



EDUCATIONAL SERVICES FOR DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING CHILDREN: PRELIMINARY REPORT ON STAKEHOLDER VIEWS

Study Direction

The 2006 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to “hire a meeting facilitator to conduct a series of meetings with a broad group of stakeholders to examine the strengths and weaknesses of educational services available to deaf and hard of hearing children throughout the state.”¹ The legislation further directed the Institute to “develop recommendations that would establish an integrated system of instructional and support programs that would provide deaf and hard of hearing children with the knowledge and skills necessary for them to be successful in their adult lives and the ‘hearing’ world of work.”²

This preliminary report summarizes views from stakeholder meetings, focus groups, and interviews conducted between September and December 2006.

Educational Services for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children

Washington State’s educational services for deaf and hard of hearing children include the state residential school, local public schools, educational service districts, outreach providers, and private schools. Each of these is described below, followed by a summary of stakeholder views.

The **Washington School for the Deaf (WSD)** is a state agency located in Vancouver. WSD operates a school for deaf and hard of hearing special education students.³ WSD students who live nearby attend classes during the day. For

Summary

The 2006 Legislature directed the Institute to consult with stakeholders to examine strengths and weaknesses in educational services for deaf and hard of hearing children. Currently in Washington, educational service providers include the Washington School for the Deaf, local public schools, educational service districts, outreach providers, and private schools.

While stakeholders identify some programs as strengths, they describe Washington’s educational system for deaf and hard of hearing students as fragmented and inadequate. Many parents, students, and educators relate great difficulties accessing services, especially in rural areas. According to stakeholders, once a child’s hearing loss is identified, follow-up services are sporadic—dependent on the motivation of individual professionals—rather than systematic.

This fragmentation is due in part to the low incidence of hearing loss: deaf and hard of hearing students are relatively few and dispersed throughout the state. Additionally, ongoing debate over which communication methods are most beneficial for students influences how people learn about available options. To improve the system, stakeholders say they want the state to designate a central agency as responsible for improving access to information and coordinating and expanding available services.

Other stakeholder suggestions for improvement are listed in this preliminary report. Stakeholder consultations will continue through March 2007. A final report with recommendations is due June 2007.

¹ ESSB 6386 § 607 (12), Chapter 372, Laws of 2006.

² Ibid.

³ Students enroll at WSD when their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) determine that this is an appropriate placement.

students who live outside of the region, WSD operates a residential program in which students live on campus during the week and are bussed or flown home each weekend. Exhibit 1 summarizes WSD enrollment data as of September 2006, when 118 students were enrolled at WSD.⁴

Exhibit 1
Washington School for the Deaf
Student Enrollment, 2006

Age Group	Day Only (local) Students	Residential Students	Total Students
4–9	15	4	19
10–12	5	9	14
13+	32	53	85
Total	52	66	118

WSD also operates an outreach program for students and staff in local public schools statewide. These outreach services include: student academic, audiological, and emotional/behavioral assessment; educational interpreter training; assistance for school staff in making programming, curriculum, and educational placement decisions; American Sign Language (ASL) classes for families; transition planning for high school students; and a birth to three program for families with deaf and hard of hearing infants and toddlers. WSD also oversees the Shared Video Reading Outreach Project, a videoconference system that provides supplemental reading instruction to deaf and hard of hearing students in local public schools.

Local public schools enroll the majority of deaf and hard of hearing special education students in Washington State. In October 2005, 85.6 percent of the 472 deaf and 98.7 percent of the 933 hard of hearing special education students attended local schools.⁵ WSD enrolled 14.4 percent and 1.3 percent, respectively.⁶

⁴ In September 2006, an additional seven students were on a waiting list for admission to WSD.

⁵ These figures are an undercount of students. Available statewide data exclude deaf and hard of hearing students who do not require special education services, have other disabilities in addition to hearing loss, or attend private schools.

⁶ The most recently available statewide data are from 2005. These figures do not match those Exhibit 1 because more students attended WSD in 2006 compared with 2005.

Local public schools generally provide instruction to deaf and hard of hearing students as part of regular special education programs. Depending on individual student needs, deaf and hard of hearing students are taught in separate classrooms with other special education students or attend mainstream classes with assistance from an educational interpreter.

