

Dear Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is David Alianiello, and I am submitting this written testimony as a concerned educator who has spent over 15 years in the service of children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (DHH). Having worked in two major public-school systems in the state of Maryland as an educator of deaf/hard of hearing children, I understand the goal of establishing a Language Acquisition Tracking Program to help DHH children develop age-appropriate language skills.

However, I am writing to formally express my opposition to **SB 502 / HB 879**, the proposed "LEAD-K" bill. While the goal of ensuring language proficiency for children who are DHH is vital, the current draft of this bill is overly cumbersome and redundant. It creates unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles that complicate existing educational frameworks rather than enhancing them. I am a deaf person myself with three children so I understand the importance of language development in children. However, as an educator, I can also see how this will place another layer of bureaucracy on families who are already overwhelmed when navigating their child's hearing loss. I work with infants and toddlers and we already have a robust infants and toddlers process in the state of Maryland that monitors children's language development. This well meaning bill will have an unintentional impact of making it harder than it already is for families. We already have processes in place to ensure that children have what they need to make the gains for language acquisition.

My specific concerns include:

1. Excessive Age Range and Administrative Confusion

The bill defines an eligible child as being under the age of 9. Most states implementing LEAD-K cap the age at 5. Extending this to age 9 "muddies the waters" with existing elementary school language tracking (e.g., DIBELS, MAP Testing). Furthermore, it creates significant confusion for families transitioning from **IDEA Part C** (Infants and Toddlers) to **Part B** (School-Age), as the requirements for Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSP) and Individualized Education Programs (IEP) are governed by different federal standards.

2. Excessive Authority of the Advisory Council

The bill mandates a specific "Language Assessment Tool" approved by an Advisory Council. Empowering a council with competing agendas to mandate a single tool restricts a school system's ability to determine what is best for an individual child. Decisions regarding a child's assessment should remain with the educators and specialists who work with them daily. Additionally, forcing an MSDE employee to consult with an external council—some members of whom may lack professional expertise in school system operations—will only lead to inefficiencies.

If LEAD-K bill passes, at the very least, it should not have this Advisory Council included.

3. Restriction of Parental Choice and Communication Modalities

Requires parents to choose between signed or spoken language acquisition assessments. This is far too restrictive. Young children are often exposed to multiple modalities simultaneously including hearing aids, cochlear implants, and various forms of visual communication. Forcing parents to "select" a track puts undue pressure on them during an already overwhelming journey. We should prioritize flexibility and parental choice as the child's needs evolve. In the beginning, a child's communication needs are not static. A family might start with a heavy emphasis on sign language and transition toward spoken language as a child has success with a cochlear implant—or vice versa. This bill's requirement for a formal "selection" process creates a bureaucratic barrier to the natural, fluid adjustments families make based on their child's progress.

4. Redundant and Infeasible Assessment Cycles

Mandates assessments every 6 months from birth to age 9. This is redundant and places an unmanageable burden on school systems, not to mention the children themselves.

- **IFSPs** already require 6-month reviews.
- **IEPs** are updated annually with quarterly progress reports as required by federal law (IDEA). Mandating a separate 6-month tracking cycle for older children ignores the reality of individual development and the comprehensive "whole child" plans that are already in place.

I strongly support the goal of having our Deaf/Hard of Hearing children progress appropriately with their language as I have dedicated my career to supporting the growth of Deaf/Hard of Hearing students from birth to the age of 21; however, the way this bill is written is not an effective nor appropriate way to accomplish this. I strongly urge you to oppose **SB 502 / HB 879**.

Thank you,

David Alianiello