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## USING DATA TO ENSURE HIGH STANDARDS—AND

# Standards to Ensure High Expectations

*By Susan Lane-Outlaw, Cheryl Lange, and Dyan Sherwood*

### *Meet Moua and Omar*

**Moua** is 10 years old and moved to the United States two years ago from Laos. Moua has little spoken language and relies on homemade gestures to communicate with her family members who speak Hmong. Her skills in American Sign Language (ASL), however, are developing with the assistance of an ASL specialist, her teachers, and her classmates. Moua does not participate in extracurricular activities at school because she watches her baby brother every evening. She enjoys using technology, watching stories in ASL, and reading books.

**Omar** is 13 years old and was born in Minnesota to a Somali immigrant family. At 2 years old, Omar was enrolled in a local oral program, and at 7 years old he was placed in a local Total Communication program. This year Omar entered the Metro Deaf School (MDS). His family attends all school meetings and shows much interest in his development. Omar's mother speaks some English and is beginning to learn signs. Omar, who shows great interest in math and science, has quickly made friends at school and is excited to come to school each day.

Moua and Omar are two students who attend MDS, one of the first charter schools in the nation. MDS, located in Saint Paul, Minnesota, provides a bilingual environment in ASL and English for deaf and hard of hearing students, ages 3-21, in pre-K through high school. In

*Photos courtesy of Susan Lane-Outlaw*



its 20 years of operation, MDS has seen its students become more diverse, and with the diversity the school has adjusted and evolved to ensure expectations remain high to meet the needs of its students.

When MDS first opened, the majority of students had hearing parents who were eager to have their children in a bilingual learning environment with high standards where they could remain at home each evening. Since MDS was the first charter school for deaf students in the United States, the staff, parents, and students had tremendous pride in being a part of it. Parents advocated fiercely for their children to be placed at MDS.

Students are instructed in all content areas using the ASL/English bilingual model. ASL specialists, a bilingual specialist, and speech-language pathologists work closely with classroom teachers and students. The needs of the unique and diverse student population are addressed through assessment and monitoring. This system establishes high expectations for all students as each student pursues his or her individual learning goals, and each student's background and learning needs are addressed.

### **Demographics and Needs Change Expectations Stay High**

From 2002 to 2013, the percentage of students who qualified for free and reduced-cost lunches at MDS jumped from 10 to 56 percent, students of color increased from 14 to 54 percent, and students listed as having a secondary disability increased from 10 to 40 percent. Students' home languages have also changed, both signed and spoken. Today home languages vary from ASL, to English, to a variety of languages other than English, and some students have



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In recent years, the increased diversity of the student population made it impossible to get an accurate picture of MDS by reviewing group-level data. With students who have diverse academic and social needs, the indicators of success have shifted to setting individual goals and determining the percentage of students who meet those goals.

The demographic shift has also resulted in a change in assessment. In previous years, nearly all the students were assessed in the academic area using assessments that included the state-mandated test. The individualized approach to accountability identifies a menu of assessments. Goals are set in the fall of each year, and individual goals are established for reading, mathematics, and ASL. There is recognition that the accountability goals for students must remain rigorous, but they also must

no signs used in their homes at all. Yet with these changes come wonderful families and students with diverse experiences, backgrounds, and rich funds of knowledge. At MDS, they have enriched the other students, teachers, and staff. Further, the majority of students continue to be described as they have always been—audiologically—as having a severe-to-profound hearing loss in their better ear.

MDS has retooled and instigated an accountability system that provides and relies on data and information, not only for gauging school success but also for providing the instructional foundation needed to address all students' needs. Through accountability, teachers as well as students can be held to high expectations.

Attention to accountability has long been a focus. MDS formalized an accountability process in 1997, long before the No Child Left Behind legislation mandated such practice. At that time, MDS used a consensus-building process to identify the outcomes for students attending and graduating from the school. Parents, community members, and professionals met to choose outcomes and indicators using a “whole-child approach,” based on a model developed by the University of Minnesota’s National Center for Educational Outcomes, which includes attending not only to academic outcomes but also to socio-emotional and language outcomes. These outcomes, the most important measures of student success, are reviewed on a regular basis. The indicators, gathered annually and used for improvement at the level of school, classroom, and student, include:

- Academic achievement
- Personal responsibility and social development
- Language/communication
- Advocacy
- Satisfaction

meet students at their enrollment level and take into consideration the diverse circumstances that impact learning. Teachers use the goals and the data gathered through the individual student assessments to address each student’s learning needs. Only in this way can meaningful expectations remain high.

A recently published longitudinal study on the reading and math growth of deaf and hard of hearing students who have attended MDS (Lange, Lane-Outlaw, Lange, and Sherwood, 2013) show academic goals were met. Further, this study found that deaf and hard of hearing students at MDS were making academic progress similar to or exceeding a nationally normed comparison group. This study was completed prior to the individualization of testing, but we believe that the more individualized approach to accountability will be equally as successful.

