

February 25, 2023

Dear Chairperson Cwodzinski 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,
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