



LEADERSHIP, ADVOCACY AND SERVICE FOR MANITOBA'S PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS

Briefing to the Standing Committee on Social and Economic Development

Re: Bill 6 – *Recognition of Sign Languages in Manitoba*

Date: May 7, 2026

Submitted by: Cheryl Smukowich, Vice-President (Boards with >6,000 pupil enrolments)

On Behalf of: The Manitoba School Boards Association

Introduction

Bill 6 represents a significant and welcome step forward for our province. By formally recognizing sign languages as fundamental languages of communication and cultural identity across Manitoba, the Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities of Manitoba are receiving a vital right that is long overdue. On behalf of our members, MSBA applauds this significant step forward in the right direction.

Recognition, however, cannot be merely symbolic. Where the Province recognizes a language on which children depend for access to education, that recognition becomes a right, and necessarily carries with it corresponding duties and obligations—particularly within our province's public education system.

For children who are deaf and hard of hearing, language access is not an auxiliary service. It is the gateway to learning, development, social inclusion, and dignity. Without appropriate, adequately resourced educational delivery in recognized sign languages, recognition risks taking flight without its corresponding requirements.

Our briefing therefore focuses on the implications of Bill 6 upon public education, where the consequences of under-resourcing in learning opportunities related to communication and use of sign language are greatest and most enduring. Systemic gaps— not limited to but especially in the early years of education— define why Bill 6 must be implemented alongside sustained investment, workforce development, and policy alignment to ensure equal, equitable, and high-quality learning opportunities for Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities across Manitoba.

Recognition Must Be Paired With Rights—and Rights With Duties

Bill 6 properly recognizes sign languages—such as American Sign Language (ASL), Langue des signes québécoise (LSQ), Indigenous sign languages, and tactile sign languages— as real languages used by Manitobans. Recognition of a language, however, is not neutral in its effects.

When a government recognizes a language relied upon for access to public services, particularly education, that recognition serves to affirm the dignity and legitimacy of the language community. This recognition also clarifies that communication in that language is not optional or interchangeable. Recognition raises the standard for what constitutes meaningful access under human-rights and accessibility laws.

Recognition therefore entails obligation and duty. In the public education context, those obligations must be interpreted to require quality learning opportunities that are equal in educational ambition, equitable in resource allocation, developmentally appropriate, and linguistically accessible in practice—not only in principle.

It is important to situate Bill 6 within the existing legislative and regulatory frameworks that already govern communication access in Manitoba’s public schools.

Public school boards are already subject to the Information and Communication Standard established under *The Accessibility for Manitobans Act*. This Standard imposes obligations on public sector organizations, including public schools, to ensure that information and communication are accessible to persons with disabilities. Among other requirements, the Standard expressly identifies sign languages as recognized communication supports that may be required to ensure meaningful access.

Notably, the Information and Communication Standard has only recently come fully into effect for public school boards, with compliance timelines extending into late 2025. As a result, school divisions have had only early experience with the operationalization of these new accessibility requirements in complex educational environments.

With the passage of Bill 6 and the formal recognition of multiple sign languages, it follows that the references to sign languages within the Information and Communication Standard must be reviewed and interpreted in light of this proposed new legislative context. Recognition elevates clarity around linguistic legitimacy, but it also underscores the need for policy alignment across accessibility, education, and human rights statutes to ensure practical and sustainable implementation.

Manitoba’s public school boards have always remained compliant with applicable human rights, accessibility, and inclusion legislation. Ensuring that these frameworks are implemented in a way that supports student dignity, participation, and educational success has been an enduring and province-wide priority.

School boards have consistently acted to accommodate students who are deaf or hard of hearing, and cannot rely upon the “undue hardship” principle as extends to most other entities due to additional statutory requirements that mandate universal pupil enrolment and access to public education. In past, accommodation and providing supports for deaf and hard of hearing students has within an environment of finite workforce capacity, specialized expertise, and funding constraints. School boards definitely have the will to accommodate, finding a way is often the most challenging requirement to meet. Thus, the introduction of Bill 6 does not create any new obligation or commitment on the part of school boards; rather, it builds upon a foundation of long-standing practice and legal compliance already carried by boards.

In view of Bill 6, it is essential that the Government be aware that expanding or raising the operational definition of what constitutes a communication support, particularly in light of the future recognition of multiple sign languages, carries significant system-level considerations.

Foremost among these considerations is the requirement that schools remain appropriately funded and resourced to meet pupil needs according to the specific sign language used by the student. Recognition without corresponding investment risks placing school divisions in an untenable position where legal expectations outpace practical capacity.

Interpreter recruitment, training, retention, and the availability of language-specific expertise—particularly for low-incidence sign languages for which supports are either unavailable or significantly constrained— must come with significant consideration for the existing funding model used by school divisions to support and accommodate students. Clear recognition of these realities is necessary to ensure that accommodation remains effective, equitable, and sustainable, rather than nominal.

