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Iowa Finally Counted Its Deaf Children. A Third of Them Had No Education Plan at All.

Heather Grizzle · November 17, 2026

Iowa counted 3,269 deaf and hard of hearing learners. 1,097 had no plan, and only 9 percent of young deaf children were assessed for language.

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A fourth grader in a small district outside Ottumwa wears hearing aids in both ears. She does well enough on tests that nobody has ever written her an IEP or a 504 plan. Her teacher seats her near the front. Her area education agency's audiologist checks her equipment once a year. When the class discussion moves fast, she laughs a half second after everyone else, and when the teacher turns to the whiteboard, the lesson goes with her. Nobody has written any of that down, because nobody has been asked to.

On paper at the federal level, she does not exist as a deaf or hard of hearing child, because Iowa does not sort children by disability. On paper at the state level, she does exist. She is one of 1,097.

She is a composite. The 1,097 is not. It comes from the Iowa Department of Education's own 2026 report to the Legislature under the state's language milestones law, which built a count of deaf and hard of hearing children that Iowa had never kept. The count found 3,269 deaf and hard of hearing learners from birth to 21 in 2024-25. A third of them, 1,097, were on no education plan of any kind. No IEP. No infant and toddler plan. No 504 plan. Nothing a parent could hold up in a meeting and say, this is what you promised my child.

To put that number somewhere you can see it: the Iowa School for the Deaf in Council Bluffs averaged 113 students in 2023-24. You could fill that school nearly ten times over with the deaf and hard of hearing children Iowa itself says are on no plan at all.

Version 2.0 of the National Deaf Education Data Index read all 348 of Iowa's public education units and every law, rule, budget and audit behind them. Iowa turned out to be the state where the federal record says nothing about deaf children on purpose, where one law produced the most honest number in the state, and where one department now runs nearly every piece of the system and checks most of its own homework.

IN BRIEF

- Iowa does not classify special education students by disability, so its federal child count reports no deaf or hard of hearing children at all, by design.
- The 2022 language milestones law built the count the state never kept: 3,269 deaf and hard of hearing learners from birth to 21 in 2024-25. 1,097 of them were on no IEP, IFSP or 504 plan.
- The same law requires language assessment in ASL and English. Only 156 of 1,824 young deaf children were assessed, 9 percent, and the two ASL tests made up 1 percent each of the assessments given.
- The Iowa School for the Deaf, now run by the Department of Education, cost $108,904 per student in 2023-24. Its agreements with Nebraska and South Dakota are not published, and the published route in runs through the district's IEP team, not the family.
- All nine area education agencies publish hearing services. Two of 325 school districts publish deaf education staff of their own. Sixteen Iowa bodies received notice of these findings. None answered.

HOW THIS WAS MEASURED

The National Deaf Education Data Index reads what a state and its schools publish about deaf and hard of hearing students. It does not visit classrooms, survey families or rate services. For Iowa, version 2.0 of the state file read 348 units on 15 and 16 October 2026: 325 school districts, the nine area education agencies as units of their own, twelve founding group charter schools, the Iowa School for the Deaf and Iowa Educational Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired. The Code, the rules, the appropriations acts, the Auditor of State's reports and the language milestones reports were read as original documents.

Each unit receives one code. PROGRAM means the unit publishes something specific to deaf and hard of hearing students: a named program, a service, or a named post such as a teacher of the deaf or an audiologist. MENTION means hearing appears only in a general way. NONE FOUND means the pages were read and nothing specific was published. Eight units could not be read.

The codes measure publication, not service. In Iowa, the area education agencies employ the teachers of the deaf, so a district coded NONE FOUND may be fully served by its agency. The Index never estimates a missing figure, and where two published figures disagree it records both. Where this article states a view rather than a finding, it says so.

A state that chose not to sort

Iowa is noncategorical. Its special education rule, 281 IAC 41.111(4), carries the federal permission that "Nothing in the Act requires that children be classified by their disability." Most states read that sentence and keep classifying anyway, because classification is how you count, and counting is how you plan. Iowa took the permission and ran with it. A child in Iowa has a disability or does not. The state does not record which kind.

There are good arguments for that. Labels can follow a child for life. A noncategorical system is supposed to serve the need in front of it, not the name on the file. A child who needs an interpreter should get one whether the paperwork says hearing impairment or something else.

But the bill comes due in the federal file. For fall 2024, the federal child count prints a dash in every educational environment and an asterisk in the early childhood totals for hearing impairment and for deaf-blindness in Iowa. It counts 68,190 school-age children with disabilities of any kind and 4,433 young children. How many of them are deaf, how many sit in a regular classroom, how many attend a separate school, how many board: the federal record cannot say. A researcher comparing states finds Iowa blank. A legislator asking how many deaf children the state serves finds nothing to cite. A parent asking whether her daughter is one of fifty or one of five thousand finds silence.

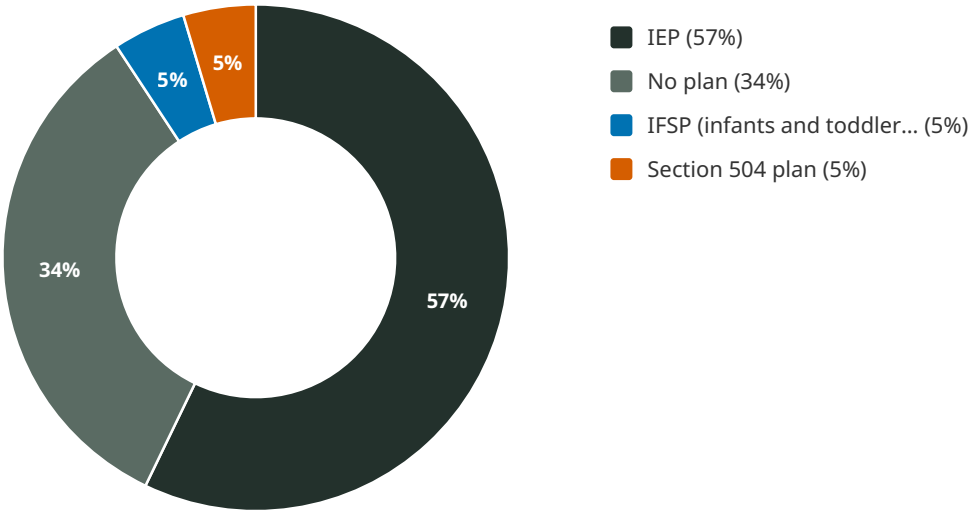
On the federal record, deaf children in Iowa are absent by design. That design held for decades. Then a law broke it.

