

Proposal to Allow Siblings of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students to Attend a USD Campus Program

Purpose:

Parents continue to ask if the Utah School for the Deaf could permit hearing siblings of deaf and hard-of-hearing students to attend a USD Campus program. A recent request by a parent was submitted to the Board of Education and USDB on October 2, 2023. Here is an excerpt from that request:

I hope this email finds you well. I am writing to you as a concerned member of our community and parent of both hearing and deaf children; to advocate for a change in policy that would grant siblings of deaf children the opportunity to attend USDB alongside their deaf siblings. This initiative not only promotes inclusivity but also offers numerous benefits to the overall development of the deaf child.

American Sign Language (ASL) is a vital mode of communication for the deaf community, and it plays an essential role in their lives. Deaf schools are designed to provide an environment where deaf children can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. However, it is equally important for these children to have the opportunity to interact with their hearing siblings, as it fosters a sense of family unity and inclusion.

Some key reasons why allowing siblings to attend USDB is beneficial:

- Enhanced Communication: ASL is the primary language used in deaf schools. Allowing hearing siblings to learn ASL and attend the same school as their deaf siblings will enable them to communicate effectively. This shared language promotes stronger bonds and helps bridge the communication gap between the siblings.*
- Emotional Support: Deaf children often face unique challenges, and having their hearing siblings nearby can offer emotional support and a sense of security. This support can be particularly crucial during moments of frustration, anxiety, or isolation that some deaf children may experience.*
- Inclusive Education: Inclusive education is a fundamental principle of our society. Allowing hearing siblings to attend deaf schools promotes an inclusive environment, where they can learn about deaf culture and the challenges their siblings face. This promotes empathy, understanding, and a sense of belonging.*
- Educational Benefits: Deaf schools are equipped with specialized resources and staff who understand the unique needs of deaf students. By attending the same school, hearing siblings can benefit from these resources and a tailored education that focuses on their individual strengths.*
- Language Development: Learning ASL at a young age can be a valuable skill for hearing children. It enhances their cognitive development and opens doors to diverse linguistic and cultural experiences, which can be advantageous in their future endeavors.*

My personal experience with our hearing and deaf daughters who attended Pre-Kindergarten together, improved their ASL and ability to communicate with each other. We wanted our children to continue to grow in ASL and learn together. However, we were told after preschool our hearing child would need to go to mainstream schooling.

When our oldest attended mainstream school, we noticed how the communication between the girls started to fall behind. Our home is a sign and spoken home, where both parents are learning ASL. We are involved in most, if not all the activities in the deaf community. Our deaf daughter does not have any auditory nerves, and malformed cochlea's. This means her only form of communication is American Sign Language. We understand the importance of American Sign Language in her life and ours moving forward. The time our hearing daughter had at the deaf school was such a benefit for our deaf daughter.

Many deaf adults I have spoken to have expressed how much of a benefit this policy change would have had in their lives.

I understand USDB is for the benefit of deaf children, and rightfully so. By opening this option, it will benefit many deaf children to feel connected to their family by improving communication. For that reason, a suggested limitation of only hearing siblings be allowed to attend, at this time, is understandable.

USDB is supportive of this request as long these students are of benefit to the deaf and hard-of-hearing students and do not deter from the mission of the USDB; which is to educate students who are Deaf, Blind, or Deaf-Blind and to provide resources and enrichment activities for them and their families so that they can achieve their full academic, social, and career potential. By allowing hearing siblings of deaf and hard-of-hearing students to attend a campus-based program, we feel the siblings can help the hearing student develop a deeper understanding of their Deaf family member, and strengthen the connection between the siblings.

Research supports that siblings can be an integral part of the language and overall development of a deaf child. The ability to communicate with a sibling may provide a significant source of familial support and language development for a deaf or hard-of-hearing child. By immersing themselves in the Deaf community, hearing siblings can develop fluency in sign language, facilitating smoother communication within the family and the community. This not only strengthens their bond but also promotes inclusivity and a sense of a shared experience.

Issues:

Currently, USDB is only allowed to enroll school-age students with a primary disability of hearing or vision loss in our self-contained schools. During the preschool years, USDB has been permitted to accept students, however, this ends when the hearing child becomes school-age. These environments are often the least restrictive environment for deaf and hard-of-hearing students and the place where these students thrive. This does separate the deaf student from their siblings who may appreciate going to school with their family member(s). In these cases, the families would like to consider the option of placing their

hearing child in one of the USD campus programs to learn ASL and to be educated alongside their family members. It would also allow the family to focus on the activities of one school instead of spreading between several schools for their children’s education.

Recommendation:

The Board of Education has the authority to determine who is eligible to be served by the Utah Schools for the Deaf and the Blind as outlined in [53E-8-401\(6\)\(b\)](#). It is recommended that the USBE create a Board Rule to allow USDB, under certain conditions, to enroll hearing siblings of deaf or hard-of-hearing students currently enrolled in a USD campus program.

The Board rule would need to honor the mission and instructional objectives of USDB; which is to educate students who are Deaf, Blind, or Deaf-Blind and to provide resources and enrichment activities for them and their families so that they can achieve their full academic, social, and career potential. It is important that the hearing siblings benefit the deaf and hard-of-hearing students and be limited to siblings willing to learn ASL and embrace the Deaf Culture.

It is recommended that there be no tuition cost to the hearing sibling and that USDB receive the WPU funding for that student. USDB is responsible for ensuring that the enrollment of a hearing sibling has no detrimental effect on deaf or hard-of-hearing students.

Considerations:	Limitations
Enrollment must be a benefit to the deaf children and the hearing sibling	Enrollment is limited to siblings of deaf or hard-of-hearing students enrolled in a campus program.
Enrolled hearing siblings will be eligible to participate in all USDB activities that are not restricted to a deaf-only experience; such as out-of-state competitions specific to Deaf students.	Enrollment is subject to an intake and evaluation process in order to be considered and to determine if enrollment is appropriate.
Hearing siblings retain all other rights of public school students	Enrollment is limited to one hearing sibling per grade level.
Hearing siblings of deaf students are eligible for enrollment at USD when they enhance and improve the educational experience of deaf students.	Parents shall agree at the time of registration that enrollment for hearing siblings is discretionary, conditional, and may be rescinded at any time, “with or without cause”
Link to ways of including siblings of deaf children in the language development of deaf or hard-of-hearing students.	Hearing siblings with behavior problems, or other conditions that would impede the

	development of deaf or hard-of-hearing students would not be eligible for enrollment
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