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# The Power and Promise of a Handshake: Milestones in Collaboration

By Roslyn Rosen

## 1816—Clerc and Gallaudet The Handshake that Launched 1,000 Programs

In 1816, when Laurent Clerc, a deaf teacher of deaf students from France, met the Reverend Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a hearing preacher from the United States, one of the world's most important partnerships began. Gallaudet had visited England and then come to France in search of a pedagogy to teach deaf children. His quest was initiated by Alice Cogswell's father, Mason; Gallaudet had worked with Alice, a young deaf girl from his hometown of Hartford, Connecticut, and he knew that there were many other uneducated deaf children like Alice throughout the United States.

In Paris, Gallaudet observed classes in France's national school for deaf students where he met Clerc. Gallaudet *knew* that Clerc had the knowledge and experience to create relevant, deaf-centric, and successful educational programs for deaf children. *Gallaudet needed Clerc*. He implored Clerc to return to the United States with him. Clerc accepted the challenge. He shook hands with Gallaudet, thus forming a formidable team and setting a new precedent.

Their collaboration began immediately. They used their journey home—nearly two months at sea—to their mutual benefit. Gallaudet taught Clerc English, and Clerc taught Gallaudet sign language. Again the men had a mutual goal, and again collaboration was needed to reach it.

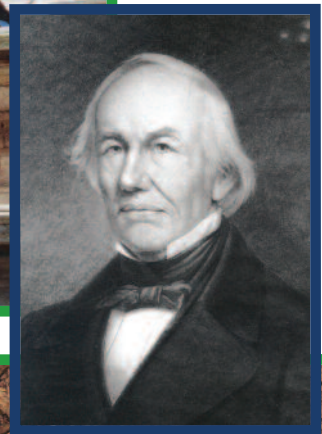
The Clerc/Gallaudet collaboration would lead to the introduction of bilingual educational programs in the United States, where students and teachers used sign language and deaf teachers were revered in classrooms. The deaf/hearing partnership set a principle that would result in the education of thousands of deaf and hard of

*Photos courtesy of the Gallaudet University Archives*

*Illustrations courtesy of the California State University, Northridge and LEAD-K*



**Clockwise from left:** Reverend Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet; DPN rally at the U.S. Capitol; Laurent Clerc; DPN protesters march through the streets of Washington, D.C.



hearing children, the founding of the world's only university specifically for deaf and hard of hearing students, and the United States becoming a beacon of light for deaf and hard of hearing people around the world.

### **1988—Students and Community Collaborations Led to a Deaf University President**

Another American milestone illustrating the power and promise of deaf/hearing collaborations was the Deaf President Now (DPN) movement at Gallaudet University. DPN coalesced as a protest in 1988 when the University's Board of Trustees failed to choose a deaf individual to become University president. Learning that the new president would be hearing, the students, faculty, alumni, Deaf community, and interpreters rallied together and formed a position statement: It was time for a university serving primarily deaf students to have a deaf president.

Collaboration was essential. The protesting individuals had divergent ideas related to processes and strategies, and even the individual who should be the deaf president, but all agreed on overarching principles. They agreed to support the student leaders elected to serve as the face of the

movement as well as the DPN Council representing the faculty, staff, alumni, families, and community.

As the protest gathered strength, it garnered the support of other minority

communities. The media showed up with its spotlight, and the country was captivated. Letters and calls from supporters and families flooded the halls of Congress, prompting key legislative leaders to ask the board to reconsider. Reconsider the board did. The result: Gallaudet got its first deaf president in its 124 years of existence.

The ramifications were profound. Not only did the nation's university for deaf students get a deaf president, but it also got a Board of Trustees with its first deaf chair and a majority of deaf members. Further, the relationships and awareness resulting from DPN contributed to the development and



support of the Americans with Disabilities Act passed by Congress in 1990 and to the large number of deaf administrators in schools and programs serving deaf populations.

Collaboration moved events forward positively, forcefully, and successfully. Success was made possible by individuals who committed to the goal, agreed to trust their elected representatives, and worked together on various tasks until the goal was achieved. Collaborative synergy means  $1 + 1 = 3!$

## Collaboration Today It Takes a Village to Collaborate

Community schools operate on the principle that it takes a village to educate a child. By collaborating with families, state and local agencies, alumni, public schools and colleges, policy makers, and employers or business owners, a school multiplies its effects manifold. By reaching beyond its borders and working with the community, providing continuing education and other opportunities, greater awareness, enthusiasm, and opportunities become possible.