Sign Language Supports and Capacity: The Current Educational Reality in Manitoba

At current time in our province, the Manitoba School for the Deaf provides a dedicated ASL–English educational environment. It is the only dedicated ASL instructional milieu in our province. MSD performs an essential role and remains a cornerstone of deaf and hard of hearing education in Manitoba.

It is important to acknowledge that MSD delivers instruction exclusively in ASL, together with written and spoken English. MSD does not provide instruction in LSQ, Indigenous Sign Languages, tactile sign languages, LSF, or other sign languages; and on its own, MSD is not resourced to serve as a universal solution for all deaf and hard of hearing students according to the many languages that will receive due recognition under Bill 6.

MSD is therefore not the sole provider of public education to students in need of sign language support. Students from Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities in Manitoba are also educated in public schools— which offer programs in English, Francophone, French Immersion and Heritage Languages— each of which operate under inclusive education policies, as well as the aforementioned human rights and accessibility requirements.

Under human-rights and accessibility principles, it is important for the Manitoba Legislative Assembly to consider that any deaf or hard of hearing student may request enrolment in any public school. When this occurs, accommodation must be provided and as stated must be effective, not merely nominal.

In practice, however, the public education system faces profound constraints. Among the most prevalent:

- low capacity for pre-Kindergarten ASL education, with virtually no foundational early childhood education in sign languages other than ASL.
- severe shortages of professionally trained sign-language interpreters with the impact of inconsistent availability of one-to-one interpretation;
- limited access beyond ASL interpretation and instruction, with minimal LSQ capacity for those identifying as members of the spoken minority francophone language communities outside of Quebec and New Brunswick, nor significantly available resources in the other sign languages that will be recognized under Bill 6; and
- heavy reliance on written language and assistive technology, even where these are pedagogically insufficient, particularly for early years learners between Kindergarten and Grade 5.

For Kindergarten to Grade 5 students, language access is developmental, not supplemental. Young deaf and hard of hearing children require intensive and consistent exposure to a full natural sign language. They require opportunities to acquire the language itself— not only to access translated spoken instruction, and full participation in social, emotional, and cognitive development alongside peers. One-to-one interpretation is often essential at this stage—not only to mediate instruction, but to enable play-based learning, peer interaction, classroom routines, emotional regulation and social belonging.

At present, this level of support remains elusive in much of Manitoba due to the limited supply of trained interpreters and the absence of robust sign-language-based early-years programming outside MSD. Recognition without resourcing at this stage of youth risks permanent language deprivation, with profound educational and social consequences.

As students develop literacy in written language, additional supports— such as captioning, FM systems, or assistive devices—can enhance access to instruction. However, these tools cannot replace real-time linguistic interaction, incidental learning, or social conversation with school staff and peers and the identity-forming relationships that come with that communication. For students with limited or no functional hearing, the social and integrative dimension of schooling remains fundamentally linguistic. Written text and technology cannot substitute for participation in the lived classroom community.

Across Manitoba's public-school system, existing capacity is overwhelmingly oriented toward ASL, with very limited integration of LSQ or other sign languages, little institutional preparedness for the linguistic diversity within Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities; and few pathways for families who communicate in non-ASL sign languages.

According to human-rights principles, a student's right to enrol in public education is not conditional on linguistic convenience. A family or student may request English, Francophone, French Immersion, Indigenous, or Heritage language schooling regardless of the sign language they use.

Sign-language recognition under Bill 6 must therefore be understood as recognition of access to the spoken instructional languages of Manitoba schools— interpreted through the recognized sign languages, not as a narrowing of educational choice. In the last session of the Legislative Assembly, under Bill 18: *The Public Schools Amendment Act (Indigenous Languages of Instruction)*, the Legislature has recently recognized spoken Indigenous languages as formal languages of instruction for the first time in Manitoba's history. That reform reflects an important principle: where a language is appropriately and respectfully recognized, the education system itself must adapt— not require the student to relocate, assimilate, or surrender their inherent identity and dignity.

The same principle must apply to sign languages. With it comes the opportunity that a deaf or heard of hearing student may also one day request the opportunity of not only Indigenous language instruction but also any of the other spoken languages recognized for regular classroom instruction. This is a reality that also extends beyond classroom instruction itself to the full educational experience of any pupil between pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12, from field trips, to extra-curriculars, athletics and student clubs.

A child who communicates primarily in a recognized sign language should never be constrained in school choice solely because the system lacks capacity. Within this context, the appropriate response cannot fall to public school boards alone. We each remain jointly accountable for the responsibility of building that capacity, being certain that available capacity and resources never result in denial or displacement of opportunity.

