

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SSB 6625

As Reported by House Committee On:
Children & Family Services

Title: An act relating to formalizing the relationship between the department of social and health services and the state school for the deaf.

Brief Description: Formalizing the relationship between the department of social and health services and the state school for the deaf.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Human Services & Corrections (originally sponsored by Senators Kohl-Welles, Carlson, Hargrove, Zarelli, Long and Winsley).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Children & Family Services: 2/21/02 [DP].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Authorizes the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) to investigate incidents at the Washington School for the Deaf (WSD) involving alleged child abuse and neglect and make recommendations to preserve the health and safety of students at the school.
- Authorizes the DSHS to conduct periodic health and safety reviews of the WSD.
- Authorizes the DSHS to conduct a comprehensive health and safety review of the WSD every three years.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 9 members: Representatives Tokuda, Chair; Kagi, Vice Chair; Boldt, Ranking Minority Member; Darneille, Dickerson, Miloscia, Morell, Nixon and Orcutt.

Staff: Tracey Taylor (786-7196).

Background:

The Legislature established the WSD in 1886. The primary purpose of the school is to educate and train hearing-impaired children ages 3 through 21. The WSD is located in Vancouver and students who are not from the area may live on-campus in a cottage or dorm during the week.

The WSD is one of 50 agencies that report directly to the Governor, who appoints the superintendent. The school has a board of trustees that provides advice to the superintendent. The WSD staff members report to the superintendent and are employees of the state of Washington.

During the past few years, a series of physical and sexual assaults have allegedly occurred at the WSD and over a half-dozen lawsuits have been filed against the state of Washington for alleged physical and sexual abuse that occurred at the school. In 2000 the Legislature passed SSB 6361 to address some of the concerns by providing training and allowing the school to refuse to enroll adjudicated Level III sex offenders. In February 2001 another alleged sexual assault occurred at the WSD.

In June 2001 the Governor directed the superintendent of the WSD to implement certain safety initiatives. One of the initiatives directed the school to work with the DSHS' Children's Administration's Division of Licensed Resources (DLR) to strengthen the residential program staffing model. Another initiative directed the WSD to convene a work group from the Attorney General's Office, the DLR and the Child Abuse Intervention Center to ensure the school's reporting procedures and incident documentation comply with best practices models.

At the Governor's direction, the DLR conducted a comprehensive health and safety review of the WSD. An on-site review by a DLR audit team occurred December 4-7, 2001; the report was delivered to the Governor on January 11, 2002. The DLR made recommendations regarding the staffing level, supervision of students, self-protection training of students, expulsion policy and completion of criminal history checks on staff. Quarterly health and safety reviews will be performed by the DLR and other Children's Administration staff as well as a comprehensive review every three years.

In November 2001 the Office of the Family & Children's Ombudsman (OFCO) completed a review of the WSD and the reported sex-related incidents using confidential records not available to other reviewers. The OFCO made several significant findings, including inadequate incident documentation and record keeping and an inability of Child Protective Services (CPS) to adequately intervene to protect students at the WSD because the school is not a licensed facility. The OFCO recommended that the Governor or Legislature formalize and strengthen the relationship between CPS and the WSD. This includes the authorization to investigate incidents at the WSD involving allegations of abuse or neglect. Also, the DLR should have the authority to follow-up regarding the implementation of safety improvements by the school. Finally, the OFCO recommended that review of the WSD by the DLR be embodied in statute or executive order.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

The DSHS is authorized to investigate incidents at the WSD involving alleged child abuse or neglect, including incidents involving students victimizing other students. The DSHS shall determine whether the alleged abuse or neglect occurred and if a referral to CPS or law enforcement is appropriate. A copy of the investigation report shall be sent to the school's superintendent. Safety improvement recommendations developed by the DSHS as the result of an incident investigation shall be sent to the WSD Superintendent and the Board of Trustees.

Periodic health and safety inspections of the WSD's residential program shall occur. The inspections should be quarterly through 2006. Recommendations regarding health and safety improvements shall be made to the WSD superintendent and Board of Trustees. A comprehensive health and safety review should occur every three years, beginning in 2004. The WSD must give the DSHS staff conducting the reviews full and complete access to all records, documents, students and staff upon the department's request.

Appropriation: None.**Fiscal Note:** Available for original bill.**Effective Date:** Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.**Testimony For:** The language is similar to the House companion. By locating the investigation of abuse or neglect allegations language in the CPS chapter and the health and safety inspection language in the WSD statute, it clears up any possible ambiguity regarding the standards the DLR will use for the WSD. This bill is a good step in making the WSD a safer place for its students.**Testimony Against:** None.**Testified:** Senator Kohl-Welles, prime sponsor; and Nancy Zahn, Department of Social and Health Services.