
Summary Report: NCDB Personnel Training Focus Group

***Chicago, Illinois
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The National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness

The Consortium is a collaborative partnership between the:

Teaching Research Institute
Western Oregon University
Monmouth, Oregon

Helen Keller National Center
Sands Point, New York

Hilton/Perkins Project
Perkins School for the Blind
Watertown, Massachusetts

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BACKGROUND

On October 1, 2006 a new national technical assistance and dissemination center for children and youth who are deaf-blind was funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). This new center, now known as the National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness (NCDB) builds upon the previously funded technical assistance activities of NTAC, the National Technical Assistance Consortium for Children and Young Adults who are Deaf-Blind and the information services and dissemination activities of DB-LINK, the national clearinghouse on deaf-blindness.

In addition to its technical assistance and information and dissemination services, a third area of focus was added to the centers charge, specifically addressing personnel training.

Personnel Training and Leadership Needs in Deaf-Blindness

The ongoing shortage of qualified special educators, teachers, and paraprofessionals continues with ninety-eight percent of America's school districts currently reporting shortages. In low incidence areas, such as visual and hearing impairments or multiple and severe disabilities, teacher shortages are increasing and often result in the provision of inadequate and inappropriate services to many students. Although paraprofessionals are increasingly used to support the inclusion of students with severe disabilities in general education settings and to provide direct and related services, adequately trained paraprofessionals are also in short supply.

Children and youth who are deaf-blind require unique interventions to meet their intervention and educational needs, especially in the areas of social interaction, communication and language. Service providers must understand the impact of combined hearing and vision loss on learning and communication. In 1996, it was reported that 960 new teachers trained in deaf-blindness would be needed by 2006. Unfortunately, between 1996 and 2001, only 75 new teachers completed teacher preparation programs in deaf-blindness (Corn & Spungin, 2003).

Today, there is no established system that low incidence personnel preparation programs and leaders in the deaf-blind community can use to plan and implement collaborative personnel training activities. This lack of a systemic training system presents a significant need. To assist in meeting this need, NCDB will facilitate the development of a national deaf-blind personnel preparation consortium that will:

- Assist in identifying national personnel shortages and training needs specific to deaf-blindness.
- Facilitate a coordinated national effort to promote personnel training to address the shortage of highly qualified personnel.
- Collaborate with personnel training efforts to facilitate summer institutes and the development of online and distance education training opportunities.
- Continue to provide personnel training through a variety of multi-state Topical Conferences, Webinars and Focus groups.

- Maximize the use and visibility of evidence-based research, best practices and emerging knowledge in personnel training activities at state and national levels.
- Collaborate with personnel preparation programs in deaf-blindness to make resources available that augment coursework and practicum experiences
- Provide consultation for workshops and online training activities.
- Identify and coordinate mentorship and internship opportunities between personnel preparation programs and the, state and multi-state deaf-blind projects and their host agencies, and other entities such as the Perkins, HKNC and the American Association for the Deaf-Blind.

NCDB's' Personnel Training Objective and Activities

The following describes NCDB's personnel training objective and its accompanying activities.

Objective 6.0: To provide leadership in a coordinated national effort to promote personnel training on the implementation of IDEA and evidenced-based practices in order to address the shortage of leadership and highly qualified personnel in the field of deaf-blindness.

The activities proposed under Objective 6 target leadership initiatives and partnerships with low-incidence personnel preparation programs; specifically those that provide training in the area of deaf-blindness. These activities include:

Activity 6.1 - Facilitating the development of a national personnel training and leadership consortium focused on deaf-blindness, to assist the Center in identifying personnel training needs and to guide the design and delivery of the Center's national leadership training activities.

Currently, there is no established system that low incidence personnel preparation programs and leaders in the deaf-blind community can use to plan and implement collaborative personnel training. The Center will facilitate the development of a national deaf-blind personnel preparation consortium that will: (1) assist in identifying national personnel shortages and training needs specific to deaf-blindness; (2) provide input, as needed, to assist in the implementation and redesign of the Center's personnel training activities; and (3) facilitate a coordinated national effort to promote personnel training to address the shortage of highly qualified personnel in all areas of the country through summer institutes and the development of online and distance education training opportunities. The initial meeting of the consortium will be conducted as a focus group initiated by the Center. It is anticipated that participants will be invited from existing low incidence and deaf-blind specific personnel preparation programs, previously funded programs and from the state and multi-state deaf-blind projects. Ongoing meetings will be held via teleconferencing and supported by a Center LISTSERV. Additional opportunities for face-to-face meetings will be identified. Support for the initial focus group is included in the budget.

