Distance Mentoring: An Effective Model for Low-Incidence Populations

The idea that expertise can be shared across distance is not a new one. In the 1800’s Louis Braille shared his knowledge of communication systems for the blind with teachers of blind students on other continents. Likewise a Spanish Benedictine monk in the 16th century shared his techniques for educating deaf students with sympathetic teachers in other countries. Their means of sharing expertise, however, involved correspondence that traveled by horse and ship and thus took months or even years, and so the benefits to individual children were small.

Advance to the 1990’s, when emerging telecommunications and multimedia technologies made possible, in theory, the near-immediate assessment and diagnosis of individuals with medical issues by specialists located hundreds, even thousands, of miles away. The field of telemedicine was born and has expanded slowly since, with the greatest potential impact on low-incidence conditions and disorders, including deaf-blindness.

Initially, says Jay Gense, director of the National Consortium on Deaf Blindness (NCDB) (http://
www.nationaldb.org/), the use of technology to connect expert service providers with remotely located children and their families, teachers, and therapists, was not needed. In the past, students with deaf-blindness were typically placed and educated in specialized residential schools or facilities with the professionals who worked with them.

Today, however, most of the approximately 10,000 infants, children and youth who are deaf-blind in the U.S. live at home and attend local public schools. This change, Mr. Gense says, is incredibly positive and profound for children and families. However, it presents a growing challenge to serve an increasing number of widely dispersed children with complex disabilities, like deaf-blindness, in settings that often lack access to trained personnel on-site.

“Almost without exception these children are the only kids who are deaf-blind at their school,” Mr. Gense points out. Quality services for these children are significantly enhanced, he states, through the implementation of distance mentoring programs in which “teams of educators and service providers are connected to each other and to the children and families they serve by information-age technology, including web and video conferencing and wikis. These technologies can be inordinately effective when properly deployed and supported at a local level.”

In addition to connecting team members and families, Mr. Gense says, technology can help foster collaborative relationships among team members, which, in turn, can generate innovative approaches to a student’s care and education. The key to effective implementation of a distance mentoring program, he emphasizes, is robust technical assistance which not only ensures that the technology provides optimum benefits but also supplies the knowledge and expertise to interact with school IT teams and administrators.

According to NCDB technical specialist Jon Harding, a distance mentoring model – called the Distance Mentoring Project (DMP) -- is being introduced by NCDB in several states, with Kansas serving as a prototype. In Kansas, he notes, 131 deaf blind students are dispersed throughout a state comprised of 293 school districts across nearly 82 million square miles. Collaborating with the Kansas Deaf Blind Project (http://web.ku.edu/~kansasdeafblind/products/) and the Kansas Schools for the Deaf and Blind, NCDB uses distance technologies to offer ongoing, responsive, relationship-based technical assistance to build the capacity of local teams working with children who are Deaf-Blind.

Nationally, NCDB is expanding the DMP model to other projects and is building an online community where U.S. Office of Special Education-funded deaf-blind projects in 52 states and localities can share information about technology applications to enhance their technical assistance activities.

D. Jay Gense, Ed. S. and Jon Harding, M.S.
Special Education Speak
One entered the deaf-blindness field serendipitously as a teenage college student; the other accidentally as a newly minted college grad seeking to extend a family legacy of teaching. Jay Gense discovered the field of deaf-blindness when he was a music performance major as a college undergraduate. “The state’s residential school for the blind requested performance lessons for students who were blind or deaf-blind,” he recalls. “I began giving private lessons at the school and I was hooked. I was immediately fascinated by the challenges these children faced in learning to access sensory information in ways that were atypical. This fascination with that process is one that’s shared by most individuals – educators and administrators – who are
Jon Harding’s mother and both his grandmothers were teachers. “I grew up in a very small town in Nebraska. A young man named Rodney lived down the street from me. I recognized that he was different, but I didn’t know what ‘different’ meant. The entire town knew Rodney and accepted him as a part of the community.” Mr. Harding majored in education as an undergraduate with the intention of becoming a history teacher. “I was attending an interview fair and one of the interviewers asked, ‘You’re looking a little down; what’s troubling you?’ I replied, ‘It’s a tough market for history teachers.’ The interviewer said, ‘There’s a big need for special education teachers. It’s not for everyone, but if you want to know more we’ll talk.’ It didn’t take long before I was hooked. This was a field in which I could make a difference.” An interest in deaf-blindness soon followed.

