

Kristine Melson Wells
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Members of the Virginia General Assembly

Dear Honorable Representatives and Senators of the Virginia General Assembly:

I hope this letter finds you and yours healthy, safe, and well. I am writing to express my earnest support for language acquisition for deaf children in Virginia. I write as a voting constituent and a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) who regularly encounters the impacts of language fluency/disfluency when working with hearing, deaf (using speech, ASL, and/or sign supported speech), and hard of hearing individuals.

Since 2015, more than 16 states have passed legislation aligned with the advocacy efforts of Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf Kids (LEAD-K). The legislation adopted by these 16+ states outlines evidenced-based, measurable, and actionable steps that allow for equitable (between hearing and deaf children) language development and acquisition. Of note, this is done through whichever language is most accessible to the child - Listening and Spoken English *and/or* American Sign Language.

Recent research, as illustrated by Mayberry and Lock (2003), among others, has found that "...adults who acquired a language in early life performed at near-native levels on a second language regardless of whether they were hearing or deaf or whether the early language was spoken or signed."

The importance of accessing and acquiring a fluent, first language (whether spoken or signed) is paramount to ensuring individuals have the foundation necessary for the joys and responsibilities that come with the rest of the journey of the lifespan. As a practicing LCSW, I regularly encounter the parallels between what the research reports and the experiences of those whom I serve when it comes to language fluency. The impact of early language acquisition and fluency opposed to lack of language access and acquisition (and therefore disfluency) has direct implications on an individual's experience with attachment, sense-of self, depression, anxiety, trauma, complex trauma, substance use, and life satisfaction including suicidal ideation and attempts. Language fluency also has a direct impact on the way in which individuals access mental health resources, frameworks, and treatment modalities.

With your support, Virginia could provide the structure necessary for equitable language access and acquisition. This would not only lead to improved educational outcomes, but significantly improved mental health, interpersonal, and intrapersonal outcomes.

Please vote **YES** on **HB649**

Sincerely,

Kristine Melson Wells
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