FOCUS

Supporting families with children who are deaf & hard of hearing

Fall 2025

HANDS & VOICES™ MINNESOTA

Preparing children with identified needs for success in going back to school

By: Lee Vang, MNH&V SE Asian Community Parent Guide

As families wrapped up the summer season and prepared for back to school, there was a buzz and excitement in the air. For families raising children with identified needs and for those from different communities and backgrounds, however, preparing for back to school might have brought extra layers of stress and confusion. When schools and services align with community values and support working families, it means that all families can begin the year feeling prepared and valued.

Let's talk about access

Access to information is important, because it ensures every student is prepared to learn and thrive in school. Accommodations such as IEP or 504 plans support students' success, especially when they are tailored to meet each student's individual needs.

Minnesota has welcomed many families from other countries over the years. With so many different languages and lived experiences, what constitutes an identified need for a student might be understood differently from one family or community to the next. Asking questions during school meetings is important to help define these needs; however, some families might not know how to ask the necessary questions to understand what rights their student has to accommodation and interpreters.

Preparation is key for success

To maximize access and benefits for your student in school, preparation is key. Families may do the following:

- Request a team meeting to review their child's IEP or 504 plan.
- View their child's schedules.
- Request language interpretation.

It is also important for educators to build trust with families early, utilize community-specific liaisons, and provide materials in the family's home language whenever possible.

Back to school should never mean back to struggling. With this information in mind, educators, advocates and families can come together to support and ensure that every child, regardless of community or ability, starts the year off at full force!

Resource Highlight: ASTra Program

National Hands and Voices' website has an entire page dedicated to educational support and training with helpful information, including webinars, on navigating the education system from birth to graduation.

Below is a link to one particular webinar we'd like to highlight about how early intervention can support your child's growth and development in their younger years when critical milestones happen.

This webinar session examines:

- Common reasons why some families might choose to decline early intervention.
- Evidence-based recommendations and guiding principles.
- The critical role early intervention plays in supporting a child's development.

Watch webinar: Powering EI so Families Can Thrive

**This webinar was supported in part by the IL EHDI program.*

Special Education Parent Advisory Council

By: Julie Gontjes, Northeast Regional Parent Guide

Have you ever considered attending a meeting of your school district's Special Education Have you ever considered attending a meeting of your school district's Special Education Parent Advisory Council?

As a parent of a child who was in special education, I attended our school district's Special Education Parent Advisory Council meetings off and on for years. Initially, I attended when an important issue to my child's education was on the agenda. However, I discovered additional benefits to attending. These included:

1. **Having direct access to the leadership of special education.**

   I built a familiarity with the individuals in special education, learning what their roles were and who was who. At times IEP meetings can be awkward, especially when emotions are high. However, it was quite a switch to be at advisory council meetings and feel more relaxed in this setting. Attending these meetings helped me see special education administrators as people doing a job, and it gave me more confidence in our interactions.

2. **Gaining insight of the big picture.**

   Information is often presented on topics like changes in special education, new rules from the Department of Education, cuts or new resources, and challenges or opportunities. This information provided context when changes affected my son's education and services. Knowing what is happening in all areas of special education helped me to better advocate for my son.

3. **These meetings are where the school district listens to parents.**

   Parents can help guide policy for all special education students. I've even seen parents bring up issues their child is having, and the issue is resolved then and there. Parents can be creative problem solvers and forces of nature when they advocate while working directly with the school district on special education issues. It is exciting to be a part of that.

To learn more about your Special Education Parent Advisory Council, look for information on your school district's special education webpage. Often, you will find detailed information regarding how to attend a meeting, as well as agendas and minutes from past meetings. If you cannot find any information, call the office of the director of special education, and ask about the parent council.

If you would like to attend a meeting but have specific limits, reach out to the school district in advance. Your school district can provide accommodation for communication needs. They may also offer other resources such as child care, transportation or the option to attend virtually. If the day or time of day is inconvenient, let them know that, too, as parent involvement is critical, and most school districts welcome feedback to make the meetings more convenient to attend.

Whether your school district's special education department is large, small or part of a cooperative, Minnesota law requires that school districts have a Special Education Parent Advisory Council. ■

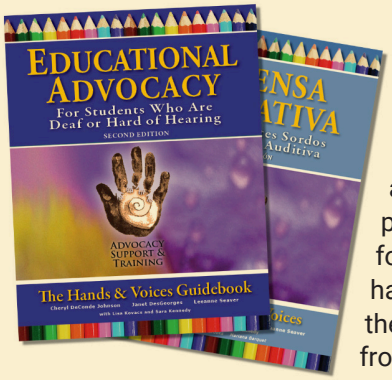
Educational Support for Your Child

Pop-Up IEP

Do you wonder how to answer statements or questions that are given to you by the school district at your IEP meetings? Check out Hands & Voices Pop-Up IEP.

