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Pennsylvania Funds Its Deaf Schools by a Formula You Can Check to the Hundredth. It Does Not Publish How Many Children Attend.

Heather Grizzle · November 26, 2026

Pennsylvania pays its chartered deaf schools by a precise statutory formula, but never publishes the enrollment its own law requires.

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In 2009, a nine-year-old deaf boy in Scranton learns that his school is closing. The Scranton State School for the Deaf, the only school for deaf children Pennsylvania has

ever run itself, is being abolished by an act of the legislature. In the fall he will go to a new school on a satellite campus a few miles away, in South Abington Township. It will be run by a private nonprofit from Pittsburgh. His parents will pay nothing. The state will pay the nonprofit a one-time $27,273 for him, and a share of $3.3 million in transition money to cover the move.

He is a composite. The numbers are from Act 50 of 2009, section 6: "Notwithstanding any other provision of law, the Scranton State School for the Deaf and the Board of Trustees of the Scranton State School for the Deaf are abolished." Pennsylvania has not operated a school for the deaf since. Instead, it names four private "chartered schools" for the deaf and the blind in its School Code, and pays for them through a single budget line using a formula precise enough that a reader can check the arithmetic.

Version 2.0 of the National Deaf Education Data Index read all 807 public education units in Pennsylvania in October 2026, the statutes, three enacted budgets and ten years of the state's special education data. Pennsylvania turns out to be the most transparently funded and least visibly counted deaf education system in the series.

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- Pennsylvania abolished its only state-run deaf school in 2009. Two private chartered schools, the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf and the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf, now teach in ASL and English, at no cost to families.
- One state budget line pays for four chartered schools, deaf and blind together: $73.1 million in 2024-25. By law it rises each year by 125 percent of the increase in special education funding. No per-school split is published.
- The law requires the state to publish each chartered school's enrollment every year. The state publishes their tuition rates and not their enrollment.
- The state counted 2,524 students with hearing impairment, including deafness, in December 2024, by home district. But 623 of 675 district counts are suppressed, so 58 percent of the population cannot be placed in any district.
- Deaf education capacity sits in the regional intermediate units: 27 of 29 publish a service. Of 500 school districts, 22 publish anything of their own.

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 Pennsylvania, version 2.0 of the state file read 807 units in October 2026: 500 school districts, the charter schools that are their own local education agencies, 29 intermediate units, career and technical centers, state juvenile facilities, the four chartered schools for the deaf and the blind, and three deaf-serving approved private schools. The School Code, three enacted budgets and ten annual PennData summaries 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. A PROGRAM row resting on a single staff line carries a weak-evidence flag. MENTION means hearing appears only in a general way. NONE FOUND means the pages were read and nothing specific was published. Fifty-two units could not be read after two attempts.

The codes measure publication, not service. In Pennsylvania, intermediate units supply most teachers of the deaf to districts. The Index never estimates a missing figure. Before release, the bodies the file names received notice and ten business days to correct it.

Four schools named in the statute

Section 1376.1(a) of the Public School Code defines a "Chartered school" as "any of the four (4) chartered schools for the education of the deaf or the blind: the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf; the Overbrook School for the Blind; the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children; and the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf." No other state in the series writes its deaf schools into law by name this way.

The Pennsylvania School for the Deaf is in Philadelphia. The Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf is in Pittsburgh, and runs the Scranton satellite that took the state school's students in 2009. Both are private. Both teach in American Sign Language and English. Families pay nothing.

