

ASL for All- American Sign Language and Deaf and Hard of Hearing Inclusion

- **Describe the precipitating events that motivated you to initiate these lessons or activities**

In 2022, Lavern Gaynor Elementary became home to two students who are Deaf. This simple change of roster soon became a catalyst for the transformation of our entire school culture. As these students began to navigate our exclusively hearing school, the rest of the school naturally became fascinated by their use of American Sign Language and how they experienced the world. It became our goal to welcome and include these students by spreading an appreciation for and understanding of American Sign Language and Deaf culture. The district then designated our school as a cluster school for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) and over the next few years our numbers have increased to servicing up to 9 of these students in a given year. In an effort to make these students feel seen and respected we have created various initiatives from a Sign Language club, to celebrating Deaf Awareness Month, to including Sign Language in our school pledge. DHH Awareness and inclusion has now become not just what we do, but who we are at LGE.

- **Describe the lessons or activities; and if adapted from another source please reference**

Our efforts to include our DHH students have been wide and varied. Some of the highlights include our Sign Language Club, Celebrations of Deaf Awareness Month, providing books/ posters with Deaf and Hard of Hearing representations, and including Sign Language as part of our School Pledge and School Rules. Below is a brief description of each.

- Sign Language Club (All Hands on Deck)- Students are invited to pick a Leadership Club to learn a new skill. This club was created specifically to teach the hearing students some of the basics of American Sign Language. Students also have opportunities to learn about DHH culture and proper etiquette when engaging with a Deaf or Hard of Hearing individual. As the club has progressed over the years, the club is often led by a DHH student who teaches his/her peers American Sign Language and includes opportunities to work on school wide initiatives.



Students in the club practice their ABC's in ASL



Students sign "I Love You" in ASL



Bulletin board with student created work from the club to help all students learn some fun winter/ holiday signs



A Deaf student leads his peers during a club day to learn the sign for butterfly

- Celebrations of Deaf Awareness Month- For the past three years we have done special activities to recognize and celebrate Deaf Awareness Month- September. Activities have included our DHH students creating videos to explain various aspects of Deaf Culture, a school wide project where every class displayed their students' names in ASL, and a project that included hand prints from students, staff, and families to show our appreciation for ASL. Also, opportunities for read aloud that taught various Deaf culture concepts were offered through the month.



Students in an all hearing classroom engage in a read aloud about what it's like to be Deaf during Deaf Awareness month



A display of student names in American Sign Language outside of a classroom



A bulletin board that reads "Our love for ASL is written in the stars!" with handprints of students, staff, and family/community members in the "I love you" handshape

- DHH representation books/ posters- We have been able to provide books which include Deaf and Hard of Hearing Characters that serve 2 major purposes. One is that it allows our DHH students to see themselves in literature. Another is that it allows their hearing peers to learn more about Deaf culture and Deaf and Hard of Hearing lived experiences. We also provided posters with some basic signs for classrooms that included DHH students so that all students within the room can learn to communicate with their peers.



A student holds up a series of books about a Deaf Dog



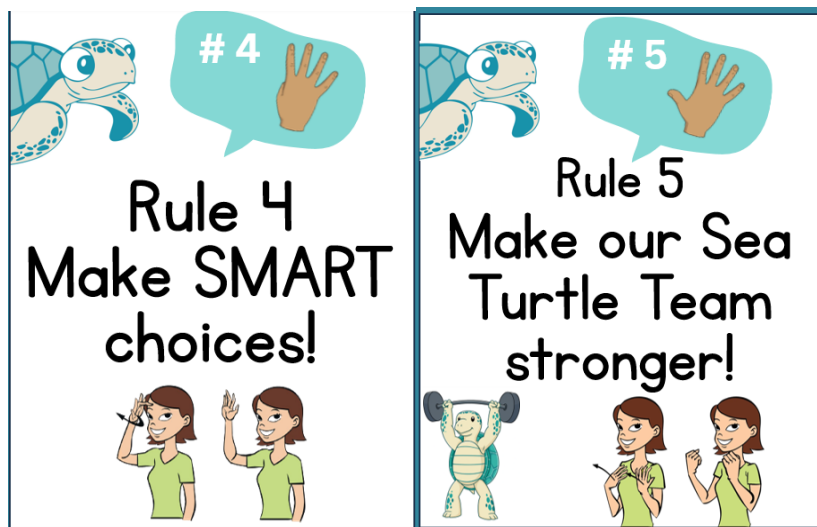
A student points to a poster in his classroom that helps teach his peers the Days of the Week in American Sign Language and signs "Wednesday"

- Inclusion of Sign Language as part of our School Pledge and School Rules- Every day students hear the pledge on the news, but now they also see and participate in its recitation not just with their voices but with their hands. All students practice saying and signing the School Pledge in English and American Sign Language. Also, with the

inception of our School Wide Rules this year, we were sure to include ASL into each of the rules.



