



**House
Legislative
Analysis
Section**

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SIGN LANGUAGE CREDIT

Senate Bill 37 with House Education Committee
amendment

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First Analysis (4-1-87)

MAY 07 1987

Sponsor: Sen. James Barcia

Senate Committee: Education & Mental Health Law Library

House Committee: Education

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

The federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act and Michigan's Mandatory Special Education Act are intended to guarantee to all handicapped children a free and appropriate public education, which includes special education and support services to meet their needs. The newly revised Michigan special education rules call for qualified interpreters for the hearing impaired. In addition, the Rehabilitation Act and Public Act 204 of 1982 mandate the provision of communication aids such as interpreter services. Despite this, many hearing impaired students who use sign language often feel isolated from their peers who can hear but do not know sign language. Some people claim that, in effect, these hearing impaired students are the equivalent of foreign students in their own schools. Some people contend that if American Sign Language (ASL) was recognized as a language and offered as an academic course, more students would participate in the courses, resulting in an eventual increase in the number of people able to communicate through sign language and greater communication opportunities between deaf and hearing students.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

Senate Bill 37 would amend the School Code to permit the board of a school district to grant high school credit in a foreign language to a pupil who had satisfactorily completed a high school course offered in American Sign Language, or who had attained proficiency in ASL outside of a public or private high school curriculum (MCL 380.1157b).

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

According to the Senate Fiscal Agency, the bill would have no fiscal implications for the state (3-18-87).

ARGUMENTS:

For:

Offering American Sign Language for high school credit would assist hearing impaired students in better understanding their own language, as well as hearing students who may want to communicate with hearing impaired students in shared classrooms and programs. This opportunity would enhance communication and socialization between hearing impaired and hearing students. Since the federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act requires handicapped students to be taught in the "least restrictive environment", many hearing impaired students have been combined in classrooms with hearing students. A more immediate benefit of having offered sign language for academic credit would be that more hearing students could communicate with their hearing impaired peers. Over the years, the bill would result in more comprehensive and fulfilling programs for deaf students, as the number of people who could communicate through sign language increased.

Schools in Maine and Texas already offer academic credit for sign language. In addition, 772 colleges and universities in the United States, including Harvard, Brown, and Georgetown Universities as well as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology accept sign language courses for fulfillment of graduate-level language requirements. In Michigan, Madonna College offers a sign language course of study and Oakland University accepts a demonstrated knowledge of sign language as part of the requirements for earning a graduate degree in linguistics.

For:

Sign language is the fourth most used language in the United States. American Sign Language is a language in its own right, with its own rules of grammar, distinct from those of English. In fact, ASL is closer in grammatical structure to French. Thus, ASL fits in the foreign language category, and it thus is appropriate for schools to offer high school foreign language credit for courses in sign language.

For:

Exposure to sign language may inspire students to pursue careers related to deafness. As more people become fluent in the language, its use would not be limited to professionals who provide services to deaf people. Employees such as those working in stores, banks, fast food restaurants, and governmental agencies could carry on basic communication with their hearing impaired consumers.

For:

The bill would permit, but not mandate, a local school district to offer high school credit in foreign language for sign language courses. The only course required by the state to be offered in secondary schools is civics. Thus, the decision to add sign language to the high school foreign language curriculum would be left to the local boards of education.

Against:

Those who believe in using only the oral or "cued speech" communication method fear that sign language, learned and used by hearing peers, could discourage oral deaf students from attempting to use speech and lipreading.

POSITIONS:

The Department of Labor supports the bill (3-9-87).

The Department of Education supports the bill (3-31-87).

The State Mental Health Advisory Council on Deafness in the Department of Mental Health supports the bill (3-31-87).

The Michigan Association of School Boards supports the bill (3-31-87).

S.B. 37 (4-1-87)