Ensuring Language Readiness for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children

Helping parents of deaf and hard of hearing children assess their child’s needs before kindergarten.

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n Massachusetts, many deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) children arrive in kindergarten with far less exposure to and understanding of language than their peers. This occurs as a direct result of language deprivation in these children between the ages of zero and five. An Act to ensure language readiness in deaf and hard of hearing children entering kindergarten seeks to remedy this by requiring the Department of Education (DOE), in conjunction with the Department of Public Health (DPH), to select language developmental milestones for DHH children, and to create resources detailing them that are easily accessible to parents. These resources will assist parents with monitoring the language development of their child from birth to age five, whether they are choosing to teach them spoken English, ASL or both. In addition, the DOE and DPH will provide resources to educators relative to how to assess language and literacy development in DHH children, both in spoken English and ASL. A task force on kindergarten readiness will be established to assist with developing resources described above.

■ The Bill
S.305/H.3550: An Act to ensure language readiness in deaf and hard of hearing children entering kindergarten

■ Elevator Speech
Hello! Our names are Rachel Lederer and Gabriel Brainson. We’ve come to you today as constituents who care deeply about ensuring equal opportunity for all of Massachusetts’ children, regardless of background. We know that early education is critical and has lifelong consequences for a child. We also believe that language is a human right, a tool that one cannot navigate our world without, and that all children should have access to it.

Massachusetts’ deaf and hard of hearing children are being left behind. 59-75% test in the warning or failing categories on statewide tests each year. This disparity is directly traceable to language deprivation that many deaf children face before they reach kindergarten. Over 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents, who have to make decisions about how to communicate with their child. Because of a lack of education and resources, parents often struggle with doing this, and as a result,
many deaf children reach kindergarten with little to no intact language. Of these children, the majority who are being left behind are those of lower socioeconomic status, minority, and immigrant families.

S.305, An Act ensuring language readiness in deaf and hard of hearing children entering kindergarten, is part of a national campaign to ensure access to language and language acquisition for all of America’s children. It establishes a volunteer task-force which will compile language acquisition milestones for deaf children, whether the language of instruction be American Sign Language, English, or both. These resources will be readily available to both parents and educators and help guide them as they work together to make important choices and ensure language acquisition for their child.

We believe this is an urgent issue which needs to be addressed as soon as possible. Will you support this bill, call for a hearing soon, and vote it out fast and favorably?

Op-Ed

Gabriel

“Equal Access to Education Exists: Fact or Fiction?”

Every child born in the United States is supposed to be screened at birth for hearing loss. According to the National Institute of Health, one baby in 1,000 of those screened will turn out to have moderate, severe, or profound hearing loss that, if not promptly and properly treated, can delay their ability to learn verbal and auditory communication skills. In the first five years of a child’s life, the introduction of any language is critical during this phase of cognitive development if we want to prevent permanent language deprivation.

While newborn screening is an attempt to mitigate language deprivation, it is only half the battle. Standardized test scores in Massachusetts place 59-75% of deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) children in the “Failing” and “Needs Improvement” categories across all grade levels. These scores are a direct result of language deprivation, implying that we aren’t doing enough for these children. 90% of DHH children are born to parents that can hear, parents who are commonly unaware as to the types of immediate services their child needs. Based on the above test scores, schools in Massachusetts are also clearly ill-equipped to monitor and prevent language deprivation—thereby, setting these children up to fail.

This makes me, a 22-year old Deaf student, very angry. As a country, we believe everyone is entitled to an education regardless of race, religion or creed. As such, shouldn’t every child receive an equal chance at a quality education regardless of any disability? The answer: yes they should, and the Act to Ensure Language Readiness in Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children Entering Kindergarten, will do just that.

A part of the national LEAD-K coalition (Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf Kids), this bill will establish a task force whose sole mission will be to monitor and further prevent language deprivation in the Commonwealth. The task force will create a list of developmental milestones to assist schools and parents in the early detection of language deprivation. The task force will also provide readily accessible documentation and recommendations on resources that parents can seek for their child to assist in acquiring language skills. By educating teachers on language development milestones and educating parents on available language development services, we will be able to ensure that children who are deaf or hard of hearing have access to language and are kindergarten-ready when they start school.

When a child is diagnosed with a hearing loss, their parents must make a choice about how they want their child to learn to communicate—spoken language, American Sign Language (ASL), or both. While LEAD-K advocates for ASL communication, touting its proven success in DHH children, they emphasize the importance of acquiring any language—ASL or other. So, because of LEAD-K’s national stance on ASL, there is a concern that this bill does a disservice to DHH children and families by favoring ASL and restricting this parental choice.

