

A School for the Deaf: An Essential Component of Idaho's Educational Offerings

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Background

The Idaho State Board of Education and other policymakers are evaluating ways to improve education for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. We support efforts to ensure that students receive high quality education programs and services statewide.

Deaf and hard-of-hearing students have diverse educational needs. This paper outlines the needs of students who thrive in a specialized school for the deaf, and it explains why such a school is an essential component of Idaho's educational offerings.

Why Do We Need a School for the Deaf in Idaho?

Occasionally questions are raised concerning the value of a specialized school for the deaf. Such questions are based on genuine concern for the welfare of deaf and hard-of-hearing children. To appreciate the merits of a school for the deaf, one must understand deaf education in context. There are seven crucial reasons why Idaho should have a school for the deaf.

1. Federal law requires a full continuum of placement options. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires states to ensure that a "continuum of alternative placements is available to meet the needs of children with disabilities for special education..." including "instruction in...special schools."²

Further, the law mandates that students be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education issued an official Policy Guidance³ to clarify common misunderstandings about LRE in relation to deaf and hard-of-hearing students:

The Secretary is concerned that some public agencies have misapplied the LRE provision by presuming that placements in or closer to the regular classroom are required for children who are deaf, without taking into consideration the range of communication and related needs that must be addressed in order to provide appropriate services.... Any setting, including a regular classroom, that prevents a child who is deaf from receiving an appropriate education that meets his or her needs including communication needs is not the LRE for that individual child.... Any setting which does not meet the communication and related needs of a child who is deaf, and therefore does not allow for the provision of FAPE, cannot be considered the LRE for that child.... ...a center or special school may be the least restrictive environment in which the child's unique needs can be met. A full range of alternative placements as described at 34 CFR 300.551(a)

and (b)(1) of the IDEA regulations must be available to the extent necessary to implement each child's IEP.

2. Students have access to free and unrestricted communication. Being the only signing deaf student in a local school can be extremely isolating because of communication barriers. Conversely, students in a school for the deaf have access to unrestricted communication because everyone uses a common language. Peer interactions are authentic because a third-party interpreter is not involved. Even if a student in a local school has a qualified interpreter, communication with teachers and peers can be unnatural, cumbersome, and invasive. Such a communication situation may be the *most* restrictive environment for some students.

What is more, a recent study sponsored by the Idaho Department of Education found that over 60% of Idaho's K-12 interpreters could not interpret 60% of the classroom information. This means that many Idaho students who desperately need the services of an interpreter scarcely have access to half of the information. On the other hand, students attending a school for the deaf do not face this problem because they receive instruction directly from teachers who communicate in their language.

3. Students receive direct instruction from certified teachers of the deaf. 'Mediated instruction' means receiving academic information through a third-party interpreter. In contrast, students receiving 'direct instruction' in a school for the deaf are taught without interference from a third party, i.e., they learn directly from a teacher. This way, students can focus on learning rather than trying to understand an interpreter who may or may not possess sufficient skills to effectively mediate communication. When designing an individualized education plan (IEP), the IDEA requires IEP teams to:

...consider the communication needs of the child, and in the case of a child who is deaf or hard of hearing, consider the child's language and communication needs, opportunities for direct communications 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 child's language and communication mode.⁴

In addition to receiving direct instruction, students have access to a suite of professionals who can communicate with them, e.g., audiologists, speech and language pathologists, counselors.

4. Students are mentored by successful deaf and hard-of-hearing adult role models. Some deaf and hard-of-hearing children who are educated in local schools never meet a deaf or hard-of-hearing adult during their entire educational experience. This means that they have no exposure to individuals who have successfully navigated their way through life with similar challenges.

Hearing children are fortunate because they have access to adult mentors

throughout their school years. Signing deaf or hard-of-hearing children who do not have regular interaction with signing deaf or hard-of-hearing adults are deprived of a rich opportunity to develop academically, socially, and emotionally.

A school for the deaf offers students an environment in which students can be mentored by adults who know how to guide them to become successful, productive citizens. Graduates often report that without the strong foundation they acquired while attending a school for the deaf, they never would have learned to function as a leader in society. This trend crosses all communication methodologies.

An increasing number of schools for the deaf are developing specialized programs to serve students with cochlear implants. Some parents enroll their children in a school for the deaf to give their child the 'best of both worlds' – a communication rich environment with hearing, deaf, and hard-of-hearing adult role models.

5. Students participate freely in extra-curricular activities. A great deal of ancillary learning occurs aurally. Many children who are deaf or hard of hearing do not learn aurally—they are visual learners by default. Because everyone in a school for the deaf has equal visual access to information, students participate in extra-curricular activities without communication barriers. Not surprisingly, a visual environment is the least restrictive environment for visual learners.

Imagine how awkward it may be for a signing deaf child in a local school to participate in a drama production or a basketball practice through an interpreter when everyone else is speaking and listening. Typically, signing deaf students who find themselves in a completely auditory environment eventually avoid situations where they are not able to freely participate. The consequence is tragic: they do not enjoy the same development experiences as their hearing peers—they become spectators in life rather than participants.

Schools for the deaf typically have athletics, drama, student government, and activities to augment students' academic learning experiences. These activities contribute to the development of adult citizens who participate in their communities at large. The value of a critical mass of students gaining access to this 'unwritten curriculum' without communication barriers cannot be underestimated.

6. A school for the deaf is a centralized information clearinghouse for local schools. A school for the deaf not only serves students on campus, but it also assists school districts that enroll deaf or hard-of-hearing students. Local schools often contact the school for the deaf for consultation, information, media materials, and technical assistance. The absence of an entity containing rich resources and expertise results in school districts being 'on their own' to figure out how to adequately serve this complex and expensive student population.

7. Idaho's large and rural geography creates a need for a central program.

Idaho's rural geography and multiple school district education system make it impossible for all deaf and hard-of-hearing students to be effectively served in or near their local schools. Some small towns are not able to recruit and retain qualified personnel who hold certifications to educate deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Additionally, some districts cannot afford the high costs of these professionals.

The presence of a critical mass of students is not only academically beneficial for students needing placement in a school for the deaf—it also has economic advantages. Economy of scale and scope must be a part of the discussion surrounding the education of deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

Conclusion

A school for the deaf provides students with unrestricted access to communication, direct instruction from certified teachers of the deaf, exposure to deaf and hard-of-hearing adult role models, and opportunities to freely participate in extra-curricular activities. Local school districts also benefit from having a centralized clearinghouse of information and expertise at their disposal.

There is a reason that almost all states have at least one school for the deaf: it is the LRE for some students. IEP teams need access to a full spectrum of viable placement options. Without a school for the deaf, local schools would be expected to carry an enormous burden and IEP teams' placement choices would be compromised. Most importantly, the existence of a school for the deaf ensures that children needing such a placement option are not left behind.