

Dear School District Leader,

THANK YOU for participating in the National Survey on Sign Language Interpreter Shortages in K12 Education.

1,356 school districts responded to the questions we posed about the supply and demand for qualified ASL interpreters in schools around the country. Below is a summary of their responses.

Research on Interpreter Shortages in K12 Schools

The RID-sponsored research on interpreter shortages in the United States was initiated last year by the National Center on Deafness (NCOD) at Cal State Northridge. Three client groups were targeted for inclusion in the research:

K12 school districts, referral agencies, and postsecondary institutions. We are pleased to share a summary of the results of the K12 survey in this issue; our next report will cover results of the survey of referral agencies; a more detailed final report on the research project will be prepared following conclusion of all data collection.

K12 Sample

In order to initiate the survey of K12 administrators, NCOD began by developing a data base of school districts in the U.S. and identifying email addresses for school district superintendents or directors of special education / pupil services. This effort took longer than anticipated, but the final number of people included in the data base reached 6,818 school district contacts. Because there was no easy way to determine which schools or districts had deaf children enrolled, all school districts for which an email contact could be developed were surveyed. After allowing for emails that bounced back as undeliverable, the final number of individuals who had an opportunity to respond to the survey was 6,680 school district personnel.

The Survey

The survey itself was web based and distributed electronically via an email message. Each of the surveys for the three employer groups is slightly different but all questions have been organized generally into 5 parts: institutional characteristics, consumer profile, coverage, employment and staffing, and issues of gaps in coverage. The survey of K12 administrators had 30 items covering these topics, plus one open-ended comment opportunity at the end.

Results

Every state was represented among the school districts responding. School district leaders were asked to report data for academic year 2005-2006, and to reply to the survey even if they had no deaf children enrolled that year.

The instrument was designed to jump to the end of the survey after obtaining some basic institutional data, if the school district had no deaf students in 2005. The total number of responses was 1,356. This represents a 20.3% response rate. However, just 221 of the respondents reported no deaf children enrolled, suggesting that the response rate for school districts with data that would interest us, was, in fact, considerably higher.

1,127 school districts (16.9%) reported having at least one deaf child enrolled in their district. The largest group (11.3%) had only one student (152 school districts). 561 districts (41.8%) reported enrollments of between 2-10 students. There were 89 districts or regions with multiple districts reporting 50+ students enrolled, including 12 Schools for the Deaf. Most of the data base was comprised of public school district representatives, so it is not surprising that the data primarily reflect their feedback (96.6%) with

the balance of responses coming from private schools (2.2%), charter schools (2.2%), and 25 Schools for the Deaf (1.9%).

Most respondents (81.2%) were responding for a school district or region, but in some cases, respondents represented a single school (5.1%). In those instances, elementary schools (39.1%) and high schools (38.4%) predominated.

Most of the school districts with deaf students enrolled (32.5%) had just one deaf student requiring interpreting services on their IEPs, followed by 15.7% reporting two students and 9.5% with three students. Forty-seven school districts had between 11-14 students with interpreting services identified on their IEP and 31 school districts reported between 40-99 students with IEP designated services. Ten school districts indicated they were serving more than 200 students, including two of the 25 Schools for the Deaf.

Note that 1,134 school districts reported having at least one deaf child enrolled in their district, yet just 846 responded to the question about number of students with interpreting services designated on their IEPs.

Based on comments, many students are receiving instructional services other than sign language interpreting.

For most (97.4%), consumers were identified as students. However, 30.6% named parents and another 19% identified teachers. Some school districts (4.2%) identified other professional staff (educational assistants, school administrators, medical doctors) and staff (bus drivers, food production, paraprofessionals), as well as other adults in the community who are served by their interpreting staff.

Responses to questions about a district's coverage of interpreter service requests varied wildly. The survey included questions about the numbers of requests for services, and numbers of requests that they were not able to fill, during the reporting period. The total number of respondents for these items varies because school districts across the country track data differently, or not at all, and many skipped questions for which they had no data. To accommodate this situation, the survey approached the issue from multiple perspectives, requesting data about coverage in different forms (e.g., number of requests, number of students, number of hours, etc.).

