Policy #: **121**
Title: **COMMUNICATION, LANGUAGE, AND ACCESSIBILITY**
Date of Initial Approval: 06-27-2019
Revision/Re-authorization Dates:
Reviewers: MSA Superintendent; MSA Instructional Leadership Team; MSAB/MSAD Site Councils

I. PURPOSE

The purpose of this policy is to ensure that full access to communication, language, and learning is provided for students and employees at the Minnesota State Academies (MSA).   Each student at MSA deserves a fully accessible learning environment which supports a high-quality education and development of linguistic, cognitive, social, and academic skills.   MSA strives for functional equivalence in language and communication access throughout the educational environment at all times, for both students and employees.

II. GENERAL STATEMENT OF POLICY

MSA recognizes the central role that language and culture play in the overall linguistic, cognitive, social, and academic development of students at MSA. Furthermore, our deaf/hard-of-hearing, blind/visually impaired, or deafblind staff members must have full access to language, communication, and information to perform their job duties efficiently.

MSA acknowledges that complex societal and historical factors contribute to the inequity within our schools, communities, and nation.   Nonetheless, MSA must work towards addressing and overcoming this inequity in accessibility. Included in this are continuous efforts towards challenging and remedying the institutional and other discriminatory systems that place barriers in the way of full access for students who are deaf/hard of hearing (D/HH), blind/visually impaired (B/VI), or deafblind (DB). MSA recognizes the right of all students and staff to have full and ongoing access to language, communication, and educational activities throughout both campuses.

By providing full access to language and communication, each student at MSA will be empowered and equipped to achieve on-grade learning and interpersonal growth as individuals. It is the goal of MSA to provide a safe learning and language-rich environment so that students can develop their language skills, literacy, thinking skills, and social skills so that they can fully access their learning.   Within this environment, employees should also have the same level of accessibility and respect in order to be positive role models and language facilitators/teachers for our students.

III. ADMINISTRATIVE AND STAFF RESPONSIBILITIES

A. MSA administration and staff members will develop, support, model, and sustain strategies for providing full access to language and communication for all students and employees. MSA administrators and employees will also establish workplace rules and expectations that support full accessibility for everyone.

B. MSA administration and staff members will develop practices that create multiple pathways to providing functional equivalence and full access to language and communication in order to meet the needs of our diverse students and employees,

and will actively encourage, support, and expect the provision of those pathways throughout both campuses in all activities and programs.

C. MSA administration will monitor policies, procedures, programs, and practices to assess educational equity and work to eliminate any language or communication disparities in all MSA programs, including attention to the following principles:
   a. Each student will receive high quality and culturally responsive pedagogy, using the most accessible and appropriate methods.
   b. MSA will recruit, employ, support, and retain a workforce that have the necessary knowledge and skills to support language, communication, and literacy skills of MSA students. MSA will model accessibility in all business practices and replace inequitable operational practices with systems that support implementation of this policy. (i.e. MSA Policies #442 – Braille Competency and Blind Awareness; and #443 – Staff ASL Proficiency)
   c. Consistent with federal/state regulations and other MSA policies, educational materials, assessments, and activities will be made accessible as much as possible, using methods appropriate to the unique learning and language needs of each student and staff member. Support services (i.e. ASL/English interpreters, Braille copies of handouts, Audio Description) must be scheduled and coordinated in advance of events to prevent gaps in communication and accessibility.
   d. Each program will seek community input and create a welcoming culture and inclusive environment that reflects the diverse language and communication needs of the school's diverse school populations, their families, and communities. Partnerships will be sought out and developed between MSA programs and community members to bring multiple cultural perspectives into our programs.

IV. COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE ACCESS FOR DEAF/HARD OF HEARING STUDENTS

Especially on the MSAD campus, but also including other areas where educational and language development activities are provided, D/HH require opportunities to learn and develop their language skills using ASL throughout all activities, including respect and appreciation for deaf culture. Providing students with an educational environment which utilizes American Sign Language (ASL) along with a strong commitment towards the development of ASL and English literacy within our bilingual instruction framework is critical. To achieve this, all staff members, contractors, and/or others working with or around D/HH students at MSA must utilize ASL for communication to the greatest extent possible, allowing for incidental learning in and out of the classroom. This includes ensuring that all of our materials, programs, and instructional activities are accessible, utilizing methods appropriate to the student, (i.e. technological supports, material modification, open/closed captioning, and/or instructional strategies) to match each student's individual learning, language, and accessibility needs.

As staff members and administrators make decisions about daily activities, curricular content, and other academic/language development decisions, they should consider the following factors:

- High expectations/standards towards the development of two languages – ASL and English.
- Training for teachers and students about language use within the classroom (i.e. use of ASL as the language of instruction; language separation; balanced literacy, prohibition of Simultaneous Communication)
- Ensuring language and cultural knowledge is developed, supporting students' self-esteem and confidence
- Removal of any barriers towards learning, in and out of the classroom
- Development of language development plans and goals to support students who may have gaps in one or both languages.
- Support of ASL literacy as an invaluable foundation for second language acquisition and development, developing thinking processes; maintaining cultural identity; and increasing communicative and literacy competence.
- Creation of a culture of respect and dignity, recognizing and supporting the unique needs and abilities of each student and staff member.
- Opportunities for both incidental and planned communication
- Access to deaf history, deaf culture, and D/HH role models, with emphasis on including diverse individuals and experiences representing more than one national origin, color, religion, socioeconomic stratum, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.
- Training for students and staff regarding communication, language use, and technology within different situations (i.e. classes, telephone/videophone calls; meetings; extracurricular activities; crisis and emergency situations)
- Interpreting services and needs
- Supporting new signers with appropriate instruction and language supports within their transition plan.