Activity 6.2 - Maximizing the use and visibility of evidence-based research, best practices and emerging knowledge in personnel training activities at state and national levels.

Extensive information resources, training materials and course content guidelines related to deaf-blindness currently exist. The Center will maximize the use and dissemination of these resources in order to increase the awareness, facilitate access to and increase the use of existing training and curricular materials. Materials will be highlighted on the Center's website. Center staff will use the growing body of educational research to produce user-friendly syntheses of evidence-based research and other high quality materials, provide individual student support and follow-up and organize and make available tailored supplementary reading materials to students and instructors. The Center will work with state deaf-blind projects to ensure that students in personnel preparation programs within the state are made aware of relevant TA activities and trainings.

Activity 6.3 - Collaborating with personnel preparation programs in deaf-blindness to make resources available that augment coursework and practicum experiences.

The Center's comprehensive collection of materials and resources is of particular value to students enrolled in pre-service programs in deaf-blindness and has the potential to provide support throughout a teacher's career. The Center will use a variety of strategies to promote the use of its resources. A "New Student Packet" will be provided to every student enrolled in a personnel preparation program that provides training related to deaf-blindness. The packet will contain a selection of articles, fact sheets, demographic information, bibliographies and state and national resource lists. A Deaf-Blind Career Development pathfinder will be created on the Center's website. The Center will also provide information to personnel training programs in deafness, blindness, severe disabilities and related services. Customized information and curricula and resource lists will be provided to students and instructors based on their specific needs and requests. Center staff will also be available to provide consultation for workshops and online training activities.

Activity 6.4 - Facilitating the implementation of collaborative strategies that address the shortage of leadership in the field of deaf-blindness.

Personnel shortages in deaf-blindness are not limited to teachers and paraprofessionals. Shortages in administrative and leadership positions are also evident and increase annually due to attrition. The Center will identify and coordinate mentorship and internship opportunities between personnel preparation programs and the Center, state and multi-state deaf-blind projects and their host agencies, and other entities such as the Perkins, HKNC and the American Association for the Deaf-Blind. This will include fiscal (see budget justification section) and non-fiscal support.

THE PERSONNEL TRAINING FOCUS GROUP

As required in its funded proposal, the initial meeting of the "consortium" was a focus group conducted by the National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness on March 6 and 7, 2007 in Chicago, Illinois.

Participants

Participants were invited from existing and previously funded low incidence and deaf-blind

specific personnel preparation programs and NCDB's Advisory Committee. A limited number of the participants also represented state and multi-state deaf-blind technical assistance projects, as well as personnel training programs. The participants included:

- Linda Alsop Utah State University
- Susan Bashinski University of Kansas
- Roseanna Davidson Texas Tech University
- Kathy Huebner Pennsylvania College of Optometry
- Linda McDowell University of Southern Mississippi
- Mary Jean Sanspree University of Alabama Birmingham
- Bill Sharpton University of New Orleans
- Alana Zambone East Carolina University

Also invited, but unable to attend were:

- Susan Bruce Boston College
- Stephanie McFarland University of Arizona
- Cathy Nelson University of Utah
- Roseanne Silberman Hunter College

NCDB staff attending included:

- Kat Stremel Western Oregon University
- Gail Leslie Western Oregon University
- John Killoran Western Oregon University

The meeting was facilitated by:

- Jeffri Brookfield University of Illinois at Chicago

Agenda for the Focus Group

The working agenda for the meeting included:

- Welcome and introductions
- Outcomes for the focus group
- An overview of NCDB
- An overview of NCDB Personnel Training Activities
- An overview from the State Personnel Preparation Programs
- Comments from NCDB's Advisory Committee
- An overview of IDEA and Highly Qualified Teachers

- A Facilitated Discussion on the Four Identified tasks

Focus Group Process

After opening introductions and overviews, a nominal group process was used during the facilitated discussion to address the four specific tasks presented to the group. This process included time for individual brainstorming, and was followed by group discussions and individual rankings.