Humility, Mr. Harding says, is a hallmark daily sensation for those who work in the deaf-blind field. “We experience humility when interacting with families that cope daily with a family member who has this disability. We are humbled by the magnitude of their experience. On the flip side are individuals who have spent a professional lifetime dedicated to helping. For me as an outsider that’s the overriding sentiment – humility, and being humbled in a way that’s beneficial to me...and using that humility to find a way to contribute.”

§ §

The Distance Mentoring Model: A New Method for a New Age

An Interview with D. Jay Gense, Ed. S., Director, National Consortium on Deaf Blindness and Jon Harding, M. SPED, Technical Specialist, National Consortium on Deaf Blindness

“There are more school districts in this country than there are children who are deaf-blind,” declares Jay Gense, director of the National Consortium on Deaf Blindness (NCDB). Gense points out that the wide dispersal of these children creates challenges for the professionals and educators who serve them, as well as for the children and their families. Services for children with complex low-incidence disabilities like deaf-blindness, he adds, are significantly enhanced via a team-oriented distance mentoring model that takes advantages of widely-available technology underpinned by a strong technical assistance effort.

The distance mentoring model employed by the NCDB team and State Deaf-Blind Project partners uses video clips, web conferencing, and a wiki which enables its users – consultants, local teams of professional service providers, teachers, and families -- to build the capacity of the local team via deaf-blind-related content and instructional
strategies. The model relies on and facilitates relationship-building among team members and families. That, in turn, contributes to the model’s mentorship capability, ultimately strengthening the support provided to families through the remote delivery of professional expertise.

This model, which supports service delivery to children at local sites throughout a state, is a far cry from what Mr. Gense recalls from his earliest days in the deaf-blind field. “I began my career in 1978 when institutionalization was the norm,” he remembers. “Families with children who were deaf-blind often saw their child placed at a residential school for the blind or the deaf. There were generally no other options. The result was that small pockets of deaf-blind expertise emerged in these centrally located facilities.” Today, the vast majority of children who are deaf-blind are living and home and attending school in his/her local community. However, these very positive changes that have transpired since the late 70’s, he notes, “do not negate the needs for teachers’ access to deaf-blind expertise and the individualized services and supports required for children, wherever they are attending school.”

The technology-based model for providing technical assistance maximizes use of limited resources of time, money and personnel, and helps address the logistical challenges of providing on-site technical assistance.

With the support of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), NCDB is partnering with several state deaf-blind projects and other organizations to develop and apply technical assistance tools based on this model that can be shared with state deaf-blind projects throughout the country, thereby avoiding duplication of effort. OSEP supports consistency of approach for delivery of technical assistance by the state projects. “Access to the same materials, resources, information and knowledge is being encouraged. Technology makes such consistency possible.”

The Distance Mentoring Project

The distance mentoring model, the concept’s supporters maintain, can supplement the more traditional model of site-based service delivery and support. That model, they say, is often crisis driven, can stifle needed innovation, and denies teachers the time to practice, observe and reflect, as well as exchange views and information with other professionals. In short, although well-intended, the traditional model is an analogue model in a digital age.

NCDB is attempting to scale, on a national level, the Distance Mentorship Project, which was created and initially implemented in collaboration with the Kansas Deaf-Blind Project (KDBP) and the Kansas State School for the Blind (KSSB). DMP benefits include the following:

• Teachers and teams of professionals receive timely assistance and immediate feedback with respect to their interventions
• Consultants and providers have increased opportunities to interact with each other
• Children receive the benefit of best-practice interventions, enhanced via data collection and review

The DMP, according to NCDB technical specialist Jon Harding, who provides technical assistance and advocacy for technology-based solutions, is a non-funded, organic model offering technical assistance
to select local teams serving children who have complex, multiple disabilities, including vision loss and/or deaf-blindness. Such technical assistance, Mr. Harding explains, can include offering local teams access to NCDB’s collection of information resources and personnel expertise. It can also document and disseminate innovations such as the use of mobile technologies and determine the capacity of the DMP model to effectively serve an optimum number of teams. The DMP model in Kansas currently serves seven teams simultaneously.

The DMP: How It Works; Technology Connects Research to Practice

Technology facilitates the fulfillment of the NCDB mission: connecting research to practice, Mr. Harding explains. Current research, he says, “has shown that interactive video conferencing can increase the likelihood that knowledge transfers to the settings in which it will be relevant, useful and timely.” This method, he emphasizes, “creates new learning opportunities and enhances collaboration and communication between consultants/practitioners and teachers.” Early on, Mr. Gense and Mr. Harding recognized that video would be the key to the DMP’s success.

