

## Families, Children and Seniors Committee, State of Michigan

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Public Testimony

### Testimony in Support of HB No. 5836, Relating to LEAD-K (Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf Kids)

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#### ABSTRACT

The impact of language deprivation on Deaf children is well documented. The vast majority of Deaf children are born into hearing families, and just a smattering of hearing parents of Deaf children in Michigan learn sign language. They have been ill-advised from medical professionals and state officials to with-hold language from their Deaf children until a point when they can be subjected to invasive head surgery. As months (years?) go by, Deaf children face linguistic, cognitive, and social setbacks that last a lifetime. LEAD-K legislation ensures that parents have access to accurate and complete information about language learning in Deaf children, and establishes measurements for language development of Deaf children in Michigan. My testimony was entered into the record in support of proposed LEAD-K legislation in Michigan.

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#### **Representative Kathy Crawford, and Chair Members of the Families, Children and Seniors Committee:**

I am humbled to have been asked to provide testimony in support of this important legislation, and I am grateful to the committee for accommodating my request to submit my testimony in writing. I do so under recent advice from my health care provider. Your accommodation of my request is very generous.

Without the benefit of being with you in person, I can't begin my remarks by connecting my testimony to that of others; and, so I will instead begin with two assumptions. First, I assume that everyone here wants deaf children in Michigan to arrive at their first day of

school fully prepared. Second, I assume that we all acknowledge that this is not happening at the present time. [A side note about language. For now, I'm using 'deaf' with a small 'd' to reference any person with a hearing loss.]

The consequences of today's bill aren't just about a deaf child's early development. The features of this bill will impact the lives of each deaf person in Michigan for their entire life. A [2019 State of Michigan study](#) revealed that DDBHH people in the state experience:

- Lower rates of fulltime employment than hearing people in Michigan;

- Greater income disparity, revealed as lower wages than hearing people with the same education; and,
- Significantly higher rates of anxiety and depression than hearing people.

On the surface, this is a bill about education; but, it's also a bill about economic development. With these important consequences in mind, and being mindful of your time, I'd like to provide some direct statements to help the legislators ground their understanding of the concerns being addressed here today. Numerous published studies support these statements:

- Deaf children are born with brains ready for language, and with cognition that is entirely intact. Everybody's daily experience is influenced by their body, and deaf people are no exception. Deaf children's brains are ready for language—language they can access.
- A deaf infant with vision can access sign language immediately, by sight. A deaf infant who is blind can access sign language immediately, by touch. These are completely natural to the deaf child, who has a visual sensory orientation.
- Amplification, surgeries, and oralism methods are an attempt to alter this visual sensory orientation. These force a pause on natural language learning through visual means, until sufficient amplification and training can be achieved to attempt the onset of language learning by speech. A delay in language learning is a feature of this approach.
- American Sign Language and English are both languages. Anybody who claims ASL is not a language is outright lying to you.

(If it seems odd that ASL doesn't have a written form, it may help to know that less than 10% of the world's languages do.)

- The building blocks of English words and the building blocks of ASL signs register in the same place in the brain. This area is not specific to speech or signing. Sign language does not hinder English, nor does it hinder speech. Instead, ASL facilitates English and speech. With sign language, the brain can be stimulated to begin building immediately—naturally. There is no reason to wait.

In fact, we know that the impact on deaf children if we do wait is devastating. Language deprivation has been proved to have cascading linguistic, social, and psychological effects on deaf people—some of which are permanent.

Which brings us to Michigan.

You may be aware of an old story that has made its way around political circles for many years, about the “post turtle”. There are many variations; but it goes something like:

*If you're walking down a road, and you come across a fence post with a turtle sitting on top, that's a post turtle. You know it didn't get there by itself.*

The story is used in many ways: sometimes positive; sometimes negative; sometimes, even religious. As a teacher and a researcher, my take is simple—when we see something happening, we have to think about both *what we see*, and *how that thing came to be*.

For decades, oralism has choked out American Sign Language—leading to the closing of multiple Deaf schools and to a shameful lack of commitment by the

state to the Michigan School for the Deaf. Parents have been denied the opportunity to make informed decisions, because they have not been provided adequate and factual information about ASL. So strong is oralism's grasp, that we do not even measure the ASL skills of deaf children.

*When you don't count something, you're saying that it doesn't count.* Thirty years ago, the legislature could be excused for not understanding the important role of sign language in the lives of Deaf people, but evidence of ASL's key role in the early development of deaf children is now pervasive and irrefutable. Sadly, for as long as anyone can remember, measuring the language skills of deaf children has been dictated by outdated oralist whims.

And, so *any time* there is a recognition of the educational, economic, and other struggles of DDBHH people in Michigan, we are describing the *legacy of oralism* in this state. The absolute best way to counter this devastation is to understand the nature of language use among our deaf children, and to provide parents with meaningful information and resources. The proposed bill, with these provisions, will give educators and parents the information they need to begin a new legacy of deaf education in Michigan.

I am thankful for your time, and for the efforts of whomever is reading this on my behalf. I am most thankful to the members of Michigan's Deaf community, for asking me to provide my perspective. They are some of the best people in The Mitten!

Respectfully Submitted,

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Chair and Associate Professor  
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