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At Northern Voices, deaf children listen

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Northern Voices teacher Angie Schnellman "spies" through her window to greet Northern Voices students while teaching assistant Julie Paschke looks on. Northern Voices, located in Roseville, is a school for young children who are hearing impaired.

On the morning of their first day of school, the preschool students at Northern Voices sit in a cluster around their teacher. Some have attended before and are sitting with the friends they'd made the previous year, while others are brand new and a little wary of their surroundings.

Their teacher, Angie Schnellman, holds up an empty picture frame; she peers through it and announces that she can see her students through the "window" she holds. She calls their names one by one, and each child enjoys a moment in the spotlight as their teacher talks to them and smiles.

This appears to be a typical preschool classroom on the first day of school, but Northern Voices, located in St. Michaels Lutheran Church in Roseville, is anything but typical. Northern Voices is the only nonprofit school in Minnesota offering children who are deaf and hard of hearing an auditory-oral program. By the time they head for a mainstream kindergarten, these students will be able to speak and "listen" in a way similar to that of their hearing classmates.

Northern Voices uses the Moog curriculum, developed by Jean Sachar Moog of the Moog Center for Deaf Education in St. Louis. The program centers around the belief that through early, specialized intervention, children with hearing loss learn to use listening and spoken language and learn to speak. Developing the ability to speak makes it possible to communicate independently with other hearing individuals, thus providing greater independence as students advance through their school years.

Language instruction is the core of all teaching, since acquiring proficiency in reading is dependent on language.

Linda E. Andersen/Review When a person reads, they are decoding written symbols that represent an already known language. If a child does not understand the language they are decoding, then they can't understand what they're reading.

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As students sit with Schnellman, they are practicing their listening and speaking skills, although they only know they are having fun. When their teachers speak to them, they watch her closely and answer her questions with spoken words. Some of the students wear cochlear implants, which help provide a sense of sound to children who are severely hard of hearing.

But does the program actually work? Maggie Johnson, whose daughter Lucy attended preschool at Northern Voices, is absolutely convinced of Northern Voices' value. Lucy is thriving in kindergarten this year. She will see a speech therapist in her new mainstream school, but she won't need her own paraprofessional to help her navigate through her day. She won't need special education services through her schooling because she has been taught to be independent at Northern Voices.

Lucy, who has severe-to-profound hearing loss, attended Northern Voices for three years; she began the program after her mother, concerned that the three-year-old wasn't talking, took her to the doctor and discovered the hearing loss. Now attending a private elementary school, Lucy knows how to advocate for herself: she tells her friends to repeat themselves if she misses what they've said, and she can do the same with her teachers.

"She's not shy, and she has a natural stubbornness that serves her well," said Maggie. "Northern Voices taught her to be loud and proud!"

The results of Northern Voice's curriculum were "immediate," according to Maggie. "One day, she came home from school, talking! It was amazing to hear a child who didn't talk, suddenly start talking."

By the time Lucy had graduated from Northern Voices, she was developmentally at the same level as her peers with normal hearing. "I'm absolutely amazed," said her mother. "Without a doubt, she wouldn't be where she is today without this school."

Back at Northern Voices, however, the students don't realize the work that is being done. They just know they are with their friends and having fun. In fact, as Schellman's group time comes to an end, two little girls squeal as they spot teacher Tanya Gahler for the first time this school year. They launch themselves into her arms, and she laughs, squeezing them tight.

"I'm so glad to see you, too," she tells them. She uses spoken words, and they understand.

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