

S66 Deaf Bill of Rights testimony

Bill Hudson, registered voter, Town of Essex

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about these 3 very important issues in the bill that impacts our Deaf and Hard of Hearing Vermonters statewide.

- **Bill of Rights for Children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing**
- **Formation of a Commission for the Deaf and Hard of hearing.**
- **Re-establishment of a center school for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing(re-open Austine school or open a campus in Vermont)**

You have heard some testimony last week from the Agency of Education, the Department of Health and from my state Department of Aging and Independent Living Commissioner. You have heard additional testimony from folks in the Deaf community. These are strong supportive testimonies that include data and findings.

I would like to provide additional information based on my own lifelong experience as a person who is Deaf/Hard of Hearing and as a Deaf professional working in the field of human services for over 25 years.

Don't you think that combining professionals in the field of educating children along with those who have lived with their hearing loss and bring a wealth of experience that no one can offer, would be in the best interest for all involved?

- Isolation and a lack of a strong language development are the norms for Deaf children in mainstream school settings. You will find this evident in a lot of Deaf education research materials on the website.

I have experienced BOTH educational settings in mainstream and a school for the Deaf/Hard of Hearing, which is the Austine school in Brattleboro, closed last September 2014.

- Austine school: I am very thankful for attending the Austine school for my last 6 years of schooling, it made the difference in who I am today because the communication was accessible for me.
- I had many many friends in my peer group. I had an identity. My teachers and staff on campus use ASL.
- My confidence level was solid when it came time to graduate. This set the foundation for my future.

My own personal experience in a mainstream setting many years ago is similar to what many of these students experience today, sadly.

- In mainstream schools, the Deaf student's best friend could be their interpreter.
- Hard of Hearing students usually do not use or require sign language to communicate but they have their own set of struggles with identity and feeling accepted.

An education helps lead us to the fulfillment of many emotional and psychological needs as human beings and helps to establish a solid foundation to build on as we grow through our years....

As a Deaf professional I have seen too many people of all ages walk into my office struggling with facing the world of work, socializing, raising a family, facing challenges that impacts their ability to get hired and hold down a good job. They missed out on opportunities to build a solid foundation in their younger years.....This does cost the State funds in the long run to plug in service gap needs to help out.

What I am trying to state is that there are answers in the experiences we have lived. We are the ones who know what it is like out there to be Deaf or Hard of Hearing. Use us as a resource, we are ready to roll up our sleeves and jump in, don't close the doors on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community.

With the closing of the Vermont Center for the Deaf/Hard of Hearing, the Agency of Education contracted with Nine East for these continuations of services. While this is appreciated, there are concerns:

- Vermont Association for the Deaf was never contacted to team up.
- Has Nine East done their homework? Proof of research and validity to what they offer?
- I am sure funding concerns is the reason behind what is perceived as a short term solution. Yes they might be the educational experts but why rule out our value of knowledge and experience.
- I want to emphasize the lack of collaboration between these agencies and the Deaf community that will impact the future of these children's educational needs and carry with them into adulthood. The research is out there, let's use this to our advantage.

Having a Commission for the Deaf/Hard of Hearing in Vermont state government would be ideal:

- Establishment of resources available for all can be provided. Much like all services under one umbrella, a Commission can bring these agencies to work together. Interpreter services, mental health needs, housing needs can be addressed, for example....
- There are 41 State Commissions across the country that are successful. Agencies feel much at ease channeling all services related through their Commission to get services in place.
- Not just for children and educational needs but for other services gaps that affect all ages.
- If you can check other state Commissions and what is offered and the success involved, you will see that having a Vermont State Commission can get things done.

Thank you for your time....