### **How Individualized Accountability Works** **Meeting Needs and Keeping Expectations High**

MDS’s fifth grade comprises six students: three are Hispanic, two are Somali, and one is Chinese. All but one of



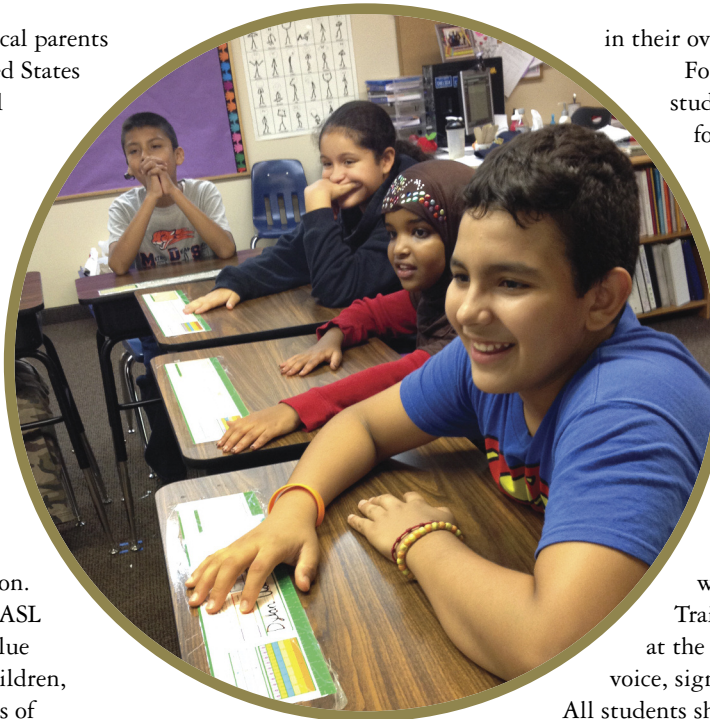
the students live with biological parents who immigrated to the United States from their home countries; all except one child, who was adopted by her American parents from her home country at 5 years old, were born in the United States. All of the parents are hearing and all use their native languages in their homes. None of the students has a sibling with hearing loss. One of the students received a cochlear implant at 5 years old; the remainder use personal hearing aids or no amplification. All of the parents have taken ASL classes, and, although they value communicating with their children, their ASL is in the early stages of development.

With such diversity in the classroom, a multi-dimensional approach to accountability is essential. Immersing students in ASL is key, not only for their language development but also for their reading and math progress. With the exception of the child who joined the program this year, all MDS fifth graders have shown tremendous gains in their receptive and expressive ASL; their skills in ASL have been increasing from the time they enrolled.

### Monitoring Progress Evaluation Keeps Standards High

Monitoring the students' progress has also proved critical. Due to the diverse group of students MDS serves, an ASL immersion was established. All students participated in the ASL immersion class four times a week, for approximately two hours each time, for four months. The class had three teachers: an ASL teacher who focused solely on ASL linguistic instruction, a bilingual teacher who focused on effective classroom bilingual instructional strategies, and a classroom teacher who focused on content, working with students all day every day. Students were screened, both when they entered the program and when they completed it. The screening was an informal assessment focused on overall signing skills, story retelling, and story creation.

The personal interview was used as a way to collect a language samples, with an overall signing skills rubric. The assessment looked at the students' overall signing skills, including sign production, vocabulary, grammar, discourse, and fluency. The students showed the most growth in their personal interviews and overall signing scores. After four months of instruction, there was an overall score increase of 16.5 percent



in their overall signing scores.

For the story retelling portion, the students' content was evaluated in the following areas: main idea, story elements, organization, and "linguistic spillover," which means language features seen in the retelling (e.g., seeing the sign for "overwhelmed" in the story and then using the same sign appropriately in the retelling). Students showed significant gains in this area, with the overall score increase being 14 percent.

The story creation assessment was based on the 6+1 Writing Traits but adapted to ASL; it looked at the students' ideas, organization, voice, sign choice, fluency, and structure.

All students showed growth, but this assessment demonstrated the greatest variation. At the extremes of the testing, for example, one student's score increased 25 percent while another student's score increased 4 percent.

### Individualizing Assessment Essential to High Standards

MDS continues to monitor its students, maintain high standards for accountability, and maintain high expectations for our students. MDS, with its bilingual educational philosophy, strives to achieve a balanced focus on language, curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Fulfillment of high expectations doesn't just happen. Accountability links high expectations to every adult in the school and incorporates high standards into the school culture.

Like schools across the country, MDS is becoming increasingly diverse. Additional learning needs are also increasing. The changes are viewed as opportunities at MDS. MDS has long had a strong accountability plan, and with a changing student body came the opportunity to reevaluate our assessments. Moving to individual accountability goals benefits all students because it holds all—teachers, administrators, and students—to high standards.

### Reference

Lange, C., Lane-Outlaw, S., Lange, W., & Sherwood, D. (2013). American Sign Language/English bilingual model: A longitudinal study of academic growth. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 18, 532-544. doi:10.1093/deafed/ent027