Students signing the LGE pledge



Pictures of our school wide rules that incorporate American Sign Language and are posted in every classroom

- **Explain how the lessons or activities teach students the importance of respecting others no matter what religious, racial, cultural, or other differences exist**

Each of these activities have helped our hearing students to gain a greater understanding and appreciation for the experiences of our Deaf and Hard of Hearing students. Students learn the proper etiquette for interacting and engaging with their DHH peers. For example, students learn that they are to keep eye contact and speak directly to a Deaf student, not through or while looking at the interpreter. They learn it's ok to tap these students on the shoulder to get their attention. Students have learned to respect and acknowledge the different ways these students interact with the world. The students have embraced Sign Language and try very hard to make their DHH peers feel included. It has also allowed the DHH students themselves to take on Leadership Roles and become visible and active members of our school community. We even had a student who served as a news anchor and was seen every week

using Sign Language to relay the news of the day, along with a hearing student who served as an interpreter behind the camera.



DHH student serves as anchor while a hearing peer serves as interpreter

• **Explain how it helped them counter bigotry and bullying and prepared them to stand up for Justice**

Thanks to the initiatives and activities we have included at our school, our students are now equipped with a respect and appreciation for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community. They have learned to embrace everyone regardless of their auditory access. Our students no longer look at hearing aids or cochlear implants as anything out of the ordinary. Collier County Public Schools did a special segment about our program and in it you can hear directly from one of our students how much he has felt welcome and included, see below. Students are becoming advocates for their peers. They are learning proper etiquette when engaging with the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and are beginning to even encourage others to do the same. For example, reminding their peers to look directly at the student rather than their interpreter. Many students are even finding a passion for ASL and expressing interest in becoming interpreters one day. Check out the article from Neapolitan Magazine below for more details. One of my favorite examples is when, in a school wide assembly, a Deaf Student spoke through her interpreter and when she finished the vast majority of the students in the room chose to sign “cheers” rather than to clap. This shows how engrained into our school culture the respect and appreciation for these students is.

If we were to receive this grant, we would be able to continue the initiatives described above and begin expansion. We truly want LGE to be a place where every student has the opportunity to learn American Sign Language and experience Deaf Culture. We hope to be able to create a special area of the library that includes books about learning ASL and with characters who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. We can also expand our club and school wide resources. We have even considered having a Deaf author come to give a talk to our school. Another area we could expand is to provide resources for our school families so that the learning and inclusion does not stop with the students but is brought home and to the

community at large. The Deaf and Hard of Hearing are a chronically underrepresented group of society and through our humble efforts at LGE we hope to be the change we want to see in the world.

- PROVIDE EVIDENCE/PROOF OF EFFECTIVENESS SUCH AS, BUT NOT LIMITED TO: A QUESTIONNAIRE, INTERVIEWS, DOCUMENTED ANECDOTAL CONVERSATIONS, AND STUDENT WRITINGS, VIDEO, ETC.

Since the inception of our DHH cluster, our school has continued to thrive and grow. We have been an “A” rated school for two years in a row. We have been receiving various awards and recognition, including from the Leader in Me foundation. We truly believe that a huge part of this success can be attributed to our ASL for All initiative. It has created a cohesive and welcoming school environment that has changed our culture in the most positive and affecting way. Below you will find various examples of how this initiative has affected not only the DHH students but all our students.

Video created by CCPS which highlights our DHH program and shows how the program has led students to feel more included

<https://video.collierschools.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=fc585031-585e-4189-a2b5-b125015d1b92>

Video of Club students signing the LGE expectations at Leadership Day, a family and community annual event

<https://collierschools.instructuremedia.com/embed/eb3afb26-7e72-480e-9de1-0f46eb8838b6>

Video of DHH students leading a club lesson on “Days of the Week”

<https://collierschools.instructuremedia.com/embed/97caa631-061c-4f31-a29a-804294d71952>

Video of students signing the School Wide expectations, led by DHH students during a club day so that they can help teach it to their peers

<https://collierschools.instructuremedia.com/embed/84788ce9-fed3-4bca-8a7b-209476ee1438>

Video of both hearing and DHH students discussing what they like about LGE. A perfect example of how our hearing students are embracing ASL in order to communicate and include their peers

<https://collierschools.instructuremedia.com/embed/4e540fba-49da-45a1-9a48-0170182e426a>

Video of students signing the school vision as part of the daily news routine, followed by signing their classroom mission statement

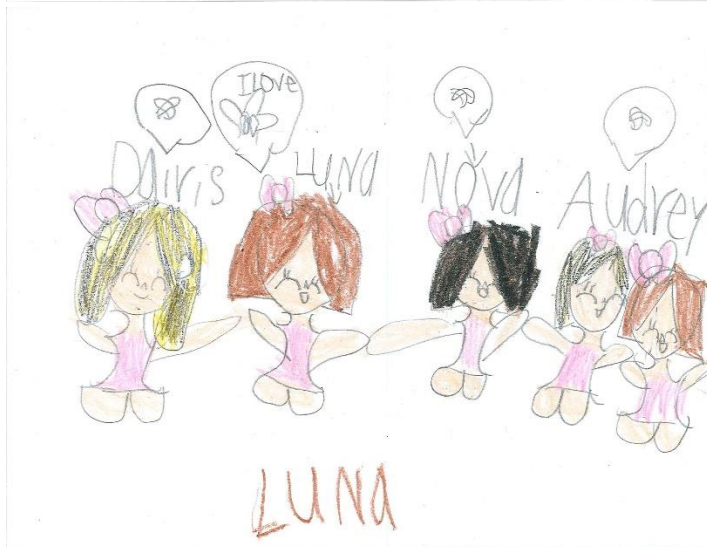
<https://collierschools.instructuremedia.com/embed/bd23a470-154d-4433-b524-fed4dd933d59>