These special education programs are sometimes supplemented by one-on-one pull-out instruction provided by itinerant teachers employed by **Educational Service Districts (ESDs)**. Some districts and ESDs with larger numbers of students hire specialized teachers of the deaf, in some cases operating a regional program that enrolls students from other districts to create economies of scale.

To supplement local and ESD programs, **Washington Sensory Disability Services (WSDS)** provides technical support to teachers and administrators in local public schools.⁷ WSDS also offers outreach services to deaf, hard of hearing, visually impaired, and deaf-blind students and their families. Other **outreach providers** include county-based Family Resource Coordinators, which are part of the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) Infant Toddler Early Intervention Program.⁸ There are also hospital-operated early identification and intervention programs, such as Children’s Hospital’s Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children’s Program.⁹

Three **private schools** serve Washington deaf and hard of hearing students:

- Listen & Talk in Bothell focuses on oral (auditory-verbal) communication and currently enrolls 37 preschool students. Listen & Talk also provides outreach services to 70 families with children age birth to three or attending K–12 public schools.
- The Northwest School for the Hearing Impaired in North Seattle uses Signed Exact English and currently enrolls 50 students in preschool through grade 8.

⁷ WSDS is a state needs project funded by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. <<http://www.wsdsonline.org/>>

⁸ <<http://www1.dshs.wa.gov/iteip/>>

⁹ <<http://www.childrenshospital.org/clinicalservices/Site2143/mainpageS2143P0.html>>

- The Tucker-Maxon School in Portland, OR focuses on oral communication and currently enrolls five Washington students. Tucker-Maxon also provides outreach support to four Washington public school students.

Educational Services in Context

For readers new to this topic, key issues in deaf education are summarized below.¹⁰ These issues include language barriers, the low incidence rate of hearing loss, high instructional costs, and controversy over how deaf and hard of hearing children should communicate. Special education law and policy also influence educational services for deaf and hard of hearing students.

Language barriers. Children born with hearing losses are not fully exposed to spoken language and are vulnerable to substantial language acquisition delays. These delays can lead to poor academic performance and social isolation later in life. Language barriers can also arise for students whose hearing losses occur at older ages; these students may have difficulty hearing faint or distant speech, following classroom discussions, or recognizing subtle language complexities.

Hearing loss as a low-incidence disability. Hearing loss is a low-incidence disability; in other words, there are relatively few deaf and hard of hearing students. Deaf and hard of hearing children make up 0.1 percent of K–12 students in Washington State.

Exhibit 2 shows that 85 percent of Washington school districts enroll fewer than ten deaf or hard of hearing special education students. Exhibit 3 presents student headcounts by ESD, further demonstrating the dispersion of deaf and hard of hearing students across the state. Exhibit 4 illustrates the location of each ESD.

¹⁰ The information contained in this section is summarized from two prior Institute reports related to deaf education: A. Pennucci & H. Lidman. (2006). *Comparative review of Washington State schools for students with sensory disabilities*. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Document No. 06-01-2201; B. McLain & A. Pennucci. (2002). *Washington School for the Deaf: Models of education and service delivery*. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Document No. 02-06-2202.

Exhibit 2
Washington School Districts by Deaf or Hard of Hearing Student Enrollment, 2005

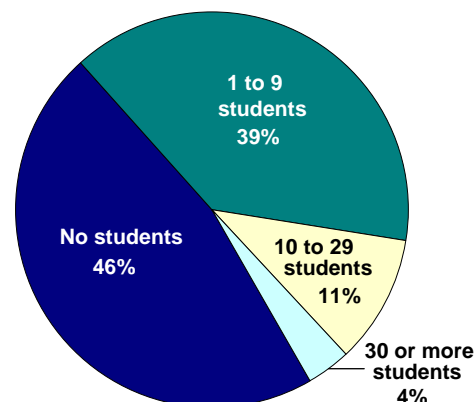
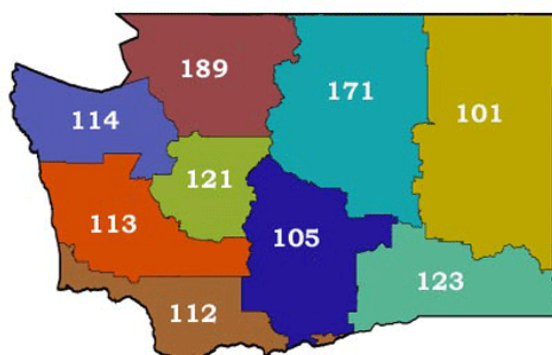


