

North Carolina School for the Deaf

Review of Policies, Procedures and Practices related to incidents of
Abuse and Neglect



North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services
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OVERVIEW

The North Carolina School for the Deaf in Morganton (NCSD) has been in operation since 1884. The school provides day and residential programming for children ages 5 to 22 who are deaf or hard of hearing. The NCSD student population has seen a steady decrease of 35 % since 2001. The student population has also changed as more students at the school have multiple disabilities in addition to being identified as deaf or hearing impaired. In February 2010, 65 of the 93 students enrolled at NCSD had an additional disability with 51% of those students having mental health diagnosis.

The School leadership has undergone various changes, including operating without permanent leadership from April 2008 to February 2010. Staffing levels have varied averaging 179-fulltime staff with a student to staff ratio of approximately 1:2. Staffing levels are two tiered, representing residential life and educational staff.

PURPOSE

DHHS Secretary Lanier Cansler directed Deputy Secretary Maria Spaulding to assemble a team of professionals to review concerns at the North Carolina School for the Deaf ranging from treatment of students and staff to inconsistent implementation of policies and procedures for handling incident reports to lack of appropriate training of staff to deal with students with multiple disabilities. The team sought clarification of the restraint policy, identified a need for a change in leadership at the school.

Also the team was asked to review school policies and procedures related to the reporting of suspected abuse, neglect or exploitation of students and to make recommendations to the Secretary.

BACKGROUND

North Carolina School for the Deaf in Morganton

NCSO is one of three residential schools operated by DHHS, along with the Eastern NC School for the Deaf in Wilson and the Governor Morehead School for the Blind in Raleigh. In 2009-2010, the school served a total of 93 day and residential students. As of August 25, 2010 the school enrolled 78 students. Classes are taught by teachers licensed by the State Board of Education in the education of the hearing impaired; most teachers hold licenses in more than one area. Students receive developmentally appropriate instruction in the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, and instruction is modified based on students' Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). NCSO is accredited by the State Board of Education, AdvancEd (formerly SACS), and the Conference of Educational Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf (CEASD). Students may earn a North Carolina high school diploma and the school participates in the North Carolina testing program, the ABCs of Public Education. Students are referred to NCSO by the local education agency (LEA) where the student resides. The referral is conducted as part of the student's IEP, and acceptance at NCSO is an IEP team decision.

FINDINGS

The findings of this report were developed as the result of interviews with 30 NCSO faculty and staff, a parent, a student and Disability Rights NC (DRNC) staff. Interviews were held on August 5, 6 and 9, 2010. The team discussed documentation on incidents reported by DRNC and reviewed all DHHS policies and procedures relating to the reporting of incidents involving students. The team also reviewed the working relationship between the educational and residential life staff and the impact of service delivery to the students.

It is important to note that during the interviews staff talked about a "two-tiered" system of faculty and staff. The most pronounced difference was between the residential life and educational staff. There appeared to be negative undercurrents among the deaf, hearing impaired and hearing populations.

Observations by the team included:

- lack of fairness in the treatment of staff and students;
- lack of consistency in the implementation of policies and procedures;
- lack of appropriate training of staff to deal with students who are deaf or hearing impaired with multiple disabilities;
- lack of communication and interaction among school and residential staff;
- lack of vision for growth and increased expectations for students; and,
- a hostile work environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the interviews with NCSO staff, a student and a parent, the team offered the following recommendations:

Adequately address the needs and requirements of the student population

- Establish processes and procedures to address students with multiple disabilities. This process would involve a set of procedures or protocol addressing how these various disabilities were shared with appropriate staff as well as providing training on how to work with students with these various disabilities.
- Provide cross training of residential life staff and educational staff on the needs of students with multiple disabilities. A collaborative plan between both staffing groups is imperative to fully understand the student's growth and challenges. Share information and communications ensuring all crucial individuals are 'in the loop'.

