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Clarke Schools today teach 'listening and spoken language,' not oralism



Clarke Schools for Hearing and Speech.

Clarke Schools for Hearing and Speech. STAFF PHOTO/CAROL LOLLIS » [Buy this Image](#)



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NORTHAMPTON — Clarke Schools for Hearing and Speech, formerly the Clarke School for the Deaf, is no longer residential, having shuttered its dorms in 2012. Today, Clarke has day schools located in Northampton, Boston, New York City, Philadelphia and Jacksonville, Florida.

Clarke now teaches what it calls “listening and spoken language,” not oralism. The school does not teach American Sign Language, or ASL, in the classroom, though school administrators say they seek to support families in whatever choices they make about language.

"Our staff are really committed to helping parents choose the best option or combination of options that's going to work for them and their families," said Barbara Hecht, the director of Clarke Boston. She said some students speak ASL at home or learn it with outside teachers.

Hecht said Clarke basically functions as an English-language immersion program. She added that even with the advanced technology used in the school, deaf and hard-of-hearing students need more early listening and speaking practice than their hearing peers in order to become proficient.

Digital hearing aids and cochlear implants — devices that are surgically implanted and can provide someone with a sense of sound — play a larger role in Clarke's classrooms than perhaps ever before. Clarke provides services to families beginning immediately after birth, Hecht said, counseling caregivers on the options available to them for their deaf or hard-of-hearing children.

Caroline Linz's son Teddy was born profoundly deaf in Pennsylvania, and as a hearing family, they didn't know how to navigate next steps. So the family called Clarke Philadelphia, and a Clarke representative came the same afternoon to talk about the school, which they then toured.

"We saw these children who are deaf speaking and thriving in the classroom," Linz said. "They looked just like our older son, who had just started at a Montessori program."

Linz's family was soon in Clarke's early intervention program, and Teddy got his first cochlear implant at 13 months old. Hecht said it is important for children who do get cochlear implants to get them early because of short "neurological windows of opportunity" for auditory brain development.

The approach has worked well for Teddy, Linz said, adding that Teddy now sings and acts in local theater productions.

"He's just like his brothers and his peers," Linz said. "It has been incredible, and we're proud of him."

Clarke offers services for infants, preschoolers and school-age children, as well as programming like support groups and graduate-level courses in deaf education.

However, Clarke's approach to deaf education is not without its critics, some of whom say deaf children who are mainstreamed into hearing schools are often the only deaf students in those schools, which can lead to social isolation.

Cochlear implants, in particular, are a deeply divisive issue, with some in the Deaf community viewing them as yet another example of the hearing world deciding what's best for deaf children.

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