

AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE POLICY

Purpose

The Rhode Island School for the Deaf is fully committed to educating students in an ASL/English, bilingual-bimodal setting and strongly supports the Statement of Principle, published by the National Deaf Education Project which asserts that

Communication is at the heart of human and academic growth; that the right to language is necessary for any educational progress to occur;

The Statement of Principle concludes that

The right to communicate with others, to exchange ideas and thoughts, to ask a teacher about a math problem, to discuss the Russian Revolution (or the high salaries of professional athletes or one's favorite author)—in short, the “right to language”—is necessary for any educational growth and central to the human experience.

Virtually everything an individual does or a society accomplishes has at its heart the ability to communicate.”

For the School's students, this means that the future must hold the same promise for them as for all students, regardless of educational challenges in language and communication. They must have the opportunity to develop the same age-appropriate language skills as do their hearing peers and to learn in an environment where there is a critical mass of peers with whom they can interact easily and from whom they can learn. A shared visual language is essential to creating this opportunity.

There is a strong positive correlation between ASL proficiency and English language and literacy skills. For children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, proficiency in American Sign Language (“ASL”) and English is important, and for many Deaf children a strong first language in ASL is pivotal to developing proficiency in the English language.

Drawing upon this knowledge, the School has implemented an ASL/English, bilingual-bimodal instructional program (“Program”), with the goal of leading students to bilingual competency in oral or written language and American Sign Language.

Successful implementation of this Program will increase the likelihood of enhancing academic outcomes for those children who attend the School.

Fidelity to the Program requires the highest possible commitment from the entire school community to communicate effectively and directly with students and to skillfully support their cognitive and emotional growth. Easy access to information within a rich language environment encourages connection to the learning community and healthy, age-appropriate cognitive development.

Teachers at the School are especially critical to this commitment. The school must employ the highest quality teachers who can provide full access to the general curriculum and who have the ability to deliver all instruction in both American Sign Language and English.

To deliver effective instruction, teachers at the School must be fluent in ASL at an “Advanced” instructional level, as measured by the American Sign Language Proficiency Interview (“ASLPI”). Proficiency at an Advanced instructional level means that the teacher is not only able to communicate effectively with his or her students, but is sufficiently fluent in ASL both to reinforce and build upon the students’ ASL proficiency, and to draw upon that ASL proficiency to facilitate development of their English language proficiency.

It is essential to the educational mission of the School that teachers are able to facilitate each student’s learning and can skillfully facilitate language and learning among students. In this way children are engaged, supported and challenged in the classroom. Creating a linguistically accessible community at the School through implementation of the Program is therefore crucial, not only to improving the children’s cognitive, intellectual and academic growth but to securing their health, safety, well-being, and overall welfare.

Legal Authority/Mandates

The Board of Trustees for the School has “broad policy making authority” to operate the School and provide policy guidance, and the specific duties to identify the needs of Deaf or Hard of Hearing children served by the School and to develop staffing policies which ensure that all students are taught by educators of the “highest possible quality.” R.I. Gen. Laws § 26-3.1(e)(2), (4) & (5)

In June 2011, the Board adopted *Policies and Procedures to Recruit, Support, and Retain Highly Effective Staff* in accordance with the above-referenced statutory provisions and the Basic Education Program regulations (the “BEP”), adopted by the Rhode Island Board of Education and effective on July 1, 2010.

In 2012, the Board submitted, and the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education approved, a Reform Plan as required under the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The State had identified the School as a “persistently lowest-achieving,” and then a “priority school” under this law, which has implemented heightened standards and accountability elements for state education agencies and local school districts that receive federal monies. The Reform Plan requires that all teachers demonstrate proficiency in ASL by achieving a minimum level of “Advanced” on the ASLPI (the American Sign Language Proficiency Interview).

The ASL Policy

In accordance with and to carry out its obligations under the above referenced federal and state law, and all other applicable laws, the Board hereby adopts a policy that requires that all staff

continue to foster an environment where American Sign Language and English are both valued, and that teachers employed by the School establish their proficiency in American Sign Language by achieving a minimum score of “Advanced” on the ASLPI.

This *ASL Policy* goes to the essence of the educational mission of the School: to deliver a high quality preschool, elementary and secondary education to children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

*2nd Reading Adopted by the Board
May 5, 2015*