

3-4-2016

Dear Chair Abrams and Members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is James Clark and I am writing to request your support for SB #444.

I am a certified Teacher of the Deaf at Southeast High School in Wichita, Kansas and have taught in the Wichita School district for almost 9 years now. I previously taught American Sign Language and Deaf Studies at the University of California, San Diego and also Cowley College here in Wichita, KS. I am Deaf, myself, due to a bout with spinal meningitis months before my 6th birthday and this left me completely deaf in both ears. I have been Deaf now for nearly 43 years and received my education in a variety of settings; a regular school, a mainstreamed school, a deaf school (Kansas School for the Deaf), a university for the deaf (Gallaudet) and a hearing university (Lamar) and in the process have acquired a Bachelor's Degree in English and a Master's in Deaf Education. I have personally and professionally seen the impact a lack of language acquisition has on deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) children and the effect it has on their future. Language deprivation in DHH children may surprise many but it's nothing new to those of us who are DHH and/or work in a DHH-related field. It's a "broken record" of sorts, one that we have heard over and over and over again. We've come to a point where we have to say "enough is enough" and work together to figure out a solution to this problem. I can honestly say that there is nothing more imperative to the future of DHH children than to address this issue head on and offer a remedy, via periodic assessments, that will help ensure DHH children acquire language at a rate equal to that of their hearing peers so that they enter their chosen school system Kindergarten-ready. I strongly believe that SB #444 will go a long way to alleviate many of these concerns.

More often than not, deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) children enter the school system with little or no language and this puts them at a disadvantage from the get-go. By this time, they'd have missed 3 to 5 years of vital language acquisition years that they can never get back. This puts the burden on educators to try and get the child caught up and this is often an impossible task when you consider that the most important language acquisition ages are from 0 to 3. Add to the fact that most children switch from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" at about the 3rd or 4th grade and if a DHH child is not ready language-wise by then, they'll forever struggle to progress at the same rate as their peers. It's not surprising when many statistics will tell you that the education levels of a majority of DHH people are at the 3rd or 4th grade level. It's also not surprising to see that many of these same people become lifelong dependents on Federal and State governments for financial help via Social Security Income, Social Security Disability Insurance, Vocational Rehabilitation and other means. Children with a hearing loss require explicit exposure to language whether it's via American Sign Language (ASL), some variant of an English signing system (SEE, Cued, PSE, etc) or orally with auditorial aids (hearing aid, cochlear implants). Which method of language delivery parents choose is a parental right but it is our hope that whatever it is they ultimately choose, that they have the support and resources they need to help their child progress and meet the necessary language acquisition milestones so that they are kindergarten-ready. SB #444 can help with this.

Now, why does this happen? Because about 90-95 percent of DHH children are born to hearing parents and only roughly 20-25 percent of those same parents actually make any effort to expose their children to language whether it be American Sign Language, an English sign system such as SEE, PSE, etc. or speech (if the child has a Cochlear Implant or other hearing aid). Many parents just resort to using a few "home signs" (made up signs), gestures or using nothing at all. This is not to say that the 5-10 percent of DHH children born to DHH parents are except from the rule. They, too, are guilty of some of the same problems we see with hearing parents. I have personally, seen this over and over again and it is one of my biggest frustrations as an educator to see this happen year after year after year. Changing the direction this has been going requires some kind of oversight, some way we can monitor a child's progress throughout the critical language development years. The most successful DHH children are often products of a strong support system of parents, family members, teachers, speech language pathologists, etc. who are all on the same page when it comes to that child's language development. It does, indeed, take a village to raise a DHH child. Parents have the largest part of the responsibility for this but we need to have the resources and personnel available to assess this progress and be able to render advice and support when needed. That's my hope for SB #444.

SB#444 will give the state and its appointed group of deaf and hard of hearing-related experts a way to monitor and assess the language development of all DHH children across the state. The most basic intention of this bill is to ensure that DHH children acquire language at the same rate as their hearing peers, from birth to age 8, so that they are able to begin and continue their schooling on equal footing with their hearing peers. It's as simple as that.

One thing I want to stress, and I cannot stress this enough, is that SB #444 is NOT about which language delivery system is best. It is NOT about forcing a parent, a school system or whatever to use one specific modality like American Sign Language (ASL). Some proponents will tell you that that's exactly what this bill is trying to do. They say it's heavily biased towards ASL. That the Deaf community is trying to take control and force everyone to use ASL. They're WRONG. It IS the parent's RIGHT to choose which system they want to use. It is a very difficult and personal decision to make and we respect that. It is our hope that parents are presented with ALL the possible options available to them and that, once they choose a modality, they are offered guidance and the resources and help they need so that they can successfully navigate the critical language development years and have a means to assess and measure their child's progress. Again, it's as simple as that.

Thank you for your consideration of SB #444. I believe this bill will be an important and positive step in the right direction and I strongly believe it will lead to, not only improved academic success, but bright, productive futures for all DHH children in the State of Kansas.

Respectfully,

James S. Clark, M.S.

Teacher of the Deaf/HH

Wichita High School Southeast