The West Virginia Schools for the Deaf and the Blind (WVSDB) provide an example of successful collaborative planning. Teachers and residential life counselors jointly work on individual student plans and enrichment opportunities. WVSDB partners with the state division of vocational rehabilitation on career and life planning for its teenagers. Students are given the opportunity to serve as legislative pages for a day, helping to educate policy-makers about the capacities of people who are deaf and who are blind. Career education programs are enriched through liaisons to technical and community colleges as well as some businesses. Master teachers work with new teachers, creating professional learning communities and discussing both areas of innovation and those needing improvement. In addition to students served on site, 600 deaf children and families are served externally through outreach programs and on-campus short courses. Through collaboration and teamwork, WVSDB maximizes capacity as a learning and living environment, as a demonstration school,

and as a valued state resource.

The California State University, Northridge (CSUN) is nationally recognized for its leadership in effective education and human development for deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing students and professionals through successful collaborations. CSUN programs include Deaf Education, Deaf Studies, the National Center on Deafness, and the federally funded Postsecondary Educational Programs Network (pepnet 2). In 2009, with a grant from the California Department of Education (CDE), deaf and hearing professionals from these programs joined hands with parent representatives and deaf students and developed *Through Your Child's Eyes: American Sign Language*, a video that encourages bilingual educational approaches for young deaf children. Presented in American Sign Language (ASL), English, and Spanish, it became an overnight sensation, with at least 35,000 hits from the United States and 30 other countries posted within the first two months. The collaboration, visibility, and trust that resulted from this video project strengthened relations between the CDE and the Deaf community and became a building block for subsequent legislative action supporting bilingual opportunities for deaf babies.

The Conference of Educational Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf, the American Foundation for the Blind, and the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) joined forces to strengthen the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Together, these organizations sponsored HR 3535, known as the Alice Cogswell and Anne Sullivan Macy Act (2015), which if passed, would:

- ensure linguistic readiness and appropriate services for deaf, blind, and deafblind children;
- require that professionals serving these children be qualified; and
- hold agencies accountable for results of state programs.

The California Association of the Deaf (CAD) and the Northern California (NorCal) Services for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (along with its eight sister agencies) provided another example of successful collaboration when, in 2010, a coalition of private Options schools got an assemblyman to introduce legislation that would have provided a brochure at no cost to parents of newly identified deaf babies. The brochure, while professing to give families unbiased information on communication options, actually focused on oral communication and summarily dismissed ASL in two sentences. Moreover, no recognition was given to the importance of language acquisition or the vital role of language, as opposed to mechanical communication methodologies, in





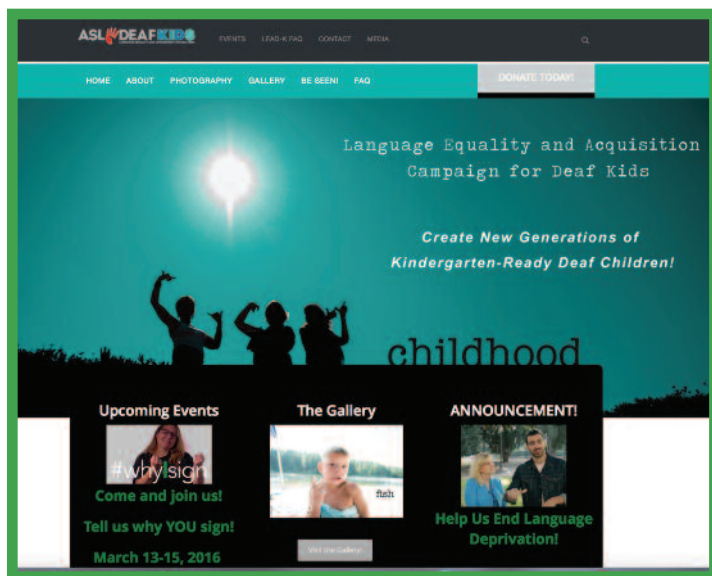
developing fundamental skills for cognition, critical thinking, and connections needed to succeed in education and life.

Individuals from various agencies sprang into action to amend the new proposal and to require the development of a brochure that would include both languages, ASL and English, as vital for a deaf child's cognitive and linguistic development. When they finished, the proponents of the original bill now opposed the bill and, in the confusion, the governor vetoed it. The assemblyman, who had good intentions, encouraged CAD, NorCal, and the Options schools to collaborate. The meeting took place with a mediator to go over the principles, criteria, and processes for the next steps. Mutual agreement was achieved. The bill went forward, and a balanced family resource manual is now a reality and available online for family use and reference (CDE, 2013). Without deaf people at the table, the results would have been neither authentic nor appropriate.