Four years ago the DMP model called for the use of a “flip” video hand-held pocket camcorder. Manufactured by Cisco, the device was already ubiquitous in most schools. Today, the vital DMP video component continues to include the following steps and technology:

- Handheld camcorders requiring minimum training are distributed to local team members, if necessary
- A child’s “routine” is elected for video capture. A routine might be, for instance, “snack time”, “reading time” or “hand washing”.
- Brief clips showing interaction between child and provider are captured
- Video is emailed by the local team to consultants or is posted online
- Videos are embedded in a Google wiki site which serves as the team repository, hosting video samples, best-practice resources and a discussion forum
- Video clips are reviewed by consultants and local team members
- Clips are edited by consultants who can add suggestions in text

Mr. Harding was introduced to the potential advantages of wikis by Robert Taylor, an education consultant/distance mentoring specialist at the Kansas School for the Blind. “Bob had been utilizing wikis independently with teams to try to build team communication.” In the DMP model, the wiki serves as a permanent home for video, interactive data resources, data collection and team conversation. Its use eliminates emailing and the possibility of lost files. Consultants utilize the wiki to post suggestions and best practices, while team members who are not part of the routine are able to keep tabs on progress. Family members can participate according to their individual comfort levels. As a secure site with controls for sharing, the wiki promotes a means of ongoing dialogue and a setting for opportunities that can result in teacher and student change, Mr. Harding notes. “We decided to combine video with wikis, in combination with web conferencing as that technology emerged.”

Recent technology innovations have nudged DMP capabilities forward and currently involve taking video with smart phones, tablets, and ultrathin
computers, Mr. Harding explains. “The deaf-blind project coordinator in Idaho, for example, uses a tablet to consolidate all the functions. The tablet has a 4G connection that allows a teacher, for instance, to access a wiki, [participate in] web conferencing, capture and upload short video clips – all with a single device. To me, that’s an innovation that demonstrates simplicity through technology.”

Four years into the DMP, he notes, “the technology we use is not revolutionary. Yet we’re always open to new technology, including social media. The technology innovation is applied where it’s needed in a way for which the users are prepared, thanks to technical assistance. Some families are proficient in the use of smartphones and tablet technology. In other cases, a teacher may not have an Internet connection in her classroom. That’s a challenge that demands adaptation.” In the DMP, he says, flexibility and adaptability trump specific technology. “Having stated that, however, there is no question that smartphones and tablets will have an impact on the model.”

**DMP Web Conferencing: Tearing Down the Wall**

Web conferencing, the DMP’s third pillar, facilitates a monthly online face-to-face meeting between local team members – service providers – and consultants that can last up to two hours. Typically, Mr. Harding says, these meetings are designed to review progress and suggestions as well as to present and respond to questions that have been prioritized in advance by the consultants. Action plans are created at the conclusion of each monthly conference. According to Mr. Harding the Kansas conferees prefer the web conference vehicle over teleconferencing in part because non-verbal communication often adds insight.

On occasion, Mr. Harding points out, DMP web conferencing enables local teams to puncture the natural wall that can exist between school and home. “I was a teacher. I saw and experienced the effects of that wall. Communication rarely dents it. I’m also a parent and I don’t have much awareness of what occurs at my child’s high school because when I ask him his response is identical to that of every American teenager: ‘Nothing’. The information window is very small. Parent-teacher conferences are often the extent of the information flow. Parents of deaf-blind students, especially, want and need information. They are very curious – and they want that wall torn down.”

**Web Conferencing Presents Synchronous and Asynchronous Opportunities**

Recently, he says, his team hosted a web conference. “The team had posted a video clip of a young lady. Her grandmother and grandfather the girl’s guardians, were on the web conference with team members. Her grandfather fired up an iPad with the Adobe Connect webconferencing app ([http://www.adobe.com/products/adobecomment/feature-details/adobe-connectmobile.html](http://www.adobe.com/products/adobecomment/feature-details/adobe-connectmobile.html)). The grandparents were ready; their applications downloaded with no instruction at all, leaving us stunned. The grandmother said prior to the meeting that she wanted to comment on one of the videos we posted. She said, ‘I noticed that Shelby [her granddaughter] was in a little distress; I think I know why. She wants her right arm available. In the position in which she was sitting her right arm was inaccessible to her. I’m certain that’s why she’s been in discomfort and you should be aware of that.’” In other circumstances, Mr. Harding points out, a year might have passed before the opportunity arose to achieve that level of communication. “This information the
grandmother conveyed to us was very important; we wouldn’t have been aware otherwise. This is the kind of communication opportunity we are trying to generate with the collaborative team concept that’s supported by technology.”

