

The meaning of deafness - Parents must choose among education philosophies

Concord Monitor (NH) - Sunday, September 17, 2006

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In Manchester, deaf students use their hands to learn. In a raucous high school study hall, loud with the sound of a grinding pencil sharpener, teenagers carry on animated conversations in furiously fast sign language.

In Hooksett, deaf students use their mouths. Aided by hearing devices, a group of giggling preschoolers play a game of hide-and-seek, calling out "Aaashley, where aaare you?" before racing to find her.

The two programs represent one of the ideological splits in deaf education. In New Hampshire, one of only three states without a specialized school for the deaf, education officials haven't taken a stance. Coupled with the debate over whether to include deaf students in regular classrooms, it leads to a lot of questions.

Should deaf students be taught solely in American Sign Language, or should they use technology to hear and speak? And should they attend local public schools or establish their own?

"The real challenge in educating deaf students is there is a definite dichotomy of philosophies," said state Education Commissioner Lyonel Tracy. "It's probably the most dramatic distinction among a group of students."

An attempt to create a state school for the deaf in the form of a charter school has been problematic. The Legislature ordered a commission to look into the issue in 1999, and six years later, the **Laurent Clerc Academy** in Concord opened its doors. But the school did not reopen this month because it couldn't attract enough students.

Supporters of the school say it's not because there isn't a need. They say the school floundered because special education officials, and sometimes hearing parents, don't know what's best for deaf children.

"There is a lack of education," said Susan Wolf-Downes, the director of Northeast Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services in Concord, the agency behind the charter school. "They just get the kids an interpreter or a hearing aid. Temporarily, that might be okay, but they can't play with their peers at recess. The kids are isolated."

Aside from tiny clusters of deaf students in other school districts, the programs in Manchester and Hooksett are what exists to serve New Hampshire's approximately 500 deaf and hard of hearing students.

The Manchester Program for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, founded in 1971 and administered by the Manchester School District, is the longest-running. It serves students in preschool through 12th grade, teaching them primarily in American Sign Language. The Hooksett school, called HEAR in New Hampshire, was founded eight years ago to serve deaf preschool and kindergarten students who use electronic methods to help them hear and speak.

But most of the state's deaf and hard of hearing students don't attend either. This year, the Manchester program has 35 students. The Hooksett school has eight. The reasons for the relatively low numbers are varied. For some deaf students, it's because they would rather learn alongside their hearing peers. For others, the commute is simply too far.

That means most kids stay within their local school districts. But in 1992, federal education officials warned that the "least restrictive environment" for deaf students may not be the regular classroom. They pointed to the "inherently isolating" nature of deafness, which deaf advocates say is made worse when a child is placed in a public school with only an interpreter who speaks their language. In 2000, close to a third of the state's deaf students dropped out of high school.

"Oftentimes, children in these situations don't develop peer support," Wolf-Downes said. "Then they have emotional issues from that."

The **Laurent Clerc Academy** sought to remedy that. Its goal was to provide a place where deaf students could learn directly from deaf teachers, who would teach lessons in sign language, as well as in written English. It was also meant to be a place where students could learn about deaf culture.

But with six kids enrolled last year, only half of whom were deaf, and no influx of students on the horizon, school officials decided not to reopen this fall. Wolf-Downes chalked the school's difficulty up to a lack of referrals from local school districts. Others in the field hypothesized that the school didn't promote itself enough. Some questioned whether the hole it sought to fill actually exists.

Everyone agreed, however, that deaf education is a complicated and sometimes-divisive issue that begins with early decisions made by parents of deaf children, 90 percent of whom can hear.

"One size, boy, does not fit all," said Cate Weir, the director of the New Hampshire Vision/Hearing Network, a state-funded organization that offers consultation to school districts serving blind and deaf students.

'Ezra is deaf'

One-and-a-half-year-old Ezra Taylor of Epsom was born deaf. A hiccup in his embryonic growth caused a host of problems: Ezra's esophagus wasn't connected to

his stomach and he needed a tracheotomy tube to breathe. When he was 9 months old, his heart, which is on the right side of his chest, stopped beating.

Ezra's parents, Rob and Patience, figured their son also couldn't hear when, at the age of two weeks, he slept through the loud clanking of a soup can being dropped into the kitchen garbage. It wasn't a surprise to Patience; she'd had dreams throughout her pregnancy that her baby would be born deaf. To the Taylors, it also wasn't a big deal.

