

CONSUMER FEEDBACK

By AL I. FINEMAN

I come before this group today not as a professional working with deaf people, but as a parent of a deaf young man. The background of my remarks to you has not been gleaned from reports, statistics or charts. It has been acquired from 22 years of frustrating, devastating and tearful experiences in an attempt to have my son assume his rightful place in society to which he is entitled.

As I look back over the years, I see a path of misdirected and misguided education. I see a chasm in professional integrity in the education of deaf children – I see a huge monument attesting to the failure of educators of deaf children who can sit back, review statistics and find they have “helped” the average deaf child achieve approximately a third or fourth grade education after 12 or 15 years of specialized schooling. This is not only functional illiteracy, but it doesn’t even equip the average deaf adult to read intelligently the daily newspaper which is generally geared to at least a fifth grade reading level. And, this is after 100 years of education of the deaf in America. What dismal results! And the battle still rages between oralists and proponents of total communication.

Why do oralists continue to perpetuate their disservice on the parents of deaf children who are only too eager to hear that someday their child will speak and take his place in the hearing world. The cliché, “They must live in a hearing world” is very misleading, for as with other unintegrated minority groups, deaf people do not become integrated with their hearing peers regardless of the fact that they may work side by side until 5 o’clock. After 5 o’clock, the deaf people either join their deaf friends or more often are alone. The vast majority of deaf people seem to marry other deaf people, with whom they are infinitely more comfortable and happy. So this “hearing world” approach that the oralists dangle in front of hearing parents is just so much “pie in the sky”. Deaf parents of deaf children are much more knowledgeable and wise. They know the score – the deaf mingle with the deaf, with whom they are most easily understood and readily accepted.

One cannot deny that there are many deaf people who can speak well. However, when these deaf individuals are exhibited in a demonstration, the audience is not told that in many cases hearing was lost after speech and language were acquired. Nor are they told the degree of deafness, whether the persons are hard of hearing or deaf to all speech sounds with or without a hearing aid. As you well know there is a vast difference in the fund of basic language in respect to prelingual and postlingual deafness. In some few select cases good speech has been acquired by those deafened prelingually, through a rare combination of superior teaching and extreme motivation. But is this the norm? Holding out the prize of speech to unsuspecting parents is tantamount to saying, "We can make an Einstein out of your child". As you well know, the younger the child when hearing is lost, the more difficult it becomes to understand his speech. And of what avail is good speech when there is little to say which occurs when extreme emphasis is placed on speech and speech reading to the detriment of academic achievement? We had occasion to visit a school where a revolutionary method of teaching was being used. The results were phenomenal, but after three years of intensive speech training the academic achievement was on about a pre-primer or primer level. Of what use is it to be able to say in perfect speech, "I'm fine, thank you. How are you?" and not much else? Another case in point comes to mind with controlled speech. As related to me, a counselor was walking along the campus with the headmaster of an oral school, pointing out that pure oralism resulting in controlled speech does not work. To prove his point, the counselor said to an approaching senior student, "Do you think it is going to rain?". The student responded to the question he expected, "Fine, thank you. How are you?". I only mention all of this to indicate some of the frustrations we have experienced with our son in his overall education. How much farther he would have developed socially, emotionally and educationally if he had been encouraged to use total communication! Since we have all finally learned manual communication, how much easier it is to reach him and how much less frustrating life has become for all of us!

Many deaf students, without complicating handicaps, are able to achieve some small place in society in spite of the deficiencies in their education. Some select few achieve outstanding success – but somehow the failures are rarely if ever publicized.

What is going to happen to the 100,000 or more under achieving deaf people, many of whom are multiple handicapped, but otherwise intelligent, in American today? What is going to happen to the 2,000 or more deaf students that are currently being graduated or terminated each year, who are underachieving and virtually unemployable? Is this the best our education of our deaf children can produce?

We, as parents, have investigated and visited many programs for the young deaf adult. We found the programs to be lacking or not geared to the

needs of the low achieving deaf person. We have availed ourselves of local, state and federal programs and still have not found a suitable facility in this vast land of ours. It has been our experience that so often the glowing literature is not always consistent with the actual facts as we see them upon visiting the facility. We live in a society that can go to the moon, but does not provide suitable facilities for the training of the thousands of underachieving deaf people. We have found that upon leaving school, there is a dearth of assistance available to the deaf person, especially the multiple handicapped. At least while in school there is a place for them to go to every day, whether good, bad or indifferent. Upon finishing school, it is like a chasm into which the individual, particularly the multiple handicapped, under-achieving otherwise intelligent deaf person is dropped. The demoralizing effect of sitting at home with nothing to do, creates havoc not only for the deaf individual, but for the entire family.

