AN ACT Relating to improving the availability and quality of sign language interpreting provided to public school students and other persons; adding new sections to chapter 28A.300 RCW; adding a new section to chapter 72.40 RCW; creating a new section; and providing an expiration.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. Sec. 1. (1) The legislature recognizes that educational interpreters, persons who provide sign language interpretation, transliteration, or both, to elementary and secondary school students who are deaf, deaf-blind, or hard of hearing, perform an essential educational task: They convey and explain concepts introduced by the teacher to the student. If deaf and hard of hearing students do not have access to an educational interpreter, they do not have full access to the provided instruction.

(2) The legislature recognizes that the professional educator standards board, in accordance with legislative directives, has established performance standards that educational interpreters must achieve, but that many educational interpreters have not yet achieved those standards.

(3) The legislature also recognizes that school districts, especially small and rural districts, face significant challenges in
hiring qualified educational interpreters, as few qualified applicants apply for vacant positions. These challenges may be due, in part, to the limited academic offerings that are available to persons interested in becoming interpreters: Only one institution of higher education offers an interpreter program and there are no on-campus offerings for higher education students in western Washington. (4) Finally, the legislature recognizes that legislation enacted in 2009 was intended to enhance the coordination of regionally delivered educational services and supports for children who are deaf or hard of hearing, and to promote the development of communication-rich learning environments for these children. The legislature finds that actions to complete that vision remain unfinished. (5) The legislature, therefore, intends to initiate a multistep process of improving the availability and quality of sign language interpreting provided to public school students and other persons by:

(a) Providing grants to increase the number of sign language interpreter programs available to higher education students;

(b) Developing or expanding mentoring programs for educational interpreters in public schools and supporting related professional development opportunities; and

(c) Developing or expanding, in accordance with previous legislative directives, regional educational opportunities for elementary and secondary school students who are deaf, deaf-blind, or hard of hearing.

NEW SECTION. Sec. 2. A new section is added to chapter 28A.300 RCW to read as follows:

(1)(a) Subject to availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, the office of the superintendent of public instruction must develop an application process and award grants to state universities, regional universities, the state college, and community and technical colleges that offer baccalaureate degrees to establish programs of study that prepare students to become:

(i) Educational interpreters that meet the applicable performance standards of the professional educator standards board; and

(ii) Sign language interpreters in other employment sectors.

(b) In awarding grants under this section, the office of the superintendent of public instruction must seek to increase the number and geographic diversity of applicable programs of study and to have
those programs available to students beginning with 2021-22 academic year.

(2) As used in this section:
   (a) "State universities" and "regional universities," and "state college" have the same meanings as in RCW 28B.10.016; and
   (b) "Educational interpreters" has the same meaning as in RCW 28A.410.271.

NEW SECTION. Sec. 3. A new section is added to chapter 28A.300 RCW to read as follows:
(1) Subject to availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, the office of the superintendent of public instruction must develop or expand a mentoring program for persons employed as educational interpreters in public schools.
(2) Funds provided under this section must be used for recruiting, hiring, and training persons to be employed by the Washington state center for childhood deafness and hearing loss who must provide mentoring services in different geographic regions of the state, with the dual goals of:
   (a) Providing services, beginning with the 2019-20 school year, to any requesting school district; and
   (b) Assisting persons in the timely and successful achievement of performance standards for educational interpreters established under RCW 28A.410.271.
(3) In recognition of the need for and benefits from professional development, funds provided under this section may also be used for periodic professional development for those providing and receiving mentoring services.
(4) As used in this section, "educational interpreters" has the same meaning as in RCW 28A.410.271.

NEW SECTION. Sec. 4. A new section is added to chapter 72.40 RCW to read as follows:
(1) Subject to availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, the Washington state center for childhood deafness and hearing loss and the office of the superintendent of public instruction shall examine options for developing, expanding, supporting, and coordinating regionally delivered educational services in the full range of communication modalities for children who are deaf or hard of hearing.
(2) In completing the examination required by this section, the Washington state center for childhood deafness and hearing loss and the office of the superintendent of public instruction must, at a minimum, consult with students, parents, teachers, principals, district administrators, and an association representing educational service districts.

(3) The examination required by this section must explore:
   (a) Options for delivering programs and services to students and school district staff through a regional framework based on educational service districts or other appropriate regions;
   (b) Student and professional development programs and services, by type and priority, that can be effectively delivered and supported through a regional framework;
   (c) Options for replicating current or proposed regional programs; and
   (d) Options for establishing or expanding summer learning programs, family learning programs, and other programs intended to create peer-oriented learning experiences for children who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families.

(4) By November 15, 2020, the Washington state center for childhood deafness and hearing loss and the office of the superintendent of public instruction must submit a report to the governor and in accordance with RCW 43.01.036 to the education committees of the house of representatives and the senate. The report must:
   (a) Reflect an inclusive development process that considers suggestions and other comments offered by persons or entities consulted during the examination process; and
   (b) Include a plan for implementing their findings and recommendations, segmented into short, medium, and long-range actions and goals.

(5) This section expires June 30, 2021.

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