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Educational Pathways for Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Students in Maryland

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Photo Description: Two hearing aids belonging to Director DeBerry are shown with their battery compartments open. One hearing aid contains a battery, while the other hearing aid has no battery installed, with a single battery placed beside it. Both battery compartments are open/ajar.

Every child deserves the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive in an educational environment where language is nurtured, communication is accessible, and individual strengths are recognized. For Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and DeafBlind (DHHDB) students, educational success begins with one essential foundation: access to language.

As Director of the Governor's Office of the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing (ODDBHH), I often remind families that there is no single educational pathway that fits every child. Maryland offers a continuum of educational options designed to meet students where they are, recognizing that every child develops differently, and every family has unique priorities. The goal is not to determine the "best" placement universally, but rather the best placement for each individual student.

Beginning Early: The Importance of Language

A child's educational journey begins long before entering a classroom.

From birth through age five, Maryland's Early Intervention system provides families with services that support language development, communication, and family engagement. During this critical period of language acquisition, families are introduced to either American Sign Language (ASL) or Spoken English, or bilingual approaches depending on the child's individual needs.

Research consistently demonstrates that early access to language whether signed, spoken, or both is fundamental to cognitive development, literacy, and lifelong success. Parents and caregivers play an essential role during these early years, partnering with professionals to build a strong language foundation.

Transitioning to Preschool

Around a child's third birthday, services transition from Early Intervention into Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (IDEA). That's where the child will receive their educational programming through the local school system.

At this stage, families become active participants in developing an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Together with educators and specialists, they explore the educational environment that best supports the child's language development, and academic growth.

Maryland offers several preschool options, including neighborhood preschool programs with appropriate accommodations, regional Deaf and Hard of Hearing programs, and specialized educational settings such as the Maryland School for the Deaf.

For example, one family may determine that their child thrives in a neighborhood preschool with interpreting services and speech-language supports, while another family may select a bilingual ASL/English environment where their child has direct communication with teachers and peers. Both decisions can be appropriate when guided by the child's individual educational needs.

Educational Choices Throughout the School Years

As students enter kindergarten and progress through high school, Maryland continues to provide multiple educational pathways.

For some students, the Maryland School for the Deaf provides an ideal bilingual educational environment where ASL and English are used throughout the school day. Students learn in an accessible setting that supports academic achievement while fostering leadership, cultural identity, and lifelong friendships.

Other students attend their neighborhood public schools while receiving accommodations such as educational interpreters, captioning, assistive listening technology, and services from Teachers of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

Some students benefit from regional Deaf and Hard of Hearing programs that provide specialized instruction and language support while maintaining opportunities for interaction with hearing peers.

Each educational placement is determined through careful collaboration among families, educators, specialists, and the IEP team, ensuring decisions remain focused on the student's individual needs.

Preparing for the Future

Education extends beyond graduation.

Beginning in adolescence, transition planning prepares students for adulthood by focusing on career exploration, postsecondary education, independent living, self-advocacy, and employment.

Students may pursue higher education through Maryland's colleges and universities, Gallaudet University, technical training programs, apprenticeships, or workforce development initiatives. Programs offered through the Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) and other state agencies provide valuable support that help individuals successfully transition into meaningful careers.

Families Are Essential Partners

One of Maryland's greatest strengths is recognizing that families are partners throughout the educational process.

Parents know their children best. Their voices, experiences, and aspirations help shape educational decisions from infancy through adulthood. By working together, families and educational professionals create individualized plans that promote language development, academic success, and lifelong independence.

Looking Ahead

Maryland has made tremendous progress in expanding educational opportunities for Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, and Hard of Hearing students. Yet our work continues.

As technology evolves, educational practices advance, and our understanding of language development grows, we must remain committed to ensuring that every student has full communication access and every family has the information necessary to make informed educational decisions.

Educational success is not defined by a single pathway. It is defined by providing each student with the tools, support, and opportunities needed to reach their fullest potential.

At the Governor's Office of the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing, we remain committed to partnering with families, educators, state agencies, and community organizations to promote communication access, educational excellence, and equity for all Marylanders.

Together, we can ensure that every Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, and Hard of Hearing student is empowered to succeed in school, in the workforce, and throughout life. And I believe we are all wonderfully made.

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