

**Michele Chaplen,** PsyD, MEd, is program director of the New Hampshire Deaf and Hard of Hearing Education Initiative, funded by the New Hampshire Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education. A teacher of the deaf since 1992, Chaplen received both her bachelor's and master's degrees from Smith College. After working as a middle and high school teacher at the Willie Ross School for the Deaf until 2008, she became the assistant director of Student Disability Services and adjunct faculty in the Communications Department of Western New England University. In 2011, Chaplen completed her doctorate in clinical psychology at Antioch University and relocated to New Hampshire.

## NEW HAMPSHIRE:

# Collaboration Works for Professionals— and Students

*By Michele Chaplen and Kelly Fleese*

In response to the unique needs of students who are deaf or hard of hearing, the New Hampshire Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education has funded the Deaf Education Initiative which supports New Hampshire's schools and families in improving the educational outcomes of the state's children and youth with hearing loss. The initiative provides training and current information about educating those students and is a resource for schools, families, and the community. The work of this initiative aligns with other state innovations designed to enhance successful postsecondary education and employment transition outcomes for students leaving high school. We are aligned ... and ready to collaborate!

The pepnet 2 New Hampshire team has partnered with the Bureau and associated state-level agencies to support postsecondary transition. The team embraced collaboration as a primary agent of change and joined with the Bureau's multi-year Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs), credit-bearing, competency-based learning experiences that happen outside the traditional classroom through federal Next Steps funding. The ELOs became the mechanism for collaborative change and a keystone in the sustainability of New Hampshire services to support postsecondary success.

The initiative incorporated Next Steps' efforts in ELO professional development and implementation of pepnet 2's national effort to support transition from secondary education to postsecondary options. The alliance we formed became an example of collaboration at the state level and signifies a cultural shift from the pursuit of individual achievement to valuing collective accomplishments. When an allied community uses a collaborative approach to change, the work and the community thrive.

As members of the New Hampshire State Transition Team, we thrive in a genuinely collaborative community. The team includes a vocational rehabilitation counselor, a teacher of the deaf, a parent of a deaf child, a teacher of the deaf working in districts

*Photos courtesy of pepnet 2, Michele Chaplen, and Kelly Fleese*



throughout the state, a licensed social worker, the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Education Initiative project director, and the Department of Education liaison to the project.

When the team united with Next Steps New Hampshire and transition specialists, we experienced a heightened level of shared leadership and reflective cooperation that transformed our team's approach. We embraced collaborating by redirecting our efforts from specific task completion to relationship building. Redefining our process

from an individual to a collective effort was a cultural change that revitalized our team. Team members reported improved working alliances and an increase in multidisciplinary service provision. Our team harnessed New Hampshire's unique collaborative networks to build and sustain an ELO dedicated to transition skill acquisition for students with hearing loss.

Given that ELOs are student-driven and individually designed, the curriculum can be

tailored to the specific needs of students who are deaf or hard of hearing. This high degree of specialization will benefit our population by reinforcing the acquisition and retention of transition skills. Moreover, an ELO will be accessible to students throughout the state

and can be adapted to each individual's skill level and communication modality. We conducted an interview with Amy Aiello, the coordinator for Next Steps New Hampshire, to learn more about the ELO development process, discussing the following areas:



- background and reasoning for the state to support and improve transition services;
- Aiello's specific role in transition service provision and ELOs;
- the role of collaboration in future planning; and
- the challenge implicit in collaborative relationships and how it affects ELO development and sustainability.

**Kelly Fleese, MS**, is a vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselor at the New Hampshire Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. She received her bachelor's degree from Springfield College in New Hampshire and her master's degree from Assumption College in Massachusetts. For over a decade, Fleese has been assisting deaf and hard of hearing individuals as they prepare for training, begin employment, and develop their careers. She provides VR services that help individuals achieve their career goals and find suitable employment.

The authors welcome questions and comments about this article at [mchaplen@ndbhs.org](mailto:mchaplen@ndbhs.org) and [kelly.fleese@doe.nh.gov](mailto:kelly.fleese@doe.nh.gov). Questions regarding the New Hampshire Deaf and Hard of Hearing Initiative as funded by the Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education, should be directed to Mary Lane at [mary.lane@doe.nh.gov](mailto:mary.lane@doe.nh.gov).



transition work. The Working Together Conference functioned as a springboard, propelling our team's collaborative approach toward system change.

## STAGE TWO Needs Assessment

As members of our New Hampshire Transition Community of Practice armed with our collaborative change model, the team talked with service providers and families to identify the most common barriers to postsecondary success. The team's interagency networks and professional development meetings and events, such as the Working Together Conference, the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual New Hampshire Transition Summit, and Transition Community of Practice monthly meetings, provided the opportunity to categorize commonly recognized barriers. The Summit is the only statewide conference for training, collaboration, networking, and information focused on postsecondary outcomes. The Summit focused on "Tips, Tools, and Strategies for Successful Transition Planning" and included a presentation by Michele Chaplen and Tom Downes on the implementation of ELOs as a tool for students with hearing loss. The Summit is hosted by the aforementioned New Hampshire Transition Community of Practice, a group of people who share a passion for transition service and interact regularly to promote successful postsecondary transition for New Hampshire students. The information and resources provided by these statewide events and allied communities generated the results which informed our classification of barriers.

