

## Comments for SB 444

My name is Robin Olson and I am writing in support of SB 444. Speaking from personal and professional experience, I must emphasize the importance of early language acquisition and immediate intervention when language milestones are not met. In the early 1980's I began working with Deaf and Hard of Hearing college students and adults as an ASL/English interpreter, tutor, and career counselor/job developer. I was struck with how many of the adults and students, while bright, capable citizens, struggled with English and with American Sign Language, as well. Limitations in language ability translated into limitations in employment opportunities and limitations in courses of study.

As I moved into teaching Deaf and Hard of Hearing high school students in public school settings and at the residential school, I again witnessed the challenges students had trying to access the general education curriculum and become fluent in a second language without having a solid foundation in a first language. Those students who excelled academically, in both the public school setting and the residential school, had strong first language foundations and were ready to tackle academic content.

Thinking that early language exposure was the key to Deaf and Hard of Hearing children achieving well academically, I went back to school and added an endorsement in Early Childhood Education. As a highly qualified Early Childhood Teacher, I constantly encounter children coming into the early childhood environment having varying language abilities. Some students come in with virtually no language, others come in with a foundation in English but no American Sign Language, and still others come in with intact American Sign Language and are ready to begin acquiring English. Those students who come in with a language base—be it American Sign Language or English—acquire the second language quickly and can access the essential Early Childhood concepts that lay the foundation for academic success. Having a system in place to monitor linguistic milestones in all Deaf and Hard of Hearing children from birth on, will allow any language delays to be caught quickly and interventions to be developed and implemented. This will raise the likelihood of young Deaf and Hard of Hearing children developing the strong language foundation needed for academic achievement which will lead to expanded post-secondary and career options down the road.

On a personal note, I am the mother of a young Hard of Hearing adult. My daughter passed the newborn screen at birth. Fortunately, her father and I used American Sign Language and English in the home from day one. When she was diagnosed with a severe hearing loss at age 3, she did not have conceptual weaknesses or delays. I credit this to the early exposure to accessible language she had from birth onward. Early access to a full language naturally develops the language center in the brain. Once those linguistic structures are in place, acquiring an additional language is easier because the brain knows how language functions. Without early experiences with accessible language, the brain does not have the structures in place which are needed to access academic concepts. This fact was brought home to me when my daughter was in second grade and brought home an English paper with a grade of F. The next week she brought home an English paper with an A. I asked her how she went from an F to an A. She responded, "Well mom, now I know the English rule."

Thank you for taking my comments into consideration. And thank you for your support of early language monitoring for all Deaf and Hard of Hearing children from birth through age 8. You will make a positive difference in the future of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Kansans by passing SB 444.