

How has the History of Deaf Education Influenced the Education Black Deaf Received?

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

Glennis Matthews

The Learning Center for the Deaf www.tlcdeaf.org
gmatthews@tlcdeaf.org

Abstract

Glennis Matthews, Superintendent of The Learning Center for the Deaf, reflects on the institution's multifaceted programs and her historic role as the first Black Deaf woman and HBCU graduate to lead a residential Deaf school. She discusses the historical and current barriers Black Deaf individuals face in education, leadership, and representation, particularly in Deaf education. Drawing on powerful statistics and historical references, Matthews critiques systemic inequities and calls for transformative change, including inclusive curricula, leadership development, and Black Deaf Studies. Her message is a passionate call to action to reframe the dominant narratives and create a more equitable future.

Keywords

Black Deaf Education, Deaf History, HBCU, Leadership, Representation, Systemic Racism

Presentation Transcript

[Slide 1]

First of all, I want to tell you who I am. My name is Glennis Matthews. I am the superintendent of the Learning Center for the Deaf. I will tell you more about that a little bit later on.

But you know what? This is my first time coming to Gallaudet. I couldn't have just come to Gallaudet without bragging about my own school and where I'm from.

[Slide 2]

There's a little bit of time for me to talk about the learning center. The learning center is the first nonprofit organization to serve as an educational facility. And we have a total of seven different programs within the Learning Center.

[Slide 3]

Here are some of our programs. The first is our parent-infant program. And this runs from birth to age 3. We go into homes, mentor parents, and they come for play dates at the school. And we provide support for parents with infants who are deaf.

The second program I want to speak about is the Walden Community Services program. And that's a community-based program for family members who can come into the behavioral health initiative and learn about that. And it is open to anyone who has a Deaf member in their family to come and receive services.

We also have an audiology clinic. Very comprehensive. Whether you need a hearing aid battery or whatever it is you need throughout Massachusetts, you're able to come and receive services.

[Slide 4]

The next program that I will speak to is our community ASL services. We provide American Sign Language classes to anyone in the community who would like to come and learn. Whether they are a Deaf person, those classes are led by Deaf people fluent in American Sign Language and leaders in the field.

And we have interpreting services. If people want to be employed and your daughter wants to go to an event or program, we have interpreters there and ready to go with them to interpret in various arenas.

And we are also part of the public school partnership that we call PSP. I will talk a little bit more about that later. Basically, what we do is send teachers of the Deaf throughout the state of Massachusetts to mainstream educational settings where there are Deaf or hard-of-hearing students to address their specific needs.

[Slide 5]

And then our seventh program is the Marie Phillips school. That's where I am. It's a combination of the Marie Phillips school and the Walden school. The Marie Phillips

school is pre-K to 12. They have vocational, AP courses, honors courses, and intensive courses. We provide specialized support for students who have that need.

A second part of the program is the Walden School. It's a nationally recognized residential therapeutic and educational program. A very comprehensive program that provides individualized services, trauma-informed care, and therapy. It's provided in a home-like setting.

[Slide 6]

As far as athletics, I see you. I see you, Reggie. We have with Marie Phillips and the Walden schools combined athletics and academic teams. We have got basketball. We have got volleyball. We have cheerleading, soccer, and the academic bowl. And also the Special Olympics. And actually, this year, we have five teams that were champions. Come on, give it up. That's right. We went to five championships and we won four of those. One of those, we were in second place. But that's a national championship. All right? And Gallaudet, we're coming for you. We are going to win this year. We are going to win this year for the academic bowl.

[Slide 7]

So, that's sort of a summary. And now I would like to talk about the history of Deaf education and how it has influenced the education of Black Deaf children.

When we think about the history of Deaf education, what are the impacts on the education that Black Deaf children receive? Let me ask that again. Because, historically, of course, there is an impact on the Black Deaf community. Where do we receive education?

[Slide 8]

Have any of you read this book? The segregated Georgia school for the Deaf? If you haven't, please do. It is absolutely mind-blowing. You see these students sitting in the front of the classroom at the segregated school for the Deaf in Georgia.

[Slide 9]

And this is one of my favorite pictures out of the whole book. This is my favorite picture. Every time I present, I show this picture. What do you see? What do you see? Give me an adjective. One word. What do you see? I see interaction. I see learning. I see inclusion. Yes? Okay. Accessibility. I see students being involved. All of those. All of those.

When I look at this picture, I will tell you what I see. I see intelligence. And I'm going to tell you why I see intelligence.

