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Narrator [00:00:35] From the Outreach Department at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Austin, Texas, this is A Sense of Texas. Here is your host, Emily Coleman.

Emily Coleman [00:00:47] Welcome to A Sense of Texas. I'm Emily Coleman. Today we're talking to Brenna Brillhart with the Outreach Texas Deafblind Project and Christina Pinckney from the field. They share more about serving deafblind students within the world of deaf ed. and particularly the regional day school programs for the deaf or RDSPDs.

Brenna Brillhart [00:01:12] Hi, my name is Brenna Brillhart. I'm a deafblind education consultant. I'm on the Texas Deafblind Team here at Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

Christina Pinckney [00:01:22] And my name is Christina Pinckney and I am an educational specialist for the Statewide Outreach Center. So Brenna and I worked together at an RDSPD. And so she was a diagnostician and I was a supervisor for the RDSPD. And so since then we've just blossomed and created a great friendship. So we continue to communicate with each other now. Yeah.

Emily Coleman [00:01:46] Okay, now when I moved to Texas, that acronym was totally new to me. So what is a RDSPD and is it in other states, or is it just in Texas?

Christina Pinckney [00:01:57] So it's just in Texas. It's a regional day school program of the deaf because Texas is so large. They have established regional day schools across the state where deaf and hard of hearing students who qualify for the program through an FIE or an ARD committee decision will come to a specific district that serve a multitude of districts. So it could be they serve 12 districts, some serve 22 districts, it just depends. And so if deaf and hard of hearing students, deafblind, deaf plus students need our services, they will be bussed to a regional day school program of the deaf where they have certified teachers of the deaf there to support them.

Emily Coleman [00:02:36] And I know I get asked a lot, like, why aren't there regional programs for blind VI across the state? And, you know, my response is often, well, you know deaf programs are really important because of language immersion and ASL. And would you say that's the primary reason they were established was for communication?

Christina Pinckney [00:02:58] I believe communication, but also to be able to communicate with peers and professionals in the student's mode of communication directly and not have to do it through an interpreter. And then there's also the whole community, deaf culture aspect of it as well, is another reason I think those RDSPDs are so important to have.

Emily Coleman [00:03:19] So, we might share students because you also serve students who are deafblind, which is why we wanted to talk to you today, and particularly why Brenna recommended you to come on the podcast and talk about that a little bit. So how

are deafblind students served in those communities? Differently, if at all. And then what was your first maybe interaction with deafblind students and recognizing that they could be a part of the students that you serve?

Christina Pinckney [00:03:50] Yeah, so as a teacher when I was in the classroom, I never experienced having a deafblind student myself. So when I became a supervisor, this was brand new to me. The district that I was in, we had very few at the time. Luckily, we had Brenna there who was very passionate about deafblind students and really helped me see the need for communication that these students had just the same as deaf and hard of hearing students. Even in my teacher preparation programs. I didn't. Get any training or any information regarding how do we support deafblind students. It was very much deafblind students were more in life skills classes, deaf plus classes, or they were in their own district. I feel like a lot of RDSPDs across the state didn't know how to serve them and didn't how to service them well. And so it was definitely a new world for me. And then once I started learning more through Brenna and through our deafblind specialist that we had, we started getting more and more deafblind kids and realizing these kids just need access to communication. We have to presume that they are capable of everything, which they are, and we need to give them access just like a deaf and hard of hearing student.

Emily Coleman [00:05:03] That's great. So Brenna, what was your like, how did you get into DeafBlind education? Because you probably didn't start there, right?