V. ACCESSIBILITY FOR BLIND/VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS

Especially on the MSAB campus, but also including other areas where educational and language development activities are provided, B/VI students require opportunities to learn and develop their language skills using Accessible Educational Materials (AEM), technology access/augmented communication devices, and/or audio description throughout all activities, including respect and understanding of their needs. AEM includes the following formats: Braille, Large Print, Audio, and Digital Materials. Providing students with an educational environment which involves the use of Braille with a strong commitment towards the development of literacy is critical. To achieve this, all staff members, contractors, and/or others working with or around B/VI students at MSA must provide access to information using AEM, and/or audio description to the greatest extent possible, allowing for incidental learning in and out of the classroom. This includes ensuring that all of our materials, programs, and instructional activities are accessible, utilizing methods appropriate to the student, including technological supports, material modification, and instructional strategies to match each student's individual learning, language, and accessibility needs.

As staff members and administrators make decisions about daily activities, curricular content, and other academic/language development decisions, they should consider the following factors:

- High expectations/standards for literacy and communication
- Training for teachers and students about accessibility within the classroom (i.e. use of AEM, audio description, augmented communication, technological advances)
- Ensuring support for language development and literacy, supporting students' self-esteem and confidence
- Removal of any barriers towards learning in and out of the classroom
- Development of Braille skills/technology training and goals to support students who may have gaps in their skills/knowledge, including developing thinking processes; and increasing communicative and literacy competence.
- Creation of a culture of respect and dignity, recognizing and supporting the unique needs and abilities of each student and staff member.
- Opportunities for both incidental and planned communication
- Access to blind history and B/VI role models, with emphasis on including diverse individuals and experiences representing more than one national origin, color, religion, socioeconomic stratum, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.
- Training for students and staff regarding accessibility for B/VI individuals within different situations (i.e. classes; meetings; extracurricular activities; crisis and emergency situations)
- Audio description services and needs
- Supporting new students with appropriate instruction and supports within their transition plan.

VI. COMMUNICATION, LANGUAGE, AND ACCESSIBILITY FOR DEAFBLIND STUDENTS

Throughout all areas where educational and language development activities are provided, DB students require opportunities to learn and develop their language skills utilizing approaches that are individually designed to match their communication, language, and learning needs. Since each DB student's needs are often unique, a clear understanding of each individual's needs and providing them with an educational environment that is carefully designed to support their acquisition of language and literacy is critical. To achieve this, all staff members, contractors, and/or others working with or around DB students at MSA must provide access to information to the greatest extent possible, allowing for incidental learning in and out of the classroom. This includes ensuring that all of our materials, programs, and instructional activities are accessible, utilizing methods appropriate to the student, including technological supports, material modification, and instructional strategies to match each student's individual learning, language, and accessibility needs.

Factors indicated above for D/HH students and B/VI students also apply to DB students and staff members/administrators must consider each factor carefully in relation to the student's unique needs. Additional factors beyond those already listed that need to be considered are as follows:
- Intervener needs and training
- Scheduling and provision of services and transportation between services on both campuses as needed.
- Incorporation of all accessibility needs in all activities (universal design for learning), including training for students and staff.
- Continued support and training for staff members

- ProTactile and/or Haptics support
- Access to deafblind history and DB role models with emphasis on including diverse individuals and experiences representing more than one national origin, color, religion, socioeconomic stratum, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.

VII. COMMUNICATION, LANGUAGE, AND ACCESSIBILITY FOR D/HH, B/VI, AND DEAFBLIND EMPLOYEES

Employees who are D/HH, B/VI, or DB deserve the same respect and accessibility as all other employees. Support for their language, communication, and accessibility needs are equally important as those provided for students. The same factors identified for students also apply to employees. Administrators and employees must create a workplace environment in which full accessibility is provided in activities, training, and other meetings/gatherings to the greatest extent possible, including consideration for communication, language access, and accessibility in all places where D/HH, B/VI, or DB employees work. Additional emphasis must be placed on public places (i.e. offices, hallways, outdoor spaces) to ensure that D/HH, B/VI, or DB staff are not excluded.

VIII. REPORTING PROCEDURES

Any student or employee who observes situations in which communication and language access was not provided should report the situation immediately to their supervisor. Upon receipt of a report, the supervisor must take steps to investigate the report and take appropriate action. The use of formal reporting forms is not mandatory and nothing in this policy shall prevent any person from reporting situations directly to the MSA Human Resources director or to the MSA Superintendent. Supervisors may consult with the MSA Human Resources department for assistance in investigating and following up with repeated violations of this policy, including possible disciplinary actions.

Cross References:
MSA Policy #442 – Braille and Blind Awareness
MSA Policy #443 – Staff ASL Proficiency