



DATE: Tuesday, March 8, 2022

TO: House Families, Children and Seniors Committee

FROM: Annie Urasky
Director, Division on Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing
Michigan Department of Civil Rights

SUBJECT: House Bill 5777

Chair Wakeman and Members of the House Families, Children and Seniors Committee,

As the Division on Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing, our mission is to affirm the indisputable right to equal and effective communication for Michiganders who are deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing.

The bill which is before you will have a direct impact on the lives of students who are deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing and their families. The Michigan Department on Civil Rights- Division on Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing is in support of HB 5777.

As both the Director of the Division and a person who is Deaf, this is personal. I not only understand how critical it is for parents of children who are deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing to have the full support and resources available to assist and enhance language development, and to have it as early as possible; I am also a testament to what can be achieved when it is provided.

The choices parents make early in a child's life matter for a lifetime. Parental choice is meaningless if parents are not provided with all possible resources and options needed to ensure their child will be able to thrive in educational environments. An infant who does not hear will not learn from sound. The most consequential early choice is determining when the infant will be exposed to visual language specifically directed at the development of communication skills. The skills learned visually as an infant establish the core foundation on which additional skills can be built. Because communication skills are both developmentally critical and cumulative, it is imperative to provide every infant with the appropriate tools as early as possible because lost time will never be fully recovered.

I often think about the many times parents shared "*If I had only known then what I know now*" frustrations with me. It is easy to understand the common frustration of hearing parents, who upon learning their infant is deaf, see it as a problem to be fixed, rather than as something to be embraced. If they are then presented with only one solution or resource to use, they too often accept it without real thought.

The key principle must be preserving the right of students who are deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing to have the ability to fully experience the same opportunities every other child has in their pursuits for success in both education and in life.

The choices parents make will profoundly shape their child's future. This bill is intended to provide information and education to empower parents to make fully informed decisions.

This bill should be enacted into law.

Thank you,

Annie Urasky
DODDBHH Director