The results clustered around three main challenges:

- **New Hampshire's rural geography**—From the seacoast, to the city, to the north country, the state's changing landscape encompasses great variability in demographics and terrain. Meeting such diverse needs is further challenged by periods of inclement weather and limited access to technology. When travel is impeded and service

The team continues to learn about collaboration through our collaborative relationships, as exemplified by our work with Next Steps. We embrace the importance of modeling the philosophies we use, as emphasized by Aiello: "Collaboration is not just talk; you have to walk the walk." Our goal is to offer statewide transition readiness ELOs designed for students who are deaf or hard of hearing and connect our efforts with the Next Steps New Hampshire project by sharing those resources on the project websites for others to access. To actualize this vision, we launched a five-stage plan that demonstrates our collaborative approach toward system change. These stages include:

1. Literature review of best practices for transition skill acquisition and retention
2. Gathering quantitative and qualitative data on current transition services and future needs
3. Consulting with existing state networks to promote collaboration and build capacity
4. Developing and implementing an ELO
5. Promoting sustainability through continuing collaboration with state-level agencies

## STAGE ONE Review the Literature—and Partner Up!

Contemporary research reflects the trend toward collaboration as an effective strategy in getting work done. Collaborating provides more efficient use of resources, helps alleviate critical shortages, and expedites change. The team actively gathered information on the use of collaborative change models from the literature and current New Hampshire transition specialists. To identify those transition specialists and promote an open dialogue, the team partnered with Northeast Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services to host the annual Working Together Conference, which showcased state- and national-level



discontinuous, it is difficult to attract employees, resulting in critical shortages in countryside districts.

- **Deafness as a low-incidence event**—“Low incidence” translates to relatively low numbers of deaf and hard of hearing individuals, including those still in school. The fewer the individuals that are in need of services, the fewer the services that are extended. As a low-incidence event, deafness does not garner the attention and resources that are deserved.
- **Variability of communication**—Some deaf individuals communicate through signing, some through voice and lipreading, and some through the use of real-time captioning. The team promotes equal acceptance of individual communication and philosophies; the variability in the communication of our students means that we must be flexible.



The results indicated that the ELO we constructed must take into account the comparatively low number of students who are deaf or hard of hearing, the geographic distances between students, and the variability in communication modality. Our learning opportunity would have to be custom-built to overcome geography, population size, and diverse communication requisites.

### STAGE THREE

#### Infrastructure—Curriculum in Three Modules

After intensive consultation with our pepnet 2 state champion, Dr. Della Thomas, we identified technology-based platforms as the most effective way to address the needs of our students. An online ELO supported collaboratively by New Hampshire’s Department of Education and the Next Steps New Hampshire project would reflect the collective knowledge of and be fully accessible to the community. It would help students experience a previously unavailable range of opportunities to develop individually based postsecondary transition skills. Inspired by our conviction that an ELO will build the capacity and sustainability of transition skill acquisition, the team examined evidence-based practices and curricula designed for students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

We are fortunate to have three certified teachers of the deaf on our team. We decided that the content for the ELO would be created collaboratively, combining a Map It curriculum—a research-based, best-practice transition curriculum—with deaf education’s recognized best practices. To provide the technical assistance and professional development necessary for this endeavor, the Department of Education and pepnet 2 will host a two-day Map It conference in early September 2016. Our goal is to educate ourselves on the implementation and maintenance of Map It and then adapt those courses to the specific needs of New

Hampshire.

As we continue to work with collaborative partners, we reflect on the need for flexibility and patience since the program’s logistics must accommodate spontaneous contributions from collaborators as well as evolving insight from team members. Embracing the process is time intensive, but it guarantees more reliable and consistent results. We look forward to launching the ELO and continuing to customize the curriculum in response to the individual needs of New Hampshire’s children and youth.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

**ELO**—The Next Steps New Hampshire State Personnel Development Grant funded by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) provides ELO professional development training to select high schools that help students with disabilities and at-risk students prepare for college, a career, and adult life. The [www.NextSteps-nh.org](http://www.NextSteps-nh.org) and [www.BeyondClassroom.org](http://www.BeyondClassroom.org) websites support the work of the project and host various tools and resources related to ELOs.

**Map It conference**—“Map It: What Comes Next” is a free, online, interactive training for transition-aged students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Included are video vignettes in American Sign Language with spoken English and written transcription, self-assessments, and a series of interactive questions to guide students as they develop their goals as well as strategies to achieve those goals. Learn more at [www.pepnet.org/eneus/092014](http://www.pepnet.org/eneus/092014).

