

Dear Members of the Oregon Legislature,

I am writing to you as the mother of Rhys Lyddane, an incredible 2.5 year old born with bilateral sensorineural hearing loss, and the first Deaf person in our family. My family's journey has been both challenging and eye-opening, and it is with deep conviction that I express my strong support for HB2953. This bill, which prioritizes early intervention and support for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children, would have an immeasurable impact on families like mine.

When Rhys was born, he failed his first two hearing tests. When he failed, we heard from those at the hospital "I'm sure he will be fine. Most kids just have fluid in their ears. You may want to check in with your pediatrician." Not only did we fast track meeting with our pediatrician but we also advocated to have him evaluated at OHSU as soon as we could as we wanted to know what our future may look like. Thanks to early identification and a series of services, we began to get the support we desperately needed. We connected with Linn Benton Lincoln ESD (Educational Service District), and within two weeks, we were assigned a Special Education Case Manager and a Teacher of the Deaf (TOD). The first meeting was emotional as we were scared, felt like we did not know what to do, and we feared that we would not have the resources needed to help our baby. Our TOD was (and still is) incredible and has been a lifeline during what was an incredibly difficult and emotional time for our family.

The services we've received through early intervention have been invaluable. Our TOD has met weekly with our family and regularly with Rhys's daycare provider. She also made sure to include our hearing daughter and my mom in activities, ensuring that Rhys's entire family is involved in the process. The videos, resources, and connections she made for us, such as introducing us to Hands & Voices of Oregon, set a solid foundation that helped our family navigate the new diagnosis.

As Rhys began his language development, our TOD worked with us, supporting our learning of American Sign Language (ASL) and assisting us with his hearing devices to make sure Rhys had every opportunity to learn to communicate. She also modeled how to interact and play with Rhys in ways that would increase his language exposure. The importance of these moments cannot be overstated. Without this kind of support, lasting cognitive damage from language deprivation is a threat as under-resourced families are less likely to know how to provide a language rich environment for their child. Programs like Early Intervention (EI) and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) are vital in ensuring that our children grow up with the language skills they need.

Through these services, we were connected with other families in our community who were experiencing similar challenges. There are not many of us, so finding others who understand the weight of decisions like hearing devices, communication strategies, and daycare concerns was incredibly valuable. These connections helped us navigate an often isolating experience, and they continue to offer support as we work through Rhys's journey.

HB2953 is a critical step in expanding the support available for families like ours. The stagnant level of funding is failing our children and our families. Inadequate funding has already impacted families. We have seen it firsthand with those we have met not only through LBL ESD but also Hands & Voices of Oregon. School Districts are making poor decisions that are forever impacting our children based on the costs and availability of resources. Just because Rhys was born with a disability does not make him any less deserving to have access to an education. Please remove the percentage cap so that our children can have vital services they need to access the same education as their non-disabled peers.

I urge you to support HB2953, and help ensure that no family has to navigate the challenges we faced without the necessary resources and support. By passing this bill, you'll provide a brighter future for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children and other special education families across Oregon.

Thank you for your time and your dedication to improving the lives of all children in our state.

Sincerely,
Kim Lyddane
Albany, Oregon