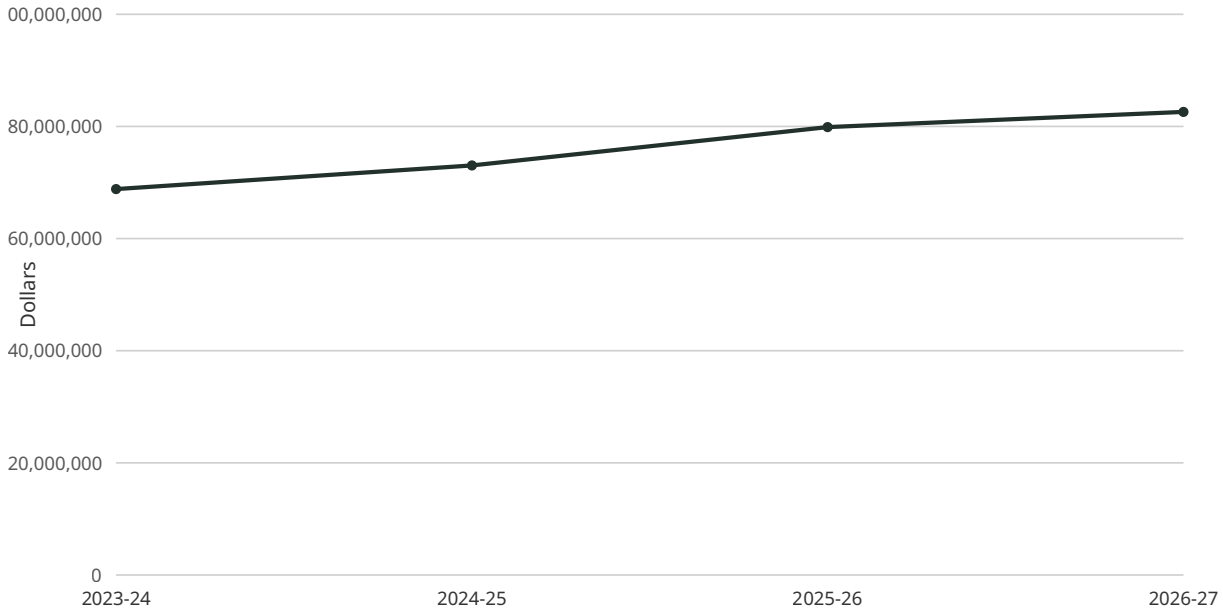
The money works like this. The home district pays "the greater of forty percent (40%) of the approved tuition rate" or its own per-pupil tuition charge, "and the Commonwealth shall pay out of funds appropriated to the department for chartered schools the balance." The Commonwealth's share then rises each year by "one hundred and twenty-five percent (125%) of the percentage increase in the appropriation for special education for the fiscal year prior."

A formula you can check

That formula makes Pennsylvania's budget unusually testable. The line is "PA Chartered Schools for the Deaf and Blind." It was $68,833,000 in 2023-24, $73,051,000 in 2024-25, $79,893,000 in 2025-26 and $82,580,000 in 2026-27.

Special education funding rose 2.69 percent from 2024-25 to 2025-26. One hundred twenty-five percent of 2.69 is 3.36. The chartered schools line rose 3.36 percent from 2025-26 to 2026-27. The formula holds to the dollar.

The year before does not reconcile as neatly. Special education rose 7.21 percent from 2023-24 to 2024-25, which the formula turns into 9.01 percent. The chartered schools line rose 9.37 percent, $258,000 more than the formula yields. No document the Index read explains the difference. The arithmetic is the Index's; the formula and the figures are the state's.



PA Chartered Schools for the Deaf and Blind, state budget line

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X	Dollars
2023-24	68,833,000
2024-25	73,051,000
2025-26	79,893,000
2026-27	82,580,000

What the formula does not tell anyone is how much goes to the deaf schools and how much to the blind schools. No per-school split of the line is published.

The enrollment the law says to publish

Section 1376.1(f.4) requires the Department of Education to publish, each year, "the approved tuition rate for each chartered school for the current school year and the

full-time equivalent enrollment." The department publishes a May directory. It prints the tuition rates. It does not print the enrollment.

So Pennsylvania spends $73 million a year on four named schools, by a formula precise to the hundredth of a percent, and the public cannot see how many children attend them. Neither deaf school publishes an enrollment figure or a list of the districts that send it students. The state's own count does not include them either.