The law that built a count

In 2022 Iowa passed a language milestones law, now Iowa Code 256.106. It came out of a national push, often called LEAD-K, built on one simple idea: deaf children fall behind in language not because they are deaf, but because nobody notices the delay until it is too late to catch up cheaply. Iowa's law directs the Department of Education to set milestones "from birth through age eight, in American sign language, English, and other languages as needed," to maintain "a valid and reliable two-fold language assessment approach, utilizing both American sign language and English," and to report to the Legislature every year.

To do that, the department needed to know who the children were. You cannot assess children you cannot find. So it built the ACHIEVE Deaf and Hard of Hearing Database, a statewide record of learners from birth to 21 who have been screened or tested by an audiometrist or audiologist. For the first time, Iowa had a list.

The 2026 report counts 3,269 deaf and hard of hearing learners from birth to 21 in 2024-25, up from 3,183 the year before. It sorts them by plan: 152 on an infant and toddler plan, 1,869 on an IEP, 151 on a Section 504 plan, and 1,097 on no plan at all.



Iowa's deaf and hard of hearing learners by plan, 2024-25
Source: Iowa Department of Education, 2026 report under Iowa Code 256.106(7)

View data

Category	Learners
IEP	1869
No plan	1097
IFSP (infants and toddlers)	152
Section 504 plan	151

That third bucket is the number Iowa's noncategorical system could never have produced on its own. Think about what it means to be on no plan. No written services. No written accommodations. No annual meeting where someone has to sit across the table from a parent and explain what is working. No legal paper trail if things go wrong.

Some of those 1,097 children may need none of that. A child with a mild loss in one ear, a good hearing aid and a teacher who pays attention may do fine. But "may" is carrying a lot of weight in that sentence. Nobody in the published record has looked.

The report counts them. It does not say who they are, where they go to school, how they are doing, or whether anyone has checked whether they need a plan. Counting a child is the first step. It is not the same as serving one.

IOWA'S LANGUAGE MILESTONES COUNT, 2024-25

3,269
deaf and hard of hearing learners, birth to 21

1,097
on no IEP, IFSP or 504 plan

1,824
ages birth to 8, the ages the law covers

156
young children assessed for language, 9 percent

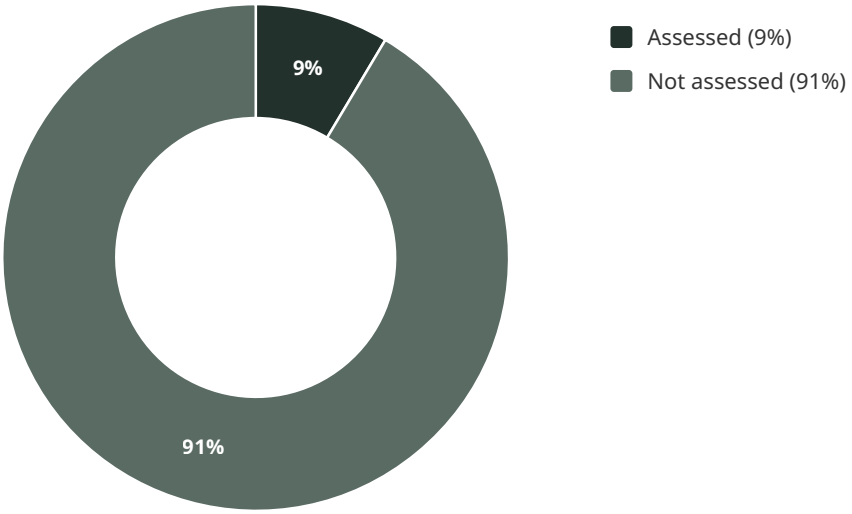
Source: Iowa Department of Education, 2026 legislative report under Iowa Code 256.106(7)

Nine percent

The language data is where the law's promise and its reach come apart.

The milestones law is about the youngest children, birth through eight. The 2026 report says 1,824 of the 3,269 learners counted were in that range. Of those 1,824, 156 were assessed for language. The report itself puts the participation rate at 9 percent. That means more than nine in ten of the young deaf and hard of hearing children the law was written for had no language assessment on the state's record in 2024-25.

Of the 156 who were assessed, 53 percent scored below average.



Young deaf and hard of hearing children (birth to 8) assessed for language, Iowa 2024-25

Source: Iowa Department of Education, 2026 report under Iowa Code 256.106(7)

View data

Category	Children
Assessed	156
Not assessed	1668

Read those two numbers together. In the small group the state did assess, more than half were behind. The state has no published idea how the other 1,668 are doing. NCG's view, marked as such: a sample that small, and that self-selected, cannot tell Iowa whether the 53 percent is the floor or the ceiling. It can only tell Iowa that it should be looking much harder than it is.

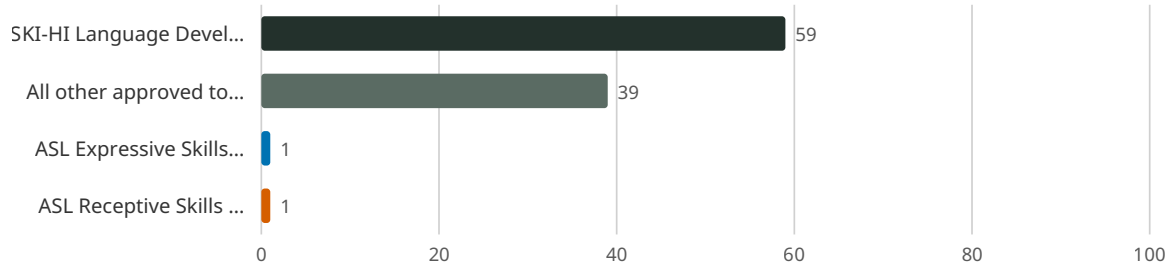
The previous year's report counted 651 children aged birth to eight. This year's counts 1,824. That jump almost certainly reflects the database filling in rather than nearly three times as many young deaf children appearing in a year, and the Index does not reconcile it. But it cuts the same way: the more completely Iowa finds its young deaf children, the smaller the share it is assessing.