The tasks, which were previously identified by NCDB staff, included:

1. Identifying the 5 most pressing challenges, barriers and/or problems encountered related to the recruitment, training, and retention of highly qualified personnel for students with deaf-blindness in the participants home state
2. Brainstorming potential solutions to the challenges, barriers and/or problems identified
3. Identifying the outcomes and impact of meeting the solutions
4. Identifying if, and in what way, a consortium might assist in meeting these outcomes

Identification of the Challenges, Barriers and/or Problems

The participants were first asked to individually:

“...identify the 5 most pressing challenges, barriers and/or problems you are encountering in your state related to the recruitment, training, and retention of highly qualified personnel for students with deaf-blindness”.

The following represents a verbatim listing of the *challenges, barriers and/or problems identified* by the participants (Note: some numbers are intentionally missing e.g., 2, or incorporate sub-numbering e.g., 10a).

1. Dramatic change in the diversity of the student’s with DBness that we need to serve (culture, linguistic, ethnic)
3. Society’s lack of value of students who are DB, devaluing human potential
4. Challenge of the skill/need, etiology, diversity of the population
5. Costs for individuals to attend 2 year and 4 year programs
6. Literacy and numeracy diminishes participation of DB in the federal conversation.
7. Lack of cohesion in the field
 - Key terminology
 - Population
 - Need for service
 - One to one paraprofessionals and interveners
 - Competencies for teachers
 - Disagreements on DB service and educational models

- About what needs to be trained
8. For all personnel – the lack of perceived benefits following training (i.e., low salary, job opportunities, recognition of peers, disincentive for leadership, personnel prep staff)
 9. Small number of existing high qualified models and/or mentors, funding for partners needed to support practicum in the field
 10. Ignorance or complacency of school districts (use of MH classes), lack of recognition of skill level needed for teaching DB. It is accepted practice to provide a child with a teacher of the deaf and a teacher of the blind to replace a teacher of DB
 - 10a. Working so hard to maintain programs that there is no time to publish...shortage of textbook and resources
 11. Research/clear synthesis of what highly qualified for DB looks like and relationship to IDEA and NCLB
 - 11a. Profession is unknown and unrecognized
 12. University politics/boards of higher ed – approval of courses and programs, institutional procedures – interferes with flexibility needed for collaboration
 - 12a. Small amount of time versus course content
 13. Opportunities within the field to discuss content and knowledge – lack of dialog
 - 13a. Lack of access to collective expertise – people to brainstorm
 14. Lack of funding for the ability to deliver training. Purchase or acquire needed expertise
 - 14a. Geography presents problems of training with low incidence populations
 15. Willingness to collaborate across perceived lines – systems barrier
 - 15a. Limit of access to technology resources for end users in distance education – problems with compatibility with technology delivery
 16. Perception of working with students who are deaf-blind scares preservice and paraprofessional students
 - 16a. Lack of deaf blind personnel training programs
 - 16b. Need to shift preservice model to include inservice and technical assistance delivery model
 17. Need for development time or on-line course
 - 17a. Need to align national, state, district, and university expectations and resources expectations for personnel development
 18. Lack of state certification or licensure
 19. Challenge in shift of focus from knowledge and skills to outcomes for students
 21. Lack of policy advocates at the local level
 22. Little or no collegial or supervisory support at the district level

23. Lack of professional renewal for folks in the field...lack of systematic professional development...do not know the continuum of professional development progression of skills (from paraprofessionals to leadership).
24. Challenge of alternative licensure or certification parallel systems
25. Sorting the content needed across three areas of regular education, special education, and DB specialists
26. No easy access to history of DB education
27. Challenge of including multiple perspectives into design and operation of program
28. How to clarify roles of collaborating and resource sharing with others
29. Balancing competition and collaboration among programs
30. Lack of future leadership in the field
31. Need to infuse research based practices into courses. What are research or evidence based practices?

Ranking the Identified Challenges, Barriers and/or Problems

Participants were then asked to select their top five concerns from the list, and rank order them from 1-5; with 1 representing their lowest individual priority and 5 representing their highest priority. Each number (1-5) also represented a respective point value. Upon completion of the individual rankings, the point values were summed to identify the group's top five prioritized concerns. These concerns, and their corresponding point totals follow.