Exhibit 3
Deaf and Hard of Hearing Special Education Student Headcounts, 2005
by Educational Service District

ESD	Deaf Students	Hard of Hearing Students
101	25	85
105	26	46
112	41	65
113	12	54
114	12	76
121	176	360
123	15	53
171	17	30
189	80	152
WSD*	68	12
State	472	933

*Does not match 2006 WSD enrollment figures in Exhibit 1 because (a) statewide data exclude students with multiple disabilities and (b) WSD enrollment increased in 2006.

Exhibit 4
Washington Educational Service Districts



The small number and dispersion of deaf and hard of hearing children makes it difficult for schools to group students for instruction. In some cases, schools employ specialized staff (e.g., audiologist, speech and language pathologist, interpreter, teacher of the deaf) for a single deaf student.

High instructional costs. Deaf and hard of hearing students incur higher than average educational costs, deaf students in particular. A 2001 state study found that services for deaf students cost nearly four times more than the statewide average for special education students.¹¹ These high average costs are due to intensive learning needs of some students as well as the low incidence nature of the disability itself. Schools rarely enroll sufficient deaf and hard of hearing students to create economies of scale to reduce these per-student costs.

In addition to having staffing and cost implications, the low incidence of hearing loss causes many deaf and hard of hearing students to struggle to find a peer group, which can impact both social and academic development.

Controversy over communication modes. Whether deaf and hard of hearing children should attempt to learn to speak or use signed English or ASL is a highly charged historical debate. With the increasing prevalence of cochlear implants (surgically implanted electronic devices that partially restore hearing and are usually used to facilitate oral communication), the debate continues.

In Washington State, deaf and hard of hearing students use a variety of communication modes, including ASL, signed English, and oral speech, sometimes in combination with one another.¹² Depending on students' communication preferences, school programs often specialize

¹¹ This conclusion is from a 2005 Institute review of WSD and the Washington School for the Blind. The Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee provided the cost data, which were originally collected for a 2001 study. JLARC. *K-12 special education study* (Report 01-11). Olympia, WA.

¹² A 2002 Institute survey collected information about 776 deaf and hard of hearing students in Washington public schools, including WSD. The percentage of students using each communication mode was as follows: ASL 37%, Signed English 6%, Pidgin Signed English (a hybrid of ASL and Signed English) 20%, Spoken English 32%, and Combination of speech and sign 7%. Deaf students were more likely to use ASL and hard of hearing students were more likely to speak orally. Data from McLain (2002).

in a single mode of communication. As noted above, the three private schools each use a different communication method, as does the state residential school (most WSD students use ASL).

Special education law and policy. Under federal special education law, educators determine what services students need in the Individual Education Program (IEP) planning process.¹³ While the law is usually interpreted to mandate inclusion in mainstream classrooms whenever possible, federal policy guidance directs school districts to provide deaf students with a continuum of educational placement options and services to meet their unique communication needs.¹⁴

Therefore, regardless of controversy, school districts are required to provide students access to instruction in whichever mode of communication they and their parents choose. Additionally, research has not found any one communication or educational placement option to be more academically beneficial than others. The ongoing debate, however, impacts how deaf and hard of hearing students and families experience the educational system, according to stakeholders consulted for this report.

Stakeholder Views

This section outlines stakeholder-identified strengths and weaknesses in Washington's education system for deaf and hard of hearing children. The appendix to this report provides details about stakeholder consultations completed to date. Most stakeholder comments focus on system weaknesses, but some also identify strengths and ideas for improvement.

Weaknesses. Stakeholder-identified educational system weaknesses are listed in Exhibit 5 on the following page.

