FACILITATING CLEAR SPEECH

WHAT IS ARTICULATION?
Articulation refers to moving the lips and tongue to produce speech sounds in words. Speech sounds are learned in an orderly sequence through about the seventh year. When students first acquire new speech sounds, their production is often inconsistent. Overtime, production of the sounds becomes more consistent.

Vowel sounds are learned earlier than consonants and are less likely to be misarticulated. The consonants most likely to be misarticulated by school-age children are /s/, /r/, and /l/.

WHAT TO DO WHEN A STUDENT'S SPEECH IS UNCLEAR?
As children acquire more sophisticated language, more complicated sounds are learned and longer words are produced requiring more fine-motor control. By the time most children enter school, their speech is intelligible to an unfamiliar listener. However, some students take longer to develop speech that can be understood in this environment.

For the student whose speech is highly unintelligible, attempts to speak may be very frustrating. As such, he/she may choose not to talk very much. Teachers who are unable to understand the student's efforts at communication may also feel frustrated. Here are a few suggestions that may help when interacting with students who have unclear speech:

- **Give choices.** As the student becomes more proficient at producing the speech sound correctly (i.e., more than 50% of the time), when he/she makes the sound in error, provide a choice of the correct production versus his/her production (e.g., "Is it sun or thun?").

- **Avoid direct correction.** When a student says a word incorrectly, avoid directly pointing it out. Acceptance of a student's attempts to communicate is essential.

- **Repeat and model good speech.** When a student makes a speech error, repeat the sound, word or phrase using a slower rate and emphasize the correct production (e.g., if the student says, "I want a tutu," you could say, "Oh, you'd like a cookie?"). Modelling correct speech allows the student to feel successful because his/her message is understood. Eventually, the student may begin to self-correct.
• **Ask for a 'replay'.** If a student says something that you cannot understand, ask him/her to repeat the message so that you have a second chance to interpret what he/she said (e.g., “I didn’t hear what you said. Could you say it again?”).

• **Watch and learn.** Look for gestures, contextual and environmental cues that might give you a hint as to what the student is saying.

• **Ask for a demonstration.** If you are unable to understand the message, ask the student to show you (e.g., say, “Can you show me?”). When you learn what he/she means, model the correct production (e.g., “Oh, you want to play with the big train.”).

• **Finally, redirect.** If the student is unable to convey his/her message and can’t show you what he/she means, redirect (e.g., say, “I know what you are telling me is important, let’s try again later.”).

**THE FOLLOWING GENERAL SUGGESTIONS MAY ALSO BE HELPFUL:**

• **Expect errors.** All children and adults make speech errors. Children normally take 7 to 8 years to learn to say all English sounds correctly.

• **Be a good listener.** Listen to what the student is saying, not how it is said. Correcting errors can negatively impact his/her confidence and may result in him/her speaking less.

• **Give praise.** If the student uses the speech sound correctly, commend him/her. Give the student credit for trying.

• **Promote good hearing.** Good hearing is essential for the development of normal articulation. If a student’s hearing is of possible concern, parents may wish to discuss the possibility of a hearing test from a qualified audiologist with their family doctor.

• **Work with the Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP).** When an SLP evaluates the student, he/she identifies the articulation needs and develops a therapy plan. The SLP will share information about the student’s progress and may ask you to work with him in the classroom. Working as a team will help to guarantee the student’s overall school success.