



**Washington School for the Deaf**  
**ASL-English Bilingual Program**  
**Fact Sheet**



*Deaf students educated bilingually not only reach the level of linguistic competence equal to that of their hearing peers, but also have better self-image, and higher self-respect.*

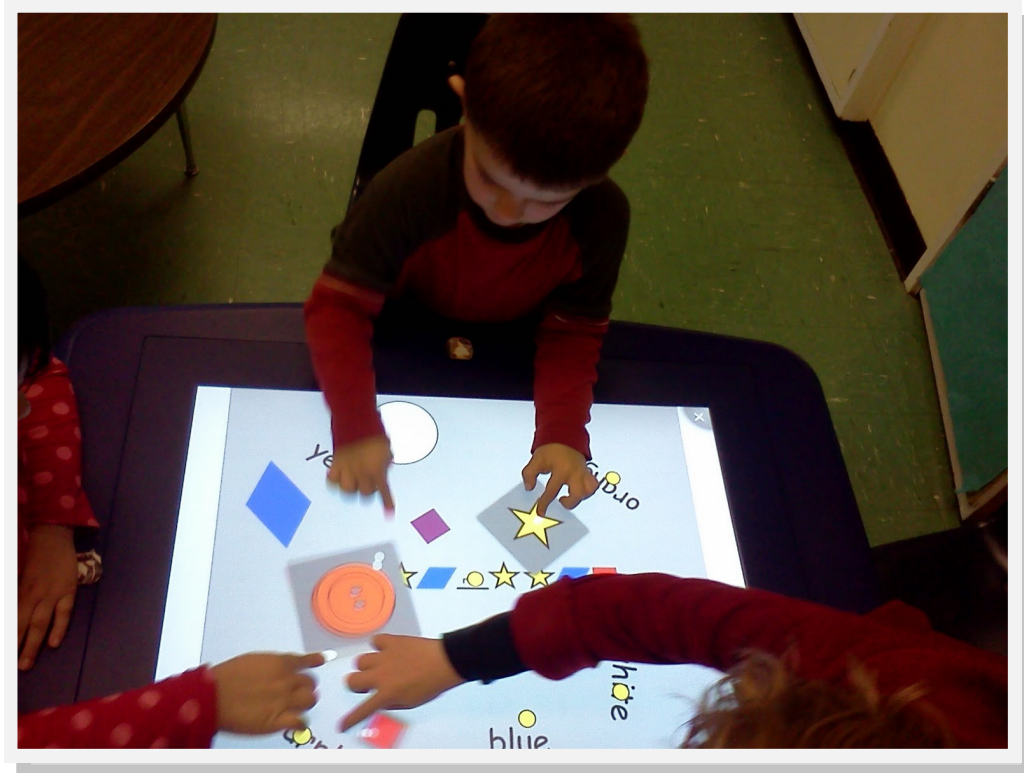




## Definitions

Bilingualism: The regular use of two or more languages (or dialects).

Bilinguals: Those people who use two or more languages in their everyday lives. The bilingual person blends aspects of the two cultures to produce a unique cultural configuration. The bilingual uses the two languages for different purposes, in different domains of life, with different people.



## Frequently Asked Questions

### Why do Deaf Children Need to be Bilingual?

- Deaf children need a strong first language in order to successfully learn a second language. For most of WSD's students, ASL is a more accessible and natural language to acquire first.
- Deaf children need to become proficient users of English, especially through reading and writing.
- Deaf children should have complete access to language from birth.
- Deaf children should develop ties and communicate fully with their parents and family members as soon as possible. ASL offers the surest way for establishing these ties and communication among family members.

### What is the Role of ASL?

- ASL triggers the human language capacity, which then influences and supports English language development.
- Language ability developed through acquisition of ASL transfers to English as students begin learning English.
- ASL plays an important role in the deaf child's cognitive and social development as well as the acquisition of world knowledge.
- ASL facilitates the acquisition of English in its spoken or written forms.
- ASL allows deaf children to acculturate into the Deaf world.