Web conferencing, Mr. Harding adds, “presents us with synchronous opportunities – opportunities that occur simultaneously. These opportunities emerge because we can see each other, which helps build relationships, whereas the wiki, which underlies our web conferencing, facilitates asynchronous opportunities, i.e. opportunities that do not occur at regular intervals.” For instance, he explains, “a team can use the wiki to report in on what transpired during a specific day or can post a new video, or we can urge team members to fill out a survey or complete an assessment form, or deliver just-in-time information. Thanks to the wiki we are not limited to communicating just once month. Instead, we talk continuously.”

In such a setting, he continues, when communication flows at several levels, “I view the consultant’s role as that of an umpire: the less we’re seen, the better. We want the interaction to occur between team members. We (consultant) might interject when necessary but our goal is to remain back-stage.”

Despite technology’s pivotal role in connecting DMP consultants and local teams with teachers and families, continued on-site visits are a reminder that technology is a complement to the on-site visits, not a substitute. “Never have we proposed that technology replace all forms of on-site support for state deaf-blind projects,” Mr. Harding declares. In fact, he points out, “The DMP process begins with an on-site visit to a child’s school, where the team members convene to establish expectations, ensure the appropriate technology and skills exist and to gather signatures.” Obtained from team members and parents, the signatures grant permission to capture video clips of interactions between a child with deaf-blindness and a provider such as a teacher, para-professional or related service provider. Individual team members, Mr. Harding says, “sign a form to demonstrate their commitment to the project.” Teams then agree to collect video of the child in the child’s customary environments and to share the video with the team’s consultants. Outcomes are selected in advance and measured over time.

**Addressing Local Realities**

The DMP model, Mr. Harding says, was created to help local organizations address local realities. In Kansas, he notes, “We needed better cross-agency collaboration. Different agencies were serving the same kids, same teams and same parents but they weren’t communicating.” Another reality was the increasing demand for services in small rural communities in western Kansas while the needed professional expertise resided in the eastern part of the state. “The result was that much time was expended driving very long distances to resolve flaring problems. This created an inability to build capacity. It resulted in a lack of communication between team members, home and providers, the absence of a ‘compass’ for teams and team members to follow. Especially for teachers in small rural communities who lack training in coping with the complexities of deaf-blind students or the implications of their disabilities, the work can be lonely.”

Jon Harding and Jay Gense agree that even the most capable teachers are sometimes unprepared to in-
struct children with multiple complex disabilities such as deaf-blindness. The DMP, they explain, provides teachers with access to practitioners with solid experience in educating these children. This access, expedited by technology, skirts the traditional waiting periods teachers may have experienced with more traditional modes of consultation. With the new model, children may also be served at home by local teams whose members’ expertise is tailored to a child’s age and capabilities. For instance, Mr. Harding says, an early childhood setting might include a team consisting of an early intervention provider, an occupational therapist (OT) and/or a physical therapist (PT) who provide service in the home. “Parents are always on the team, a requirement for this process if the process is to be effective. We give control of the team to the family. We tell families, ‘You own whatever emerges from this process.’”

Teams working with school-age children are required to include a child’s primary teacher, parent or guardian, a paraprofessional and/or intervener and an administrator. Each local team appoints a contact person to maintain communication and consistency between the local team and consultants, Mr. Harding explains.

“We’re Trained to Fix Things”: Humility in Listening

Since the DMP’s inception in Kansas, consultants supporting NCDB’s Kansas distance mentoring effort have include Dr. Anne Neilsen, Outreach Director, Kansas State School for the Blind (KSSB); Robert Taylor, KSSB Education Consultant/Distance Mentoring Specialist; and Megan Cote, Coordinator, Kansas Deaf-Blind Project. According to Mr. Harding, the expertise of the Kansas consultants varies. “Dr. Nielsen is a strong leader in vision services. Bob Taylor’s background is in severe disabilities, as is Megan Cote’s. My background is teaching and AT. It’s a truism that most professionals in the deaf-blind field come from other disciplines, which ultimately makes the quality of their input richer.”

Consultant diversity of expertise is a plus, Mr. Harding remarks, “because having consultants with various perspectives encourages us to set aside our respective professional prejudices in order to formulate a process that is truly collaborative. As consultants we’re trained to fix things. In our collaborative process that penchant has to be approached delicately. The best practice is to voice one’s own opinion and then ask a consulting colleague, ‘What do you think?’ ‘What do you see?’ ‘What shall we recommend or suggest?’ We need different perspectives in caring for these complex kids.”

