

AmeriCorps Program Progress Report 2010-2011

New Mexico School for the Deaf's AmeriCorps Sign Language Program made a remarkable impact during its launch year. The schools and families of 134 students were served in five regions of the state. Seven members lived in five locations (Farmington, Gallup, Silver City, Las Cruces, Carlsbad), serving larger geographical regions and multiple communities (Hobbs, Eunice, Lovington, Roswell, Artesia, Mescalero, Cloud Croft, Ruidoso, Alamogordo, White Sands, Hatch, Sunland Park, Anthony, Deming, Silver City, Grants, Thoreau, Ramah, Pine Hill, Pueblo Pintado, Cuba, Gallina, Youngsville, Chama, Shiprock, Kirtland, Bloomfield, and Aztec). Our AmeriCorps members have logged many miles during their service year, covering their territory and serving their assigned locations.

How much service was provided?

The program taught sign language to the families and educational teams of deaf children. It is estimated that 4-5 people per child received some amount of sign language instruction (via one-on-one support, ongoing weekly classes, small group instruction or a one-time workshop). That means between 536 to 670 people were reached by AmeriCorps service in the first year of operation. These individuals may have attended a single workshop or received several hours of service weekly during the course of the program year.

Service hours for the program year were calculated student by student. For example, the student receiving the highest level of service received 193.25 hours. These hours include the total amount of instruction time received by this student's school program and his family at home. The average amount of service received by a student's community averaged 50 hours. A further breakdown of service hours is as follows:

Under 10 hours of service – 36 students
Between 10 – 25 hours of service – 67 students
Between 26 – 50 hours of service – 40 students
Between 50 – 150 hours of service – 22 students
Over 150 hours of service – 5 students

Students who received services were newly identified deaf babies through high school students. The majority of students served attend public schools in their home area,

while some students attend NMSD in Santa Fe (their families were served in their home area).

What were some observations?

One notable program impact appeared during programming that occurs in Santa Fe during the summer. In two programs, attendance skyrocketed this year. Family to Family Weekend increased from 60 in 2010 (with similar numbers in years prior) to 101 in 2011. This June event welcomes families from around the state for a weekend of learning and socializing with other families who have deaf children. ASL Immersion Week, held at the end of July, is an intensive ASL learning week for families and educators. In 2010, the event hosted 115 attendees. In 2011, there were 179 attendees with 29 on a waiting list. This increase in attendance at both events can largely be attributed to AmeriCorps members. Through AmeriCorps services, participants increased their comfort levels interacting with deaf people. They also were encouraged by members to attend these events, as they too, would be present. Participation in these Santa Fe events, leads to opportunities to meet many deaf people, to meet other parents facing similar experiences, and to meet other professionals working with deaf children, etc. NMSD Outreach now needs to consider adding an additional ASL Immersion Week to our calendar to absorb the high demand for seats at this event!

What were program impacts?

Adult participants received a pre-service and post-service survey that asked them to rate their own learning of ASL and to rate changes they noted in the deaf child with whom they work or live. The ratings ranged from 1 (low) to 5 (high). In terms of their own language learning, participants noticed subtle increases in most categories. In terms of changes in the deaf child, the increases were more notable.

In the category of expressive language skills, participants noted a slight decrease in the deaf child's ability to fully understand their signed message (84% to 82%). The program is not surprised by a decrease in this category. As people increase their language skill, they gain a more realistic view of the complexity of the language. Often new signers inflate their skill level. After some instruction, they have a clearer picture of their level. One AmeriCorps member reported, "When I was doing a home visit one mom told me that her daughter came to ask her the sign for something. She said it was the first time that had ever happened. Finally she can tell her daughter the names of some things in sign language!" Often deaf children become language teachers for their parents. In this case, the mother was able to be a natural language model for her child! Another

AmeriCorps member reflected, “After my first visit with one dad I taught him a lot of signs and when I was getting ready to leave he asked me how to sign I love you so he could, for the first time, tell his son ‘I love you’ before he went to sleep.”

When assessing how a deaf adult understands their message, the rating increased through the program year (74% to 78%). Participants reported their own confidence in communicating with deaf adults has increased quite significantly as a result of program participation (68% to 76%).

In the category of receptive skills, participants’ ability to understand what the child signs remained unchanged (78% to 78%). This could be explained by the extreme gap between child and parent skill. Even though parents are improving, their child has a higher level of skill, comparatively, that the overall understanding has not yet changed. Participants increased their confidence when a deaf child signs to them (78% to 82%). All in all, participants overall feel slightly more fluent in sign language after participating in the program (54% to 56%).

Through the surveys, participants were also asked to rate changes noticed in the deaf child. These changes were more remarkable than those noted above. These results indicate that, even the slightest change in the signing skills of those around the children favorably increase the level of engagement for the deaf child. Participants feel the deaf child signs more frequently with them as a result of service (80% to 88%). Participants notice the deaf child more frequently sharing stories about their daily activities (78% to 88%). It was reported that the deaf child more frequently attempts communication with non-signers (78% to 82%). Finally, participants said the deaf child’s interaction with everyone in their environment increased (76% to 88%). An AmeriCorps member noted, “I have been teaching ASL to one student for a year now. When I met him he was shy and nervous. Now that he has developed more language skills his true confidence and personality are shining through.” All in all, participants feel the program is helping them communicate better with the deaf child (96% to 100%).

Summary

NMSD is more than pleased with the outcomes of the program’s first year. The warm state-wide reception of the program and its members has been even greater than anticipated – with participant numbers being higher than predicted. Adult participants have increased their signing ability, both receptively and expressively. Deaf children are showing increased levels of inclusion and engagement as a result of more signing in

their environments. NMSD programs have seen a marked increase in participant numbers. We are eager to see these impacts and more program benefits increase in years to come!