PENNSYLVANIA'S CHARTERED SCHOOLS FOR THE DEAF AND BLIND

4
schools named in the statute, two of them deaf schools

$73.1M
one line for all four, 2024-25

125%
of the special education increase, added each year

0
enrollment figures published, despite the statute

Source: Public School Code 1376.1; enacted General Fund appropriations 2023-24 to 2026-27

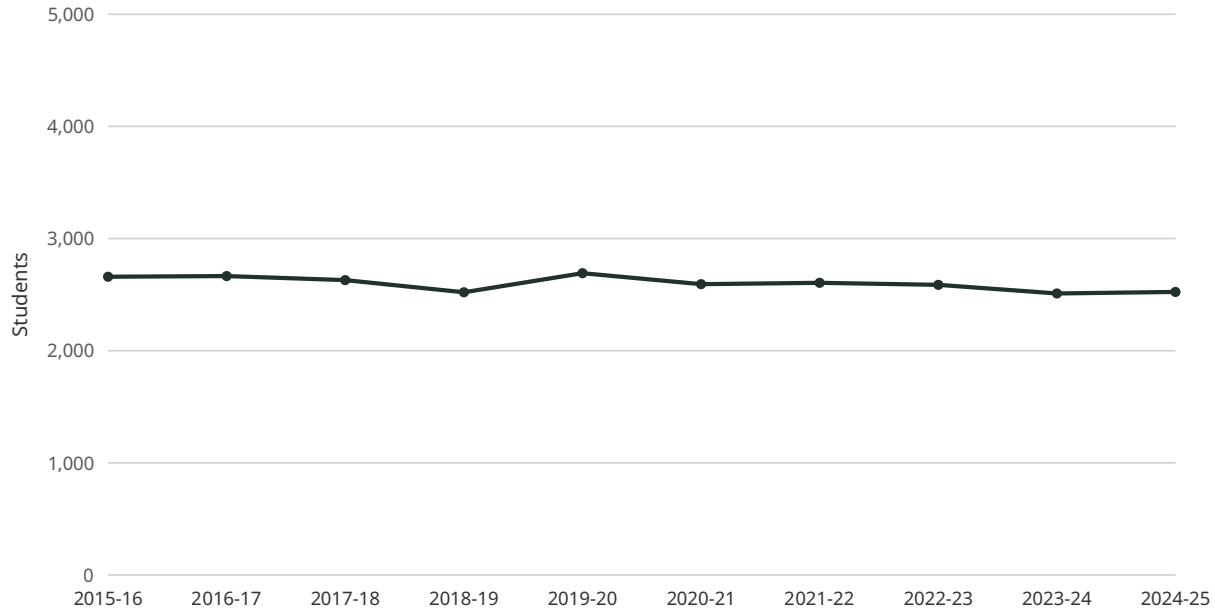
Audits that stop at Scranton

The Auditor General audited the Scranton State School for the Deaf twice before it closed, for periods ending in 2006 and 2008. Those two audits are the end of the trail. A search of the Auditor General's reports in October 2026 found no audit of either chartered school for the deaf. The state abolished the one school it could audit directly, and now funds two it does not.

A count that hides most of the children

Pennsylvania's special education data system, PennData, counts deaf children in one category, "Hearing Impairment including Deafness." On 1 December 2024 it counted 2,524 students aged 5 to 21 in that category, and 78 who are deafblind, among 348,430 students with disabilities.

The ten-year line is flat to falling: 2,660 a decade ago, 2,524 now. Over the same years the total number of students with disabilities rose by 78,097.



