

John Bel Edwards
GOVERNOR



Jason "Jay" Isch
VICE CHAIRPERSON

State of Louisiana
Louisiana Commission for the Deaf
Board of Commissioners

To: Board of Directors
Louisiana Special School District
2888 Brightside Drive
Baton Rouge, LA 70820

October 27, 2022

From: Jay Isch, Vice Chairperson, acting on behalf of the Board of Commissioners for the Louisiana Commission for the Deaf
628 n. 4th Street
Baton Rouge, LA 70802

RE: Community concerns regarding the administration of the Louisiana School for the Deaf

To the Board of Directors of the Louisiana Special School District:

On behalf of the Louisiana Commission for the Deaf (LCD) Board of Commissioners, I am writing this letter with concerns we have collectively received from members of our community with the continuing situation at the Louisiana School for the Deaf (LSD) and how they are being administrated by the Special School District (SSD).

First, I would like to reiterate that the LCD Board of Commissioners has the legal right to advocate for the well-being of the Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard of hearing population in the state of Louisiana. This Board was established over 40 years ago to provide services, all the while bridging gaps in our community to valuable resources. We are designed to provide credible expertise including acting as a form of checks and balances for circumstances like these.

Secondly, the LCD Board of Commissioners passed two motions at our Special Session held on October 26, 2022, at the Louisiana State Capitol. The first motion is to share the concerns we have received from the community regarding the ongoing situation at SSD in their administration of LSD.

These following concerns have been made into a matter of public record at our Special Session on October 26, 2022, at the State Capitol:

1. SSD Acting Supt and Board did not respond to multiple meeting requests by concerned members of the Deaf community.
2. Numerous Louisiana School for the Deaf and Visually Impaired (LSDVI) and SSD staff have resigned, and some have filed formal grievances against the current SSD administration, but the SSD Board has not acted possibly in violation of their own policies. Most recently, Dr. Heather Laine was terminated after filing two grievances directly to the Special School District Board of Directors, which also has reportedly yet to be resolved.
3. SSD administrators have shown up to meetings or discussions without interpreters or have attempted to use "signing" employees rather than the LSD staff interpreters to facilitate dialogue with LSD staff and students which is in direct violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
4. Positions at the school level are being eliminated and or changed significantly by SSD administration without inclusion of LSD or LSVI administrators.
5. Positions are being filled by SSD administration with those who are without knowledge or experience working with Deaf/visually impaired children or special education experience, especially Deaf Education.
6. Reports of positions being filled while the hiring period were still open.
7. Students may not be receiving services mandated on their Individual Education Plans (IEP) due to staff shortages; While it is widely recognized the difficulty in finding individuals with the appropriate credentials to fill these roles, unused Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funds exist that could be used to provide these mandated services at LSDVI, per review of public records. However, SSD administration has not provided any strategies for ensuring sufficient IEP services are being provided.
8. Reports of SSD administration mandating staff to serve additional students which may be in violation of caseload limits as described Louisiana Administrative Code.
9. SSD administration has demoted, made title changes, and/or terminated staff without a formal evaluation or Performance Improvement Plan.
10. Access to the grievance form for unclassified employees has been removed from SSD internal staff website.

11. Concerns with SSD using a local Consulting firm with no knowledge or expertise in Deaf education in their search for new SSD Superintendent. This consulting firm may have not met one of their contractual obligations in gathering input by stakeholders regarding the criteria of qualifications for this important position.

You may view the video recording of the meeting at:

https://house.louisiana.gov/H_Video/VideoArchivePlayer?v=house/2022/oct/1026_LA_CFTD

Our second motion: the LCD Board of Commissioners is formally requesting a joint meeting with the SSD Board of Directors. The LCD Board of Commissioners recognizes the urgency and severity of the repercussions ill-advised decisions can have on the long-term sustainability of our community as a fixture of our society- our norms, our core values, our principles, our unique culture, our professions, and above all, our language. We hope that in meeting with you, we can support you and be utilized as a resource of expertise as you navigate your responsibilities to the Special School District.

American Sign Language and Deaf Education are over 200 years old and ingrained in civilization with countless research of the legitimacy of its language foundation, uniqueness, benefits, and rich history. However, advancing technology currently moves at a pace much faster which has created multiple barriers, misconceptions, and sometimes bad advice, by those who simply do not understand us or our educational and linguistic needs. Plainly stated, competent leadership is imperative. Our only disability is the fact that we are the sole linguistic minority in a world of audible language users.

There is nothing about us, without us.

Regards,



Jay Isch
Vice Chairperson

Approved by the La Commission for the Deaf Board of Commissioners: Vice Chair Jay Isch, Deaf Representative; Secretary, Dr. Ashley Argrave, Professional Representative; Brad Wellons, Hard of Hearing Representative; Megan Wimberly, DeafBlind Representative; Cammy Gaspar, Parent of a Deaf Child Representative; Jimmy Challis Gore, President, La Association of the Deaf

Representative; Sherry Powell, Department of Children and Family Services Designee; Bambi Polotzola, Director, Governor's Office of Disability Affairs.

Endorsed by the following:

Louisiana Association of the Deaf, Inc.

Greater New Orleans Association of the Deaf

Baton Rouge Association of the Deaf

Lafayette Athletic Association of the Deaf

Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council