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“Educational Village” for Students Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

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Pam Millett, PhD, Reg CASLPO



Hilary Clinton coined the phrase “It takes a village to raise a child” in 1996, reminding us that everyone in the community plays a role in supporting children and families. For deaf and hard-of-hearing students, there is an “educational village,” with many dedicated people providing the services they need for successful learning. But who are these villagers? What should be in place for every student with a hearing loss? Is there a checklist that parents or professionals could have to

feel confident that appropriate services are being provided?

As always, my knowledge is primarily Ontario-based, but while the structure of how services are delivered and the funding models differ, the village and villagers are similar across Canada. I don't have a checklist of services because students are all different. However, I have tried to describe the supports, services, and technologies available on most school boards to give readers a sense of the wide spectrum of services that could be accessed, depending on an individual student's needs.

Technology

Personal hearing technology

(hearing aids, cochlear implants, bone-anchored hearing devices)

Access to the curriculum for most of our students starts with wearing their hearing aids, cochlear implants, or bone-anchored hearing devices. While these devices are the responsibility of families, everything we do at school loses its effectiveness if students can't hear. I like to say to teachers that many of our deaf and hard-of-hearing students are one dead battery away from not understanding anything that is going on that day at school. School funding for specialized equipment is limited to devices such as FM systems and cannot be used to pay for personal devices, earmolds, or repair costs. However, personal FM systems rely on the student's device working; if a student comes to school with dead batteries, the FM system cannot be used. Therefore, we may be able to add items such as hearing aid battery chargers to our funding application for the FM system. Teachers of the deaf and educational audiologists often spend considerable time establishing consistent device use at school – for example, teaching a student how to put on their hearing aids or helping a teacher set up a reward system for consistent use.

FM systems

To the best of my knowledge, FM systems are provided for school use by publicly funded school boards/authorities in all provinces and territories. In Ontario, the relevant program for publicly funded schools is the Specialized Equipment Amount (SEA)., which covers not only the cost of FM systems but other devices such as laptops, specialized seating, and change tables. This funding is not available to private schools in Ontario; the Ministry of Education does not regulate or oversee the operation of private schools. Funding for FM systems is available for Indigenous students attending schools on-reserve through Jordan's Principle. However, the piece that can be missing in schools outside of the publicly funded system is the availability of professionals with the necessary expertise.

Costs for FM systems depend on what is being ordered, but they can cost $8000-$10,000 (with accessories and loss/damage warranties). Many students with special needs also require laptops, tablets, and learning software. Individual schools do not bear these costs. However, by school boards and Ministries of Education, costs still add up provincially (and these numbers do not include the salary costs of teachers of the deaf and educational audiologists). I would reiterate the

message I give my students, though, that their priority must be providing access to classroom instruction; without this, student learning suffers, and there is a cost to be paid over time.

I have divided my list of “villagers” into two categories – people who would directly support the student every day at their school, and people who provide more specialized supports on more of an as-needed basis.

Professionals at the School

Teachers of the deaf

I have talked previously about the role of teachers of the deaf in Canadian schools. Many school boards (perhaps the majority these days) do not have congregated classes for deaf or hard-of-hearing students at all. The role of the itinerant teacher who sometimes drives hundreds of miles a week to see students in their school is even more crucial; school staff rely on their expertise, recommendations, and support.

Educational audiologists

Dr. Krista Yuskow recently described some of the challenges facing educational audiologists in her article, “Educational Audiology: In the Trenches,” including the fact that there are not nearly enough of them. By my rough math, in Ontario, perhaps 1/3 of school boards “have” an educational audiologist but far more likely to be someone contracted for perhaps 1 day a month, perhaps a couple of days a week, than an audiologist who is a full-time employee.

Learning Resource Teachers

All schools have a teacher who supports students with learning challenges. This person develops students’ Individual Education Plans (IEPs), coordinates referrals and services, and provides direct instruction in areas such as reading. Learning Resource Teachers are an excellent first point of contact for parents or professionals concerned about a student’s learning.

