



Deaf Bilingual Coalition

Sign from the start...Success for a lifetime!

August 30, 2011

Honourable Leona Dombrowsky
Ministry of Education
22nd Floor Mowat Block
900 Bay Street
Toronto, Ontario
M7A 1L2

Dear Honourable Leona Dombrowsky,

Re: Deaf/Hard of Hearing Students in Ontario Schools and V.O.I.C.E. for Hearing Impaired Children's Position Paper

The Deaf Bilingual Coalition (DBC) is a grassroots organization of Canadian and American Deaf and Hearing people who are concerned about the current situation of denying access to American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des signes quebecoise (LSQ) for Deaf infants and children during the critical early years of development. The DBC advocates for the right of Deaf children to access ASL/LSQ, respectively, from birth and become fluent in their native languages as well as the majority languages (English/French) throughout their school years, respectively. The DBC also believes that Deaf children benefit best from a multilingual and multicultural upbringing that respects not only the majority cultures but also minority ones such as ASL and LSQ cultures.

The Deaf Bilingual Coalition (DBC) wishes to present its perception that the actions of VOICE for Hearing Impaired Children (VOICE) that are in direct conflict with Canadian multicultural values which includes respect for the human rights of Deaf Ontarian citizens. This respect for the human rights of citizens is reflected in Canada's ratification of the U.N. Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) on March 11, 2010. This document's guiding principles include non-discrimination and respect for the evolving capacities of children...to preserve their identities. Therefore, the government of Canada, and by extension, the government of Ontario, is obligated to ensure that all organizations respect the human rights as outlined in the UN CRPD document.

VOICE appears to ignore the 21st International Congress on The Education of the Deaf (ICED) 2010 Vancouver New Era Accord (July 19, 2010). The ICED 2010 Vancouver New Era Accord, which invokes the UN CRPD, calls upon all nations to: a) endorse the

resolutions adopted by the World Federation of the Deaf at its 15th Congress in Madrid in 2007, specifically those that **promote and support equal and appropriate access to a multilingual/multi-cultural education**, b) **Include the sign languages of their Deaf citizens as legitimate languages...and to treat them as equal to those of the hearing majority**, and c) Involve their Deaf citizens to assist parents of Deaf infants, children and youth in the appreciation of the Deaf culture and sign languages.

The [May 26th position paper](#) states that VOICE “provides auditory-verbal (AV) intervention and actively engages in advocacy to promote listening and spoken language development to support parental choice for listening and spoken language.” The objective of the Auditory-Verbal Therapy (AVT) approach is to “teach hearing impaired children to use whatever usable hearing they have in order to acquire speech & language.” On www.voicefordeafkids.com/avt_plan.asp, it is quite clear that neither American Sign Language (ASL) nor langue des signes quebecoise (LSQ) is encouraged. That page states that AVT treatment plans support “the development of spoken language for communication. Sign language is not used in the Auditory-Verbal approach.” This statement shows that VOICE supports the **exclusion** of American Sign Language (ASL) and langue des signes quebecoise (LSQ), which are the sign languages of Canada’s Deaf citizens.

By encouraging the restriction of Deaf children to spoken language only, VOICE is enabling Auditory-Verbal Therapy programs to create and perpetuate policies that deny parents of deaf and hard of hearing children the right to use ASL/LSQ services for their children. This is promoting language and cultural oppression of (ASL) and (LSQ). Such oppression is most certainly in violation of Canadian (and Ontarian) multilingual and multicultural values as well as the human rights of young Deaf Ontarian citizens.

The dogmatic listen-and-speak-only ideology that excludes ASL/LSQ has already proven quite harmful to many Deaf Canadian children’s educational, language, emotional and mental development. Please refer to Judge Orr’s landmark August 19, 2005 Saskatchewan court decision that American Sign Language must be offered to Deaf children as an option in the early years. “At issue in that court was the philosophy of Saskatchewan Pediatric Auditory Rehabilitation Centre (SPARC) which follows the restrictive “auditory-verbal” approach which focuses only on restoration and remediation of hearing and speech.” (Malkowski’s August 7, 2010 open letter to Newfoundland Minister of Education)

Furthermore, VOICE fails to acknowledge ASL and LSQ, and Deaf culture associated with either language. A thorough search of www.voiceforkids.com will not yield a shred of information about ASL or LSQ, (except for a passing mention of ASL in an August 18th letter in reaction to Ontario Association of the Deaf’s August 10th letter to the Minister of Education). You will not find either language named in their position paper. When “sign language” is mentioned, it is always in a negative/inferior context. This is definitely a far cry from treating ASL or LSQ as legitimate languages, equal to English and French languages.

The May 26th [position paper](#) contains erroneous and harmful misinformation backed up with citations of biased research to justify discriminatory AVT practices that marginalize ASL and LSQ.

For instance:

- “Recent data suggest that sign language may interfere with spoken language in children identified after one year of age (Nittrouer, 2009).”