The most commonly expressed view among stakeholders is that Washington's educational system for deaf and hard of hearing children is

¹³ Federal special education law was most recently re-authorized in 2004. *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004*. 20 USC 1400.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Education. (1992). *Notice of Policy Guidance*, 34 CFR § 300.551.

fragmented. Stakeholders report that currently, once a child's hearing loss is identified, follow-up services are provided sporadically—dependent on the motivation of individual professionals—rather than systematically.

Stakeholders uniformly describe Washington's educational system as inadequate to meet deaf and hard of hearing students' needs. Stakeholders report that most deaf and hard of hearing students attending local public schools do not receive sufficient services in terms of both quantity (hours of specialized instruction) and quality (use of qualified staff). Stakeholders primarily attribute system deficiencies to the low incidence nature of hearing loss: students are thinly dispersed and it is rare to find a full range of services or trained personnel in a given locality.

Stakeholders also express the widely held concern that families receive incomplete information about communication and educational placement options. Stakeholders believe that service providers offer selective information for different reasons: certain options are not available locally, providers are unaware of some options, or providers are biased in favor of a particular method.

Overall, while stakeholders identify isolated Washington programs as strengths, they emphasize that, in the absence of comprehensive, unbiased information about options, families see no "system" to access for their children.

Exhibit 5

Stakeholder-Identified System Weaknesses

- No systematic link to services following identification of hearing loss
- Lack of comprehensive information about communication and program options
- Unqualified educational interpreters in public schools
- Insufficient teacher and interpreter training
- Lack of transitional services in high school

Stakeholders also frequently mention the use of unqualified educational interpreters in local public schools as a critical concern. Many educators and parents describe interpreters who know only

rudimentary sign language, do not understand child development, or, with good intentions, overstep their roles to assist children with homework. There are no state standards for educational interpreters, and with relatively low pay, stakeholders report that qualified interpreters are scarce.

There has been recent legislative attention to this issue. In 2003, the Legislature directed the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to review qualifications and competencies required of educational interpreters and make recommendations regarding training programs.¹⁵ In 2006, the Legislature directed OSPI to develop educational interpreter standards and plans for implementation by January 2007.¹⁶

Stakeholders also suggest that public school teachers need specialized training to effectively educate deaf and hard of hearing students. Currently, Washington State University Vancouver is developing a teacher of the deaf certification program slated to open in summer 2007. No other teacher of the deaf preparation programs exist in Washington State.

Finally, some stakeholders say that local public school programs do not have adequate transition planning or vocational training for deaf and hard of hearing students.

While found throughout the state, these system weaknesses present greater challenges for students, families, and educators in rural areas, according to stakeholders.

Strengths. Stakeholder-identified strengths in Washington's education system for deaf and hard of hearing children are listed in Exhibit 6.

Exhibit 6

Stakeholder-Identified System Strengths

- Washington School for the Deaf
- Shared Video Reading Outreach Project
- Washington Sensory Disability Services
- Special education law and policy
- Individual parents
- Private schools

¹⁵ SSB 5105, Chapter 171, Laws of 2003.

¹⁶ ESB 6606, Chapter 68, Laws of 2006.

Stakeholders describe the Washington School for the Deaf (WSD) instructional and residential programs as especially helpful for the social and academic development of older (middle and high school) students. For students who attend local public schools, stakeholders identify WSD’s outreach program and Washington Sensory Disabilities Services (WSDS) as key supports.

Stakeholders also value special education laws and policies that require schools to provide individualized instruction sensitive to the communication needs of deaf and hard of hearing children. Some stakeholders identify parents acting as advocates and the three private schools as key factors contributing to student success.

Strategies for improvement. Exhibit 7 lists stakeholder suggestions for improving Washington’s education system for deaf and hard of hearing children.

Because they view the system as fragmented, many stakeholders say the state needs to clearly designate an agency as responsible for coordination and oversight of available services for deaf and hard of hearing students. Federal law places responsibility for special education services on school districts, but stakeholders suggest a statewide coordinator be established with the following objectives:

- Expand families’ and educators’ access to comprehensive, unbiased information on communication and educational program options;
- Coordinate services to provide continuous support from early identification, birth to three, preschool, to K–12 programs; and
- Assist school districts and ESDs to regionalize services where possible.

Some stakeholders feel strongly that the state should require deaf and hard of hearing adult participation in this oversight.

