

**Marianne Belsky**, chief academic officer, joined the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center in 2014, bringing with her a wealth of experience in a variety of educational settings—public schools, residential programs for the deaf, and a program serving students with special needs. Before beginning her tenure as chief academic officer, she taught for 19 years, and she has served for 12 years as an administrator, including service as a K-12 principal and an instructional coach. Currently, she oversees the academic, athletic, and student life programs at Kendall Demonstration Elementary School and the Model Secondary School for the Deaf, is involved with content development with the Clerc Center's national programs, and serves on the Gallaudet University President's Executive Team.

# Co-Leadership and Community Involvement at the Clerc Center

*By Marianne Belsky and Nicole Sutcliffe*

“It is only through dialogue, deep listening, and passionate disagreement that we find our way to something larger than a singular and isolated point of view.”

~ Karen and Henry Kimsey-House, *Co-Active Leadership: Five Ways to Lead*

*Deaf education in the United States began in 1817 with the bilingual co-leadership of Laurent Clerc and Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. So, it just made sense when, in June 2018, Gallaudet University president Roberta J. Cordano officially appointed Marianne Belsky and Nicole Sutcliffe as co-leaders of the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, located on the campus of Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. Belsky is currently the Clerc Center's chief academic officer, and Sutcliffe is its chief administrative officer.*

Transformation in education—of practices, strategies, interpersonal and technological skills, etc.—is a must in order to meet the ever-evolving needs of students not only at the Clerc Center but across the country. However, as any leader will tell you, change isn't always easy.

Shared leadership has allowed us to bring our very different backgrounds and areas of expertise together to lead change in new ways. Additionally, as a bilingual, deaf/hearing team, we bring a unique perspective to our work and to the schools and programs with whom we collaborate. When we began our appointment at the Clerc Center, we recognized the need to address critical issues facing deaf education today: collaboration, leadership, equity, reimagination, and community (CLERC). As we look toward a new strategic plan for the Clerc Center, these themes remain critical both internally and for the nation.

Further, each of these themes contributes to the final Clerc Center mission: excellence in deaf education across the United States. The Clerc Center has been working on several innovative initiatives with the goal of supporting the exchange of ideas and highlighting the incredible work

*Photos by Matthew Vita, Clerc Center*



**Nicole Sutcliffe**, chief administrative officer, has served in numerous capacities since joining the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center in 2003, most recently serving as executive director from 2008-2016. Throughout her career, she has been engaged with leadership efforts across Gallaudet University, including co-chairing the University Planning and Budget Committee, serving as a member of the Crisis Leadership Team, and serving as a member of the Gallaudet University President's Executive Team since 2016. Sutcliffe's background is in finance, business administration, and deaf studies. As chief administrative officer, Sutcliffe oversees the administrative and operations arms of the Clerc Center as well as the Clerc Center's national programs and the Gallaudet University Regional Centers.

being done in schools and programs serving deaf and hard of hearing students all over the country. While we strive to provide our Kendall Demonstration Elementary School (KDES) and Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD) students with exemplary education, we know educators everywhere are striving to do the same. How can we showcase their work and share innovative and effective strategies? How can teachers in Maine and Louisiana connect on lesson plans for high school chemistry? Or a team of elementary school teachers and counselors collaborate on social-emotional learning for students in grades 3-5?

Our goal is to create both a virtual and physical space for educators nationwide to come together and exchange ideas—to have one place in which learning communities can gather to learn, engage, and share. Our new national learning and engagement portal will provide a virtual space for the exchange of ideas, professional development, learning cohorts, and on-demand learning for all aspects of education for deaf and hard of hearing children (birth-age 21). The portal will include resources from

**Above:** Reimagination and collaboration are two of the critical needs in deaf education today on which the Clerc Center's current strategic plan is focused.

educators nationwide and will highlight the many talented educators and leaders in our community.

As we look toward this new academic year, we want to share some of the work underway here at the Clerc Center.

