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Delaware Keeps Its Deaf School Inside One Local District, and No Public Document Says What It Costs

Heather Grizzle · September 5, 2026

Delaware keeps its only school for deaf children inside one local district. No public document says what that arrangement costs. NDEDI's Delaware file.

What the Delaware state file in the National Deaf Education Data Index found...

Delaware was supposed to be the easy one. Nineteen school districts, twenty-two charter agencies, one school for deaf children, and a state small enough that a family in Selbyville can drive to the only deaf school in the state and back in an afternoon. When I built the Delaware file for the National Deaf Education Data Index in August, I expected a short profile. What the record produced instead was the most unusual governance arrangement in the eight states examined so far, a financing model that no published document quantifies, and a live federal civil rights complaint whose central number nobody, including the state, can check.

The Index is a fifty-one jurisdiction reference project documenting, from primary sources only, where Deaf and hard of hearing students are educated, what public money follows them, and what institutional machinery governs the provision. All forty-one Delaware local education agencies were audited, every figure below is traceable to a named public source, and where the record was silent the file says so rather than filling the gap. That discipline mattered more in Delaware than in any state before it.

A state school that belongs to a district

The Delaware School for the Deaf in Newark is a public residential school with a statutory basis, state-funded staff positions, and accreditation from the Conference of Educational Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf. It is also a school of the Christina School District, one of Delaware's nineteen local districts, and so is Statewide Programs for the Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Deaf-Blind, the umbrella that serves deaf children in the other forty agencies. Where Alabama runs its deaf school

through a state agency and Connecticut buys places at a private one, Delaware keeps a public school and places the whole apparatus inside one local district.

The operative statute, 14 Del. C. § 1331, reads as a staffing schedule rather than a charter. It sets ratios for resource teachers, interpreter tutors, literacy specialists and residential advisers, declares all of them state unit positions, and never names Christina. No provision of Title 14 assigning the school to any district could be located, so the assignment appears to rest on administrative practice rather than express law. That is not an academic point. On 1 January 2023 the General Assembly used budget epilogue language to move the Office of Statewide Autism Programs out of Christina and into the Department of Education. The mechanism for detaching a statewide programme from the district exists, it has been used within the last four years, and the deaf, hard of hearing and deaf-blind programmes are the only ones still there.

Money that flows through three channels and appears in none

Christina's own budget documents describe the school as one of three programmes for which the district is fiscal agent and state that they "are all partially state funded with the remainder coming from tuition billing." The state's share arrives through the ordinary unit count. In the certified 2025-26 count the school carries 105 students generating 40.38 units, every one of them in the complex special education unit and none in preschool, basic or intensive. The remainder arrives as bills. Delaware law lets a receiving district charge tuition for a nonresident pupil counted in the complex unit, and because every student at the school is a complex-unit student, every one of them is billable to the district or charter where the family lives. Those sending agencies pay from a local tuition tax that each board may levy without a referendum.

The consequence is that no state budget document isolates a dollar figure for the Delaware School for the Deaf. The Governor's FY2026 recommended budget itemises no district and no statewide programme. No per-pupil tuition rate is published, and no document states whether charters are billed on the same basis as districts or whether families pay anything for the residential programme. Capital is the one clean case: the State Auditor's records show roughly thirty-nine million dollars in state construction appropriations between 2007 and 2010. Operating cost is invisible.

I want to be precise about what that does and does not mean. A legislator, a parent, an advocate or an auditor asking what Delaware spends on deaf education cannot answer the question from published sources. That is not evidence of anything improper. It is

evidence that the school's finances are structurally hidden by the design of the funding, which is a more durable problem than any particular funding level would be. One illustration: a court-ordered property reassessment in New Castle County forced Christina to reset its tuition tax rate from $0.8903 to $0.1981 per hundred dollars of assessed value, and that levy is the one from which tuition billing is paid. A county reassessment reaches, three steps removed, the local tax that helps fund the state's only school for deaf children.

