

Written Testimony on House Bill H7011

Submitted to the Rhode Island House Finance Committee

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Neither - Need level of accountability, before writing a check.

Rhode Island Program Doesn't Need Another Check. It Needs Accountability for Deaf Children.

Recently, I met three-year-old twins at a Deaf and hard-of-hearing children's event. They were laughing and playing, clearly comfortable with the adults around them. They were using spoken English supported by hearing technology.

I knelt down and asked their names.

They didn't respond.

I tried again. They looked at their parents. The parents answered for them.

We played. The game didn't require much language. They smiled. I smiled.

But we couldn't truly communicate.

Later, I kept thinking about one of the twins. For the sake of this testimony, I'll call her Lily. When adults spoke around her, her eyes worked harder than her ears. She leaned forward. She guessed. She pieced together fragments. When she missed something, she smiled anyway.

I recognized that smile.

I am Deaf. I know what it feels like to work twice as hard to access only part of the language in a room.

That experience leads directly to my position on H7011:

Before allocating additional funding, Rhode Island must establish a statewide accountability framework to ensure that every deaf child fully acquires language.

House Bill H7011 proposes \$1.167 million to sustain the Rhode Island Auditory Oral Program. I understand the concern about disruption for children currently enrolled. Stability matters. However, funding a single program without addressing systemic accountability gaps risks continuing a pattern that has long harmed deaf children.

Rhode Island already invests over \$10 million annually in the Rhode Island School for the Deaf, while additional programs operate through separate funding streams. Philosophies differ, systems remain fragmented, and families are left navigating competing approaches.

What is missing is not funding.

What is missing is accountability for outcomes.

The central issue is not modality—speech versus sign. The central issue is **language access during early childhood**, when brain development is most sensitive to linguistic input. Without safeguards, children can spend critical years in programs that do not provide full access to language.

Language deprivation often goes unrecognized. It appears as delay, as “almost,” as effort without full comprehension. By the time gaps are identified, valuable developmental time has already been lost.

This is preventable.

Research has documented the long-term cognitive, educational, and mental health risks associated with language deprivation (Hall et al., 2017; Gulati, 2019; Humphries et al., 2012). At the same time, Deaf Community Cultural Wealth highlights the importance of visual language access and Deaf-informed approaches in supporting healthy development (Geer & Zarchy, 2023).

Families deserve meaningful choice among communication approaches. But **choice without accountability can mask delay**. When children are not meeting language milestones, there must be a clear, enforceable requirement to adjust supports—including access to fully accessible visual language.

I respectfully urge the Committee to consider the following actions before passing H7011:

- **Condition any funding on structural reform**, not continuation of the status quo
- **Commission a statewide study** of deaf education that examines funding, language acquisition outcomes, and system fragmentation
- **Establish standardized, statewide language benchmarks** for deaf children from birth through early education
- **Require annual, transparent public reporting** of language outcomes across all programs receiving state funds
- **Mandate timely intervention** when children are not meeting language milestones, including access to visual language
- **Embed Deaf professionals in oversight and governance structures**, ensuring decisions reflect lived expertise

If interim funding is deemed necessary to prevent disruption for children currently enrolled in the Auditory Oral Program, that funding should be **explicitly temporary and tied to participation in this broader accountability process**.

Rhode Island has the opportunity to lead by building a system that guarantees—not assumes—language acquisition.

When I think about those three-year-old children, I don't think about funding lines. I think about time. Language development does not wait for legislative timelines.

Every year without full access matters.

This is not about closing programs. It is about building a system where every program—regardless of philosophy—is accountable for one non-negotiable outcome:

Every deaf child fully acquires language.

Anything less is preventable harm.

References

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