

Heidi Givens, Interviewed by Allison Slone, HSG Design Team

1. How long have you been advocating for deaf student population and why is this your passion?

"That is a fantastic question. It feels like I have always been advocating for deaf students, ever since I started teaching. However, I think it definitely increased when I moved to KY. When my husband and I decided to move to KY, I made a choice not to apply to the KY School for the Deaf. I felt that there was a greater need for teachers in the public schools instead of at KSD. Being in the public school setting, I spent a lot of energy advocating for equitable access for my students, supporting their families, and empowering my students to make their own communication choices and to learn how to self advocate. Somehow, those efforts within my school and students expanded to across KY and the U.S. The Deaf and Hard of Hearing community battle inequities daily. They need allies to stand with them, to advocate beside them, and to give them platforms to demand equity. I can't ever imagine going back to solely focusing on my classroom. Being a true educator is not a 9-5 job. Being an advocate is a 24/7 job that I humbly and proudly accept and live."

2. You recently became the lead for a Deaf Ed. Task Force through KDE. How did that come about?

"The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Work Group was formed as a result of a few meetings. Several months ago I had a meeting with Commissioner Lewis, where I was educating him about the history and current status of deaf education in the U.S. and in KY. During that meeting, he suggested I meet with Gretta Hylton, Director of the Division of Learning Services, to discuss how KDE can support districts in understanding how Least Restrictive Environment applies to deaf and hard of hearing students. Tony Peavler, Director of KY School for the Deaf's Outreach program, and I met with Ms. Hylton and a few other members of the DLS team. During that meeting, we came to realize that districts needed a lot more support than just LRE support. Ms. Hylton and all of us agreed that a Work Group needed to be established. Tony and I are co-leads of the Work Group."

3. What are the goals of the task force?

"The Work Group is charged with developing a guidance document for districts, similar to the Autism guidance document, and accompanying trainings and webinars."

4. Now that the Deaf Ed. Task Force has met once, what are your first steps toward reaching the goal?

"Interestingly, during our first meeting, a member shared that KY ranks 51st in post-secondary outcomes for the deaf and hard of hearing. This report includes D.C. and Puerto Rico. Commissioner Lewis asked why this was the case (Yes, he attended our meeting for almost 2 hours). This spurred a very in-depth and profound discussion about the various factors that lead to such poor results. This made the entire Work Group, Commissioner Lewis, and Ms. Hylton realize that there is much work to be done beyond the guidance document. With that said, the first steps is to prioritize the sections of the guidance document and form subgroups to begin creating those priority sections. The work group will be meeting monthly for the next year to develop this document and trainings."

5. If you could change public education to meet the needs of the deaf student population, what would be your number one wish?

"So many of the root causes for KY being 51st in postsecondary outcomes can be fixed. There is such a critical shortage of teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing throughout KY and the nation. This is because most parents and districts are choosing to educate DHH children in the home district. This, unfortunately, leads to a lack of experts to work with these children and social isolation of the students. My wish would be that KDE follow the recommendations of 3 different committees/task forces from the past 20 years: the establishment of regional DHH programs throughout KY. By bringing together DHH students from across a region, there will be a critical mass to create DHH classrooms when students will have other DHH peers. It will solve the critical shortage; for example, instead of 6 districts each needing to hire 1 teacher for 1 student, there will only be a need for 1 teacher to serve 6 students. There are endless benefits of the regional program model beyond the few listed above. I will continue to advocate for this model until the day I retire and beyond."