Forty agencies, one name

Delaware has no listening and spoken language educational placement. There are no OPTION Schools members, no auditory-oral school, and no auditory-verbal track anywhere in the state; the only such service is clinical, inside the cochlear implant programme at Nemours Children's Health. Christina therefore holds both ends of the pathway. What it does not hold is the day-to-day instruction of mainstreamed deaf children. Its outreach arm describes itself as a provider of "technical assistance, coaching, and professional development," and its service list is addressed to district staff rather than to students, asking districts whether their assessment teams understand hearing loss and whether they have "the time and training" to evaluate their own deaf education staff.

That last question presumes districts have deaf education staff to evaluate. Of forty-one local education agencies, exactly one names the Delaware School for the Deaf, Statewide Programs, or Christina anywhere on its public website, and that one is Christina. Two agencies met the threshold for a coded programme: Christina, the operator, and Appoquinimink, the state's largest district, whose entire published hearing provision is one bullet in a related services list reading "itinerant services for the hard of hearing, partially deaf (HHPD)." Fourteen agencies mention hearing only in passing. Twenty-four publish nothing at all. One, a Dover charter whose every web domain has failed, could not be read by any method. No Delaware agency outside Christina publishes the title of a teacher of the deaf, an educational interpreter or an educational audiologist. Publication is not the same as service, and the Index says so in every workbook. But a service designed to build district capacity is operating in a state where no district discloses any.

The number at the centre of a civil rights complaint that nobody can check



In December 2023 the ACLU of Delaware filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights alleging systemic discrimination against deaf and hard of hearing youth. Its headline claim was quantitative: nationally about nine per cent of deaf and hard of hearing children attend a school for the deaf, and in Delaware the figure is over forty. The director of Statewide Programs said she was "not sure where they got the 40% number." Members of the deaf community objected to the complaint as well, the ACLU filed a narrowed version in June 2024 with an apology, and no public outcome has been located.

Here is what the state's own record can contribute. The Department of Education's last child count broken out by disability category is for 2017-18. It recorded 201 students aged six to twenty-one in the hearing impairment category, of whom 113 spent most of the school day in a regular class and 56 were in a separate school, a share of 27.9 per cent. Nothing comparable has been published since. Current educational environment files disaggregate by age and by race and never by disability category, and the state's otherwise excellent open data portal carries a single binary disability flag. As of 2024-25 there is no published Delaware source from which anyone can determine where the state's deaf and hard of hearing students are educated.

The 27.9 per cent figure and the forty per cent figure are not the same measure, and the file does not pretend they are. The complaint appears to describe all deaf and hard of hearing children, including those under five, where the school's share would be much higher. But the point holds whichever number is closer to right. A state facing a federal complaint about placement rates stopped publishing placement rates by disability category several years before the complaint was filed. I found no evidence the two facts are connected, and the second is almost certainly a reporting simplification. The effect is identical either way: the central factual question in the dispute cannot be resolved from Delaware's published data by the complainant, the respondent, or anyone else.

What else the record corrected

Two smaller findings are worth carrying forward. Delaware was believed to have passed a LEAD-K style language milestones law between 2017 and 2019. It did not. The nearest instrument is the 2010 Deaf Children's Bill of Rights, which guarantees that no child is denied instruction in a communication mode solely because another is used, but creates no assessment tool and no advisory body. This is the third consecutive state in the series whose believed LEAD-K provision dissolved on inspection. And

Delaware's educational interpreter standard is unusually strict, requiring an EIPA score of 4.0 with no provisional tier where many states accept 3.5, yet the state has no general interpreter licensure at all, and a 2022 bill to create one died in committee.

What the file could not establish

The dollar cost of the school in any year. The tuition rate charged to sending agencies. Whether Christina staff teach students enrolled elsewhere or only advise their teachers. The instrument, if any, that assigns the school to Christina. Current placement data by disability category. The 2014 Deaf Education Task Force report, the last state examination of the subject, which could not be found online. Each is recorded as a gap rather than filled, and several could be closed by a records request.

Delaware is the eighth state in the Index and the eighth to show that there is no national norm for how a state educates deaf children. What it adds is a specific lesson about visibility. A school can be public, statutory, accredited and stable in enrolment, and still be impossible to find in a budget or in a placement dataset. The Index exists to make that kind of absence legible, one state at a time.

TIPS

Know something about a sign language AI system 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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