

The Equity in Deaf Education Team—**Amy Bogartz, Janette Duran-Aguirre, Mallorie Evans, Bianca Gerald, Richard Hall, Stephanie Johnson, Stephanie Komlos, Debra Lack, and Lauren Maucere**—is a group of Deaf professionals who got together to address the long-standing inequity and bias in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The team encourages and supports other school districts in the struggle to elevate language equity and language access all Deaf students deserve. The team welcomes questions and comments about this article at DeafEdLAUSD@gmail.com.

Road to Resolution:

Forming a Team, Documenting Discoveries, and Making an Impact

By Amy Bogartz, Janette Duran-Aguirre, Mallorie Evans, Bianca Gerald, Richard Hall, Stephanie Johnson, Stephanie Komlos, Debra Lack, and Lauren Maucere

What led a group of professionals in the Los Angeles Unified School District to form an equity team, and how did the team uncover information, propose solutions, and get needed change?

In the spring of 2019, around the time of a six-day general teachers' strike, several teachers of the deaf compared notes about their classes and discovered that, despite working in the same district, their curricula, working environments, and resources were vastly different. Soon after, we—a group of deaf education professionals—formed the Equity in Deaf Education Team. Our goal: to bring needed change to the Los Angeles Unified School District and improve educational outcomes for Deaf* students.

We had long been aware of bias in our district. In 2016, a group of educators at Marlton School, the only district-run day school for the deaf, founded in 1968, shared with the superintendent, Dr. Michelle King, their concerns about the ongoing oppression, exacerbated by the high turnover of administrators who lacked knowledge of deaf education and American Sign Language (ASL). The teachers' union—United Teachers of Los Angeles—supported the plea for quality leadership. Despite these efforts, in 2018, another unqualified principal was assigned to Marlton. This led to protests and demands for the principal's resignation. The district promised to increase the pool of qualified candidates with ASL fluency, deaf education knowledge, and the required administrative credentials (Phillips, 2018).

In March 2020, schools closed due to COVID-19 and pivoted to online teaching. Several months later, George Floyd was murdered, fueling demands for systemic reforms. Our district held mandatory anti-bias training in an attempt to address and analyze deep-seated bias within educational practices. During our training, a district

Photos courtesy of the Equity in Deaf Education Team



Left to right: The Equity in Deaf Education Team—Lauren Maucere, Janette Duran-Aguirre, Mallorie Evans, Amy Bogartz, Debra Lack, Stephanie Komlos, Bianca Gerald, and Stephanie Johnson. (Not pictured: Richard Hall)

representative (Alison Yoshimoto-Tower, as part of the Los Angeles Unified School District's Anti-Racist/Unconscious Bias Training, 2021) said:

Discrimination and prejudice are not limited to the color of one's skin. [They include] language, which is directly tied to one's cultural identity. Our students, families, and staff are proud of their language. So, let's celebrate, embrace, and engage in conversations about the language diversity within our district. Striving to include and support those of all races, cultures, and languages, seeing these as assets, is among the more important work we do.

These words became our guiding principle as they encapsulated the inequities we were attempting to address. The quote underscored the parallels between racism, audism, ableism, and linguicism. While racism upholds whiteness as superior to all other races, audism upholds hearing people as superior to Deaf people, and linguicism in deaf education upholds spoken languages as superior to signed languages.

Our Discoveries

Over the next few years, we gathered data. We collected anecdotal information about our education programs and stories from families, and we connected with outside agencies to gain insight into their experiences with our district's programs. We uncovered information that indicated systemic issues and biased policies that negatively impacted the success

of our district's 2,100 Deaf students and their families, including:

- The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Itinerant Program determined Deaf students' least restrictive environment primarily through auditory-based assessment and students' hearing levels, which outranked other factors, such as language access, academic skills, and socio-emotional development, and used these to determine students' placement in oral, signing, or itinerant programs.
- Changing a student's placement from itinerant services to a sign language or spoken language special day program for deaf students was referenced as a move to a "more restrictive environment." Students who "failed" in the oral program were moved to a campus where students "relied on ASL" as a "last-chance" option.
- Itinerant teachers (serving 1,700 mainstream Deaf students in our district, aged 3-22, including students in private preschools, Head Start programs, special day programs for students with disabilities, non-public schools for individuals with exceptional needs, and Career Transition Centers) focused primarily on auditory skills, self-advocacy, and hearing technology.
- Deaf students with other educationally impacting disabilities who would benefit from ASL were often placed in programs designed for hearing students in which they did not receive consistent exposure to ASL.