### What is the Role of English?

- English is the language spoken/used by the majority of deaf children's parents and family members.
- English is the primary language of American society. ASL is the primary language of the Deaf community. Deaf children who are raised bilingually ideally become members of both the Deaf and hearing communities in which they live and work.
- Written English is an important way for children to gain knowledge.

- The deaf child's academic success and his/her future professional achievements will depend in large part on a good mastery of English in written form. For some deaf children, spoken English can also be an additional communication tool.

### What are the Characteristics of an Effective Bilingual Program for Deaf Children?

- Learning Proceeds from Whole to Part.

Children need the big picture first. They develop concepts and the language to understand and express those concepts by beginning with general ideas and then filling in the specific details.



- Lessons are Learner-Centered

Lessons begin with what students know, and activities build on student interests. Teachers create contexts in which students can construct knowledge because they know learning is not simply the transmission of information.

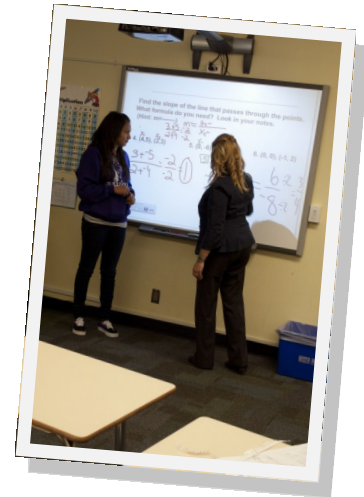


- Lessons Have Meaning and Purpose for Students Now

Students learn concepts they see as relevant to their immediate lives. Students are given choices in what they study. They reflect upon what they are learning and apply what they learn to their lives inside and outside of school.

- Lessons Engage Students in Social Interaction

When students share their ideas in social settings, individual thinking and language are shaped by social interactions. Working in groups, students also learn the important life skill of collaboration.



- Lessons Develop Through-The-Air ASL and Written English Language

The traditional view has been that deaf children should focus first and primarily on English in order to develop literacy; however, deaf children can develop literacy in English through first developing their competency in ASL. (Note: For deaf and hard of hearing children who have abilities and interests in developing spoken English, instruction can be provided to reinforce and support spoken English, as well).

- Lessons Support Students' First Language and Culture

Teachers build on strengths by helping the student develop concepts in the first language, ASL. Full development of ASL facilitates the acquisition of English; recognition of ASL and Deaf culture build self-esteem.

- Lessons Show Faith in the Learner to Expand Students' Potential

Teachers who believe in their students plan activities that show their faith in the learner. All students can learn if they are engaged in meaningful activities that move from whole to part, build on students' interests and backgrounds, serve their needs, provide opportunities for social interaction, and support their first language and culture.

(Freeman and Freeman, ESL Teaching: Principles for Success).





### What Does the Research Say?

- A strong correlation exists between ASL fluency and English literacy skills (Strong & Prinz 1997; Prinz 2002; Hoffmeister 2000).
- Research has documented that as ASL skills improve, English skills also improve (Strong & Prinz 1997).
- Sign language skills are the crucial factor in educational achievement and English literacy (Strong & Prinz 1997) (Israelite, Ewoldt & Hoffmeister 1989).
- Individuals who learn sign language from birth perform better on linguistic and memory tasks than individuals who do not start learning sign language until after puberty (Morford & Mayberry 2000).
- Deaf students educated bilingually not only reach the level of linguistic competence equal to that of their hearing peers, but also have better self-image and higher self-respect. They are less impulsive. Behavior disorders are rare. They are emotionally more mature, more independent, and socially better-adapted (Grosjean 1992; Mahshie 1995).
- A study in Switzerland with 39 deaf students aged between 8 and 17 showed the linguistic competencies necessary to support the learning of written language *can* be developed through a natural sign language, either as an alternative or a complement to language skills developed orally. This shows linguistic interdependence operates between sign and written language in a similar manner to the relationship that exists between two written languages (Niederberger and Prinz 2005).
- One study reported significant positive correlations between ASL and reading comprehension among 50 deaf students aged 8 – 16 years (Hoffmeister, de Villiers, Engen, and Topol 1998).
- Significant correlations were found between ASL proficiency and English reading among 31 students ranging from grades 4 – 8 (Padden and Ramsey 1998).
- A study with 72 deaf elementary students reported a relationship between students' ASL proficiency and their writing skills in English (Singleton, Morgan, DiGello, Wiles, Rivers 2004).
- Cognitive Advantages of Being Bilingual (Cultural and Language Diversity and the Deaf Experience, Chapter 4, pages 55-56).