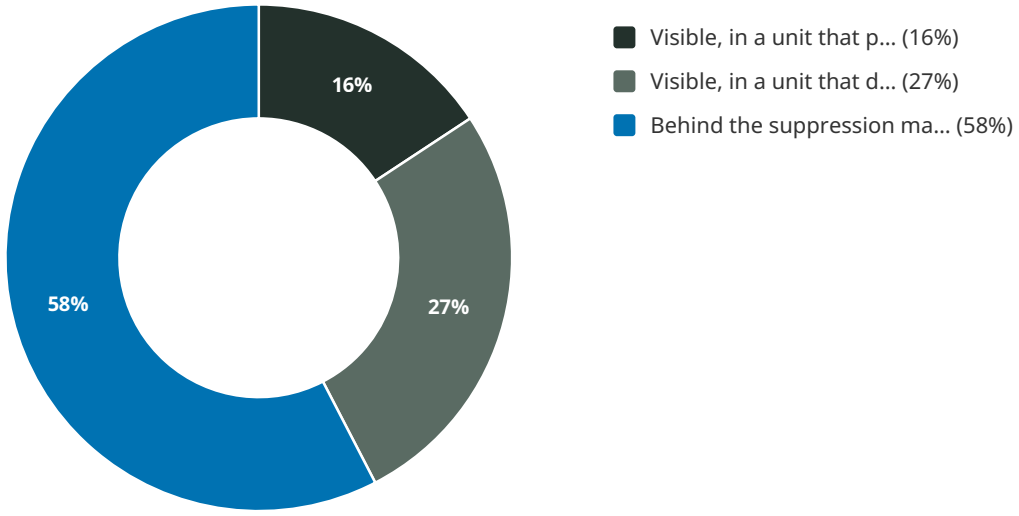
Pennsylvania students in Hearing Impairment including Deafness, December 1 count

Saib Cov Ntaub Ntawv

X	Students
2015-16	2,660
2016-17	2,665
2017-18	2,629
2018-19	2,521
2019-20	2,692
2020-21	2,594
2021-22	2,605
2022-23	2,588
2023-24	2,510
2024-25	2,524

PennData does publish the count by home district, in Table 12. But it suppresses any cell of ten or fewer. Of 675 local education agencies, 52 print a number, summing to 1,070, and 623 print an asterisk. Pittsburgh shows 36. The other 1,454 students cannot be placed in any unit.

So the Index's publication measure only half works here. Of the 1,070 students whose district is visible, 397, or 37.1 percent, live in a unit that publishes its own deaf program or service. Against the full state count, that is 15.7 percent as a floor. The remaining 58 percent sit behind the suppression mark.



Pennsylvania's 2,524 students with hearing impairment, by what the state lets a reader see

Saib Cov Ntaub Ntawv

Hom (Category)	Students
Visible, in a unit that publishes a program	397
Visible, in a unit that does not	673
Behind the suppression mark	1454

There is no row in Table 12 for either deaf school, any approved private school or any intermediate unit as a provider. A deaf student placed at the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf is counted at home. The chartered sector is invisible inside the state's own count.

