

Testimony of Angela Frith, President of St. Rita School for the Deaf Before the Ohio Senate Education Committee

Regarding the Transition of St. Rita School for the Deaf to ODBES

Date: May 14, 2025

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Angela Frith, and I serve as President of St. Rita School for the Deaf, located in Evendale, a suburb outside Cincinnati, in Hamilton County. I am honored to testify as an interested party in strong support of the House budget language proposing the transition of St. Rita to become a state-supported school under Ohio Deaf and Blind Education Services (ODBES). Without this transition, we risk losing a 110-year-old institution that meets a distinct and critical need through a specialized learning environment built by expert and experienced staff.

St. Rita has proudly served deaf and hard-of-hearing students, as well as hearing students with complex communication needs, since 1915. St. Rita has enrolled students from across the country, around the world, and the Greater Cincinnati region. Our school has evolved to become a unique institution, known nationally for our use of Total Communication with American Sign Language (ASL) at the heart of our philosophy. We are the only Catholic, private PK–12 school for the Deaf in the United States and one of only two schools in Ohio dedicated solely to educating deaf and hard-of-hearing students—the other being the Ohio School for the Deaf here in Columbus.

Today, families from other states inquire about enrollment, and some even relocate to Cincinnati to access our services. Our school is nationally recognized, having recently presented at four national conferences on American Sign Language (ASL) phonology and vocabulary. The interest and demand for our innovative services and practices continue to grow, but we can't always meet those demands due to a lack of resources.

Since the beginning of January, there have been 10 parent inquiries, four with autism, two with multiple disabilities including hearing loss, and three deaf. Four out of ten students have been accepted into the program. 2/3 are district placed, and the other is working on placement. One family is relocating from Illinois for our services. We created a waiting list for three Kindergarten students whose complex needs require intensive support in school-readiness behaviors and language development, necessitating the hiring of an intervention specialist.

Research finds that nearly 40% of deaf children have additional disabilities, and they require a level of specialized instruction, language access, and support that many schools and districts cannot provide.

St. Rita currently educates 71 students, 60% that fall at or below the poverty level. As a tuition-based school, payer sources include the Jon Peterson 19/71 (27%) and Autism 6/71 (8%) scholarships, Early Childhood grants 7/71 (10%), Private Pay 3/71 (4%), and school district placements 36/71 (51%). Our students represent 34 school districts across 8 counties in the Greater Cincinnati region, including Butler, Clermont, Hamilton, Montgomery, and Warren counties. . 49% are formally identified under the category of deafness. The other 51% are identified in the other 13 categories of disabilities with many of them having hearing loss as an additional disability.

St. Rita School for the Deaf employs 68 individuals, 67 full-time and one part-time with 28% of our staff identifying as deaf or hard of hearing. Our team includes 26 teachers and 15 instructional aides. We provide comprehensive related services through 8 in-house professionals, including a school counselor, dean of discipline, social worker, nurse, audiologist, and three speech and language therapists. We partner with the Hamilton County Educational Service Center (ESC) to provide a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst and an additional speech-language therapist. Our operations team of 19 supports the school's leadership, food service, finances, IT, facilities, development, and marketing.

The proposed transition to ODBES is about expanding access to a specialized learning environment while preserving a legacy.

By transitioning St. Rita to a state school under ODBES, we will:

- **Expand educational choice and access** for families seeking a day-school option closer to home and strengthen our ability to serve students who are deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing with complex communication needs. This eliminates the financial barrier of private tuition, allowing more low-income and rural families to access specialized learning environments. It also supports enrollment growth and gives IEP teams a meaningful, state-supported option to determine the Least Restrictive Environment.
- **Provide students with direct daily access to licensed teachers of the deaf,** intervention specialists, an audiologist, speech-language therapists, and supports without the limitations of itinerant services. In contrast to traditional itinerant services in mainstream environments, which offers 2-3 hours weekly, St. Rita students engage with and have access to specialists throughout the school day;
- **Retain and grow a highly qualified staff of 67 full-time employees,** 28% who are deaf or hard of hearing, ensuring authentic, culturally responsive education. With an average staff tenure of over 10 years, St. Rita staff embodies authentic representation and best

practices in deaf education and the education of students with complex communication needs. As a result of our national conference presentations, two public school districts from other states have reached out to us for guidance, and we recently hosted an observer from a district 3.5 hours away who sought our expertise in supporting students with apraxia. Under ODBES, recruitment pipelines could be strengthened for hard-to-fill roles, and retention could be improved through stable, competitive salaries and professional development.

