

**Testimony to the MORE Commission**  
**Jeffrey S. Bravin, Executive Director**  
**American School for the Deaf**  
**December 8, 2014**

**Guiding Principles at ASD**

We believe that to effectively educate students in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it is vital to have strong and meaningful collaboration with families, local school districts, service providers, educational community leaders and partners, as well as funders.

We believe that an inviting, safe, and healthy educational environment that promotes full communication access and effectively utilizes technology for our students and educational partners is essential to enhance learning and quality of life.

We believe that ASD is on the cutting edge of innovation by being a vibrant learning organization and collaborative partner able to embrace change. As a learning organization, we must be able to demonstrate agility, flexibility in approach, and the capacity to generate and integrate new knowledge, pedagogy, and skills into best practice and ongoing professional growth and development.

We believe that all children and youth have the capacity to learn and that the educational process must take into consideration **their unique language and communication needs and learning styles**. The learning opportunity must maximize the potential of each student in an accessible language and communication rich educational environment.

**Deaf Children Learn Differently**

Primarily, deaf children receive and process information visually, rather than auditorially like their hearing peers. Additionally, deafness is a low-incidence disability, and as such, often misunderstood. A number of factors are considered in making a decision on the type of educational placement for a student who is deaf or hard of hearing. In concert with parents and the Planning and Placement Team (PPT), the local school districts are the gatekeepers of special education services, are responsible for resource allocation, and ultimately determine a student's placement. They are required to follow federal and state special education regulations mandating that a child be educated in the "least restrictive environment." Least restrictive environment refers to "an educational environment which meets the needs of a child requiring special education and related services as set forth in the child's Individual Education Plan (IEP) and which, to the maximum extent appropriate to the child's needs, ensures that the child will be educated with children not requiring special education and related services." (A Parent's Guide to Special Education in Connecticut, Connecticut State Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education and Pupil Services, 2007.)

A white paper entitled *Meeting the Communication Needs of Students with Hearing, Vision or Speech Disabilities*, issued jointly by the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education, said the following, "Under Title II of the Americans With Disabilities Act, schools, must, without charge ensure that communication with students with disabilities is as effective as communication with students without disabilities, giving primary consideration to students and

parents in determining which auxiliary aids and services are necessary to provide such effective communication.”

When parents, the PPT team and local school districts are determining the appropriate educational placement for a student, “least restrictive environment” is one of their central considerations. As stated in the Individual Education Program form, “For students who are deaf or hard of hearing, the PPT has determined (after considering the student’s language and communication needs, opportunities for direct communication with peers and professional personnel in the child’s language and communication mode, academic level, and full range of needs, including opportunities for direct instruction in the student’s language and communication mode, and considering whether the student requires assistive technology devices and services) that the following are required.” This would include placement and services at a center school. This means that a continuum of educational options will be looked at from a regular public school setting to a center school for the deaf.

However, by and large, educators of the deaf and the deaf community would advocate that primary consideration be given to language and communication development and access, and being educated among one’s peers; otherwise an educational setting thought to be the least restrictive environment for some children may actually be the most restrictive environment. It also implies that students with multiple special needs will more likely be considered for placement at a center school. In fact, ASD has experienced an increase in the percentage of its center-based student population who has special needs in addition to their hearing loss.

ASD has worked collaboratively with the Connecticut Coalition for the Education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students to develop a Language and Communication Plan. This document serves as a platform for appropriate educational placement for deaf and hard of hearing students, and it is essential that we educate LEA’s and SPED Directors regarding the specifics and provide assistance in implementation. (See below)

*Effective July 1, 2012, Section 11 of Public Act (P.A.) 12-173, entitled an Act Concerning Individualized Education Programs and Other Issues Relating to Special Education, requires that the individualized education program (IEP) of any child identified as deaf or hard of hearing must include a language and communication plan (LCP) developed by the child’s planning and placement team (PPT). Any child with an identified hearing loss, regardless of whether deafness or hard of hearing is the primary disability category, must have a LCP which documents the considerations and/or actions discussed and identified by the child’s PPT.*

The LCP must address:

- The primary language or mode of communication used by the child;
- Opportunities for direct communication with peers and professional personnel in the primary language or mode of communication for the child;
- Educational options available to the child;

- The certifications and qualifications of teachers and other professional personnel required to administrate the child's LCP, including the teachers' or professionals' proficiency in the primary language or other mode of communication for the child;
- The accessibility of academic instruction, school services and extra-curricular activities for the child
- The necessity and use of appropriate accommodations and modifications including assistive devices accessibility in the child's physical environment

