



The Albuquerque Sign Language Academy  
*children. family. community. possibility.*

EXCERPTS FROM CHARTER APPLICATION

## **PROPOSED EDUCATIONAL OPTION**

### **The Albuquerque Sign Language Academy (ASL Academy)**

The educational statistics on deaf and hard of hearing students are grim. Clearly there is a need for a quality educational program in Albuquerque, the largest metropolitan area in the State of New Mexico, which will accommodate deaf, hard of hearing and hearing students. The ASL Academy founders are devoted to closing the gap between deaf and hard of hearing children and their hearing counterparts by focusing on the importance of academic achievement, family involvement, and community connections. To that end, charter founders will develop a program focused on and knowledgeable in the unique needs of deaf and hard of hearing children and their families. By providing a carefully constructed learning environment for children who are deaf and hard of hearing, we will give them the opportunity to flourish and reach their full potential – not only educationally, but also socially and emotionally. We look forward to the opportunity to overcome these challenges and alter the course of these children’s lives for the better.

To change course we must first understand the issues which influence the statistical data. *Toward Brighter Futures: 2003 Task Force Report on the Education of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing* (NMSD & NMDOE, 2003) also examined the causes of such poor educational outcomes and the following contributing factors were given:

- The unique, low incidence nature of hearing loss
- Limited auditory access to expressive and receptive language which is necessary for language development and attainment of cognitive milestones
- Lack of communication opportunities at home because 90% of children with hearing loss are born to hearing parents
- Limited opportunities for language at school due to lack of communicatively-fluent staff and communication-accessible program components
- Lack of timely modifications to school programming which ensure communication development and optimize academic achievement
- Society’s historically negative view of hearing loss, which often results in low expectations for deaf and hard of hearing individuals

Additionally, the *2003 Task Force Report* gives a call to action to improve services to deaf and hard of hearing children by stating (NMSD & NMDOE, p. 17):

*“It is necessary because we cannot and must not tolerate the isolation of our children and youth and cannot accept impediments to their well-being and education growth.*

*It is necessary and the right thing to do because this is not a partisan issue or an academic debate, but a matter of basic human needs and human rights.*

*It is necessary because we cannot lose another generation of children and youth who are deaf or hard of hearing.*

*Finally, it is necessary because they are all our children and youth.”*

We intend to answer that call by creating an excellent educational program for deaf and hard of hearing children and families. Opening a charter school is an exciting option because it provides for *significant and immediate* change. As with many other charter schools, parents and educators see a need which is not being addressed and a population which is not being served by existing schools or government programs. The purposes of charter schools are many, but these, as listed in The Charter Schools Act [22-8B-1 NMSA 1978], speak directly to our deaf and hard of hearing children:

- *to enable individual schools to structure their educational curriculum to encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods*
- *to address the needs of all students, including those determined to be at risk*
- *to create new professional opportunities for teachers*
- *to improve student achievement*
- *to provide parents and students with an educational alternative*
- *to encourage parent and community involvement*

In 2004, the State of New Mexico enacted “The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children's Educational Bill of Rights” (*See Appendix I*) which acknowledges that “hearing loss affects the most basic human need, communication.” The purpose of this Bill is “to encourage the development of a communication-driven and language-driven educational delivery system in New Mexico for children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.” Furthermore, the Bill states that it is necessary for deaf and hard of hearing children to advance in their educational endeavors, and that they are as capable as other children, but their educational environment must include:

- quality, ongoing and fluid communication
- teachers who understand and are trained in deaf education
- deaf and hard of hearing role models
- direct and appropriate access to all aspects of the educational model, including in the cafeteria, on the playground, and during extracurricular activities
- information to families

Section Three of *The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children's Educational Bill of Rights* calls upon the public education department and other agencies to act expeditiously in ensuring that:

*“these children have what every other child takes for granted, including an educational environment in which their language and communication needs are fully addressed and developed and in which they have early, ongoing and quality access to planned and incidental communication opportunities; and the recommendations, consistent with the findings and purpose of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children's Educational Bill of Rights, be completed expeditiously.”*

The ASL Academy will offer an innovative program unlike any other program in the State of New Mexico. Nationally, there are only a few deaf and hard of hearing programs which also enroll hearing siblings and peers, and the ASL Academy vision further extends to include parents and families in order to foster real change in deaf education. The educational and social statistics demonstrate that the program models offered to date are simply not working. The ASL Academy has been carefully constructed to offer an educational experience that no other school or program in the State does.

