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STATE OF MICHIGAN  
DEPARTMENT OF CIVIL RIGHTS  
DIVISION ON DEAF, DEAFBLIND AND HARD OF HEARING  
ANNE URASKY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

MATTHEW WESAW  
DIRECTOR

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Superintendent Whiston and Members of the Dearborn School Board,

Good evening.

My name is Anne Urasky. I was recently named as the Director for the Division of Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing, a division within the Michigan Department of Civil Rights. Together, the Division and Department are dedicated to helping improve the lives of one million Michigan citizens who are Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing. Our mission and my role here today, is to affirm every person's indisputable right to equal and effective communication. And importantly, in this context it must be recognized that the right of every student to equal educational opportunities is fully dependent upon that student's right to equal and effective communication.

I am here today with some of my colleagues.

Chris Hunter, who is the former Executive Director who returned to act as the Division's Interim Director until I started.

Karlee Rose Gruetzner, who is a Rights Representative with the Division, and

Dan Levy, the Department of Civil Rights' Director of Law and Policy.

While I have been asked to speak on behalf of all of us, and of MDCR Director Matt Wesaw, any of us would be happy to answer questions you might wish to ask.

We are here today primarily to listen and learn, but also to express concern.

There are many considerations that go into determining questions like what educational program will best suit students who are Deaf. Even when there are clear answers, the answers often vary based on local factors, including not only the goals and priorities of the district, but also those of parents and students. We are here today because this forum provides an opportunity to listen to the concerns of parents and community members, and because we hope we may also hear from you as school leaders. And we do not plan to stop listening after tonight; we will continue to reach out to the school board, district leadership, parents, students, teachers and other concerned persons in order to better understand how we got to where we are today, and to help find ways to ensure that tomorrow is better.

We commend the Dearborn school board and district leadership for recognizing that the present program is not serving Dearborn's deaf students as well as it should, and for wanting to do better. While we cannot say before we learn more whether ending the present program is the right or wrong change, we agree that change is needed. We look forward to the chance to work together to ensure that our concerns are addressed so we can be confident change is not a step back to where Dearborn schools was when it determined the present program was needed in the first place, but instead that change is a step forward moving Dearborn schools toward our shared goal.

Some of the concerns we hope to hear addressed, include:

The appearance that previous interactions between interested parties may not have been conducive to looking for mutually beneficial solutions in which all shared a common desire to achieve success -- and to our belief that building such cooperative effort is in everyone's interest.

The need to understand the basis for any decision not to pursue bilingual education options for students who are deaf and ensuring that if not already done that this possibility is properly considered.

An apparent assumption that students who learn to 'vocalize' spoken English in order to communicate with hearing persons are "more successful" or "better prepared" to live in a hearing world that is based on a hearing person's conception of what makes it 'easier' for a deaf person to live or 'fit in' a hearing world -- rather than being based on Deaf persons' perceptions of what it means to successfully do so.

We salute you for not being complacent -- for recognizing that something needed to be done. But change itself is not an answer; it must be the right change. We do not believe it is possible to say the specific change proposed is the right one until these questions are answered:

Are there enough qualified interpreters to *better* meet the needs of students after the proposed program change?

Will young students who are Deaf who no longer have the benefits of learning in an environment with other peers whose primary language is ASL be *better* able to learn the language acquisition skills necessary for them to later gain functional fluency in ASL and/or English?

Does denying daily interaction with other peers who are also deaf *better* prepare students who are Deaf to later live in a largely hearing world, or does it make it less likely they will develop the self-identity allowing them to see their deafness as a difference to be recognized rather than a disability to overcome?

Does ending the current program this year offer a *better* road to a successful program rather than taking a year to look at the options to improve service delivery and then implementing a plan specifically designed to work best for the students' benefit?

In short, it is not enough to say that the present practice isn't working as well as we want it to. If that is the issue, we need to work together to find ways to make it work better. It's not enough to throw in the towel because of how hard it is- we need to act to improve things better for deaf students. The *only acceptable* reason to abandon the current program for students who are deaf – is that the change will be *better for students*.

The Department and Division assert that the first question you need to be asking yourselves is not the one that we have heard being asked so far. The question cannot only be whether the current way of doing things is successfully serving the needs of deaf students – I don't believe nobody here today would argue that it is. The question you must ask yourselves is *whether* the proposed change will *better* serve the needs of deaf students than the current program does? So far, the only answer appears to be “we hope so”. That answer isn't good enough.

You have taken the courageous step of recognizing the need to make changes. Please do not now take the easy way out by doing no more than ending a program that we can all agree falls short of achieving everyone's shared goals and expectations. Let us instead do the right thing by working together to develop and adopt a plan that will get us there.