During the pilot test of the instrument, many school representatives suggested that it would be difficult to provide a figure for the total number of requests for interpreter services, but that it should be included.

As expected, answers were mixed between number of hours of services for students, number of requests for students, numbers of "other" types of requests (extracurricular activities) and numbers of requests for services other than those for students (e.g., parent meetings).

In terms of numbers of requests during the 2005-2006 school year, most schools counted one student as a single request that required an interpreter every school day (daily IEP support), and requests for meetings with parents as individual requests (e.g., three meetings per school year equaled three requests). For requests other than classroom interpreting (extracurricular activities), individual requests were counted separately, as well. So, for example, one school district reported "more than 160 requests for interpreter services for events other than the regular school day". The most common data reported ranged between 1- 5, reflecting the actual numbers of students that districts indicated were receiving services. One district reported "15 requests, not including the regular 7 hour day of the 6 students". Some districts translated demand for services into numbers of interpreters needed (e.g., need for 3 fulltime interpreters). And other schools indicated their calculations only (e.g., 32 interpreters for 177 days X 7 5/8 hours) which is most easily understood as 43,188 hours of service. With these kinds of reports, it becomes clear that standardizing "demand" is not so straightforward and making sense of fulfillment of service requests (coverage) is even more challenging.

Other Examples of some typical responses to this item:

184 days in the year, 35 elementary students required 1735 minutes a day secondary students 1925 minutes a day. Over 500 hours of extra activities such as sports, clubs, school events

24 students plus 12 extra curricular events (softball season, basketball season etc)

One Student Request for interpreter

7 for students 11 for parents in meetings

9 students needed an interpreter every day; additional 32 requests either for substitutes for the 9 interpreters or parent/extra curricular needs for students or families to attend meetings, etc.

180 school days

Most schools said they can cover classes, even if they have to break apart interpreter teams or call an outside agency. They do, however, report gaps in coverage for extracurricular activities and sometimes reschedule meetings in order to accommodate interpreters' schedules. The greatest challenge for schools that are marginally staffed is to cover an interpreter absence when no substitute can be found. Several survey items requested information about the gaps in coverage, i.e., how often and under what circumstances was the school district not able to fulfill a request for service. Questions asked for feedback about the Total Number of Requests not filled, the Number of Interpreter Absence days and the Number of Absence days they were not able to backfill with a substitute.

Of those who attempted to calculate the number of requests they were not able to fill, estimates ranged from 10%-40%. As one person reported, "this is really difficult to track. When we do not have an interpreter we call an outside agency or cover internally to be sure each child has access to communication although interpreters often have to double up on classes". One school district noted that "Two full time positions remained open all year." Another wrote that a student did not "move to their district because they could not find an interpreter." A contributing factor was interpreter absences; most school districts (69%) who reported figures for this item indicated they were not able to backfill between 1-10 times during the academic year. This may partly be accounted for by the number of open positions for interpreters. Nearly 60% of the schools indicated that they had at least one open position currently posted; 23.4% had two open positions. In all, 209 school districts were seeking staff. To recruit for new hires, school districts primarily rely on their own School / District website (75.1%) or Word of mouth (67.5%), with just 90 respondents (15.1%) indicating they used RID VIEWS or the Local Chapter in their recruitment efforts.

Gaps in coverage were attributed primarily to lack of qualified interpreters in the area. Competition appeared to not be a major issue for most school districts responding, though there was strong Agreement (43%) that multiple employers in the area may contribute to the competition that they do experience. Aside from availability and competition, the strongest Agreement with other issues that might be contributing to shortages was with their lack of ties to an ITP/IEP (33%) and geographic location of the school district (47%). 33% strongly disagreed with the statement that "Qualified interpreters are available when needed", the predominate response; another 14% somewhat disagreed. And a surprising 46% (27% strongly agreed, 19% somewhat agreed) agreed with the statement that "We are not experiencing gaps in coverage", which most likely is a result of their reported success generally at covering classrooms, as required by the IEP. When a district must fill a gap in coverage, most (54.3%) reported filling requests with non-certified interpreters. Others have hired a permanent substitute, contracted with agencies, rearranged interpreter schedules, and used teachers who can sign. One school indicated they are hoping to use VRI in the future, and a few districts indicated they are trying to train their own interpreters. Solutions vary, but most are creative and do the best with the

resources they have. As one noted, "I have lucked out so far in hiring an interpreter, but I know my time is coming to have a position that will be extremely difficult to fill".

