

Nationwide Shortage of Qualified Sign Language Interpreters



Hannah Cheloha not only certified, but gained more confidence in her signing.

A CPD program is whittling away at a nationwide shortage of qualified sign language interpreters by providing specific, targeted training. It helped Tracy Quinlan, a sign language interpreter in Arizona. Her state requires a 3.5 proficiency score in the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment—and though she was close to achieving it, she wasn't quite there. (The EIPA is a national certification test that evaluates an interpreter's performance in a number of signing skills.) In 2009, her state began signing up interpreters for training through the Arizona Training of Interpreters in Public Schools program. ATIPS is run by Training and Assessment Systems for K-12 Educational Interpreters (TASK12). That's a project of the CPD's Technical Assistance for Excellence in Special Education division—and it operates in a growing number of states throughout the nation. In Arizona, Quinlan fit well within the target group. She had taken the test and just missed meeting the requirements. She was invited to participate in her state's training, where her experience included a two-day, face-to-face workshop and a lot of work online. "We had to record ourselves and post it for everyone to see," she said. While that might have been intimidating, the teachers made everyone feel comfortable as they gave feedback. "They did it in such a nice way that it didn't feel like criticism." What's more, the instruction and feedback were specific, said Hannah Cheloha, another Arizona interpreter. "I really feel like they targeted the skills that I struggled with myself. I got a lot of one to one attention that you can't really get in a workshop." The training's targeted material didn't happen by accident. For years, the TASK12 project has assessed interpreters and collected data on the areas where they needed the most help. The goal: to help trainees not only pass the test, but also enhance their classroom work. "The success of students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing in mainstream classrooms

depends on many factors," wrote Arizona teachers Doug Bowen-Bailey and Patty Gordon in a joint statement for this story. "For those whose education includes the presence of a sign language interpreter, it is critical that the interpreter be qualified. ... In many respects, this standard is similar to having measurements for the width of a doorway to ensure physical access. Having certified interpreters in the classroom is a measurable commitment to providing access for students who are deaf and hard of hearing." As for Quinlan and Cheloha, both women finished the training and re-took the certification test, which they passed. While they credit their training for boosting their test performance, they agree it did more than that. They feel more proficient in their signing. "A lot of it was the practice," said Quinlan. One exercise in particular sticks in her memory: she learned to portray a concept visually instead of translating word for word. "I feel like my skills improved dramatically," Cheloha said. "My confidence is so much greater." They are not alone. "The national average for passing the EIPA is about 40%, while the passing rate for people who went through this program is over 60%," wrote Brown-Bailey and Gordon. "Perhaps even more importantly, people have expressed a commitment to change the way they work in the classroom--acting with a better understanding of how the educational environment functions and what role they can play in supporting the success of students who are deaf or hard of hearing. " TASK-12 provides testing services to evaluate the skills of interpreters in 14 states. Training has been offered to interpreters in five of them--Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Kansas and Georgia. For more information on the TASK-12 program, visit the TAESE website. You can also contact Dr. Bernhardt Jones, the project director, or Cheryl Sheffield, the program coordinator.