

3/15/2022

HB 5777

I am the father of an adult Deaf son. He attended the Total Communication Program for Deaf children in Dearborn where he got both oral and sign instruction. He thrived in that environment, went on to graduate from college and then worked as a teacher, a tour guide and a translator. He is now working on a graduate degree in linguistics.

I speak to you in support of House Bill 5777 because of what I observed during my son's time in Dearborn and what I heard from the professor of audiology at the hearing last week. During the time my son was going to school in Dearborn, every year there would be children transferring into the program from the oral programs in Redford and Taylor. They were transferring in because it was obvious they were not learning anything useful. They were not able to communicate with either hearing or Deaf people. They had not learned any of the things we would expect them to know. Even the ones who transferred in early elementary school were already noticeably behind academically and socially. They had undergone oral training, trying to learn to lipread and speak at the expense of academics and acculturation. I do not remember any of these kids having useable speech. The children had been given the so-called "right to fail" at oralism before being

shuffled off to the signing program, where it was apparent that they would never catch up. They were being condemned to life as second-class citizens. The professionals knew the window for language acquisition and cognitive skills necessary for academic success is very narrow. Even though they knew this, they refused to acknowledge the tremendous damage they were doing to these kids until it was way too late to do anything about it. The transferred kids did learn to sign, but they never caught up in school. It was a disaster and practically criminal. I suspect that if the parents of these children had not felt guilty for their acquiescence in going along with the oral program, there would have been lawsuits filed for the damage done.

My first sign language teacher, Judy, had gone to an oral school from the age of five until she graduated from high school. She had no useable speech, she could not even communicate well enough with her hairdresser to be able to explain what she wanted done and did not have any useable skills. This is the common lot of Deaf people who are kept from developing academically by an overemphasis on oral training. It leads to personal frustration and dependency on governmental social services.

When my wife and I learned of our son's deafness just prior to his first birthday

the experience was alarming. The ENT MD and the audiologist already just assumed we would be enrolling our son in an oral program. Nevertheless, we went and checked out the realistic options available to us: the oral program, the total communication program, and MSD. Our experience was that the staff at the oral program in Redford was condescending toward any other option. They are true believers in their method and their line seems plausible to anyone not acquainted with the issues involved. It is natural and self-serving that the oral programs work so hard to keep children from going to signing programs and learning to sign because they have a vested interest in keeping their student numbers up for funding purposes. Also, once children are vested in hearing aids and cochlear implants, they are likely become a perpetual source of income for all those who service people who are trying to speak and hear. These oral programs are a business conduit for audiologists and other technicians working with the deaf and hard of hearing. I also think that when, finally, children who were not successful in the oral program were belatedly transferred into the signing program it was because the oral programs didn't want these "failures" to bring down the test scores that are used to evaluate them. Let them bring down the scores of those other programs. Those kids were sacrificed on the altar of

oralism. The benign picture the professor of audiology tried to paint in her testimony last week is false. When parents of a deaf child are initially faced with professionals who only support the oral method, it is very hard to be skeptical and go another way. And this is key: it keeps parents from making an informed choice.

My personal experience and the observation of other parents and their children is that, in spite of lip-service to the contrary, the overwhelmingly negative attitude by staff in oral programs to teaching children to sign as soon as possible makes it very difficult for parents who do not understand the vital importance of timely language acquisition to not bow to the “professionals” who seem so assured. It is daunting to parents to consider the prospect of having to learn sign language, and this is also used to sway the parents to go oral. Also, the bugaboo of losing the child to the Deaf community is regularly rolled out. It is disingenuous to expect partisans to accurately portray options to parents that may remove a child from their program. It is imperative that parents be given timely and honest information about their child’s academic and social progress right from the beginning, so that they can make an informed choice about what is best for them.

Just as most parents of hearing children are given information about the

schooling and programs they might have available to them, so should the parents of Deaf Children. You wouldn't expect school districts to tout the virtues of home schooling or private schools. The parents might decide to continue in the oral program, but it should be their decision and be based on all of the information available. The government should empower parents to make informed decision as to what is best for their child.

It is ethically right and good social policy to provide parents of Deaf children full and honest information right from the beginning and then on a regular and timely basis upon which then can determine what is best for their children.

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