

Cerney, B. March, 1996. "Don't Quit, We Need You" RID Views. Silver Spring, MD: RID Publications.

Don't Quit, We Need You!

Brian Cerney, CI/CT

Lately I have noticed a disturbing trend. Educational interpreters who are trying to improve their skills are being told that the first thing they must do is stop interpreting in educational settings. The justification offered is that educational interpreters are being used by money-hungry administrators to provide substandard educations to deaf students across the country. While the justification may be true in many school districts, encouraging concerned educational interpreters to quit is the exact opposite of the approach we need to take. These interpreters may leave, but the deaf children will remain. Less qualified people will replace the newly culturally enlightened interpreters and the deaf children will endure even more limited linguistic and intellectual challenges. These deaf children will face increased oppression and when these deaf children fail, the blame will fall on the same people who have been blamed for centuries - the deaf children. "Johnnie needs to remember to wear his hearing aid," "Mary just isn't paying attention in class." If we force concerned people who are honestly trying to improve their skills out of the schools, the deaf children will receive even worse services and their problems will increase, not fade away.

The goal we should be working toward is to make interpreting such an expensive option that many school administrators will prefer to pursue what will become the cheaper option – residential schools. We must train educational interpreters, improve their resumes, and build them up to a level on par with teachers. Then their demands for equitable pay will have to be met. If we also work to improve working conditions and team interpreting becomes the norm, then we will see less administrators being so eager to provide interpreted educations to the deaf children they attempt to serve. Economics ultimately will have the greater force.

Another reason to encourage educational interpreters is that they provide pressure to those residential schools which do not yet have an appropriate respect for American Sign Language. Too many teachers of deaf children are hearing people who still believe that signing and talking at the same time provides equal access in two languages. Too many people with this misunderstanding of language, and language acquisition, are teaching in our residential schools today. If the residential school does not support the appropriate use of ASL but a competing mainstream program does acknowledge, respect, and use ASL, then the parents can wield the power of their IEP and get their kids (and the money) into the better program.

Educational interpreters provide a choice which may not always be the best choice, but often can be a better choice. If we fail to demand higher standards in educational interpreting, and at the same time fail to train the people who are already there, then we will lose any say in what educational interpreting should be. We will see educational interpreting become less and less expensive as standards fall amazingly lower than they already are in many places. We will see more and more residential schools closed because they will be seen as a needless option since the task of interpreting will appear to be such an easy and inexpensive replacement. We must preserve the ability to choose. Without choices, we are not truly free.

Cerney, B. May, 1996. "Educational Interpreting Revisited" RID Views. Silver Spring, MD: RID Publications.

Educational Interpreting Revisited

Brian Cerney, CI/CT

Once again I have been given the opportunity to respond to readers of one of my articles. This discussion represents one the great opportunities afforded us by our national organization: a public debate which helps us all to learn from each other!

The concerns expressed by Kelly Anderson regarding Hard of Hearing students are quite legitimate. Hard of Hearing students are very often left with reduced options to meet their needs. Being neither deaf nor hearing and yet, somehow both, these children need a mix of services which place additional burdens on both residential and mainstream educational settings - if those needs are met.

M. Paula Frederick understood my main point to be that we should build up the resumes of educational interpreters with the sole purpose of having them lose their jobs. That was not my point. I have seen many instances of mainstreaming being pushed by administrators (and many parents, respecting people in positions of authority, simply agree to the advice they receive). In other situations the parents push for mainstreaming and the administrators agree but pursue the least expensive options available. High standards for educational interpreting are not universal. This often means that people are hired to be "interpreters" who have no knowledge of ASL, Manual English Codes, or even fingerspelling. The people who do possess interpreting skills are often left in the position of working extended hours without reasonable physical and mental rest and no opportunity to learn from peers or continuing education.

A disturbing trend I have seen lately is that interpreters who become involved with the deaf community are encouraged to leave the field of educational interpreting: just at the point that they are becoming bicultural and therefore can finally begin the process of real interpreting. My article was intended to encourage those people to stick with the profession: keep improving your skills, keep getting better. Interpreting may become expensive, but it must if the goals of providing access and integration to the mainstream are to be achieved. Many deaf children are receiving at best a parallel education through their personal adult assistants who follow them from class to class, sometimes interpreting, sometimes tutoring, sometimes teaching. Many parents, teachers, and administrators don't understand the abilities of deaf children, nor the function of interpreters and therefore don't demand higher quality of services. I don't want educational interpreting to disappear... I want it to get better. That is how we work to apply pressure to residential environments... to get them to compete and become better than they are.