Ranked Priority 1 (Item 7 - 288 points)

A lack of cohesion in the field, including:

- Key terminology
- Definition of the population
- Need for service
- Use and training of one-to-one paraprofessionals and interveners
- Agreement on the competencies for teachers of students who are deaf-blind
- Disagreements on DB service and educational models
- The critical skills to be trained

Ranked Priority 2 (Item 11 - 90 points)

Research and a clear synthesis of what highly qualified for deaf-blindness looks like and its relationship to IDEA and NCLB

Ranked Priority 3 (Item 15 - 27 points)

The willingness (e.g., lack of) to collaborate across perceived lines is often a systems barrier

Ranked Priority 4 (Item 17a – 14 points)

There is a need to align national, state, district, and university expectations and resources expectations for personnel development

Four concerns tied (items 8, 12, 13a and 14a) as the final priority, each with 12 points. These included:

Ranked Priority 5a (Item 8 - 12 points)

For all personnel – the lack of perceived benefits following training (i.e., low salary, job opportunities, recognition of peers, disincentive for leadership, personnel prep staff)

Ranked Priority 5b (Item 12 - 12 points)

University politics/boards of higher education (e.g., approval of courses and programs) and institutional procedures which interfere with the flexibility needed for collaboration

Ranked Priority 5c (Item 13a - 12 points)

A lack of access to collective expertise and people to brainstorm with

Ranked Priority 5d (Item 14a - 12 points)

Geography which presents problems of training with low incidence populations

Grouping the Identified Challenges, Barriers and/or Problems

Upon completion of the ranking, the participants also chose to group the identified concern, and subsequently identify categories for the grouped concerns. The seven categories which surfaced include:

1. The Profession
2. Collaboration
3. Content
4. System
5. Process
6. Accountability
7. Funding

The following lists the challenges by their identified category.

The Profession

1. For all personnel – the lack of perceived benefits following training (i.e., low salary, job opportunities, recognition of peers, disincentive for leadership, personnel prep staff) (8)
2. Perception of working with students who are deaf-blind scares preservice and paraprofessional students (16)
3. Opportunities within the field to discuss content and knowledge – lack of dialog (13)

4. Lack of access to collective expertise – people to brainstorm (13a)
5. Lack of professional renewal for folks in the field...lack of systematic professional development...do not know the continuum of professional development progression of skills (from paraprofessionals to leadership) (23)
6. Profession is unknown and unrecognized (11a)
7. Lack of future leadership in the field (30)
8. No easy access to history of DB education (26)
9. Working so hard to maintain programs that there is no time to publish...shortage of textbook and resources (10a)
10. Lack of cohesion in the field (7)
 - Key terminology
 - Population
 - Need for service
 - One-to-one paraprofessionals and interveners
 - Competencies for teachers
 - Disagreements on DB service and educational models
 - About what needs to be trained

Collaboration

1. How to clarify roles of collaborating and resource sharing with others (28)
2. Willingness to collaborate across perceived lines – systems barrier (15)
3. Balancing competition and collaboration among programs (29)

Content

1. Research/clear synthesis of what highly qualified for DB looks like and relationship to IDEA and NCLB (11)
2. Dramatic change in the diversity of the student's with DBness that we need to serve (culture, linguistic, ethnic) (1)
3. Challenge of the skill/need, etiology, diversity of the population (4)
4. Small amount of time versus course content (12a)
5. Sorting the content needed across three areas of regular education, special education, and DB specialists (25)
6. Need to infuse research based practices into courses. What are research or evidence based practices (31)

System

1. Ignorance or complacency of school districts (use of MH classes)...lack of recognition of skill level needed for teaching DB...it is accepted practice to provide a child with a teacher of the deaf and a teacher of the blind to replace a teacher of DB (10)
2. Lack of policy advocates at the local level (21)
3. Need to align national, state, district, and university expectations and resources expectations for personnel development (17a)
4. Lack of state certification or licensure (18)
5. University politics/boards of higher education...approval of courses and programs, institutional procedures – interferes with flexibility needed for collaboration (12)
6. Challenge of alternative licensure or certification parallel systems (24)
7. Society's lack of value of students who are DB, devaluing human potential (3)
8. Literacy and numeracy diminishes participation of DB in the federal conversation (6)
9. Lack of deaf blind personnel training programs (16a)

Process

1. Accurate and timely identification of personnel serving students who are deaf-blind... where are the teachers to be recruited, trained, and retrained (?)
2. Little or no collegial or supervisory support at the district level (22)
3. Need to shift preservice model to include inservice and technical assistance delivery model (16)
4. Limit of access to technology resources for end users in distance education – problems with compatibility with technology delivery (15a)
5. Geography presents problems of training with low incidence populations (14a)
6. Challenge of including multiple perspectives into design and operation of program (27)
7. Need for development time or on-line course (17)