Among the most desirable of consultant skill sets, Mr. Harding insists, is humility in listening. “We try to honor what the local team members – especially the parents – are telling us, what the teachers are saying to us, even if the teachers have had no experience with deaf-blind children. We honor what teachers, and the other team members, are trying to achieve. We believe from the outset that teachers are striving desperately to provide effective support to the deaf-blind children in their charge –sometimes without much help. As Jay says often, ‘Even the best teachers need support.’”

Typically, he asserts, local teams supporting these teachers display plentiful individual, specific expertise. “What’s often lacking, however, is the capability to integrate that expertise. What’s needed, and what the DMP model provides, is an opportunity to set the team’s tone and then announce to team members, ‘Each of you has something to contribute but we may need to step back a little first.’”

The DMP approach, Mr. Harding points out, supports a team’s abilities to implement a quality IEP,
and minimizes the pressures and animosities that often arise in situations that can prove to be adversarial among team members. There’s no contentiousness in our process, no ‘us versus them’, only us. We establish trust. Mistakes are encouraged here. We want team members to make mistakes because we view those mistakes as learning opportunities. We will make those mistakes together.”

Team members, he says, also foster an ingredient that is never present in more contentious settings: a sense of humor. “Oddly, a little humor in this very serious field is essential in building a collaborative environment. We are directed and action oriented, but humor can sometimes be the glue.”

**DMP’s Role in Rural Communities: Broadband Is Universal**

Every state possesses a significant rural aspect, Jon Harding remarks. “Even Rhode Island is a big state when rural needs have to be met.” Nationwide, he points out, most children who are deaf-blind are served in their home communities and schools. “Meeting the needs of these children is a treadmill if technology is not employed in a significant and effective way.”

Even remote rural settings, he says, are benefiting from nearly universal access to broadband technology. “I’m not sure anymore that ‘rural’ is synonymous with ‘out-of-date’ in terms of technology. In Kansas, some of our most rural school districts are well-wired and geared due to state initiatives or local funding.”

When he does a presentation about the role of the DMP in Kansas, he says, “I display a map of Kansas in which I draw a line from the northeast part of the state where most of the expertise is located to Elkhart in southwest Kansas. Making that journey requires at least a full day’s drive. When time, fuel, cost and other variables are factored in, it quickly becomes clear that the excessive travel time required in the pre-DMP model not only flunks a cost-benefit measurement but also limits local team contact with a child, his family and his teacher.

“Our model is designed to solve that problem by enhancing contact through connectivity. The state deaf-blind project or the state school for the blind often has a relationship with local teams. Because of this existing relationship, either the state project or the school proposes local teams as candidates to transition to a distance mentorship model.” Sometimes this approach works, sometimes it fails to be effective, he says. But there is no question that the DMP concept helps solve the rural issue. It’s easy to sell distance mentoring to a teacher in Beloit, KS when she learns that for nine months she’ll have the benefit of multiple contacts, suggestions and resources that she lacked before.”

Addrs Jay Gense, “Jon and I have a rural perspective because we each grew up in very rural communities. But any discussion about serving children with low-incidence disabilities like deaf-blindness transcends typical rural issues. The fact is that despite where they live, children with deaf-blindness, their families and their teachers can feel isolated. The result is that rural issues per se have less of an impact on very low-incidence disabilities than on some other disabilities. Deaf-blind children, their families and teachers can feel as isolated in the borough of Manhattan in New York City as well as in Manhattan, KS or Holton, KS. In all of our considerations ‘isolation’ is a key word.”
What Makes a DMP Candidate?
Mr. Harding explains that there is no ideal teacher or administrator candidate profile for DMP adoption. “We’ve made mistakes in this area. We’ve experimented with situations where we were convinced the DMP would be a good fit and it proved not to be. We’ve found that a prime key for a successful adoption is the existence of a previous relationship between a teacher, an administrator and a local team. We can’t go in cold and ask a team to try something as new as the DMP model; It doesn’t work.”

Instead, he continues, “we need teachers who are secure in themselves and in their own professional skills.” Teacher experience is not a factor, he insists. “We’ve encountered new teachers who are very comfortable and confident in their own abilities and are not threatened by the prospect of being on camera or by having a video made of them interacting with a child.” Teaching, he observes, “has traditionally been an isolating profession in which teachers close their classroom doors and teach; no one watches unless the principal visits a class.”

