

The Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Committee meeting for a discussion on the Education Needs of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students. Tuesday, 23 May 2023 at 11.00 am, Leinster House

[Opening Statement by Andrew Geary, Parent & Advocate for his Deaf Son, to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.](#)

I thank the Chair and Committee Members for the opportunity to speak today.

Background information on our Campaign

I am the father of 4 boys, all in fulltime Education. The oldest has just finished first year at UCC, all my other sons are in Secondary School ranging from 1st Year to 5th Year. My Deaf son Calum has no auditory nerve and therefore has never heard a single sound notwithstanding travelling the world in the first few years post diagnosis to give him some access to sound. Despite never hearing a sound, he was not diagnosed as deaf until after his second birthday. Our family is a Signing family, we all use Irish Sign Language at home.

President Mary McAleese 1997, then Vice Chancellor Queen's University Belfast, voiced the feelings still felt by us as a family today about her brother John, "*we fell unwittingly and trustingly into the hands of 'experts'..., whole decades later we are a lot wiser, sadder and angrier. The deliberate and sustained repression of Sign Language; the failing to recognise that the English Language remained an uncrackable code for many deaf even after primary and secondary education; the sterile debates about the validity of oral and signed teaching traditions; the failure to adopt a holistic, whole family response; these were all features of an era I hope is fading*". We are possibly at a crossroads only because of a momentous amount of stress, tension, sleepless nights and possible financial loss. I am pleading we can finally leave this era behind with a real Education for my Son and our Sign Language using Children. We needed a Family Response, We needed Quality and Quantity of Language from a Qualified Source for all our Deaf Signing Children from Birth. The Recognition of Irish Sign Language Act 2017 was designed to be the first step of this new era.

Deaf Education System for Deaf Signing Children

Irish Sign Language is still the only language in the Education System that does not require a Degree to teach in that environment. Quite often with great acclaim to the Teachers, they attended classes in ISL on their own time and expense. To teach in the Schools for the Deaf requires no professional or any qualification in this area. Most Teachers again to their great credit completed courses in Deaf Education in the UK. However British Sign Language is a completely different language, as different from ISL as spoken English is from Russian. Thus access to the curriculum was based as much on good fortune and geography of finding the right SNA. This is despite the NCSE report and research conducted by Dr. Marc Marschark in 2009. Academic research has always consistently stated Deaf Signing Children must have access to the highest level of fluency in Sign Language from the earliest age not the lingua franca adopted. Despite honest commendable efforts of all concerned, this is referenced in reports on Calum's Education from an early age. Before our High Court case the only way a Deaf Signing Child could access the curriculum was if a qualified Interpreter or fluent signer took up the post as an SNA. The question must be asked, why Irish Sign Language is not a

subject for Leaving Certificate. The recent welcome announcement that Ukrainian will soon be a Leaving Certificate subject demonstrates when there is a will there is a way.

High Court

Our High Court case focused the need for full fluency in the Classroom through an In-class Irish Sign Language Teacher/Interpreter, who is at minimum a Graduate of the Centre for Deaf Studies, Trinity College Dublin. This person should have a Level 8 Degree specialising in Irish Sign Language. This fluency should be equivalent to C2 Production & B1 Reception on the CEFR Language Scale. This person should be a permanent employment, with pay commensurate with this very responsible position.

The Toll of the last 2 years in the High Court has been enormous, though hopefully worth it, the whole practice of forcing families to go to the High Court has scarred us deeply. Mentally, Emotionally and Financially. After many years of campaigns, a few interludes of real access made the years of reduced access even harsher. Many false dawns and erroneous promises, nothing even 25 years in the public service fully prepared me for the demands of the last 2 years in the legal process and High Court. Beginning with the struggle to get all the information on record through FOI requests, to see Officials already knew in 2016 that I would eventually go the High Court was heart-breaking. It felt like I was being disloyal to my own country. I was completely burned out from the constant back and forth of affidavits. At times, all I felt I had for support from total burn out was figures from our history books and obviously the teachers that brought them to life. I felt that I was on trial trying to testify as to why my son was entitled to citizenship of his own country. It was almost akin to the Napoleonic-Victorian eras when anyone of Special needs, Deaf etc. could not inherit their family's property. Are we that harsh that in the 21st Century, we want to deny our Children who are different Full Citizenship? Why are families such as ours who seek better access to an education forced through such pain and anguish? I just hope that this discrimination ends and all our nation's children will be cherished equally.

As a Community Volunteer for most of my life and Public Servant it is hard to comprehend what our state imposes upon parents, campaigners and carers if they dare to raise their heads above the parapet and actually ask for something. I always thought in a Rights based Republic, the one envisioned by our founders, this state would campaign for equality, freedom of expression and education not fight you every inch of the way. It is the People rather than the Process that should take precedence in a modern democracy. What is freedom of speech if the same state denies my Son his right to express himself in one of our native languages? It also saddened me deeply that the National Disability Authority's 2020 report on the Irish Sign Language Act 2017 lay unpublished for 18 months because of our case.

Democracy is demanding but we must all still believe in our nation and its foundations. This would not be possible without the three pillars of democracy, the great Storytellers, the great Legislators, we have truly great TDs and Senators, and access to the High Court. All three of the above, made this happen. I braced myself to tell our story from the witness box for all to hear, win or lose. Nevertheless, eventually this settlement after months of negotiation by our legal team ultimately gave us what we spent 8 years campaigning for and 2 years in the legal system and the High Court. We do not have to sell our home now and we hopefully can just get back to being Parents and I can mourn my father, who passed away on the day the offer

finally came. This time we hope as a family we have reached our destination and not another junction on the road to access.

The Future

The Department has now established Two new roles, for all Deaf Signing Children in Ireland. An ISL Specialist In Classroom Support Person plus another position, an Advisor Role. These national posts were advertised recently. Calum is thriving, he has Great access to all his subjects in school. He is enjoying Secondary school. He is in Bishopstown Community School in Cork City. . All his teachers tell us how able he is. I am blown away by how far he has come in such a short time because of real and full access to the Curriculum. Calum has had full access since he entered Secondary School as an interim measure. This have given him access to the full vocabulary of each subject, including the complete lexicon of phrases and terminology. Calum always had Great Teachers however now the bridge is fully established between language and learning. This is because his access is through a person who is fully qualified. The new roles come with some teething issues however as I question whether the pay and conditions will attract people to the posts. These roles have a long list of requirements, I am hopeful the remuneration and conditions will equate with those requirements. There is also a major need for additional training for Interpreters. The 4 to 6 new graduates emerging from TCD every year is barely replacing the outgoing Interpreters. Ireland has approximately 80 Interpreters from a Deaf Signing Population of 5,000. For an almost identical Deaf Signing Community in Finland there is at least 500.

thank you