Also, be sure to read Chapter 9 (Leaping "Hurdle Talk" in an IEP) of, *The Hands & Voices Guidebook*.

If you do not have a copy of *this book*, contact Shannon Hohrman at Shannon.hohrman@lssmn.org or 218.350.0771. If you have the book and are interested in purchasing the second edition, visit Hands & Voices :: Recommended Products. *The Hands & Voices Guidebook* is also available in Spanish.



ASTra Program

The **ASTra** program is a deaf and hard of hearing educational support program that embodies the mission and vision of Hands & Voices. The program provides support and materials for parents of children who are deaf and hard of hearing that address the needs of these learners. ASTra content is derived from years of direct experience working with families in schools and attending training sessions from The Hands & Voices Guidebook.

To request support or more information from MNH&V's ASTra program, please email mnhv@lssmn.org. ■

MNH&V DHH GUIDE

DEEP DIVE

with Hannah Harriman

Many students with identified needs receive accommodations in school, whether in K-12 education or in college or another post-secondary program. While all students are entitled to reasonable accommodations, there are key differences in what those supports look like and how they are offered. This article is not exhaustive. We do not have space here to explore the differences between Individualized Family Support Programs (IFSPs), Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and Section 504 Plans. However, it will give you the essential information you need to begin planning for accommodations in this upcoming school year.

In K-12 education, students are entitled to accommodations through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Many of these accommodations are provided through an IEP or Section 504 Plan. IDEA accommodations may include preferential seating, assistive technology, extended test time, or utilizing textbooks and assignments in alternative formats. While students are integral to requesting accommodations, they are ultimately members of a team with varying perspectives, specialties and experiences, who collectively come together to determine what accommodations and tools will work best as they pursue their academic and social/emotional goals.

After graduating from high school, a student transitions to receiving accommodations to which are entitled through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Due to my specific perspective and experiences, the example here will detail accommodations utilized in the college setting. One important distinction between high school and college services and accommodations is that the student must take an active role in requesting them. The student must take initiative to meet with the team offering services at their college. While the student will have support, that support is contingent upon them being proactive and supporting their needs at all times. Accommodations in college may include extended testing time, assistive technology, preferential seating, or housing accommodations in the dorm.

We must take a moment to define the difference between accommodations and modifications. Accommodations are tools used to accomplish the same task without lowering standards. Modifications, on the other hand, often lower the standards or requirements that the student must achieve. To be clear, there are times for modifications in K-12 education, such as shortening assignments or adjusting an academic requirement. However, the student and team should work together in K-12 schooling to reduce modifications whenever possible. Not only will this assist the student in preparing for post-secondary transition it will also teach critical skills such as problem-solving, adapting and finding creative solutions to a challenge.

Finally, I'd like to leave you with some practical tools you can use as you prepare to request accommodations for the upcoming school year, no matter where you are in your academic pursuits.

- Start by being proactive with your academic and social/emotional needs. Utilize the wisdom, experience and advice from your IEP team members, but do not leave everything up to them.
- Attend and actively participate in your own IEP meetings when appropriate, as this develops leadership skills.
- Take the time to meet with teachers or professors the first week of classes to introduce yourself and share your needs.
- Request accommodations well in advance of the school year or semester, as some can take time to obtain and put in place, as in the case of alternative textbooks or assistive technology.
- Remember that you are not alone.

You have a team supporting you, but they can't know your challenges or needs if you don't inform them. In short, being proactive and supporting yourself and your needs are learned skills that lead to life-long success.

IN YOUR CORNER

By: Anne Barlow, Director, MNH&V

Ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus is attributed with the saying, "The only constant is change."

Sometimes change feels like it's within our control, and sometimes not so much.

As someone who had my life mapped out by 8th grade, the concept of change from my planned path was not something I thought about.

When we became new parents, we had an idea of what parenthood was going to be. When we discovered that our son was deaf, that changed many things for us: our household, our hopes and dreams for him and who we leaned on for support. Later it changed where we lived, how we communicated and what we needed to learn in order to help him grow into the best version of himself. (Spoiler alert — he is the best version of himself!)

Some changes were difficult. Sometimes we had to make a lot of changes to find out what worked best.

Activist Bertha Calloway is credited with saying, "We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails."

Ultimately, change became something like a good friend; it became empowering. I learned that if there was something that wasn't working, I could work toward something better. If something was working well, sometimes that became a launchpad for an even better outcome.

Big changes. Little changes. Day-to-day tweaks or slow change that spans months and years…change is constant.

> "Ultimately, change became something like a good friend; it became empowering."

MNH&V has changed a lot over its lifetime as well! What started as a tiny program with a passionate army of a few parents back in 2000 has blossomed into a robust chapter of Hands and Voices, an international organization with a clear mission of parent-to-parent support.

