CHEHALIS
SCHOOL DISTRICT

Celebrating Our Staff

"I feel like I'm a hub of resources, not just helping students but also their families."
-Maggie DePuye-Phillips, CSD Language Coach and Deaf Services Consultant

Deaf & Hard of Hearing Student Support: Partners For Family and Student Success

Facilitators, Not Helpers

The Chehalis School District's students who are deaf and hard of hearing have the opportunity to work with two American Sign Language (ASL) Interpreters as well as a Language Coach and Deaf Services Consultant. The first thing these three are quick to point out is that they do not consider what they do "assistance" or "helping" instead, they prefer to talk about working with students and families to facilitate academic success.

"Interpreters facilitate communication between the school and the Deaf or Hard of Hearing students,' explained Interpreter Rhesa Durgin.

"And I'm a mentor and a role model to many of the students," added Maggie DePuye-Phillips, Language Coach and Deaf Services Consultant.

Durgin and She'Anna Wilson are the two full-time K-12 ASL interpreters working for the Chehalis School District. The district sometimes contracts with other ASL interpreters when needs arise. Interpreting in an educational setting is a specialization that requires passing both a rigorous performance exam and knowledge exam. These exams test not only an interpreter's ability to use sign language, but also their knowledge of Deaf Culture and their understanding of issues related specifically to interpreting in an educational setting.

Wilson, an interpreter for the Chehalis School District since 2011, first became interested in ASL during childhood. Growing up in Napavine, her best friend was deaf, so she picked up a lot of ASL. Later in life, while attending Centralia College, staff learned she knew sign language and asked her to interpret for them. That work led to her job interpreting for the Centralia-Chehalis Special Education Cooperative. When that program split between Centralia School District and Chehalis School District, Wilson made the decision to stay with Chehalis.

"I love seeing the connections they make," Wilson said of what she enjoys about working with students. "When they master concepts and I see them bridge that gap, it's so fun."

Durgin started working as an interpreter 19 years ago in the Longview area, then took a few years off to raise kids. She returned to the work 11 years ago and joined the Chehalis School District 7 years ago. The students are really what drew her to the work.

"I think I'd be in education even if I wasn't interpreting," Durgin said. "I love working with kids and seeing their growth. Especially in a small town, you're going to be with a student for a long time."

Our district ASL interpreters are paired with a student by Executive Director for Student Support Katie Howell and they generally work with them for the entire year. If the partnership is a good fit for student and interpreter, it's not unusual for them to continue to work with one another over the years. Recently, Wilson got to attend graduation with a student she had worked with since second grade.

"Interpreting graduation for him was very emotional," she said.

She'Anna Wilson signs for a student at Chehalis Middle School during the recent Veterans Day assembly.

A Cultural Component

In addition to interpreters, Chehalis School District students who are deaf or hard of hearing also work with Maggie DePuye-Phillips, a Language Coach and Deaf Services Consultant who has worked for the Chehalis School District since 2016. She is an employee of the Chehalis School District but also works as an independent contractor for four other school districts.

"I think when they added my services, that really increased awareness of what the needs were and how we needed to address it," DePuye-Phillips said. "I'm not a Teacher of the Deaf but my role is support. My main job is to work with the students and teach them to be independent."

If students' family members are not deaf or hard of hearing themselves, the student may not have had much exposure to deaf culture and norms. DePuye-Phillips, who is deaf herself, understands first-hand what students who are deaf and hard of hearing are experiencing. She said topics she talks to students about can range from self advocacy to how its OK to take a break from wearing your hearing aids when you need one.

"I work with students one on one to bridge the gap between the deaf and the hearing world in a lot of different ways," she explained. "It's kind of like a puzzle and I put in the missing pieces."

DePuye-Phillips has a Master's degree in Deafness Rehabilitation Counseling and teaching and has taught ASL for the last 30 years in post-secondary settings. Besides working with our district's students who are deaf and hard of hearing, she said she is also a resource for general education teachers and other staff who have questions about working with students who are deaf and hard of hearing in their schools. Wilson and Durgin said if a student they serve is struggling with a concept or situation, they often turn to DePuye-Phillips' whose own life experiences can sometimes help them come up with a solution.

