

March 12, 2021

House Education Committee
P.O. Box 30014
Lansing, MI 48909

Dear Chair Hornberger and the Honorable Members of the House Education Committee,

On behalf of the more than 300 members of the Michigan World Language Association, I am writing to oppose HB 4326. I respectfully request that this letter be entered into the record of testimony of the hearing of March 16, 2021.

HB 4326 would equate foreign language with computer coding by allowing it to replace language credits in the Michigan Merit Curriculum. We don't dispute that computer coding is a useful skill in the workplace. But computer coding is not a discipline – it's part of the larger field of computer science – and it is not the same as a world language.

Coding should not stand in for the unrelated and critical discipline of foreign language any more than it should stand in for English or World History. Even *Code.org*, an organization dedicated to expanding access to computer science in schools, formally opposes legislation like this that would allow students to opt out of foreign language for coding¹. To quote Hadi Partovi, *Code.org*'s CEO, "The only people who would suggest that computer science is akin to learning a foreign language have never coded before." A more reasonable solution would be to add a computer science requirement to the Merit Curriculum alongside world languages.

We dispute the idea that seems to be at the core of this and similar bills that have been introduced to this committee previously: that language skills are less important than computer science or other disciplines in the workplace. This is simply not true. There is a wealth of data showing employers need workers with language skills, including employers here in Michigan. A 2017 report² found that the demand for bilingual workers in Michigan nearly tripled between 2010 and 2016, and an Indeed.com search for bilingual jobs in Michigan just today found over 2300 listings in a variety of sectors, including health care, sales, customer service, finance, criminal justice, and more.

Language needs in the workplace also exist beyond Michigan. In 2019, nine out of 10 employers surveyed by Ipsos³ nationwide reported needing workers with foreign language skills. This need crosses all sectors of employment and all types of jobs, with some of the most intense demand for workers with foreign language skills in STEM fields like healthcare, and trades like construction. And the languages that these employers reported needing are the ones being taught in Michigan schools: Spanish, French, German, Japanese, and Chinese top the list.

But language skills are not all that students gain when they study another language. They are also learning to communicate and interact in real time with real people, which are transferrable skills, and skills that are in the most demand by employers. Two separate recent surveys of U.S. employers⁴ found that communication skills topped the list of the most sought-after skills by employers, with other so-called "soft skills" related to human interaction rounding out their lists. Additionally, nearly three-quarters of employers found it difficult to find employees that had the communication and soft skills they were looking for.

¹ [Computer Science Is Not A Foreign Language](#)

² New American Economy, *Demand for Bilingual Workers in Michigan*

³ [Making Languages Our Business: Addressing Foreign Language Demand Among U.S. Employers](#)

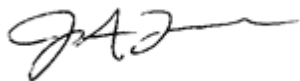
⁴ [NACE Job Outlook 2019; Morning Consult on behalf of Cengage](#)

For many students, the primary benefit of taking the required language credits relates to culture. They develop an awareness and appreciation of not only the differences that make every culture unique, but also the similarities that unite us all. In fact, many MIWLA members report that as a result of the MMC graduation requirement, they had to change how they taught language, recognizing that they must reach all students and not just those who are college-bound, or who plan to take more language classes. For many, this change has been to make culture the starting point and the center that language learning revolves around. Students leave K-12 language classrooms with an awareness that people who live where the language is spoken, including people right here in Michigan, have ways of existing in and understanding the world that don't always align with their own ways of existing in and understanding the world. Equally important is that in language classrooms, students begin to explore why these differences exist, so that they can better understand and interact with people in the interconnected world we already live in. This ability to think critically about their own and other cultures, and to understand the perspectives of people from other cultures, whether those are world cultures, workplace cultures, rural cultures, urban cultures, or any of the multitude of cultures that we find right here in Michigan, are also transferable and very important skills. Employers recognize this, too: more than nine out of 10 surveyed said it was important to hire workers with intercultural skills.⁵

I would further emphasize that language study benefits all students, including those who will work in skilled trades or technical fields, those who will not pursue a four-year college degree, those who will continue to live in Michigan or elsewhere in the United States, and those with special needs, evidenced by decades of research showing improved overall academic achievement and enhanced cognitive abilities of those who study a second language⁶.

We hope you will recognize that HB 4326 asks you to make a false choice between two unrelated disciplines that would limit opportunities for Michigan's kids to develop skills and understanding they need more than ever in today's world and workplace. I respectfully ask that you reject HB 4326, and any others that would weaken the world language requirement in the Michigan Merit Curriculum.

Respectfully,



Julie Foss
Public Affairs Liaison
Michigan World Language Association

⁵ [*It Takes More than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success*](#)

⁶ [*What Does the Research Show about the Benefits of Language Learning?*](#)