

ABSTRACT

As parents, educators, and professionals we are dedicated to improving educational outcomes for deaf and hard of hearing, as well as hearing students in the greater Albuquerque area. Therefore, it is our intent to open a bilingual charter school, The Albuquerque Sign Language Academy (ASL Academy), which will utilize American Sign Language (ASL) and English in order to achieve academic excellence, support family involvement, and promote multicultural community integration. Because of the relatively small number of deaf and hard of hearing (dhh) children, the ASL Academy will accommodate not only deaf and hard of hearing students, but also hearing students - including siblings of dhh, children of deaf adults (CODAs), visual learners, and others who would benefit from a bilingual education but are not eligible for enrollment in existing "deaf" programs and schools. Nationally, only a few programs offer this innovative model serving a diverse population. By expanding the critical mass of bilingual peers, an optimal learning environment supportive of academic, social, and emotional development will be created.

The ASL Academy will initially offer classes for 40 students in kindergarten through the fourth grade, and ultimately for 80 students from pre-school through the eighth grade. The ASL Academy will be centrally located in Albuquerque so that children from outlying areas, including Rio Rancho, Bernalillo, Belen, Los Lunas, Tijeras, Moriarty and Edgewood, may readily attend. We will operate on a year-round schedule in order to increase continuous access to ASL. The weekly schedule will be structured to accommodate ancillary services for students, and it is intended that additional programming will be offered during intercessions. Professional development for teachers will emphasize deaf and bilingual education topics that are relevant to their work and beneficial to students.

A rigorous standards-based bilingual educational program which promotes high academic expectations is the foundation of our school. The curriculum will support language acquisition of both ASL and English for all students. We believe a learning environment carefully tailored to support each student's unique needs will result in increased academic performance in all subject areas. Therefore, educators will frequently assess student performance and adjust curriculum and/or student placement as necessary to ensure all students are being appropriately challenged.

Of vital importance to the success of all children is the involvement and support of their family. Since 90% of students with hearing loss come from hearing families, we must also focus on educating parents. We will provide programs for families including ASL classes, parent groups, and educational workshops. By providing parental support and encouraging parental involvement, we will promote social and emotional well-being, increase academic expectations and student performance, and create a collaborative relationship between school and family.

Furthermore, we will unite deaf and hearing persons of varying backgrounds in the greater Albuquerque area by offering events which promote school, family, and multicultural community interaction. Hosting community events will increase awareness of deaf and hard of hearing children and their abilities, connect students and parents with deaf and hard of hearing adults, provide social opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing students and hearing siblings enrolled in other schools, encourage family networking, and offer interpreting opportunities for students attending the University of New Mexico. The creation of these new partnerships will complete the framework in which children can grow and prosper throughout childhood and into adulthood.