By creating a bilingual multicultural school staffed by teachers and administrators who are all trained, experienced and passionate about education, we will create a true school-wide community in which deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing children and their families will be the main priority. All aspects of the program will focus on the needs of people impacted by hearing loss, including full access to curriculum, direct instruction in American Sign Language, high academic standards and expectations for all students, expansion of the critical mass by including hearing children such as siblings and children with deaf parents, school-wide access to language including in the cafeteria and on the playground, development of parent groups and educational workshops, relevant professional education opportunities for teachers, social opportunities including school clubs and athletic programs, and community events encouraging multiculturalism and networking. For many teachers, parents, and children, this all-encompassing school has been an unattainable dream. By bringing together critical stakeholders and educational professionals, our charter school will succeed in accomplishing what many have long envisioned for the greater Albuquerque area.

*“...families, educators and consumers have realized that deaf and hard of hearing children, like all children, require and should have a number of options for the selection and development of communication and language and educational programs”* (The National Agenda, p. 16).

**SECTION V.**  
**EDUCATIONAL PLAN**

**A. CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK**

**1. PHILOSOPHY AND APPROACH TO INSTRUCTION**

- *A description of the educational philosophy and curricular approach of the proposed school.*

The educational philosophy of The Albuquerque Sign Language Academy is built upon serving three important entities: the child, the family, and the community. The ASL Academy will be comprised predominantly of children who are deaf or hard of hearing, a population often misunderstood and educationally underserved. The parents and teachers of deaf and hard of hearing children recognize that these children are capable and eager to learn, and if given the right learning environment, their accomplishments can be as limitless as those of their hearing peers. A carefully designed, dynamic, and bilingual learning environment which meets the needs of each child individually will optimize educational outcomes for all children, whether deaf, hard of hearing, or hearing.

- *A description of why the particular educational philosophy and/or approach was selected.*

The ASL Academy's educational philosophy supports the cultural model of deafness which recognizes that deaf persons have a unique identity, language, history and society, as opposed to simply a biological disability, and that children are served best when American Sign Language is the instructional language. This cultural model has gained support in the last decade, because the clinical model which focuses on simply overcoming the biological hearing deficit using amplification techniques resulted in poor educational outcomes such as the third grade reading levels of deaf high school graduates previously discussed (Dragow, 1998). The pedagogy for teaching deaf children has been the basis for much discussion. Some programs have utilized a "total communication" model which exposes students to both spoken English and ASL simultaneously. However, because ASL is a language that is both grammatically and structurally different than English, many critics contend that it is therefore impossible to speak English and sign ASL at the same time. Other programs provide use an educational interpreter, however, oftentimes the core meaning of the curriculum is lost, along with the richness of the language, when students must attend to two people at the same time. The ASL Academy will utilize a direct instruction model since these programs have been widely researched and are accepted as providing improved educational outcomes for a variety of students, including regular educational students, hearing students with learning disabilities, deaf, and hard of hearing students (Kraemer, Kramer & Koch, 2001). The ASL Academy believes that all children are entitled to full access to the curriculum and appropriately trained ASL fluent educators to guide them in their studies. Therefore, the bilingual curriculum will be rigorous and standards-based, and will utilize direct instruction in American Sign Language (ASL) and English to promote high academic expectations for all students.

- *Documentation, research, and/or a rationale that supports the educational philosophy and curricular approach.*

Sherman Wilcox, Ph.D, professor of linguistics and chair of the Department of Linguistics at the University of New Mexico, provides the following commentary regarding American Sign Language (Wilcox, 1991):

*Because of its unique modality -- visual/gestural rather than aural/oral -- many people wrongly assume that ASL is fundamentally different than spoken languages. ASL is a fully developed human language, one of the hundreds of naturally occurring signed languages of the world. It is not a derivative of English. It is not a "simplified" language -- it contains structures and processes which English lacks (such as ASL's rich verbal aspect and classifier systems). There is abundant linguistic research on ASL demonstrating that the grammar of ASL is radically different from English -- surely as different as any of the more traditional foreign languages taught in school.*

American Sign Language is the third most widely used language in the United States, and is the predominant language, meaning it was learned as the first or second language, for an estimated 500,000 Americans including Deaf native signers, hearing children who have Deaf parents, and adult Deaf persons who learned ASL from other Deaf adults (Wilcox, S & Peyton, J.K. 1999 and E-Michigan, 2002). Additionally, ASL has its own literature by and about Deaf people, in both written and oral modes, reflecting customs and rituals, legends and tales, games and jokes, poetry and naming practices unique to Deaf culture. In fact, “Deaf culture is now recognized and studied by anthropologists, ethnographers, folklorists, and others interested in culture and cross-cultural communication” (Wilcox, 1991).

