

Michigan State Senate Education Committee – Testimony on HB 4822

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Good afternoon, Chairman Pavlov and members of the committee. My name is Barbara Gottschalk, and I am representing myself. I'm an English language acquisition teacher for Warren Consolidated Schools and here to speak in opposition to Section 7-B of House Bill 4822. This section was amended to provide a good cause exemption for limited English proficient students, also often referred to as English language learners, who have had less than three years of instruction in an English language learner program. Unfortunately, this isn't enough.

Widely accepted research by experts in second language acquisition, in fact, research cited on the Michigan Department of Education website, shows it can take from five to seven years for English language learners to perform at grade level. Why then, should students still classified as English language learners be considered for retention in third grade? The services suggested for English language learners in HB 4822 are appropriate, but the bill fails to acknowledge that English language acquisition is developmental. Short-term, targeted reading interventions won't quickly lead to grade-level English proficiency; it takes time.

A third grade student at my school who I'll call Rony, illustrates this slow, but steady progress. Rony was born in Iraq and entered school in the US three years ago this spring with basic English. In 1st grade he tested at a low intermediate level on the WIDA, the annual test of English language proficiency administered to all English language learners in Michigan. As a 2nd grader last year, he tested at a high intermediate level. He is still improving as a 3rd grader, and he continues to receive the services HB 4822 suggests, but his reading ability is one year below grade level. I fully expect Rony, however, to reach proficiency, and grade level, within the five to seven year window referenced so often in research.

Why not just give English language learners like Rony the gift of time by retaining them in third grade? According to federal law students may not be retained at grade level solely for having limited proficiency in English. The *Lau v. Nichols* Supreme Court decision (1974) made it clear that students with limited English proficiency must be granted equal opportunity in education, and may not be discriminated against because of their lack of English. Schools must give them support (like the support provided in HB 4822) and opportunities to learn English so they can participate meaningfully in the academic classroom. They cannot be treated differently from other students (for example, kept from being promoted to the next grade) because of their lack of English language skills.

Even after three years, Rony is still mastering grade level academic English, but Michigan's WIDA test already holds him and his teachers accountable for his progress toward English, and thus, reading proficiency. That's why I feel one way HB 4822 could be greatly improved is to provide a good cause exemption to all limited English proficient students.

Thank you, committee members, for the opportunity to appear before you today.

From Guidance Handbook for Educators of English Learners with Suspected Disabilities, page 9, Michigan Department of Education, January 2016

http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/Guidance_Handbook_for_Educators_of_English_Learners_with_Suspected_Disabilities_-_January_2016_515881_7.pdf

Developing a Second Language (L2): Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency

Language learning takes time—it requires many years to become proficient. Research is clear that five to seven years or more (Collier 1987; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000) are required for students to develop full second language proficiency (with some research suggesting even longer periods of time). This is because language is complex. Proficiency requires development in four domains: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Young children learning their first language develop language at two levels. The first or initial level occurs during the first few years of language acquisition. A second more complex level occurs three to five years after the initial level development of language (Cummins, 1979).

The initial level, termed Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, or BICS, includes the student's ability to participate well in social interactions and daily routines. In fact, the student participates so well that in many instances teachers perceive the student's English ability to be much higher than it truly is. The second, higher level of English understanding and expression is referred to as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), consisting of the language skills necessary to function in an academic setting. Examples of CALP are using and answering higher-order questioning (e.g., why, what if), using cause and effect reasoning, and conducting logical arguments.

References

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Lau v. Nichols, 414 U.S. 563 (1974). Retrieved from <http://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-supreme-court/414/563.html>