Bill 6 moves Manitoba decisively in the right direction. To fulfill its full promise and potential however, it must be implemented alongside:

1. Explicit policy alignment with education, human rights, accessibility and other applicable legislation as well as the existing inclusive-education framework;
2. Sustained promotion of, and investment in, interpreter training, recruitment, and retention;
3. Support for remote and hybrid service delivery, not only to serve needs in rural, northern and remote communities, but also to promote universal access particularly for low-incidence languages such as LSQ, Indigenous sign languages, as well as the other sign languages that newcomer communities may use to communicate— such as FSL for members of official francophone language minority communities;
4. Early years focused programming that prioritizes intensive sign-language acquisition;
5. Clear commitment on the part of the Manitoba Government to public school divisions that recognition of sign languages also entails the obligation, duty and requirement to provide meaningful, effective accommodation in our province's classrooms, playgrounds, gymnasiums and the many other locations both inside and outside of school where education is provided to our students.

Recognition must extend to ensuring that students who rely on sign languages can fully participate in Manitoba's public-education system according to the highest and fullest standards of dignity, equity, and opportunity. In this, our students must be kept in focus first and foremost with acknowledgement that the same remains true for parents, guardians and responsible adults from the Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities, and also for our staff: from teachers, to educational assistants, administrative staff, custodians, bus drivers, and so many other employees who rely on the human good of communication to build relationships with one another. One can well conceptualize what "parent-teacher" meetings require, so that the meaningful experiences that come from these opportunities are equitable and equal for all.

Public schools in Manitoba are committed to providing this equitable and equal opportunity through delivery of the good of public education. Bill 6 affirms that Manitobans from the Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities—and the sign languages they rely on—belong fully within that commitment.

Aligning Recognition With Capacity

Bill 6 represents meaningful progress. To ensure its successful implementation within public schools, recognition of sign languages must be accompanied by clear policy alignment, realistic funding commitments, and shared accountability between Government and school boards.

Public school boards cannot, and should not, be expected to absorb the full system-wide implications of raised expectations regarding communication supports under Bill 6, without corresponding legislative and fiscal partnership. Recognition must therefore be understood not as an endpoint, but as a starting point and clarion call for coordinated planning, resourcing, and implementation that ensures Manitoba's public education system is equipped, resourced and able to meet and respond the needs of every student with integrity, equity, and care.

Given the current state of capacity and resources, the question of how a student using each of the sign languages that will be recognized under Bill 6 can best be supported comes into view, according to every dimension of public education highlighted in this brief. In past, Manitoba has been a leader through government recognition of the scale of investment required to ensure meaningful accessibility and inclusion.

And such investments reflect our shared commitment to social justice and ensuring that Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities receive the path to partake in full citizenship. In 2008/09 through to 2011/12, the Government of Manitoba set an important precedent by providing dedicated and extra-ordinary funding to support accommodation for a student who pursued entry into a professional post-secondary faculty in furtherance of their vocational and career aspirations. That investment—approximately \$1 million per year (in today's purchasing power) over the course of the student's full undergraduate post-secondary study pathway—was directed toward the provision of full sign language interpretation and other support, recognizing that access to education cannot be achieved without adequate and sustained resources. The student who was fully resourced with this funding overcame every barrier to

succeed in their education and in the years since, has applied their profession to service of the most critical and vital needs of members of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities.

The lesson from this precedent is important in context of Bill 6. The post-secondary institution who advocated for special funding to support this student could not have achieved their graduation without the extra-ordinary support received from the Government of Manitoba. The student who aspired to break barriers and realize their aspirations and vision for the future could not have enrolled and taken advantage of the important learning opportunities without that support. The Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities would not have access to a qualified professional capable of communicating with them using their own language, without mediator or interpreter, without that support. That funding support was the catalyst for Manitoba to become a leader, and to action the true definition of inclusion, justice, equity and human rights for the first time in Canadian history, within that particular profession.

This precedent is instructive. It demonstrates that when access to communication is respected as foundational rather than auxiliary, appropriate accommodation requires intentional funding decisions rather than ad hoc absorption within existing budgets and resources. The same principle necessarily applies within the K–12 public education system, where early and sustained access to language directly shapes long-term educational and social outcomes.

In Closing

True recognition is measured not through declaration alone, but by whether our children can learn, grow, and thrive in the languages that give them access to the world and the many splendours of life. Bill 6 provides the foundation. It now falls to the Government, those elected to serve our province in the Legislative Assembly, and also to our member public school boards to provide the means to ensure that recognition is matched with the resources, planning, and accountability necessary to achieve full equality, rendering it both effective and real. In this, Manitoba's public school boards shall strive to meet every obligation, considering it as the highest duty and honour that we can undertake. But school boards cannot do it alone. We trust that the full significance of Bill 6 comes with the understanding of what it will take, with clear next steps following passage of the Bill, so that every child and every community is able to flourish in present and future generations.