Brenna Brillhart [00:05:11] No, so I started my career as a teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing, started out teaching self-contained elementary students. I recognized the need for diagnosticians who are trained and evaluating these students. That became my passion and then I found myself at, you know, the RDSPD that Christina and I worked with and I had the opportunity to travel through 12 different school districts and do evaluations only on children who were deaf and hard of hearing, including children who were deafblind. So I just had the opportunity to keep, you know, running into these kids and meeting kids. I started noticing a pattern. I noticed that there were deafblind children who had been given access and support to everything from day one. And I met students who were doing incredible things that I don't think many people are aware that deafblind individuals can achieve. So I started just wondering, well, these other students who, you know, clearly are not achieving at their full potential who have not been provided full access to their education, what would their lives be like? What would their communication competency be if they were provided this access that, you now, the law grants them, that special education regulations support them in having. So as I just met incredible deafblind individuals and their families, I just became so interested. I did the Texas Tech program, I learned even more and then I just had the pleasure to apply this knowledge and to advocate for these students.

Emily Coleman [00:07:03] So were you already working there when Christina came on board or? Yeah, yes, you were there first.

Brenna Brillhart [00:07:11] Yeah, I was there when Christina came along as our supervisor. And it was a breath of fresh air to work with an administrator who wasn't, you know, coming with all of the knowledge, but really leaned into the team that we had, the team who had specialized training in this area and was willing to learn alongside us. And then use that information to advocate to other administrators. It was a blessing that TSB had created tools for us to use that guided us through this process, specifically the tool determining the need for an intervener. It was the tool that we often use to collect and analyze data. And then when Christina was having conversations with with other

administrators, I believe that it allowed her to really, take a data-driven approach to making some of those decisions.

Emily Coleman [00:08:19] Now you, you know, you recommended that we talk to Christina because of her advocacy work. And also it's unique to get an administrator that people want to hear from, you know? So you must be clearly be doing good work. So are there questions you'd like to ask her directly about her work at the RDSPD and like how it has benefited deafblind students?

Brenna Brillhart [00:08:42] You know, Christina, if you were talking to another program administrator that had deafblind students in their program that was maybe confused on why a student might need an intervener and was looking at things from a monetary perspective, what advice would you have for that, that administrator or educational team?

Christina Pinckney [00:09:08] Well, a couple things. So one, I'm not working with the student every day. I don't know the student as well as my teachers do. So I leaned in a lot to, you know, the diagnostician. We had -- we luckily had a, we called her our deafblind specialist, but she was certified in VI and then also certified in DHH that I leaned into a lot as well. And we would go through as a team prior to the ARD meeting and talk about okay let's look at the need for an intervener paperwork from TSBVI. We looked at that, we gathered data, we spoke with the classroom teacher that the student was with every day as well. And I really just leaned into the teachers and what they were saying and the data that they were showing me and a big thing monetary wise were two things I would say. What first is we have to make a decision based on what the student needs. We can't make a decision based on monetary reasons, but of course it always comes back to funding. Where are we going to get these this funding from for this intervener that this student is requiring? And luckily we have what's called high cost funds and that's something I discovered probably about year two as an administrator that a student who is costing more than three times the amount, you can apply for high cost funds to help cover that intervener salary. And typically that intervener salary is three times, the amount that the student, that the district gets from state funding for that student. And so then you can apply for a high cost funds to get that. And that was the way that because these students are coming from outside districts, that funding doesn't come from district that's serving the student. The funding comes from those districts and they're the ones that have to pay for that. And so to have those conversations with the administrators and say, "hey, there is this option of high cost funds that we can look at." So you don't have to worry about that. We have to focus on what the student needs. And right now the data is showing that the student is an intervener. And then let's talk about applying for high cost funds later on to help support that as well. But the biggest thing for me is at the end of the day, we can't look at monetary reasons. We have to look at what the student needs and what the data says. And I think that was a big thing for the whole RDSPD as a whole. We really, that was one of our like mottos that really wasn't a motto, like labeled the motto, but it was what does the student need and let's figure out how to make it happen.

Brenna Brillhart [00:11:32] Could you also speak to the deafblind specialist position that we had? When you joined the team at the RDSPD we didn't have that position. Can you talk a little bit about how another administrator could go about getting a position like that added to their program?

