



Lessons Learned

About E-Learning for Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

In spring, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced most schools to provide educational services through remote learning formats. In May, 2020, [Supporting Success for Children with Hearing Loss](#) distributed a survey that was completed by 629 professionals who work with students who are deaf or hard of hearing (DHH), and a separate survey that was completed by 267 students in grades 5-12 who were receiving services from these educators. The average response time was 55 minutes, resulting in a wealth of information revealing issues and positives.

1. Access to instruction is necessary for learning - it takes planning and expertise

Hearing loss is not a learning disorder. It is a communication access issue which, if not accommodated, will impact learning.

- 49% of responding teachers reported issues with providing, or achieving consistent, effective use of assistive hearing technology or interpreter services, with an additional 15% reporting lack of family support in use of the access accommodations.
- 49% of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed that they believed their students were able to access their education equally to peers last spring.
- When asked about use of accommodations, 58% of students using FM/DM hearing assistance technology said it was not as effective as when they used at school, 50% claimed captioning was not as effective and 36% indicated interpreter services were not as effective as use at school.

The [ADA](#) requires schools to ensure that students with hearing loss can communicate as effectively as others. The indication that appropriate access only occurred for half of students with hearing loss is a very serious concern. Furthermore, many teachers of the deaf/hard of hearing reported that much of their time was spent addressing access issues through remote learning technology rather than being able to focus on IEP goals. In too many cases, even when their typically hearing peers were engaged in online learning, students with hearing loss could not effectively access communication to be able to fully understand, nor participate.

To be educated effectively and not experience discrimination in the learning situation due to access barriers there must be adequate planning for appropriate access accommodations by the persons with expertise in the communication issues of students with hearing loss. Equally important is support by school administration to ensure that these accommodations are appropriately used by classroom teachers in all learning settings. Teachers wearing masks, not making their faces visible for lipreading on screen, not using head or body-worn microphones so that captioning can be suitably accurate, and internet connectivity issues for sign language interpretation all impacted the level of access to learning for students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

2. Specialized instruction for students with hearing loss is a necessity for full participation

Remote learning practices included the assignment of work to be completed independently. Due to lifelong communication access issues it is usual for students with hearing loss to have gaps in vocabulary and other language learning, along with weaker executive functioning skills. In a classroom environment, a student who hesitates to begin an assignment can receive assistance from teachers or peers. Remote learning served to expose challenges in completing work independently for many students, at rates greater than had been observed in their classroom performance. It also revealed that addressing these weaknesses systematically through specialized instruction and in-class support at more intense levels than had been provided is likely necessary if students are to be independent learners. Furthermore, specialized instruction in self-advocacy services was clearly necessary if students are to effectively access their communication accommodations.

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Instruction in self-advocacy to develop skills to recognize when a communication issue has occurred and strategies for how they can act or request to resolve these issues, and work on executive functioning skills, are foundational to students with hearing loss fully participating in their education.

Due to the low incidence nature of hearing loss, it is very challenging to gather students with hearing loss together to focus on self-concept and self-advocacy issues. From the survey, of the 106 students who met online with other students who were deaf or hard of hearing, 95% felt these opportunities were 'awesome' or 'okay.' When asked if they had a choice about continuing to meet with the teacher of the deaf/hard of hearing online, 48% of the students said it would be fine to usually meet online, 39% said it would be fine to meet online sometimes, and only 13% indicated they would not want to continue meeting online.

The important role of the teacher of the deaf/hard of hearing cannot be minimized to **1)** achieve appropriate access accommodations, **2)** support student knowledge of their use, **3)** develop self-advocacy skills so they can fully participate, **4)** provide learning opportunities for groups of students who are deaf/hard of hearing, and **5)** provide specialized instruction and support to promote independence and full comprehension necessary to keep pace within the general education curriculum. While collaboration with other IEP team members is necessary, only the teacher of the deaf/hard of hearing has the training and expertise to provide all of these services. An educational audiologist would provide valuable direction and support to access needs. Continuing to provide some instruction online appears effective for many students, which is good news in light of the concerning shortage and overburdened status of itinerant teachers of the deaf/hard of hearing.

3. Some instructional practices can benefit all students, even those with hearing loss

- **Opportunity to review:** A number of students reported that they liked being able to review recorded lessons. This additional exposure allows a student who does not hear all of the speech sounds to increase their listening comprehension and provides the extra time to process the meaning of what was said. Time to view again would be of benefit to many students, not just those with hearing loss, whether in a remote learning or classroom environment.
- **Proximity to the teacher:** Some students responded that they liked remote learning because their teacher's face was always visible and they were never at a distance from the student. This serves as a clear reminder that access to education for students with hearing loss is tied to proximity to the teacher and/or the appropriate use of hearing assistance technology.
- **Captions:** Many students were provided captioning for the first time. If the captioning could be provided so that there was adequate accuracy, students felt more engaged and included. One of the principles of Universal Design for Learning is to offer information in more than one format to give all students a chance to access the material as best suits their learning strengths. [Multiple studies](#) support the use of captions to improve listening comprehension and literacy of students K-12 with typical hearing.
- **Controlled discussion:** During remote learning discussions, students with hearing loss felt they could participate equally with their peers because they were able to follow along with the written discussion and add their own comments rather than struggling to hear during student discussions. This emphasis on access, even during group interactions, underscores the necessity for the student with hearing loss to be fully included.
- **Collaboration is key:** When teachers of the deaf/hard of hearing who successfully collaborated with families, classroom teachers, and other educational providers – and the technology worked – there were numerous positives to online education and true student successes.
- **Good practices are good practices for all!** [High-leverage Practices](#) in special education need to be in practice regardless of the learning environment, if students with hearing loss are to thrive.

In Chinese, the word CRISIS has two characters, one danger, and the other opportunity.

John F. Kennedy