Summerland Secondary School Experience

In 2007, SETBC struck a committee to develop a comprehensive Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Device Curriculum which was intended to be the basis from which school districts could develop a Board/Authority Authorized (BAA) course. This would enable students to have the option of receiving high school credit for their AAC skill development. The belief was that comprehensive AAC device competency was essential for students to participate as fully as possible in their school program. Since AAC competencies are different from, and additional to, the competencies that speaking students must acquire to become effective communicators, it was believed that these competencies needed to be taught systematically and sequentially. Thus, it seemed helpful to provide a document that could be used as a provincial resource for supporting and teaching students with AAC needs in the educational system in British Columbia.

The AAC models of communicative competence by Light and communication independence by Dowden, were used as a framework for offering a well-rounded AAC device language curriculum. The resultant course was broken into four levels or units which could be taken individually. In that way, those with already developed AAC skills could challenge any unit for credit.

Mike, a student from Summerland Secondary, has completed his AAC course. He and his team, Speech Language Pathologist, Glenda Mason, resource teacher, Sue Richert, and educational assistant, Christie Young, share their experience.

To obtain approval for the AAC Curriculum as a Board/Authority Authorized (BAA) course, Sue prepared the necessary paperwork for the formal application to the school principal and school board, making reference to the document. The Director of Instruction and Assistant Superintendent visited a session with Mike and Glenda to see and learn about the device first hand, and to observe the competencies needed to successfully communicate with the device. Glenda felt this step was instrumental in the approval of the course since the school district administrators observed the complexity of Mike's Vantage and the challenges related to AAC usage.

Upon authorization, the school team met to discuss how the course would be set up and evaluated. They decided to timetable a linear course of approximately 120 class hours, worth 4 credits towards graduation. They agreed to work on Mike's individualized goals to a mastery level rather than determine course completion based on semester dates. In the end, Mike took one and a half school years to complete the course.

Glenda identified the specific skills to be taught in each of the four competency areas (operational, linguistic, social and strategic) and put together the assignments, drills and assessment for the course. She adapted tracking forms in order to use a parts-to-whole approach, so Mike could practice the building blocks of various discourse styles, which would be functional in both the classroom and social contexts. The evaluation measures used to determine competence were pre-/post-probes of untrained materials. Although the curriculum provided global competencies, these needed to be customized according to the device and student abilities. It is clearly not a "one-size fits all" course.

Christie consistently worked with Mike during one class period each term on systematic, structured lessons laid out by Glenda. This structure allowed them to carry on practice in the absence of the SLP who attempted to visit once weekly. Communication regarding progress via email was critical in keeping the SLP abreast of skill development and needs.

Mike's communication and device skills improved notably over the year and a half. Although he had prior experience using his Vantage, his typical sentences were only three to four words in length. He seldom initiated conversations and was slow to respond, having difficulties knowing what to say and how to locate vocabulary. By the end of the course, his sentences were quickly formulated and averaged seven to eight words, ranging up to thirteen. Mike learned the contour of a conversation to keep an interaction flowing, including initiating, making comments, asking questions, checking for listener understanding and wrapping up. He also took responsibility for his communication device and was eager to show off his skills to others.

For those considering using the AAC Curriculum as a BAA course, the following recommendations are made:

1) Start early. The process to get a course approved and developed for the individual student may take several months.
2) Dedicate time in the schedule for the course.
3) Dedicate an educational assistant to the course.
4) Ensure SLP support can be provided for the initial setup and for ongoing monitoring and assessment.
5) Model use of the device.
6) Empower the student to become the master of the device, encouraging independence in vocabulary selection and storage.
7) Ensure ongoing team communication.

For more information, please contact Kathy Ryan (SET-BC Region 3 Consultant) at kryan@setbc.org.