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>
> NCG

Which test, and in which language

The milestones law is bilingual on its face. It requires milestones and assessment in both American Sign Language and English. The 2026 report lists eleven approved assessments, and to the department's credit, ASL tools are on the list: the ASL Expressive Skills Test, the ASL Receptive Skills Test and the Visual Communication and Sign Language Checklist among them.

Being on the list and being used are different things. Of the 156 assessments given in 2024-25, 59 percent were the SKI-HI Language Development Scale, a general developmental scale. The ASL Expressive Skills Test made up 1 percent. The ASL Receptive Skills Test made up 1 percent. One percent of 156 is one or two children.



Language assessments given in Iowa, 2024-25 (percent of 156)

Source: Iowa Department of Education, 2026 report under Iowa Code 256.106(7)

View data

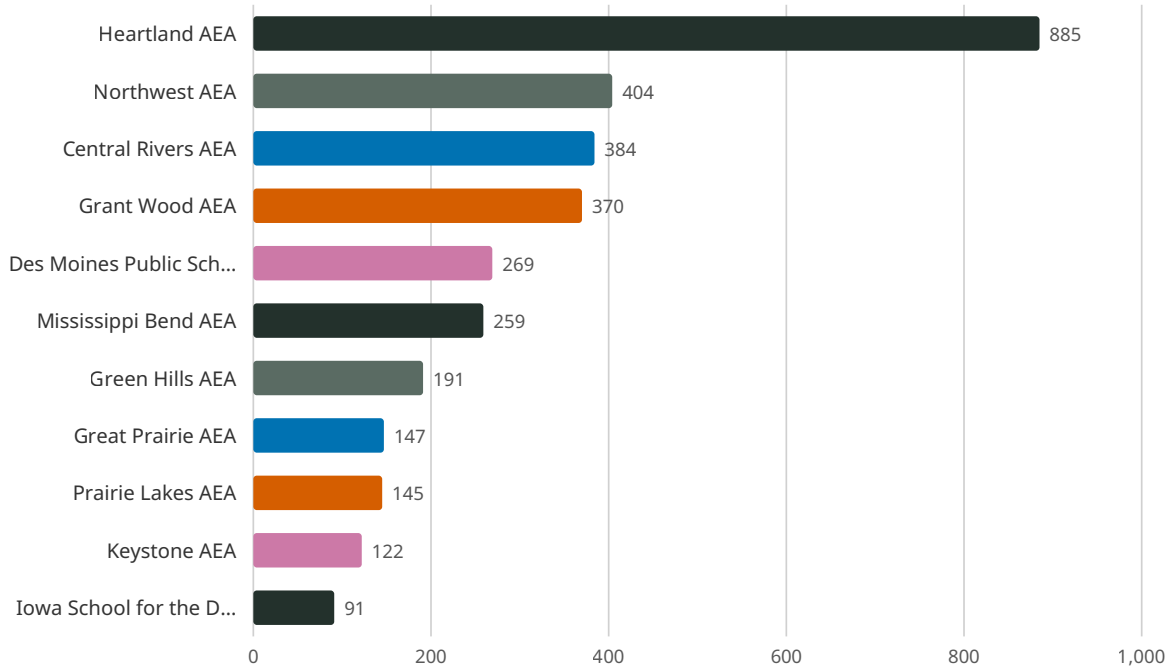
Category	Percent
SKI-HI Language Development Scale	59
All other approved tools	39
ASL Expressive Skills Test	1
ASL Receptive Skills Test	1

Here is why that matters, and this is NCG's interpretation. A general developmental scale can tell you how a deaf child compares with hearing children of the same age. It tells you much less about whether a signing child is actually acquiring ASL, the language the law names first. A state can pass a bilingual law and still run a mostly monolingual measurement system, and the report the Legislature reads every year will look fine. Nobody has to lie for that to happen. They just have to use the familiar test.

Outside Council Bluffs and Des Moines, no school unit in Iowa publishes a word about how deaf children are taught to communicate.

Where the count stops

The ACHIEVE count is published by area education agency and for two specific units. That is the farthest down it goes.



Deaf and hard of hearing learners counted in ACHIEVE, by location, 2024-25

Source: Iowa Department of Education, 2026 report under Iowa Code 256.106(7)

View data

Category	Learners
Heartland AEA	885
Northwest AEA	404
Central Rivers AEA	384
Grant Wood AEA	370
Des Moines Public Schools	269
Mississippi Bend AEA	259
Green Hills AEA	191
Great Prairie AEA	147
Prairie Lakes AEA	145
Keystone AEA	122
Iowa School for the Deaf	91

Heartland, the central Iowa agency, carries 885 of the state's deaf and hard of hearing learners on its own, more than a quarter of the state. The Iowa School for the Deaf holds 91. Des Moines, the only district that publishes a real program, holds 269.

The count is not published by district. So a parent in Newton, or Ottumwa, or Spencer cannot look up how many deaf children are in her district, whether her child is one of three or one of thirty, or whether the district down the road has more. The Index's district-level publication measure cannot be computed for Iowa for the same reason. The best count in the state stops one level above where families actually live. The data exists, because the database has to know where each child is to count them by agency. Publishing it by district is a choice not yet made.

One department, every lever

In 2023 Iowa did something most states would not. It put deaf education under one roof. The Iowa School for the Deaf, founded in 1855 as the Iowa Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, moved from the Board of Regents to the Department of Education, which "shall … Govern the Iowa school for the deaf" under Iowa Code 256.95. Educational services for blind students moved with it, and the two share a single superintendent.