However, having read the bill, the language is clear. The writers of this bill see the importance of informed parental choice, they see the importance of having options. The bill does not prefer one method of communication over another, instead it supports equal access to effective communication for all. This bill provides options for children to help them communicate. It offers options for parents to help them make informed choices about what is best for their child and their family.

If we’re serious about equality in our country and in the Commonwealth, the issue of language deprivation needs to be rectified immediately. The goal of government is to provide everyone with equal opportunity and equal access to success, and this bill will go a long way to ensuring the provision of equal opportunity. So please, contact your local representatives and tell them you need their support on this bill. Tell them the children need their support on this bill. Together, we can put a stop to language deprivation once and for all.

Rachel

If you’ve ever taken an introductory psychology class, you might have heard of Genie. She was a girl who was found in 1970 to have been severely abused and socially isolated by her father, and [as a result] developed effectively no language by the age of 13. Cases like this are of interest to psychologists and linguists because they are seen as very rare occurrences—happening maybe a couple of documented times in a century.
The truth is that for deaf and hard of hearing children in the United States and Massachusetts today, the occurrence rate is much higher. This devastating disparity cannot be overlooked or normalized. Deaf children have all the same capacities for learning as hearing children. All that they need is full access to language from an early age to develop their linguistic and cognitive abilities like any other child.

One reason that deaf children are being left behind is that over ninety percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents.

Children who are born into deaf families who already use American Sign Language, or ASL, to communicate, are exposed to signs from birth in the same way that hearing children are exposed to speech. Research has shown that linguistic development in these children mirrors development patterns in most hearing children, and prepares children for written English literacy in a similar fashion.

However, for deaf children who are born into hearing families, the situation is different. Many of these parents might not have ever known a deaf person before. They don’t know how to communicate with their child, and suggestions from doctors and therapists are often conflicting.

Many hearing parents pursue technologies such as hearing aids and cochlear implants in efforts to allow their children to hear and process language in that way. Others make efforts to learn sign language and teach this to their children.

The problem of language deprivation exists independent of language type. There are deaf children who are taught very limited spoken language; there are deaf children who are taught very limited signed language.

A national campaign called LEAD-K, or Language Equality and Acquisition in Deaf Kids, is aiming to pass state-level legislation which combats the problem of language deprivation in deaf kids across the country.

A new bill entitled “An act ensuring language readiness in deaf and hard-of-hearing children entering kindergarten” has recently been introduced in the Massachusetts legislature. This bill is a part of national LEAD-K efforts. Its effects would be to establish a task force to make recommendations on language developmental milestones to parents and educators, to better track deaf children’s linguistic development before they reach kindergarten. The milestones would be available for both ASL and spoken English, and parents would be able to choose which language to teach their children.

Arriving in kindergarten without fully formed language has devastating effects on long-term cognitive development. By the time a child reaches age 5, over ninety percent of their brain has already developed, and the foundations for future learning have already been set.

Some who are opposed to the bill argue that ASL is not a viable language to teach deaf children, and that giving parents the option to choose this path is detrimental to a child.

The truth is that for some children, ASL is the only option. For some, cochlear implants are a medical impossibility, and outcomes after implementation are variable.

ASL is a fully formed language with a rich cultural tradition, complete with grammar, vocabulary, and syntax independent from English. It is a natural language for deaf children to learn; it facilitates their growth and development in ways that spoken language does for hearing children.

Additionally, for those who receive cochlear implants, the procedure is usually not done until after the tenth month of a baby’s life. The introduction of ASL during the period prior to implantation would facilitate natural language development. Without it, children would be left without language for up to the first year of their life, or more. Eliminating ASL as an option entirely would leave some children entirely without language.

Deaf children deserve language, and this bill ensures that parents and educators will be better informed and able to help facilitate that process, regardless of what language is used. It ensures basic civil rights to deaf children and allows them to think, communicate, grow, and thrive. Please contact your elected representatives and ask them to support S.305 and H.3550.

House Ways & Means Script

Members of the Committee: Can we agree that all children, regardless of background, deserve equal opportunity and access to a quality education? The most important years for education and language development are during the first 5 years of a child’s life. Once a child reaches age 5, 90% of their brain has already been developed—marking these years as crucial for a child’s future educational success. This early childhood education sets the foundation for a child’s success in life by building early language and communication skills, just like it did for you and me.

