

Dear Madame Chairperson Richardson and Colleagues,

My daughter, Hazel, is a 6th grader at Metro Deaf School in St. Paul. I also currently serve as the School Board president at Metro Deaf School (MDS). My family found MDS after spending kindergarten and half of first grade in Minneapolis Public Schools. Through witnessing what Hazel experienced, I can speak to the realities of a mainstream school versus a signing environment. Being in a mainstream school is not the Least Restrictive Environment for a Deaf child. It is the most restrictive: to be unable to communicate directly with all but one or two people in the school building, to hear all information second hand through an interpreter or spoken into an FM listening device worn by one person, to never be included in playground games because there is no one to explain the rules.

At Metro Deaf School, Hazel found a place where she could communicate with everyone directly, from the lunchroom staff, all the way to the principal. And most importantly, she can connect with her peers. She has also learned to use American Sign Language (ASL) with a fluency she never would have obtained without being fully immersed in the language.

We need to do everything we can to preserve this ASL only, language rich environment for young, Deaf children. MDS has been operating for nearly 30 years as the state's only day school serving Deaf and hard of hearing students. Throughout this time the Department of Education has occasionally questioned whether the language in charter school law: "...and may not establish any criteria or requirements for admission that are inconsistent with this section" restricts Metro Deaf School's ability to specifically serve Deaf students. Please support this amendment. It will add much needed clarity to the law so that MDS can continue to operate in a way that serves the needs of this small, but extraordinary group of children.

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