

Chair Pryor and Members of the House Education Policy Committee:

I am writing in support of HF59 both as a parent of two students who attend Metro Deaf School (MDS) and as a MDS Board Member. HF59 (and its companion bill SF1024) is critical for the ongoing operation of MDS as a school that meets the needs of Deaf, Deaf-Blind and Hard-of-Hearing (D/DB/HoH) students.

Since its founding in 1993, MDS's mission has always been to meet the needs of Deaf, Deaf-Blind and Hard-of-Hearing (D/DB/HoH) students. At MDS, all students and staff use American Sign Language (ASL) and students thrive because they have full language access. MDS's ASL/English bilingual approach allows D/DB/HoH students to be with their peers and to have full access to language and information not just from teachers, but everyone in the school. The majority of MDS staff are D/DB/HoH themselves and serve as role models and professional educators and service providers for our students, and all MDS staff members are trained to work with D/DB/HoH students.

My family moved to Minnesota in 2018 primarily for the educational access that MDS provides to D/DB/HoH students. My two daughters (a 7th grader and a 5th grader) are thriving at MDS, in contrast with their previous experiences in schools that did not primarily serve D/DB/HoH students with a bilingual ASL/English approach. While the teachers and staff in their former schools were well-intentioned, my daughters were often isolated from peers, missed out on learning and generally did not have full access to school due to lack of language access. Since joining MDS, my daughters have been able to have friends, play sports, compete on academic teams, participate fully in school, and just be kids -- their whole environment is accessible. Additionally, at MDS my children, who are Black, have exposure to other students like them and from a variety of other diverse backgrounds.

HF59 is critical for the ongoing operation of MDS as a school that meets the needs of D/DB/HoH students. Students attend MDS from over 35 different school districts, and passing this bill ensures resident districts can continue to use MDS as their federal setting 4 option for D/DB/HoH students. This is important because the majority of students are placed at MDS by their resident district because they do not have a comparable program using ASL/English bilingualism. Additionally, MDS does not screen D/DB/HoH students based on any additional educational needs. Indeed, about 35-40% of MDS students qualify for other special education categories as well.

I ask that you support the passage of HF59. This bill simply clarifies that MDS may continue to serve D/DB/HoH students, which it has been doing for nearly 30 years. There is no additional cost to passing this bill as Metro Deaf School has always operated this way.

Thank you.

-IJR

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MDS:

Metro Deaf School – Board Member & Board Secretary

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February 28, 2023

Chairperson Pryor and Colleagues:

My son, Henry, is a student at Metro Deaf School, a free public charter school in Saint Paul. Henry is a delightfully funny and sweet boy who is hard-of-hearing and nonverbal secondary to his diagnosis of Cornelia de Lange Syndrome. He has been thriving in this ASL environment from the time he started at the age of 2 ½ to now as an 11 year-old boy. After much research into schools and services in the San Francisco Bay Area where Henry was born, we realized there was no school that could offer what MDS has. Moving from California to Minnesota for Henry to attend MDS has been one of the best decisions we could make as his parents. His communication and personality have flourished in a way that would not have been possible with the limited services available in California. Although schools for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students exist in California, they were not prepared to work with children with other needs. Attending MDS is giving Henry an opportunity to reach his full potential as a contributing member or society and has provided a community of support for Henry that is invaluable to him now and will continue to be for the rest of his life.

MDS serves Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard-of-hearing students from 0 to 21 years old from over 35 school districts. MDS welcomes Deaf, DeafBlind, or Hard of Hearing students with other unique learning needs as well. Henry along with several of his peers has unique learning needs including Autism Spectrum Disorder and Developmental Disability. Having an environment where everyone uses ASL allows Henry to have unlimited access to peers and adults. He can benefit from watching two teachers sign to each other when planning an activity or problem solving. He has access to all the incidental learning hearing children have in school. As a parent I believe it is critical for MDS to remain a Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing school servicing the Twin Cities area and beyond.

