

**SFA**

BILL ANALYSIS

Senate Fiscal Agency

Lansing, Michigan 48909

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Senate Bill 37 (as enrolled)

Sponsor: Senator James A. Barcia

Committee: Education and Mental Health

Date Completed: 4-14-87

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**RATIONALE**

The Federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act and Michigan's Mandatory Special Education Act ensure that all handicapped children have available to them 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 accessibility 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. If American Sign Language (ASL) were recognized as a language and offered as an academic course, some people contend, more students would participate in the courses. Eventually, the number of people able to communicate through sign language, it is believed, would increase, resulting in greater communication opportunities between deaf and hearing students.

**CONTENT**

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 enrolled in high school who had satisfactorily completed a high school course offered in American Sign Language or who had attained a proficiency in American Sign Language outside of a public or private high school curriculum.

Proposed MCL 380.1157b

**FISCAL IMPACT**

The bill would have no fiscal impact on the State. It would have an indeterminate impact on local boards of education operating high schools. The fiscal effect would depend on whether local boards of education chose to grant foreign language credit for American Sign Language, and if so, whether program modifications would be necessary to offer courses in American Sign Language.

**ARGUMENTS****Supporting Argument**

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.

**Supporting Argument**

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 therefore is appropriate for schools to offer high school foreign language credit for courses in sign language.

**Supporting Argument**

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.

**Supporting Argument**

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 offering 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.

**Supporting Argument**

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.

**Supporting Argument**

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.

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### ***Supporting Argument***

Public Act 84 of 1985 amended the School Code to permit the board of a school district to grant high school credit in a foreign language to a high school pupil who had attained proficiency in a foreign language outside of a public or private high school curriculum. Allowing local school boards to grant credit for proficiency in American Sign Language outside of a high school curriculum would be compatible with those provisions of the School Code.

### ***Opposing Argument***

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.

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This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan Senate staff for use by the Senate in its deliberations and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.