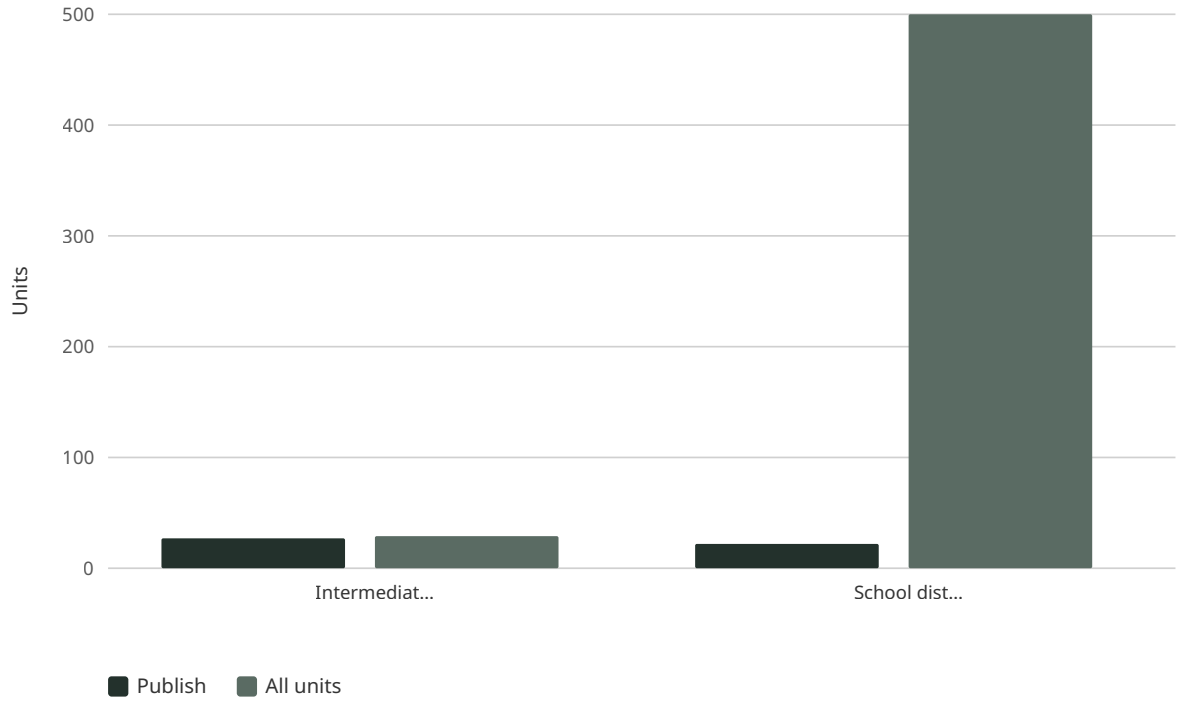
The intermediate units carry it

If the districts and the count say little, the 29 intermediate units say a great deal. Under Article IX-A of the School Code, every district "shall be assigned to an intermediate unit, and shall be entitled to the services of an intermediate unit." Twenty-seven of the 29 publish deaf education services they sell to member districts.

Allegheny IU 3 runs a Deaf/Hard of Hearing Support Program "delivered by Teachers of the Deaf, Educational Sign Language Interpreters, and Educational Audiologists." BLaST IU 17, in north-central Pennsylvania, says "Any one of our 19 school districts may contract with us for itinerant services." Bucks IU 22 offers audiologists, listening and spoken language specialists, captionists and "American Sign Language Interpreters - all of whom have Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA) state credentialing or National Credentials." Montgomery County IU 23 runs a Children's Hearing Center.

Against that, 22 of 500 districts publish their own deaf education staff or service, 18 of them only a single post. North Allegheny, outside Pittsburgh, is the exception: its Deaf and Hard of Hearing Support Program runs classrooms "operated by the District at Peebles Elementary School, Carson Middle School" and the high schools, the one district-run classroom program the Index found outside Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.





Pennsylvania units publishing deaf or hard of hearing services

Saib Cov Ntaub Ntawv

Hom	Tshaj Tawm	All units
Intermediate units	27	29
School districts	22	500

Three hundred eighteen units mention hearing, mostly by reproducing the state's eligibility list or the school nurse's mandated hearing screening schedule. Three hundred sixty-three publish nothing. Fifty-two could not be read, some because their state directory address now leads to unrelated or hijacked sites.

Three units in the state, other than the deaf schools themselves, name a chartered or approved private school for the deaf. Two name the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf among approved private placements. One recites the chartered schools as a class in a tuition policy.

Other private schools, other languages

Three approved private schools also serve deaf students. Two teach listening and spoken language rather than sign: Clarke's Philadelphia program and DePaul School for Hearing and Speech in Pittsburgh. They sit under the same approved private school statute as the chartered sign language schools. A family in Pennsylvania can choose between ASL and spoken language and have the state pay for either.

