



# “What Parents Need to Know”

**Spotlight on:** 

## School Placement Considerations for Students Who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing

The one thing that parents of deaf and hard of hearing children understand better than anyone else is that the choices in communication, educational placement options, and other decisions about raising their children are complex and individualized. It takes a great degree of flexibility and understanding of the issues. Unfortunately, parents often lack the necessary knowledge and advocacy skills when confronted with a ‘one size fits all’ model by the systems that are there to support them.

When it comes to the considerations of educational placement for the deaf or hard of hearing child, (d/hh) parents become ‘equal partners’ in the process by knowing the law and understanding the communication needs of their child. From understanding the answers to basic questions such as ‘Who decides where my child goes to school?’, to the more complex considerations of academics, communication access, and social considerations, getting to the ‘right’ educational placement for a student who is deaf/hh can be satis-

factorily achieved when parents become meaningfully involved in the process.

### ***You’re in the Game – Come Prepared***

...A parent arrives at her daughter’s IEP team meeting, and the school district administrator announces that due to her child’s degree of hearing loss and/or communication mode, she must attend the center-based program. The family is crushed when they realize their dream of wanting their daughter to be able to go to school with her sisters in their neighborhood school is not an option.

...A parent across town in a different district attends his son’s IEP and is told that the law requires that all students in special education attend their home schools, even though his son uses a visual mode of communication. The parent fears his son will have no friends, no authentic communication peers and no direct instruction by appropriately trained school personnel.



How can two different families, both under the same special education laws, be subject to two entirely conflicting scenarios? Which school district got it right? Or are they both wrong? Can you question a school district's 'philosophy' of educational placement? Do you, as the parent, have a right to participate in this decision? Whether you realize it or not, you are an equal partner in the decision making process of school placement decisions, and when armed with the knowledge of the law, you can ensure that process is individualized to meet the needs of your child.

### **WHO decides?**

In the broadest sense, parents have the awesome responsibility to choose for themselves the educational setting for their child: Public education, home-schooling, or education in a private institution. For the parent who has chosen public education for their child, they are then part of a decision making team through the IEP process in determining services, supports and placement issues. When a parent chooses home-schooling or a private placement, a different set of rules apply to what they can and cannot expect from special education under The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (IDEA)

When it comes to who is making the decision about school placement in public education, the law is clear. IDEA states in

Sec. 300.552(a)(1) "In determining the educational placement of a child with a disability, including a pre-school child with a disability, each public agency shall ensure that the placement decision is made by a group of persons, including the parents, and other persons knowledgeable about the child, the meaning of the evaluation data, and the placement options."

### **What are the factors the team should consider in school placement decisions?**

Sec. 300.550, 300.551 in IDEA lists the basic requirements for LRE, or "Least Restrictive Environment" placement for students in special education. Generally speaking, placement in special education for a student starts with the idea that the student would attend the school that he or she would attend if special education were not a consideration. But the law emphasizes that LRE is not just a place, but also the setting in which the student will be in the least restrictive environment based on his individualized needs.

For children who are deaf and hard of hearing, their communication needs set them apart from children with other disabilities. The law has delineated these needs in the following section:

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#### **IDEA, Section 300.46(a)(2)(iv)**

"The IEP Team shall consider the communication needs of the child, and in the case of a child who is deaf or hard of hearing, consider the child's language and communication needs...opportunities for direct communications with peers and professional personnel in the child's language and communication mode, academic level, and full range of needs, including opportunities for direct instruction in the child's language and communication mode."

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But how does the "consideration of communication needs" mesh with the general applicability of the LRE concept? When you take into

account both sections of the law, LRE and consideration of students who are deaf/hh, the individualized needs of the student becomes the primary predictor of the placement decision. Only when the individualized needs of the student have been addressed should a team begin the discussion of WHERE those needs will be met.

Other factors to consider, as well as factors that CANNOT be used in determining placement are distinguished in the following IDEA regulations, Appendix A, section I(1) under the subtitle of "Extent to which child will participate with nondisabled children". The regulation states that in all cases, placement decisions must be individually determined on the basis of each child's abilities and needs, and not solely on factors such as category of disability, significance of disability, availability of special education and related services, configuration of the service delivery system, availability of space, or administrative convenience. The regulation states, "Rather, each student's IEP forms the basis for the placement decision. Further, a student need not fail in the regular classroom before another placement can be considered. Conversely, IDEA does not require that a student demonstrate achievement of a specific performance level as a prerequisite for placement in to a regular classroom."

#### **Looking at the big picture of School Placement: Academically, Communicatively, and Socially**

Three of the main issues in considering placement are of equal importance and intertwined in such a way that they must be addressed in the context of one another:

- ❖ Academic level of the student
- ❖ Communication mode or lan-

guage (regardless of the degree of hearing loss)

- ❖ Opportunities for direct interaction with peers.

For instance, because a student is at grade-level academically, it should not equate to automatic placement in a mainstream setting, if the social and communication needs of that student have not been addressed in the mainstream setting. The 'social' element of the placement consideration should not be taken lightly, when you understand the developmental significance of cognitive learning through interaction with peers.

(Schick, B. Cognition in the classroom, The Communicator Jan. 2004)

If that student who is at grade level uses a different mode of communication than the peers in a mainstream classroom, the choice of school placement cannot be made solely on the issue of academic performance. In another scenario, perhaps a student who is behind academically, but whose mode of communication matches the students in the mainstream classrooms, cannot be automatically placed "down the hall" in a resource room with other special education students based solely on the fact that he/she is behind academically.

