

Dispelling the Myths and Celebrating the Strengths of Schools for the Deaf

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Parents' dreams for their children are universal: attend a good school, get a great education, and grow up to be healthy, happy, productive adults. For most, the decision about the school their children will attend is an easy one: the vast majority of children attend the schools closest to their homes.

For a child who is deaf, the decision is suddenly not so simple. It can even be downright overwhelming. Instead of one obvious choice, parents often have a contin-

uum of options, including general or special education at the neighborhood school, a center-based site, or a state School for the Deaf, which typically has both day school and residential components. While each has advantages and disadvantages, this article explores the strengths of a School for the Deaf, and debunks some myths associated with this setting.

Let's start with some myths often used to steer parents away from Schools

for the Deaf, and examine them in light of current practices.

Safety: Schools for the Deaf, particularly because of residential components, are held to a higher standard than local public schools because the students live and learn in a 24-hour environment. Students are under close supervision and often have much stricter rules than in other school settings. Safety training

is a top priority. For example, all staff at the Washington School for the Deaf must participate in 16 hours of safety training annually, and new staff must complete 32 hours of safety training within their first three months. No such requirement exists for local school employees.

Additionally, Schools for the Deaf typically have solid programs to train staff in child abuse and neglect and how to report it, with a focus on not only the physical but also the mental well-being of students. If you have any questions about the school—you will find that the school welcomes the opportunity to share its policies, procedures, and training information.

Inferior Education: Students who receive early services and support and



then attend a School for the Deaf in preschool develop at the same pace as their hearing peers. Similarly, students who transfer to a School for the Deaf during their early elementary years achieve outcomes commensurate with hearing peers. Sadly, such schools are often a choice made quite late in a child's educational life. The average age of children transferring from public school is 12–13. Many are significantly delayed in language and academics and spend the rest of their middle school and high school years struggling to make up this deficit. In spite of this, Schools for the Deaf often offer these late-arriving students an opportunity to develop functional academics, career and work training, and a positive self-identity.

Using ASL Inhibits Speech and English Language Acquisition: Some parents and professionals believe learning ASL will interfere with or inhibit the child's acquisition of spoken and written English. There has never been data supporting this, and Laura Ann Petitto's 2009 research confirms this is not true. As most countries know, being bilingual or trilingual enhances a child's cognitive development and is a strong contributor to success as a student and adult. Learning ASL as a first or second language stimulates the language pathways in the brain. There is no research or anecdotal evidence to indicate learning ASL has anything other than a positive effect on a child's educational achievement, nor does it inhibit the acquisition of speech. It is ironic that "baby sign" is seen as a best practice for hearing children, but is not allowed for many deaf



children.

Parents Will “Lose” Their Child:

Some parents are afraid if their child goes to a School for the Deaf as a residential student, they will lose the child once the child discovers the Deaf community. Clearly, the environment at the school promotes a unique common experience, camaraderie, and friendship among students and staff; however, this only serves to strengthen family relationships where communication, love and engagement exist in the home. The expression, “blood is thicker than water,” is just as true with deaf children.

Some of the characteristics of a high-performing School for the Deaf that make this a rich educational environment are:

Highly-Qualified Staff: More than 90% of teachers at Schools for the Deaf have master's degrees in deaf education as well as undergraduate degrees in content areas such as elementary education, science or math. The services staff is also fully prepared in their area of expertise (i.e., counseling, school psychology, audiology, speech language pathology) and is able to communicate directly with the students in ASL. Para-

educators, nursing staff, and residential supervisors as well as administrators are fluent in ASL and trained to work with deaf and hard of hearing students.

Communication Accessibility: At most Schools for the Deaf, the goal is for every employee to have knowledge of ASL, with most staff being fluent. This adds to the safety of the environment, and provides students with direct access to information and support. In other words, this unrestricted access to language and communication offers the students the same access to adults and peers as hearing children have everyday in their schools, and encourages them to become culturally competent bilinguals.

Intensive Services: Most Schools for the Deaf have a critical mass of students and can offer a full range of services such as classroom instruction from a teacher of deaf students, direct communication between students and teachers/related services staff rather than relying on an interpreter, related services staff located in the same building or on the same campus, highly-skilled cochlear implant and speech therapy support, nursing, and comprehensive residential services. This is often a challenge in local schools, especially when there are only a few deaf/hard of hearing students in a district.

Small School Advantages: We remember the advantages of the small coun-

try schools that used to be the norm: more individual attention, a sense of community and belonging, strong relationships with adults, full opportunity for participation in all aspects of school life. At Schools for the Deaf, the small class sizes and caring, deeply committed staff make it virtually impossible for a student to fall through the cracks.

Continuity of Curriculum: Schools for the Deaf usually have curriculum staff whose role is to pursue best practices in instruction, as well as ensure the K-12 curriculum is aligned from one grade level to the next and is in agreement with state and federal standards. This is possible because all school programs are centralized with common expectations. Schools for the Deaf often have additional staff resources to support instruction such as ASL, reading, math, science, social studies and transition services.

Peer Interactions: Research demonstrates peers have a significant influence on language acquisition. In a School for the Deaf, students communicate directly with each other, engage in small or large group discussions, and fully participate in collaborative learning activities. The result is students acquire age appropriate social and academic language skills.

A Focus on Abilities Rather Than Disabilities: Students at a School for the Deaf feel, and are, normal. Deaf and hard of hearing students want to

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be like everyone else. They *don't* want to stand out; they *do* want to participate in all school activities. At a School for the Deaf, they aren't the only ones with interpreters, hearing aids or cochlear implants. Rather, they are just kids, focusing on school work, building relationships, playing sports, developing leadership skills, and getting the most out of their school experiences.

Extracurricular Activities: Athletics, clubs, and social activities are what keep many students, hearing or deaf, in school. These opportunities help students develop their self-esteem, personal skills and interests, and instill a sense of belonging. A School for the Deaf is typically small enough that virtually every child is welcomed and valued on athletic teams, can be involved with student leadership, and can fully explore his or her interests.

Deaf Role Models Motivate and Inspire Students: Deaf and hard of hearing students need to learn from and develop relationships with deaf adults. This affords students the opportunity to learn about themselves and their own potential. Deaf adults who have successfully navigated the educational pathways of their own life experiences are perfectly suited to guide, mentor and support students as they explore their interests and set their goals for the future. Schools for the Deaf have excellent deaf instructors, residential staff, related services staff, and employees in other departments throughout the campus who provide students with clear examples of what they are capable of, and help mentor students in achiev-

ing their dreams.

Parent Support: Schools for the Deaf provide support in learning sign language, helping parents meet other parents of deaf children and successful deaf adults, and accessing information to better prepare parents in meeting their deaf children's needs.

Accurate Assessment and Capacity to Report on Student Outcomes: Schools for the Deaf have professionals trained in administering and interpreting assessments for deaf students. Staff with this unique training are rarely available at local public schools. Because Schools for the Deaf tend to be small, the staff is able to monitor student performance closely. Local public schools or districts typically do not have the capacity to collect this information; therefore, it is almost impossible to know how well deaf students are doing as a group.

In the past 40 years, CEASD has seen the deaf education field change considerably through advancements in technology, instructional practices and educational outcomes, the advent of bilingual education, increased focus on student safety and social/emotional development along with many other innovations. CEASD believes that one thing remains constant: Schools for the Deaf can provide language-rich, high-quality educational and leadership opportunities where deaf and hard of hearing students and their families receive the services and support they like their hearing peers – are entitled to and so clearly deserve.

CEASD's website is at www.ceasd.org.