Christina Pinckney [00:11:53] Yeah, so we had already had deaf and hard of hearing itinerant teachers. And of course, every year it rotates, some teachers leave, sometimes we get new ones. But as our deafblind population was growing, Brenna was like, we really

need someone who can do, who knows both worlds, right? And can provide a great -- great resources to these students that knows both worlds. And we didn't have that person. But Brenna did a great job of recruiting. Again, a lot of this wasn't me. A lot of it was the staff that I had. They each had their passions in specific areas. I had a diagnostician who loved the babies and so I leaned into her for all things babies, deafblind babies as well. And so Brenna was able to recruit someone who was VI certified and working on getting her DHH certification as well, we were able to recruit her and in an open position that we had we had her serving some of these deafblind students who had DHH itinerant support in our RDSPD, and I was like, you're going to serve them. We'll still provide the VI side, but we're also going to have a DHH VI certified person seeing these kids. And it was beautiful and it helped our classroom teachers who were also with these students just give these deafblind students better resources, better access to communication, better access to language, because we had someone who knew the VI side of things. That was not any of our DHH teachers. We didn't get that training. And so it was such a beautiful mix. Like we've already had a position open. Let's hire someone that can do both. And so that was a great, great opportunity for us. And I wanted to get more, but then eventually I stopped being a supervisor, but really just using what we had and then going for it. But I think another huge thing is knowing the budget and knowing what funding you do have is a huge aspect of it. Because if you have extra funding the next year, let's create an itinerant position for someone who has both was a great tool for us.

Emily Coleman [00:13:49] Do most of the RDSPDs have somebody that provides like the VI services if they need it or do any of the other ones have deafblind specialists?

Christina Pinckney [00:14:01] So I know there's several that are starting to try to get some more that have both sides of it, but typically, no, typically you have the district that the RDSPD is housed in providing the VI services and then the DHH teacher providing the DHH services. And it's a huge disservice to the student because they're just serving the kid on -- one serving the kid on Monday, one on Thursday, and it's like, no. They need to come together and they need to serve the kid and collaborate together to really give the student what they need. And then to just building your own. So if there's someone who's already a DHH and they're interested in learning more in the deafblind world, then we would say, hey, go take this Texas Tech class if you're interested and we can support you in that. You know, if you need extra 30 minutes throughout your day to really get some studying in things like that then please take that because we need we need that so we need to build people within our our program to get there.

Emily Coleman [00:14:57] So, yeah, how do you also -- you mentioned interveners of course and how important those are for students who are deafblind? Where do you find them and where do they get their training?

Christina Pinckney [00:15:11] Yeah so, a lot of it was building, again, building within the staff that we already had, or even sometimes some of our alumni who graduated, they already had the sign skills to be an intervener. And so, because a lot of our deafblind kiddos, they had some vision, so they could see the signs, you know, in specific areas. Again, this is a whole new world still I'm learning about. So if I'm saying anything wrong, but it was a lot the people that we already had and training them. So we would have our deafblind specialists on PD days. Have trainings just for the interveners because they had the communication, they had language side, which I think is such a hard part to get that they needed to learn more the deafblind side of things. So we would provide a lot of trainings for that. We even had a deafblind intervener go through a program. What was the program called, Brenna?

Brenna Brillhart [00:15:57] He went through the Central Michigan University program.

Christina Pinckney [00:16:00] Yes, she was phenomenal. But a huge struggle again is the pay. We were really struggling to get people above me to understand the unique nature of an intervener and why their pay needs to be at the same level of their knowledge and their expertise. So that was a struggle that I had every single year that I was there.

Brenna Brillhart [00:16:22] We were lucky in the fact that our district recognized interveners as a specific role and already had a job description that was developed for this position. There are many districts out there who might be hiring their first intervener for a student. And recently TSB just published our VI Administrator's Toolkit and part of that toolkit are sample job descriptions for the intervener role and for that Teacher of the Deafblind. So if there is a district that is looking to add those roles that's a great resource for them to look at to develop their own job description as well as to look at some sample interview questions to ask during that process.