A year later, House File 2612 rebuilt the nine area education agencies. Their boards became advisory. Each agency's special education director became an employee of the Department's special education division. Districts now send 90 percent of their special education support services money to their agency and keep 10 percent. In 2026 the Legislature amended the same chapter again, through House Files 2357 and 2754, effective 1 July 2026. None of those changes carries a provision specific to deaf or hard of hearing students, and whether they change how a teacher of the deaf reaches a classroom cannot be answered from the published record.

HOW IOWA PUT DEAF EDUCATION UNDER ONE DEPARTMENT

1855
Iowa Institute for the Deaf and Dumb created
Senate File 51 founds what becomes the Iowa School for the Deaf.

2011
Vinton blind school campus closes
Blind education goes itinerant. The deaf school stays residential.

2022
Language milestones law
Iowa Code 256.106 requires ASL and English milestones and an annual report.

2023
School moves to the Department of Education
The Board of Regents no longer governs the deaf school.

2024
House File 2612
AEA boards become advisory; special education directors become Department employees.

2026

House Files 2357 and 2754

Chapter 273 amended again, effective 1 July 2026.

So follow the chain. The state school answers to the Department. The agencies that employ the teachers of the deaf have special education directors who answer to the Department. Early intervention runs from the Department. The milestones report that tells the Legislature how deaf children are doing is written by the Department. Iowa is the mirror image of states like Illinois, where the same functions are scattered across agencies that do not talk to each other.

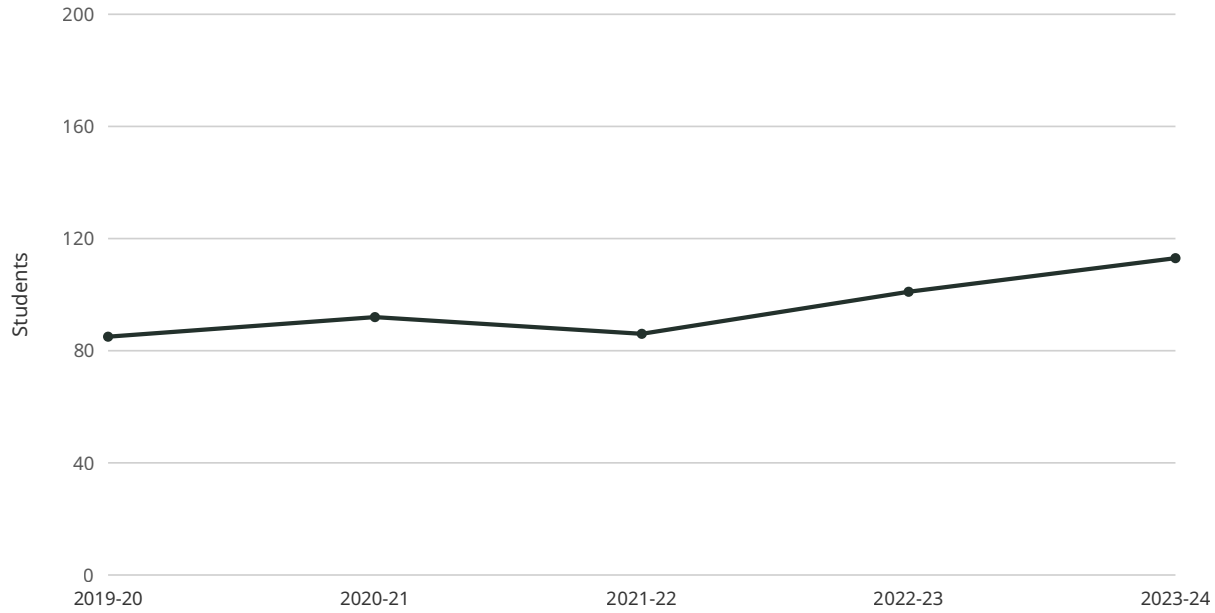
This part is genuinely good. Iowa has one place to ask every question in this article. Nobody can point at another agency. The money for the school sits by name in the education appropriations act, where anyone can find it.

This part is not. When one department runs the school, directs the agencies, writes the outcome report and decides what gets published, it is grading its own work. The Auditor of State's last report addressed to the Iowa School for the Deaf itself covers fiscal 2023, with no findings. The Auditor's database lists no school-specific report after the transfer. Nobody has published a special audit of what the 2024 restructuring did to services for deaf children. Consolidation made the system easier to see. It has not yet made it easier to check.

The school in Council Bluffs

The Iowa School for the Deaf calls itself "a language immersion program offering both day and boarding options." Its students "use sign language, spoken language or both," and its faculty "are specialized teachers of the deaf." It offers "100% Free tuition, room, board & transportation," with boarding students driven home every Friday at noon. Superintendent Chris Kaftan arrived in 2024 and also leads the blind services program.

The Auditor of State's table is the clearest picture of its size and cost. For the year ended 30 June 2024, the school spent $14,776,380 from its general educational fund, $12,306,130 once public service and building repair are taken out, for an average enrollment of 113. That works out to $108,904 per student, down from $115,100 the year before. Enrollment has climbed for two straight years.



