

Clarify charter school law to protect Metro Deaf School

Date: February 27, 2023

To: Education Policy
Sen. Steve A. Cwodziński, Chair

From: Minnesota Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind & Hard of Hearing

Please support the continued focus on deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing students at Metro Deaf School – SF1024

The Minnesota Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind & Hard of Hearing urges committee members to protect the sole federal setting level IV program for deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing students in the metro area by supporting SF1024.

The second charter school in the nation to open, Metro Deaf School (MDS) has been operating since 1993 with an environment, curriculum, staffing, and even custom-designed facilities exclusively dedicated to students with a primary disability of deaf, deafblind, or hard of hearing. The tailored focus on this specific student demographic has been a cornerstone of their success, and their enrollment is now reaching record levels, with waiting lists for some classes.

For many deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing students, a least restrictive environment (LRE) means a **language-rich environment**. MDS achieves LRE by providing an environment where American Sign Language is the primary language of instruction – and communication. Kindergartners can arrive each morning and communicate directly with the front office staff. High schoolers can spill something in the cafeteria and ask custodial staff for a mop or towel to clean it up. A basketball player can joke and strategize with his teammates and coach instead of being relegated to the bench as deaf and hard of hearing athletes often are in other settings. A large majority of students stay for MDS' afterschool programs, where they are joined by students coming from other schools to experience MDS' language-rich environment.


In an October 16, 2021, letter from the Minnesota Department of Education, MDS was informed that to comply with statute 124E.11, they must update their admissions policies to accept all students, regardless of disability status. Doing so would devastate MDS's current model of maximizing language access for deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing students.

This bill updates statute 124E.11 to allow MDS to continue its highly successful model of serving children whose primary disability is deaf, deafblind, or hard of hearing. In its thirty years, MDS has become a vibrant part of the local and nationwide Deaf and DeafBlind community, with numerous alumni rising to take leadership positions locally and nationwide. Our community recognizes MDS' high value. Districts

also do, as **75% of the students at MDS are district-placed** – an extraordinarily high number for a charter school.

We are grateful to Senators Maye Quade and Morrison and Rep. Richardson for their advocacy in protecting this priceless gem for our community's current and future children. We urge committee members to join us in supporting SF1024.

Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alicia Lane". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping tail on the letter "e".

Alicia Lane
Government Relations Director