



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

EXCERPTS FROM CHARTER APPLICATION

#### **4. STRATEGIES AND METHODS**

- *Provide a description of the strategies and methods to be used in delivering the curriculum.*
- *Provide an explanation of how the curriculum will address students' needs and assist students in reaching the NM Standards.*

#### **Bilingual, Language Rich Environment**

*“The ability to receive and express individual thoughts and to be part of an environment with rich, appropriate, and on-going communication opportunities is both essential to the growth of deaf and hard of hearing children and a fundamental programmatic component that has not frequently been available to these children”* (The National Agenda, pp. 19-20).

*“Deaf and hard of hearing children must have access to programs and services that will ensure their development of age-appropriate communication and language skills. They must have access to effective communication with language models and meaningful and shared communication with a variety of individuals in a variety of settings in order to enhance language development”* (The National Agenda, p. 20).

The underlying premise of the school is the use of American Sign Language (ASL) by all students and staff members in the classroom and on the school campus, including in the cafeteria, on the playground and during after-school activities to ensure all students have full access to school curriculum and experiences. This bilingual environment will allow students from varying backgrounds and experiences to communicate directly with peers and school staff by utilizing a common language, ASL. Educational staff, including native signers, will provide direct-instruction in ASL for all subject areas, which will improve and accelerate learning. All students will experience feelings of membership within the school community, and the resulting increase in emotional well-being and social interactions will further positively impact student academic performance.

#### **ASL and English - Language Arts**

*“The development of age-appropriate communication and language skills is fundamental to a child’s academic, social, cognitive, and linguistic development, as well a physical and mental well-being...”* (The National Agenda, p. 19).

*“The development of age-appropriate English skills is crucial to deaf and hard of hearing students”* (The National Agenda, p. 22).

*“Deaf and hard of hearing children are capable of and must develop age-appropriate literacy skills, including the ability to read and write”* (The National Agenda, p. 22).

School-wide, the curriculum will focus on ASL and English proficiency. By devoting the largest portion of the school day to Language Arts, teachers will emphasize the importance of language acquisition, reading, and writing. Students will be divided into age- and level-appropriate reading groups in order to provide a learning environment which addresses the specific needs of each student. Teachers will regularly evaluate student performance to ensure students are meeting academic goals consistent with NM Standards. As necessary, teachers will collaborate to re-evaluate student placement and instructional strategies. Nightly reading logs and school literacy

programs will encourage families to read to their children at home on a regular basis, which will allow students and families to develop an enthusiasm for reading. Greater exposure to language at home and in school will promote literacy and enable students to meet required state standards and improve upon historical testing scores.

*Fingerspelling can be "the most powerful strategies increase retention, understanding and students' abilities to apply the concepts they are learning" - Patricia Wolfe (PBS, 2004).*

The use of sign language and fingerspelling is an important strategy for engaging young readers and developing early literacy skills, especially since it is useful for all types of learners and all levels of ability, and therefore, will increase students' abilities to meet state standards and achieve adequate testing scores.

### **Direct Instruction / Individualized Instruction**

*"Deaf and hard of hearing children must be provided with full communication and language clearly and consistently in all educational environments with peers and professionals. Appropriate access can occur in many forms, most notably from educational staff that can communicate directly, proficiently, and in an on-going manner in the child's communication mode and language..." (The National Agenda, p. 20).*

The ASL Academy will focus on providing direct instruction in small class settings in order to meet the individual needs of all students. Prior to each school year, parents and teachers will collaborate to develop the best possible learning program for each child. The classroom and school environment will enable teachers to work together to address student abilities appropriately and allow students to receive direct educational instruction at an individualized level and pace. Regular student assessment and teacher evaluations will ensure that student progress is monitored frequently and student placement adjusted accordingly to best support the student in achieving his educational goals and meeting required standards.

### **ASL Fluent Staff**

"All educational staff working with deaf and hard of hearing students must demonstrate adult-level proficiency in the communication mode and language used by the students with whom they work." (The National Agenda, p. 36).

All teachers and educational assistants working at the ASL Academy will be fluent in ASL in order to provide direct instruction to students ensuring full access to the curriculum and promoting student ASL acquisition and competency. As demonstrated, improved ASL skills support increased literacy and will, therefore, result in better educational outcomes and attainment of state standards.