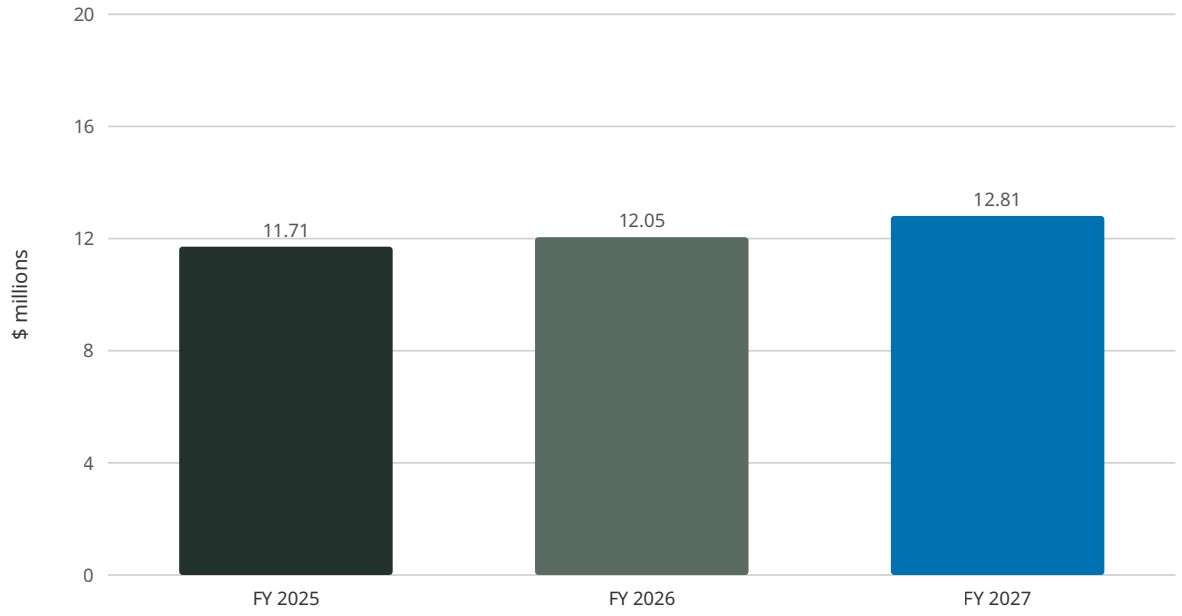
Iowa School for the Deaf average enrollment (Auditor of State)

Source: Auditor of State, report on the Iowa Department of Education, FY 2024

View data

X	Students
2019-20	85
2020-21	92
2021-22	86
2022-23	101
2023-24	113

The Legislature has been putting more money in. It appropriated $11,707,253 and 120 positions for fiscal 2025, $12,049,644 for fiscal 2026, and $12,813,313 and 132 positions for fiscal 2027, the last adding a nurse, a special education director and a school safety system.



State appropriation to the Iowa School for the Deaf ($ millions)

Source: Senate File 2435 (FY 2025), Senate File 647 (FY 2026), House File 2783 (FY 2027)

View data

Category	$ millions
FY 2025	11.71
FY 2026	12.05
FY 2027	12.81

A note on that per-student figure, because it gets thrown around. $108,904 is a lot of money. It is also what a residential school with interpreters, deaf teachers, dorm staff, transportation home every week and a language-rich environment actually costs, and the Auditor's computation already strips out construction and storm repair. The honest comparison is not the school against an average Iowa classroom. It is the school against what it would cost to give a deaf child in a rural district the same access to language all day long, which nobody in Iowa has published.

The door you cannot open yourself

Here is the part families find out the hard way. The Iowa School for the Deaf is free. The door is not yours to open.

Admission runs under Iowa Code 256.97. A resident under twenty-one "who has a hearing loss which is too severe to acquire an education in the public schools is eligible to attend." Read that sentence slowly. Eligibility is written as a deficit: a child qualifies when the public schools have been found unable to educate her. And on the published record, the route in is an IEP placement that the resident district initiates. The school describes its own referral process, but nothing it publishes gives a family a way around the district. The district's team, with the area education agency's staff at the table, decides whether a child goes.

HOW A DEAF CHILD REACHES THE IOWA SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF

Family asks for the state school
The published route runs through the district, not the family.

→ **District IEP team meets**

District IEP team meets
The area education agency's staff usually sit on the team.

→ **Team decides placement**

Team decides placement
Under 256.97 the question is whether the hearing loss is too severe to be educated in the public schools.

Yes → Placement at the Iowa School for the Deaf

No → Child stays in the district, served by the AEA

That design puts the district, and the agency whose teachers serve the district, in the position of deciding whether a child leaves them. NCG's view: that is a structural conflict of interest, whoever sits in the room and however good their intentions. Nothing

in the published record shows how often families ask for the state school, how often teams say no, or how those decisions differ from one agency to the next.

Since the Iowa file was released, families have contacted NCG describing this: requests for the state school that went nowhere, and a sense that some regions simply do not send children to Council Bluffs. NCG cannot verify any individual account from the published record, and is not naming anyone. That is what public records are for. On 16 November 2026 NCG filed three requests with the Iowa Department of Education under Iowa Code chapter 22: for records on deaf and hard of hearing students, for Iowa School for the Deaf placement decisions in the Green Hills region, where the school itself sits, and for Green Hills records on deaf and hard of hearing students. The Department acknowledged all three the next day. What comes back will be reported here.

Iowa parents have also taken the question to Governor-elect Rob Sand's transition, asking for a direct route for families to seek enrollment at the state school without a district veto. Whether the new administration takes it up is its decision to make. The question is now on the record.

Secrets at the state line

The school says "a handful" of its students come from Nebraska and South Dakota under "agreements in place with some neighboring states." The statute says nonresidents "may be admitted … upon such terms as may be fixed by the department," and that "The fee for nonresidents shall be set by the department." Neither the agreements nor the fee is published.

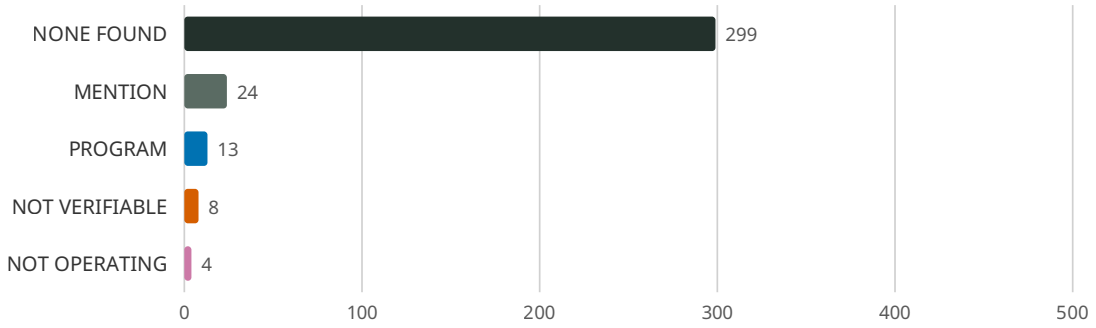
That matters beyond Iowa. Nebraska closed its own school for the deaf in 1998, and the Iowa school is, in practice, Nebraska's residential option. So two states are running a deaf residential arrangement on terms neither will show the public. How many Nebraska children board in Council Bluffs, who pays, how much, and whether Iowa taxpayers are covering any of the gap: none of it can be read anywhere. These are public schools serving public children with public money. The terms should be public too.