Accountability

1. Challenge in shift of focus from knowledge and skills to outcomes for students (19)

Funding

1. Costs for individuals to attend 2 year and 4 year programs (5)
2. Small number of existing high qualified models and/or mentors, funding for partners needed to support practicum in the field (9)
3. Lack of funding for the ability to deliver training...purchase or acquire needed expertise (14)

Brainstorming Potential Solutions to the Challenges, Barriers and/or Problems Identified

A variety of potential solutions emerged from the discussion, although these were not specifically prioritized nor tied to a specific prioritized concern. These included:

1. Continue to facilitate the establishment of a consortium
2. Address the lack of cohesion in the field
3. Use generated barriers to elicit broader input from field
4. Develop a series of white papers and position statements to help unify the field and address the lack of cohesion identified
5. Plan a national/regional training/professional development strategy
6. NCDB lead-out on discussion with OSEP related to funding for a deaf-blind specific national personnel pre training program/consortium (consistent with model employed by NCLVI)
7. Secure/ and/or generate funding to implement a new national personnel training system
8. Provide leadership and develop mechanisms in order to facilitate and foster communication in the field
9. Conduct an asset map of existing personnel preparation and deaf-blind projects to determine resources available and willingness to share the available resources
10. Use new NCDB PT webpage as a centralized location to collect and disseminate personnel preparation information, tools and resources identified
11. Facilitate the agreement/buy-in/consensus of competencies for service providers working with deaf-blind children and students across levels (e.g., paraprofessional through leadership roles) and define the roles of all stakeholders
12. Use new NCDB PT webpage to facilitate communication in the field; facilitate an ongoing dialogue with field
13. Continue with the identified synthesis of research and add to research/instructional content basis for training
14. Establish a new professional organization dedicated to deaf-blindness
15. Re-examine existing personnel prep models in relationship to measured student outcomes
16. Facilitate a culture shift from competitive to collaborative funding

Identifying the Outcomes and Impact of Meeting the Solutions

Although participants discussed ideas for outcomes that could be achieved through implementing the aforementioned solutions, these outcomes are yet to be developed and agreed upon.

Identifying If, and In What Way, Might a Consortium Assist Personnel Training Programs

In identifying in what way(s) a consortium could assist personnel training programs, the participants suggested that the consortium provide leadership to:

- Compile, in one central location, individual summaries of each instructional strategy for which effectiveness with kids with deaf-blindness has been demonstrated and that each entry should:
 - Document an evidenced-based strategy/practice
 - Take the form of a written summary and/or video illustration
 - Be catalogued by learner’s age/topic/others TBI to be searchable
- Facilitate the design, implementation and demonstration of effective professional development models for professional development and personnel training including:
 - Replicating known practices that are effective
 - Piloting new and/or untested practice.
 - Examining the implication of context in the design and effectiveness of the professional development model and personnel training components
- Identify multiple, shared and sustainable funding sources to support professional development and professional training
- Piloting multiple models and identify those strategies that have high impact and are cost effective.

Participants also identified the specific purpose and mission of the consortium as follows:

“The purpose of the National Personnel Preparation Consortium on Deaf-Blindness is to provide leadership that:

- Provides a forum for ongoing communication and dialogue related to critical personnel development issues
- Promotes cohesiveness in the field related to standards, practices and services, and that
- Results in a shift from competition to collaboration in the development of a new model of personnel preparation and training “

It was also proposed that the consortium:

“Facilitate the design, implementation and delivery of effective models for professional development and personnel training to include:

- Investigating of known practices that are effective, as well as piloting new and/or untested approaches
- Examining the implications in the design and effectiveness of the professional development and personnel training models and their components

NEXT STEPS

At the conclusion of the meeting, NCDB committed to:

- Continue to facilitate the development and organization of a national personnel training consortium
- Explore further possibilities for using the NCDB personnel training webpage as a “repository” for resource sharing and collection, as well as a means for fostering communication through Listservs and document sharing
- Facilitate future face-to-face meetings at natural occurring opportunities such as the summer Project Directors’ meeting
- Initiate discussion with OSEP staff related to potential funding for future deaf-blind personnel training activities and consortium funding
- Use input from the focus group meeting in NCDB’s development of its personnel training work scope for its cooperative agreement with OSEP