

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

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Public Testimony

### Testimony in Support of HB No. 5777, Relating to LEAD-K (Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf Kids)

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#### ABSTRACT

Legislation affecting deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing children in Michigan’s schools lacks provisions for informing parents about the array of linguistic and social needs of deaf children. Michigan also lacks procedures for measuring, tracking, and improving linguistic readiness for DDBHH children entering kindergarten. Language deprivation leads to cascading cognitive, linguistic, and social issues, and impacts the well-being of DDBHH people throughout their lives. LEAD-K legislation ensures that parents have access to accurate and complete information about language learning in DDBHH children, and establishes measurements for language development of DDBHH children in Michigan. My testimony was entered into the record in support of proposed LEAD-K legislation in Michigan.

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#### Representative Rodney Wakeman, and Chair Members of the Families, Children and Seniors Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of HB 5777—a simple-yet-important modernization of Michigan’s approach to educating children who are deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing (DDBHH). Throughout Michigan’s infrastructure, there are impediments to advancing the lives of our deaf children and citizens. With limited information, legislators of old enacted policies that hinder the ability of deaf children to achieve their best, and to equip Michigan’s parents with the resources they need to make informed decisions about their children. HB 5777 does not solve every problem, but it addresses the important issue of

school readiness. 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 born 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.

As I speak with you today, Hollywood is in the midst of award season—wedged between the Screen Actors Guild Awards (the *SAGs*) and the Academy Awards (the *Oscars*). Universally, the film *CODA* has been lauded for its powerful representation of a deaf household with two deaf parents, one deaf son, and one hearing daughter. The film and its cast are riveting. Hearing audiences are taken with the deaf cast members and their use of American Sign Language (ASL) on screen and during their numerous award speeches and press briefings. Audiences are moved when Ruby, the sole hearing family member, uses ASL and English together in a performance of Joni Mitchell’s classic song *Both Sides Now*. So much so, that the actress who portrays Ruby will perform the song at the upcoming BAFTA Awards (the British equivalent of the Oscars).

Reality for most deaf children is unlike the household that is celebrated in *CODA*. Most deaf children are born into hearing families that do not know sign language. Just a smattering of these hearing parents and family members will ever learn sign language. Instead, they will withhold sign language from their deaf child.

Why? These parents don’t set out to hurt their deaf children. But, lacking appropriate resources when they learn their child is deaf, many parents succumb to the dated, un-founded claims of a brutal and inhumane educational approach that withholds sign language from deaf children in an attempt to force them to hear and to prioritize speech. Parents are told that sign language hinders speech (it does not), and they are pressured by a massive and lucrative industry to alter their child’s bodies rather than pursue natural language.

We know that the impact on deaf children when language is withheld is devastating. Language deprivation has been proved to have cascading linguistic, social, and psychological effects on deaf

people—some of which are permanent. Here is what the science says:

- Deaf children are born with brains ready for language, and with cognition that is entirely intact.
- Deaf children need 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.
- Anything other than natural language causes language delay. Amplification, surgeries, and oralism methods are an attempt to alter the visual sensory orientation of a deaf child. 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.
- 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.)
- Sign language does not hinder English, nor does it hinder speech. Instead, ASL facilitates English and speech. 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. With sign language, the brain can be stimulated to begin building immediately—naturally. There is no reason to wait.

I, too, have been guilty of taking a this-or-that approach to language and deaf children. An important insight into deaf lives can be seen in CODA—and in the real-life interactions the film’s actors have with reporters and awards presenters. Even in a predominantly signing deaf family, deaf people are multi-lingual and multi-modal. In their day-to-day lives, CODA’s Rossi Family mixes American Sign Language with English. Deaf people routinely live multi-lingual/multi-modal lives, a fact that is born out in language research.

And so, when we act as though education must choose between one language or another, we do not reflect the reality of deaf people’s lives. Michigan’s habit has been to ignore American Sign Language in the lives of deaf children. This is a bad habit based on old information and the cost is too great.

HB 5777 will be one important step toward bringing much needed change to legislation that impacts the lives of DDBHH children and their families. As the world celebrates the fictional Rossi family from the film CODA, let us not forget the important work we have left to do for the deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing children of Michigan. It is time to stop looking at Michigan’s deaf children through one lens or the other. It’s time for us to see deaf children from *Both Sides. Now*.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Chair and Associate Professor  
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