

CBC RADIO - ST. JOHN'S MORNING SHOW

April 29, 2024

CBC's Darrell Roberts and Jessica Singer

Darrell Roberts

Ignored and isolated. Some parents of Deaf children say that's how their kids are treated in this provinces education system. That includes the Churchill's who say no systemic changes have been made to Deaf Education despite winning a human rights case a year ago. The CBC's Jessica Singer joins me in the studio with more on the story. Good morning, Jessica.

Jessica Singer

Good morning, Darrell.

Darrell Roberts

Remind us of the Churchill's and their human rights case.

Jessica Singer

Yes. So just over a year ago, Kim and Todd Churchill of St. John's won a human rights case against the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District, which now operates is no schools. If you remember, it was a bit of a tingly six-year long court battle, and when the decision was made, the case found the school district had discriminated against their deaf child Karger and failed to provide him with the accommodations he needs. A big issue for the Churchill's was that current wasn't being taught or evaluated using ASL or American Sign Language. So, he was massively falling behind and basically being language deprived for most of his school life. Now, Carter is now 13 and he's currently in an ASL immersive classroom at St. Paul's Junior High in St. John's. And at the beginning of the school year, Kim and Todd say they really full of hope and promise because again, Carter is learning in an ASL immersive classroom. There's now a deaf teacher that was hired for his classroom in September among many other supports that they advocated for but they say that hope diminished as the school year went on.

Kim Churchill

We found out that a reason parent teacher interview that Carter is actually being taught grade seven curriculum this year, not after learning grade six, grade five, grade four grade three and he's probably really only at a level of grade one. And how do you go from that to all of a sudden be expected to learn and be taught grade seven curriculum, there is a substantial massive gap here and he is struggling and the entire class is.

Todd Churchill

You know, he was pushed from grade to grade you know, and he left beachy Cove elementary at the end of grade three and couldn't read. And you know, today now Carter is in grade seven and still cannot read.

Kim Churchill

and that and the fact that the expectation is to treat him now as if he is a typical grade seven student. No, he's not you've created this mess. You need to fix it and this is not how you fix it.

Jessica Singer

How do they fix it?

Todd Churchill

There needs to be some intensive tutoring help as well outside of just regular classroom time, because there is such a large gap in language and certainly curriculum. I can only imagine how frustrating it must be on him for him daily you're in classroom. I know he certainly expresses his frustration to us at night when he comes home and he says you know I don't have any understanding or any idea I don't understand what they're teaching me.

Jessica Singer

It was six years that you spent right. Fighting for that case to come to a close what you did last year like that was six years until you got some answers. Was it worth it?

Todd Churchill

I think it was because somebody had to be the person who held the district to account and had it formally documented that this existed. You know, there's been tremendous amount of interest in Carter's case internationally, if you could believe that.

Kim Churchill

I've spoken to people as well who've told us that with their fight, Carter's case has actually made it easier for them to fight for their child. Even though we're still struggling Carter still struggling here. And a lot of deaf children who have need access to ASL is not being granted that in this province, we know and other places in the world it actually has helped which is mind blowing.

Jessica Singer

What have things looked like systemically? Has this resulted in any systemic change in the province?

Todd Churchill

I would say there has been no systemic change in our province. The only changes that have happened have happened in the St. John's area for children in other parts of the province because we've had parents and other parts of province. Reach out to us and their children are in the exact same discriminatory environment. This parent on the West Coast shared a letter that she recently received from Crystal and Howell, our current Minister of Education, who said you know we'll make every effort to provide your child with a student assistant who has American sign language fluency. And if we can't, we'll just train them. And it was the most idiotic statement there ever was. It's like, you're just going to walk, you know, learned this over a weekend or something. I mean, it'd be like saying, I'm going to learn Japanese in two weeks. It's so it was the most idiotic statement I've ever seen written from somebody who is actually now the leader of how education is being provided because now it is now a department. Of course, our case was against the district, and the district no longer exists. So now the department is directly responsible for these bad decisions.

Jessica Singer

That was Kim and Todd Churchill there. And the parent from the West Coast. You heard Todd mentioned there. You mentioned the parent from the West Coast who received that letter from the government. Her name is Samantha Brown.

