

Written Testimony from Maryland School for the Deaf Faculty and Staff Association

AFT Local 4828

Submitted by Edna Johnston, Member of AFT Union at

Maryland School for the Deaf, Frederick Campus

SB 556 - Collective Bargaining – Staff – Maryland School for the Deaf

Before the Senate Finance Committee

February 25, 2021

SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS

Good afternoon madam Chair and members of the Senate Finance Committee. My name is Edna Johnston, an American Sign Language (ASL) teacher and a member of AFT Local 4828, the union for educational staff working at the Maryland School for Deaf. On behalf of the hundreds of public school educators working to teach Maryland's students enrolled at our state's School for the Deaf, I call for a favorable-with-amendments report on SB 556, the bill that would grant us the right to engage in collective bargaining, a right that every other public school teacher in the state has.

As an alum of this cherished school, I am in my 15th year as a faculty at Maryland School for the Deaf-Frederick. In the first eight years, I taught High School English as a Highly Qualified (state certified) teacher- Composition, American Literature (my favorite), World Literature, Grammar, Comparative Linguistics (ASL and English), and Reading and Writing as a Process. Each subject was taught at three levels at one time or another- remedial, merit, and honors. This meant three different types of curriculum for the same content. No easy feat. Taking a break from the additional load of doing IEPs (Individualized Education Plan) for each student that I taught, I transferred to the Early Childhood Education (ECE) department for two years to work with deaf toddlers which I enjoyed since I was always fascinated with language development. That was when I became Highly Qualified in ECE and took six credits worth of classes related to childhood education. When a teacher transferred to the English department, I requested and was given a transfer to the ASL department where I have been the last five years. My co-worker and I are the only ASL teachers in high school and we each also teach a middle school (MS) class in ASL Literature because they do not have ASL teachers. We each teach ASL Linguistics and ASL Literature in High School which are required courses. Every summer, my co-worker and I work together on revamping and expanding the ASL curriculum for K-12 often for a small stipend or even without pay. We also spend tons of money out of our pockets on ASL videos, curriculum subscriptions, and conferences that are not covered by the school. We do this because we are passionate about what we do.

The faculty at the Maryland School for the Deaf are credentialed teachers in a number of fields. For example, I am APC certified which means I have an Advanced Professional Certificate in English and ECE. My post-secondary degrees include the following: Administration and Supervision: Educational Specialist (EdS- MA+ 30), Master of Arts in Deaf Education (presently known as Bilingual Education: ASL and English), Bachelor of Science in ASL Studies and Bachelor of Arts in English: Literature. In addition to these degrees, I am ASLPI- certified which means I have the skills necessary to evaluate students (and even staff) on their ASL. ASLPI stands for ASL Proficiency Interview which is based on the LPI- a very high standard used in the military to measure levels of fluency in a target language. That aside, I am also nationally certified by the ASL Teachers Association as a Master ASL teacher. This well-respected organization offers two levels of mastery in ASL pedagogy- Certified or Master. The organization provides certification to "ensure that teachers possess the skills and knowledge to teach ASL and the culture of the US Deaf community". Needless to say, I am overqualified as a teacher. I teach

because I truly care about my students. Hundreds of my co-workers are just like me. They are overqualified and underpaid.

MSD, as it is known in ASL, is a unique school because it is a bilingual community that serves all kinds of deaf students from infancy to 21. Students vary in their hearing levels- some are hard of hearing and rely on a more Englishy structure of ASL with more “Englishy” mouthing and some are profoundly deaf (like myself) who do not speak a word from the mouth but are very fluent in ASL. The degrees of bilingualism vary as well. Most of our bilingual students are ASL-dominant, English-dominant, or balanced. Few are semi-linguals and they usually come from non-signing families and therefore are language deprived. Many of them also come to MSD with a co-morbid gene. This means when one has an impaired gene (the lack of hearing for instance), there is often another impairment present- some at birth and some developed as a result of language deprivation which impacts one’s socio-emotional well-being. Some of the issues that our students may have include: anxiety, depression, reading disorders, ADHD, ASD (autism spectrum disorder), SPD (Sensory Perception Disorder), ODD (oppositional defiant disorder). Also, there are reading disorders due to language deprivation or co-morbidity as well as ASL disorders (i.e. grammar and production). This is with the deaf (and hard of hearing) students. We also teach students with special needs who require a higher level of expertise- being able to break down concepts into smaller units. We also have international students who were denied adequate education in their own countries. Year after year, we graduate a large number of students who go on to college and become productive citizens with specialized knowledge and skills. We also graduate students who become skilled laborers as well. At MSD, everyone works as a team to meet each child’s needs, no matter how diverse.

We are just like any other public school teacher in Maryland. We are different in only two ways- our students are deaf and therefore are bilingual in ASL and English. We also do not have the same protections of a collectively bargained union contract. With this bill, we hope to correct that mistake so our co-workers in all levels of employment at MSD will be protected as well. Our educational staff are part of the very few public school educators that do not enjoy collective bargaining rights. Because of this, the Maryland School for the Deaf has been unfairly harmed. We have lost a number of high-quality educators to other places with better benefits and job protections. We work in Maryland although it is ranked the 50th worst state to retire in. Our retirement accounts receive no matching contributions no matter how small. I personally had my salary frozen for NINE long years so that is more than 100,000 dollars gone. This is why I keep working throughout the year as an adjunct faculty and doing side jobs to support my family of six. Passage of this bill will go a long way towards seeing that our school—which provides vital educational services to Maryland’s deaf and hard-of-hearing students—will no longer be treated differently than any other public school in the state.

The amendments we are proposing would clarify who is eligible for collective bargaining at the school, making the process available to teachers, specialists, and other non-supervisory staff at the school. Employees who do these jobs at schools in local county school districts have unionization rights, and the amendment we are proposing would bring the Maryland School for the Deaf in line with those school systems.

Again, I urge a favorable-with-amendments report for SB 556. Thank you.

Edna F. Johnston, EdS