



"The world has watched the deaf community come of age. Together we've overcome our own reluctance to stand up for our own rights."

Dr. I. King Jordan, President Emeritus
Gallaudet University

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Friday, February 2, 2018

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Superintendent Julee Nist
Illinois School for the Deaf
125 S. Webster Ave
Jacksonville, IL 62650

Dear Superintendent Nist:

We write this letter to you from a place of great concern. The Illinois Association of the Deaf (IAD) has been adamant the long-standing issues at the Illinois School for the Deaf (ISD), many of which predate your arrival at ISD, are irrevocably hindering ISD students' learning outcomes and damaging ISD's reputation.

Deaf culture and American Sign Language (ASL) remains marginalized at ISD and very visible instances of audism and oppression of students, parents, staff, educators and the larger Deaf community remain the way of business at ISD. Consequently, at the hands of ISD staff members like Angela Kuhn, Allison Guidish and others, ISD has fostered an environment of oppression that actively works behind the scenes to systematically attack hundreds of Deaf children, depriving them of their natural language, culture, and identity.

The teaching methodology and culture at ISD is teacher oriented, not student oriented. ISD offers bilingual pay for teachers, but does not use the American Sign Language Proficiency Interview (ASLPI), a holistic language evaluation used to determine global ASL proficiency, as a way to assess teachers' ASL proficiency. Furthermore, Deaf students, staff members and members of the Deaf community have been subject to blatant disrespect of our culture and language at ISD. For example, hearing staff members like Jill Bruington have talked in front of members of our community without signing. Yet, these very individuals receive bilingual pay. To this end, we ask: what second language are teachers fluent in that qualifies them for bilingual pay?

As our President referenced during the December 2017 ISD Advisory Council, the URL for ISD's Cued Speech Facts or Myths page was www.illinoisdeaf.org/getacue. We appreciate the change to the new URL, especially as the existing URL was insulting and demeaning to the Deaf community. However, the existing URL is indicative of the continuous patronizing, oppressive and biased culture at ISD.

Your staff portrays the use of ASL as being a contributing factor to ISD students' delays with written and spoken English, but does not address the issues of language deprivation and its long-term impact on developing language fluency and comprehension. Instead, they've thrown options into the mix without even addressing the fundamental issue at hand.

Illinois Association of the Deaf
P.O. Box 2161, Palatine, IL 60078
224.800.1795 • info@iadeaf.org
www.iadeaf.org

For example, we refer to the Cued Speech poster developed by Angela Kuhn and Karla Giese several years ago, one that blatantly diminishes the value of ASL as a language to the benefit of cued speech. Despite our association bringing these audist behaviors to the attention of your predecessor, this poster is still displayed on the ISD website.

ASL is a visual language that should not be viewed as inferior to English (or any other language) as it meets the full criteria of linguistics: phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. This visual vernacular is classified as a fully developed language. The aforementioned poster makes no attempt to recognize ASL as such and instead cites heavily biased sources in favor of cued speech. Along this line of thinking, the poster explicitly and inaccurately compares the 250,000 words in an English dictionary (with 50-75,000 words considered as basic) to an estimated 5,000 commonly used signs in ASL.

ASL fluency has been proven by numerous research studies - including that of a US Department of Education funded study - to be effective in supporting the development of English and literacy. Furthermore, there are numerous successful programs throughout the country using a bilingual approach to educate Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children, including the California School for the Deaf, Fremont (CSDF) and Maryland School for the Deaf (MSD).

To this end, according to the California Department of Education, only 8% of all Deaf and Hard of Hearing students in the state of California pass California's High School Exit Exam (HSEE) while 50% of students at CSDF pass the HSEE. Furthermore, students who attended the Early Childhood Education at CSDF have a 90% to 100% chance of passing the HSEE. Students of MSD share similar success as more than 70 percent of MSD graduates go on to college. It is important, however, to note CSDF and MSD utilize a balanced bilingualism approach, one where English and ASL have equal value, and are successful without the utilization of cued speech.

With the introduction of cued speech at ISD, has ISD come close to achieving similar success to CSDF and MSD?

With relevance to the aforementioned Cued Speech poster, one of the groups experienced learning via sign supported speech and ASL for the majority of academic content. The former is not ASL in its pure form and disqualifies the validity of the "study" completed. Furthermore, combining speech and ASL conflicts with the Illinois School for the Deaf's accessible bilingual philosophy in which "the separation of ASL and English when communicating to/with others is expected."

ISD staff members like Angela Kuhn are using skewed research to manipulate parents in an effort to further their audist agenda. This must change.

Additionally, testimony provided by Angela Kuhn, ISD Principal, and Allison Guidish, educator at ISD, at Kuhn v. Rawlings in July 2017 reflected personal biases favoring the use of cued speech in the classroom while simultaneously marginalizing ASL (the written transcript of Kuhn v. Rawlings is available as public record at the Circuit Court of the Seventh Judicial Circuit; in no way are the mentioned excerpts manipulated).

Angela Kuhn disagreed with the insistence that deaf people could learn English through the use of sign language. As found on page 134 of the written transcript of Day 2 of Kuhn v. Rawlings, Angela Kuhn shared, “I would not agree that they learn English with any, with levels of proficiency that would be deemed acceptable in a school environment...” This demeaning comment is not only insulting to ASL and the Deaf community, but to Deaf education in its entirety, especially as research shows children who already have a strong language foundation with ASL perform better academically as compared to other peers (for more, visit Boston University’s website at <http://www.bu.edu/research/articles/asl-language-acquisition/>).

