educators in southern/southeastern Ohio, contact Dr. Doug Sturgeon, Associate Professor, College of Professional Studies, Shawnee State University, 940 Second St, Portsmouth, Ohio, 45662; 740.351.3270; or via email at dsturgeon@shawnee.edu.

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For more information about the **OLAC and OIP** resources, contact Dr. Jim Gay, OLAC Co-director, at jimgay@basa-ohio.org.