MDS is the primary reason why I relocated my family here from California and I urge you to support this amendment to maintain MDS as a school supporting Deaf, Deafblind and hard-of-hearing children.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Kathleen McKenna

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February 28, 2023

Dear Chairperson Pryor and Colleagues,

I am the mother of three Deaf children who attend Metro Deaf School in St. Paul; Zachary in 6th grade, Jeremiah in 4th grade and Jeneal in 1st grade. I also have been a part of the Metro Deaf School (MDS) staff since 2017, first as an Elementary Teacher and currently as the Coordinator of Teaching and Learning. Prior to finding MDS, my family resided in Maryland and attended another bilingual program for the deaf as young as six months old while I worked as a Teacher of the Deaf in a mainstream setting. Through both our personal and my own professional experiences, I can attest to the discrepancies and challenges a deaf child faces in a mainstream environment versus a school setting in which all staff and students utilize American Sign Language (ASL), their native language. Mainstream settings are not an ideal nor fully accessible for Deaf children. In a mainstream classroom setting, Deaf students are unable to communicate directly with all persons and are instead limited by their interactions with an interpreter and/or Teacher of the Deaf/Hard of Hearing. This does not account for large classroom sizes/student-to-staff ratios, the social emotional impact and fatigue from having to attend to both an interpreter and the speaker/information presented.

Metro Deaf School provides a fully inclusive and accessible environment for my children. My three children are able to attend the same school while experiencing autonomy within their respective grades. Not only do they have the benefit of a classroom full of signing peers, teachers and paraprofessionals, but they are able to fully communicate with each individual in the building throughout the school day. MDS provides my children with an education in their native language, access to athletics and non-academic activities and opportunities for engaging with members of the Deaf community through various events. My children are blessed with numerous opportunities to engage with Deaf/Hard of Hearing adult role models on a daily basis, which cannot be found anywhere else.

I understand that the Department of Education has questioned the language in the charter school law: "...and may not establish any criteria or requirements for admission that are inconsistent with this section", which only serves to restrict Metro Deaf Schools ability to specifically serve Deaf students. Metro Deaf School has provided an educational setting that not only serves students who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing, but does so by providing a language-rich environment in their native ASL. It is crucial that you support the amendment that will allow MDS to continue to operate and serve the needs of the exceptional children who both currently attend and will seek bilingual ASL programs for their Deaf children.

Thank you,
Laura White
Parent
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Dear Chairperson Pryor and Colleagues,

My daughter, Hazel, is a 7th 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. In a mainstream school Deaf children are unable to communicate directly with all but one or two people in the school building, they get all information second hand through an interpreter or spoken into an FM listening device worn by one person, they are rarely included in playground games because there is no one around 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 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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Clarify charter school law to protect Metro Deaf School

Date: March 1, 2023

To: Education Policy
Rep. Laurie Pryor, Chair
Rep. Josiah Hill, Vice Chair

From: Minnesota Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind & Hard of Hearing

Please support the continued focus on deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing students at Metro Deaf School – HF59

The Minnesota Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind & Hard of Hearing urges committee members to protect the sole federal setting level IV program for deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing students in the metro area by supporting HF59.

The second charter school in the nation to open, Metro Deaf School (MDS) has been operating since 1993 with an environment, curriculum, staffing, and even custom-designed facilities exclusively dedicated to students with a primary disability of deaf, deafblind, or hard of hearing. The tailored focus on this specific student demographic has been a cornerstone of their success, and their enrollment is now reaching record levels, with waiting lists for some classes.

For many deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing students, a least restrictive environment (LRE) means a **language-rich environment**. MDS achieves LRE by providing an environment where American Sign Language is the primary language of instruction – and communication. Kindergartners can arrive each morning and communicate directly with the front office staff. High schoolers can spill something in the cafeteria and ask custodial staff for a mop or towel to clean it up. A basketball player can joke and strategize with his teammates and coach instead of being relegated to the bench as deaf and hard of hearing athletes often are in other settings. A large majority of students stay for MDS' afterschool programs, where they are joined by students coming from other schools to experience MDS' language-rich environment.

In an October 16, 2021, letter from the Minnesota Department of Education, MDS was informed that to comply with statute 124E.11, they must update their admissions policies to accept all students, regardless of disability status. Doing so would devastate MDS's current model of maximizing language access for deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing students.

This bill updates statute 124E.11 to allow MDS to continue its highly successful model of serving children whose primary disability is deaf, deafblind, or hard of hearing. In its thirty years, MDS has become a vibrant part of the local and nationwide Deaf and DeafBlind community, with numerous alumni rising to

take leadership positions locally and nationwide. Our community recognizes MDS' high value. Districts also do, as **75% of the students at MDS are district-placed** – an extraordinarily high number for a charter school.

We are grateful to Senators Maye Quade and Morrison and Rep. Richardson for their advocacy in protecting this priceless gem for our community's current and future children. We urge committee members to join us in supporting HF59.

Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alicia Lane". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping tail on the letter "e".

Alicia Lane
Government Relations Director