Although there are increased educational opportunities in public schools, nationally, children and youth who are deaf and hard of hearing generally continue to have low academic achievement because of language and communication challenges and delays that occur by not being placed in a linguistically accessible environment at an early age. At present, students often come to ASD after encountering barriers in developing adequate language and communication skills in other educational settings. As of September 2013, the average age of new students enrolled at ASD is fourteen years old. Research indicates that early language and communication acquisition determines future academic success. ASD is well-positioned with trained professional staff and extensive experience to provide necessary supports to these students. A statistically significant negative correlation was found between age of enrollment and language outcomes at 5 years of age. Children who were enrolled earliest (e.g., by 11 months of age) demonstrated significantly better vocabulary and verbal reasoning skills at 5 years of age than did later-enrolled children. Regardless of degree of hearing loss, early-enrolled children achieved scores on these measures that approximated those of their hearing peers. (Center for Childhood Deafness, Boys Town National Research Hospital, Omaha, Nebraska 68131, USA. moeller@boystown.org)

We find that public schools are keeping children in district from pre-kindergarten until on average, about 8<sup>th</sup> grade. After they are found to be significantly behind their hearing peers, the decision is made to send the child to ASD. We compare the progress of children who come to us at an early age to their later-enrolled peers and find consistently that children who are exposed to early language interventions and are placed in a communicatively-accessible environment do better on standardized tests measuring reading and language acquisition.

As a learning organization, ASD takes seriously our responsibility to provide educational and professional development opportunities to our staff, parents and the community at large. Through the use of cutting-edge technology, ASD provides access to information, tutorials, and opportunities for networking. ASD supports staff and professional development activities. We also provide workshops and networking opportunities for parents and caregivers.

Additionally, we offer a wide-range of educational opportunities to the community, including teachers, educational administrators, and service providers. It is important that we maintain a robust statewide Birth-to-Three program so parents and caregivers have information regarding Pre-K-12 options and can make well informed decisions.

### Who is ASD?

The American School for the Deaf (ASD) was founded in 1817 and is the oldest special education school in the Western Hemisphere. In addition, we are the only school in Connecticut exclusively devoted to

the education of deaf and hard of hearing children. ASD's mission is to serve the deaf and hard of hearing community as a multi-faceted, innovative institution dedicated to the development of intellect and the enhancement of quality of life, producing educated and self-directed citizens. ASD has been a national and world leader in the education of deaf and hard of hearing children while also leading the way in the development of innovative instructional models since its founding. As such, it is regarded by other schools for the deaf in the United States as a leader, with its programs often serving as catalysts for new program development in other schools for the deaf.

In addition to a campus-based pre-kindergarten through high school academic program which currently serves 175 students, ASD has a licensed 45-bed ASD clinical treatment program for emotionally/behaviorally challenged deaf and hard of hearing students. The PACES (Positive Attitudes Concerning Education and Socialization) program is the only program in the region that serves students whose emotional and/or behavioral disorders prevent them from being served in more traditional programs. ASD also provides off-campus outreach and support services to Connecticut public schools with teacher of the deaf placement and interpreting services, Outreach Educational Audiology program; the Adult Vocational Services program. Totally, ASD serves nearly 500 students statewide.

#### **State-of-the-art Educational Environment**

In designing the state-of-the-art Gallaudet-Clerc Education Center, the educational needs of deaf and hard of hearing students were paramount in every decision made regarding the architecture and construction of the building. Each room within the school is equipped with a Phonak Amplification System, which was determined after thorough research to be the system to best meet the needs of our students. In addition, each classroom is equipped with Smartboard technology. Because this technology is designed to support visual instruction, it is ideally suited to the visual learning style of deaf and hard of hearing students.

#### **How does ASD fit into the Special Education category?**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act entitles children with learning disabilities to a free and appropriate education, which includes the offering of specific programs or classes, access to specialists, and the modification of educational programs, curriculum and teaching methods. To qualify for Special Education services, children must be identified as falling into at least one of the following thirteen categories: Autism, Deaf-Blind, Developmental Delay, Emotional Disturbance, Hearing Impairment, Intellectual Disability, Multiple Disabilities, Orthopedic Impairment, Specific Learning Disabilities, Speech or Language Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, Visual Impairment, Other Health Impairment (TBD).

Research demonstrates that deaf and hard of hearing children learn differently than their hearing peers. ASD is committed to providing students with access to curriculum and teaching methods to meet the students' unique learning style in a linguistically accessible total communication (LATC) environment.

#### **How can the state help meet the needs of special education students?**

It is important for the state decision makers to understand that special education is not "one size fits all." What is the least restrictive environment of one student may be the most restrictive for another.

Like all children, deaf children need a linguistically accessible total communication learning environment and peer group in order to thrive and reach their full potential. The state has made great strides in understanding and addressing issues germane to deaf education with the passage of the Child First and Language and Communication Plan legislation. We would hope that the forward progress continues to include a discussion regarding least restrictive environment as it applies to deaf and hard of hearing students.

**Transition Services: How do we ensure that our graduates will become independent and productive citizens?**

One of the most critical services we offer our students is transition planning. As per federal law, we start at age 15 developing a transition plan for each student. Planning includes navigating the various state departments from which they will receive services, a robust work/study program which will ready non-college bound students a solid foundation for entering the workforce, and supports for our college bound students.

**Do we have a way to track our graduates?**

ASD does a graduate follow up survey every year as well as maintaining lines of communication through email, direct mail, social media and community events statewide, regionally and nationwide.

