



EQUALITY AND QUALITY EDUCATION FOR DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING CHILDREN: A STATEMENT OF CHILD FIRST PRINCIPLES

INTRODUCTION

While the deaf and hard of hearing communities and the special education world in general have debated the meaning and reach of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for more than 30 years, it is beyond contention that when provided appropriate language learning and academic opportunities deaf and hard of hearing children can and do attain high levels of achievement. The population of deaf and hard of hearing children is diverse, and their needs for access to language and communication are diverse as well. These include access to American Sign Language and English and communication through sign language, spoken language, sign and voice, visual technology, auditory technology, and other supports and services. When access is not provided, children fall behind in linguistic and cognitive growth and ultimately educational achievement. Support for each child's language and communication development is the key to the child's success.



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 protect this human right to language for deaf and hard of hearing children.

LANGUAGE DEPRIVATION IS DISABLING

Being deaf is not what disables a child—it is language deprivation that results from diminished exposure and access to meaningful language and communication. Ongoing access to language and communication is essential for normal cognitive functioning and development and is taken for granted for every hearing child. Without comparable 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 overcome. All too often inaccurate information is disseminated about the best way for deaf and hard of hearing children to learn language. Renowned researcher, Laura Pettito, said it best when she said that the brain does not discriminate between signed and spoken languages, people do. (Pettito, 2009)

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 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. Proximity alone is not integration.



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. Early-unrestricted access to language is critical to developing cognitive abilities and world knowledge. (Slobin, 1980; Kegl, 2002; and Gardner and Gardner, 1985) All children need to have ongoing 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 schools where placement is based on a rigid interpretation of LRE.

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.

DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING STUDENTS HAVE A RIGHT TO AN IEP WHICH SAFEGUARDS:

Multiple Pathways to Language Learning

Each deaf child acquires language in his or her own unique way. Individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing depend on multiple learning modalities. Research supports the need for full and accessible natural language and interactions regardless of modality. Pedagogies should be designed to support language and cognitive growth. (Easterbrooks and Baker, 2002).

Family Involvement

A critical factor in the language development of deaf and hard of hearing children is the family. Parents of deaf and hard of hearing students have the right to be informed participants in their child's educational planning and be knowledgeable about all developmental and educational opportunities. This is true for parents of infants and toddlers in the Part C early intervention programs as well as for parents of children in the Part B program. Educators have a responsibility to ensure that a balanced and informed decision-making process is available to all families which includes trained professionals from the field of education of the deaf and hard of hearing. All too often educators do not share accurate and complete information critical for parents to become equal partners.

Placements Based on Individual Needs

The LRE for a deaf or hard of hearing child is one that supports the child's strengths and meets the child's needs for meaningful language and communication access, social interaction and educational achievement. This environment includes quality, on-going, and interactive participation in planned and incidental learning opportunities with a variety of peer and adult role models both in and out of the classroom. The LRE

is a language rich environment where the child is an engaged learner achieving age appropriate language and learning benchmarks. All too often the literal interpretation of LRE as a location closest to home and non-disabled peers is counterintuitive to the unique needs of deaf and hard of hearing students.

Instruction by Qualified Personnel

In order for an educational placement to be appropriate, deaf and hard of hearing children must be provided with qualified and certified teachers, psychologists, speech therapists, assessors, administrators, interpreters, and other support personnel who understand their unique needs and are specifically trained to address them effectively. These personnel should be proficient in the primary communication and language mode of the deaf and hard of hearing child and share a single goal of ensuring that the child succeeds linguistically, educationally, socially and intellectually using all available tools.

Educational Progress Monitoring

It has been said, "What works for the child is the right choice." However, given the low incidence of deaf and hard of hearing students, many well intentioned professionals lack experience in understanding what deaf and hard of hearing children need to succeed and the levels to which they are capable of achieving. To address this, progress monitoring of appropriate developmental and educational benchmarks is necessary to validate the child's progress. Early intervention programs and schools must be accountable for ensuring that their students achieve appropriate educational objectives and goals. If the child is not achieving, the placement should be re-evaluated to provide the student with further options.

References

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CHILD FIRST: A CALL TO ACTION!

CHILD FIRST is a national campaign to ensure that educational programming at the national, state, and local level is driven by the IEP and appropriately addresses the educational, language, communication, and social needs of deaf and hard of hearing children. Child First was developed and is being driven by national organizations that advocate for the educational rights of deaf and hard of hearing children and that believe that policy guidance is needed to ensure these rights are protected.

CHILD FIRST recognizes that at the time IDEA (then the Education for All Handicapped Children Act) was passed in 1975, children with disabilities were precluded from going to school, either by law or by schools that were not equipped to teach them. Today this landmark law with its subsequent

amendments requires states, local school districts, and schools to protect the rights of, meet the individual needs of and improve the results for students with disabilities and their families. Although we celebrate the core principles of IDEA that have led to significant national progress, we also note the continuing challenges for the low incidence population of students who are deaf and hard of hearing. Those challenges include:

- **Accessing a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)** that provides opportunities for direct communication access and opportunities for direct instruction with age appropriate peers and adult role models.
- **IEPs** that include consideration of the child's language and communication needs, including communication with peers and professionals that daily enhances the child's intellectual, social and emotional development.
- **Evaluations** that are conducted by professionals who have knowledge and expertise about these unique needs and how they are translated in the IEP and how they impact the classroom. Too often, this does not occur.
- Ensuring that a **continuum of alternative placements**, including special schools, is available. Too often, LRE is misapplied for deaf and hard of hearing children, and they are placed in linguistically limiting and socially isolating educational environments.

CHILD FIRST campaign members are working to insure that the nationwide educational policy and practice for deaf and hard of hearing children starts with addressing their language and communication benchmarks through the IEP. Only then can educators move forward with placement decisions that address LRE. Furthermore, the children's IEPs and educational placements must facilitate full language and communication development.

CHILD FIRST believes now is the 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 peers. Deaf and hard of hearing children are as diverse as any other group of children and the choices in communication, educational placement options and other decisions are complex and need to be individualized. Child First believes educating all deaf and hard of hearing children without regard to their individual differences can create irreparable harm—one size does not fit all.

What you can do: To find out how you can support improved outcomes for deaf and hard of hearing students go to www.ceasd.org or contact nationaloffice@ceasd.org.

***LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION ACCESS IS NOT A STRATEGY:
ACCESS IS A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN AND EDUCATIONAL RIGHT. (Siegel, 2000)***