DMP utilization, he says, presents teachers with a new situation that causes their classroom doors to be opened. “Are teachers quickly adaptable to new situations? Are they flexible enough to make adjustments on the fly? This is a lot to ask of some teachers. We certainly understand the pressures teachers are under, especially regarding accountability.” Administrative buy-in for the DMP concept and its implementation is necessary, he adds. “Administrators need to be on board and understand what we do and how we do it.” Parental support is also a must. “Generally, parents like this concept, but we want them to feel empowered by it,” he says. For teachers and others on local teams, technology competence is a factor. “Are the individuals on the team competent with technology? Do they have basic skills? Have they ever been in a web conference before, for example? Are they comfortable browsing the Internet? Have they ever uploaded a file? If they have not, it adds complexity to the process.”

District IT Departments and the DMP: “We Try to Make It Easy for the Districts”
Members of school district IT departments are not part of local teams, and their willingness to support the DMP model is initially an unknown quantity, Mr. Harding says. “I once believed we would have easier access in rural districts because there was less likelihood of the district or school having an IT department.” He was occasionally wrong in his assumption, he admits, and even in rural districts he would be confronted with the same potential areas of conflict as in larger districts with multiple IT teams. “Often the principal would defer to the IT department and the IT department would give the DMP concept a thumbs-down because a hole in the firewall might have to be created. However, in other large districts – and rural districts as well – administrators have instructed the IT department to accommodate the program’s technology needs. The administrators understand how our process will work and have ensured that safeguards are built in.”

He emphasizes that “these are my very informal observations gleaned from my experience over several years. The ongoing Steppingstones research project [by University of Kansas] might come to different conclusions regarding this issue.”

His basic message to administrators regarding the DMP process and technology imperatives is, “We will import a structure. We won’t need the IT de-
partment. We can deliver the connection with Internet technology. We don’t circumvent or hide. But we do often say that what we offer makes it easier for the district and we will help facilitate according to the district’s requirements. Our bottom line: We try to make it easy for the districts.”

**Overcoming Barriers to Implementation**

IT departments, he admits, do not always take kindly to such a posture. “Usually it induces a raised eyebrow, a healthy bit of skepticism, sometimes some resistance. Some IT departments see their mission as protective, to limit access. One large suburban district told us, ‘You can do this [the DMP] but we want you to use our proprietary in-house intranet, which can do all that your cloud-based services can do.’ We thought, fine, this will be great. It wasn’t great. The securities inside that intranet system were so stringent that we were unable even to use our first names. So I was assigned a name, “Purple Platypus”. Megan Cote was “Green Unicorn”, etc. We couldn’t even know who was commenting on the site and would receive notices that there was a sixth grade cupcake party on Friday. The system wasn’t pragmatic or functional for our purposes. We walked away from it.”

Resistance to the use of the program’s cloud-based services, Mr. Harding says, is not entirely unusual. Such resistance arises, he explains, because of the belief that such services are inherently less secure and less private. “I don’t subscribe to that theory,” he declares. I’m seeing more alignment – more synergies – between what we are doing and what the broader educational systems are doing. The safeguards we build into the DMP should accelerate that alignment and enhance synergies.”

Professional ethics, he adds, play a role in this approach. “We assume that individuals who are hired as professionals at a local district understand what is ethical and what is not and will be bound by that understanding. We don’t want participants to share passwords. We do have to be cautious. Never do I seek to diminish potential security dangers or dismiss concerns. We advise the use of reasonable precaution, but we don’t permit the fear of the danger to stymie our work.

“Our responsibility as consultants is to make the process work whenever possible regardless of these obstacles,” Mr. Harding states. In fact, he adds, coping with obstacles brings to the surface a key – perhaps the key – characteristic for participants in a distance mentoring program: persistence. “For us, a hurdle is just an opportunity to devise another approach. All of us here possess that trait because we believe that this program can be effective. Often when we have attempted to scale the program, participants have become frustrated. For instance, they say, ‘I’m having problems uploading video.’ The question then is, ‘What’s not working? Tell us specifically.’ Then we’ll try to come up with a solution. We don’t have the perfect recipe, unfortunately. What we are trying to say is, ‘Buy your ingredients and then tell us what the correct proportions are, the right titration of these ingredients, and then we can learn how to mix them properly.’ That’s an effective way to induce collaboration.”

For the nine states that are currently scaling the DMP, he explains, “we have created a community of practice. We have our own wiki and meet as a group to review progress and issues and what has been
learned to date. I’ve been impressed by what we are hearing. The program runs until the end of the 2013 school year, at which point we hope to draw some conclusions regarding what we as a group – not just individually -- have learned from this process.”