Above: The Equity in Deaf Education Team, Jackie Goldberg, Scott Schmerelson, and other supporters cheer the passing of Resolution #029-21/22.

Deaf Community Tells an LA School Board: Serve All Deaf Students!

By Amy Bogartz, Janette Duran-Aguirre, Mallorie Evans, Bianca Gerald, Richard Hall, Stephanie Johnson, Stephanie Komlos, Debra Lack, and Lauren Maucere

On May 10, 2022, we—the Equity in Deaf Education Team, a group of professionals and educators, as well as parents and others from the Deaf community—rallied in front of the Los Angeles Unified School District headquarters wearing red shirts and holding signs demanding equity in deaf education.

We had worked hard for this day. A few years earlier, our team had uncovered issues and policies showing systemic bias against Deaf professionals and Deaf students who used American Sign Language (ASL), and we saw that this bias negatively impacted the success of our district's 2,100 Deaf students and their families. We documented what we found and shared these findings with Los Angeles Unified School District board members. Our findings became the framework for Resolution #029-21/22 to “Restructure Deaf and Hard of Hearing Education: Elevate Language Equity, Eliminate Bias in Deaf Education, and Improve Educational Outcomes.” The goals of this resolution are to:

- Special day programs for deaf students, situated in various schools throughout the district, had skewed support; programs focused exclusively on speaking and listening skills were allocated more resources than programs that used ASL and English.
- The classes that used spoken language only were labeled consistently as “Listening and Spoken Language,” while sign language classes were assigned various labels, such as “signing” or “Total Communication,” and not the more accurate “ASL/English Bilingual.”
- The spoken language program (for 130 pre-K-8 students at seven schools) was assigned five support providers; the sign language program (for 280 pre-K-12 students, including those on the alternate curriculum at nine schools) was assigned one support provider to three schools. The remaining schools and alternate curriculum students had minimal support.
- For both programs, the imbalance of support and resources between spoken language and sign language programs went unnoticed by school site administrators, who had limited knowledge of Deaf learners.
- The infant program brochure didn’t mention ASL or sign language. It listed only “listening and speaking” and “educational audiologists” as the “optimal support” for Deaf babies and their families. If parents knew to ask for ASL services, only three of the 12 teachers were fluent enough to accommodate them.



- Ensure alignment of instructional services with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 300.324(a)(2)(iv), taking into consideration the child’s language and communication needs and opportunities for direct communication with peers and professionals.
- Establish a committee of professionals in deaf education to work with the district’s Human Resources Department on matters of recruitment, hiring, and retention.
- Centralize programs that involve Deaf students, professionals, and families within a Deaf and Hard of Hearing Education Department.
- Provide families of Deaf infants (ages 0-3) with complete, accurate, and unbiased information regarding language and program options.

- Establish ASL/English bilingual education as the early intervention standard for Deaf infants.
- Acknowledge ASL/English bilingual programs with the goal of fluency and literacy in ASL and English.
- Retain parental rights as outlined in the IDEA.

In an unusual move, the number of presenters before the Board was increased to allow for an even representation of those who opposed and those who supported this resolution. Our opponents said that the resolution was about removing parental choice; they also spoke of the inconvenience and burden on their families of learning another language.

Those in favor of the resolution shared their experiences with the deaf programs.

As they did so, they exposed the ongoing prejudice toward Deaf people and the discrimination against ASL users as well as the higher value placed on listening and speaking over visual language.