Nine agencies that publish, 325 districts that mostly do not

Every one of Iowa's nine area education agencies publishes hearing services on its own website: audiologists, audiometrists and teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing.

Keystone, which version 1.0 of the file could not read past its home page, publishes the same standard text as the others. On that, Iowa is better than most states.

The districts are a different story. Two of 325 publish deaf education staff of their own. Des Moines Public Schools runs a Deaf/Hard of Hearing Program that instructs "through a total communication approach, using both American Sign Language and printed/spoken English," from home visits for infants to site-based K-12 classes. Dallas Center-Grimes lists an interpreter staff department and a sign language interpreter position. Twenty-four districts mention hearing in passing. Two hundred ninety-nine publish nothing.



How Iowa's 348 education units were coded

Source: NDEDI Iowa state file, v2.0

View data

Category	Units
NONE FOUND	299
MENTION	24
PROGRAM	13
NOT VERIFIABLE	8
NOT OPERATING	4

Under Iowa's design, that silence is the system working. The agency employs the teacher of the deaf, so the district has nothing of its own to post. But think about what that means for a family that just moved to Mount Pleasant with a deaf six-year-old. They go to the district website. It says nothing. They have to already know that Iowa runs deaf education one level up, at an agency whose board, since 2024, no longer governs it, and whose special education director works for the state. Knowing where to look should not be the price of getting help.

The agencies after 2024

Iowa's area education agencies have been rebuilt twice in three years. Supporters of House File 2612 argued that districts should control more of the money and that the agencies' results did not justify their independence. The agencies and many parents warned that the change would thin out the specialized services, deaf education among them, that small districts cannot provide alone. Both sides made their case hard in 2024.

What the published record cannot yet tell anyone is who was right about deaf children. No agency publishes a headcount of its teachers of the deaf. No report breaks out what share of the 90 percent flow pays for hearing services. The nine agency financial audits for fiscal 2025, filed between November 2025 and March 2026, carry no hearing line. If deaf education got thinner in a given region after 2024, there is no published number that would show it.

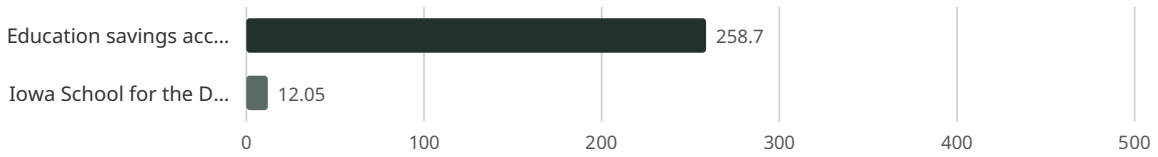
Money with no name on it

The school has its own line in the budget. Everything else is harder to find.

Iowa's special education funding runs on three weighting tiers set in 1975 and now expressed as additional weightings of 0.72, 1.21 and 2.74. There is no deaf or hearing weight. The only place hearing appears in the weighting documentation is as a sample case: "Hearing Impaired with full time Interpreter in Regular Class." A deaf child is, in Iowa's funding system, an example in a manual. What the state actually spends on deaf children outside Council Bluffs cannot be added up from anything published.

Now set that beside the other education program Iowa grew fastest. The Students First education savings account reached 27,866 students using it at an accredited nonpublic school on 1 October 2024, up from 16,757 the year before. It became universal

from 2025-26. The Auditor's June 2026 analysis put the fiscal 2026 cost at roughly 258.7 million dollars.



Two Iowa education lines, fiscal 2026 ($ millions)

Source: Auditor of State, June 2026 ESA analysis; Senate File 647

View data

Category	$ millions
Education savings accounts (Auditor's estimate)	258.7
Iowa School for the Deaf appropriation	12.05

That is more than twenty times the state school's appropriation for the same year. The account program reports recipients by grade, gender, race and household income. It does not report by disability. Whether any deaf child holds one, and whether any family has left a public program that served a deaf child for a private school that may have no interpreter at all, is unknowable from the published record.

The oversight of that program already has a paper trail. The Auditor of State's report on the Department for fiscal 2024 carries two findings on it, one on controls over the contract with its administrator and one on the Department's refusal to provide documentation of those controls, which the Department disputes. The state auditor whose office wrote those findings, Rob Sand, won the governor's race on 3 November 2026 and takes office in January, with Republican majorities in both chambers of the Legislature. The education savings accounts were among the sharpest disagreements of the campaign. That gives Iowa a rare moment: the Department that runs deaf education is about to answer to a governor who has already audited it.