In Massachusetts, many deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) children arrive in kindergarten at age 5 with far less exposure to and understanding of language than their hearing peers. Roughly 59-75% of these children have tested in the categories of “warning/failing” or “needs improvement” on statewide assessment tests. This comes as a direct result of language deprivation in these children during their early childhood years.

Language, in any form, is imperative to navigating school, jobs and the world at large, a basic human right that we are denying our deaf and hard of hearing children. The language deprivation that these children experience is a result of the lack of information their parents have available to them on how to best facilitate their child’s language acquisition.
90% of deaf or hard of hearing children born in the United States every year are born to hearing parents. Imagine that, being a new parent with a deaf or hard of hearing child and not knowing what informed decisions to make on how best to raise your child and how to teach them a skill that should come naturally—communication.

This bill will mitigate the issue of language deprivation by establishing a volunteer task force of experts that will work on recommending specific language learning milestones for deaf and hard of hearing children learning American Sign Language, spoken English, or both. These guidelines will provide a structured way in which parents and educators can monitor the growth of the child, compile the data, and ensure that the child is learning communication and language skills in a productive and timely fashion. These milestones will inform parents of the progress of their child and the task force will provide the parents with informed options regarding ASL and/or English acquisition and potential steps for their child to acquire either or both.

It is important to note that this bill does not discriminate against which language the child will learn and the choice is solely up to the parents—something the opposition has failed to recognize. Both sides agree and want timely language acquisition; the argument comes down to which language these children should acquire. The resources available will be balanced in nature and will allow families to make the personal choices that are right for their child and will enable them to learn and thrive. It is also of note that these resources are made publicly available, so that families of all children, regardless of socioeconomic background, can access information which will allow them to most effectively advocate for their child in special education meetings.

The proposed volunteer task force will be made up of respective experts in the ASL, English, D/deaf and hard of hearing communities. Because it is volunteer-led, the fiscal implications of this task force will be minimal. Regarding the task force, there is one item of note that might incur expenses, and that would be the provision of an interpreter at these task force meetings, should the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing not be able to provide one at no cost. Looking past the task force, there is a potential expense in providing training and guidance for early childhood educators on how best to carry out their jobs using these new developmental milestones established by the task force. Unfortunately, we have no numbers to provide regarding this cost as the LEAD-K bills in other states are too new and have not collected enough data at this time.

In the short term, while this bill would require small expenditures by the Commonwealth the value and importance of stopping language deprivation means that it would be in our best interest to push this bill forward as fast as possible and vote it out favorably.

Long-term, it is in all of our best interests to ensure that deaf and hard of hearing children are able to develop language and participate fully in school and later in their personal and working lives. We are confident that this bill will unlock the potential of these children and would lead to them making meaningful contributions in the Massachusetts and United States economies as language-capable adults. The positive effects of timely language acquisition are significant and long-lasting, both on a personal and societal level. So, please vote this out fast and favorably. Thank you!

■ Letter to the Legislator

Dear Senator Feeney,

We are writing to you today as constituents who care deeply about ensuring equal opportunity for all of Massachusetts’ children, regardless of background. We know that early education is critical and has lifelong consequences for a child. We also believe that language is a human right, a tool that one cannot navigate our world without, and that all children should have access to it. This issue is deeply personal for us, as one of us is deaf.

We are concerned that Massachusetts’ D/deaf and hard of hearing children are being left behind. 59-75% test in the warning or failing categories on statewide tests each year. This disparity is directly traceable to language deprivation that many deaf children face before they reach kindergarten. Over 90% of D/deaf children are born to hearing parents, who have to make decisions about how to communicate with their child. Because of a lack of education and resources, parents often struggle with doing this, and as a result, too many of these children reach kindergarten with little to no intact language. Of these children, the majority who are being left behind are those of lower socioeconomic status, minority, and immigrant families.

S.305, An Act ensuring language readiness in deaf and hard-of-hearing children entering kindergarten, is part of a national campaign, entitled LEAD-K, to ensure access to language acquisition for all of America’s D/deaf children. The bill would establish a volunteer task-force which will compile language acquisition milestones for D/deaf children, whether the language of instruction be American Sign Language, English, or both. These resources will be readily available to both parents and educators and help guide them as they work together to ensure language acquisition for their child. This would come at little cost and great gain.