Unintended Synergies: Using the DMP for AT Assessment
According to Jon Harding, the DMP model has been put to synergistic use that was unintended – as a tool for assistive technology assessment, for example. We’re beginning now to explore other areas of possible DMP crossover applications. We don’t think the DMP model is disability-specific, although we have tried to scale the Kansas model to deaf-blindness. There has already been much interest in using the model for various disabilities, from autism to deaf-blindness. We are learning that this model can be adopted and applied effectively in a setting in which there’s a need for information and support.”

For more information on the DMP, see: http://www.nationaldb.org/dbp/apr2010.htm

More information about NCDB’s technology solutions, is available at:
http://www.nationaldb.org/TechnologySolutionsInitiative.php

---

ARTICLES

All Children Can Read: Literacy for Children with Combined Vision and Hearing Loss
This National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness literacy website is based on the following assertions:
• All children can become literate
• Literacy development is founded on experiences and concepts beginning very early in life
• Literacy instruction must include a strong emphasis on communication and socialization
• Literacy exists along a continuum from emergent literacy to independent literacy
• Literacy skills should not be taught in isolation since they relate to other social and academic skills
• It is essential to build a trusting relationship with a child and intentionally offer early learning opportunities that expand on familiar ideas in a context the child understands.

Focusing on the stages in the literacy continuum, each website page provides a list of related skills, examples, video clips and articles describing evidence-based strategies to help children develop essential literacy skills and progress along the continuum.
http://www.fctd.info/resources/5309

Students with Significant Disabilities: Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment Issues
This site, provided by the Louisiana Department of Education, is designed for educators and family members who support students with significant disabilities, including autism and deaf-blindness. These students have complex needs in areas such as communication, behavior support, and acquisition of academic, social, and vocational skills. The site provides a great deal of academic resources, some specific to Louisiana, but many which would be of value to edu-

§ §
Assistive Technology in Action Video Series

In the first video, you’ll meet Sam Graves, a young man with cerebral palsy who, with the help of AT, is a successful college student, blogger, and sportsman.

Our second video introduces Elle, a young woman who, with the help of AT, is able to communicate with family, friends, and teachers.

http://www.youtube.com/user/FCTDvideo

We invite you to view and share these videos with your colleagues and the families you serve.

Stay tuned for our next video!
Meet Mason!

Design to Learn

Design to Learn is based at the Oregon Institute on Disability and Development, a program of the Oregon Health & Science University in Portland, Oregon. Their staff of researchers and special educators specialize in developing assessment and teaching strategies for children and adults with low-incidence disabilities. They have special expertise in addressing the educational needs of children who are deaf-blind and children with autism spectrum disorders. In addition to products available for purchase, Design to Learn offers two online courses and several free resources, including their Guide for Young Children who are Deaf-blind, a 56-page guide to assessing young children who are deaf-blind or who have multiple disabilities.

Some of their materials are available in both English and Spanish.
http://www.fctd.info/resources/5230

The AIM Navigator

The AIM Navigator is a process facilitator that guides the work of a collaborative team as they work through the AIM-related needs of individual students. The Navigator consists of a series of guiding questions to assist teams with decision-making about need, selection, acquisition, and use of accessible instructional materials. Learning supports for completing each decision-making step are available throughout.

http://www.fctd.info/resources/5163

§ §
Knowledge Network Members

Dual Sensory Services, Inc.
DSI Services, an Alaska special education service agency (SESA), provides resources and services to learners with dual sensory impairments (DSI), their families, teachers, and therapists. Services are made available in homes, schools and community settings. They include: technical assistance through on-site consultation; in-service training; support to attend trainings that address DSI issues; promotion of home-school partnerships and collaborative teaming; access to a parent navigator; an extensive lending library; and access to local, state and national resources pertaining to DSI issues. The DSI newsletter, Keeping in Touch, and program mailings provide up-to-date information. The SESA library maintains current literature and videotapes specific to deaf-blindness.

For more information, contact:
DSI Services
Special Education Service Agency
3501 Denali Street, Suite 101
Anchorage, AK 99503
Phone: (907) 563-8284
Fax: (907) 562-0545
Contact: contact Patrick Pillai, Executive Director
Email: ppillai@sesa.org
http://www.fctd.info/organizations/12150

American Action Fund for Blind Children and Adults (AAF)
AAF assists blind and deaf-blind persons in securing reading material; educates the public about blindness; provides specialized aids and appliances to the blind; offers consultations to governmental and private agencies serving the blind and provides services to blind children and their parents. The AAF Tarzana, CA office houses the organization’s free lending library of Braille and Twin Vision® (print/Braille) picture books for blind children. The AAF Baltimore office manages the AAF Free Braille Book Program which provides postage-free books to borrowers in the U.S. and Canada. AAF publishes and distributes Action Line, a free weekly Braille newspaper available to blind and deaf individuals nationwide.