### **Audiological Services and Amplification Devices**

Regarding the issue of amplification, the ASL Academy will focus on neither deaf nor hearing culture exclusively, but rather will be inclusive of both cultures and respectful of each family's personal decision regarding amplification, thereby creating a multi-faceted community supportive of all deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing children. The ASL Academy's educational philosophy includes meeting the needs, as determined by both educators and parents, of each child. Such needs and related goals vary by child and are dependant on a variety of factors including degree of hearing loss, effectiveness of amplification devices, Individualized Education Program, and family culture. The ASL Academy will be thoughtfully supportive of students concurrently developing ASL and spoken language skills, while also preserving the mission and instructional model of the school. The classroom will make use of assistive devices, such as hearing aids and FM systems, in order to provide full access to spoken language utilized by teachers in specific settings, namely during the spoken language portion of reading class or during speech therapy sessions, for students appropriately requiring such services. This inclusive educational environment, focused on individual student needs and mindful of family culture, will foster feelings of self-confidence, belonging, and acceptance of others, among all students and their families, and will not undermine the school's bilingual educational model.

### **Personalized Learning Plan (PLP)**

In order to provide students with an exceptional learning environment, all regular education students, preschool through eighth grade, will have a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP), which is a parent-teacher collaborative accounting of a student's academic, social, and emotional strengths and weakness, areas of interest, and learning styles. This information will be utilized to create personalized learning goals which will be assessed at regular intervals throughout the school year. Teacher observations, student self-reporting and other assessments will be used to monitor PLP progress and to ensure that student goals are both realistic and challenging. Information concerning student performance will be provided to students and their families throughout the year in student progress reports and discussed during parent-teacher conferences. The PLP can be revised throughout the year based on these assessments and conversations to ensure all students are being appropriately challenged.

### **Family Involvement Plan (FIP)**

*"The educational system that serves deaf and hard of hearing children...must work collaboratively with the families of those children..."* (The National Agenda, p. 24).

All ASL Academy students will have a Family Involvement Plan (FIP), developed through parent-teacher collaboration, which will encourage families to share their time and talents with the school community by setting family goals related to the school and to their child's academic, social, and emotional development. Examples of family goals include assisting in the classroom, volunteering as field trip chaperones, and attending parent groups, ASL classes, and parental workshops offered by the school and other community organizations. Family involvement will be documented and discussed at parent-teacher conferences during the school year. Academic achievement will be reflective of parental involvement, and therefore, by increasing parental participation and knowledge, students will show improved educational outcomes.

## **Thematic-Cross Curricular Approach**

The learning environment will be based on school-wide educational themes/units which will change every 3-6 weeks, depending on the subject matter. At the beginning of each unit, teachers will collaborate to develop a cross-curricular map, including a timeline, core content and assessment tools, and will align it with state standards to guide instruction and ensure students have attained required skills at the conclusion of each unit. By offering school-wide thematic units, younger students will be able to develop language/vocabulary along with their siblings and older school mates, which will provide additional opportunities for social and emotional growth, and will foster feelings of self-confidence and self-competence. Theme-related vocabulary will be taught during parent workshops and ASL classes so that new language can be supported and reinforced at home.

Examples of educational themes/units are transportation, plants and flowers, zoo animals, the human body, birds and reptiles, the weather, ocean life, planets and stars, Africa, and Ancient Egypt. Such a wide variety of topics will provide critical opportunities for language development and a general knowledge base for the students. The classroom environment will include posters, bulletin boards, independent project tables, classroom library books, art projects, and music selections, which will all reflect the current theme. Preschoolers will be provided ample opportunities for self-selection exploration and student-directed play in a purposefully constructed environment, as well as teacher-led classroom activities such as storytelling, group discussions and art projects. In elementary and middle school, the themes will be integrated into the regular curriculum, and content will be adjusted to ensure it is grade-level appropriate. Examples of “special projects” which will reinforce the educational unit include guest speakers, student plays/performances or class science projects. Age-appropriate field trips relating to the current theme will be instrumental in reinforcing classroom instruction in a “real-world” setting. By including themes in the curriculum, students will be given additional opportunities for language development over a wide range of topics. Such topics will pique student interest and provide for a rich educational experience, which will assist them in achieving state academic goals across all content areas.