Josh Oppenheimer, the father of a Deaf child, noted that parents were receiving incomplete information. Speaking in support of the resolution,

Oppenheimer stated, “Parents should have information, access, and support for the full

range of educational models and be empowered to make this choice for their child and family.” **Heidy Alveregna**, a parent, noted the bias that permeated the educational environment in our district, saying, “I will tell you firsthand, I have seen our Deaf professionals be treated so poorly. [How can I expect] my Deaf child to be respected in a district that does not respect its own professional peers?” **Dr. Ellen Schneiderman**, a professor at the California State University, Northridge and an expert on early language acquisition and literacy, seemed perplexed by those who opposed the resolution, saying, “I am unclear why there has been so much expressed fear surrounding

language equity. The resolution promotes all language opportunities and equity in available resources.”

The most compelling comments perhaps came from our Deaf students. **Veyra Campos** expressed her frustration, sharing, “Imagine your teacher tells you that your natural language is not welcomed ... Imagine your teacher punishes you for using your natural language ... Can you see yourself learning in such an oppressive language environment?” **David Sanchez** addressed the Board first in ASL, sharing, “I remember in preschool, if I signed, my teacher would hit me on the wrists. In my mainstream classes, I felt like I didn’t fit in. I wanted to be in classes with other Deaf and hard of hearing students. I would break or throw away my cochlear implant [processor] so I didn’t have to use it. Most people think that Deaf people

who use ASL do not speak” Sanchez then switched to spoken English, saying, “This is not true. Learning ASL has helped my English skills and speech skills. I have the option to sign with my friends and teachers, and I can speak with my friends and teachers if I want to.

Knowing two languages is better than knowing one.”

Long-time board member **Jackie Goldberg**, who co-

authored the resolution, emphasized the importance of learning language during the first years of a Deaf child’s life. Noted Goldberg, “We must not miss a critical window in the years before kindergarten to promote [Deaf children] acquiring language, whether it is spoken, or signed, or both.”

Our efforts paid off; all seven board members voted “Yes,” and the resolution to elevate language equity and restructure deaf education was passed. The message is clear: It is time to address pervasive inequities in our district’s deaf programs and in deaf education nationwide. As board member Goldberg said, “We must move mountains to make sure that [Deaf children’s] needs are addressed.”



Deaf Education in an LA District

A SUMMARY

The Equity in Deaf Education Team looked into programs for Deaf students in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The following is a summary of what the team found:

- Prevalence of language deprivation among Deaf children
 - Lack of Deaf professionals and Deaf representation in decision-making roles
 - Lack of recognition of ASL
 - An infant program biased toward the modality of listening and speaking English
 - Lack of support and guidance for parents who wanted their infants educated bilingually with ASL and English
 - No ASL specialist and limited ASL support for Deaf students in itinerant classrooms
 - Non-deaf education teachers (i.e., general education and special education teachers) that lacked knowledge of Deaf students' language and learning needs
 - No centralized support system
 - Hearing levels as the primary determinate of student placement
 - No support for ASL/English bilingual programming
 - The district was not following the laws (i.e., SB 210, LEAD-K) that state Deaf children be language-ready for kindergarten at age 5
 - The district was not following K-12 ASL Content Standards
 - The district was not following the Deaf Child's Bill of Rights
- Teachers of the deaf had far fewer opportunities to connect, collaborate, and support each other than teachers in general education. Professional development was not focused on



best practices for educating Deaf students. Instead, teachers learned teaching strategies designed for hearing students and were encouraged to independently make necessary adjustments to meet the needs of their Deaf students. The itinerant program's meetings centered on general district policies and procedures and hearing technology.

A few teachers in the spoken language program expressed frustration with the number of Deaf students placed in their classes with low language skills, echoing similar concerns of teachers in the sign language program, illustrating that too many Deaf children were arriving to kindergarten without age-appropriate language skills. (This contradicted California law, SB 210, based on Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf Kids [LEAD-K], passed in 2015, to work toward the goal of Deaf children entering kindergarten with age-appropriate skills in ASL or English or both.)