Who interprets

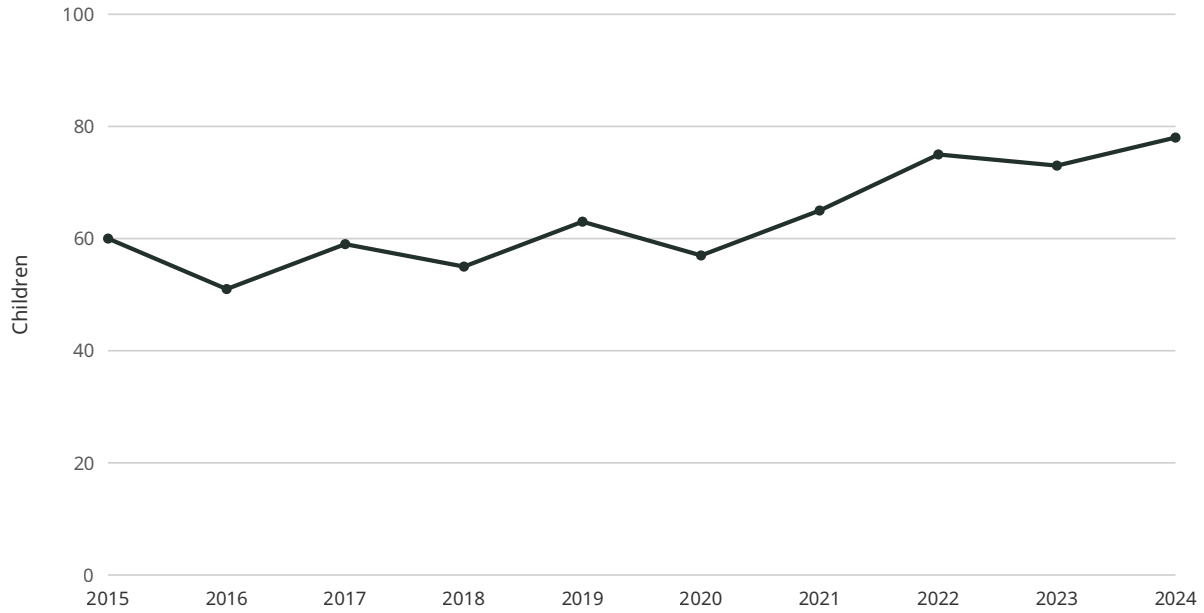
Pennsylvania's interpreter rule is in the education regulation. 22 Pa. Code 14.105(b) requires a score of 3.5 on the EIPA for the assigned grade level, or state registration, plus 20 hours of staff development a year. Act 143 of 2024 rewrote the state's general interpreter registration law and left its school exemption word for word. No language milestones law or deaf child's bill of rights was found.

The deafblind child in a school for the blind

Pennsylvania's four chartered schools share one statute, one appropriation line and one directory. Two are schools for the deaf. Two are schools for the blind. For a child who is both, the boundary between them is administrative, not real.

Overbrook School for the Blind in Philadelphia, founded in 1832, serves "young children who are blind, visually impaired, deafblind, or have additional disabilities" in its early intervention and preschool programs. Its audiology service monitors hearing aids and assistive listening devices. On 4 October 2026 its home page featured a deafblind student and the intervener who works beside him. The Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children, chartered in 1887, publishes a Deafblind Programming page offering "intervener support, audiological services, and technical assistance from our Deaf Blind Resource Team," under a supervisor who oversees speech-language pathology, audiology and the intervener department.

The state's count of deafblind children is rising. PennData counted 78 on 1 December 2024, up from a range of 51 to 75 across the previous nine years. In most districts the figure is suppressed. The Pennsylvania Deaf-Blind Project, hosted by the state's training network PaTTAN, publishes no count of its own, and the intermediate units' Deaf-Blind Resource Teams carry the work out in the regions.



Deafblind children counted by PennData, 1 December each year

Saib Cov Ntaub Ntawv

X	Menyuam Yaus
2015	60
2016	51
2017	59
2018	55
2019	63
2020	57
2021	65
2022	75
2023	73
2024	78

The appropriation for the four chartered schools publishes no split by school, so the Index cannot say how much of the $79.9 million goes to deaf schools and how much to blind ones. For a deafblind child, it may not matter. What matters is whether the school she attends has an intervener, and the two blind schools publish that they do.

