

March 5, 2022

House Families, Children, and Seniors Committee

c/o joybrewer@house.mi.gov

Re: HB 5777

Dear members of the House Committee:

I am a parent of three deaf children who are now adults. I am also an advocate for all children with hearing loss and have been since 1983. I have attached my CV which demonstrates my commitment and expertise in this area. Within a 5-month period in the 1980's I learned all 3 of my young children were deaf. I investigated every possible aspect of educational options, language acquisition, audiological interventions, challenges to societal inclusion, potential career limitations, and the effect of language choice on literacy. I immersed myself in the world of individuals who were Deaf and used American Sign Language (ASL). I completed classes in ASL and became well acquainted with many Deaf adults. I attended an A. G. Bell National Convention and met hundreds of deaf adults who used spoken English (or other spoken languages).

This investigation made me realize that most people in typical society don't know or use ASL. I learned that ASL has a grammatical structure completely different than English and there is *no written form* which means no books; NO textbooks. I learned the average reading level of a high school graduate who uses ASL was – and remains – at the 4th grade level. In order to learn to read, children who use ASL must learn English in it's written form. ASL has about 5,000 words with about 1800 typically used in day-to-day communications, while the English language has well over a million words, with 200,000-300,000 used in most communication. Higher reading levels require greater vocabulary and successful readers have extensive vocabularies. I learned that over 90% of children with hearing loss are born to parents who have normal hearing, like myself. Parents typically want their children to learn the language of their home, so little ones can communicate with their grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and other family members. In families where ASL is used to communicate with a deaf child, it usually is the child's primary caregiver who learns ASL, and other family members seldom become proficient. This results in the child being isolated from extended family at home and from typically hearing peers at school, church, and other social situations. The unemployment rate for individuals who are Deaf exceeds 60-70%. If a potential employer has the choice between hiring an individual who is deaf but can communicate in spoken language, rather than an individual who uses ASL, and an interpreter must also be hired; the choice is obvious. There will always be a need for ASL for some people. About 6% of children with hearing loss use ASL combined with written English for reading, 12% use Cued Speech (a supplement to spoken language), but the vast majority use spoken language.

The knowledge I gained from my investigations over the years resulted in me choosing spoken English for my three children. Today they hold BS degrees in mechanical engineering, biomedical engineering, biology, and nursing, MS degrees in engineering and nursing, and an MBA from the University of Michigan. They are all contributing members of society – professionals who are employed as a nurse, a program manager for NASA, and a business owner.

I am requesting that you vote NO on Michigan HB 5777 for two reasons: First, HB 5777 is biased against spoken language in its required participants on the advisory committee, and second, this bill pertains to the education and educational assessment of children who are deaf or hard of hearing and therefore falls outside of the purview of the Families, Children, and Seniors Committee. In the fall of 2016 HB 6005 and HB 6006 (legislation like this currently proposed HB5777 with the same general flaws) were submitted by the Michigan LEAD-K group and referred to the House Committee on Education. The bills failed to garner support to reach a vote and died in committee. In 2017 the LEAD-K group again submitted similar, flawed legislation in HB 5158 and HB 5159 which the Education Committee kicked to the Health Policy Committee. These bills failed to garner support and died in committee. Now the LEAD-K group has submitted HB 5777 with the same flaws, and it has been sent to your committee. [*LEAD-K is a group that advocates for the use of ASL for ALL deaf children.*]

I support providing full information to parents of young children who are deaf and hard of hearing, including information about American Sign Language (ASL), Listening and Spoken Language (LSL), Cued Speech, Augmentative and Alternative Communication and other appropriate modes of communication. Additionally, I support requiring valid assessments and providing children with professionals who are trained in the language and supporting mode of communication chosen by the parents, subject to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). **HB 5777, however, FAILS to create an avenue for these to occur.** Specifically, for HB 5777 to achieve its stated goal of developing a resource for use by parents or legal guardians of any child who is deaf or hard of hearing, regardless of the language that they choose to use in their home, **the bill must do a better job of representation of the diversity of the population of deaf or hard of hearing children in the state of Michigan.**

This bill was submitted by a group that advocates for the use of ASL for ALL deaf children; a group affiliated with the LEAD-K movement. HB 5777 is biased toward support of that language primarily through its description of the advisory committee to be formed.

For HB 5777 to serve all children who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families, equal and adequate representation of the different approaches to language learning should be reflected in the choice of advisory committee members. **As written, this bill gives ASL advocates a majority on the advisory committee.** Only a small percentage of Deaf and Hard of Hearing

children use ASL as their primary method of communication: a 2010 study by Gallaudet University showed that, at that time in Michigan, **13% of students used sign language including ASL compared to 79.4 % who used Spoken Language and 5.5% who used Spoken Language with Cues.** A 2018 survey published by The National Center for Hearing Assessment and Management indicated a reduction in the use of ASL nationally: only 6% of children who are deaf or hard of hearing age 0 to 6 years used ASL as the primary method of communication. This compares to 66 % of the children that used exclusively Listening and Spoken Language and 12% used who Cued Speech. **It is clear that NO ONE group should have control of the advisory committee, certainly not a group representing only between 6 and 13% of the children affected by the bill.**

In the run up to the drafting of this bill, the idea of giving a majority of the seats on the advisory committee to ASL advocates was expressly opposed by each of the representatives of the professional organizations in the field of language development and early education of children who are deaf and hard of hearing that attended the *April 9, 2019 Stakeholders meeting*: Michigan Audiology Association, Michigan Professionals for Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing, the Michigan CEC division of Communication Disorders and Deafness, and the University of Michigan Sound Support. The National Cued Speech Association, the Michigan Hearing Loss Association and the Michigan Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (MI AG Bell). Only the LEAD-K representatives supported giving ASL advocates the majority on the advisory committee.

For the reasons cited above, I am opposed to HB 5777 and request that you vote against it.

Respectfully,



Shon Halacka
4481 Chisholm Trail
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan 48301

(248) 709-7025
ShonHal@comcast.net