Research indicates that because ASL is a fully developed and natural language, containing “grammatically sound phonological, morphological, and syntactical structures,” its use allows deaf and hard of hearing students to acquire language in a normal and predictable manner, quite similar to the way hearing children acquire spoken language. For optimal language acquisition, children should be exposed to ASL during the early years of childhood, including preschool and elementary ages. It is important for all deaf and hard of hearing children, regardless of level of impairment or family background, to have a foundation in ASL so that they have a mode for accessing, organizing, and expressing information presented in an academic setting (Drasgow, 1998). Children who have ASL as a first language can then further build upon that language base and develop English skills. Conversely, children with weak ASL skills and therefore a weak language base demonstrate more difficulty in transferring between ASL and English (Speights, 1996). Research shows that deaf children who are exposed to ASL at an early age have better academic outcomes than deaf children with limited or no ASL experience, and that children with only moderate levels of ASL fluency demonstrate improvements in English literacy. As a visual language, American Sign Language is best suited for providing full access to curriculum for deaf and hard of hearing students, which is why the ASL-English bilingual model will be utilized at the ASL Academy (Drasgow, 1998).

- *An explanation of why the educational philosophy and/or approach is/are likely to result in improved educational performance of students.*

American Sign Language was shown to enhance brain activity in a study of persons who were deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing, and included a mix of those who knew and did not know ASL prior to the study. Brain scans indicated increased blood flow as a measure of neural activity in both sides of the brain, with the left side being typically used to access English and the right side used to access sign language. When students utilize both sides of their brain they are capable of making more connections related to learning, thereby resulting in increased educational outcomes. Younger children can more readily acquire second and third languages, and those intellectual skills are transferable to other areas. This is true for both regular education and special education students (Lawrence, 2001). The concept of “distinct memory stores” demonstrates how the “built-in redundancy” of the bilingual model provides two sources for information recall, thereby assisting students in mastering new concepts, and further supporting brain growth and development in young children (Prevatte, 2005).

The bilingual educational model incorporating American Sign Language and English, in both spoken and written forms, is additionally beneficial to all students because it promotes acquisition of English literacy skills. The ASL Academy will utilize American Sign Language to improve pre-literacy and literacy skills in students since research has proven using ASL positively impacts “vocabulary development, phonemic awareness, letter-sound relationship, and spelling ability” (Prevatte, 2005). Additional evidence specific to hearing children’s exposure to sign language and fingerspelling indicates benefits in vocabulary recall, use of adjectives and adverbs, early language acquisition, improved reading and communication skills, and accelerated language development (Forham, 2001). Not surprisingly, research on the use of ASL with hearing students indicates benefits related not only to literacy, but also to cognition, including findings that exposure to a visuo-gestural language improves visual-spatial cognition and spatial memory. Sign language experience enhances nonverbal cognitive skills including visual/perceptual discrimination and spatial relations recognition. One report concluded that “it would be extremely useful to offer sign language as a second language to hearing children” for these reasons (Capirici, Cattani, Rossini & Volterra, 1998).

It is important to emphasize that in addition to utilizing ASL to deliver instructional information, the ASL Academy supports a true bilingual model in which students must develop *language* and *academic* proficiency in both ASL and English. To this end, educational research supports teaching each language separately. In order for students to experience the cognitive and academic advantages of a bilingual program, and become proficient in both languages, each language must be given equal importance in the curriculum and in classroom instruction, and the program must require sufficient amounts of student work product in both languages. The ASL Academy supports an instructional model which utilizes “language planning” to ensure teachers are “consciously separating and monitoring the two languages and presenting them as distinct systems” (Nover, 2006). The ASL Academy will implement a bilingual model for curriculum development and instruction in language arts to promote student language competence in both ASL and English and therefore improve student testing scores in reading, which will facilitate improvements in other content areas as well.