Every interpreter licensed, one place to train a teacher

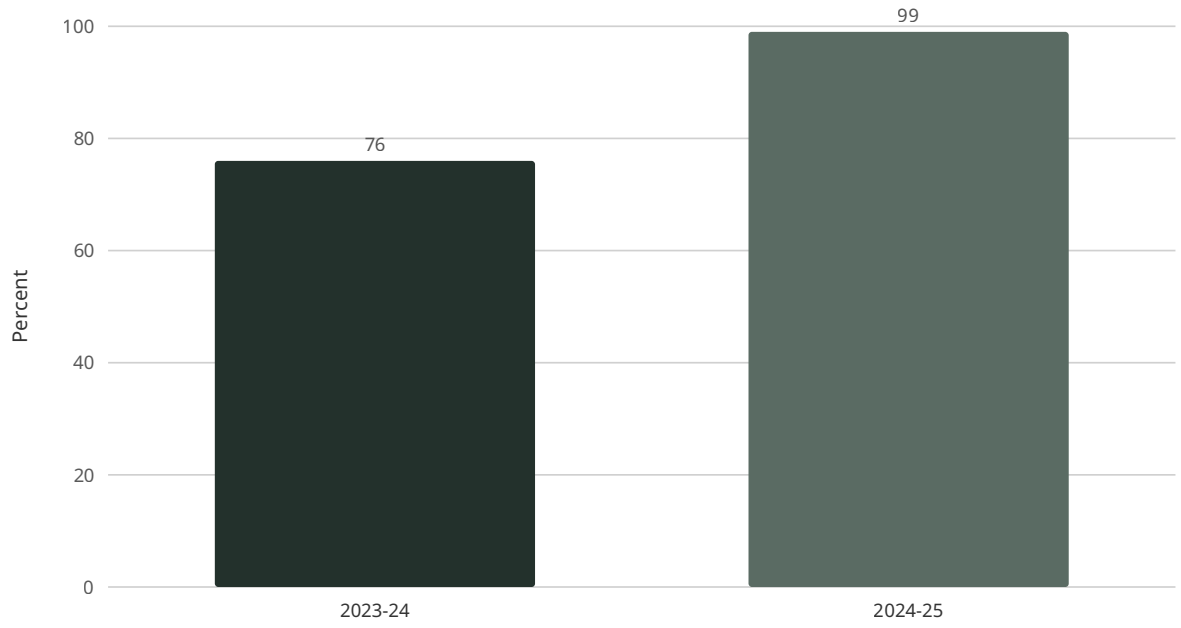
Some of Iowa's rules are among the clearest in the country, and this is one of the parts that is good. Iowa Code 154E.3 says "Every person providing interpreting or transliterating services in this state shall be licensed." The licensing rule, 481 IAC 961.2, accepts national certification or "the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA) with a score of 3.5 or above." A temporary license under supervision lasts two years and may be renewed once, four years in all. The only exemption is a substitute working no more than thirty school days a year. The federal personnel file counts 103.22 full-time interpreters and 39.38 audiologists in Iowa schools, all fully certified. Many states would love to say that.

The teacher pipeline is a different picture. The Birth-21 Deaf or Hard of Hearing endorsement "requires applicants go through an approved program," and the only college program offering it in the state is the University of Northern Iowa's 34-hour teaching minor. One minor, at one university, is the only route to the credential inside the state. The state publishes no headcount of teachers of the deaf. The agencies name theirs in staff directories without counting them. So nobody can say, from anything public, whether Iowa has enough teachers of the deaf, where the vacancies are, or how many children each one carries.

Babies, done right

Here is the part of the Iowa record that shows what the state can do when it decides to.

Iowa Code 135.131 is plain: "All newborns and infants born in this state shall be screened for hearing loss." Early intervention, Early ACCESS, sits in the Department of Education and is delivered through the agencies, and the 2026 report states the rule without hedging: "learners diagnosed as DHH are automatically eligible for Early ACCESS." It found 154 deaf or hard of hearing children under three in 2024-25, and 152 of them, 99 percent, on a family service plan. The year before, the report found 146 children and 111 on a plan, 76 percent.



Deaf and hard of hearing children under three on a family service plan, Iowa (percent)

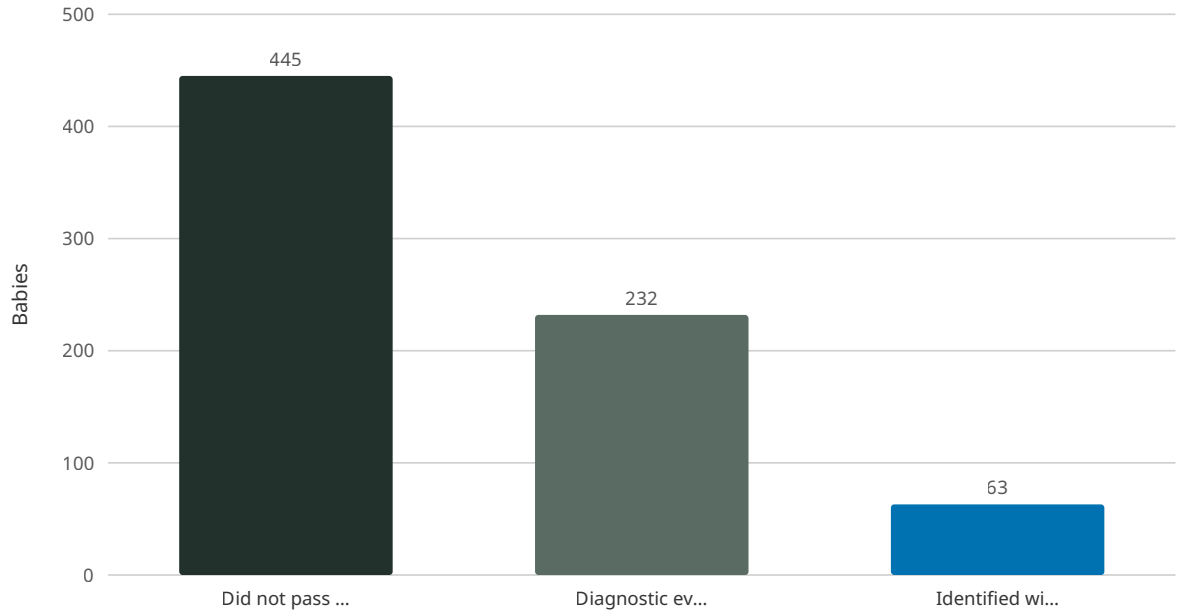
Source: Iowa Department of Education, 2025 and 2026 reports under Iowa Code 256.106(7)

View data

Category	Percent
2023-24	76
2024-25	99

That jump is large, and the two reports do not explain it. It could reflect better identification, better data matching or a real change in how fast babies are enrolled. The Index shows the figures side by side and does not reconcile them. Either way, in Iowa a reader can see what share of identified deaf babies are actually in early intervention, because the state wrote a law that made someone count. Every other age group in this article deserves the same.

