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RE: ANNOUNCED CLOSURE OF THE NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR PROVINCIAL SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF

SEPTEMBER 20, 2010 | ADMIN

OPEN LETTER

September 16, 2010

Dear Hon. Dr. Darin King, Minister of Education

The announcement of the closure of the Newfoundland and Labrador Provincial School for the Deaf (NSD) has sparked an outcry of concern from individuals and organizations, including The Canadian Hearing Society. The accommodation needs and accessibility requirements of accessible education for Deaf and hard of hearing students must be fully understood and the ramifications of this decision fully considered. Students, families and educators from NSD are now facing the government's decision without being duly considered or given choices.

Should the government continue to focus on enrollment numbers as its primary reason for the closure of NSD, it is overlooking crucial elements, the repercussions and related costs. Honourable Minister, you have said, "Deaf and hard of hearing students will be provided with the support needed to promote their educational, social and emotional growth". How is this possible with the limited resources – qualified interpreters, specialized educators, auditory verbal therapists, and other key professionals – and quite

frankly a lack of knowledge and understanding of the accessibility needs of these now vulnerable students?

Students are placed at a distinct disadvantage when classrooms and the language of instruction are not accessible. It jeopardizes the quality of education they receive as well as a host of related ramifications and costs. Deaf, oral deaf, deafened and hard of hearing students have the right to choose between mainstream and specialized schools, such as the Provincial School for the Deaf where a signed language learning environment is offered. Former “mainstreamed” students from Newfoundland and Labrador have provided testimonials of being bullied by other students, of teachers who did not recognize their potential and lowered their expectations of them, and of general isolation they suffered. Moores (1993) postulated that integrating deaf children in hearing classrooms (inclusive education) in some cases may actually be an exclusionary practice.

There are several government documents across Canada that indicate that many mainstreamed deaf and hard of hearing students report experiencing inaccessible information and communication, and attitudinal barriers, as well as:

- Mismatch communication between student and parents and family
- Inaccessible communication between student and teachers
- Lowered expectations and mislabeling of Deaf and hard of hearing students
- Social isolation
- Cyber bullying, bullying, harassment
- Discrimination (i.e. denial of communication access services such as signed language interpreting and captioning services, lack of captioning in media)

Appropriate language and communication supports such as specialized personnel who have expertise in the field of deaf education and have appropriate signed language and cultural skills, FM systems, speech supports and other related language and communication supports (i.e. real-time captioners) must be available to accommodate culturally Deaf, oral deaf, deafened and hard of hearing language and communication needs in the classroom and in extra curricular activities.

The government is demonstrating that it is not committed to creating equitable education for all children in Newfoundland and Labrador, where students graduate and can expect to enter a society where they can be respected, go on to higher education, achieve employment, have full access to communication and participate without barriers, because the closure of NSD puts at risk those outcomes for Deaf and hard of hearing students. Placing these students in mainstreamed educational environments requires many specialized services, keen awareness of the accommodations and requirements of accessible education and without the school for the Deaf, such services would be required throughout the entire province.

Newfoundland does not have the number of resources across the province to provide accommodations and accessible education for students who are culturally Deaf, oral deaf, and hard of hearing.

It is our understanding that Newfoundland and Labrador has one auditory verbal therapist (AVT) who works with school-aged children. Considering the number of Deaf and hard of hearing students in the province who have cochlear implants, one AVT is inadequate. Will increasing the number of resources fall under your scope and is it included in your plan for these students?

We also understand that most signed language interpreters in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador reside in St. John's, and that there are no interpreters with the Association of Visual Language Interpreters of Canada (AVLIC) certification. Since educational interpreting has been identified as one of the most difficult of interpreting settings and the skills needed are extremely complex, who will be monitoring and accountable for ensuring qualified interpreting services are in place for Deaf and hard of hearing students?

Provincial schools for the Deaf, such as NSD, are equipped to provide their students with accessible education, exposure to the rich history, language and culture of the Deaf community and provide Deaf role models and language models. They are the resources for other educational facilities to learn about assistive technology, interpreting and captioning services and accommodations for Deaf students and students with hearing loss.

