

KEN SMITH
PO BOX 202112
HARRISBURG PA 17120-2112



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
HARRISBURG

COMMITTEES

AGING & OLDER ADULT SERVICES
EDUCATION, MAJORITY SECRETARY
HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES
LABOR RELATIONS
VETERANS AFFAIRS & EMERGENCY
PREPAREDNESS

March 3, 2009

Hon. Edward G. Rendell, Governor
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
225 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Governor Rendell,

For almost 130 years, the Scranton State School for the Deaf has been providing education for the hearing impaired. This school has survived a national economic depression, multiple wars, and many other challenges that faced our nation. SSSD is part of the 112th legislative district to which I represent. I find the idea of closing the school morally unacceptable.

On many occasions I have witnessed the excellent education provided at SSSD. I have watched in amazement the communication between educator and student and student to student. It is an environment that fosters a wholesome and fulfilling education.

As you are aware, the Scranton State School for the Deaf was founded in 1880. However, deaf education in the United States was recognized as early as 1817 when the Hartford School was established in Connecticut. Later it became known as the American School for the Deaf. The same year as the founding of SSSD, an international conference for deaf educators was held in Milan. A battle over methods of teaching, sign vs. oral resulted in a decision that would profoundly affect the deaf community. The oral method of teaching won the battle. For the next 80 years, deaf students were forbidden to sign in a classroom. Educators believed that if a deaf child signed, he or she would not learn how to speak. As a result, deaf teachers for deaf students were no longer necessary. The effect of this decision was student isolation, frustration and scholastic failure.

In the early 1960's, American Sign Language was proclaimed on par with any spoken language and reintroduced as a successful method of teaching to deaf students. Additionally, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act passed by Congress in 1990 included the requirement that disabled children need to be placed in the LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT

as close to their home as possible. Several states including North Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, and California have passed a "Deaf Child's Bill of Rights".

Scranton State School for the Deaf provides an appropriate education for hearing impaired students. The good intentions of the educators at the Milan Conference caused long term disadvantages to the very students whose welfare was in their hands. If educational provisions are interpreted incorrectly, the placement of children in alternate programs may not meet the individual needs that are being met for the students currently enrolled at SSSD. In an effort to resolve a budget deficit, please do not impose long term setbacks to our deaf community. Remember the results of the Milan Conference; if we do not learn from history, we are doomed to repeat it.

Yes, I understand educating the deaf student is expensive. Keep in mind this school educates K-12 and provides services 24 hours a day five days a week. Also, SSSD is only at 50% of its capacity. If the Pennsylvania Department of Education would partner with the administration at SSSD and lead deaf students to the school, then the cost per student will be reduced.

It is my hope that SSSD can become the flagship for education within the deaf community. We have the opportunity to provide education for hearing impaired students that made the attempt to be educated in their home school district, but, for many reasons found themselves either not accepted by their peers or unable to maximize their educational opportunity.

This past weekend, I participated in a multi-state high school basketball tournament for the deaf. It was highly competitive and SSSD found themselves in the championship game against West Virginia School for the Deaf. West Virginia was victorious but all of the teams that participated were truly winners. What a sight it was to witness students and faculty cheering on their respective teams. This is a small example of what SSSD offers as part of a complete and challenging education for their students. SSSD provides a well rounded education by combining an academic environment with strong social support in a setting that insures student success in this most challenging world.

In conclusion, I implore you to reconsider and to understand the long term effects that would be brought to this community by dismantling this beloved school. Every child in America has the right to be happy and well educated. Taking this school away from the deaf community today and in the future would be a serious mistake on the part of those elected to be their leaders.

Sincerely,



Kenneth J. Smith
State Representative
112th Legislative District