"He's Ezra, and Ezra is deaf," Rob Taylor said.

The Taylors began learning to sign two days after Ezra's official diagnosis. Despite being told it was "borderline neglectful" not to research ways to help him hear and talk, the Taylors said they saw sign language as the only option.

"It was either learn it and talk to him or don't and not talk to him," Patience Taylor said. "That's not an option."

Today, Ezra is an active baby with a tuft of brown hair, a wide smile and a vocabulary of nearly 20 signs. He can say "mama," "dada" and ask for more food. He waves hello with both hands and immediately turns his head whenever he sees movement. His father said Ezra is happiest when he's around people talking in sign language.

"Deaf people have a culture, they have a language," Rob Taylor said. "Making him hear would be the equivalent of making an African-American person white or making a blind person see."

Jeff and Eileen Perra of Keene made the opposite decision last year when they found out that bacterial meningitis had left their 3-year-old son, Jason, deaf in both ears. Soon after he recovered, they opted to give Jason two cochlear implants, surgically implanted devices that translate sounds into electric impulses sent to the brain.

"It was either implants and he'd be able to hear again and talk, or we'd have to learn sign language and he'd have to go to a special school and he'd have to embrace the deaf community," Eileen Perra said. "There's nothing wrong with that, but that's not what we wanted."

Jason Perra is now a talkative 4-year-old preschool student at HEAR in New Hampshire. The other day, he and his classmates worked on their listening skills with the aid of orange popsicles. When the teacher told the kids to lick their pops with their top lips, Jason obeyed. That Jason knew how to hear and talk before he contracted meningitis has helped him regain those skills quickly, his mother said.

Choosing a communication method isn't so easy for all parents of deaf children. But a recent effort to screen New Hampshire babies for hearing loss before they leave the hospital is helping parents to make those decisions earlier on, which audiologists and deaf educators say is critical to the child's success.

Since 2000, the state has set up newborn hearing screening programs at 24 hospitals. Lisa Bujno, of the state Department of Health and Human Services, estimates that 14,500 babies are tested each year. In 2004, 119 had a hearing loss, she said.

About 60 babies are referred each year to the state's early intervention program, according to director Jan Halley. The program is neutral, meaning the staff doesn't sway parents toward one communication method or another. Instead, they present all of the options - sign language, hearing aids, cochlear implants or a combination of the three - and allow the parents to choose.

"Most families don't know where to go with a deaf baby," Halley said. "It's a process."

When the child is 2, Halley said her staff begins talking to the family about school. Again, they present all the options - regular public schools, the Manchester program or a residential school in a neighboring state such as Massachusetts. Usually, she said, if a deaf toddler can manage with his or her hearing skills, they're placed in a regular public school.

That's what the Perras want for Jason. They hope Jason will transition seamlessly next year into his local kindergarten in Keene. But the Taylors don't want that for Ezra. They'd like him to go to a specialized school in New Hampshire, one where he won't feel like an outcast. If that's not an option by the time Ezra is school-aged, they plan to home-school him.

"We understand that it's a hearing world," Rob Taylor said. "But we don't want to hurt his self-esteem by putting him in a regular school."

Classroom challenges

That's what happened to Joe Jacques, a 14-year-old boy who grew up in Rochester. Taught mostly in regular classrooms with an interpreter until he was 12, Joe was reading at a first-grade level in the sixth grade, said his mother, Fran Jacques. He hated school and faked being sick in order to stay home. He also struggled to make friends; in all his years in public school, he was only once invited to a birthday party.

Fran Jacques, tired of coaxing her son out of bed in the morning, finally became fed up.

At first, "I believed in the system," she said. "But then it was 'Whoa, hold on. You're doing something wrong. This kid can't read.'"

Joe became deaf after contracting meningitis as a baby. Fran Jacques said she and her husband first tried fitting him with hearing aids, but they weren't strong enough. They also considered cochlear implants but decided the surgery was too invasive. So the family began learning sign language.

When Fran Jacques heard about the **Laurent Clerc Academy**, she pulled Joe out of the local public school and enrolled him there, a move she said wasn't supported by the district. On the day the charter school opened, he was the only student not related to the director and teacher, a married couple whose three children also attended.

Within months, Fran Jacques said, Joe had improved both his reading and self-esteem. He began bugging her to take him to book stores and asked for the first time to activate the closed-captioning on the television. Joe never once complained about the hour-long bus ride to Concord, and by June, he was reading at a fourth-grade level.

