

The NASBE Interview

*Because state boards of education frequently have direct authority for and regular reporting from schools for the deaf and blind, which typically are stand-alone districts, NASBE opted to interview two superintendents about their work. **Dr. Lou Maynus** is superintendent for the Ohio School for the Blind and the School for the Deaf. **Joel Coleman** is superintendent for the Utah Schools for the Deaf and the Blind (USDB). NASBE's Robert Hull interviewed them in November 2021.*



What should state boards know about your schools in terms of postsecondary success? How is it different from other schools?

Maynus: When we're talking about students with low-incidence [disabilities]—handicapping conditions, or for deaf students, deaf culture—a large number are not employed or have a hard time getting jobs once they leave school. Oftentimes, it's because employers do not understand how they can make it happen. We need that transition piece strengthened for our students with college and career readiness. The tie between middle and high school—we call it pre-ems or preemployment—all the way to business and industry and college needs to be strengthened. Because when we do have an employer or get in with postsecondary and get it right, our students are highly successful. It's just about providing that bit of scaffolding and those supports. We model that at both of our schools.

I have a director for teaching and learning who is blind herself. She's a great role model. And I have a director for teaching and learning who is deaf himself. They both model professionalism at the highest level. It's about those connections for college and career readiness. It's getting everyone on the same page.

Coleman: A lot of times we're focused on access for students with disabilities, but access sometimes can be no more than being an observer of what everyone else is doing when they're thriving. We need to have a mind-set that goes beyond access. When we do things like hire teachers who are blind for the blind and teachers who are deaf for the deaf, or administrators for that matter, they model the kind of engagement that their students can have in the real world, instead of just giving them the minimal experience of simply knowing what everybody else is doing.

It's difficult for policymakers to facilitate innovation and success without getting into the weeds and being too prescriptive. There's nothing harder than to not do more. [Elected officials] want to roll up their sleeves, dig in, and do everything they can to help, but sometimes all they need to do is simply remove barriers and whenever possible work with state legislators [and] at the national level to remove regulations that might box us in too much where the rubber hits the road. [They should] allow the educators who are specialists in this field and the administrators who oversee them to create an environment and a culture of thoughtful but really bold creativity. We don't have to do things the way they've always been done.



Joel Coleman
Superintendent, Utah Schools for the Deaf and Blind (USDB)



Dr. Lou Maynus
Superintendent, Ohio School for the Blind and the School for the Deaf



Special education is just right for that kind of thinking because we personalize education for each child with an individualized education program. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act creates a tremendous framework. But we also need to have the freedom to try things, to fail, and to try again. I don't think that's different from the children who are typically developing in the regular classrooms. If state boards could have that mind-set, they could create a framework and encourage a lot of innovation without trying to prescribe everything through policy. We could see some exciting approaches with students with disabilities—or with regular ed students who are also craving that personalized, competency-based approach that meets the needs of more students.

Why has your school achieved postsecondary success?

Coleman: Our state board has been very thoughtful about producing a portrait of a graduate, which I know is not unique to Utah. When NASBE talks about creating college, career, and civic success, we're just saying, "What should successful, happy adults look like? What are the baselines for that?"

In Utah, USDB has a role in the lives of the kids who are deaf, blind, or deaf-blind from birth on. We also have a whole core of early intervention teachers that go into homes and help families learn about their children. Incorporating the families into the learning process is a critical element. I realize that's an ideal standard that's really difficult, but it's something policymakers in every state should try to replicate whenever possible.

We are also fortunate to have enrichment funds that come from state trust lands. It's about \$1 million of our \$42 million operational budget, but that sliver of funding is probably the most effective resource we have because we get to be very creative with it. We get to go out and say, "What are the real needs of the families?" Our code actually requires us to provide activities in a family-friendly environment. So we incorporate the whole family unit into the learning of that child so they don't just send them to school and leave the parents without knowing what's going on.

How do expectations affect deaf and blind students?

Maynus: There's a children's book [that says] you shouldn't be expecting a fish to climb a tree. I'm very appreciative of Ohio and our approach to graduation requirements. We've really moved to be much more inclusive in looking at graduation skills. I recently went to a superintendent's meeting to look at all of the different ways to reach high school graduation, and I'm just so thrilled with the options to get to graduation because it's more personalized. It allows us to look at students and their interests and give them options, many that include workplace experience. It helps us to make sure that we're matching the student to their unique ability and helping them thrive. I absolutely believe that we [can] have high expectations, and we help our children reach those by personalizing rather than saying, "Everybody's going to be able to climb a tree, and if you can't climb a tree then you've got a problem."

Coleman: Absolutely right. We have a similar structure for graduation and different kinds of certificates and diplomas. We have an extremely high graduation rate, but we don't focus all year on graduation. It's one metric, and we measure it and take it seriously, but what's exciting now is that the education system is finally acknowledging that not everybody fits into the same box. We should not only celebrate but actively pursue different strengths that kids have everywhere while stretching them in areas that they might not have natural strengths in as well.