- Interdependence Theory: Second language acquisition is influenced considerably by the extent to which the first language has developed. When a first language (ASL) has developed sufficiently well to cope with decontextualized classroom learning, a second language (English) may be relatively easy to acquire. When the first language is less well developed, or where there is attempted replacement of the first language by the second language, the development of the second language may be relatively impeded (Cummins 1984a). (Taken from Baker, C. 2001—Second language acquisition and learning. Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism.)
- Being bilingual has definite economic advantages and increases the individual's career opportunities (Hakuta & Pease-Alvarez, 1992).
- Only those students who have received strong cognitive and academic development through their first language (ASL) for many years (at least through Grade 5 or 6) as well as through the second language (English) are doing well in school as they reach the last of the high school years (Young 1997, pp 12 -13).
- US Department of Education funded study showed:
  1. When second language students receive substantial primary language support (ASL), their English development is not delayed.
  2. When students receive primary language support (ASL), they also progress in content instruction; however, they fall behind when they are too quickly switched to all English instruction (Ramirez 1991).



## Where is WSD Now and Where is WSD Going in the Future?

- Established an ASL-English Parent Advisory Group SY 2008-2009.
- Established a Language Planning Committee SY 2008-2009.
- Began work on ASL curriculum SY 2008; draft of Elementary level curriculum completed SY 2009-10; plan to adopt the national curriculum when it is ready in 2013-2014.
- Adopted the ASL-English Bilingual Professional Development program as a training model for all teachers, related service providers, and teacher assistants. Completed level one in SY 2009-10 and level two in SY 2010-11. Currently, staff is receiving training on level three and will complete the program with level four in SY 2012-13.
- Hired an academic ASL Specialist to support ASL assessment and instruction SY 2010-11.
- Implemented an ASL-English dual language preschool program with typically developing peers SY 2010-11.





## Testimonials

We had Nic's IEP meeting today. Nic is reading at his grade level or above. I believe the reason for this is because WSD's bilingual approach to teaching gives Nic the opportunity to learn with all learning styles. Because he can access voices with using his hearing aids, he can understand some instruction (Auditory). If he doesn't understand he has access to ASL, which gives him the ability to see what is being explained (Visual). In addition, he has the opportunity to use his hands (kinesthetic) to reinforce what he has learned. I believe it is the opportunity to participate actively using all learning styles, that has made Nic an excellent reader and an eager student."

Jeanmarie Moore, Current WSD Parent



When we found out that Walter was Deaf, there was no doubt in our minds that we would move to Vancouver so he could attend the birth- to-three program at WSD. Through this program Walter has gotten the opportunity to meet other Deaf and hard of hearing kids, enjoy the beautiful playroom, and learn the necessary tools to prepare him for Preschool. He started the program as a baby, and left as a boy ready to endeavor on. Now he is in Preschool and we cannot wait to see what more he will learn from WSD!"

Tiffany Gay, WSD Parent 2009-2011

ASL gives our daughter the ability to express her self without limits. She is able to communicate effectively with family, teachers and peers. We feel that in order for her to successfully navigate in a hearing world, she also needs to know how to use English. When WSD told us they were implementing a bilingual program we were thrilled. Our daughter is improving daily in her communication skills and learning to be a strong reader. The bi-language approach to her education is helping her to learn and develop her English skills naturally.

Tricia Feik, Current WSD Parent



“Every deaf child, whatever the level of his/her hearing loss, should have the right to grow up bilingual. By knowing and using both a sign language and an oral language (in its written and, when possible, in its spoken modality), the child will attain his/her full cognitive, linguistic and social capabilities.”

(Jim Cummins, “The Relationship between American Sign Language Proficiency and English Academic Development: A Review of the Research.”)