The experiences of parents and students also confirmed our findings and the consequences of systemic bias. Parents shared stories with us, showing the prevalence and varying levels of language deprivation within the district's programs. **Evelyn and Wilson Pena**, whose son had been deprived of ASL during his early years, said, "It wasn't until he was in third grade when they told us that he could go to a deaf school ... Before, they were like, 'Oh, he's hard of hearing, he could hear a little bit, so he's not qualified to go into a deaf school.'"

We sought and received support from many organizations, including the California Educators of the Deaf; California State University, Northridge; the California Association of the Deaf; the National Association of the Deaf; the Disability Rights Center; the Greater Los Angeles Agency on Deafness, Inc.; the California School for the Deaf, Riverside; and, perhaps most consequentially, the American Civil Liberties Union. The organizations shared the stance that for the sake of Deaf students, our district must restructure its deaf education programs.

Some agencies, such as the Greater Los Angeles Agency on Deafness, Inc., and the California School for the Deaf, Riverside, had also experienced a shift in their relationship with our programs. **Deaf West Theatre** wrote: "In recent years, it

More on Resolution #029-21/22 to Restructure Deaf Education

Using the work of the Equity in Deaf Education Team, the Los Angeles Unified School District board members passed a resolution restructuring deaf education, including the establishment of a Deaf Education Department to centralize all programs for Deaf students: audiology, infant, itinerant, and special day programs. In addition, the resolution:

- Kept listening and speaking programs and services as an educational option
- Recognized ASL as a language of instruction
- Agreed to provide parents with all language options
- Implemented an ASL/English bilingual program in early intervention for Deaf infants
- Retained parental rights as described in the IDEA

has become harder for us to offer our services to the students because the administration is not accessible to us or the teachers in the district. It is apparent that the administration is not attuned to the needs of the students and that they do not come from a background of deaf education.” This was not a surprise as deaf education has been historically controlled by monolingual-hearing individuals who promote a strong emphasis on the listening and speaking philosophy while dismissing the lived experiences of Deaf professionals, stifling the successful education of our Deaf students.

The Equity in Deaf Education Team met with **Jackie Goldberg**, a sympathetic school board member who has a Deaf niece, and **Scott Schmerelson**, a school board member who is our district’s Special Education point person. Both Goldberg and Schmerelson recognized that the educational outcomes of Deaf students were unacceptable and used our data as the framework for a resolution to restructure deaf education in our district.

A few weeks before the Los Angeles Unified School District board meeting vote on the resolution, we held a virtual Town Hall open to the public with the California Educators of the Deaf, the Deaf Education and Families Project at California State University, Northridge, and Deaf Latinos y Familias. We shared the history of our school district’s deaf education programs and our plan to restructure by centralizing programs into one department and to improve student and family access by adding ASL to the continuum of options and services. In addition, stakeholders were encouraged to sign and share a petition and to join a letter-writing campaign to the Board. We

used social media to share information, correct misinformation, and connect with the public. We reached beyond national borders, as the biases in deaf education are pervasive worldwide.

When the Los Angeles Unified School District board members passed Resolution #029-21/22 to “Restructure Deaf and Hard of Hearing Education: Elevate Language Equity, Eliminate Bias in Deaf Education, and Improve Educational Outcomes,” the result was a victory for deaf educators, the Deaf community, and Deaf students. Still, the victory is only the beginning of our journey. Our hope is to address the inequities in deaf education not only within our school district but beyond for Deaf children around the world.



Authors’ note: When we capitalize “Deaf” as we have throughout these articles, we are using the definition of the California Educators of the Deaf: “We understand that Deaf does not encompass all the lived experiences of Deaf individuals. These identities may change over time and place; some examples include Deaf, Hard of Hearing, DeafBlind, and Late-Deafened.”

Reference

Phillips, A. M. (2018, May 30). At L.A.’s only school for the deaf, parents want leaders who speak the same language. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-edu-marlton-school-20180530-story.html>