THINKING MAPS®
CASE STUDY

The Power of a Shared Visual Language for Learning
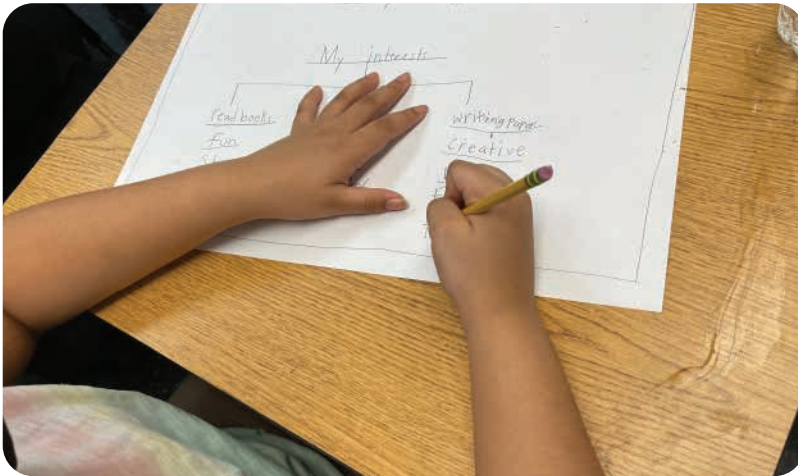
Lexington School for the Deaf, East Elmhurst, New York

SNAPSHOT

Lexington School for the Deaf

- 241 students
- State-supported school for students with severe/profound hearing loss
- 158 teaching and non-teaching staff
- ~50% English Learners

Language is a critical foundation for learning. For students at Lexington School for the Deaf, Thinking Maps is a shared visual language that helps all students participate and succeed, regardless of their previous language experiences. Thinking Maps has also become an essential part of the school culture, fostering communication and collaboration for students, teachers and non-teaching staff. The school's commitment to ongoing training and support and a strong implementation of the Thinking Maps Learning Community (TMLC) laid the groundwork for success.

A FOCUS ON LEARNING AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Students at Lexington School for the Deaf come to the school with a wide range of language abilities and needs. The population includes students proficient in both English and American Sign Language (ASL), students with limited English proficiency, and students with virtually no language background at all. With programs for students from preschool to age 21 and families speaking more than 100 languages, the school must address a wide range of language and learning needs. The teaching staff includes both Deaf and hearing teachers.

Jane Moran, the Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction, explains, "Many of our students are

> "I've noticed a huge change in how our students talk about their learning using Thinking Maps. Even at the preschool level, they are able to explain their thinking and why they are using a particular Map. We didn't see those kinds of conversations before."
>
> - Jane Moran, Executive Director, Lexington School for the Deaf
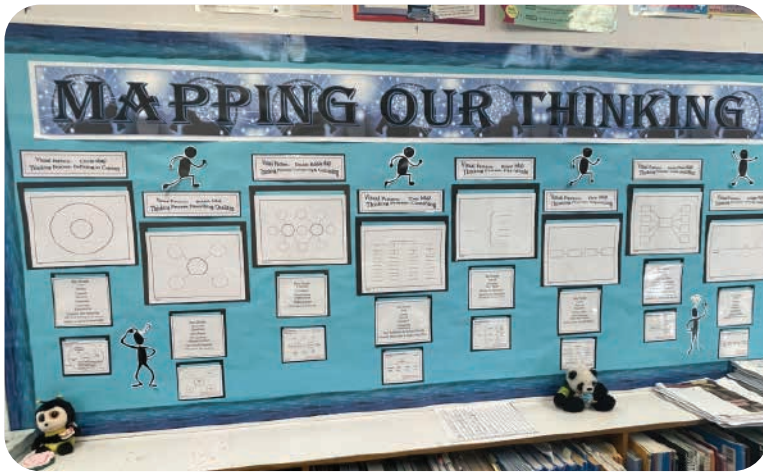
severely language deprived. 90% of Deaf children come from hearing families, and it's often hard for parents to communicate with their children. Some parents learn American Sign Language, and some don't. Some families do not speak English. Some of our students arrive without knowing their home language, either spoken or signed."

The school has a preschool program for ages 3-5 along with K-5 elementary school, 6-8 middle school, and 9-12 high school programs. The school also has a large Foreign Language Transition Program (FLTP) for older students arriving with limited or no English proficiency. Many of these students come from home countries where they had no access to education for Deaf students. Some students have multiple physical disabilities or learning challenges, including students with low IQ and students with low vision in addition to hearing loss.

The school needed teaching and learning strategies that would work for all students, regardless of language background. They also wanted to foster a more collaborative environment among both teaching and non-teaching staff. Thinking Maps met both needs by providing visual tools for students that struggled to communicate in any language and a communication bridge that cuts across all the languages used by students and staff.

