

Keeping An Umbrella Over Our Deaf And Hard of Hearing Students

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Pam Millett, PhD, Reg CASLPO



The late Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Supreme Court Justice of the United States, once commented on changes to voting rights legislation, saying “Throwing out preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet.” She may have been talking about voting rights, but the principle she highlights is equally relevant for us. It is nonsensical to look at a situation where someone is standing in the rain protected by an umbrella, and then conclude that that person doesn’t need an umbrella because “look, they’re not wet, why do they need an umbrella?”. However, sadly, this is increasingly the situation in school boards where services (particularly teacher of the deaf jobs) are being eroded or increasingly, cut entirely.

The most recent example happened in February in the Peel District School Board, where all itinerant teachers (including teachers of the deaf and teachers of students who are blind/low vision) were convened at the board office and informed that their jobs were declared redundant for the coming 2024-2025 school year. Itinerant teachers would be assigned to other roles such as classroom teacher. Thanks to the quick response of parents, particularly the group Ontario Parents of Visually Impaired Children, [the decision was “reversed”](#) (well, temporarily, since the decision

will be revisited again every year). The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Alliance (AODA) covered [this story](#), noting that “It is unfair that parents of students with disabilities must thereby be ready to fight this battle again next year and potentially every year.”

While the Peel District School Board has been in the media lately, it is not the only school board cutting itinerant teacher jobs through direct cuts or not replacing teachers who retire. Faculty in our program have fielded many emails from professionals and parents, with similar stories from their school boards. Given the amount of money appropriately allocated to the Infant Hearing Program by the Ontario government, why would we want to undo the good work being done by the provincial Infant Hearing Programs to send children to school with as close to typical language, cognitive, psychosocial and emergent literacy skills as possible, by removing services once they enter kindergarten? As a group, students with hearing loss are achieving significantly better language and literacy outcomes than 20 or 30 years ago, because of Universal Newborn Hearing Screening, early intervention, and improvements in hearing technology. But only because they have umbrellas. Why are their umbrellas being taken away in some school boards? I think some basic misunderstandings by school board administrators are perhaps understandable given how much things have changed for deaf and hard-of-hearing children over the past 20 years or so.

Misunderstanding #1: All deaf and hard of hearing children are doing so well these days that they don’t need a teacher of the deaf or educational audiologist

This misunderstanding perhaps makes sense – why would you need to provide special education services to a student who is achieving at grade level and hearing peers? And of course, many students are achieving much better language and literacy outcomes than 20 or 30 years ago. There are two things to remember, however – (1) for students who doing well, this is because of the supports that are in place, both the laying of a solid foundation through the Infant Hearing Program and through the work of teachers of the deaf and educational audiologists who ensure that students have the best assistive technology, that teachers and school staff are knowledgeable about effective practices and strategies and that someone is monitoring progress to ensure that small issues are addressed before they become big issues. (2) There are still many students who struggle and who require special education services, which teachers of the deaf and educational audiologists best provide. As I wrote in a previous column, [The Changing Needs of Students with Severe to Profound Hearing Loss](#), to a certain extent our students have become victims of their own success in the sense that school staff assume that because they can talk and respond when you call their name, they’re not deaf.

Misunderstanding #2: Any deaf and hard of hearing students who are struggling are all in congregated classes or at the provincial schools for the deaf

When I entered the field almost 40 years ago, students with significant needs (generally those with more severe hearing loss) were generally educated in congregated classes or at the schools for the deaf. This situation has completely changed; more than 90% of deaf and hard-of-hearing students are now educated in the mainstream, in regular classrooms in their local schools. There are very few congregated classes in Ontario – an informal count suggests that only approximately 7 of 72 school boards in Ontario still offer special deaf and hard of hearing classes. Students requiring significant specialized educational support must be accommodated in regular classrooms without

an option for a congregated class placement. Reasons why there are fewer congregated classes are complicated and often related to geographical constraints; it's not a problem that is easily fixed. However, the reality is that in a school board which does not have congregated classes, a grade 8 student reading at a grade 1 level will still be enrolled in a grade 8 classroom and requires direct support from a teacher of the deaf.

Misunderstanding #3: Even if there are students who require intensive support, there is no requirement by the Ontario Ministry of Education that this be provided by teachers of the deaf

The regulations governing this are quite old, from the days when special education funding was specifically provided only for students with more than a 70 dB pure tone average. The [Ontario Ministry of Education Policy/Program Memorandum 76C](#) states students with hearing loss greater than 70 dB must be provided with a program of instruction (which can be a resource room or itinerant model) which must be "... provided by a teacher who has the necessary qualifications to teach blind, deaf, or deaf-blind pupils, that are outlined in [Regulation 268, R.R.O. 1980, section 23](#)". Teachers who are hired without this qualification (and many are) must have a [Temporary Letter of Approval](#) stating that they are in process of qualifying. Some school boards have argued that this regulation does not apply to them if they do not have congregated classes. However, students deserve appropriate services regardless of their degree of hearing loss or educational placement.

Misunderstanding #4: School resource teachers and community audiologists can provide the supports that deaf and hard of hearing students need

The qualifications referenced in above are the [Ontario College of Teachers' Additional Qualification "Teaching Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing"](#). In Ontario, the qualification in English is provided at [York University](#), and consists of 400 hours of university coursework and 400 hours of supervised practicum. As an example, the two courses in Language and Literacy Development include 144 hours of coursework on this topic. The curriculum includes 36 course hours and labs on FM systems alone. Resource teachers and classroom teachers simply do not have the same content knowledge or technical skills as those who hold the qualifications of teacher of the deaf. School boards should not assume that community audiologists can pick up the slack in recommending, fitting, training teachers, verifying, validating and troubleshooting FM systems, or that parents can pay for these services. Yet technology is arguably the biggest and most effective umbrella that our students have.

In 2018, they concluded by saying, "Perhaps surprisingly, in 2018, as professionals, we need to continue to advocate for deaf and hard of hearing services in schools." It's now 2024, and the situation is worse. As per usual, as an Ontario educational audiologist, my information is specific to Ontario – your mileage may vary. However, it is incumbent on all audiologists who see children to be aware of their local educational contexts in terms of what services are available and which students qualify, for example. We cannot assume that school services provided in the past, or that we imagine would automatically be provided, are available to our students and families. We need to make sure those umbrellas don't disappear.