When you get into the real world, not everybody's evaluated on whether they're an attorney or a doctor. You can have happy, healthy, successful people that might not have any college degrees at all or who went into technical education instead. There are as many options as there are people. When we have that same mind-set, I think it helps kids a lot.

We also expect similar things from adult learners, staff, and educators. We don't expect every one of them to be the same, so in our administrative practices we try to draw different strengths from them, and we allow a personalized approach in their professional development and with microcredentials.

I've only been at USDB for about eight years, but I've seen our staff relax and feel like, "Oh, it's okay to be me." They in turn treat the children like, "You don't have to be what I want you to be. Let's find out what your best self is and pursue that."

What issues around the teacher or leader pipeline affect your schools?

Coleman: I don't know any institutions that have a more difficult time finding qualified people. Everybody knows there's a shortage of special education educators, but when you have to have expertise and endorsements in blind or deaf education, it's even more difficult.

Maynus: Absolutely. My biggest gap recently has been finding administrators. We have a small pipeline of teachers in state, but are there any schools where they are creating principals for the deaf or principals for the blind schools? I don't know of any. For our blind schools, we end up hiring content experts and adding the credentials for the teacher of visionally impaired at times. At our deaf school, because we need to have fluency in ASL and that's an extra competency that is required, there's just layers and layers of expertise, and finding that is very difficult.

Coleman: Pay, though important, is not the top issue. Studies show teachers often struggle with environment and culture. At USDB, we've created a fun, exciting place to work, but a lot of those in other districts report that there is so much in the way of compliance and a lack of support that they're not able to fully do the teaching part fully.

The second thing we're having trouble with is we struggle to get them through the licensing process, which is a self-inflicted barrier in our state. The state board is working with us in good faith to improve that, but it can be difficult to tackle licensing policies. Qualifications mean different things to different people, right? Some of our teachers seeking full licensure are doing miraculous things with the students. In a pragmatic way, they're highly qualified, but in a technical way, they aren't yet.

Maynus: One message I would like for state board members to hear is that, for example, for

a blind adult taking some of these qualifying assessments, the braille they have to know for one algebra problem might go five or six pages. By the time I read six pages, I'm not going to remember the content of that first page. That has nothing to do with my ability to teach.

The same thing for a deaf individual with the phonics assessment that they have to take in our state. We could debate and argue the need for that phonics portion for teaching our deaf children reading. That assessment is hurting some of our folks. They're not able to get certified.

Coleman: The process itself can be traumatic for them. We talk a lot about equity when it comes to students with race and other issues, but I don't think there's a way we can justify giving some currently required licensing exams because they are so deeply inequitable. That's something we ought to address immediately.

How do we improve teacher preparation in institutes of higher learning?

Coleman: We may think K-12 is steeped in tradition, but the higher ed system is exponentially more so. Most of them desire to operate in good faith, but when you start getting into the details, that's when they say, "Wait, wait. We're not comfortable." Our state board [has started] listing competencies instead of coursework in the rules that qualify programs for licensure. The higher ed folks are challenged when it comes to thinking about competency, even more than we are.

I like the term equity. My concern is that sometimes it [is] only applied to racial issues. But it's a good principle and ought to be applied as a lens to all of the important issues. If we apply it more broadly, perhaps we can get more movement with higher ed because they seem committed in principle to thinking that way as well. It's up to state boards to shepherd them with this little piece of authority they have.

Maynus: Internships and mentoring [need to cover] a larger portion of that bachelor-degree time for our preservice teachers, getting them out there much sooner so they can find out if this is for them. Is this what they want to do? We're told that if we're going to lose teachers, we will lose them within the first three years.

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Having that mentor for classroom management, strategies, uniqueness [is key]. We have medically fragile children, children with social-emotional needs, the frustration of delayed language. There's so many complex needs; a longer mentorship would really support our preservice teachers.

What would you like to see changed in IDEA?

Coleman: The first thing that comes to mind is the definition of least restrictive environment, especially for students who are deaf. Most folks in the field think that LRE means you push them in as much as possible with their nondisabled peers. That's not a bad general approach, but with the deaf, LRE can mean different things. If deaf students don't have direct language access in a specialized school with both ASL and English, they are significantly disadvantaged. We just need to recognize that.

Maynus: LRE was the first thing that popped into my head. At the blind school, orientation and mobility is a number-one priority for our students. It took a little bit for me to swallow that. I'm about reading and writing and mathematics. I am now at the point where, "Yes, orientation and mobility is a primary human necessity." Please include deaf and blind people in these conversations. While we're making these decisions, we do need the people at the table who are experiencing it.

What should a state board consider when it looks at accountability for schools for the deaf and blind?

