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Letters to the Editor Monday, 01.18.10

Editorials

Braille is essential for blind students

Questions have arisen from the blind, medical professionals and instructors of the visually impaired in our community concerning a New York Times Magazine article Listening to Braille.

As president and CEO of the largest and oldest private agency serving the blind in Florida and as one of this nation's handful of totally blind CEOs, I am passionate about the dramatic decline in the number of Braille users. Unfortunately, the article did not differentiate between individuals deprived of their eyesight at birth versus individuals who lose their eyesight later in life.

Yes, it is difficult for older adults who become blind to be fluent readers of Braille, but every one of these individuals should have the ability to recognize Braille labels. In contrast, individuals who were born blind absolutely need to be able to read just like their sighted peers, and the only way this is possible is through Braille.

In order to receive a standard diploma a schoolchild who is blind in Florida is required to take FCAT either in print text or Braille. Those children not proficient in Braille will never receive a standard diploma; therefore they will not be able to pursue higher education. In contrast, one student who is a client at Miami Lighthouse was able to achieve a near-perfect score when she took the Braille version of the FCAT exam and is now applying to several universities with the goal of becoming an attorney.

Braille is literacy. Why should the blind be denied the right to read? Auditory technology is not a substitute. Would we tell sighted persons they can only get information from a radio or an auditory piece of technology and no longer can read print material? That is what we are telling the blind when Braille is deemphasized and technology is thought to be a replacement. It is not.

I frequently am asked by one of our students to write a reference letter, and sometimes they even send me a draft. When I open the e-mail attachment and read it through my computer using screen-reading software, I can immediately tell whether they learned Braille as a child. Those who didn't misspell words and cannot punctuate. Our students need to be both Braille and technologically literate, and that is what Miami Lighthouse for the Blind does in collaboration with Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

Without Braille, a blind student will no longer be able to achieve what his or her sighted peer is able to achieve. No longer will there be blind attorneys or other professionals in areas where the blind have been able to excel because of their combined Braille and technological literacy.

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