



# COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS A-Z™

## *Educational Advocacy for Students Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing*

### **1. What is educational advocacy for students who are deaf or hard of hearing (d/hh)?**

There are two parts to the answer:

- a) Educational advocacy is the application of specialized knowledge and expertise (including special education law and systems savvy) to support and promote a child's optimized educational outcomes including academic and social interests.
- b) Being an advocate for a student who is deaf or hard of hearing requires additional knowledge of issues that are unique to this student population.

The fact that many who function as educational advocates--even attorneys specializing in education law representing schools or parents--have the skillset for "a" but not have an understanding of "b" puts the responsibility for advocating for a child's appropriate education right on the shoulders of the parents.

### **2. What issues are at the forefront of d/hh educational advocacy?**

After 150 years of experience\* educating children who are deaf or hard of hearing, there is evidence that the educational system in the United States is not making the grade for these students, as reflected in these statistics:

- Student Achievement Test (SAT) Grade Equivalency Scores for high school graduates who are d/hh:
  - 3.9 Reading Comprehension; 5.0 Math; 4.5 Language; 6.0 Spelling  
(*Bloomquist Traxler, 2000*)
- Between the ages of 8 and 18, d/hh children gain 1.5 years in reading skills.  
(*CADS, 1991-2*)
- 30% of all deaf/hh children leave school functionally illiterate  
(*Conrad, 1974*)
- Only 8% of deaf/hh graduate from college  
(*US Comm., 1988*)
- 40% d/hh unemployed, 90% underemployed  
(*Siegal, 2000*)

*\*Many state schools for the deaf have been in existence since before the Civil War.*

The issue of educational underachievement should be at the forefront of every parent, educator, administrator and university teacher training program, but often the disagreement over causes and solutions leaves us without measurable, sustainable progress.

Strengthened language in the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) does require educational planning teams (including parents) to address “special considerations” in the case of a student who is d/hh, (which reflect the knowledge referred to in 1.b above), but little implementation of that directive is actually meaningfully experienced by parents in the development of their child’s Individual Education Program (IEP). A movement to pass laws at the state level that makes “special considerations” more than a passing conversation but an actual mandate (typically known as the Deaf Child’s Bill of Rights) has increased nationwide.

### **3. What should every parent or professional know about educational advocacy?**

Hands & Voices has many workshops that answer this question comprehensively, but in the interests of brevity, here are some “not to be missed” points that often do get missed:

Most of today’s younger students have benefited from early identification of their hearing loss, and have received effective intervention services that can prepare them to arrive at public school with language levels on a par with their hearing peers (regardless of whether that language is spoken or signed). Instead of rewarding that achievement with a determination that no more services are necessary—because after all the child doesn’t show a negative impact from his/her “disability”—schools need to be asking how they can maintain the child’s achievement with appropriate communication access supports, classroom accommodations, specialized instruction, and other strategies that are appropriate for that individual child.

Parents are encouraged to participate as equal members on the IEP team. They have a responsibility to the success of their child’s education. As such, if there is a need for the parents to receive counseling and/or training as determined by the IEP team in order for them to help their child benefit from his/her education, (a common example is sign language instruction), then this can be included on the child’s

IEP under “Related Services.” This opportunity is often missed by IEP teams, and should be emphasized to parents and professionals alike.

Being deaf or hard of hearing does not automatically make a student eligible for special education support/an IEP. The IDEA specifies that the student must have a qualifying disability AND be in need of specialized instruction. Much of educational advocacy is based on what constitutes “specialized instruction”, where it will be delivered and who is qualified to provide it.

Parents have a role and specific rights under the IDEA which are outlined in the “Procedural Safeguards” section of law. This section describes, among many other things, what to do if parents don’t agree with the Individual Education Program (IEP) for their child being offered by the school.

Never assume that “no” means no. The distance between “yes, I think we can do that for this student” and “no, if we did that for him, we’d have to do it for every other kid in this building,” can be closed by effective advocacy.

#### 4. Where else can I find information about educational advocacy for students who are deaf or hard of hearing?

- At [www.handsandvoices.org](http://www.handsandvoices.org), search the word “Advocacy” and see how many resources come up. Don’t miss the Pop-Up IEP™ at [http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/education/popup/pop\\_index.html](http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/education/popup/pop_index.html), an interactive resource that gives you response-options to common problems that come up in an IEP meeting—plus the legal citations that back up your response. Also, our advocacy vanguard, “R’Advocacy & the New Vocabulary of Power” that teaches you basic strategies to improve your advocacy efforts; See <http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/education/advocacy/radvocacy1.htm>
- Visit [www.wrightslaw.com](http://www.wrightslaw.com) featuring Pete Wright, Esq., parent attorney with a Supreme Court win under his belt.
- The **Laurent Clerc Center at Gallaudet University** has exhaustive resources to share at: <http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/>
- See [www.agbell.org](http://www.agbell.org) for comprehensive advocacy resources focused on kids who are learning to listen and speak.
- **The American Society for Deaf Children** has a wealth of resources at <http://www.deafchildren.org/>

**Contributed by:** Leanne Gillespie Seaver, MA, is mom to three kids, including Dane, her eldest son who is profoundly deaf. She speaks nationally and internationally on topics related to deaf education, and parenting a deaf child. Seaver sits on the Advisory Board for the National Center on Low Incidence Disabilities, the American College of Educators/DHH Joint-Together Executive Advisory, the Quality of Life-DHH Research Advisory Board, and for AFB/Bridge Multimedia. She served as a founding Commissioner for the Colorado Commission for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing. Leanne’s particular interests lie in advocacy and special education law. She worked professionally as a writer and television producer for 20 years, and won a regional Emmy for writer/producer of the 2004/05 “Parents Are the

Power” campaign for KUSA in Colorado/Wyoming before joining Hands & Voices National full time in 2006.

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*Communication Considerations A to Z™ is a series from Hands & Voices that's designed to help families and the professionals working with them access information and further resources to assist them in raising and educating children who are deaf or hard of hearing. We've recruited some of the best in the business to share their insights on the many diverse considerations that play into communication modes & methods, and so many other variables that are part of informed decision making. We hope you find the time to read them all!*