



Greta Palmberg,

MEd, is a transition instructor in the Vocational Education, Community Training, and Occupational Relations Program (VECTOR) in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. She has served on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Advisory Board for the Minnesota Department of Education and worked nationally through PEPNet to provide professional development in the area of transition. A recipient of the Shaklee Teacher Award, a national award to recognize outstanding teachers of children with disabilities, Palmberg received her bachelor's degree from Illinois State University and her master's degree from the University of Illinois. She has teaching experience and certifications in the areas of deaf/hard of hearing, learning disabilities, emotional/behavioral disorders, and developmental cognitive disabilities and is the mother of a deaf young adult.

**HIGH EXPECTATIONS +
READING INTERVENTION PLAN =**

Big Jump in Students' Reading Scores

By Greta Palmberg and Kendra Rask

Our students had postsecondary dreams.

Leng wanted a career in computers. Leng's postsecondary goal on his Individualized Education Program (IEP) was to attend a technical college, but his college placement score in reading was too low to be accepted for the coursework. The door to a computer degree was closing.

Shayne wanted to be a chef, and a job in a neighborhood restaurant fueled this dream. College placement testing revealed he did not have the reading skills required by the culinary arts program at the technical college. His reading score placed him at approximately the fourth grade level—not at the developmental level required for entrance into the program.

Fadumo wanted a career as a certified nursing assistant and took coursework in this field as part of her transition plan. She excelled in the hands-on portion of the coursework and passed the state's skills test. However, despite intensive supports, she was still unprepared to meet the reading and literacy requirements and failed the written portion of the state test. Fadumo wanted to develop the reading skills that would allow her to pursue a health career.

Leng, Shayne, and Fadumo were among our bright and ambitious deaf and hard of hearing students who lacked the reading skills to enter even the developmental coursework at our local technical college. Further, as with all the students in the



Photos courtesy of Greta Palmberg and Kendra Rask



Kendra Rask, BS, is an Intermediate District 287 special education instructor in the VECTOR Program. She serves as a classroom teacher as well as the postsecondary liaison for students who are seeking to pursue postsecondary education. She received her bachelor's degree in elementary education from Saint Cloud State University, an AAS in interpreting from St. Paul Technical College, and special education licensures in emotional/behavioral disorders and specific learning disabilities from Bethel University. Rask is a certified American Sign Language interpreter, National Association of the Deaf, Level 4 Advanced, and a proud CODA (child of deaf adults). She believes that high expectations empower and, by definition, improve outcomes for both the individual and our world.

The authors welcome questions and comments about this article at glpalmberg@district287.org and kmrask@district287.org.

Vocational Education, Community Training, and Occupational Relations Program (VECTOR), the nationally recognized transition program that serves 18- to 21-year-olds in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, these students were running out of time. In a few short years, they would be 21 years old and no longer eligible for services. Precious minutes were ticking away.

VECTOR serves a variety of students with disabilities, about one-third of whom are deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf/blind. As part of what the federal government calls a "traditionally underserved population," our students come from the homes of immigrants and refugees, homes in which there is only one parent, and homes where neither parent speaks English, or they experience other factors that make them educationally vulnerable. (See Figure 1.)

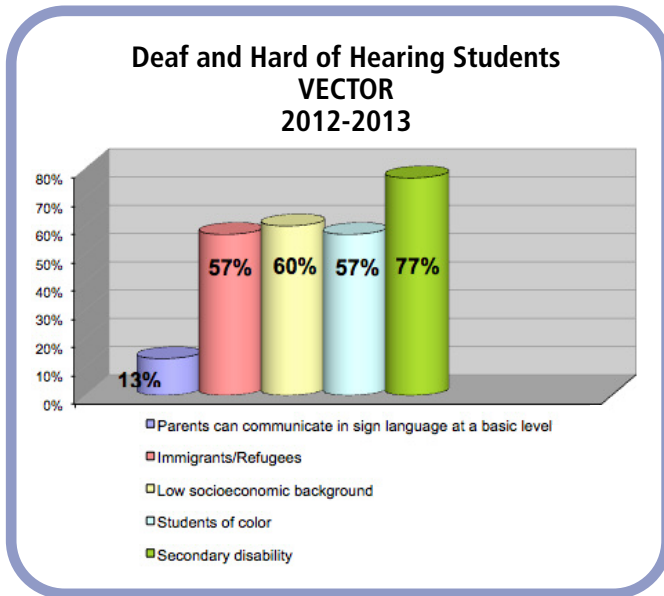
Since 1987, we have been customizing transition services for students who are deaf, hard of hearing, and deaf/blind. In the spring of 2012, the VECTOR staff for deaf and hard of hearing students teamed up to design the reading intervention that we knew was imperative.

