



July 30, 2021

Senate Committee on Finance, Ways & Means  
706 Cordell Hull Bldg.  
25 5th Avenue North  
Nashville, TN 37243

RE: S.B. 248

Dear Chairman Watson and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, I write to oppose Senate Bill 248 as currently drafted, which would require the Tennessee School for the Deaf, together with the West Tennessee School for the Deaf, to maintain a program that mandates the promotion of American Sign Language (ASL) over other modes of language and communication to families of children who are deaf or hard of hearing (D/HH).

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) is the national professional, scientific, and credentialing association for 218,000 members and affiliates who are audiologists; speech-language pathologists; speech, language, and hearing scientists; audiology and speech-language pathology support personnel; and students. Over 3,700 ASHA members reside in Tennessee.<sup>1</sup>

ASHA opposes S.B. 248 because it creates a program that inappropriately promotes one mode of language and communication, ASL, over others. With that said, ASHA supports the overall intent of S.B. 248, which is to ensure young children who are D/HH have a strong language foundation for academic readiness and success. To achieve this goal, ASHA recommends that the bill include language that supports a family's right to decide the most appropriate language(s) (e.g., American Sign Language, spoken language, or both), communication mode(s) (e.g., augmentative and alternative communication), and education plan for their child.

### **Current Services for Children Who Are D/HH**

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As it stands now, children who are D/HH can receive services through Tennessee's early intervention program (TEIS), which includes a variety of communication methods that suit the individual child's needs and the family's preferences. Those methods may include ASL, but it may also include listening and spoken language (with assistance from a hearing aid or cochlear implant), cued speech or language, or another communication method with appropriate educational supports.

Having communication options to choose from is critical for parents. Over 90% of children who are deaf are born to parents who can hear.<sup>2</sup> While ASL may be the most appropriate choice for some children, **ASHA recognizes that there are several evidence-based communication options that should be made available to families.**


## **ASHA Supports a Parent's Right to Decide and the Development of a Comprehensive Parent Resource**

ASHA has model legislation for your consideration that accomplishes the following objectives:<sup>3</sup>

- emphasizes a parent's right to decide the language(s) and communication mode(s) that are best for their child and family;
- promotes a comprehensive and balanced parent/family resource that includes existing developmental milestones, assessment information, and education options for children who are D/HH and encourages implementing agencies to utilize experts in the state to advise them on the creation of the resource;
- strengthens existing federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) legislation that requires a comprehensive assessment and the development of an intervention plan that utilizes the full complement of qualified providers to ensure that all children who are D/HH receive the services they need to develop a strong language foundation for future academic success; and
- requires implementing agencies to widely distribute the parent/family resource to families, medical specialists/facilities, parent resource centers, early intervention and preschool programs, as well as school districts throughout the state so that families have the tools and resources they need to fully participate and impact decision making.<sup>4</sup>

Thank you for your consideration of ASHA's position on S.B. 248. If you or your staff have any questions, please contact Tim Boyd, ASHA's director of state health care and education affairs, at [tboyd@asha.org](mailto:tboyd@asha.org).

Sincerely,



A. Lynn Williams, PhD, CCC-SLP  
2021 ASHA President

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<sup>1</sup> American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (2020). *Tennessee* [Quick Facts]. <https://www.asha.org/siteassets/uploadedfiles/Tennessee-State-Flyer.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Mitchell, R., Karchmer, M. (2002). *Chasing the Mythical Text Percent: Parental Hearing Status of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students in the United States*. Gallaudet Research Institute. [https://research.gallaudet.edu/Demographics/SLS\\_Paper.pdf](https://research.gallaudet.edu/Demographics/SLS_Paper.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (n.d.). *ASHA LEAD-K Model Bill* <https://www.asha.org/siteassets/uploadedfiles/LEAD-K-Model-Bill-ASHA-Version.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (n.d.). *State Issue Brief: Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf Kids (LEAD-K) State Legislation*. <https://www.asha.org/siteassets/uploadedFiles/LEAD-K-Issue-Brief.pdf>.