

Title: **Deaf students at an Arizona school will go virtual, but not without obstacles**
By Katelyn Keenehan | Luce Foundation Cronkite Fellowship

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, students around the country are adjusting to their new normal when it comes to online classes, virtual events, and social distancing to prevent the spread of the virus.

But for the 1,622 deaf and hard of hearing students enrolled in Arizona public schools this past year, according to the Arizona Department of Education (ADE), and for many more enrolled in private schools, these adjustments introduce new barriers to communication and learning.

Sequoia Deaf School (SDS), part of the Edkey charter school district in Mesa, has 52 deaf K-12 students enrolled for the 2020-21 school year. Their experience navigating the pandemic illustrates some of the challenges deaf students face in returning to the classroom.

In July, the Sequoia Deaf School announced its distance learning plan for the upcoming fall semester. The Edkey charter plans to begin its hybrid semester in October. However, no specific date has been set due to the uncertainty surrounding the new coronavirus.

The Arizona Department of Education and the Exceptional Student Services (ESS), which oversees education for students with disabilities, provided [guidance](#) for bringing them back to school. Some of the recommended procedures include identifying learning gaps from the previous semester, providing personal protective equipment, and increasing the levels of communication between students and faculty.

ESS emphasized that the measures are not prescriptive; and therefore, function more as recommendations. Each individual district is able to make the final call on their fall COVID-19 reopening plan.

The Sequoia Deaf School's system will be a mix of online and in-person classes. Students enrolled in the deaf education program that also have intellectual or physical disabilities will receive in-person attention for their specific needs. Other students at SDS are expected to attend completely online.

Prior to the COVID-19 shutdown, SDS operated on the same campus as the Sequoia Charter School. Many deaf students are integrated with hearing students.

Warren Keller, the principal of Sequoia Deaf School and a member of the deaf community, said this approach is one of the best ways to teach deaf children how to interact with the hearing world.

“It's not like a gated community of deafness, you know, they're out in the community, they're interacting with their hearing peers. And they're getting used to being part of a community that is with both deaf people and hearing people,” he said.

At the Sequoia Charter School, deaf students learn in the same classrooms, play on the same sports teams, and participate in the same clubs as their hearing peers.

But in March, the coronavirus pandemic pushed students across the country online - Edkey charter included. This meant no more in-person instruction, sports, or after school activities.

Jennifer Reid, the assistant principal of Sequoia Deaf School, explained that integration as one of the most important tools for children with deafness. For the rest of their lives they will need to know how to work with an interpreter or read lips to complete activities such as attending medical appointments, job training, or even secondary school, she said.

MASKS COMPLICATE LIP READING CUES

An important skill deaf individuals develop from a young age is reading lips and body language. Deaf people become experts in this realm to compensate for their compromised sense of hearing. They also read facial expressions to determine the mood and tone of the conversation, [according to the Hearing, Speech and Deaf Center \(HSDC\)](#) in Seattle, Washington.

Sequoia Deaf School provides an outlet to learn American Sign Language (ASL) and lip reading skills starting as early as kindergarten.

With the introduction of masks to slow the spread of COVID-19, deaf individuals are often unable to grasp the conversations happening around them. Keller explained his own struggles with this new reality.

“It's been difficult with everyone in a mask, especially to get lip reading cues. So that's been a huge challenge for me,” he said.

Lip reading is not a stand-alone method of communication for people that are deaf. Even if a person speaks slowly, [only about 25% of the conversation](#) can be understood by lip reading alone, according to HSDC.

But, what complicates the issue is that details are often pieced together by facial expressions, which are now hidden behind a piece of cloth, Keller explained.

SDS and the Edkey charter invested in clear face masks and shields for all deaf students and staff. They will hand them out when students return to campus.

VIRTUAL LEARNING CREATES ATTENTION CONCERNS

Virtual learning can be an obstacle for many students, but it is exacerbated for students that are deaf or hard of hearing, according to educators.

“Visual attention is really difficult for our students. It takes a lot for your brain to visually attend to something. And as a hearing person, we can just look off in the distance and keep listening. But for a deaf person, you have to stay focused visually. When doing that for an extended period the brain just doesn't function like that,” Reid said.

The elementary age deaf students are the biggest point of concern at SDS due to their short attention spans.

The CEO of the Edkey charter school district, Mark Plitzuweit, said that deaf students come into their first year of school three years behind the language.

“They're five or six years old, coming into kindergarten, and they are just beginning the initial steps of any type of verbal, nonverbal, sign language, or any type of communication,” he said.

They are also at an age where their American Sign Language skills are not fully learned and developed.

“That's where checking for understanding comes in,” Plitzuweit said, “If I've said something to a student, I can follow by asking them ‘do you understand?’ or ‘can you repeat what I said?’ those types of things.”

To increase the success rate, virtual deaf education classes at SDS were shortened to 30 minutes for the rest of the 2020 academic school year in order to maximize students' visual attention spans.

“So they are short but have heavy content,” Reid said, “We are going to start out a little bit slow, kind of retrying to get back in touch with the students.”

SOCIAL DISTANCING IMPACTS ON COMMUNITY

Virtual education can also be a lonely experience; however, students that are deaf already experience much higher levels of isolation. Reid explained that only 5% of deaf children are born to deaf parents.

“A lot of our students go home to neighborhoods where they're the only deaf child in that neighborhood. They're the only deaf child in their family, and they might have been the only deaf person their parents have ever met,” she said.

And for many deaf students, their deaf-school community has become a safe haven, according to Keller, who attended both regular and schools for the deaf growing up.

“It's been very difficult for a lot of our students to be out of school, and not because they aren't learning,” Plitzuweit said, “It's because they've lost the connections with their friends and with the community that we have built at the Sequoia charter school.”

Keller said he believes that the socialization aspect will be the biggest labyrinth for deaf students in a virtual learning environment.

“We want to make sure that the students don't feel alone and that they're able to be celebrated,” he said.

The school's deaf-education classes for kindergarten age students have between six to eight students to make it easier to connect one-on-one with students.

“Our teachers know their students very well, and are also very close with the [students'] families and that's another piece too,” Reid said.

To help families during the spring school closures, SDS offered virtual ASL classes for the parents of deaf students. This helped students feel less isolated at home during quarantine because they began to develop a method of communication with their family, Reid added.

SOME STUDENTS HEADING BACK TO CLASSROOM

A handful of deaf students at Sequoia Deaf School have other developmental disabilities that hinder them from thriving in an online learning environment. Reid said SDS plans to bring those students back onto campus in October.

“Our students that are deaf with additional disabilities like autism, or deaf with moderate intellectual disabilities, they'll be coming back onto campus at staggered times as well,” she said.

She added that some students lost their accessibility to physical therapy and occupational therapy services in the time they stayed home under quarantine for five months.

“Without receiving those services for an extended period of time, we do have some students that may never regain what they've lost during this time,” Reid said.

With no specific date set for return in October, the school is proceeding with a hybrid approach.

As principal, Keller said he understands that students have had different experiences during the pandemic. He emphasized the importance of thinking creatively for solutions to many of these fundamental barriers for his deaf students in particular.

“I think if you take care of their happiness and their safety, they'll be able to give 100% so I feel like I'm coming up with a lot of stuff, but I gotta sort of implement it slowly and remember to be patient,” he said.