



MARYLAND
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE

February 26, 2026

Senate Bill 502
Language Acquisition Tracking Program for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children -
Establishment
Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Position: Favorable

The Maryland Catholic Conference (MCC) is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals, and numerous charities combine to form our state's second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government.

Senate Bill 502 establishes the Language Acquisition Tracking Program for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children in the State Department of Education to ensure that eligible children develop language skills at the same rate and to the same extent as their peers; establishing a State Coordinator of Language Acquisition for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children to coordinate the Program and create a parent and guardian resource to help parents and guardians of deaf or hard of hearing children track a child's language acquisition progress

Early language acquisition is foundational to healthy brain development. During the first five years of life, neural pathways responsible for communication, learning, and social interaction are rapidly forming.¹ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention emphasize that meeting language milestones is a critical indicator of overall child development. When children experience delays in early language exposure, it can affect literacy, academic performance, and social-emotional growth.

For deaf and hard of hearing children in particular, consistent and fully accessible language exposure is essential. Research supported by the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders shows that without early access to signed language, spoken language supports, or both, children are at risk of language deprivation, which can have long-term

¹ <https://www.firstthingsfirst.org/early-childhood-matters/brain-development/#:~:text=How%20Brain%20Connections%20Are%20Built,connections%20that%20last%20a%20lifeti me.>

developmental consequences.² Studies funded by the National Institutes of Health further demonstrate that early and consistent language access strengthens cognitive development, executive functioning, and long-term academic outcomes.

This legislation creates a structured and proactive approach to prevent children from falling behind. It establishes a Language Acquisition Tracking Program within the State Department of Education to ensure that eligible children are assessed within six months of diagnosis and every six months thereafter. A standardized language assessment tool will measure progress in signed language, spoken language, or both—based on the informed choice of the child’s parent or guardian. By requiring regular assessments conducted by qualified teachers or specialists, the program ensures that developmental benchmarks are consistently monitored and that any delays are identified early. Importantly, the program is provided at no cost to families, removing financial barriers that could otherwise prevent timely evaluation and intervention. The legislation also establishes a State Coordinator of Language Acquisition and an Advisory Council to support coordination, accountability, and parent resources. Empowering families with tools to track their child’s progress strengthens collaboration between educators, specialists, and parents.

Consistency in monitoring is key. When language delays are identified early, targeted interventions can be implemented before gaps widen and become more difficult to remediate. Without such safeguards, children risk long-term educational setbacks and social isolation. No child should miss critical developmental milestones because of a disability or lack of adequate support. This legislation ensures that deaf and hard of hearing children receive the structured, equitable access to language they need to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

For these reasons, the Maryland Catholic Conference asks for a favorable report on **SB 502**.

Thank you for your consideration.

² <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5469702/>