Research on a co-enrollment program containing deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing children noted that hearing students acquired sign language skills quickly and began signing to their deaf and hard of hearing classmates within a short time. Hearing students continued to gain ASL skills to the point that by the second and third year of the program some hearing students would sign without speaking, and for a classroom observer it would be difficult to distinguish the hearing students from the deaf and hard of hearing students in the class. Testing data showed significant gains in deaf and hard of hearing student's reading scores in the second and third years of the program, which was in contrast to the below grade level scores of children not in the program. Researchers commented that such improvement "speaks highly of the co-enrollment model." Additionally, teachers in the co-enrollment program noted that hearing students benefited from the "increased wait time and decreased teacher talk rate." Of equal importance was the resulting increased interaction between deaf and hearing students that the program provided by teaching ASL to hearing students. By providing students with a common language, deaf and hard of hearing students were able to expand their social circle and have meaningful conversations with hearing peers. Similarly, one of the first co-enrollment programs in the United States, the Tripod program in California, has noted that "socially, deaf and hard of hearing students and hearing students developed friendships that were maintained outside of the classroom setting and learned to comfortably communicate with one another" (Kreimeyer, Crooke, Drye, Egbert & Klein, 2000). The ASL Academy will further build upon these encouraging findings and create a diverse school setting in which all children can communicate directly with one another, thereby improving social opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing children which are frequently lacking in other programs, while increasing self-confidence and social-emotional well-being of all students.

- *A description of how the educational philosophy and/or approach aligns with the school's mission and student needs.*

ASL Academy students will be provided with a language rich environment (ASL and English) which will allow them to gain knowledge of self, peers and the world. The ASL Academy curriculum will provide state-required educational content through direct instruction utilizing a variety of teaching strategies including, but not limited to, thematic-focused classroom activities, special projects and field trips. The educational philosophy and classroom environment will promote the following additional aspects which are critical to student success:

- Students will be active participants in the educational process and will be provided with a variety of learning experiences and opportunities for hands-on and self-directed involvement.
- Students will be encouraged to develop relationships with other children, and such peer interaction opportunities will be incorporated into the curriculum and school environment daily.
- Classroom environments will be exciting, interesting, and academically focused, and will be integrated with the school environment and the surrounding community.

- Academic expectations for all students will be high, and instruction will be differentiated and appropriately modified to meet the needs of each child individually to ensure student mastery of required curriculum content.

Teachers and educational assistants will be instrumental in establishing high student expectations and providing a superior educational environment for ASL Academy students. ASL Academy educators will be deaf and hearing professionals certified in deaf education, special education and regular education collectively, and fluent in ASL and English. Teacher and educational staff quality will be ensured through a rigorous interview process, continuous supervision, and regular performance evaluations. Additionally, teachers and school staff will be supported through regular professional development programs which are applicable to their work and reflective of their knowledge, experience, abilities and interests. Research on teacher excellence indicates the following qualities, philosophies, skills, and instructional approaches serve students best, and therefore, will be utilized at the ASL Academy in order to promote high academic expectations and ultimately improve educational outcomes (Banks, 2005):

- Demonstrate a passion for school mission, educational content, and teaching, which indicates a concern for students' academic achievement and emotional well-being
- Knowledge of students' talents, needs, and prior experiences, and ability to modify instruction to accommodate for differences in students
- Ability to work collaboratively with families and professionals to implement student educational plans, and then effectively and regularly communicate instructional goals and progress with students, families, and other professionals
- Ability to convey information clearly and concisely, to break down complex ideas and make them understandable, and to repeat key concepts throughout the instructional period
- Engage students by teaching them not only the concepts, but also how to think and problem-solve in order to develop critical cognitive strategies that will better prepare them for life
- Encourage student interaction and participation, and provide opportunities for students to learn from each other in a nurturing, supportive and safe learning environment which fosters student trust and self-confidence
- Challenge students and provide situations in which students might fail
- Highly organized, efficient time management skills, and an established classroom routine including the development of high quality lesson plans
- Create an atmosphere that is flexible, yet controlled, integrate behavior management into instruction, and develop effective behavior support plans

The ASL Academy acknowledges that parents are of critical importance to the learning process and directly impact student achievement. Teachers and school staff will view parents as partners, collaborators and advocates for their children, and parents will be respected as their child's first teacher, and an integral part of the educational process. The school community will be supportive

of parents and families and will accept children as the collective responsibility of the community. Educational research encourages thoughtful reflection on the importance of parent-teacher relationships and the purposeful creation of positive partnerships. Oftentimes, the relationship between parents and deaf education professionals is strained when parents are sometimes made to feel “inadequate or at odds” with the professionals. The result is that parents may have a more difficult time being directly and actively involved in their child’s educational experience (Calderon, 2000). The educational philosophy of the ASL Academy requires that teachers and school officials work to promote healthy and cooperative relationships with parents in order to provide students with a positive educational experience and learning environment conducive to student achievement. Such relationships will be based on the mutual goal of improving educational outcomes and will be built through regular teacher-parent collaborative meetings and conversations regarding student progress. Teachers will also be encouraged to incorporate parent-volunteers into the classroom setting. These opportunities will allow the parent to observe teacher interactions with students, and parents can then model that behavior in order to improve communication with their own child. By consciously including parents in school activities, parents will feel valued by the school community (Calderon, 2000).