Bringing reading research, transition program philosophy, and high expectations together would be critical. Our goal was to increase our students' skills in meaningful, measureable ways that would allow them to read their college texts and benefit them over a lifetime. A reading specialist who was also a former interpreter confirmed that when a text is above a student's instructional reading level, frustration sets in and it becomes difficult for learning to occur. This, of course, has implications for a student's entire educational experience.

We put other postsecondary coursework on hold and enrolled nine deaf and hard of hearing students in our newly-designed College Reading Readiness class. We increased the time students spent reading and selected a new text focused on academic reading in the college setting. We used an on-line program that included use of the Lexile system to measure text difficulty and to analyze students' reading levels as the levels changed over time.

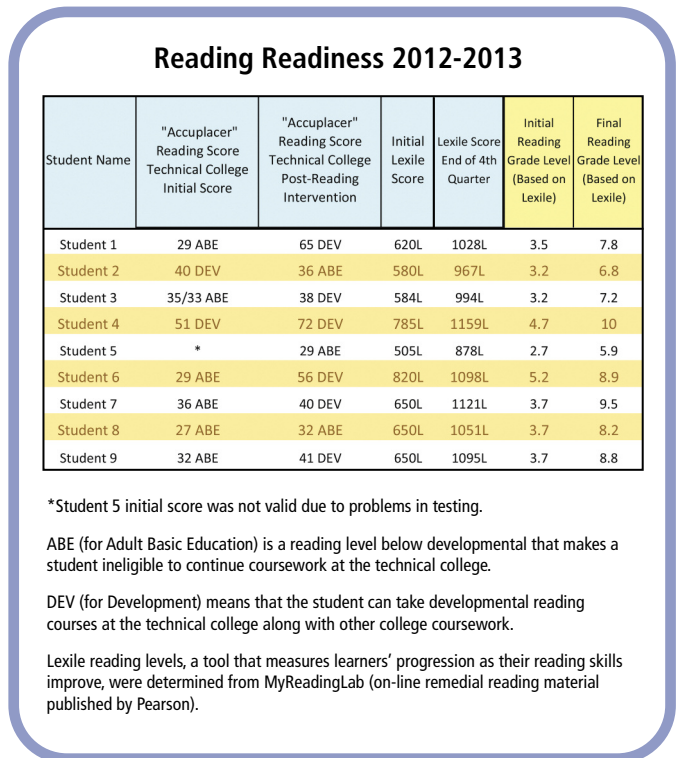
We also looked for ways to motivate our students and keep their expectations high.

Figure 1:



Above: In this chart, the demographics of the deaf and hard of hearing students in VECTOR reflect the program's exclusive focus on those the federal government defines as "traditionally underserved." **Right:** This chart shows the improvement experienced by students who undertook a reading intervention in VECTOR in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota.

Figure 2:



Motivation was inspired through a variety of strategies: students charted their reading growth; guest speakers spoke about college careers; and Howard A. Rosenblum, chief executive officer of the National Association of the Deaf, sent our students an encouraging letter. "Deaf and hearing people are equals," he wrote. "The most important tool for equality is language. Improve your reading and writing, and you will be more powerful!" This became our class motto.

At the end of the year the students were tested, and the results showed a success greater than any of us had anticipated. (See Figure 2.) Our students had achieved unprecedented growth in academic reading. Every student increased his or her reading between three and five grade levels, and the class averaged a 394-point increase in Lexile scores. Six students had raised their scores enough to take college developmental coursework and pursue their postsecondary goals. Three other students committed to continue in the course another year. Just as importantly, our students became active learners, empowered and determined to hold themselves to a higher standard.

