

Deaf/Hard of Hearing Services

Part of special education law addresses the needs of students who have hearing loss. Federal (and state) law refer to Hearing Impairment; however, the preferred term by people who live with hearing loss is Deaf/deaf or hard of hearing. Those who use the capital D (Deaf) view deafness as a cultural difference rather than a disability. Within the school system, the term Deaf/Hard of Hearing (DHH) is commonly used.

<https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/forms/pdf/podelg-dhh-001.pdf>

A student may have a hearing loss, but not meet eligibility requirements for Deaf/Hard of Hearing services. The eligibility criteria has two parts. The first part asks if there is a significant hearing loss, meaning a significant permanent impairment in hearing OR a significant pattern of chronically fluctuating impairment in hearing documented by a licensed audiologist and observational data from the parents and teacher of the child. The student does not need to be prescribed hearing aids to meet this step of the eligibility criteria. Students who have chronic middle ear infections or difficulty understanding speech/language across environments that inhibits learning can be determined to have a significant hearing loss.

However, in order to meet full eligibility criteria for Hearing Impairment, the student's hearing loss must also adversely affect at least one of three areas: educational performance including academic performance; speech perception and production; and language and communication.

How does a hearing loss impact educational performance including academic performance?

Permanent hearing loss or fluctuating hearing can interfere with how the student takes in auditory-verbal information and processes that information. The more severe the hearing loss, the more difficult it is for the student to incidentally gain language skills, such as overhearing conversations or picking up new vocabulary from radio or television. Students with hearing loss often mishear words, or the conversation comes too rapidly to follow so they lose focus and withdraw attention. Students with hearing loss also tend to require many more repetitions in hearing words to master their understanding and use.

To address this question on the eligibility criteria checklist, the evaluation team must consider the student's vocabulary (academic and social) and how the student's hearing impacts performance in the general curriculum. With younger students who are learning to read, the team must analyze if the hearing loss negatively impacts the student's ability to manipulate sounds and words to develop phonological awareness and phonics skills, as well as gain and retain vocabulary. With older students who have developed basic reading skills, the focus turns to the continued development and retention of vocabulary and language growth to apply to reading comprehension and writing skills. Individual norm-referenced tests are often administered by a teacher of students who are deaf/hard of hearing to collect performance data. This information, combined with classroom performance, and state and district testing, and

parent input provide the evaluation team the information needed to consider how to respond to this part of the eligibility criteria checklist.

How does a hearing loss impact speech perception and speech production?

Hearing loss impacts each person uniquely. Two students may have very similar audiograms (a graph representation of audiological testing done in a clinical setting) but be impacted in very different ways. Students with chronic middle ear infections, resulting in fluctuating hearing, may spend years hearing “under water,” with muffled and inconsistent sound coming in while in various environments. Students with permanent hearing loss (nerve damage) may miss key speech sounds in connected speech. These students often have to “fill in the blanks” when listening, shifting their thinking to substitute words that they may have misheard to keep the integrity of the auditory-verbal message. Sound closest to the student (within 3 feet) will be heard the clearest. Distance from the speaker degrades the quality of the sound that the student perceives. Background noise further interferes with the auditory-verbal signal. Hearing aids and/or cochlear implants make sound louder and more accessible to the student, but they do not CORRECT sound. Hearing aids make ALL sounds louder, requiring the amplification user to mentally filter out extraneous sound and focus on important speech or signalling sounds to gain meaning.

The student does not have to use amplification for consideration of the Hearing Impairment eligibility criteria. Assistive listening technology, such as an FM/DM system can assist in bringing the speaker’s voice directly to the student’s ear via an ear-level receiver, bypassing much of the background noise in a typical classroom, but it too does not correct hearing or eliminate the possibility of misinterpretation of the received signal. An FM/DM system can help the student maintain focus and reduce mental fatigue from having to strain to hear for extended periods of time. Amplification is a tool that can be considered to support students when discussing supplemental aids and services. Students who use amplification may need instruction and support to learn to use these tools in various situations.

How does a hearing loss impact language and communication?

Because students with hearing loss generally have more difficulty incidentally developing language skills, their overall communication skills can be impacted. Students with hearing loss often do not realize that their peers do not hear the same way that they do, and are unaware of things they can do to improve their access to auditory-verbal information. Older students may realize that they have a hearing loss, but do not want to appear any different from their peers and attempt to reject tools and strategies to improve their listening ability. Parents and teachers may notice a difference between how the student uses language and communicates in a social environment vs. academic performance. Adults may notice the student seems to follow peer conversations and respond appropriately in social situations, but has difficulty learning and retaining new information presented via class instruction. The teacher of students who are deaf/hard of hearing will often conduct classroom observations to gather information regarding the compensatory behaviors that the student uses, including use of existing visual supports, self-advocacy strategies employed, and analyze the auditory demands within the classroom.

This information can help the evaluation team determine if any supplemental aids or services are warranted to assist the student with hearing loss.

The teacher of students who are deaf/hard of hearing also monitors what the student knows about his/her hearing loss and what strategies he/she uses to self-advocate. The goal is guiding students in developing the skills necessary to become an independently functioning deaf/Deaf or hard of hearing adult. These skills are unique to hearing loss and are not part of the general education curriculum, which is built on the presumption that students come to school with typical hearing and vision abilities. Part of the consideration of this question on the eligibility criteria must address how the student is able to communicate his/her needs regarding his/her hearing loss, within the classroom and within the community as the student transitions from the K-12 setting to post-secondary adult life.

In Wisconsin, the majority of students who meet the eligibility criteria for Hearing Impairment identify as hard of hearing rather than deaf or Deaf; however, each student's hearing loss needs to be individually assessed and programming individualized to meet their unique needs. Services can range from minimal monitoring (health notice in school records), consultation with school staff and parents, direct instruction with students in their home school district, resource programming with other students with hearing loss, and residential instruction at the Wisconsin School for the Deaf. The evaluation team should discuss all needs and options to develop an individualized education program and educational placement.