

My name is Rebecca Lalanne.

Let me introduce myself briefly. I grew up and still live in Vermont. I am Deaf and ASL is my first language. I work as the director for DVAS (Deaf Vermonters Advocacy Services). We are culturally and linguistically designed to meet specific needs of Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and DeafBlind community from youth to elder. We provide training at the police academy, court systems, hospitals, and schools on awareness, culture, and access.

I am here because I see a crisis in Deaf education. I am also here because I see the bill as a great opportunity to address the crisis.

Many families with DHHDB children chose to move out of Vermont due to the educational system's failure to listen and meet their specific needs. I gained this insight through direct interactions with these families, who shared their concerns and experiences with me.

Families with DHHDB children faced challenges in getting the support during their IEP meetings. I am aware of this issue as these families sought my assistance, and I have actively participated in their IEP meetings. I observed numerous instances in which members of the IEP team attempted to discourage parents from advocating for the best interests of their DHHDB children. For instance, despite requests from several Deaf children for ASL lessons, the IEP team neglected to address their needs, citing a perceived lack of necessity.

There are many more stories that you have not seen.

I recommended that they share their concerns to the Agency of Education (AOE). They indicated that they followed this suggestion; however, they encountered a lack of responsiveness to their concerns.

Based on my interactions with these families, I chose to gather data from various communities, including the deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind, parents, and professionals. The objective was to gain a more thorough understanding of the current state of the educational system in Vermont. The insights I've gathered from over 100 participants are as follows:

**79% reported that the educational system did not sufficiently accommodate the needs of DHHDB children.**

**70% reported that there were a few professionals in the educational system who were actually qualified to work with DHHDB children.**

**80% reported that services DHHDB children received were not enough or not equitable.**

**64% reported that the educational system provided limited and/or inaccurate information on services and supports available for DHHDB children.**

**42% of parents support having a bill of rights specifically because they want their child/ren to thrive, belong, and be able to learn in an environment that is equitable.**

**82% said the issues with the educational system were a human right issue.**

**80% agreed that DHHDB child/ren deserve to live \*and\* attend school in Vermont.**

I acknowledge a potential concern you might have, which is the existence of various federal laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitative Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). It's important to note that while these laws provide crucial protections, they still have gaps. This proposed bill is not intended to replace them; rather, it serves as a supplement aimed at addressing those gaps and strengthening the educational rights of DHHDB children.

It's crucial to understand that the purpose of this bill is not unique, as 18 other states have already passed similar legislation. These states recognized the need for such measures by actively listening to the stories shared by families, children, and professionals.

Merely conducting an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting, as mandated by the IDEA and Section 504, does not automatically ensure that deaf children will receive the necessary support, services, or an equitable education.

The decision-makers in the majority lack the lived experiences of being deaf, hard of hearing, or deafblind. They do not firsthand experience the challenges of navigating an environment where communication barriers exist. Again, simply convening an IEP meeting, while important, does not inherently bridge the gap in understanding and may fall short in addressing what DHHDB children need.

It is true that many decision-makers have undergone training in special education and have experience working with students with disabilities. One might assume that this background makes them experts. However, this is not necessarily the case. Each disability presents distinct needs and experiences, and what sets Deaf and Hard of Hearing with DeafBlind (DHHDB) apart is the absence or limited access to sound, including spoken language, in contrast to other disabilities that have access. Additionally, DHHDB encompasses a unique language and culture for which many professionals lack proficiency and knowledge.

Unfortunately, it is extremely rare for schools, school districts, and even the Agency of Education to engage with us—DHHDB professionals who have lived experiences and actual expertise. We possess valuable knowledge and resources that can significantly aid schools in crafting an equitable education for DHHDB children.

You may gather data from various sources, including the Agency of Education (AOE), the CARES Team (contracted under the AOE), and the Vermont Early Hearing Detection and Intervention Program. The data may indicate that there are approximately 425-450 students in Vermont. However, it's essential to note that the data alone doesn't show the full narrative.

I want to reiterate the urgency of the crisis, emphasizing how important the S172 bill is. Like Atilia mentioned, We know what we need & deserve, and are telling you with this Bill. Trust us. Believe us.