This survey generated considerable discussion. Nearly one third of the respondents (29.7%) took advantage of the opportunity to write in the "comments" section. Some comments focused on efforts districts are making to address what they see as a growing demand, such as one program the "has set a goal to strongly encourage area High Schools to offer ASL as a foreign language credit." Several addressed anticipated shortages based on certification issues. For example, one district indicated that "they have been able to use current interpreter on a TEA emergency certificate.

However, when this emergency certification can no longer be used, and if the interpreter fails to pass test and get certification -- there will be a vacancy which will be difficult to fill with a certified interpreter", and others reinforced this concern, "Once interpreters receive a higher certification, they tend to leave for Video Relay Service to earn more money than what the school system can offer. Interpreter shortage is not because there are not enough in the area, but mostly due to certified/qualified interpreters not wanting to do educational interpreting". "We are not experiencing shortages. We are experiencing frustration with the testing requirements and cost. Currently I am in need of one interpreter. They do not have to be certified, but they do have to pass the screening. The student is struggling and needs help, but I cannot find anyone to fill the position. In most cases we have experienced educational interpreters who do a very fine job interpreting, relating to students and school personnel, and pre/re-teaching under the direction of the teacher. They are frustrated by the regulation in our state that they must pass the EIPA when in EVERY case they interpret for students who do not sign back to them. Also, in every case they interpret for one student only. They are not paid much money to do this job even though some of them have 4 year college degrees, drive long distances, and are certified teachers. They have to spend their own time and money to try to up-grade skills. It is very difficult to really make progress in their area of weakness (in every case that is voicing what deaf adults sign) when they all live in a rural area with no deaf adults with whom to practice. As a result, at least two of them have decided to stop interpreting - what a loss that is!"

The isolation associated with rural locations was noted by several, "Our biggest challenge stems from our rural location and lack of interpreter training programs in our area", and "At this time we live in a very rural area. We are in desperate need for certified interpreters. There no place close to go to a training program. All persons now employed are learning on their own".

And there were comments about the need for more diversity among interpreters, "We have the most difficulty finding male interpreters. This is the first year we were able to hire one. We hired 2 but one did not take the position. We would like more males because we have so many students who are boys and they would like to have men too". Another school district is in need of interpreters who are familiar with the Navajo history, culture and language.

Also, ITP programs came under scrutiny. As one school representative noted, "Interpreter training programs tend to focus on producing community interpreters rather than educational interpreters." For some, "finding the interpreter is not usually the problem. The major problem is finding interpreters that can distinguish educational interpreting from community interpreting. "

Many had occasional needs, especially for parents who are deaf. In the words of those describing this situation, "I have a core group of people I can call on and sometimes make up to half a dozen calls to find an interpreter".

And, "we only need someone intermittently. We have a hard time finding someone for IEP meetings and school meetings for parents who are deaf. We pay what we are charged, but often they drive an hour+ to get to our district. We spend hours trying to find an available interpreter".

A few expressed concerns that ITPs focus almost exclusively on ASL & Deaf Culture. Several indicated that training should include "exposure to the other numerous communication methodologies available to the parents who make these decisions for their children. Another

stated, "Our program is based on a strong English language component using SEE especially for the elementary level students. Our cochlear implant students also request/demand English (they want what the teacher is saying--not an interpreter's version) for the middle school and high school students. It is unfortunate that the training programs are not providing more training in this signing system".

Finally, the divergence of experiences can be summed up by these two very different responses: "I am at a loss. When trying to find an interpreter last year I called 64 different people or agencies and could not get a local person. I live in a large city and to me this is unacceptable" - compared to "So far we have been able to fill all interpreter positions".

Look for this summary in the June issue of RID VIEWS.

Always interested in your comments,

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