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Education

'Small but loud': Deaf community pushes back against proposal to cut ASL professionals in Anchorage School District budget

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Eighth grade deaf students Jorryn Freeman, left, and Eli Jackson receive sewing instruction through an American Sign Language interpreter during a family and consumer science class on Wednesday, Feb. 5, at Clark Middle School. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

Teachers, administrators, parents and students at the Alaska School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, or AKSDHH, say that the Anchorage School District's proposed budget cuts could have a dire impact on their small yet essential program.

To reconcile a \$111 million structural deficit after nearly a decade in which state education funding has not kept up with inflation, the school district on Jan. 31 proposed massive cuts that would eliminate roughly 300 teaching positions and dozens of school programs throughout the district. Anchorage school officials say deep cuts are unavoidable without an increase in state funding for public schools, and are pressing legislators and the governor to approve a permanent change this year.

While the potential impacts to the Anchorage School District are widespread, the most vocal group at a Feb. 4 school board meeting were those speaking through American Sign Language, or ASL, interpreters.

The school currently serves 29 deaf and hard-of-hearing children from preschool through 12th grade from across the state with a 25-person staff fluent in American Sign Language. It stands to lose two full-time, ASL-fluent staff positions in the proposed budget cuts, plus an administrative assistant, and a vacant position for a paraprofessional. Those positions are filled by the school's longtime counselor, Courtney Westmann, and its intervention coach, Byron Jensen.

The loss of Westmann and Jensen's positions could mean delayed or denied access for deaf students seeking support in crisis situations, more than a dozen staff and parents said in testimony at a Feb. 4 Anchorage School Board meeting.

“When we lose those positions, we lose fluent ASL professionals,” said the district’s assistant director for special education, Clara Baldwin, through an interpreter. Baldwin oversees the school, which is primarily housed between Russian Jack Elementary, Clark Middle School and Bettie Davis East High School.



Anchorage School District’s Clara Baldwin, an assistant director for special education, signs with a deaf student during lunch on Wednesday, Feb. 5, at Clark. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

Ethical standards bar ASL educational interpreters from interpreting for mental health professionals, staff said. Instead, in the absence of ASL-fluent mental health professionals, the school would have to rely on contracted interpreters on an as-needed basis. But needs arise suddenly, staff said.

“Our students should not have to wait for an ASL interpreter to be arranged so they can interact with non-ASL-fluent district personnel,” Baldwin said.

Westmann — a graduate of the Alaska School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and its counselor of 15 years — said that it's essential to have a counselor who is fluent in the linguistic nuances of ASL, but also understands the needs of the Deaf and hard of hearing.



Paraprofessional Nathan King helps deaf students with a project during an art class. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

“Every student has a different signing ability, and I’ve been able to adapt to match their level, allowing me to interact with them effectively,” Westmann testified Feb. 4.

Students at the school have access to their core subjects directly delivered from ASL fluent staff, but they are able to take general education classes with the help of educational interpreters and other support staff as they wish, according to Baldwin.

Westmann said that she understands the educational challenges of learning with an interpreter. She lived them.

“It was a struggle for me, and having that experience enables me to better support our deaf and hard of hearing students on how to use interpreting services, how to advocate for themselves and how to learn in this educational environment,” she said.

Beyond providing access to direct, rather than facilitated, communication, staff said that deaf professionals serve as essential role models for kids growing up in a hearing-dominated world.

“Representation matters,” AKSDHH teacher Leah Lyons said Feb. 4, through an interpreter. “And having someone in a position of authority who shares a cultural and linguistic background can help students feel understood and validated.”

Sixth grader Pepper Draper testified that the school has helped her “grow up.”

“I’m able to be a part of Deaf culture and work on my Deaf identity, and I very much cherish my school and the program,” she signed.

Ninety percent of deaf babies are born to hearing parents, according to [the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders](#). That means that the vast majority experience language deprivation, or limited access to their language at home.

“They’re possibly not getting that language acquisition until they’re 5 or 6, when they come to school,” Jensen said through an interpreter during lunch at Clark Middle School this past week. The result, he said, creates a greater need for a position like his, which was added to the school three years ago. “That has a huge impact on their academic performance, their behavior and their mental health.”



Educational interpreter Janelle Caspersen signs for deaf students during an art class. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

At Clark Middle School last Wednesday afternoon, seven deaf and hard of hearing students finished up lunch, and headed to their daily elective in a combined class with hearing peers.

In one classroom, art teacher Heather Doncaster led a group in creating their own color wheels. Beside her, AKSDHH educational interpreter Janelle Casperson stood signing Doncaster's instructions to a table of students.

In the hallway outside the classroom, Jensen signed with a student he'd pulled aside for a "cool-off period" after he'd been disruptive in class. Later, the student rejoined the class and got to work on his color wheel.



Intervention coach Byron Jensen works with deaf students in the Anchorage School District. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

“It’s not like our students don’t have behavior problems,” said Baldwin, as she watched Jensen do his job last Wednesday. “It’s middle school. But when it happens, we deal with it.”

According to district superintendent Jharrett Bryantt, the district’s proposed budget doesn’t plan to cut staff members, but to reshuffle them. The 300 slashed teaching positions strategically account for already-vacant positions, and educators who are retiring or leaving the district.

“What you’ll see for every single school is that there are reductions in the number of teachers assigned to those buildings,” Bryantt said in an interview. “What this budget would do is essentially reassign those staff members from building A to building B.”

It's unclear how that plan reconciles with a specialized program like AKSDHH, where Westmann and Jensen's expertise can't easily be transferred to another school.

Fine-tuning specific circumstances like theirs will be determined by school board members in the coming weeks, while lawmakers and the Dunleavy administration negotiate in Juneau. The school board will vote on the budget Feb. 25.

"Really, the goal here is to not remove people, but really to buy ourselves time. One, for the board to process community input so they can make adjustments," Bryantt said. "But, bigger picture, while we consider what could happen in Juneau that could make all of these conversations about individual positions irrelevant, because we'll have an opportunity to rebuild our workforce ... and that is my hope."

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