For further information, contact:
American Action Fund
1800 Johnson St
Baltimore, MD 21230
Phone: (410) 659-9315
Contact: Dr. Martin Maurer, Executive Director
Email: actionfund@actionfund.org
http://www.fctd.info/organizations/12745

National Center to Inform Policy and Practice in Special Education Professional Development (NCIPP)
NCIPP is an OSEP-funded center which aims to improve teacher quality and increase commitment to teaching students with disabilities by: (1) informing special education policy and practice on induction and mentoring; and (2) identifying and recommending induction and mentoring implementation strategies. NCIPP conducts webinars based on the needs of states. Transcripts can be viewed on their website. They also provide reports, briefs, and presentations, all of which are available to users at no cost. For a description of their technical assistance services, please see their website.

For more information, contact NCIPP at:
National Center to Inform Policy and Practice in Special Education Professional Development
DB-LINK (National Information Clearinghouse for Children Who Are Deaf-Blind)
Affiliated with the National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness (NCDB), DB-LINK houses an extensive collection of information related to deaf-blindness. A team of information specialists makes this resource available in response to direct requests, via the NCDB web site, through conferences and a variety of electronic media.
For further information, contact:
DB-LINK
Teaching Research Institute
Western Oregon University
345 North Monmouth Avenue
Monmouth, OR 97361
Phone: (800) 438-9376 (TTY; toll free) (800) 854-7013 (toll free)
Fax: (503) 838-8150
Contact: Gail Leslie, Project Director
Email: dblink@tr.wou.edu
http://www.nationaldb.org/ISDefault.php

Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youths and Adults (HKNC)
This federally funded program provides information, and support and advocacy services to deaf-blind youths and adults, their families and the professional service providers who support them.
The HKNC training program provides evaluation, short-term comprehensive vocational rehabilitation training and assistance to consumers in obtaining employment, housing and community supports. The center also provides professional internships. Field services include 10 regional offices and more than 40 affiliated agencies. HKNC supports the National Family Association for Deaf-Blind, maintains a national registry of individuals who are deaf-blind and publishes a tri-annual newsletter.
For more information, contact:
Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youths and Adults
141 Middle Neck Road
Sands Point, NY 11050
Phone: (516) 944-8900 TTY: (516) 944-8637
Fax: (516) 944-7302
Email: hkncinfo@hknc.org
http://www.fctd.info/organizations/1363

Project Reach
Funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), Project Reach provides technical assistance and consultation, information, training and family support to Illinois children with deaf-blindness and their families. Project Reach supports the activities of four deaf-blind specialists and a family specialist dispersed throughout the state of Illinois. These specialists collaborate with local school programs, community service providers and families, providing information brochures, periodic telephone contacts, trainings and on-site consultation on a variety of relevant topics.
For further information, contact:
Project Reach
818 Dosage Boulevard
Glen Ellyn, IL 60137
Connections beyond Sight and Sound (CBSS)
A collaborative project involving the Maryland State Department of Education and the University of Maryland, Connections provides specialized technical assistance to enhance the capacity of local educational systems to meet the needs of the state’s 208 children with deaf-blindness, age birth-2. The project’s strategies include:

- Conducting statewide, multilevel needs assessments to determine the array, type and intensity of technical assistance and training necessary to sustain students with deaf-blindness
- Providing technical assistance and information to family members of children who are deaf-blind, early interventionists, special and regular educators and related service providers that result in appropriate assessment, placement and support services
- Providing in-service training combined with site-based follow-up, consultation and coaching to institutions of higher education (IHE), school administrators, educational professionals, para-educators/interveners and agency personnel that focuses on evidence-based practices
- Providing training and support to families of children with deaf-blindness

For more information, contact:
Connections beyond Sight and Sound
University of Maryland
1308 Benjamin Building
College Park, MD 20742
Phone: (301) 405-7915 (voice/TTY)

For a state-by-state list of each of the Deaf-Blind projects, please see the NCDB website at: http://www.nationaldb.org/. Click on the easy-to-use map to get contact information for the state project in which you are interested. The listing includes the number of children with deaf-blindness in the state.