Quotes from students in the All Hands on Deck Club

"We do a lot of stuff for Deaf people. We didn't know how to talk to Deaf people, but now we get to learn!" 2nd grade

" My favorite thing about All Hands on Deck is learning how to talk to Deaf people" Alexandra, 5th grade

Drawings created by primary students to show how they feel about being able to use ASL to communicate with their friends



Students performing a song with Sign Language integrated throughout as part of Leadership Day

<https://collierschools.instructuremedia.com/embed/4c8d8137-3984-4bae-a179-b0ed4a73d8bb>

Neapolitan Magazine article which highlights how this initiative has helped not only the DHH community but also the Hearing Students

KINDNESS CORNER

Bridging the Silence

Fifth Grader Embraces Sign Language to Help a  Classmate

By Andrea Stetson



◀ Dayla Velazquez Gongora learned sign language to better interact with her classmate Matthew Yescas, who is hard of hearing. Photos by Andrea Stetson.

"When I found out that we were going to have a hard-of-hearing student, I wanted to learn to communicate with people who can't hear," Dayla explained. "Matthew's interpreter helped me start with some signs, and then she encouraged me to start using the app ASL Bloom."

Now, she knows more than 200 words. One morning, Matthew's aide was unavailable during a physical education class, so Dayla stepped in to assist.

"When the PE teacher was talking, I signed for Matthew and told him everything the teacher was saying and the rules of the games, and he understood," Dayla said.

Dayla Velazquez Gongora quickly moves her hands and fingers as she asks her classmate Matthew Yescas about his favorite subjects in school. The fifth graders at Lavern Gaynor Elementary School in Golden Gate became close friends after Dayla began a personal mission to learn American Sign Language. Now, she often helps interpret for Matthew when the school interpreters are not there and helps him interact with others.

It all began last year when Lavern Gaynor became a cluster school for students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

"Dayla became very interested in how students were signing, and she learned there were apps where she could learn signing," said Principal Susan Jordan. "She worked on it over the summer, and when she came back as a fifth grader, Dayla was able to have actual conversations."

The school currently has nine students who are deaf or hard of hearing. All around the hallways and classrooms, there are posters in sign language. Jordan said some students learned simple signs like thank you, but Dayla, who already spoke both English and Spanish, was the only student on a personal quest to learn ASL.

NOT SO SIMPLE

Learning ASL is not as simple as teaching words, according to Monica Lorenz, an exceptional student education resource teacher and team leader at Lavern Gaynor.

"American Sign Language is not just signed English," Lorenz explained. "There is not a sign for each word. Their syntax is different. It is a completely different language with its rules and grammar."

Lorenz is proud of Dayla's success in learning the language, but she is even more impressed with her drive to help others.

"Dayla just has a really big heart," Lorenz said. "She has gone through so much as a person, and I have seen her grow so much. She found that

Learning ASL is not as simple as teaching words, according to Monica Lorenz, an exceptional student education resource teacher and team leader at Lavern Gaynor.

this is something she could do that helped her interact with more people.”

Learning sign language has also expanded Dayla’s horizons.

“School can be hard for her, but she doesn’t have to be really good at reading or math to be good at this,” Lorenz explained. “Her own purpose has grown. It really warmed my heart because she did not know what she wanted to do when she grew up, and now she wants to be an ASL interpreter. Her natural ingrained desire to help people has come to fruition and she sees a future in it. She now has a drive that was not there before.”

Dayla hopes to one day be a sign language interpreter in a local school.

Matthew wants to be a math teacher. But for now, the two fifth graders are glad to have this special friendship.

Dayla and Matthew chat about everything from their favorite school subjects to their teachers to about whether a homework assignment is easy or difficult.

“We talk about his best friend who is in middle school and we play on the playground. I love when he laughs. He is so funny,” Dayla said.

“I like to chat with Dayla,” Matthew said through his interpreter. “She will ask me what a sign is, and I will teach her ASL and she learns from me. We talk about signs and we play in the playground.”

Matthew says Dayla is different from other hearing students who try to interact with him.

“Other students will try to finger spell some words, and a few students will try to sign, but Dayla signs and is able to chat with me,” he said. “She is really easy to teach. She learns very fast. She is a good signer.”

“When asked what prompted her to start this journey, Dayla shared that she wants to be the best friend possible for her deaf peers,” Principal Jordan explained. “Dayla has demonstrated both leadership and kindness here as a student at Lavern Gaynor Elementary School.” ✨