

March 19, 2022

Michigan House of Representatives
124 North Capitol Avenue
Lansing, MI 48933

Dear Michigan House of Representatives,

I am a Deaf individual born and raised in Michigan. I am in favor of HB5777, because it allows the parents to make informed decisions about the education of their Deaf children. In contrast to the opposition's main argument, this bill is not biased, but balances out the existing bias that has been tilting the field against the Deaf children.

I would like to share with you my experiences and to dispel some misrepresentations made by the people opposing the HB5777 bill.

I was born Deaf in 1987 and I was the first Deaf person my parents ever met. Naturally, they did not know American Sign Language when they discovered my deafness at age of 1. Rather than obediently taking the doctor's insistence to use the oral method, they explored other options and did their due diligence to make what they felt was the best choice for me, which was using American Sign Language as my primary language. Since they had never learned ASL before, they were learning the language at the same time I was learning it from signing mentors as a baby. Today I am a native, fluent ASL user, and I am also a native user of the English language.

Opponents of this bill say that hearing parents do not have time or the ability to be adept in ASL in order to communicate with their children. This is categorically false. Despite being totally ignorant of ASL, my parents were able to learn ASL, and although they are not native users, they were able to become skilled enough to communicate with me meaningfully.

By the time I entered elementary school in the Dearborn School District, my vocabulary was on par with those of my hearing peers, and it was thanks to the early identification of my deafness and my parents' assiduous involvement in my pre-school education, having signing mentors to teach me words, both in ASL and written English.

After graduating from high school, I entered university and majored in English, getting my B.A. in 2009. I learned written Spanish, and I used Spanish extensively while traveling from Mexico to Argentina for 13 months. I then found a job teaching ASL and English in Tokyo, Japan, and lived there for over 8 years, learning the written Japanese language and Japanese Sign Language. I eventually transitioned to being a Japanese-English translator and JSL-ASL interpreter. I am currently a M.A. student at Gallaudet University, studying Linguistics.

I am very fortunate to be able to travel widely and have a fulfilling career, not only in the US, but also overseas. I am also fortunate to be able to be fluent in 5 languages, because without being exposed to language in a speedy way when I was a toddler, I would not have had a strong linguistic foundation to build upon in my later years. I have seen many other Deaf people who did not have the same access to language as I did until later. Their

linguistic development was impacted because the window of their critical period of language development closed before they had a strong linguistic foundation as I did. Too many Deaf people struggle to be fluent in a language or multiple languages because of lack of access to language as a child. All too often, parents are influenced by doctors and audiology specialists to rely exclusively on hearing. If they had the same access to language as a toddler as I did, their language skills would be on par as anybody's. Implementing HB5777 would give the parents information so they can make the best choice for their child.

The AG Bell Foundation and other members that oppose this bill aver that it is biased. But the truth is that they are scared that they would lose their advantage that they have been enjoying for years. It does not add any bias, but lessens the informational bias against sign language. Nowhere in the bill does the bill force the parents to choose sign language - it only asks that equal information be provided to the parents so they can make a choice for themselves for the best possible future for their children.

Thank you,

Martin Dale-Hench

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