Finally, Deaf and hard of hearing students have spoken out about their experiences of isolation in the regular school system and their sense of not belonging. The academic, social, emotional and psychological results of isolation are devastating and strategies to compensate for real school experiences need to be tantamount in the Department's plan for creating inclusive education for Deaf and hard of the hearing students in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Does Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education have:

- ASL proficiency policies for teachers of deaf students for effective communication and teaching in the classroom?
- guidelines on standards of educational signed language interpreting in the classroom at local school boards?
- access and accommodation policies to meet the needs of Deaf and hard of hearing students and ensure adequate resources to support their academic achievement performance?
- accountability mechanisms to monitor school administrators to ensure school boards deliver appropriate and accessible language and communication supports in the classroom and for outside classroom extracurricular activities, in consultation with representatives from Deaf and hard of hearing communities in Newfoundland, and external experts in the field of education of the Deaf?

This year CHS celebrates its 70th anniversary. CHS, a not-for-profit organization, is the leading provider of services, products and information that remove barriers to communication, advance hearing health and promote equity for people who are culturally Deaf, oral deaf, deafened and hard of hearing.

As President and CEO, I am proud to be part of an organization that employs a diverse workforce with unique skills that contribute towards the growth of CHS. We have a number of staff who attended NSD; they are actively engaged members of their communities and this workplace in no small part because of NSD. They share the serious concerns people and organizations have about the announced closure of the school.

The government must consider the short- and long-term effects of this decision. Earlier this year the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf (ICED) “New Era” document [www.iced2010.com] and the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities were endorsed by the Newfoundland and Labrador Provincial Government to support Deaf schools. Yet before this year comes to a close the government’s decision shows a significant shift.

We encourage the Minister to engage in further consultation with educators and professionals who have expertise in the field of educating Deaf and hard of hearing students and who are abundantly aware of the repercussions when students face barriers to language and learning.

We, at CHS, are committed to equality for all Canadians. We have 70 years of experience to draw upon and we offer to share this with the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador just as we have with partnerships with the Ontario Ministry of Education and School Boards in delivering workshops on Communication Accessibility and Anti-Audism Awareness Training as part of our Ontario Ministry of Education-CHS Barrier-Free Initiatives Project.

The Canadian Hearing Society is happy to work with various ministries of education across Canada to develop a system to better accommodate culturally Deaf, deaf oral, deafened and hard of hearing elementary and high school students so that we prevent the needs of these students from falling through the cracks of school board systems and ensure that a full continuum of educational placements for all students who are Deaf or hard of hearing are available to meet their linguistic, social, emotional, academic, vocational and civic needs.

Sincerely,

Chris Kenopic
President and CEO

Additional information

The term “deaf and hard of hearing” denotes two distinct groups of students. Deaf students are those who cannot access spoken language; therefore, they use a signed language to access information and communicate generally. Hard of hearing students may or may not use a signed language but they can often access the spoken language of the community through the use of communicative technology (amplification devices such as hearing aids, for example) and English

is often their primary language. Due to this major differentiating characteristic (one group using a signed language and the other, the spoken language of the majority culture), their educational needs will differ greatly. For those who use a signed language the benefit from a school for the Deaf – where they would have full access to the curriculum, all extra-curricular activities, and access the rich history, language and culture of the Deaf community – is full inclusion.

There are a number of documents addressing the need of a full continuum of educational placements, including School for the Deaf:

- Canadian Association of the Deaf Position Paper on Education
<http://www.cad.ca/en/issues/education.asp>
- National Association of the Deaf Position Paper on Deaf Schools: K-Grade 12
<http://www.nad.org/issues/education/k-12/position-statement-schools-deaf>
- World Federation of the Deaf Position Paper on Education Rights for Deaf Children
http://www.wfdeaf.org/pdf/policy_child_ed.pdf
- Conference on Educational Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf Position Paper on The Full Continuum of Educational Placements for All Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing

<http://www.ceasd.org/acrobat/continuum.pdf>
- International Congress on Education of the Deaf (ICED) Statement on Statement of Principles and Accord for the Future
<http://www.iced2010.com/>

Contact

Hon. Darin King
Minister of Education
Department of Education
3rd Floor, West Block
Confederation Building
100 Prince Philip Drive
St. John's, NL A1B 4J6
education@gov.nl.ca
DarinKing@gov.nl.ca

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