A SHARED VISUAL LANGUAGE FOR THINKING, LEARNING AND COMMUNICATING

Thinking Maps is a shared visual language that unifies the school and enables efficient communication and learning. Frank Dattolo, the upper school principal at Lexington, says, "Deaf students are very visual learners. In the past, we've used a lot of graphic organizers. But Thinking Maps are different. Each Thinking Map is targeted to a specific cognitive area. These are the basic cognitive skills our students need to develop. It has helped with metacognition."

Thinking Maps also gives teachers a visual framework for presenting information to their students. Frank explains, "Most of our teachers are hearing. And while they may have an understanding of deafness, having a common visual language has helped us become more unified and given teachers a framework to see how they can better organize information for our students."

Thinking Maps are not just tools used to support and enhance students' academic experiences. The Maps have also provided a critical means of communication for students who are still developing basic language skills. For example, one family, who spoke Mandarin,

> **"Thinking Maps allows teachers to be more confident in communicating with students. Some information can be so complex. Thinking Maps helps them get to the crux of the most relevant information. It's a tool that allows communication to flow more freely between teachers and students."**
>
> -Frank Dattolo, Upper School Principal, Lexington School for the Deaf

Código para niños sordos

Semana de espíritu

Club de drama

Relaciones culturales entre los estudiantes y sus países

Divertidas actividades extracurriculares para interactuar entre entrenadores. y amigos

Cuando te conviertes en Bluejay

Programa de Habla y Lenguaje

Programa de Empleo Juvenil de Verano

Celebrar graduaciones

Conocer maravilloso Presentadores que visitan Lex

Mitin de preparación

Exploración de carrera

Tazón académico

Equipos de apoyo

was struggling to find a way to explain an upcoming eye surgery to their child, who is both deaf and legally blind. His teacher researched the surgery and worked with the student to create a Flow Map with simple pictures. The process helped him understand what he could expect during the surgery, which reduced his anxiety and led to a more positive experience.

Staff members also use Thinking Maps for communication, collaboration and planning. Thinking Maps have made it easier for multiple people to collaborate on Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs). Teachers use Map Builder, part of TMLC, for lesson planning and creating unit and annual plans. All administrators and support staff use Thinking Maps for planning and communication, too—including finance, pupil services, human resources and the athletic department.

SUPPORTING WHOLE-SCHOOL CHANGE WITH COACHING AND TMLC

Lexington leaders prioritized training, coaching and support to ensure the success of their implementation. When Cindy Roberts was appointed the Supervisor of Professional Development and Assessment in 2021, she also took responsibility for Lexington's Thinking Maps implementation. "We had already been using Thinking Maps for a few years, but it was inconsistent, especially during the pandemic," she explains. "When we came back to the building after the pandemic closures, we decided to make Thinking Maps a priority."

> "Thinking Maps are a great tool for collaboration, because they allow everyone to see your thinking at a glance. It's just an easier way to organize information."
>
> - Cindy Roberts, Supervisor of Professional Learning and Assessment, Lexington School for the Deaf

That process began by introducing (or reintroducing) Thinking Maps to all teachers over several weeks in the fall of 2021. Ultimately, Cindy trained nearly every adult in the building, including instructional assistants, support staff and back-office staff. The use of Thinking Maps in the classroom was reinforced through weekly meetings with each department from September to June. "The goal was to make sure Thinking Maps are an everyday tool, not just an occasional thing," Cindy says. The ongoing coaching and support Cindy provided have increased acceptance and use of Thinking Maps across all grade levels.

TMLC has also been an important element in the success of Thinking Maps at Lexington. The online courses in TMLC have been instrumental in training office staff and teaching assistants, who do not have defined professional development time. Teachers, administrators and office staff also use Map Builder for planning and collaboration. Cindy helped to create a framework for lesson plans and units of study in Map Builder that is now used by all teachers.

Since the reintroduction of Thinking Maps in 2021, use of Thinking Maps and TMLC in the classroom and beyond have soared. The leadership team is committed to keeping it that way. Jane says, "We're fully invested in Thinking Maps. This is not something that will end. The goal is to have Thinking Maps just be a natural everyday part of everything we do."

How did Lexington School for the Deaf reinvigorate their Thinking Maps implementation?

Annual rollout of Thinking Maps to all teaching staff

Weekly departmental meetings with teachers for planning, coaching and support

Deliberate modeling and use of Thinking Maps for planning and collaboration by administrators

Training for teaching assistants and office staff through TMLC

Use of Map Builder for lesson and unit planning

Advanced training with *Write from the Beginning... and Beyond* and *Path to Proficiency*

→ **Successful integration of Thinking Maps and TMLC into daily school life**