Principals

In some ways, the school principal is the village chief. They are responsible for the day-to-day education of their students, allocation of resources, staffing, and the health and well-being of the entire school community.

Educational Assistants (EAs)

Educational assistants support teachers and students under the classroom teacher's direction. In Ontario, at least, individual EAs are typically only assigned to students with very complex needs. More commonly, an educational or classroom assistant may be assigned to the whole class.

Notetakers

It is rare for a fully mainstreamed student attending their neighborhood school to have a notetaker (although they may receive copies of a classmate's notes). Notetakers are occasionally provided in special circumstances, generally in high schools with a congregated class or a homeroom for deaf or hard-of-hearing students where a notetaker would support several students.

ASL interpreters

Most American Sign Language students attend provincial schools for the deaf where ASL is the language of instruction. However, suppose parents/students prefer their neighbourhood school as an educational placement (perhaps the family lives at a distance from the school for the deaf and does not wish the student to board there). In that case, ASL interpreters assigned to the student are provided.

Special education support services

All school boards employ professionals who offer various specialized services related to supporting students with learning challenges. The school principal, Learning Resource Teacher, or teacher of the deaf would be able to provide more information for your student's school.

Speech-language pathologists

Depending on the school board, speech-language pathologists are sometimes quite involved with students with hearing loss, sometimes not. Teachers of the deaf may be more responsible for language, literacy and learning support. Still, they may ask for a consultation or collaboration with a speech-language pathologist for issues outside of their scope of practice (e.g., fluency, motor-speech disorders, alternative or augmentative communication).

FM System Technicians and Instructional Technology Specialists

Some larger school boards employ FM system technicians, who provide general use and

maintenance support (fixing a sound field system, for example). Instructional technology specialists offer important support for the hardware and software used by deaf and hard-of-hearing students (e.g. recommendations for apps for iPads).

School psychologists

Deaf and hard-of-hearing students can sometimes present with cognitive challenges that require a psychoeducational assessment by a school psychologist.

Social workers

School social workers can support families in many ways, including connecting them with community resources (such as a local service club, which might provide funding for hearing aids), serving as informal case managers for students with complex needs, and assisting with paperwork. Social workers may be assigned to specific teams (such as the deaf and hard of hearing team or the autism team).

Occupational therapists

Many school boards employ occupational therapists to provide assessment and intervention at school for students with fine/gross motor skills.

Vision resource teachers

Students who are blind or have low vision can receive services from a Vision Resource Teacher – this may be a teacher employed by the school board or (in Ontario) a consultant from the school for the blind.

Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS)

School settlement workers provide support for newcomers to Canada. This includes support related to school but also helping families obtain information about services for housing, employment, public transit, health care, language training, and community support.

Translators for parent meetings

School boards provide translation services for meetings with school staff for parents who do not speak English or French. This can include ASL interpreters but more frequently includes translators for a wide variety of spoken languages (Urdu, Mandarin, etc.).

Nurses

School nurses are not the fixture in education that they used to be, however, they are an important support for students who are medically fragile or who require specialized care such as feeding.

Other support services and resources

It is impossible to list all the other support services and programs available that can make a dramatic difference in a particular deaf or hard-of-hearing student's life. These include mental health supports, English Language programs for parents and the community, programs or educational placements for Indigenous or Black students, summer school programs, youth leadership opportunities, parent workshops, early years programs, transition to work programs for high school students, as well as cultural, athletic and academic programs.

The overall cost of the village per deaf or hard-of-hearing student is impossible to calculate. Special education funding (how much and where the money goes) is always a hot topic. However, our newborn hearing screening programs are founded on the principle that intervening sooner than later is more cost-effective and productive. The CBC reported, for example, that every $1 spent on early education results in $6 of economic benefit later. Conversely, a lack of support may result in a middle or high school student who cannot read, does not graduate with functional literacy, and struggles to find employment as an adult – what does that cost?