- **Create operational efficiencies that streamline processes**, optimize resource allocation, and enhance the overall effectiveness of the school. By sharing some resources rather than duplicating them it will allow for more fiscal responsibility and the ability to grow enrollment without relying on tuition. For our existing enrollment, \$2,352,824 could be returned to school districts by eliminating the need for tuition payment since the school would be fully funded under the state.

The environment at St. Rita is unique and cannot be replicated. It is rooted in a culture of belonging, shared identity, and communication. Our team fosters daily success and growth in students who have often faced academic, linguistic, and developmental setbacks in traditional educational settings. Families who choose St. Rita typically do so after other avenues have failed to meet their child's needs, finding here a place where their child is not only supported but truly understood.

When a young girl joined preschool at St. Rita School for the Deaf, her profound deafness and limited communication in American Sign Language (ASL) posed significant challenges. Now a thriving kindergartner, her language skills are flourishing thanks to St. Rita's barrier-free environment, where deaf role models and ASL-fluent teachers and peers provide direct communication access. Her parents, committed to her success, have taken ASL classes to strengthen family communication and support her development. With her confidence and academic journey underway, the next steps include incorporating literacy-building curricula like Bedrock and ASL Phonology. This transformation with the specialized learning environment of a team of people are setting her up for lifelong success.

We are proud that many of our hearing students learn and utilize ASL to give them a foundation of language and communication that allows them to express their wants and needs. They communicate with their peers and begin to gain their voice, becoming advocates for the Deaf community in the process. Even being able to interpret conversations for their peers and staff with people who don't know sign language.

London began his journey at St. Rita in Kindergarten and is now graduating with the Class of 2025. Diagnosed with Apraxia of Speech at a young age, he's used ASL to support his communication and has worked hard with our speech team over the years to improve his speech.

His passion for music led him to Timeless Recording Studio during his junior year as part of our Work Study program, where he was invited back to produce his original song, Love Letter. The experience sparked a deeper love for music and inspired his post-graduation goal: applying to the Mercury Audio Program for hands-on training in music production which he has been accepted into and will start in June.

The House budget authorizes St. Rita to become a state school under the umbrella of ODBES beginning with the 2026-2027 school year (FY27) and directs the Department of Administrative Services to determine the amount of funding needed to purchase St. Rita's building and land from the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. However, the House budget does not include operating funding for the school in FY27. We have worked closely with ODBES to determine the amount needed to operate and we ask that you please appropriate \$8.3 million for FY27 in the Senate's substitute bill.

With your support, the support of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and our dedicated Board of Limited Jurisdiction, we are ready to honor our past, celebrate our present, and boldly step into the future as Rita Community School under ODBES.

We envision a future where every child's voice, deaf or hearing, is understood, celebrated, and empowered through accessible language-rich education that is barrier-free, individualized, and with direct communication. This environment maximizes the students' full potential by developing the whole child to be confident, contributing members of society.

A future where students become confident, contributing members of society like Megan Neal.

Megan, a teacher of one of our K-2 classrooms, and proud alum of St. Rita School for the Deaf, recently won the Southwest Ohio Educator of the Year award. Megan has come full circle to inspire the next generation as a dedicated educator. Her journey from student to teacher is a testament to her personal growth and unwavering commitment to the Deaf community. As a Deaf role model, Megan employs innovative and creative teaching methods to connect with her students, fostering an environment where they consistently achieve remarkable progress. Her exceptional dedication was recently highlighted in a Spectrum News report, aptly recognizing her as a "Rock Star" in the field of education. Megan's passion and ingenuity continue to break barriers and set new standards in education and for her students.

Thank you for your time and for your consideration of this important opportunity for students, families, and the entire state. You are invited and welcome at any time to step inside our building, see our commitment and our successes. I welcome any questions from the committee.

Respectfully, Angela Frith President, St. Rita School for the Deaf Evendale, Ohio.