And Leng, Shayne, and Fadumo?

Leng increased his reading by five grade levels. A few weeks before graduating from VECTOR, he re-took the college placement test and increased his score by nine points. This nine-point difference was what he needed to enroll in developmental reading at a technical college. Today, he is an independent college student, taking three courses at the technical college and pursuing a computer career as a desktop support specialist.

Shayne increased his reading by more than four grade levels and his college placement test score by five points. He committed to a second year of intensive reading instruction and enrolled in secondary vocational culinary arts classes. His college goal is closer now, and he is determined to make it happen.

Fadumo increased her reading by four grade levels and her Lexile score by over 400 points. She increased her college placement test score by 36 points! This score not only elevated her to the developmental reading level at the technical college but allowed her to skip

the first developmental reading class altogether. She adjusted her goals when her reading scores improved. Instead of becoming a nursing assistant, Fadumo has decided to pursue a career in radiologic technology.

As news of the success of our program spread, we were asked to open another class, this time for hearing students. We agreed to do so—with the provision that the classes for hearing and deaf students remain separate—and we now teach two courses instead of one.

We had hoped that the College Reading Readiness course would result in reading gains. We saw our students become active learners, forge ahead multiple grade levels in reading, and gain college-ready skills. A pathway to college was opened.

We hoped for reading gains; what we achieved was so much more.

The dedicated and amazing staff that devised and implemented the reading program for our deaf and hard of hearing students included: Dori Beach, Kayla Beccue, Kathy Manlapas, Donna Moe, Greta Palmberg, Kendra Rask, and Tina Sunda.

When the Clock is Ticking

Designing a College Reading Readiness Course

By Greta Palmberg and Kendra Rask

Looking back on the course we designed, we recognize that the catalyst to success was the commitment to incorporating five course components: substantial instructional minutes, authentic academic reading material, various instructional groupings, instruction on vocabulary and background knowledge, and modeling of college expectations. Alone, each component was effective; together, they were powerful. Here is a look at these five critical components.

SUBSTANTIAL INSTRUCTIONAL MINUTES

A dramatic increase in time spent on reading was required for students to make unprecedented growth and to develop college-reading skills. Each class would be twice as long as our normal 50-minute class period. Students would commit to a course that met Monday through Friday for 100-minute blocks. Further, the class would not follow regular quarter or nine-week scheduling; it would continue for a solid year.

AUTHENTIC ACADEMIC READING MATERIAL

Staff focused on academic reading, giving students strategies to move beyond learning to read and equipping them to begin reading to learn. After much research, the text we chose was *Reading for Life* by Corinne Fennessy, a college developmental text for students at a sixth to ninth grade reading level. *Reading for Life* was chosen because each chapter engages students with stories and vocabulary around different careers, and this matched our transition program's focus. To enhance career knowledge and motivate student interest, the class took quarterly field trips to a variety of area businesses, met with human relations personnel, and had guest speakers come to talk about the careers we were reading about in class.

Further, each chapter focused on developing a different reading skill. These skills, the backbone of our instruction, included identifying the main idea, stated and implied; understanding supporting details; and recognizing patterns of

organization. They also included making inferences, drawing conclusions, developing vocabulary, and thinking critically.

Our text was paired with Pearson's MyReadingLab™, an on-line program specifically created for the developmental reader at the college level that delivers instruction beginning at the fourth grade level. This on-line program uses the Lexile system to measure text difficulty and to analyze students' reading levels as the levels change over time. Our students began, on average, at the 600 Lexile level. We predicted that students would need to raise their scores to between the 1,000-1,100 Lexile level to get into a developmental college-level reading course.