- “Literacy is highly dependent on phonological processing abilities which involve segmenting sounds in words. Accordingly, the development of listening skills promotes strong literacy foundations (Robertson, 2009)”

In Dr. Kristin Snoddon's [American Sign Language and Early Literacy: Research as Praxis](#), (2009, p. 42), she dismantles such misleading claims in this excerpt: “...on one website is the claim that ‘Research has shown that children who do not use sign language develop more sophisticated use of their hearing and speaking skills’ (HEAR in Dallas, 1996). **However, no link is provided to research that addresses this specific claim...** Studies which find the spoken language of Deaf children with cochlear implants who are enrolled in auditory-oral programs to be superior to that of children enrolled in Total Communication programs as “sign language” programs (e.g., Geers, 2006) **do not show the full picture regarding the effects of ASL on spoken English development.** Total Communication programs as a widespread phenomenon in the U.S. (Anderson, 2006) are not bilingual education programs and constitute part of the monolingual approach to educating Deaf students. Additionally, **many students enrolled in Total Communication programs have been transferred from auditory-oral programs where they did not succeed in acquiring spoken language** (Spencer, 2002).”

Another Canadian researcher, Dr. Jim Cummins, author of [The Relationship between American Sign Language Proficiency and English Academic Development: A Review of the Research \[1\]](#), (2006) also disagrees with VOICE's claims. He stated in his September 17, 2008 letter that “research carried out during the past decade among deaf children shows clearly that children who develop strong ASL proficiency develop better English literacy skills than those whose ASL abilities are weaker or non-existent.” Cummins takes it further: “In particular, **children who receive cochlear implants are frequently discouraged from developing fluency in American Sign Language (ASL).**” (See attached Cummins' September 17, 2008 letter in support of International Sign Language Day)

Scientific research by renowned University of Toronto Cognitive Neuroscience researcher, Dr. Laura Petitto, backs Dr. Snoddon and Dr. Cummins' arguments. As she wrote in [On The Biological Foundations of Language](#), (2000), Petitto discovered that both signed and spoken languages are processed and housed in much of the identical brain tissue. In her September 9, 2008 letter in support of International Sign Language Day Dr. Petitto argues that “signed languages should not only be respected but be afforded the identical rights and privileges as all spoken languages... [because] The human brain treats both signed and spoken languages identically.” (See attached September 9 letter)

ASL/LSQ are excluded in Auditory-Verbal Therapy programs in favour of the **monolingual spoken-language-only** ideology. We cannot help but be reminded of the **monolingual (English-only)** position of an organization originally known as the **Alliance for the Preservation of English in Canada (APEC)**. The APEC was later renamed **Canadians against Bilingualism Injustice (CABI)**, and is currently known as the [Canadian Network for Language Awareness](#). This organization campaigned against the Canadian government's policy of official bilingualism, and practices linguicism (prejudice against another language) against the French language and Francophones. Linguicism and bigotry do not reflect Canadian multilingual and multicultural values, and therefore cannot be allowed to continue.

We share the concerns expressed by the Ontario Association of the Deaf (OAD) that VOICE is excluding ASL/LSQ in its promotion of monolingual spoken language as the preferred choice for Deaf children. The exclusion of ASL/LSQ leads to the perspective that VOICE is not treating these languages as equal to the English and French in Canada. VOICE does not seem to indicate a willingness to work with Deaf citizens as stipulated in the ICED 2010 New Era and Accord for the Future document. (See VOICE's August 18th post at www.voicefordeafkids.com)

We support the Ontario's Association of the Deaf's suggestion that the Ministry of Education encourage VOICE for Hearing Impaired Children to work with Deaf citizens whose native languages are American Sign Language (ASL), and langue des signes quebecoise (LSQ) in the best interests of our Deaf children in a multilingual, multicultural country.

Dr. Petitto said it best when she said that the brain does not discriminate between signed and spoken languages. We---our social policies, our educational systems, our greater society--- should not discriminate against them as well.

The Deaf Bilingual Coalition (DBC) wishes to remind you that it is important for all Deaf students and their families to see that the Ministry of Education supports multilingual and multicultural education that will benefit the Deaf children themselves. The use of ASL/LSQ along with English/French during early childhood development and in educational settings will provide the best educational foundation for Ontario Deaf children. This foundation will allow Ontario Deaf children and students to be proud, confident, productive, creative and enabling citizens of Canada.

Sincerely,



David Kerr
Chair, Deaf Bilingual Coalition

cc: Steve Duke, Chair, VOICE for Hearing Impaired Children
Dalton McGuinty, Premier of Ontario
Tim Hudak, Leader, Ontario PC Party
Andrea Horwath, Leader, Ontario NDP Party
Rosario Marchese, NDP Education Critic
Elizabeth Witmer, PC Education Critic
Irwin Elman, Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth in Ontario
Barbara Hall, Chief Commissioner, Ontario Human Rights Commission
Andre Marin, Ontario Ombudsman
Jennifer Beer, Chair, Ontario Hands & Voices
Jim Roots, Executive Director, Canadian Association of the Deaf
President, Ontario Association of the Deaf
Dean Walker, Executive Director, Ontario Association of the Deaf
Chris Kenopic, President & CEO, The Canadian Hearing Society
Colin Allen, President, World Federation of the Deaf