 Increasing Access to Qualified Speech-Language Pathologists: The West Virginia Story
August 2012

Personnel Improvement Center Awards Services to West Virginia

Each year, the Personnel Improvement Center (PIC) at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education accepts applications for technical assistance in states to assist them in:

a) developing and implementing personnel preparation partnership (PPP) plans between state, local programs and Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) to meet local needs for special education, Part C and related services personnel and

b) attracting, developing and supporting (ADS) new and existing, qualified personnel.

Dr. Lisa Churchill, PIC state PPP service provider, assists states in determining both needs and resources available and then leads local teams in developing customized PPP accessibility plans for those high need locales. Dr. George Ann Rice, PIC state ADS service provider, assists states in attracting, developing and supporting highly qualified special education, early intervention and related services personnel by working with state leadership to identify human resource and special education directors in up to three high-need locales, as identified by the state agency. Best practices in recruitment and retention are then integrated into the local plans.

West Virginia requested assistance from the PIC in both the PPP and ADS services to address the critical shortages of highly qualified speech-language pathologists (SLPs). West Virginia’s State Department of Education (WVDE) was awarded both PIC services for the 2011-2012 school year. Dr. Churchill and Dr. Rice worked with WVDE state leaders, Kathy Knighton, Coordinator, Speech and Language, and Kathy Hudnall, Coordinator, Monitoring and Compliance, to leverage the necessary resources for developing and implementing SLP preparation program partnerships and increasing the number of fully certified SLPs recruited, hired and retained by local districts in West Virginia during the October 2011 to October 2012 PIC service year.

Coordination of Efforts in West Virginia

In December 2011, Dr. Churchill established the following goals with WV state leadership: (a) examine WV state-wide personnel data on SLPs, (b) develop a statewide speech-language pathologist assistant survey to assess interest in becoming a SLP, educational background and
other relevant data, (c) increase and improve collaboration among WV IHEs, local education agencies and state education directors and (d) develop and implement partnership structures to address the critical shortage of SLPs in the state. Dr. Rice then met with WV leadership in February 2012 and set the following goals for the ADS service: (a) increase the number of fully certified SLPs recruited and hired by local districts, (b) identify methods for the SLPAs working in districts to become fully certified SLPs (to earn their masters’ degrees in Communications Disorders), (c) identify barriers to the recruitment and retention of fully certified SLPs and to develop strategies for the removal of those barriers and (d) develop strategies for improving the working conditions of the district SLPs.

In order to address these goals, Dr. Churchill and Dr. Rice coordinated four on-site meetings with West Virginia state leadership during the 2011-2012 service year. Dr. Churchill assisted in the development of a state action plan at the initial on-site meeting to outline the strategy for developing PPPs (see WV the action plan). She also facilitated bi-monthly calls with state leadership to provide on-going support and to ensure progress in implementing the state action plan to address the critical shortage of WV SLPs. Work has now begun on developing the PPPs, using regional units to facilitate the creation and implementation.

Dr. Rice worked with WV state leadership to identify stakeholders for the ADS service planning process which included district directors, district human resources representatives, SLPs, SLPAs and state department of education representatives, including those from the State Office of Certification (see the WV ADS action plan). She also facilitated brainstorming sessions to share best practices in recruitment and retention and identify the barriers to achieving these strategies with local district administrators. Subsequent discussions were held to identify the barriers that could be addressed immediately and those that would require long-term initiatives.

**Outcomes from the Service Year**

The coordinated efforts between Dr. Rice, Dr. Churchill, Kathy Knighton and Kathy Hudnall have resulted in several significant outcomes for the 2011-2012 service year. A partnership between Western Kentucky University (WKU) and the WVDE has been established and an online master’s program in Communication Disorders will be offered only to SLPAs employed by WV local districts. Districts are currently recruiting for SLPAs to apply to be part of the first WKU/WV cohort. In addition, the group identified key factors to emphasize in marketing resources, such as a DVD, for attracting SLPs to live and work in West Virginia.
Advice for Other States:

1. According to Dr. Churchill, the co-leadership between Kathy Knighton and Kathy Hudnall serves as an exemplar for other states. Collaboration between individuals to share responsibility for initiatives like the SLP project in West Virginia ensures success.
2. Create structures to improve communication and collaboration among partners that are user-friendly. Private online communities of practice are a good means to facilitate such communication.
3. SEA action plan activities need to be realistic and leverage already existing resources for all partners.
4. Involve as many of the stakeholder groups as is practical and seek their input not only for identifying the barriers to recruitment and retention, but also the strategies to overcoming those barriers.
5. Seek resources outside of the state.

For more information about the West Virginia Department of Education and PIC work, view a webinar here.

This document was written by Leila Richey, PIC communications manager. Special thanks to the following for providing the information included here:

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