VARIOUS INSTRUCTIONAL GROUPINGS

We chose a hybrid model of instruction that included group instruction, small group work, and individual practice. We introduced specific reading skills or modeled effective reading strategies to the students in a large group. Students worked in small groups to process their learning, to practice reading

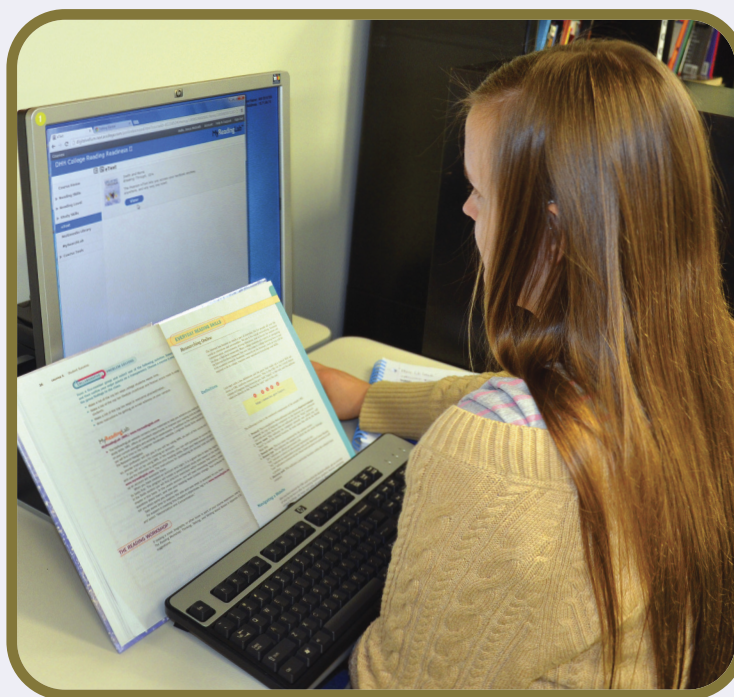
skills, and to work on certain skills necessary in postsecondary training and employment, such as collaborating with each other to find answers and working within time limits. They worked individually when they pulled up MyReadingLab and performed exercises and did diagnostic tests that measured individual growth.

"I really liked working together," noted one student, looking back. "The whole class helped each other. Learning how to work in a

group, discuss stories, and answer questions helped me understand my reading better."

INSTRUCTION ON VOCABULARY AND BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Due to the English language difficulties experienced by our students, vocabulary instruction was expanded. In addition to the vocabulary activities in the book, we worked on extending background knowledge before each story was read. Although it was time consuming, the addition of teaching and discussing each story's background paid off as students read. Having





explicit background knowledge not only increased comprehension but equipped students with the knowledge they needed to discuss story concepts using critical thinking skills. As one of our teachers remarked, “Sometimes you just have to stop what you’re doing and explain who Paul Bunyan is, even if you live in Minnesota!”

Vocabulary development focused not only on definitions but on learning multiple meanings of words in context. Students were encouraged to look up words online that they did not know in the MyReadingLab passages. The instructional team, including the interpreter, teacher, and educational assistant, worked together to promote vocabulary. Staff signed, fingerspelled, and wrote vocabulary words on the board during instruction. In addition, students were expected to hold themselves accountable for increasing their own vocabulary—not only for a good grade but for their own future success in college and the workplace.

MODELING OF COLLEGE EXPECTATIONS

Students were instilled with a lofty goal—to increase reading levels by more than one grade. The primary learning activity was simple: students were expected to read. On the first day of class, the teacher displayed a paragraph on the SMART Board and asked the students to read it. To her amazement, all eyes turned instantly to the interpreter. The students were waiting for the interpreter to sign the paragraph to them!

This was the pivotal moment when we realized that our students had become passive. We knew that the first college-level expectation we would instill in them would be that of active learning. After so many years of frustration, they had

stopped asking questions; not understanding was their norm. We cultivated a classroom in which students felt comfortable asking questions and taking an active role in their learning. We increasingly and incrementally raised the level of the material and classroom expectations. We wanted our students to realize their reading growth was ultimately under their control.

We took time to talk about and demonstrate other skills—how to organize a notebook, how to take notes from the textbook, how to create a planner to keep track of assignments. We also worked on teamwork and test-taking skills. All of this took time away from reading, but these critical skills are necessary for students wanting to succeed in the postsecondary environment.

VECTOR started out with a goal—to assist our students in becoming better readers. All of the research, teaming, and hard work paid off when these five components helped us establish literacy as the foundation of academic achievement, and our students excelled amid high expectations.

Reference

Fennessy, C. (2010). *Reading for life*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Longman, Inc.

Resource

Pearson’s MyReadingLab™, www.pearsonmylabandmastering.com/northamerica/myreadinglab