Darrell Roberts

Tell us about Samantha.

Jessica Singer

Yes. So, Samantha lives in Corner Brook and she has a daughter named Lilly who is 11 years old and Lilly is Deaf and attends Eastside Elementary, and she's in grade six there. Samantha says accessing adequate supports for her daughter has been a challenge.

Samantha Brown

Pretty much almost seven years we've been fighting with the school board to play appropriate services for her body by appropriate I mean, like someone who was fully equipped in ASL. We've been fighting for a full time Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) teacher here on the west coast. I had a meeting actually last week with the school board, the head of the DHH. And they asked me what I wanted for Lilly what services

and I requested to have a full time Deaf and Hard of Hearing teacher. And the reply was if we give Lily more hours than that takes away from other kids.

Jessica Singer

How do you feel when you heard that?

Samantha Brown

My heart literally sunk because I feel like Lilly deserves to have the rights of any other kids. And if they don't have enough people here on the west coast to handle all the caseload then why is that? Why do my kid have to suffer because of that?

Jessica Singer

And so, what supports has she had in the classroom for her 11 years? Like, what has been offered to her?

Samantha Brown

So, at the beginning, Lilly actually didn't have no support at all from kindergarten to grade three. So, she didn't have a Deaf and Hard of Hearing teacher. She did have a student assistant that was supposedly trained in ASL, but there's never been any like proof of that she actually has served certification in ASL. From grade three to now we have had a different Hard of Hearing teacher with Lilly, but she's only approved for – this is another part - she's only approved for two hours a week with her Deaf and Hard of Hearing teacher. Her school is like amazing, they do what they can. Lilly's IRT took upon themselves to learn ASL and done the courses. Thank God. They are, they're amazing like they've been a really big support and making sure that she has access to ASL during her school day when she doesn't have a Deaf and Hard of Hearing teacher with her.

Jessica Singer

Have you reached out to like government and what is their response been?

Samantha Brown

I have actually. I've reached out to the government. I did get a reply back through an email, telling me that -because I've been really pushing for like someone who was certified with ASL and also having a full time Deaf and Hard of Hearing- So, their email back to me, basically stated that next year because Lily goes to a new school next year, her position would get posted with the qualifications that would be needed. And my main concern was that they could have people saying they have ASL that would apply that technically don't have certification because they don't actually request or at least they don't do testing on any of the student assistants to make sure that they're actually

qualified. They just basically take their word. They came back and said, you have no worry, Lilly will have a student assistant next year. If she's not, if we're not able to find anyone that ASL trained then we would do training as we go.

Jessica Singer

How is Lilly feeling? How has this been affecting her education and what's she been going through?

Samantha Brown

I feel like it's frustration more so like she gets so frustrated when she's trying to communicate and can't be understood. And I feel like it's just sorry, I get emotional sometimes. I feel like she's just been it's been so long that she's been like deprived of it that like now, I know like she's behind further than like other kids that are Deaf.

Jessica Singer

That was Samantha Brown talking there about her daughter Lilly who is Deaf. Now Samantha says her daughter only qualified in February for a Deaf education program that provided her with that Deaf and Hard of Hearing teacher she was describing. So, she looks to St. John's now as an example. And she says she wants her daughter to learn in an immersive environment just like Carter Churchill is now because ultimately, all she wants in life is for her daughter to be included, supported and set up to succeed just like any other child. We reached out to the Department of Education and they provided us with a statement. I'm just going to summarize some of the key points here. The Department says they have programming planning teams which assess students to then determine what supports a student needs. It says there are 20 teaching assistants and 4 teachers for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students across the province. And the department also says that ASL classes are provided three times a week for teaching assistants working with Deaf and Hard of Hearing students so they're learning alongside you know, that's three times a week for teaching assistants to learn ASL. The only ASL classrooms right now for Deaf students are both in St. John's at East Point Elementary and St Paul's Junior high. And the Department says students who can't attend to those dedicated ASL classrooms are directed to an ASL program that is said to connect students and families from across the province.

Darrell Roberts

Alright Jessica, thanks so much for that.

Jessica Singer

Thanks for having me.