Department of Public Instruction (DPI) involvement in solutions

- Review existing roles and responsibilities of the NCSO leadership team with specific attention placed on the responsibilities including but not limited to the school's Psychologist, Social Worker, Guidance Counselors, Clinical Team and Residential Life Director.
- Develop a plan for greater interaction of DPI with the schools. This measure would ensure greater coordination with the standards set forth by the state's public education system with focused goals for meeting graduation requirements and testing standards.

Families

- Establish child and family team meetings, with a goal of setting regularly scheduled meetings with published time line and structure. These meetings would focus on the need for increased parental involvement with opportunities for parents to express concerns. Encouraging parental involvement in school life; i.e. parents as classroom volunteers, on playing fields, assisting in organizing events and fundraising efforts.
- Establish interdisciplinary teams of educational and residential life staff. The Teams functions would involve collaborating on multiple issues of the student's life and educational plan and how they correlate. This might include a daily log from class to residential life and would be accessible to all who have direct contact and interaction with the student.

Address systemic problems

- Re-constitute the Human Rights Committee with clear roles and authority. Re-organize the committee to become one of the major standing committees with structure to address student, teacher, administrator and parent concerns.
- Human Rights meetings should be consistent with structure, leadership, and clear operational protocols as to membership.
- Develop a process to address the changing student population.
- Establish best practices for dealing with students with multiple disabilities.
- Provide on-going in-service staff training to keep staff up to date on changes and service delivery methods of technology.

Training and staff development

- Institute an organized staff development plan to include team building and thorough review of roles and responsibilities. It is critical that all staff members view themselves as an equal part of the team.
- Upgrade the “hands-on” training for dealing with problem behaviors and instituting restraint techniques.
- Review all personnel positions of residential and educational staff with focus on required and proper credentials and educational background for positions.
- Retrain current staff and any new staff on incident reporting and investigating policies and procedures, including Ethics training.
- Design and implement a communication plan between residential staff and the educational staff for reporting of incidents.

Better coordination with other resources available to the school

- Develop individual behavioral support plans for students, as necessary, with the involvement of an interdisciplinary support team (residential life staff, teachers, parents, psychologist, guidance counselor, social worker and anyone with a direct concern). Once a plan has been established, quarterly meetings should be scheduled to evaluate the effectiveness of the plan.
- Establish better protocols for working with LEAs. Well defined educational roles and clear direction on reaching achievement goals would be aligned with county/state standards.
- Perform individualized staff training based on the student needs and behavioral assessment. Secure outside assistance from other DHHS facilities and agencies. This collaboration between DHHS agencies will offer consultant services of experienced staff for the medically complex population to provide individual assessment of the students in this category and to act as advisor to the staff.

- Establish a Quality Assurance Team to periodically review policies and procedures, incident reports, staff training, behavioral support plans, and IEP's to ensure standards compliance and to determine if trends or patterns are developing in specific areas of the facility.

CONCLUSION

By all accounts the North Carolina School for the Deaf is an extremely complex institution and organization and one that has both potential for discord as well as opportunities for amazing success.

Through the years the school has provided much needed educational opportunities to a population eager and ready to learn. As a result thousands of young people have gone forward to happier, more productive lives.

Thus this review process has identified various areas of deficiencies that clearly indicate that DHHS needs to ensure that the vision and the mission address the changing population of the school. The ultimate goal is to ensure the needs of the students at the school are met. The team identified the need for new leadership as an integral method of restoring the school's effectiveness, fostering a positive work environment free of intimidation, retaliation and favoritism. The recommendations contained in this report are designed to move the school forward with high expectations both in student achievement and staff performance. The focus is to obtain and maintain a level of excellence that reaches from leadership to student performance and behavior to staff development to increased parental involvement.

An expanded vision and mission along with open communication, team building and re-definition of the students to be served will lead to restoration of NCSD as a resource in the honored and historic tradition it has served so well.

TEAM MEMBERS

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