Some of the changes have been in funding, size, programming and community collaboration. Each change has been beneficial and has made us a more robust organization.

Our most recent change has been to move our office to a new building, but still with LSS, still in St Paul and still serving families throughout Minnesota. You might have seen our new address on our website and emails.

MNH&V's new office location:
1605 Eustis Street
Saint Paul, MN 55108

As parents, you already know that change is on the horizon. Every stage of your child's development brings change (some of it fun, some not so much)!

Some of those changes might be more easily navigated with support from parents who have walked that way already — not to tell you what to do, but to walk with you as you learn and grow on your own journey.

MNH&V is here, at our new location in St. Paul, to continue to support you with resources and deep empathy and to cheer you on as you go along your parenting journey of learning, change and growth!

MNH&V Summer Events Recap

By: Leslie Carnegie-Hilde

Did you know?

- Approximately 95% of deaf or hard-of-hearing (DHH) children are born into hearing families.

- 83% DHH children attend mainstream schools where they are often the sole student in their class or school who has a hearing difference, which can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Families can be the bridge between their DHH child and strong social connection.

By participating in DHH events, families help provide their child with opportunities for mentorship and access to language, while empowering them to explore and form their own Deaf identity that can contribute to better social outcomes.

Minnesota Hands & Voices strives to create connections for families with DHH children. Each event that MNH&V hosts is free for the entire family, giving your child, their siblings and yourself the chance to connect with other families on a journey similar to your own.

Events are held both in person and online, giving families the opportunity to meet other families across

Minnesota in whatever setting works best for them. Events throughout the year vary in theme and can range from social to educational.

To view more events from Minnesota Hands & Voices, visit our Eventbrite page.

Registering for an event? Be sure to complete the entire form so we have the most accurate information for things like food counts and activity kits. Reminders are sent out prior to the event. Questions regarding events can be sent to MNH&V Event Coordinator Leslie Carnegie-Hilde at leslie.carnegie-hilde@lssmn.org.

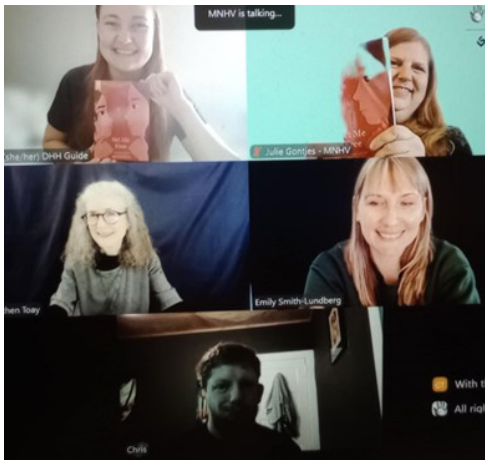
BOOK CLUB EVENT

Fry Bread Book

Comments from Parents: "I enjoyed the book, the crafting, connecting with other families and guides."

STAND UP FOR READING

Virtual Book Club: Set Us Free



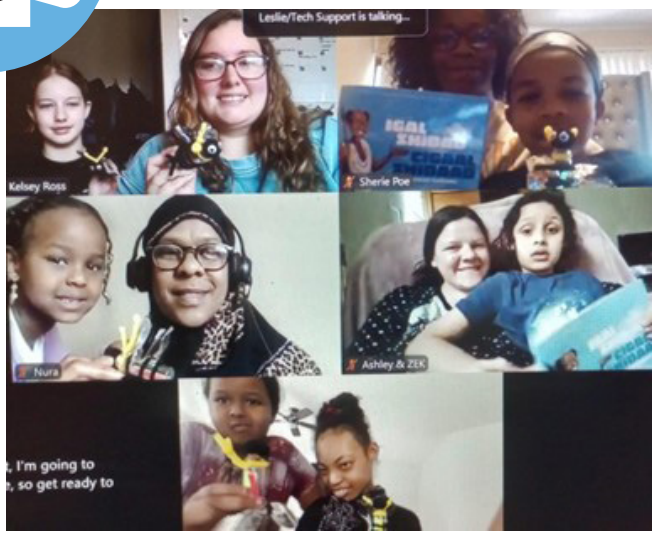
Comments from Parents: "It was a good meeting."

Click & Connect w/Deaf & Hard of Hearing Guides

CLICK & CONNECT EVENT

Comments from Team Members: "DHHG experiences brought perspective to the parents of DHH children"

Comments from Parents: "Thank you for the meeting. We will dig into the resources. We love resources!"



Travel of Igal Shidad Book

Comments from Parents: "Very interesting in learning more about fireflies. The activity was great to create a firefly, and the story book was great too." "Thank you for also reading the book in Somali — that was a great experience to participate in."

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