Emily Coleman [00:17:09] Yeah, I was just wondering when you were talking about the Administrator's Toolbox and if it included some of this stuff in it. I haven't looked at it since it's been re-released, but I'm hearing great things.

Brenna Brillhart [00:17:19] Yes, the Administrator's Toolkit Toolbox was updated. It has more deafblind considerations and deafblind guidance added to it, just general information for administrators, as well as having the addition of the job description and sample interview questions.

Emily Coleman [00:17:38] Now, you mentioned something earlier about students who are deafblind being in "Deaf Plus" programs. What is that? I don't know what that is.

Christina Pinckney [00:17:48] So that's more of a life skills class, but it's something that Brenna and I both found a lot of when Brenna was going out and doing evaluations is these students being mislabeled and not giving the opportunities the full access to education and language that they they deserved. And so we did, we saw a lot of that. And luckily, because our RDSPD did have a life skills, we were able to get them into our life skills and then be able to reevaluate and get better idea of where is the student at? What is actually the best placement for the student? Because, you know, these students are getting maybe itinerant support two times a week and getting access to language two times the week. They're not gonna learn a full language two times per week. They need to be fully immersed into the language every single day. It's like you have a baby here that's learning. You're speaking to the baby two times a week. That baby's not gonna learn to speak, right? And so it's the same way with American Sign Language and access to languages they need to be fully immersed in it and so being able to get them to the RDSPD and really truly give them access to language was a huge game changer and seeing what the student is actually capable of and they're capable of so much so much. And so that was a huge awakening for me coming into this role for sure.

Emily Coleman [00:19:06] Yeah, I mean, communication and language access is sort of just the key to everything, especially for students with sensory impairments, but when you're deafblind, as you two both know, it's multiplied greatly. Other questions that you wanna ask or make sure we share today?

Brenna Brillhart [00:19:26] So Christina, one of the things that I've seen talking to people across the state is there still seems to be confusion between an intervener's role and then a paraprofessional who's there to support the whole classroom. Could you break that down for us and let us know how they're different and also how is an intervener not an interpreter? And are there deafblind children out there who might require an intervener and an interpreter?

Christina Pinckney [00:20:02] For the last question, yes. The first thing that I did because it was new to me too. So I needed to be informed, okay, what is the difference? So we did meet as a leadership team with our deafblind specialists and discuss and laid out, okay, What is a paraprofessional? What is the deafblind intervener? And what is an interpreter's role when working with a deafblind student? And then we also talked about in the classroom what is their role, what does that look like, and once we established that as a leadership team we then had a team with the whole RDSPD, hey these are the different roles, these are all the expectations of each role. And then from that we took the interveners and explained to them themselves, okay these are your roles, and these are your expectations, but also knowing that an intervener role might look different for this student compared to another student, right? And so then that deafblind specialist was able to work with interveners on one-on-one, working with the student to figure out, okay, what does your role look like specifically for the student? But we did have, you know, we would have some deaf plus, so deafblind with additional disabilities, maybe autism, you, know, all sorts of different things that they might be in a life skills classroom, getting access to communication and they had a deafblind intervener as well. But that might look different than a deafblind student that is in the Gen. Ed. Classroom. And that student needed an interpreter on top of the intervener because the student couldn't see areas on the left side so the interveners pointing hey here or the interveners zooming in for the student to be able to see what what is being presented and that was the intervener's role while the interpreter is continuing to sign and give access to the presentation or what the teacher is saying. So we did, we did have some deafblind students who had an ASL -- a certified ASL interpreter and an intervener. All day long. And how we were able to get that and justify that was through data to show hey this kid needs that and then when people were fighting about hey the funds that's when high cost funds came in and was able to support with those costs. Because you know administration definitely does look at but where's the funds going to come from so we looked at high cost for some of those students.

