

Angel Schultz
15 Buratti Rd Johnston RI 02919
401-349-7260

Dear Senator DiPalma and Members of the Senate Committee on Finance,
I am writing to express my strongest possible support for Joint Resolution S3083, An Act appropriating funding for the Rhode Island Auditory Oral Program (RIAOP). I respectfully urge the Committee to adopt a funding structure that ensures RIAOP receives sustained annual support, not just for the 2026–2027 school year, but in the years that follow.

As a mother and someone who is hard of hearing myself and also the President of RI Hands & Voices, *a parent-led organization advocating for families with children who are deaf or hard-of-hearing (D/HoH)*. I know firsthand that, currently, access to this vital support like RIAOP is too often dependent on a family's location and a parent's ability to navigate complex systems. This resolution, however, would break down that barrier by making these services a clear line item, ensuring a child's zip code does not determine their ability to receive essential and equitable services. .

My 5-year-old daughter has been a recipient of the Rhode Island Auditory Oral Program's services since Early Intervention, and this support has continued as she transitioned into Johnston Public School. Having RIAOP at the table has been critical in giving her meaningful access to sound, spoken language, and educational opportunities. Today, she is confident in managing and using her cochlear implants, is able to instruct her teacher on the appropriate use of the Roger mic, and can confidently explain her technology to her peers. This program has empowered her to a degree I did not achieve for myself until graduate school.

I firmly believe she would not possess the level of confidence or access she has today without the specialized expertise and support provided by RIAOP. She is, as I've been told, a leader in her class and at the top of her kindergarten cohort—a success that would be impossible without RIAOP's support. This achievement is not an accident. It is the intentional result of her auditory training, self-advocacy skills, and the foundational support given to her by the oral program. Furthermore, the opportunity to interact with her deaf peers during extended school year (ESY) services in the summer has been instrumental in her social-emotional development.

While I firmly believe RIAOP has had a positive impact, I cannot say it alone has contributed to her success. As her first language was American Sign Language (ASL), I subscribe to the philosophy that language builds language, and I have never subscribed to spoken language *over* ASL. I believe that without the supplementary ASL support, which we have continually fought to incorporate into her Individualized Education Program (IEP) and through extracurricular activities, she may have experienced

language gaps. I dream of one day having a truly bilingual educational opportunity available in this state, as this would ensure all-around academic achievement. Our family's need for this program is not diminishing; in December, I welcomed another deaf daughter who will require the same specialized support. For families like mine, RIAOP is not optional, Auditory oral training is essential and must be built upon. RIAOP equips children with hearing loss and their families with the tools, community education, and confidence necessary for the opportunity to a successful long-term achievement and inclusion in their local schools.

If this program is reduced or eliminated, deaf children in Rhode Island who rely on technology risk being systematically marginalized and left behind. The services RIAOP provides are highly specialized and not readily available anywhere else in the state. RIAOP ensures that families who choose a spoken language modality have access to a high-quality, auditory-rich environment, which is crucial for children utilizing hearing technology. If RIAOP ceases to exist, families seeking this specialized support would lose a crucial public option. The state's other comprehensive program, the Deaf school, focuses on a "voice off and sign only" modality, which is essential and valid for many families but does not provide the distinct auditory training and technology support that RIAOP offers. Continued and stable funding is necessary to guarantee that all families have consistent access to the high-quality, specialized options that allow them to choose the best path for their children's success.

I respectfully urge the Committee to adopt a funding structure that allows RIAOP to continue receiving sustained, multi-year support beyond this school year. Predictable funding is crucial for maintaining the highly specialized staff and curriculum that families depend on to ensure their children thrive.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this critical matter.

Sincerely,
Angel Schultz, Hard of Hearing Adult, President of RI Hands & Voices
Peter Schultz
Parents of Savanna & Azaria Schultz