Maynus: I believe in a data-driven system, but we can have lots of different data. I believe in attendance data, behavior. Are my lessons engaging enough that children are happy and engaged in the classroom? And what are they engaged in? I believe in outcomes. What are we producing? Are we producing students who can thrive? Tracking that post-high school data is important. I believe in teacher observations. I believe in looking at teaching strategies that are so much around all the different data, not just the summative assessment.

I'm a big proponent of pre and post. I like to do a lot of quick formative assessments. Collecting that is more of a day-to-day look at instruction. We put MAP testing into our annual reports and recorded what children had decreased, stayed the same, and increased. We look at that pre and post, rather than a specific number. Are our children moving forward? Are we seeing progress?

Coleman: I have this love-hate relationship with data. Like Lou, I'm an academic, and I realize how important data are. Often [there are] only certain authorized ways to measure that, which don't work for everyone. For the deaf, we use MAP testing also, which I think is helpful, much more than our state-approved assessments.

There are also data that may not be as standardized but are almost more valuable when we're talking about real lives. We take parent feedback data very seriously. When you get these students who are deaf or blind, or any students with disabilities for that matter, you have parents who are engaged and have sacrificed more than others will ever understand. No federal, state, or local school system can have a more important opinion on those children than their own families.

I would never say, "Let's get away from data." It's not necessarily measuring the wrong things, but it's not always measuring the right things. Ongoing, constant discussion to improve accountability systems is itself a tremendously helpful part of what we do.

Maynus: I do exit interviews with all the high school seniors, and that is such powerful data for me. We have some core questions. Would they encourage a sibling to come to this school? What would they like to see [done] differently? This year we've been looking at data through COVID and all the things that we've had to figure out, so if I'm going to sum it all up in one statement: We need to be creatively thinking about what the data are and what they tell us.

Coleman: It's a tremendous blessing to be part of the schools for the deaf and the blind because nobody else thinks they know better than us what we should be doing. In other school districts, everybody's an expert, right? We get a little bit of deference that way, and it also allows us the flexibility to sort of poke around with impunity and really pursue whatever works for each child in a very personalized way.

Are there myths about education for the deaf and the blind you'd like to put to rest?

Coleman: Our students would be the first ones to tell you they have been told their entire lives, "You can't do that." But they will also tell you, "I can do anything except hear." Or "I can do anything except see." The best way to help policymakers understand that is to support big, hairy, audacious goals with these students.

For example, our deaf and blind schools got together this last year and entered a race called the Seventy48 in Washington State. They had to paddle 70 miles in 48 hours right up through Puget Sound. But they didn't just enter the race and paddle. They built the long boats themselves and then practiced all year at a couple of big lakes. We partnered with a regular school in Colorado that had done this before.

I first assumed the deaf kids would take off with it, and a couple did, but most of the final crew was our blind students. They figured out how to set up the pacing with both sound and visual flashing because they had to paddle through the night. They paddled through storms. We even had an evacuation at one point. But in the end the state board, legislators on appropriations committees, and even families said, "Okay, our children can do anything."

We also sponsor international study abroad experiences for our juniors and seniors. They come back and say, "No offense to all of our teachers that we love, but nothing was a better experience in my 12 years of schooling than this because now I've seen for myself that I can literally do anything. I can go anywhere." They become fearless. We have to let them show what they can do and not just tell them they can do it.

Maynus: I would like to dispel a myth that schools for the deaf and blind may not be necessary, that all deaf and blind children can be equally educated in traditional schools. Having worked in an extremely large district as a senior-level administrator, at the state level, and at schools for the deaf and the blind, our schools for the deaf and the blind are in many instances the best-kept secret, with many unique, specialized services all housed together. Fiscally, I can't duplicate that across the state.

I had a dental hygienist tell me that her 17-year-old daughter who is deaf never got

to meet another deaf person until she was 16, and it was so hard for her. We want children to come for a while. They can be in their districts. They can do short-term programming, summer programming. We can be a resource for our state, a continuum of services. It doesn't have to be one or the other.

What else do state board members need to know?

Maynus: Our state board members have such vast responsibility, and their net is so big. But as much as they can learn about our students, the more they understand, the more they're able to share with others. We have two state board representatives assigned to our schools, and that makes all the difference in the world. They come out and learn about us, and they go back and share with other board members and network for us.

Coleman: USDB is fortunate to have good support from our Utah state board and from the Utah legislature. We've got three major campuses, and we're building our fourth. We've got smaller ones throughout the state and a robust outreach services program in the rural areas. When you get to know us, you'll find things that you can apply to the whole education system. We should not be considered separate. We're specialized, but the principles that bring success to us will bring success to every student and educator and administrator in the state. It's worth tremendous effort to try to package those principles of success into policies and mind-sets that can be applied broadly, and everyone will benefit from the examples that the schools for the deaf and the blind can provide. ■

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