

It Takes a Village to Raise a Deaf Child

By Kenneth Norton, Ms

Mr. Norton has devoted the greater part of his life to the California School for the Deaf-Berkeley and Fremont. Over the span of 73 years he was a student, teacher, coach, dean of student and retired volunteer. He began his teaching career at the Oklahoma School for the Deaf where he was a teacher and coach for 11 years. Among Mr. Norton's literary accomplishments are four books, one of them The Eagle Soars to Enlightenment, a history of CSD, 1860-2000.

As the saying goes, it really does take a village to raise a child and for Deaf children, this village is primarily found at residential schools such as CSD-Fremont. As in a village, a Deaf child at a residential school is surrounded by a close-knit "village" of peers and multiple generations who communicate in his language, help him develop his potential, and teach him how to thrive in the greater world. This is, indeed, a better way to learn.

Unfortunately, there is real concern about declining enrollment among state residential schools. One reason is the development of new hearing aids that benefit some but not all Deaf children. Another major reason is the lack of truthful and comprehensive information about the nature of state schools which leads public school administrators, as well as state legislators, to have an unclear understanding about the essential value of residential schools for Deaf children.

This writer does not intend to disparage public schools that run mainstream programs for Deaf children. However, when we uphold the best interests of Deaf children, we must carefully consider the comprehensive education that residential schools provide for them.

Let us compare some of the features of CSD to the mainstream schools: CSD is committed to providing Deaf children with a comprehensive academic program in the least restrictive environment. It offers bilingual instruction for Early Childhood, Elementary, Middle School, and High School students in which language development in both ASL and English is essential. Students thrive in a climate where innovation is encouraged and supported. Another key advantage of the residential school is their "Total Educational Programs" which include a wide variety of after school activities. Deaf students attending mainstream programs do not have easy access to this kind of learning in the hours out of the classroom.

The philosophy of residential schools, like CSD-Fremont, is to offer a 24-hour educational environment that promotes the growth of every student. This includes social

skills, peer socialization, independent living skills programs for seniors (which often includes working in the greater community), social events, and activities in the cottages. Not only can students engage in intramural sports, they can also participate in interscholastic athletics (football, basketball, volley all, baseball and track) in which students compete with teams of hearing students from public schools in their division. Far from being isolated, Deaf students are taught to thrive in a rich language environment, develop their identity, and how to thrive once they go out into the larger world.

A successful village life at the residential school includes a social culture among peers with the guidance of adults that promote: the fundamentals of leadership, maintaining a positive attitude and self-discipline, empathy, the ability to struggle, having humility, taking initiative, and taking personal responsibility. Students in a mainstream program too often miss out on these important aspects of their development.

Naturally, children initially feel bad when their parents leave them alone in a strange school. All children need to communicate with their parents often in order to feel secure. Soon after arriving at school, however, students often tell their parents not to “bother them” so often with video or phone calls as they are busy with school activities. Typically, newcomers to CSD-Fremont adapt to residential life quickly because they have found other students who share the same interests and whose company they enjoy.

Let me share my own experience at CSD. In 1931, when I was 5 years old, my deaf parents enrolled me into CSD. Because my mother was heartbroken when she parted from me, my father decided to withdraw me from school a week later. While Superintendent Stevenson tried to reason with my father, I told my Dad that I wished to go play with my new friends. Supt. Stevenson stood up and pointed out that I was ready for CSD. My parents agreed to let me continue. Later, my mother admitted that she was very content that I began my education at CSD at that young age.

The vitality of CSD campus life can be seen through another, more recent, anecdote: A hearing sister of a CSD senior desired to get an idea of how her older sister thrived at her residential school. She received permission to spend a week at CSD, shadowing her older sister in her classes and in her dorm. Immediately afterward, the hearing sister said she was surprised how much she enjoyed the after class activities. She had learned a lot from the residential life and wished she could attend CSD instead of going to her hometown public high school because, there, she had nothing to do after class hours. It is a sad irony that even the hearing sister, who had free access to all of the after school activities of her public school found the life at CSD to be more enriching and beneficial. Deaf students in mainstream public schools have a much more difficult time trying out for the cheerleading squad, joining the football team, or running for class president.

This fall, in this era of COVID-19, students have become upset about not returning to CSD-Fremont since the school, like so many others in California, has had to adopt a

distance learning program. The students say they especially miss the campus life and their extracurricular activities. CSD dorm counseling staff have been regularly meeting with students after their on-line classes thorough Zoom and have had animated ASL conversations, both individually and in group meetings. The students are hungry to freely and openly communicate with others in ASL and often keep their teachers and counselors on Zoom for lengthy face-to-face calls.

This author strongly urges Deaf Communities, the California Association of the Deaf, and National Association of the Deaf to campaign to follow through on our promise to educate the whole Deaf child. Moreover, this writer urges state legislatures throughout the United states to enact legislation to save the state schools for the Deaf for they are the real villages in which to raise Deaf children.