### **Collaboration** **Southeast REAL Project in** **Collaboration with AIDB**

The Southeast Regional Early Acquisition of Language (REAL) Project, a collaboration with the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB), focuses on early language acquisition and works with families and service providers to ensure deaf and hard of hearing children are exposed to language early enough to help them succeed in life. This federally funded project began in 2019 and serves nine states in the southeastern United States: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi,



North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

Training, technical assistance, and resources are being developed and provided to early intervention professionals who work with parents and caregivers of deaf and hard of hearing babies from birth to 3. Consideration is given to the experience and knowledge of the professionals related to early language acquisition for deaf and hard of hearing children when creating the materials. Some of the projects include, but are not limited to, the creation of bilingual story sharing videos for the families, creation of early acquisition of language curriculum materials for parents and caregivers, and support for language planning in the home of the child.

The Clerc Center has also recently relocated the Gallaudet University Regional Center (GURC) for the Southern region to AIDB to create a seamless transition from early intervention services to the world of K-

12 education. As families “graduate” from the REAL program, we can provide continued learning through the work of the GURC as their child enters school. The GURC will also provide professional development and resources to professionals working with deaf, hard of hearing, and deafblind students in this region.

### **Leadership School Transformation and Leadership Team Development**

The Clerc Center is building on our school transformation initiative that began just before the COVID-19 pandemic closed our schools. We are currently partnering with several schools to begin transformation of their program, or a component of their program. At the schools’ request, the Clerc Center observed programs and developed action plans and training recommendations for transformation. The Clerc Center will provide training

**Above:** Like students across the United States, the Clerc Center has had to reimagine the delivery of quality instruction to our students in a virtual world. **Right:** As a part of transformation happening throughout the Clerc Center, teachers, staff, and administrators participate in workshops and training.

both live and online through the new portal to build an ongoing support network for lasting change. For one program, this partnership will be a transformation from a Total Communication program to a truly bilingual program; for another, change was needed in the Student Life program to develop robust and equitable programs for students after academic hours. These transformations are true partnerships between the Clerc Center and school leaders, teachers, and state-level professionals.

The Clerc Center has also developed an 11-module leadership team training series designed to provide training on critical leadership concepts, including

Building Strong Teams, Leadership and Influence, The Art of Conversation, and Continuous Improvement Planning. Through onsite sessions and virtual cohorts, this training series will work with both new and seasoned leadership teams to build their shared vision and leadership skills. By working with teams, we can build not only strong individual leaders but also leadership depth and breadth within programs.

### **Equity** **Meeting Demands for Social Change/Building a National Library of Resources**

In the midst of the pandemic, the nation also faced a racial reckoning and demands for social change. This helped accelerate our continued work of envisioning and building an equitable

equity education—from reviewing curriculum for historical accuracy, to providing brave spaces for conversation about race, to looking at the rights and contributions of the LGBTQIA+ community. The Clerc Center aims to create an online library of resources for teachers, school professionals, leaders, and families on these critical topics. As we build this library, we will be reaching out for recommendations of teachers doing extraordinary work in this area of expertise.

### **Reimagination** **Meeting Needs During a Worldwide Pandemic**

In March 2020, the pandemic hit and we, like all of you, had to immediately shift our focus to continue to meet the needs of our KDES and MSSD

for teachers in general education environments, but our teachers—and teachers all over the country—had to innovate to translate these tools to work in a bilingual, visual environment. This further emphasized the need for a central location for these types of resources and tools. Our new national learning and engagement portal will include resources on creating bilingual environments in the most common learning management systems as well as tutorials on apps and technology that benefit bilingual learners.

We have all grown our technology skills in incredible ways over the last two years. How can we, as an educational community, tap this growth to evolve the approach to teaching deaf and hard of hearing students? What can the students themselves teach us about the

world of technology and its impact on their learning? We have already changed—quickly and substantially—yet we know this is only the beginning.

### **Community** **Maintaining a National Focus in the Midst of Change**

What we have learned through our conversations with leaders in a wide variety of educational environments, with teachers in classrooms, and with students and families themselves is that we all desire true

excellence in education for deaf and hard of hearing students. By creating communities—both virtually and face to face—we can transform the educational experience and outcomes for our students.

We will be reaching out, and we hope you will join us in these efforts. Together, real change is possible.



organization both for our students and our employees. Through continued dialogue and daily change, we aim to create both short- and long-term impact for current and future students, teachers, and staff.

There are many teachers in programs all across the country doing excellent work with students on many areas of

students. Like schools across the country, we had to reimagine the delivery of quality instruction to our students in a virtual world. We, like you, watched many tutorials on various new-to-us technologies, and none of these tutorials considered the bilingual classroom or the bilingual learner. Resources were being released every day