

**Testimony of Sharon Knewton on HB2621  
16 February 2022**

A child deaf from birth, especially one born into a hearing family, suffers from language deprivation in their early years. The child misses out on conversations and explanations happening all around him. We call it language deprivation, rather than information deprivation, because more importantly than the delay of accessing knowledge, is the deleterious effect of the loss of brain training that hearing children receive as they naturally and effortlessly acquire language.

The Kansas School for the Deaf (KSD) does not just teach a mode of communication, but imparts a language, a full and rich language, to deaf and hard of hearing children. Teachers of the deaf are trained and experienced in helping children with early childhood language deprivation to acquire language and develop to the child's full potential. KSD is a wonderful environment with happy children spending the time needed to naturally acquire language as they see ASL modeled by adult-to-adult, adult-to-child, and child-to-child interactions. My child's favorite time at KSD is ASL story time. We have teachers who really bring a story to life! KSD is a unique environment, that cannot be replicated in our hearing schools, because only at KSD do that many ASL fluent adults and children come together to form a community.

At KSD my child gained a language that she can share with family and friends, teachers and classmates. My child's language is American Sign Language.

At KSD it is our goal for each child to reach their full individual potential. Part of that process is striving for bilingualism in ASL and English. Part of this is teaching and allowing a child to reach their full potential in different forms of each language. For English this includes hearing, speaking, reading and writing. Children at KSD fill the full spectrum of each facet of English as an individual child's unique abilities are not stagnant.

Should a child gain access to hearing, so that the child has access to not only American Sign Language, but also gains the ability to hear spoken English as a means of instruction, this does not negate the benefits of American Sign Language for personal development, for education, for self-expression, and as a bridge to English language acquisition. This is currently recognized by KSD as deaf and hard of hearing children who gain access to hearing by medical intervention or amplification are allowed to continue attending KSD. This legislation, HB 2621, seeks to recognize that education in American Sign Language continues to benefit children who gain access to hearing English through any means, and allow the same consideration in attendance at Kansas School for the Deaf, no matter the manner in which access to hearing is gained.

In hearing schools our children study and celebrate language. We teach grammar and spelling, expression through spoken and written English, and even language art forms of drama and poetry. We teach self-expression because we know that this develops critical thinking and problem solving skills. We do not teach our children to receive language at the detriment of being able to express themselves with language. This legislation is before us because there is a child whose only expressive language is ASL.

Her brain path did not find a way to hearing in early childhood. She was deaf, then hard of hearing, and now through changes in her nerve pathway, hearing. But her brain has not found a path to speech, nor to deciphering symbols for written words. Considering only a child's current ability to hear, rather than her ability to participate in language, does not provide an appropriate education. Capping a child's vocabulary and grammar at age ten, does not provide an appropriate education.

Current State statute does not take into account the fluidity of hearing that is now possible with modern medicine and technology. Kansas state statute establishes the Kansas School for the Deaf to educate deaf children. The statute does not specify how to proceed with children who were deaf who later gain access to hearing. It is, however, clearly stated in the KSD attendance policy that a hearing child can be denied attendance and this has been the practice for many years.

My child was transferred in November 2021, to the elementary school up the street from KSD. An ASL interpreter and later a para who knows some sign were hired to assist her. Rather than being in a class with a teacher trained to teach ASL, and immersed in the ASL language rich environment at KSD with teachers, staff, and students modeling ASL throughout the day, my child is restricted to signing to a single adult through whom she must communicate with her teacher, classmates, librarian, school secretary, art teacher, lunch room, PE class, recess playmates, etc. My child has not had an ASL language art or vocabulary lesson since November. (Please see the letter sent by the Olathe school district.) The development of my child's expressive development is in the hands of someone who "knows some sign", but is not a trained teacher.

For my child's individual education, excluding her from an ASL language rich environment, is not an appropriate plan. Members of her KSD IEP team have pointed this out. For no other child in Kansas do we educate only receptively, without consideration for self-expression. I believe that the fine people of Kansas who fund the Kansas School for the Deaf do so with the intent of helping children and did not intend to exclude my child.

I am simply asking that the Kansas legislature consider updating statute to reflect today's reality.

I will address concerns about HB2621 during my testimony and look forward to the conversation.

Thank you

Sharon Knewton