



Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators Testimony
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S.66 Human Services; education; persons who are deaf or hard of hearing; bill of rights, commission

Context

VCSEA supports those who remain concerned about the closure of the Austine School and the Vermont Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. We recognize that this closure represents a significant loss for many in the deaf community. The importance of deaf culture and community and its value as a base for first language for children who use ASL to communicate are clear.

We are also aware of the decline in numbers of deaf students in Vermont. With the closing of Vermont Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing the Agency of Education moved quickly to reestablish consultant services to schools throughout Vermont through Nine East. The AOE continues to work actively with Nine East and the Vermont Department of Health to meet the educational needs of children who are deaf and hard of hearing.

Proposed Bill of Rights and Commission

- Chapter 48 in S.66 adds to and is repetitive of federal and state law regarding the education of individuals with disabilities. It is important that we do not create a different standard than the requirements for a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) embodied in the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and reflected in Vermont's Education statutes.
- In determining "Least Restrictive Environment" (LRE) the Individual Education Planning (IEP) team is the locus of decision making and must by federal and state law consider the need for a continuum of services. This applies to any disability area in education including for students who are deaf and hard of hearing. Education rules and case law support consideration of deaf culture in determining the LRE for each deaf or hard of hearing student. Every child's individual circumstances, strength and needs must be considered.
- There are students who are deaf or hard of hearing who require access to similarly situated peers for the purposes of receiving appropriate education services. Given the small numbers the reestablishment of a K-12 school for students may be too large an undertaking. However, it is important to consider services available in Vermont in a systematic, regional way that provides improved access to children and families. It is worth exploring how we might create regional opportunities to support a cadre of deaf mentors, and engage deaf and hard of hearing peers for language and social development for students in our state.
- It is critical that the interpreters employed to work with students who are deaf and hard of hearing are appropriately trained and certified. VCSEA encourages this committee to consider all the state and community agencies, and advocates within the deaf community in sustaining access to deaf mentors in ASL, qualified interpreters and peer opportunities for language development. Multiple agencies will need to work together with parents and the larger community to achieve this goal.
- VCSEA believes that all children must have the opportunity to gain access to robust communication instruction and experiences in their earliest years. Birth to three is a critical time for communication development and that must be considered within the context of serving very young children who happen to be deaf and hard of hearing. Also, the full implementation of Act 166 in 2016 will afford all three and four year olds access to at least 10 hours per week of high quality preschool services. This implementation can serve as a locus for services and foundation for preschoolers who are deaf and hard of hearing.
- If a commission is to be created for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing VCSEA recommends that a special education administrator be appointed to this commission. In Vermont it is this position in the school districts and supervisory unions that carries responsibility for oversight in implementing state and federal laws governing children with disabilities under the IDEA and state statutes. These administrators are required to be knowledgeable of the needs and resources appropriate to addressing the needs of students with disabilities including those who are deaf and hard of hearing. The role of the commission as proposed would be well served by including a special education administrator. VCSEA, representing Special Education Administrators throughout the state, would like to be part to this critical effort.