As you know, they do all of that in one room. Did you know they were doing all of that in just one classroom? If I went into that room and saw all of those children doing all of those different activities in just one space, they knew that this was the moment for them to take advantage of the opportunity. So, they got together and said Okay, you're going to do PE. You're going to show what math looks like. And you just sit there. And you show what reading looks like. They knew how to pose for this picture. In that one moment, they had one moment in history to have what they do shown.

This is what happens in a Black Deaf classroom. Right? Right? So, when I say what I see is intelligence, it's because they knew how to pose.

[Slide 10]

So, let's talk about this. Let's talk about how Black Deaf education has played out. For example, at the Georgia School for the Deaf, the first Black Deaf person was admitted in 1882. Just entered, was admitted there, and permitted to be on the campus. Didn't say anything about whether they were integrated with white students.

And desegregation at that school didn't end until 1975. I was born in 1975. Okay? So just imagine, I was born back in 1975 and I graduated. I was in the South and lived in Georgia. There was the potential, perhaps, for me to go to another college. That college could have been? Spellman. Hey. I see you girl. That's your alma mater.

So, I could have gone to Spellman College. It was established in 1881. It's an HBCU.

So. I could have gone there, having graduated a long time ago. Hold that thought. Hold that thought.

[Slide 11]

Suppose when I graduated from the Georgia School for the Deaf, I thought no, I'm heading north. I'm done with living in the South. I think I will go to another college. What if I came here to Washington DC? How many of you know where Gallaudet University is? It was established in 1864. Uh-huh.

The first Black Deaf person graduated in 1954. Or was it 1913? There are two schools of thought there: 1954 or 1913. Keep that in mind. We'll talk a little bit about that later. So maybe I could have come here and gone to Gallaudet. If I hadn't gone to Gallaudet, maybe I would have wanted another experience right here in Washington, DC. I could have gone to Howard University, right? Could I have gone to Howard University? A historically Black college and university? Maybe I could have. It was established in 1867. An HBCU right down the street. 15 minutes away. 15 minutes from Gallaudet's campus.

As a Black Deaf woman, would I have had that opportunity?

[Slide 12] Let's see the next slide.

So, let's go back to the question I posed before about Gallaudet and who the first Black Deaf graduate was from Gallaudet and what year they graduated? There are questions surrounding that. Some people say 1954. Who in the audience agrees with that? Who says 1913? Y'all scared and aren't sure. Some don't know. What's the right answer? Stop looking at your neighbor and raise your hand.

Slide 13]

All right. Let's see. Let's see the next slide.

You see that? This was captured from Twitter. But it was actually taken from the National Deaf Life Museum. And if you don't know anything about the National Deaf Life Museum, shame on you. You're right here at Gallaudet, how could you not know? But

this is a true story. It's a true story. I'm going to zoom in on this picture so you can see who we're talking about. People say this was the first Native American student to graduate. That person was actually Black. Okay? Oh, oh. A Black person. Let's see. Let's zoom in. Can you see him? Did you find him?

[Slide 14]

The one over here on this side, on the left side? That's who you think it is? Okay. Got to zoom in to see it. Let's look. There we go. There we go. We have Baba Andrew Foster. That's a dad, right? Andrew Foster. This is the one we know of. And this is the one whom we don't know. The one who has been overlooked in history. Why is that? Why is that? And what does that say about us? His hair would be slicked back to the side. He passed as a Native American. He applied as a Native American, was accepted to the university, and no one knew that he was Black. Took that grease, slicked his hair back. You know the products. He laid the baby hairs down, his edges laid to the side. Nobody knew. Nobody knew. There he is, in 1913, passing as a Native American.

And then we have 1954 with Andrew Foster. We say he's the first because he's the first who could say he was Black out loud. In 1913, this gentleman could not admit that. He was smart. I talked about intelligence. That's intelligence.

[Slide 15]

So, what do we have with our look back at history? The Georgia School for the Deaf was established in 1846. There was a Black student there in 1882. Spellman University was established in 1881. Howard University was established in 1867. Gallaudet University was chartered in 1864. The first known Black person – and we have to agree – the first known Black Deaf person graduated in 1954.

What's really interesting about this is when the Civil War was fought. Look at those years, that period of 1861 to 1865. And then the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863. Look at those dates in history. Think about what they mean. I don't think the ink

was even dry when slaves were like “yeah, we’re getting it”. You want us to fight in the Civil War? Here we go. Here we go.

We did exactly what we needed to do. Just the thought of freedom, and we were headed out. Just the thought of freedom. And freedom was not guaranteed. It was a 50/50 proclamation. It was a 50/50 gamble, right? For us, it was worth the risk. So, going back to Massachusetts, let’s talk about a study that was done. I want to review some statistics with you.