These examples illustrate the need for a continuum of services for deaf and hard of hearing students. You cannot simply create a chart, implement a policy, or philosophically take a stand about placement issues for this unique population of students. Each student's needs must be individually accounted for prior to discussion about placement options.

**A Continuum of Placement Options**

A full continuum of placement, program and service options to serve d/hh students more effectively, including those students with additional disabilities should include, but

not be limited to:

- ❖ Regional programs (combined in resource and general ed. Settings) that provide the critical mass of age and language-appropriate opportunities for direct

**“No one placement is best for all children who are deaf or hard of hearing. Any individual child will do best when the placement meets his or her needs.” (www.babyhearing.org)**

instruction and communication with staff, peers, personnel, and services.

- ❖ a State school for the deaf (Residential and Day School)
- ❖ General education placements with all necessary support services, such as itinerant teachers credentialed in d/hh education, interpreters, and assistive listening technology.
- ❖ Special day classes and resource programs, as required by federal and state laws, which may include reverse mainstreaming, partial mainstreaming, and team teaching opportunities.
- ❖ Nonpublic schools, virtual schools, home instruction, hospital instruction, and institutions required by federal and state laws to meet the needs of students with disabilities that cannot be met within the traditional public school setting.

In states such as Colorado, the "Deaf Child Bill of Rights Communication Plan" must include an explanation and consideration of all educational options provided by the administrative unit and available for the child/student. The following

is a list of other considerations when participating as a team member in the placement decision of a student who is deaf or hard of hearing.

Possible issues to address when considering placement:

- ❖ Philosophy of center-based program and compatibility to student's communication needs.
- ❖ The "Least Restrictive Environment" should be defined in context to the communication needs of the child
- ❖ More than one type of placement should be discussed (i.e. mainstream, center-based etc.)
- ❖ There may be biases within in the team about communication methods or range of placement.
- ❖ Preconceived ideas on placement based on degree of hearing loss.
- ❖ Itinerant services -their availability and appropriateness
- ❖ Other programs available outside of district: I.e. State School for the Deaf, center based programming in other districts
- ❖ Pros and cons of different options should be discussed
- ❖ NCLB ( No Child Left Behind) regulations regarding schools that do not meet "Adequate Yearly Progress"
- ❖ What kind of services would need to be implemented in order for the student to attend his "home/neighborhood" school

**Case Study:**

Steven is seven years old, and received a cochlear implant three years ago. He lives with his family in the suburbs of a fairly large city. He has been placed in his school district's center-based program that has a Total Communication model (personnel both sign and speak during the academic day). In the past, Steven's family used some sign language with him, but his oral skills

have progressed to a point where he rarely uses sign language for expressive or receptive input. His parents feel very strongly that Steven needs strong spoken language models during his day. He has very strong auditory skills, and is not fluent in sign language. The teachers at the TC program have not had experience with children who use cochlear implants, and they strongly believe all children should use sign language. Steven loves

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math and science, and learns best with a “hands on” approach. Steven has made friends at his center-based program, but doesn’t have any friends in his own neighborhood.

“Consider Placement based on the communication needs of the Child” Steven was placed appropriately at the age of four, but now at the age of seven his needs have changed. The school district is not large enough to provide an “oral” option program, so they have tried to meet

the needs of all deaf/hh kids in one center-based program. There are very few kids out in the “mainstream” in that district, in order to save money. The speech therapist in the TC program has never worked with a child with a cochlear implant, and has decided to “treat him like a child with a hearing aid”. The parents are considering moving to another state where they have heard there is an excellent oral school. The special Education Director recently learned that there is a program in the neighboring district that has 8 children with cochlear implants there, and has a national grant to model support for students with cochlear implants.

**ACTION PLAN:** The IEP team must review on an annual basis the needs of the student and his placement. Stevens’s mode of communication has changed over the last few years, and so his needs have changed. The professionals working with Steven need to have some skills/expertise/experience working with kids who have cochlear implants. Since there are no personnel with expertise with cochlear implants, the two special education directors from Steven’s school district, and the neighboring district begin to create a collaborative rela-

tionship so that Steven can be placed out of district into a program that fits his needs – an oral program. Transportation will be provided by the home school district. Steven’s home school has an after school math and science club. It is determined that Steven will participate in the club on a regular basis. This will also give Steven the opportunity to meet kids who live in his neighborhood.

This case study illustrates one example of the considerations within the deaf or hard of hearing experience. Another scenario might present the exact opposite case, a deaf or hard of hearing child who needs to change placement into a setting where sign language is used.

Finding the right school placement for a student who is deaf or hard of hearing children requires an IEP team to truly look at the individual needs of that student. The successful education for our children is accomplished when their academic, social, cognitive, and communicative needs are met. In this way, the mission of special education is fulfilled, to prepare students for employment and independent living. Only then, will the efforts of educating deaf and hard of hearing students be fulfilled.

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*This information is a part of the “What Parents Need to Know” series. Produced by Colorado Families for Hands & Voices through a grant from the Colorado Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Copyright © 2004*

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## **The “What Parents Need to Know” Series**

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**The “What Parents Need to Know” Series includes full articles and two-page synopsis of the following topics:**

- ❖ **Socialization and the Child who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing**
- ❖ **Self-Advocacy for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students**
- ❖ **School Placement Considerations for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Student**
- ❖ **From High School to Post-Secondary Education: The Transition Process**

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