Some of those opposed to this bill believe that it privileges one form of communication over the other; the truth is that it does not. Parental choice as to whether they will teach their child ASL, English, or both is clearly highlighted throughout the bill. The task force created would represent a variety of perspectives on ASL and English instruction for D/
deaf children and ensure that the most pertinent information is made easily accessible. While there are a variety of medical, social, and other factors affecting choice of language, everyone can agree that it is cruel to deny language to a child, and this bill ensures that it will not happen.

We believe this is an urgent issue which needs to be addressed as soon as possible. The livelihood of thousands of D/deaf children today and in the years to come is at stake. We therefore ask you to support this bill, call for a hearing soon, and encourage your colleagues to vote it out fast and favorably.

Sincerely,
Rachel Lederer
Gabriel Brainson

Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Rachel

On meeting with Cathy Cogen, Coalition leader for Massachusetts LEAD-K

The meeting was a video conference between Rachel Lederer, myself and Cathy Cogen, one of the coalition leaders on the Massachusetts LEAD-K team. This meeting was to reflect on our earlier visit with Senator Lesser and discuss the intricacies of the bill. We spoke about Cathy’s connection to the Deaf community and why she is interested in the issue of language deprivation. We talked about our own interests in the subject and discussed the debate surrounding the bill as a whole— who supports it, who does not, and why. This discussion was constructive in understanding the current political climate surrounding the issue of preventing language deprivation in Deaf children.

Rachel and I were also able to ask Cathy many questions regarding the specifics of the bill such as its history in other states, the opposition in other states, the budgetary concerns, and we even asked what more we could do outside of the classroom to assist with the advocacy efforts. I think this meeting went really well, we were able to glean a ton of information that in turn helped us further advocate for the bill. The main thing I learned from this meeting is that the most essential thing in the field of lobbying or advocacy is constant contact. Always send emails, call and follow up consistently. Always make sure someone will remember you favorably, and just be personable and make connections with everyone you talk to.

On meeting with Representative Tyler

This meeting took place on March 6th at 1pm in the Massachusetts State House. Those in attendance were myself, Rachel Lederer, Representative Tyler and his aide, Ryan Dominquez. The purpose of the meeting was research-based, as Rachel and I were tasked by Cathy and the [LEAD-K] coalition to figure out how much those on the House Education Committee knew about the bill.

We sat down with Rep. Tyler and his aide and we started asking them questions about the bill. We asked if they had heard of the bill, what they knew about the larger issue of language deprivation and what their thoughts on the bill were. Rachel and I filled in any information that they were missing or didn’t know and in the process, we were able to figure out that Rep. Tyler and his Aide could be possible supporters of the bill when the time came. Ryan Dominquez, the aide, told us of his Deaf aunt and told us how much things like this mean to him and his family. It was clear that Rep. Tyler knew of this, and was equally understanding as to the benefits this bill would present, should it be passed.

This was our first meeting with a legislator who didn't know about the bill previously and I think it went really well. I felt very nervous at first, but again, once I started having a conversation, things got much easier from there.

Rachel

On Meeting with a legislative aide

I spoke with Christian Kelly, a legislative aide of Senator Adam Hinds, in his office. I introduced the bill to him, and right away, he recognized it and asked whether it was the LEAD-K bill. He said that Senator Hinds had heard concerns about the bill from ENT doctors, but would not definitively say whether the senator was opposed to or supportive of the bill. I explained to him that the bill emphasized parental choice of which language to teach their child, and he said he knew and that the problem the doctors had was with the presence of choice. ...

This was interesting to me because organizations like the American Speech and Hearing Association (ASHA) had put out statements saying that they oppose versions of the bill that privilege ASL as a choice over spoken language, but to my knowledge, none of the bills that were part of the national campaign actually stated that ASL would be preferential to teach deaf children – all of them advocate for parental choice. The Massachusetts bill creates a task force which is explicitly balanced between experts in/advocates of spoken language and ASL early education. It was sad to hear that presenting ASL as even an option had received pushback like that.

I told him that I would send him more information and he gave me his business card. I am planning on sending him our advocacy video to better explain the bill. Because of this meeting, we explicitly included more language in the video concerning how this bill does not impose ASL on any family or child, and explaining why it is of crucial importance to give parents and educators all the information and support to teach deaf children in acquiring language.
Update

As of August 11: A joint hearing was held on July 23rd, and can be viewed in its entirety using this link: https://malegislature.gov/Events/Hearings/Detail/3223.

For more information

View the bill (MA legislature website):
S.305: https://malegislature.gov/Bills/191/S305
H.3350: https://malegislature.gov/Bills/191/H3350

Organization or Coalition support:
LEAD-K: https://www.deaffocus.org/lead-k