

Fingerspelling and Decision-making in the K-12 classroom

*** Supplemental Assignment**

By: Jay Fehrman

In a 9th grade government class, a teacher is discussing how our government functions and how laws are made. You have the members of the Congress voting for and against the bills after they have been drafted at the committee level. Often at the committee level, there are sub-committees that work on the details of the bills before it is sent to the Congress.

After working in the mainstream classrooms with Sign Language interpreters and other Teachers for Deaf/Hard of Hearing for 20 years, there is much to be said about the decision making process that happens behind fingerspelling or the lack thereof. In ASL, there are signs that have many meanings that may be difficult for a younger Deaf consumer to decipher. These types of situations call for the need of fingerspelling to provide greater clarity to the message.

How is the Deaf student supposed to know that you are talking about Congress, Committee, Cabinet, or Council - especially when the context is very closely related? This is where fingerspelling comes in.

First, there are a number of misconceptions in the field of Deaf education. Second, this article is my attempt to clarify one misconception related to fingerspelling. There are some who did not know, or did not believe (once they were told) that fingerspelling actually enhances literacy. Fingerspelling is actually the closest part of ASL that matches English (Kevin Williams, personal video). One can think of Fingerspelling as a bridge between English and American Sign Language. Some staff were supporting the use of invented signs instead of fingerspelling believing the student is not able to read fingerspelling. One problem with that scenario is that the student has not had consistent and constant exposure to fingerspelling which; as a result; created weaker fingerspelling receptive skills. Invented signs is not a language and puts a Deaf student at a distinct disadvantage of not having the actual word given to them, as well as not having the larger signing population understand the invented sign when used. Fingerspelling actually enhances literacy as it gives the Deaf student a more expansive vocabulary.

There is no evidence that shows fingerspelling or sign language would diminish a Deaf/Hard of Hearing student's ability to develop spoken Language. (<http://v12.gallaudet.edu/research/research-briefs/english/importance-fingerspelling-reading/>) I have found the Visual Language and Visual Learning Lab at Gallaudet University (<http://v12.gallaudet.edu/>) to be a great resource in understanding the implications of our work.

Jay Fehrman has been a Principal/Manager of Deaf/Hard of Hearing and Blind/Visually Impaired Services at Northeast Metro Intermediate District 916 for the past 7 years. Prior to joining Northeast Metro 916, Jay was a teacher for D/HH at Coon Rapids High School for 10 years and has served as an itinerant teacher in the Rochester, MN area for 4 years. He serves on several workgroups to enhance the educational experience for D/HH students including Statewide D/HH

Collaborative Planning, D/HH Transition Committee, Resource Center: D/HH Advisory Committee, Statewide D/HH Network Meetings and Assistive Technology Leadership Team at Minnesota Department of Education. His personal and professional experiences in the mainstream setting have served as a source of passion in enhancing services for Deaf/Hard of Hearing learners. He can be reached at jay.fehrman@nemetro.k12.mn.us or by videophone: 651-964-1274