The news that the charter school was closing this year was a blow, Fran Jacques said. Unwilling to send Joe back to the regular public school, the family sold their house in Rochester and moved to Maine, where they enrolled him in the Governor Baxter School for the Deaf in Falmouth. The Jacques said they saw leaving the state as their choice.

"We're just so tired and exhausted right now," Fran Jacques said. "Why should we have to fight to get an education?"

Charlene Hood of Concord also feared that her daughter, Nicole, would be isolated and perhaps fall behind in the local public school. So after finding out when Nicole was a year old that her daughter was born deaf, the Hoods decided to enroll her in the Manchester program.

Nicole, 18, graduated from high school last year and is now a college freshman. Before leaving for school last month, Nicole said she was happy with the education she received in Manchester, considered by most to be the state's de facto school for the deaf.

But though she excelled academically in both deaf and hearing classes and had a small group of friends, Nicole, who uses sign language, said she sometimes felt "out of place" and torn between worlds. She enjoyed the academic rigor of regular classes, but missed being able to talk with her classmates. It was the same with athletics: As a member of the field hockey and softball teams, Nicole communicated with her teammates through an interpreter. Once the season was over, however, there was no easy way to keep up the conversation.

"It's hard because you can't make new friends right away," Nicole said.

This year, Nicole is attending the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York, which has a program for deaf students, to study graphic design. She will be in classes with the school's more than 1,200 deaf students for the first two years and then finish her degree alongside hearing students. Nicole, who wears tight jeans and sends text messages with her Sidekick, said she's excited to choose her friends for the first time in her life.

"I didn't have a lot of choices in Manchester," she said. "It's a very small deaf world."

A state school?

In 1941, a Manchester man named Ulric Roberge sent a letter to the state attorney general to inquire about schooling for his son, Norman, who was deaf. He received a letter back that said there was a suitable school for the deaf in Vermont, but that the state tried not to separate "far and wide" the deaf children sent to special schools.

"Moreover, the state is presently planning to have its own school before very long," the letter said.

Sixty-five years later, the state does not. What it does have is an agency that employs three teachers of the deaf, who are fluent in sign language and up-to-date on advances in deaf technology. Upon a school district's request, someone from the agency will visit up to four times a year to show teachers how to adapt their lessons.

Last year, the New Hampshire Vision/Hearing Network, which provides the same services for blind students, made visits on behalf of 219 deaf and hard of hearing students. Director Cate Weir said she wishes they could provide more services. When asked what she would need to do that, her answer was quick.

"Just more of everything," she said.

A commission formed by state lawmakers to look into the issue of deaf education recommended just that. Led by Sen. Andre Martel, a Manchester Republican, the Commission on the Education of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in New Hampshire said in its final report that "the need still exists for regional (deaf education) programs to be developed or expanded in New Hampshire."

As proof, the commission offered that "four-fifths of identified (deaf) students receive little or no support services from a teacher certified in the area of disability."

"The need for the coordination of services for these students through regional programs becomes essential if these students are to reach and maintain 'adequate yearly progress' as required" by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, the report says. According to Martel, after conducting research for five years, the commission realized that "the only thing left to do was open a school." The **Laurent Clerc Academy** was the result.

But not everyone in the state agrees that a separate school is the only answer. Lynda French, the director of HEAR in New Hampshire, said she believes the state has several good programs already. What it could use is more collaboration between them, she said.

"The (deaf) population is just so spread out," French said. "It continues to be a challenge to meet the needs of kids throughout the state."

Her program, however, has no plans to expand beyond kindergarten. Most of the children who attend HEAR in New Hampshire return to their local public schools, and French said there has been no cry from parents for their kids to stay any longer.

Mike Wallace, on the other hand, who's in charge of the Manchester program, said he'd like to accept as many more students as would like to come. Wallace, who is deaf, said he thinks it's sad that deaf kids are alone in schools across the state, and while he recognizes that Manchester may be too far for some, there's power in numbers.

"The program here is top-notch," Wallace said. "We'd like to see it grow."

The **Laurent Clerc Academy** would like to grow, as well. Wolf-Downes said she plans to reach out to special education directors across the state over the next year to tell them about the school. She also plans to use Northeast Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services, which helps both deaf adults and children, as a promotional tool.

"The kids are out there," she said. "We just need to find them."

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