The newborn screening pipeline has a leak of its own before Early ACCESS ever sees a child. The CDC's 2022 survey shows 36,731 Iowa births and 35,992 babies screened, 98.0 percent. Of those, 445 did not pass. The table records 232 with a diagnostic evaluation and 63 identified with hearing loss.



Iowa newborn hearing screening follow-up, 2022

Source: CDC Hearing Screening and Follow-up Survey, 2022

View data

Category	Babies
Did not pass screening	445
Diagnostic evaluation recorded	232
Identified with hearing loss	63

That leaves 213 babies who did not pass and have no diagnostic evaluation recorded on the CDC's table. Some had one that was never reported. Some moved. Some families said no. The table cannot say which. What it can say is that nearly half the babies who failed their screening drop out of the record at the very first step, and the earliest years are the ones a language delay is cheapest to fix.

Deafblind children at the blind school's address

The Iowa Deafblind Services Project is hosted by the Iowa Educational Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired, at the same Council Bluffs address as the school for the deaf. Its registry is "an annual census of all Iowa children/youth from birth-21 who have both hearing and vision problems," and it counted 120 on the national deaf-blind count for December 2024. The federal file prints no Iowa deaf-blindness count at all. Once again, Iowa knows a number the federal record cannot see.

The blind service it sits inside is its own story. Iowa closed its school for the blind campus at Vinton in 2011, when it had 16 pupils, against 119 in 1972. The blind service has been itinerant since, and the Auditor counted 719 outreach students for it in fiscal 2024. So Iowa has already run the experiment of turning a residential school into an outreach service, for blind children, and chose to keep its deaf school. Anyone who wants to argue about the future of the school in Council Bluffs has a fifteen-year case study sitting in the same building.

Families and the people who advise the state

The Department convened a deaf and hard of hearing advisory group in 2020. It met on 18 October 2024 and 2 May 2025, and fifteen of its listed members are deaf or hard of hearing adults or family members. Iowa Hands & Voices is the parent group the state's Commission of Deaf Services lists.

That commission is its own relic. Iowa Code 216A.113 still composes it with "at least four members who are deaf or hard of hearing, and three members who are representatives of telephone companies." Telephone companies. In 2026. Another statute, 299.22 in the compulsory attendance chapter, still treats the state school as the default, so that attendance there "may be excused" when the superintendent certifies a child is taught elsewhere. Both laws describe a world that ended decades ago, and nobody has rewritten either.

The Iowa Association of the Deaf has no website a search could find and publishes an email address on its Facebook page. Iowa has no listening and spoken language school and no private deaf school of any kind. For a family that wants either, the nearest options are out of state, and no Iowa statute names a way to get there.

Nobody answered

Before release, the Index sends notice of its findings to every body the file names as responsible, with ten business days to correct anything wrong. For Iowa that was sixteen bodies: the Department of Education, the Iowa School for the Deaf in its own name, the blind services program that hosts the deafblind project, all nine area education agencies, the Department of Health and Human Services for the Commission of Deaf Services and newborn screening, the interpreter licensing board, Iowa Hands & Voices and the Iowa Association of the Deaf.

The notices went out on 17 October 2026. The window closed on 30 October. None of the sixteen responded. No correction, no objection, no question. The file was released as noticed.

Silence is not agreement, and the Index does not treat it that way. But it is worth saying plainly. A state department, its school and nine regional agencies were each handed a public account of what they publish about deaf children, with an open invitation to fix anything wrong, and none of them had a word to add.

What Iowa should do next

These are NCG's recommendations. Each one asks Iowa to publish or measure something it already has, or can get, without a new program.

1. Publish the ACHIEVE count by district, suppressing only the cells too small to protect privacy. The database already knows where each child is.
2. Find out who the 1,097 learners on no plan are and whether anyone has assessed what they need. Report the answer the way the infant numbers are reported.
3. Treat 9 percent assessment participation as a failure to fix, not a baseline to report. Set a target, and report ASL assessments separately from general developmental scales.
4. Publish the agreements with Nebraska and South Dakota, the nonresident fee, and the number of out-of-state students at the Iowa School for the Deaf.
5. Publish each area education agency's headcount of teachers of the deaf and audiologists, and what share of the special education support flow pays for hearing services.

6. Commission an independent audit of the Iowa School for the Deaf and of what House File 2612 did to deaf education, by someone who does not report to the Department of Education.
7. Report education savings account recipients by disability, so the state can see whether deaf children are leaving public programs and where they land.
8. Publish how often families request placement at the Iowa School for the Deaf, how often IEP teams decline, and how those decisions differ by agency, and give families a direct way to ask.
9. Rewrite 216A.113. Deaf Iowans do not need telephone companies on their commission.

Back to the fourth grader

Go back to the girl outside Ottumwa. For most of Iowa's history she would have been invisible: no federal category, no state category, no plan, no number. A 2022 law made her countable, and the first counts say there are more than a thousand children like her.

Iowa deserves real credit for that. It built the database. It put deaf education under one roof. It licensed every interpreter. It gets nearly every identified deaf baby into early intervention. Plenty of states have done none of those things.

But a count is a promise, not a delivery. Iowa has counted her and not yet looked at her. It has a language law that assesses fewer than one in ten of the children it covers, a state school whose door only a district can open, agreements at the state line nobody can read, and one department checking its own work. Sixteen bodies were asked whether any of this was wrong. None of them said so.

She is one of 1,097. Iowa knows that much now. The question is whether anyone in Des Moines is going to find out her name.

The full Iowa file covers all 348 units, each row with its source link, retrieval date and method, and is available under the Index's licensing terms. Corrections are welcome and are published with the next version.

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TIPS

Know something about a sign language AI system, or about deaf education in your state, that the public should know? Send it to tips@novaracg.com. Every tip is read by me and kept confidential. If you work in the UK, writing to us is not by itself a protected disclosure under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, so before you share employer information, check your options with Protect (protect-advice.org.uk), the free whistleblowing advice line.

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