From the first month to kindergarten

A Pennsylvania baby meets the system through the Department of Health. The Infant Hearing Education, Assessment, Reporting and Referral Act, Act 89 of 2001, sets the national 1-3-6 standard: screened in the first 30 days, diagnosed by 3 months, in intervention by 6. The program's page publishes no figure on how close the state comes.

Early intervention is split in two. The Office of Child Development and Early Learning is "a dual deputate of the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Department of Education (PDE)." Infant and toddler services run through Human Services and

preschool through Education, delivered by 34 county and joinder programs under Act 212 of 1990. That act lists "deafness/hearing impairment" among the conditions that make a three- to five-year-old eligible. Whether a diagnosed hearing loss makes an infant automatically eligible depends on Human Services regulations the Index did not read.

The handoffs are where a deaf child can lose months. A baby is screened by a hospital, diagnosed by an audiologist, served at home by a county program, moved at three to a preschool program run under a different department, and enrolled at five by a district or an intermediate unit. Each handoff is to a different body with a different website. None of them, on the pages read, names the next one.

Nobody explains how to choose

Pennsylvania offers families a wide range of placements: two chartered schools for the deaf that teach in American Sign Language, two listening and spoken language schools paid for through the approved private school route, a school for deaf children with emotional or autism needs, 29 intermediate units, and the district down the street. The Index looked for any public document that helps a family or an IEP team choose among them. It found none.

The sources checked are named so a reader can retrace the search. The Department's approved private schools page names the PDE-4010 placement approval form, with no criteria. The May 2026 directory gives rates and descriptions. The special education regulation, 22 Pa. Code 14.131, says what an IEP's communication plan must address, not where the child should go. PaTTAN's pages offer competencies and practices. Each school's admissions page describes its own intake. The Department of Health, the Office for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and the early learning office offer no placement guidance.

So a family weighing an ASL school in Philadelphia against a spoken language preschool across town, both publicly funded and both legitimate, works it out from each school's own description of itself. For all those options, there is no neutral page that lays the choices side by side.

Who sits beside the student

Pennsylvania's interpreter standard has been in place since 2008. What surrounds it is less defined. No standard in Chapter 14 covers a sign language aide, a notetaker or an intervener. Central Susquehanna IU 16 lists a "Communication Facilitator" and Berks County IU 14 lists "communication facilitators" among program staff. Bucks IU 22 employs C-Print captionists. The two blind schools employ interveners trained by the Deaf-Blind Project rather than credentialed by the state.

These are real jobs held by real people who spend the whole day with a deaf child. The state sets a bar for one of them and leaves the rest to the employer. Twenty-seven intermediate units name a teacher of the deaf, an audiologist, an interpreter or a department of some kind. None publishes a count.

Questions Pennsylvania is positioned to answer

1. How many full-time students attend each chartered school for the deaf, as section 1376.1(f.4) requires the state to publish?
2. How much of the $73.1 million line went to each of the four chartered schools?
3. What explains the $258,000 by which the 2024-25 line exceeded its own formula?
4. Which districts send students to each school for the deaf?
5. Will the Auditor General audit the chartered schools for the deaf, as it audited the Scranton state school?
6. How many deaf students does each intermediate unit serve on behalf of its member districts?

Go back to the boy from Scranton. He is twenty-six now. The school he left was the last one Pennsylvania could audit, staff and count directly. The schools that replaced it are named in statute, funded by a formula that adjusts to the hundredth of a percent, and required by law to report their enrollment every year. The state publishes the price and not the count. Pennsylvania wrote a better accountability law for its deaf schools than almost any other state. It just has not followed it.

The full Pennsylvania file covers all 807 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.

Heather Grizzle-Odland is the founder of Novara Consulting Group and principal investigator of the National Deaf Education Data Index. She is DeafBlind and lives in Minnesota.

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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