[Slides 16 & 17]

First, by talking about Dr. Kim Meyer. I had the honor of working with Dr. Meyer. The public school partnership was established in 2001. And she served as the director from 2001 to 2022, when she finally retired.

And we served 600-plus Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in 80 different school districts. Those students didn’t come to The Learning Center. We would go serve them and consult with them because they were still our students. They were important. Deaf and hard-of-hearing students are important no matter where they are.

[Slide 18]

You know, these young students really didn’t have the opportunity to make their own decisions. Their families made those decisions for them. There was an unpublished dissertation about what was happening. It was a survey of 177 teachers who had a teaching degree. Okay? A teaching degree. The survey did not specify the kind of teaching degree, but they had a teaching degree.

And I want you to look at the numbers from those 177 participants. Out of 177 participants in the study, 148 had a Deaf education degree. Not bad, right? Not bad. Not bad. 148. 25 of them had a teaching degree. Four of them were currently in a program for Deaf education. A total of 119 of the participants were currently working as teachers of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students. But only four of them had a Deaf education

degree. But all of these 119 teachers were working as teachers of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

[Slide 19]

Now let's get down to the demographics. We know this information. Women dominate the field of education, right? 160 of those participants were female. 12 of them were men. And five of them were nonbinary. Okay? So not bad in terms of numbers.

[Slide 20]

What about their hearing statuses? Now, we already know this information. There is no big surprise here, we already know what it's going to look like. 150 of them were hearing. 20 of them were Deaf. Seven of them were hard of hearing.

[Slide 21] Next slide.

All right. Now race. This is my favorite slide. We already know what the answer is going to be. When you ask about who dominates the NFL, who is in the NBA and when you talk about who is in jail? There are no surprises with these statistics. 150 of these teachers were white. There was one, count it, count it, y'all. One! I see you, I see you! ONE Black person. Just one. We had two Asian people and three who said they had two or more races.

[Slide 22]

So, we thought okay, we're in a race here. Now in terms of ethnicity, non-Hispanic or Latino. And then five Hispanic Latino. Five? Okay. We got a little flavor there. Got a little bit of spice.

[Slide 23] Next.

So, of these 177 participants, remember 148 had a Deaf education degree. Of those 148 who had a Deaf education degree, there were 26 programs they attended and

graduated from. So, from the time that they graduated until they took the survey, seven of those programs closed. Seven.

[Slide 24]

You might be saying, Glennis, what's the story here? Have y'all read this? Have you read this? This is our family. Y'all ready about our family? Come on now. Shame on you if you haven't read this. If you haven't, you need to. This is the most comprehensive and most beautiful gathering of data about our community that's been done in a long time. This is about our family. And what I like is the comparison they used between Black people who are Deaf and Black people who are hearing.

[Slide 25]

And these are the three top graphs I like to share with people in terms of making comparisons. We don't compare Black with white, we're over that. We're done with that. We want to promote a positive environment. So, we're comparing Black Deaf with Black hearing people.

[Slide 26]

The top five occupations for Black Deaf and Black hearing people are shown before you on the slide. If you look at the blue on the left side, that's the Deaf community. On the right side, the yellow color is the hearing community.

The top occupation is janitorial work for the Deaf community. For the Black hearing community, the top occupation is a health aid, health services. Aid, see the word aid? Not doctor. Aid. Health aid.

Second, for the Deaf community is health aid. Second, for the hearing community, truck drivers. For Deaf people, the third is truck driving. For hearing people, it's customer service. Customer service.

[Slide 27]

If they just made things accessible, we could do that occupation too. They just need to make the engagement more accessible. If it were accessible, I could be in customer service. “Ma’am, don’t talk to me like that. I understand your services were cut off.” See, if it were accessible, I could do it! It’s easy! And say, “Wait, wait a minute, no. Let me get my supervisor for you. Please hold.” Then tell my supervisor, “You better tell him!” Make customer service accessible for us. We could do that. Number four. Let’s look at the employment education level. What are the gaps based on our level of education? The top level starts from less than high school to Ph.D. Dr. McCaskill, that’s her up there. Look at the parallel between the two. It’s about a 20% difference. 20 to 30% difference starting from the left in high school to Ph.D. Not bad. I thought the disparity would be much greater. Okay. I’m a little settled knowing what the gap is. But now my favorite part comes next.

[Slide 28]

I love this next part. And you will see why it’s my favorite. How much money do we earn? What’s in our pockets? It’s pretty much neck in neck. What does that tell y’all? What does the world see? That we’re Black. And that’s it. That’s what the world sees. Doesn’t matter if you’re Deaf, hard of hearing, mixed hearing status, doesn’t matter. What they see is that you’re Black, and that’s it.