## **Vocabulary Development**

The ASL Academy will focus on developing student vocabulary in both ASL and English. The reading and literacy program will promote several key aspects of vocabulary attainment including natural growth in meaning vocabulary, lifelong learning through indirect vocabulary instruction, and learning of specific words through direct vocabulary instruction. Additionally, the following methods for building vocabulary will be utilized: definition-based approaches, context-based approaches, concept-based approaches, and semantic mapping (Schirmer, 2000). Children need a context based approach, encountering a word in context to develop a full sense of its meaning (Gipe, 1980; Gipe & Arnold, 1979). Guessing vocabulary from context is the most frequent way to discover the meaning of new words. Through a concept-based approach, students will find new relationships in old knowledge and from relating new information to old knowledge (Schirmer, 2000). Children will create semantic maps to organize prior knowledge into formal relations to provide a basis for understanding. By emphasizing attainment of vocabulary across the curriculum, the ASL Academy will provide students with a strong language foundation which will further improve standardized testing performance and educational outcomes for all students at all levels.

### **Early Intervention – The ASL Academy Preschool Program**

The preschool will provide a bilingual language-rich environment which will allow students to gain knowledge of self, peers and the world through thematic-focused play, classroom activities, special projects and field trips. Teachers will be ASL fluent and knowledgeable in early childhood education and deaf education, and will regularly assess student progress and document student development. Students will have access to native ASL users in order to further promote language development and increase knowledge of deaf culture. Students will be provided with age appropriate content in subject areas such as language arts, mathematics, social studies and science in order to ensure kindergarten-readiness. The classroom setting will provide students daily opportunities to learn and practice important life and school skills including behavior self-regulation, problem-solving, and negotiating social interactions. Teachers and educational assistants will provide student support for these spontaneous social interactions in order to promote appropriate behavior modifications and emotional development. Pre-school and kindergarten teachers will collaborate for seamless student transitions to elementary school at the end of the year.

By providing a thoughtfully and purposefully constructed preschool environment, focused on language acquisition and student progress and which encourages parental involvement and promotes family importance, we will create an ideal setting which will foster student growth and development, and will ultimately result in improved academic performance throughout the student's educational career. The preschool experience will provide a foundation for student achievement, which will be expanded on in subsequent grade levels at the ASL Academy.

### **ASL Academy Announcements**

The ASL Academy student body will meet collectively every morning for daily announcements, the pledge of allegiance, and other activities which promote school unity and community. The announcements will be led by the Academy Administrator, the Executive Director and the Family/Community Services Coordinator, and will provide opportunities for student interaction including games, stories, and mini-performances/presentations by students reflective of their classroom work. Announcement time will provide opportunities for peer-modeling across grade levels and confidence building for all students, as well as opportunities for language practice and exposure, which will be academically beneficial.

### **Educational Programs for Families**

*“Early, consistent and meaningful communication between family and child is essential in fostering language competency and the development of literacy. Therefore it is essential that families are provided with support in developing their own and their child's communication and language skills. They need to work educationally at home and with the schools to develop their child's communication and language skills”* (The National Agenda, pp. 20-21).

The ASL Academy will employ a full-time Family and Community Programs Coordinator to provide support services for families in the form of school-based and educational-focused parent groups, ASL classes, grade-level homework assistance training, educational workshops related to child development, parenting techniques, deaf culture and other topics of interest to parents and

relevant to student needs. The ASL classes will be skill level appropriate and designed to correspond with school themes and classroom curriculum so parents learn relevant vocabulary, which will provide increased communication opportunities and allow parents to be more helpful with homework assignments. The ASL Academy educators value parents and families and acknowledge that by supporting parents, parents can better support their children, resulting in increased educational outcomes as well as social and emotional benefits for all children.

### **Community Involvement**

“Deaf and hard of hearing children require and are best served when effective and mutually respectful partnerships are established between and among educators, families and the institutions and programs in the community that serve those children and their families” (The National Agenda, p. 23).

The ASL Academy will employ a full-time Family and Community Programs Coordinator to organize community events encouraging multiculturalism and networking by uniting deaf and hearing people in the greater Albuquerque area. By offering events which promote school, family and community interaction, the ASL Academy 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 enrolled in other schools, and encourage family networking, all of which are beneficial to the social, emotional and cognitive development of ASL Academy students.

