



An Open Letter to President-Elect Barack Obama



Dear President-Elect Obama,

Like millions of Americans and citizens of the world, I offer you heartfelt congratulations on your monumental election victory. Your campaign of “hope” has inspired millions young and old here and abroad.

Your theme, “We are One”, has resonated throughout the Deaf community. As you know, our community is not at all homogeneous. There are deaf people of every social group, age, and color. A wonderful microcosm of the Deaf community may be found at Gallaudet University, the only liberal arts college in the world geared for deaf and hard of hearing students. You may like to know that it was President Abraham Lincoln who signed the Gallaudet College charter in 1864.

The American Deaf community has had a long and proud history in our country. Our fight for basic civil rights has been well documented in numerous books and videos. Perhaps the most recent popular documentary on the history of Deaf people is “*Through Deaf Eyes*”.

In the past 50 years, deaf and hard of hearing individuals in this country have made great strides in becoming full participants of our society. Laws such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act have outlawed discrimination against deaf people and ensured deaf people everywhere access to information through sign language interpreters and captioning. Although thousands of deaf people continue to receive public assistance or are underemployed, more and more deaf people today are obtaining higher degrees and entering the highly skilled work force.

The once insurmountable barrier in telephone communication for deaf people was finally overcome with the invention of an acoustic coupler in 1964, which paved the way for communication

between teletypewriters over telephone lines. It was not until the 1980’s that telephone relay service became readily available to everybody, deaf and hearing individuals. Today, video relay service has further leveled the communication playing field for deaf people.

The greatest challenge for deaf children as a special education group today continues to be the misapplication of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) law. The major thrust of the law is that all disabled children be placed in regular classrooms. For many special education students, this is the least restrictive environment. However, for many deaf students, this local neighborhood school placement is the most restrictive environment.

Deaf students everywhere need access to classroom instruction which is fully and naturally accessible to their eyes and ears. That is, all students must learn academic subjects in a “maximized learning environment”. Often this means a teacher with fluent American Sign Language and English skills and a critical mass of deaf and hard of hearing peers who sign American Sign Language and speak English.

There are thousands of deaf students today in public schools where they are the only deaf student in the whole school. Often they experience the dreaded “Velcro Syndrome”. Students are unable to fully interact with their peers or their teachers as they must follow their interpreter around all day. This interpreter is the child’s teacher, teacher aide, counselor, and best friend. This experience of isolation is numbing and demeaning. The “least restrictive environment” definition in IDEA needs to be changed for deaf students so that their educational placements are language-driven, not location-driven.

On a positive note, more and more deaf infants and toddlers now receive

“intervention services” as early hearing loss detection equipment is now widely available at birthing hospitals and immediate

referrals are made to local infant and toddler programs and center schools for deaf students. Early language acquisition remains the single most important gift that parents and early intervention professionals give to a deaf toddler.

As you are forming your administration, I strongly recommend that your team contact the National Association of the Deaf (www.nad.org), Conference of Educational Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf (www.ceasd.org), American Society of Deaf Children (www.deafchildren.org), and Telecommunications for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Inc. (www.tdi-online.org) for expert consultation on educational, employment, housing, health care, and communication access solutions. These organizations have a history of outstanding deaf leadership, and have a close working relationship with the Deaf community as well as the United States government. Many of its members are community organizers and stand ready to work with you and your team.

It is with much hope that the collective march of all deaf and hard of hearing Americans towards full equality will accelerate during your presidency. It is not until all Americans are full participants of our great society that we will truly be equal.

Godspeed,

*James E. Tucker
Superintendent*