"I feel like I'm a hub of resources, not just helping students but also their families," DePuye-Phillips said.

Working as a team to create the best possible learning environment for students who are deaf and hard of hearing is something Durgin, Depuye-Phillips and Wilson all said they appreciated. Wilson recalled when she first started as a K-12 interpreter, she was the only interpreter for the district, splitting her time between two students and having no teammates with whom to consult.

"Now, there's just so much support for the students," Wilson said.

"That's not the standard statewide or nationwide," Durgin added. "It's something Chehalis has done to support our deaf and hard of hearing students."

Maggie DePuye-Phillips works with one on one with a student. She explained that each student's needs are different so each session is different.

Each Student is Unique

When it comes to students in the Chehalis School District who are deaf and hard of hearing there is no one right way of creating a plan for educational success. Each student, family and circumstance are different. For example:

- Some families use ASL in the home and some do not
- Some students use ASL to communicate and some do not
- Some students use their voices to communicate and some do not
- Some students use assistive hearing technology such as cochlear implants, hearing aids or Frequently Modulation (FM) systems and some do not
- Students can identify with a host of deaf communities such as Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, Hard of Hearing or Late-Deafened

It is the work of the team to get to know students and families to understand their needs and work with them in a way that feels empowering to everyone.

The work of an ASL interpreter goes beyond simply signing the words that are spoken. Durgin explained that there is a lot of learning that takes place in a classroom that has nothing to do with what the teacher is talking about in front of the class. For instance, a side conversation between the teacher and a student, which hearing students may overhear and which leads to more understanding of the subject, must also be signed for a student who is deaf or hard of hearing.

"So much incidental learning happens during the day so it's important for us to interpret that, too," Durgin said. "Even if another student is getting in trouble, the deaf student should know for their safety and so they know what the class expectations are."

The role of an interpreter is also to interpret what someone means and convey that to the student. For example, if a teacher tells the class to turn in an assignment, they could mean to physically turn it in or to submit it online. Or a student who uses a cochlear implant or hearing aids may hear some noises in the classroom and ask what they are hearing. Or someone may use a figure of speech or phrase that would be confusing if taken literally.

"ASL is not just English words put in sign, it's let me understand what you mean," Durgin said.

ASL interpreter Rhesa Durgin facilitates a conversation during class for a student she serves. The student's conversation partner correctly looks at her to talk, rather than looking at Durgin, the interpreter.

Good to Know

As members of the Chehalis School District Community, you may encounter someone who is deaf or hard of hearing. Here are some useful things to keep in mind:

- The terms deaf and hard of hearing refer to communities that people prefer to identify with. Some people choose to use ASL and some do not. It is best to ask someone how they prefer to communicate and which terms they prefer to use to describe themselves.

- Each person who is deaf or hard of hearing and their family is different and their experiences are all different. Even if you know someone who is deaf or hard of hearing, do not assume their experiences and choices are the same as someone else who is deaf or hard of hearing.

- If you meet a person working with an interpreter, speak directly to the person who is deaf or hard of hearing, not to the interpreter. Do not say "can you tell him/her ..."

- Do not assume people who are deaf or hard of hearing can lip read. Even those who do can only understand about 30% of what you are saying so they may prefer to communicate in a different way to fully understand you.

- Interpreters translate not just words but everything going on in a room or situation, including ambient noise others may take for granted. Because of this, especially young people who are deaf and hard of hearing can become easily fatigued and need frequent breaks.

- If you see an interpreter working with someone, even if their hands are not moving, assume they are working. Do not try to strike up a conversation with the interpreter- only the deaf or hard of hearing person.

More Useful Information

Hearing Loss Association of America

National Association of the Deaf

American Society for Deaf Children

Notice of Non-discrimination
Anti-bullying Policy and Procedure