In the state of Pennsylvania we have a magnificent, modern facility for vocational rehabilitation, but at the time of recent experience and last inquiry, there were no adequate facilities for deaf people.

Residential private schools, many of which do a fine job in other areas of rehabilitation, back off when they learn the prospective student is deaf. The immediate question asked is "How will we communicate with him?"

Programs offered, through glowingly portrayed in well written brochures, fail completely in many basic areas. Two fundamental problems we have encountered are woefully inadequate staffing and an unsympathetic general administration, particularly, when the program is part of a large facility. Another serious problem, is lack of proper understanding between teacher and student because of inadequate communication. Unless a deaf student is well versed in lip reading, which at best is most difficult as so many sounds in the English language are invisible, he cannot understand his instructor's speech. Writing takes much too long and oft times the deaf student is not familiar with the vocabulary used. Unless the instructors are versed in sign language, the program, at best, is doomed to failure. It all results in either inadequate training, little rehabilitation or dismissal.

We recently visited a facility in Florida, which does a unique job in the rehabilitation of hearing students who have serious problems. The students are told upon entering, that there are only two ways available to them to go home; one is to graduate, the other is to die. There is no violation of rules or anything they could do, short of murder, which would result in dismissal. And they have had some remarkable results in habilitating severe delinquents. This, to me, is a prime example of a school administration sympathetic and dedicated to the success of the student.

In our efforts to locate a good facility, we discovered a fine organization in New York City. While their program was very worthwhile, the staff dedicated to genuine help, they lacked living facilities. Our son had

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to commute daily from Philadelphia to New York, spending five hours or more each day traveling. After six months he became so exhausted that he had to stop. A facility must have a mix of all the ingredients necessary to fulfill adequately the mission. This, too, was an incomplete facility, housed within another organization unrelated to the deaf, and unable to provide necessary services after the training day ended, plus no place to live.

Which brings me to the final phase of my remarks. What is desperately needed is a facility such as the kind being proposed under pending Congressional legislation, which would provide 24 hour around-the-clock training and supervision. A facility adequately staffed with competent personnel well-versed in total communication, with deep feelings for their deaf clients, plus an administration keyed solely to the problems of the underachieving deaf person – sympathetic, understanding and responsive to their needs, are fundamental requirements. This should encompass the entire spectrum of human needs, from personal hygiene to sex education, to how to apply for a job and how to keep it. Individual counseling must be made available to help the underachieving person cope with the myriad problems in today's complex world. And it must be done in a medium that is readily understood. We need a free standing facility, devoted exclusively to the deaf, where the student cannot be dismissed short of the most serious behavior. For it is just then, when he is in trouble, in his moments of crises, that he needs skilled, professional help, in addition to the support of competent and understanding staff.

Many deaf persons who have normal health, mobility and intelligence function well below their capacity as proven by their lack of employment, underemployment and poor social and emotional adjustment. Such underachievers can be properly trained to rise above their disabling handicaps, assume their rightful role in society and achieve independent living status. Existing rehabilitation services are not adequate to meet the needs of the underachieving postschool deaf person. Their dilemma is self-defeating. Few rehabilitation programs even attempt to meet the needs of the deaf client and those that try can only offer what, at best, is mediocre and mediocrity will not solve our problem. Meanwhile, those in urgent need of proper services are becoming older. More youngsters, being terminated or "completing" their formal education are added to the already dismal scene. At the rate we are going, those underachieving deaf people not yet born are guaranteed the fate of failure because America cannot provide adequate funding to alleviate this tragic problem.

Money spent on the rehabilitation of deaf persons, has proven to be an investment in the lives of future tax-paying citizens. It is not expenditure that goes down the drain. Unless comprehensive rehabilitation programs structured around personal, social and vocational adjustment training are funded to provide specialized services to meet the unique needs of the low

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achieving deaf people, our efforts are doomed to failure. America's greatest resources, "human lives", the theme of this convention, "Manpower", will be wasted.

Underachieving deaf people can be helped. Our experts tell us that given the proper facilities, training and supervision, they can be turned around and become useful citizens in society, no matter what role they may play. It is up to us as parents and you as professionals to see that such a plan is implemented.