Shortly afterwards, NorCal, with executive director Sheri Farinha, and CAD, with president Julie Rems Smario, launched a workgroup of diverse representatives from California, a few other interested states, and the NAD. The goal: legislative and mobilization strategies to ensure deaf children have language to be kindergarten-ready. This new coalition became known as the Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf Kids—Kindergarten Ready (or LEAD-K for short). The LEAD-K website ([www.asl4deafkids.org](http://www.asl4deafkids.org)) includes information, resources, and photos regarding a deaf child's right to ASL and English and to be kindergarten-ready.

The California SB210 bill focused on state accountability for systemic changes and early language benchmarks for families, and it stipulated that early education professionals be capable of assessing whether deaf babies met those benchmarks for acquiring language proficiency in ASL and/or English in order to be ready for kindergarten. It also indicated that the U.S. Department of Education, rather than the U.S. Department of Health, become responsible for this aspect of the early identification and intervention program.

The LEAD-K team drafted a model bill, and then Farinha and Rems Smario submitted the bill to the California legislative body. They also collaborated with Options schools on the bill and the lobbying for it. The bill passed both houses unanimously and won approval from the governor in October 2015. Funding to implement timely assessments and prevent language deprivation begins in 2017. In addition to the powerful impact that this legislation will have on the youngest deaf children, the collaboration required to draft and pass it raised the awareness of state legislators about the essence of involving deaf people in processes and decisions about them, enhanced the role of state schools for the deaf, and enabled families to easily procure resources to prevent language deprivation in their deaf children. Several states are currently developing their own versions of this legislation.



## Collaborating for Success Points

The LEAD-K movement includes all aspects of successful agreements on the following:

- *Establishing a clear goal.* The deaf child will be ready for kindergarten. This is the prize; keep eyes on it.
- *Articulating overarching principles.* The principles are non-negotiable, centering on the deaf child's right to language—ASL and/or English—and full access to education. Parents need to have language benchmarks starting at their child's birth. The state, which is mandated to provide early intervention programs, needs to be held accountable for outcomes.
- *Sharing essential information.* Dismal data exists on the high percentage of deaf and hard of hearing children who, through language deprivation, are not ready for kindergarten. This data was shared with various legislators and constituencies to get them engaged.
- *Ensuring diverse stakeholders are at the table.* Varying perspectives and experiences strengthen the outcomes. Innovations “for a specific group” often have great cross-sectional benefits for society at large; curb cuts and captions, for example, benefit more than just the intended groups (Rosen, 2012).
- *Collaborating across various aisles.* Relationships, collaborations, and networking with various organizations and legislative bodies can lead to positive results. The bill focused on language proficiency—ASL and/or English—and thus got support from both sides to ensure deaf children would be on target linguistically in ASL and/or English. Families would be informed about benchmarks and strategies for meeting them in one or both languages.

# Key Steps for Successful Collaboration

By Roslyn Rosen

A snowflake by itself is fragile. Together, snowflakes contribute to formidable glaciers that have been known to move mountains. Successful collaborations—the synergy of people tackling what can seem to be a mountain of challenge—have also transformed landscapes.

Key steps include:

- **Ensuring diverse stakeholders are at the table.** Not only does each stakeholder bring vital perspectives, but the involvement of individuals representing diverse perspectives helps to increase trust in the process and outcome within each constituent group. For example, cuts in curbsides, which originally required the retraining of seeing eye dogs for the safety of their owners, have had great benefits for society at large, including bikers, skaters, stroller pushers, and wagon pullers. Closed captioning, originally and primarily begun for deaf and hard of hearing individuals, has resulted in customers in noisy venues such as bars and airports being able to understand TV programming and second language users garnering assistance with English language learning. (Rosen, 2012)
- **Recognizing different talents and strengths within a group.** At the dawn of civilization, the cooperation of hunters and gatherers demonstrated how various talents helped the tribe to survive and thrive. This early example of teamwork—different people having varying abilities and/or interests—enabled our species to thrive. Members of a group need to be willing to keep an open mind, modify views as needed, and step out of their comfort zone to take on new assignments as needed to accomplish the agreed-upon goal.
- **Trusting the group and the process.** To succeed, the group must visualize its goal and articulate the overarching principles to inform the process, communication, and outcomes. Individuals need to be willing to set aside their own personal agenda for the benefit of the team. Adjustments can be made regarding the process and product based on group determinations.



The focus shifted from mechanical communications skills to language proficiency and safeguards.

- *Ensuring deaf leaders are involved and that goals and processes are deaf-centric.* This ensures the outcome will be authentic as well as culturally and pedagogically appropriate for deaf children, leading to success in school and life.

Since Clerc and Gallaudet shook each other's hand two centuries ago on another continent, the leadership of deaf people and the collaboration among deaf and hearing individuals, families, state agencies, interpreters, schools, and communities have been essential to the success of deaf and hard of hearing students. Adherence to overarching principles has defined successful collaborations and continues to do so today.

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