



# Collaboration Exemplar: Rural Students Learning American Sign Language



# Executive Summary

The Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind (CSDB) is a state-funded school within the Colorado Department of Education. The school was established for the purpose of providing comprehensive educational services for children, birth to age 21, who are blind/visually impaired and/or deaf/hard of hearing. The mission of the school also includes supporting individuals who are family members or who are interested in supporting individuals who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing or blind/visually impaired. In order to make sure that its services could be provided to students in rural communities who want to learn ASL, CSDB partnered with [Colorado Digital Learning Solutions](#) (CDLS), which receives funds from Colorado Empowered Learning, to create a digital American Sign Language (ASL) class and offer this class to students virtually. As a

# The Idea

Many caring and passionate people across the state are working to support Colorado's students, but despite their best efforts, may struggle to reach those in need of their services in rural communities. Through partnership with CDLS, a grantee of Colorado Empowered Learning, CSDB was able to address this challenge through the use of digital learning techniques.

# How it Works

**Determine How Digital Learning Can Be Most Impactful:** CSDB currently offers a continuum of services for students and families. They have staff members that provide outreach services and supports to schools and conduct immersion events for families. CSDB staff have created educational videos that can be viewed on YouTube and are used in the ASL classes for families about experiences with children who are deaf, hard of hearing, or visually impaired. CSDB has a legislative mandate to serve as a statewide resource. However, teaching American Sign Language to those in more remote parts of the state is a challenge, with long drive times often complicated by winter weather conditions. The development of an ASL digital course thus seemed a natural enhancement to existing programming.

**Determine How Credit Will Be Awarded:** The ASL course is offered as an elective for high school students that counts toward foreign language credits.

**Adapt the Course:** CSDB staff are experts in communicating in ASL and thus play a key role in reviewing and enhancing the curriculum. CDLS and Colorado Empowered Learning supports experts in the digital learning space who are able to translate in-person engagement strategies to those that work in a virtual setting.

**Leverage Established Systems & Structures:** The Colorado Empowered Learning program supports services that already have the systems and structures for registration, enrollment, and course delivery in place such as CDLS. The new ASL course was simply offered as an option in a catalog filled with over 200 courses that schools and districts across the state make available to their students. The Colorado Empowered Learning program (CDLS) also takes care of the logistics of registration, enrollment, and digital content delivery, making the course available via its learning management system.

**Train Staff in Digital Learning Delivery:** Since the course adaptation process was a collaborative one, it helped teachers familiarize themselves with the new format. They found that editing the course was easily done and made adjustments to the existing purchased curriculum. Moreover, they were able to identify strategies for making the materials more interactive, giving them opportunities to watch students demonstrate their sign language skills, integrating expressive communication into the curriculum. By the conclusion of the course adaptation process, CSDB's teachers felt that the technology was user friendly. They knew how to monitor and oversee student assignments and felt that they could support students in being successful.

**Establish Fee Structure:** because CSDB staff are the facilitators for the Colorado Empowered Learning/CDLS ASL course, and Colorado Empowered Learning always compensates its qualified, certified teachers for facilitation, CSDB receives compensation for staff time. These fees support the salaries of CSDB teachers and ensure that as interest and demand in the ASL course grows, they will be able to hire additional highly trained staff to support that growth. This partnership also ensures that Colorado Empowered Learning has access to the best teachers for an ASL course, allowing it to offer the highest quality instruction for students.

## Purpose & Impact

The program launched in Fall 2018 and immediately had 34 students register, demonstrating demand for the program that is only likely to grow as awareness grows over time. The course adaptation and facilitation has been handled by three teachers who use ASL as their primary mode of communication. This means that 34 students are now able to get ASL language modeling from experienced and caring adults.

CSDB has found engagement with the program promising and looks forward to expanding this approach. In the future, CSDB's staff hope to develop some of their own curriculum, offering additional classes for other individuals who may be interested in a career in deaf education or education for the blind. CSDB has observed that there is a crisis in these two fields, which both have a tremendous need for sign language

A woman with long blonde hair is smiling and holding a tablet computer. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The text is positioned in the upper left quadrant of the image.

## About Colorado Empowered Learning

Colorado Empowered Learning is the implementation support program that aims to help educators statewide combine the use of technology with great instructional practices. Program services are delivered by non-profit providers Colorado Digital Learning Solutions and iLearn Collaborative.