Because the ASL Academy’s educational philosophy and mission place a high value on the family, the school will employ a full-time Family and Community Programs Coordinator to provide ample opportunities to support families by organizing and providing ASL classes, parent groups, deaf role models, and educational workshops. ASL classes will be integrated with school themes and curriculum to allow parents to obtain relevant vocabulary and to assist their child with homework assignments. Other classes and workshops will relate to child development, parenting skills, and other topics of interest as identified by parental input. Research indicates a positive link between increased maternal communication skills and a child’s language development, early reading skills and social-emotional development. Additionally, “mothers who developed better communication skills with their children had children with higher language and reading scores and less behavior problems” (Calderon, 2000). Interestingly, it is also reported that parents of deaf children were more likely to observe, rather than actively volunteer, in the classroom. It was offered that one reason may be parents feeling that they are not skilled enough to actively participate in the classroom. It is further recommended that educators “do not undervalue the importance of school-sponsored sign classes, family retreats, open door policies, or other efforts that can help families increase their communication skills with their child. These activities indicate to families that they are vitally important to the education of their child and that schools value the home-school connection” (Calderon, 2000).

Research further suggests that parents who are deaf themselves may be more accepting of their children with hearing loss, and that the resulting positive parent-child interaction “contributes to the child’s higher self-esteem, which consequently results in higher achievement” (Drasgow, 1998). Clearly, since 90% of deaf and hard of hearing children are born into hearing families, it is critical that support services including ASL acquisition, as well as information for parents regarding hearing loss, are provided. These hearing families are often learning ASL as a second language, and since a strong ASL foundation results in better educational outcomes, the ASL Academy’s educational philosophy encompasses family support services. By assisting parents in their attainment of ASL and thereby allowing them to communicate with their children directly and to have more meaningful conversations with their children, the ASL Academy will further

positively impact educational outcomes. Parents will be better equipped to support their child's language development, will have more understanding of their child's experiences related to hearing loss, and will hold higher overall expectations for their child.

Regarding community support, research indicates that mothers of deaf children have smaller social networks, and almost one-third express dissatisfaction with support received from partners and friends. It was noted that mothers who were satisfied with social support reported more positive interaction with their deaf children, and it was therefore recommended that increasing mothers' satisfaction with support networks would further improve their relationship with their deaf child (Lederberg & Golbach, 2002). Additionally, it is recommended that intervention services focus on "boosting the resources that mothers need for coping and try to diminish the effect of stress-intensifying factors." Such services would focus on improving networking and confirming a mother's sense of coherence, that is, her view of the world as being meaningful and predictable (Hintermair, 2004).

In an effort to develop community support and grow social networks in order to provide families with additional resources, the ASL Academy's Family and Community Programs Coordinator will organize school-sponsored events and will distribute information regarding additional community events. This will provide opportunities to connect students and parents with other deaf and hard of hearing families and adults in the greater Albuquerque area and throughout New Mexico. ASL Academy community events will encourage participation by deaf and hard of hearing peers enrolled in other schools and will facilitate student and family networking. In this way, the school will unite and expand the critical-mass of students in the greater Albuquerque area and promote school-family-community relationships with the Deaf and hearing communities. Research shows that for children who have significant hearing loss, being a member of the Deaf community is important because it "promotes a healthy view of who they are as human beings and increases self-esteem and confidence in their abilities to interact in a wide array of situations." It is important to note that Deaf, with a capital D, is used to identify deafness as a cultural issue, and not simply as a medical issue (Baker & Baker, 1997).

By hosting inclusive community events, the ASL Academy will increase awareness of deaf and hard of hearing persons, which are often overlooked by the majority community of hearing persons. The ASL Academy will strive to build connections between Deaf and hearing cultures, which are further entwined in the Mexican, Hispanic and Native American cultures also common in New Mexico. These opportunities to create new partnerships are exciting and will be embraced and fostered through the inclusive school culture of the ASL Academy. Important new relationships will provide the essential framework in which all children can grow and prosper, and will create a multi-cultural environment ideal for learning. By providing a quality bilingual multi-cultural educational program which focuses on ASL-English language acquisition, is aligned with State standards, and promotes family and community involvement, the ASL Academy will positively impact student achievement and educational outcomes for all students in the greater Albuquerque area.