



THE STATE
of ALASKA
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

Department of Health

SENIOR AND DISABILITY SERVICES
Governor's Council on Disabilities
and Special Education

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April 7, 2025

Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson
State Capitol Building, Room30
Juneau, AK 99801

Re: SB 8 – An Act Relating to Public School Students Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Senator Gray-Jackson,

The Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education (the Council) fills a variety of federal and state roles, including serving as the State Council on Developmental Disabilities (SCDD) under the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act, the Interagency Coordinating Council for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities (ICC), and the Special Education Advisory Panel (SEAP) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. As the state DD Council, ICC, and SEAP, the Council works with Senior and Disabilities Services and the Department of Education and Early Development to ensure people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and their families receive the services and supports that they need, as well as participate in the planning and design of those services.

Given Alaska's rural nature, children who are Deaf or hard of hearing are not always provided access to American Sign Language (ASL). Often children who are hard of hearing are placed together with hearing children and only given the opportunity to learn English, when ASL may provide them a better opportunity to acquire language. As they age, they often have a language deficit due to not being provided the proper opportunities as a child.

Deaf and hard of hearing children are born with the same ability to acquire language as any other children and deserve the same opportunities to do so. They have the capacity to be educated, graduate high school, obtain further education, and to pursue a career.

To that end, all families of Deaf or hard of hearing children should have access to appropriate early intervention and family educational services, comprehensive information, and access to state resources to help their deaf children reach their full potential. This includes access to, and assessment by, qualified professionals proficient in developing the child's acquisition of language throughout their early intervention and school years.

Deaf and hard of hearing children should be able to acquire both English and American Sign Language (a natural visual language) simultaneously with the support of intervention services prior to entering school and reinforced within the school system. Exposure to all information, specialized personnel, school programs, social activities, and extra-curricular activities will allow deaf and hard of hearing children to fully access their education and society. This exposure should be experienced in settings utilizing a critical mass of language peers to ensure age-appropriate development of learning, emotional and social skills, and should provide access to deaf adult role models to help internalize their self-worth and visualize their potential.

The Council strongly supports the passage of the Senate Bill 8, An Act Relating to Public School Students Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing Children.

Sincerely,



Jena Crafton
Chair, GCDSE



Catilin Poindexter
GCDSE Legislative Committee Chair