[Slide 29] Next slide.

Now this is from the same study. We have some quotes and comments from people in the study that was conducted by Dr. Meyers. Take a look at what they said. This is “Eva” who said, “If I went to a school that didn’t offer ASL, I still would have been a teacher”, but not of Deaf students. Sue, a hearing girl, says, “Deaf education has a PR relations issue. Nobody knows it exists.” Wow. Okay.

And then we have Ann. What does Ann say? Somebody in that school cared enough about Deaf education to tell her about it. If they hadn’t mentioned it, she would never have known that Deaf education even existed.

Now, let's talk about responses from Deaf individuals. So, this particular person, Wendy, had a bachelor's degree and couldn't find a job. So, how does that impact people who are Black and Deaf who have a bachelor's degree and couldn't find a job?

And now Mary's comment.

[Slide 30] Next slide.

So, when you look at Massachusetts, you see that all together, we have about six schools or programs for the Deaf. There are a few others. But based on my knowledge, there are about six specific schools or programs for Deaf students as listed here. The Learning Center is listed there. That's me.

[Slide 31] Next slide.

Do you see that? I will give you a moment to read that last bullet point. Do y'all see that? In the whole state, in Deaf education. Two. Where are they? Where are they? Hello? Hello? The Learning Center for the Deaf. All right now. All right. We got them. We got them. You want them, but we've got them. The Learning Center.

You're looking at one. It's funny, but it's not funny. The other Black professional is the principal of a high school, a Black Deaf woman. It's just us two in the whole entire state of Massachusetts. Holding it down.

So, we're going to change the narrative. We're going to change the narrative. But how are we going to do that? We can't just complain and tell the same stories. We have to change those narratives. But how do we do that?

So, let's think about this. What if we had a dream? What if we had these internal trainings inside a school for the Deaf right there? What if we trained leaders at the school? Imagine what that would look like. What would it look like? What would that narrative be? What if we trained them at an HBCU? Come on. I'm going to pause for a moment and let you look at that one. Teacher programs at those institutions are set up for us. What if we were there? What would that look like? What would our narrative be like now? Y'all, let me have a seat. I'm done now. I'm done. Y'all got water? I'm about the faint. Somebody help me. Seriously. Seriously. Come on now. What if? What if they taught Black Deaf studies in Deaf education as part of the curriculum? Why do we have to go out and find out about it in social circles? Why isn't it taught in school? What if Black Deaf studies were taught as part of the curriculum? Those are the master narratives that we should be sharing right now.

You know, I'm not here to insult narratives of the past. I would never do that. But that concept of "Deaf can" unsettles me. I don't like to share what I *can* do. I like to share what I *did*. If I say Oh, I could, it's a possibility, and then I don't finish it, that's a problem. I mean, life happens. Right? But we want to talk about what Black people did. So that's what I am sharing.

[Slide 33]

Let me tell you what I did. When I was growing up, and I was in a Black, I mean Blackity Black, Black neighborhood. Went to a Black elementary school. My junior high school was Black. I know you call them middle schools now. Then I went to high school, and it was Black. And then to two different HBCUs. And now I'm back. Now I'm back. And I'm writing my dissertation, and I'm humbled, I'm the first Black Deaf woman to become a superintendent of a residential school for Deaf children. Of a school for Deaf children. The first. The first HBCU graduate to become a superintendent. The first, you know, out of Black people, hearing people, male, or female, I'm the first. I did it.

So that's why you can't tell me we can't change the narrative. Don't tell me that we can't change the narrative. We can. We can.

[Slide 34]

And that's it, y'all. That's it. Thank you for listening so much.

PUBLICATION TEAM

Patrick Boudreault, Executive Editor
Rezenet Moges-Riedel, Co-Editor
Lissa Ramirez-Stapleton, Co-Editor
Megan Konstandtinidis, Assistant Editor
Brenna Smith, Assistant Editor

Carolyn McCaskill, CBDS Director
Lindsay Dunn, CBDS Scholar Fellow
Evon Black, CBDS Associate Director
Kristina McKinnie, CBDS Assistant

Theodore Doresette III, Lead Videographer
Cem Barutcu, Videographer
Amelia Palmer, Videographer
JC Smith, Videographer
Blue20 LLC, Editing and Transcript

PUBLICATION FUNDING

This symposium proceeding was made possible with generous financial support from Sorenson Communications and Gallaudet University; The Office of the Provost, and Gesture Literacy Knowledge Studio.