### **Diversity of Student and Staff Populations**

The ASL Academy will serve a diverse student population which will include deaf and hard of hearing students, and also hearing students, including siblings of children with hearing loss, children of deaf adults (CODAs), visual learners, and other students with varying needs who would benefit from a bilingual education model. The ASL Academy Governance Board, the Academy Administrator, the Executive Director, the Family and Community Programs Coordinator, teachers, educational assistants, audiologists, therapists, parents and family members will include both deaf and hearing adults, each with their own unique background and experiences, which will be celebrated and respected throughout the school community. This diverse and knowledgeable group will work collaboratively to create a critical support system and optimal learning environment for the ASL Academy student population, resulting in academic, social, and emotional benefits for all students, as well as an optimal working environment for school staff.

## **Student Assessments**

“Historically, American educational policy and specific programs have not formally and systematically provided educational assessment, development, and access for deaf and hard of hearing children. Without such access, deaf and hard of hearing children cannot grow or achieve educationally in a way that is commensurate with their individual talents and dreams (The National Agenda, p. 19).

The ASL Academy’s emphasis on regular and continuous student assessments will provide teaching staff with the critical information they need in order to provide an individualized instructional program to each student. The ASL Academy will use a wide-variety of testing methods to ensure a clear, accurate, and overall view of student progress and abilities in areas of academic, social, and emotional growth, including the following assessment methods: NM Standards Based Assessments, teacher observations, student self-assessments, short-cycle school-based assessments, informal formative and non-standardized written and oral tests, pre- and post-year assessments, and assessment of student work-product. Assessment data will be gathered frequently, recorded diligently, and analyzed weekly at collaborative staff meetings. Such information will be vital in ensuring that all students are on track to meet or exceed state standards. Parents will be given regular updates regarding student progress throughout the year, including bi-annual written narratives, quarterly progress reports/report cards, and parent-teacher conferences which will be held a minimum of three times per year. Additionally, graded student work-product will be sent home weekly to allow parents an ongoing opportunity to review their child’s productivity during the previous week.

## **Technological Access**

Students will be provided opportunities to improve computer skills on a regular basis, and as an integrated part of the curriculum. The ASL Academy will purchase necessary computer equipment and will have hi-speed internet access in all classrooms which allows for safe and appropriate use of the internet by students. For example, several math and reading programs utilize computer programs so students may practice their skills, and related testing will provide technology-based, online and differentiated instruction on an on-going and grade level appropriate basis. The ASL Academy will utilize a school website to post information about the school which is useful to parents, and also as a tool to encourage community partnerships and promote student achievement, all of which will combine to increase educational outcomes and allow students to meet state standards across multiple content areas. The ASL Academy recognizes the importance for all students to be technologically literate in order to succeed academically at this time, and also to secure employment when they enter the workforce in the future.

- *Provide a description of professional development that may be necessary for implementation of the strategies and methods to be used in delivering the curriculum.*

### **Professional Development**

Professional development and staff training, offered as part of the weekly schedule and also during in-service days throughout the year, will focus on improving teacher skills and teaching strategies, and will be directly connected to classroom curriculum and student needs, including vertical articulation to assure smooth transitions as additional grade levels are added to the educational program. Teachers, staff, and the Academy Administrator will collaborate regularly to select topics, thereby ensuring that the training reflects teacher abilities and interests, expands and improves instructional techniques and curriculum content, focuses on students with special needs including hearing loss, and facilitates improvements in student progress and educational outcomes. Ideally, training will encompass a variety of issues, including social-emotional well-being of students and families, strategies for optimizing family-school interaction and relationship development, cultural diversity awareness and promotion, and information regarding State and Federal laws concerning special education services. Because of the specific population that the ASL Academy will serve, it may be necessary that guest speakers from other states, specifically trained in ASL strategies or the education of deaf and hard of hearing students, be hired for staff workshops. Similarly, staff will likely need to attend seminars and workshops out of state. The ASL Academy will optimize educational opportunities and minimize costs by attending conferences offered in New Mexico and in nearby states when offered. Training staff on applicable topics throughout the year will directly impact teacher-student interaction and classroom teaching techniques, resulting in improved student performance across all content areas.