Other specific strategies stakeholders suggest the state pursue include the following:

- Implement educational interpreter standards and increase interpreter training;

- Expand teacher preparation to include training in deaf education for all teachers;
- Assist school districts, particularly those in rural areas, in developing recruitment and retention strategies for interpreters, teachers of the deaf, and other specialized staff;
- Evaluate pilot instructional programs to identify research-based practices associated with improved student outcomes;
- Mandate universal newborn hearing screening;¹⁷
- Create specialized programs and services for troubled deaf youth requiring mental health services and students with other disabilities in addition to hearing loss;
- Develop specialized outreach services for Spanish-speaking and Native American families with deaf and hard of hearing children; and
- Encourage school districts to pool resources to purchase and share instructional technology (such as sound amplification and text-based devices).

Exhibit 7

Stakeholder-Suggested System Improvements

- Designate a single state agency with responsibility for coordination and oversight
- Require deaf and hard of hearing adult participation in oversight
- Regionalize programs and services where possible
- Implement standards for educational interpreters
- Expand training for interpreters and teachers
- Help school districts recruit and retain qualified interpreters and teachers
- Mandate newborn hearing screening
- Evaluate innovative instructional programs
- Create special programs for troubled deaf youth and students with multiple disabilities
- Reach out to Spanish-speaking and Native American families
- Pool district resources for technology purchases

¹⁷ Newborn hearing screening is currently voluntary in Washington. The National Center for Hearing Assessment & Management (NCHAM) estimates that 88 percent of newborns were screened in Washington in 2005. See: <<http://www.infanthearing.org/states/washington/index.html>>.

Appendix: Stakeholder Consultations Completed to Date

The 2006 Legislature directed the Institute to “hire a meeting facilitator to conduct a series of meetings with a broad group of stakeholders.”¹⁸ The contracted meeting facilitators¹⁹ provided four ways for stakeholders to submit input for this study:

- 1) “Town Hall” meetings open to the public
- 2) Focus Groups of stakeholder subgroups (e.g., teachers, parents, or students)
- 3) One-on-one/small group interviews
- 4) Online survey/comment forum

Exhibit A-1 lists the participants and locations of town hall meetings, focus groups, and interviews completed as of this writing. The stakeholder input summarized in this report was gathered during these events.

Online Survey/Comment Forum. As part of this study, the meeting facilitators also created a website (<http://www.dhhedwa.org/index.html>) with survey and public comment components to expand stakeholder participation. This website became operative in December 2006. Input collected from the online survey and comment forum will be included in the final report.

Stakeholder consultations will continue through March 2007.

Exhibit A-1 Stakeholder Consultations Completed September–December 2006

Participants	Location
Town Hall Meetings (2)	
Deaf and hard of hearing adults and students, parents, educators, school administrators, and state legislators (115 participants)	Ellensburg Lynnwood
Focus Groups (4)	
Parents (7)	Vancouver
WSD teachers (8)	Vancouver
Directors of agencies serving deaf and hard of hearing adults (8)	Olympia*
Hard of hearing and deaf adults who communicate orally (5)	Seattle
Interviews (14)	
Deaf and hard of hearing college students (3)	UW, Seattle
Parent educator-counselor	Kirkland
Regular classroom teacher	Rural WA**
School district special education administrators (2)	Vancouver
Public school principal and special education administrator	Vancouver
Interpreter mentor/parent	Vancouver
Statewide coordinator, deaf and hard of hearing services, WSDS	Ellensburg
WSD staff (4): superintendent, outreach coordinator, audiologist, librarian	Vancouver

**The agency directors' focus group was held in Olympia; the directors represented agencies in Pasco, Spokane, Seattle, Tacoma, Bellingham, Vancouver, and Olympia.*

***City name withheld for confidentiality.*

A final report, due June 30, 2007, will include excerpts from stakeholder comments and Institute recommendations to integrate Washington's instructional and support services for deaf and hard of hearing children.

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¹⁸ ESSB 6386 § 607 (12), Chapter 372, Laws of 2006.

¹⁹ Theresa B. Smith, Ph.D., Socio-Cultural Anthropology, University of Washington (1996) and Robert I. Roth, M.A., Art Education, California State University (1983).



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