

7 March 2022

Dear Members of the Families, Children, And Seniors Committee:

I am a member of the faculty of the Linguistics Department at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where I direct the *Sign Language and Multi-Modal Communication* laboratory. I am also a Director and Board Member of Camp Looking Glass, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that provides summer camps and year-round recreational programming for children with disabilities. This letter does not express an official position of my institution. As a scholar and service provider with more than a decade of experience working in disability services and studying language and language development at our nation's preeminent research institutions, I am writing to you today to issue my **unwavering and enthusiastic support of House Bill 5777**. It is vitally important that we usher this bill forward through the legislative process and begin the work of building a better future for our deaf and hard-of-hearing children. The resources and policies mandated in HB5777 will improve the educational services available for deaf and hard-of-hearing children, and *finally* begin to correct the disabling communicative barriers and expectations we have long foisted on them. As is so often the case when we begin to address and undo histories of oppression, the power of this bill comes from its grounding in equity.

By all linguistic measures, there is equity between signed and spoken language.

Though our language leaves no traces in the fossil record, there is reason to believe that sign languages have co-existed alongside spoken languages for all of human history. Moreover, nearly a century of research has now confirmed that the linguistic structures of signed languages and spoken languages are similar, as are the neural processes of language production and perception. Infants raised in signing homes exhibit the same pace and pathway of language acquisition that is found in spoken language development – even babbling to themselves in the crib while they look at their hands. Indeed, the hands and eyes are so well-suited to the task of linguistic communication that isolated deaf children innovate their own language-like systems in order to perform one of the most fundamental of human activities, *talking to people*.

Thus, our biological capacity for language does not preference or privilege one mode of language over another, so long as the language is accessible. It is in this respect that a vast chasm exists between the choice of signed or spoken language for a child with a moderate to profound hearing impairment. Whereas a hearing child will find equally accessible either signed or spoken language (many hearing children of deaf adults grow up bilingual in a sign language), a deaf child has no natural access to auditory language. Sign language, however, is accessible to deaf children.

Thus, early interventions that provide exposure and access to sign language are the only way to guarantee typical language exposure, experience, and development for deaf children. **By all outcome and well-being measures, providing sign language access benefits deaf children.** All spoken language and hearing interventions run the risk of failure, and to fail in this domain is to deprive a child of a basic human need, language. Early language deprivation has severe and acute, lasting consequences for a child's educational and psycho-social development. Ramifications range from increased rates of depression to increased susceptibility to abuse. In school, deaf children deprived of early sign language can experience linguistic impairments that isolate them from peers and teachers, and research tells us that such linguistic isolation leads to and compounds other academic, social and developmental problems. Unsurprisingly, failing to meet the language needs of deaf children leads to their decreased socio-economic attainment as adults. Unfortunately, these detrimental outcomes have been the reality for most deaf and hard-of-

hearing children for generations. Due to discriminatory and ableist views about signed versus spoken languages, deaf children have been forced to conform to hearing and speaking norms and they have suffered for it.

In addition to innumerable social and psychological benefits, which include improved relationship with caregivers, **early access to sign language is also the best way to guarantee speaking and literacy development in deaf children.** In the US, research has shown that early access to sign language helps children develop speaking and literacy skills, and that deaf children learning sign and speech in bimodal-bilingual environments outperform deaf children who are being exposed to speech alone. Acquiring a sign language does not inhibit the development of a spoken language; instead, controlling for other factors, English language attainment is *higher* for deaf children with better American Sign Language skills.

In sum, on the matter of language choice, the scientific evidence is clear: sign languages are languages and the best possible outcomes for deaf and hard-of-hearing children occur when sign language access is provided. HB5777 creates mechanisms and resources for providing improved language access to deaf children and their families in Michigan. In doing so, this legislation **complies with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which calls for the recognition and promotion of sign languages.** Moreover, HB5777 paves the way for overall improved language and English literacy development for deaf children and, in doing so, **respects the right to bilingualism mandated by both the National Federation of the Deaf and the World Federation of the Deaf.** Thus, though targeted at our educational system, **HB5777 is fundamentally a piece of civil and human rights legislation.**

In this case, however, the arc of the moral universe does not bend toward justice by *hearing calls or amplifying voices of the oppressed* because the very source of oppression is the harm caused by normative pressures to speak and hear. Rather, with HB5777, **we have the chance to finally open our eyes and remove the handcuffs that have needlessly burdened and failed generations of deaf and hard-of-hearing children.** In the interest of children across the state of Michigan, we must pass this legislation.

Sincerely,



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