

## The Child First Campaign

As part of its Child First campaign, CEASD has developed a proposed bill, the Alice Cogswell Act of 2013. If passed this bill would amend the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in ways that would "promote and better ensure delivery of high quality special education and related services to students who are deaf or hard of hearing." The bill addresses students' language and communication needs, state plans, the continuum of alternative placements, qualified personnel, natural environments, and other issues. To learn more and show support for this proposed bill, go to <http://www.ceasd.org/child-first/alice-cogswell>.

**What:** Child First is a national campaign to ensure that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) appropriately addresses the language, communication, and educational needs of deaf and hard of hearing children.

**Who:** Child First was developed and is being driven by national organizations that advocate for the educational rights of deaf and hard of hearing children.

**Why:** At the time IDEA (then the Education for All Handicapped Children Act) was passed in 1975, many children with disabilities were precluded from going to school, either by law or because schools were not equipped to teach them. IDEA changed that by requiring states, local school districts, and schools to provide them with an individualized education.

The main principles include:

- **Individualized Education Program (IEP):** A program tailored to the child that supports the child's progress in the general education curriculum. For deaf and hard of hearing children this includes consideration of language and communication.
- **Evaluation:** A child's IEP is based on information gathered through an appropriate evaluation. The evaluation must be performed by qualified personnel.
- **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE):** To the maximum extent appropriate students with disabilities are educated with students who are not disabled.
- **Procedural Safeguards:** The student and his parents have certain rights that are protected by law, such as the right to be involved in developing the IEP and the right to be part of the team that decides placement.

In order to meet deaf and hard of hearing students' educational needs, programs must first address their language and communication needs. However, today implementation of IDEA pays little attention to this issue. Instead, IDEA implementation often focuses on the location where the child is being educated, rather than the supports and services available at that location to meet the needs of the child. Child First is attempting to shift the focus of IDEA back to the individual needs of the child. It is attempting to ensure that deaf and hard of hearing children's IEPs and educational placement facilitate full language and communication development, which will lead to greater educational success.

It is time to ensure that deaf and hard of hearing students across the United States experience the same kind of access to language development, social interaction, and academic opportunities experienced by their hearing peers.

# Statement of Principles

Equality and Quality Education for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children:

A Statement of Child First Principles

Quality access to language and communication

is a human and educational right.

This right is fundamental and indispensable in the provision of a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for deaf and hard of hearing children under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Sadly, however, the implementation of IDEA does not adequately protect this right.

Language deprivation is disabling.

On-going access to language and communication is taken for granted for every hearing child and is essential for healthy cognitive functioning and development. Without such access, deaf and hard of hearing children lose the opportunity to become thinking, literate, self-sufficient individuals. Instead, they experience disadvantages and delays that can become impossible to erase. It is diminished exposure to language and communication – not being deaf or hard of hearing per se – that disables a deaf or hard of hearing child. Educational programs must ensure that deaf and hard of hearing children have opportunities for language development, on-going interactive access, and age-appropriate use of language. Language and communication are central to the educational progress of deaf and hard of hearing children.

Research supports need for full access to all interactions.

Research shows that children and adults learn more from human, social interactions and active learning than from anything else. Children need to have access to and be connected with a variety of peers and adults with whom they can communicate spontaneously and effectively. As fundamental as this issue is, such genuine opportunities are all too often elusive for the deaf or hard of hearing child at school.

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) determines the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for a child served under IDEA.

The IEP identifies the unique educational needs of the child, which ultimately leads to the choice of placement. IDEA requires a continuum of alternative placements to be available, as any single placement cannot be the LRE for all students. Because LRE varies by student – a setting that meets the needs of one may not necessarily meet the needs of another - all placements on the continuum, including specialized programs and schools, are equally valid and necessary. Discussions about LRE that focus solely on location without taking into account the quality of education, support services and social interactions a child experiences in that environment are misguided.

One size does not fit all.

As with other students receiving their education through special education, a “one size fits all” approach cannot be used to determine a deaf or hard of hearing child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals or subsequent placement. Each child’s unique strengths and needs must drive these. Every child must have an education and learning environment that goes beyond mere physical inclusion – it must provide accessible language development and interaction opportunities so that the child is a true member of the school community.