On page 136, Angela Kuhn was unable to cite studies showing the benefits of cued speech. Where is Beverly Trezek’s research? We have yet to see any conclusive evidence or results from her study; to this end, if ISD is referencing inconclusive evidence to support the use of cued speech, this could be rendered unethical in academia.

Instead of referencing research, Angela Kuhn shared ISD relied upon the consultation of their reading consultant and reading specialist, and referenced pillars within the national reading panel as reasons for implementation of cued speech at ISD (page 113). However, Angela Kuhn failed to mention the national reading panel is designed for hearing students, not Deaf students. Phonemic awareness shall not be looked at as the “be all end all,” especially if it doesn’t guarantee success with hearing children who can hear and speak.

Why are hearing individuals at ISD continuing to make major decisions affecting education of Deaf children without including an ASL specialist to advise how to best utilize ASL as a support for the development of English and reinforcement for literacy?

Of additional concern is Angela Kuhn advising the average growth per year for a deaf student is “two months” (page 147). This is an egregious comment, one that is absent any substantial reference to back the claim. Angela Kuhn referenced the Northwest Evaluation Association Measure of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP), but this is a test that does not take into consideration any “deaf norms.” To this end, by using the NWEA MAP, how can one effectively evaluate how much progress a Deaf child should make in a year?

Testimony provided by Angela Kuhn does not posit teachers come together regularly to re-assess students’ needs and to ensure they meet their yearly goals; this could constitute as a dereliction of responsibility. Consequently, we encourage you to investigate whether IEP goals are designed for students to achieve one year’s progress.

Further substantiating our concerns is testimony provided by Allison Guidish. On pages 138 through 143 of Day 1 testimony, Allison Guidish shared Cued Speech is more important for a child that is profoundly deaf than it is for one with residual hearing. She also stated that despite a child functioning better with sign language, the child would suffer a detriment if instructed full-time in ASL. This is a contradictory statement and is particularly concerning to the IAD.

On page 86 of Day 2 testimony, Angela Kuhn stated, “The team is not always in agreement with her (Claire Rawlings) suggestions or her, the things that she would like to talk about at IEP meetings.” This act of disregard is similar to the experiences other parents of Deaf children at ISD brought to our attention. Ironically, once a child receives special education services, parents do not have full decision-making powers regarding their children’s education; instead, it now becomes a “team decision” in which the educational team can essentially override parental preferences and recommendations if they’re not in alignment with the teaching philosophy at the school. This is concerning to the IAD and, unfortunately, the actions of oppressive staff members at ISD have validated our concerns that students’ ASL and social-emotional needs are not being met in the classroom.

The communication bias and audism that has permeated its way throughout campus has rendered teaching jobs as undesirable and serves as a deterrent to qualified Deaf candidates applying for teaching positions. Even if Deaf candidates were to apply for jobs at ISD, ISD has a biased hiring process in place. While we respect the validity of the Rutan interview format that is used to hire at ISD, we also recognize there are no Deaf individuals involved in the process of developing desired answers to the questions that are asked during the interviews. This is gross negligence and a way for the principals to establish and maintain control at ISD. It is abhorrently unacceptable that hearing individuals like Angela Kuhn continue to develop educational standards and expectations for Deaf individuals and their respective language and culture.

ISD’s communication policy stipulates ISD shall provide an accessible bilingual communication environment. Yet, students shared with IAD they expressed their frustrations to ISD principals of not learning when using cued speech. Students have also shared concerns regarding the current poster highlighting ASL and Cued Speech simultaneously, one where there are pictures making references to the need for auditory learning. This is a disrespect to ASL and Deaf culture, especially as this poster is replacing educational posters highlighting ASL on campus.

ISD students shared with us they tried to set a meeting with your office to discuss their concerns, but have not received any confirmation about a meeting. We ask you set up a time to meet with said students to discuss.

As members of the Deaf community, we relate to these students; continuously, we’ve felt our values, language and culture be marginalized and our voices stifled at ISD. Members of our community have pulled their children out of ISD because the school will not accommodate their child’s specific needs. To this end, we ask:

- How many families have pulled their children out of ISD over the past several years?
- How many families want to send their children to other schools but do not have the resources to make the move?

ISD is known as a “cued speech” school prevalent with audism; this is in spite of how much ISD keeps purporting it is a bilingual school.

Deaf individuals know the truth about what’s going on at ISD. Unfortunately, hearing parents don’t know what they don’t know. They come to ISD trusting ISD staff members like Angela Kuhn and Allison Guidish as experts

in Deaf education. Instead of doing what's right by the children, staff members are essentially violating parents' trust by not using evidence-based bilingual education.

Collectively, the aforementioned issues at ISD have become insurmountable, and we request you:

- Hold your leadership team, including the principals who further purport their biased agendas, accountable;
- Develop a comprehensive strategy to effectively recruit qualified, Deaf educators, administrators and staff members to work at ISD;
- Address the issues of nepotism at ISD;
- Instruct the IT team to take down the Cued Speech poster from the ISD website;
- Revise the Rutan interview process to ensure Deaf individual(s) are a part of developing desired answers for interview questions;
- Expand the ISD ASL Program with ASL specialists who are Deaf and fluent in ASL;
- Issue a school-wide policy that staff members should utilize ASL in front of Deaf students and faculty members instead of speaking; and
- Produce and release the results from Beverly Trezek's cued speech studies conducted at ISD.

The mission of the ISD is to educate students who are deaf or hard of hearing to be responsible self-supporting citizens. To this end, we look forward to ISD making swift changes to eliminate the audist and oppressive behaviors rampant at the school and treating ASL and English with the equal respect they deserve.

Sincerely,

The Illinois Association of the Deaf Board of Directors

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