

ASDC/Endeavor 2013

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

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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 parents, the decision about which school their children will attend is an easy one—the neighborhood school. Some may consider private schools or homeschooling, but the vast majority of children attend the school closest to their home.

What happens when the child is deaf? The decision is suddenly not so simple. In fact, it can be downright overwhelming! Instead of one obvious choice, parents often have what is called a continuum of options for their child's educational program. These options include general or special education in the neighborhood school, a center-based site, or the state School for the Deaf, which typically has both day school and residential components. While each of these options has advantages and disadvantages, the purpose of this article is to explore the strengths of a School for the Deaf and debunk some of the myths associated with this setting.

Let's start by looking at some of the myths that are often used to steer parents away from a School for the Deaf and examine them in light of current practices.

- **Safety:** Schools for the Deaf, particularly because of their 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 both in school and in the residential program than they had in previous school settings. Safety training is a top priority. For example, in Washington State all staff at the School for the Deaf must participate in 16 hours of safety training annually, and new staff must complete 32 hours of safety training within the first three months of employment. No such requirement exists for local school employees. Additionally, Schools for the Deaf typically have strong programs to train staff in what constitutes child abuse and neglect

and how to report it, with a strong focus on not only the physical but the mental well being of students. If you have any questions about the school in your state—ask! You will find your School for the Deaf welcomes the opportunity to share its policies, procedures, and training information with you.

- Inferior Education: Students that receive early services and support and then enter the School for the Deaf in preschool develop at the same pace as their hearing peers. Similarly, students that transfer to a School for the Deaf during the early elementary years, achieve outcomes commensurate with hearing peers. Sadly, Schools for the Deaf are often a choice made quite late in the child's educational life. The average age of children transferring from public school to a School for the Deaf is 12 - 13. Many of these students are significantly delayed in language and academics and will 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 are often able to offer these late arriving students an opportunity to develop functional academics, career and work training, and a positive self-identity.
- The Use of ASL at Schools for the Deaf Inhibits Speech and English Language Acquisition: Not all Schools for the Deaf offer a bilingual educational environment; however, for those that do, some parents and professionals believe learning ASL will interfere with or inhibit the child's acquisition of spoken and written English. We have always known there was no data to support this, and Laura Ann Petitto's recently published research (2009) confirms it. As most countries in the world know, being bilingual or trilingual enhances a child's cognitive development and is a strong contributor for 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 for those students able to develop spoken language. It is ironic that "baby sign" is seen as a best practice for hearing children, but still "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 and becomes a residential student, they will lose them as a part of their family when they discover the Deaf Community. Clearly, the environment at a School for the Deaf 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 as with hearing.

Now let’s consider some of the characteristics of a high performing School for the Deaf that make this a rich educational environment.

- 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 related services staff is also fully prepared in their area of discipline (i.e., counseling, school psychology, audiology, speech language pathology) and is able to communicate directly with the students using 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 some knowledge of ASL, with most staff being fluent. This adds to the safety of the environment, as well as provides students with direct access to information and support when the need arises. In other words, this unrestricted access to language and communication offers the deaf and hard of hearing students the same access to adults and peers as hearing children have every day 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 are able to offer the full range of services students need such as classroom instruction from a Teacher of the Deaf, 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 country 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. Schools for the Deaf share these same

characteristics. 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 under a single administration with common expectations. Schools for the Deaf frequently have additional staff resources to support instruction such as ASL, reading, math, science, social studies and transition specialists.
- 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 group discussions, and fully participate in collaborative learning activities. The result is students acquire age appropriate social and academic language skills.
- The Chance to Focus on Abilities Rather Than Disabilities: Students at a School for the Deaf have the opportunity to feel normal. Deaf and hard of hearing students want to be like everyone else. They DON'T want to stand out; they DO want to be able 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. They are just kids, focusing on school work, building relationships, playing sports, developing leadership skills, and getting the most out of their school experience.
- Extra Curricular Activities: Athletics, clubs, and social activities are what keep many students in school. This is true for hearing and deaf students alike. These opportunities help students develop their self-esteem, personal skills and interests, and instill in them a sense of belonging. Unlike a larger public school, the School for the Deaf is typically small enough that virtually every child is welcomed and valued on the sports teams, has the potential to be the homecoming queen or president of the class and can fully explore his or her avocational 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 deaf and hard of hearing 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 that provide students with a clear example of what they are capable of and help mentor students to achieve their dreams.

- Support for Parents: Schools for the Deaf provide support in learning sign language, helping parents meet other parents of deaf children and successful deaf adults, and accessing other information to better prepare them to meet the needs of their deaf child.
- 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 is rarely available in local public schools. Because Schools for the Deaf tend to be small, they are able to monitor performance of students closely. Local public schools or districts 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 field of Deaf Education change considerably through the advancement 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 can receive the services and support they –like their hearing peers—are entitled to and so clearly deserve.

About the Author: Jane Mulholland is currently the Superintendent of the Washington School for the Deaf (WSD) in Vancouver, WA. WSD is part of the Washington State Center for Childhood Deafness and Hearing Loss (CDHL). Jane has been in the field of Deaf Education since 1974, serving as Superintendent and other educational leadership positions at the Oregon School for the Deaf, the Oregon Department of Education, and the Arizona Schools for the Deaf and Blind. She also founded a school improvement consulting business in 2007 called Planning for Student Success. Jane is a member of the CEASD Board.