

February 3, 2021

Maryland House of Delegates
House Office Building
6 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Delegates:

I am writing to express my support for HB651, the Educational Interpreters Certification Requirements Bill. I am an educational audiologist with Calvert County Public Schools and have led the Deaf & Hard of Hearing Services for 23 years. My experience working with our Deaf & Hard of Hearing students as well as participating in the Maryland State Steering Committee for Deaf & Hard of Hearing Students for a number of years has given me a local and a statewide perspective on the interpreting needs within our educational system. This outlook leads me to strongly favor the establishment of certification requirements for educational interpreters under the Maryland State Department of Education.

Deaf and hard of hearing students are a heterogeneous group, with varied educational and communication needs. These needs are not driven by hearing test results and are as varied as the number of students within the school system. While many of our students thrive with the provision of listening technology and auditory/visual accommodations, some require the provision of communication through a visual language (American Sign Language) or a visual communication system (English presented through Cued Speech or oral interpreters). A large majority of students requiring ASL enter school with significant deficits in their first language, due to their inability to adequately access spoken English and the lack of ASL competence within their home environment. This language challenge places the school-based sign language interpreter in the unique position of being a primary language model as well as the means of communication for a student. The student frequently depends on their interpreter as both the point of access to learning as well as their access to language development. In contrast to sign interpreters in other settings, the educational interpreter must transition smoothly and constantly between these roles, as well as take on the responsibility of being a flexible and skilled member of an educational team. This varied skillset is specific to the educational environment and is not reflected in the background of most traditional interpreters.

In my experience, the skill range of those hired as educational interpreters is quite broad, ranging from those with only basic knowledge of ASL vocabulary to those who are both fluent signers and skilled interpreters. This range is currently ill-defined due to the lack of certification requirements. Educational interpreters do not consistently have the signing proficiency required to provide clear communication and a rich language model. Schools often struggle to

adequately assess the skill set of a sign language interpreter applicant, and there is currently no way to recognize through higher pay those interpreters who have a higher level of skill. When skills need to be developed, continuing education support through provision of classes or professional leave has been sparse, leaving educational interpreters to search on their own for growth opportunities without expectation for compensation. The use of traditional interpreters from interpreter agencies does not resolve this problem due to the significant difference in the roles and responsibilities of an educational interpreter. The certification of Maryland educational interpreters will serve to define and improve skills in order to improve students' access to learning and language.

The concurrent effort to license sign language interpreters in the state of Maryland (LR1068 – Maryland Sign Language Interpreter Act) is commendable and needed but is not the appropriate vehicle for educational interpreters. The additional skill set required of educational interpreters as described above argues strongly for educational interpreter certification and training under the purview of the Maryland State Department of Education.

Thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts in support of our educational interpreters through the proposed HB651 legislation.

Sincerely,

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