Brenna Brillhart [00:22:11] So that's a great model of support, having an intervener, having an interpreter if needed, having a classroom paraprofessional if needed, but can you help us with -- you know people get sick, we live in the real world. What's the best way for an administrator and their team to approach making sure that children are covered when staff are absent?

Christina Pinckney [00:22:36] That's a great question. So specifically for the interpreter, we always had a contract agency. If we couldn't find, rearrange our schedule for that day to bring in another interpreter, we always contracted with an agency. As for the intervener, if the intervener was out, we would try and train all of our paraprofessionals at the beginning of the year with some intervener training because if there's a paraprofessional in the classroom that is able to then step in as the intervener for that student. So we would try to give all our paraprofessionals training on what is the deafblind intervener? What is their role? To get some basic training for that so that we can then move that paraprofessional to become that student's Intervener for that day.

Brenna Brillhart [00:23:18] So that's a really great answer about training all paraprofessionals or giving them some level of training so that they're able to step into an intervener role on a substitute basis as needed. But what would you say to an administrator where potentially the classroom paraprofessional is absent but the intervener is there and they want to move the intervener to be the classroom paraprofessional and leave the child without an intervener for the day.

Christina Pinckney [00:23:48] Check the child's IEP. And if the child's IEP says they have a one-on-one intervener, you better keep that intervener there, because then you're out of compliance with the IEP.

Emily Coleman [00:23:58] I love this conversation and also so much how you've mentioned over and over again that funding can't be a decision. I think that that makes jobs complicated for administrators, but it's just the truth. And you know, when advocating for services for students, there's often times where I would just ask, you know well, if you're not going to provide an intervener, like how is a student going to access their communication and their education? And like, how are they gonna access the world? And... Put it back on the, the team, you know, okay, if we're not going to have an intervener, how are they going to do it? And most of the time the answer is there isn't another way to do it like that, that's just a basic need. And so recognizing that and advocating for it is just so important.

Christina Pinckney [00:24:43] Yes, yes. And even if they're young, some people say, you know, oh, they're only three, they don't need an intervener yet. And it's like, no, actually, that's the perfect time to introduce an intervener and start giving them language and learn how to use an intervener. That's the best time. You know, we've already missed out zero to three years, hopefully parents, you know, gained access to language and started learning. But if not, like, we got to get them services immediately.

Emily Coleman [00:25:09] Well, and that speaks to when educational decisions are made far too young for kids and they're like, Oh, well, they have multiple disabilities. So they're not going to learn ASL or they don't need access in the same way. And, or they, I don't need Braille or whatever it is. It's like, you can't make that decision for a baby. Like you just have to throw everything at them, give them all the same opportunities as their peers. And then, you know, give them a chance because otherwise you never know if it's due to lack of access or another reason.

Christina Pinckney [00:25:39] Exactly.

Emily Coleman [00:25:41] Well, any last words of advice if there's like, if an administrator or an educator has a student that's deafblind for the first time, like what are some hot tips you would give them to help out?

Christina Pinckney [00:25:54] Probably two things. One, I would collaborate with VI teachers. If you have DHH teachers there, and collaborate with VI teachers, get talking, see what kind of resources you can get from them. But also reach out to TSBVI that you guys are a huge resource. It's a great help. And I've everyone I have met at TSBVI has been more than willing to meet with me within a couple of days and talk through things and really get some good strategies going. And so I would say reach out. Because there's a lot of resources that you might not be aware of that they can provide your program with.

Emily Coleman [00:26:31] Thanks to Brenna and Christina for enlightening us about advocating for and educating students who are deafblind and prioritizing their communication needs. From the TSBVI Outreach Department and A Sense of Texas, I'm Emily Coleman. See you next time!

Narrator [00:26:49] This has been a presentation of the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired Outreach Department. If you have any questions or suggestions for topics to cover in future episodes, please contact us at podcast@TSBVI.edu.