

TEACHING NATIVE AMERICAN TRIBAL LANGUAGE

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Senate Bill 1014 as passed by the Senate

Sponsor: Sen. Michael Prusi

House Committee: Education

Senate Committee: Education

First Analysis (9-22-10)

BRIEF SUMMARY: The bill would allow a teacher without a teaching certificate to teach a Native American tribal language and culture class, and also allow students to fulfill their two-credit world language requirement under the Michigan Merit Curriculum by completing Native American language coursework.

FISCAL IMPACT: The Department of Education would incur minimal additional administrative costs for setting up a process for approving non-certified teachers to teach Native American tribal language and culture classes. There would be no measurable fiscal impact on local school districts.

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

The Michigan Merit Curriculum requires that all students earn at least two credits in world language study in order to graduate from high school. Phased-in, the requirement applies to all students beginning with those who will graduate from high school in the class of 2016 (that is, those who entered 7th grade this year, in the fall of 2010).

The world language credits must be earned in classes taught by "highly qualified teachers"--a distinction reserved for teachers who are licensed and certified by the state (upon the recommendation of a university-based teacher education program) to teach certain subjects and grade levels, and who are appropriately deployed by school officials to teach classes within their subject area expertise. See **Background Information**.

Michigan has three Native American languages: Ottawa, Ojibway, and Potawatomi. According to committee testimony, the Potawatomi language is the least often spoken of the three, having only 30 fluent adult speakers nationwide. Nearly all the teachers of Native American languages in Michigan are elders in their respective Native American communities.

For example, the elders of the Hannahville Indian Community located in Michigan's central Upper Peninsula (in Menominee and Delta counties), and the elders of the Gun Lake Potawatomi Tribe located in southwestern Michigan (in Allegan County) teach the Potawatomi language and culture in area schools. At Hannahville the language is part of the K-12 curriculum studied in the community's charter school. In Gun Lake, which has not yet opened its charter school, the language is taught in summer enrichment classes for school students, and year-round in the evening for adults.

Further, in Hannahville, community leaders have created a dynamic and permanent language acquisition program, drawing on the knowledge of Potawatomi speakers. To promote and ensure the survival of the language in their community and tribal school, they worked over three years to develop a Potawatomi language curriculum that is aligned to the Michigan Department of Education World Language Standards and Benchmarks, and they have also created multi-media materials, computer language labs, a language website, and two online language courses (lasting nine- or 36-weeks).

Few of the elders who teach Native American languages are certified as foreign language teachers, since few study their native language in university settings. Indeed, few universities offer coursework in Native American language instruction for pre-service teachers who are working to earn their bachelors' degrees.

Legislation has been introduced that would allow students to fulfill their two-credit world language requirement under the Michigan Merit Curriculum by studying Native American languages, and also to waive the teacher-certification requirement for the elders who work in their communities as Native American language instructors.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would amend the Revised School Code to allow a teacher without a teaching certificate to teach a Native American tribal language and culture class.

Specifically, the bill would allow the Michigan Department of Education to enter into a memorandum of understanding with a federally recognized Native American tribe, the board of a school district, or the board of directors of a charter school. That memorandum would authorize the state superintendent of public instruction to allow the tribe, the district, or the charter school to use teachers without valid Michigan teaching certificates to teach Native American tribal language and culture classes. To achieve this end, the state school superintendent would issue a three-year letter of approval (or a letter of continuing approval).

Under the memorandum of understanding, the uncertified teacher would have to demonstrate mastery of the tribal language, either through a credential issued by a federally recognized tribe, or by another means considered suitable by the Department of Education. The memorandum of understanding also would have to include requirements for renewal or continuing approval of the non-certificated teacher as established by the tribe, school district, or charter school in collaboration with the department.

Under the bill, the Native American tribe, school district, or charter school could apply the credits earned by a tribal language student who is taught by an uncertified teacher for any purpose and to the same extent, as if taught by a certificated teacher, including credit toward completion of the requirements for a language other than English. (Note: the Revised School Code requires a student, beginning with those entering third grade in 2006, to complete at least two credits in a language other than English, or equivalent course work, or other learning experiences, before receiving a high school diploma.)

HOUSE COMMITTEE ACTION:

The members of the House Education Committee reported out the Senate-passed version of Senate Bill 1014 without amendments.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

To learn more about the world language requirements of the Michigan Merit Curriculum, see pages 100-102 of the "Frequently Asked Questions" document published by the Michigan Department of Education. To do so, visit the following web address:
www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/FAQ__Entire_Document_12.07_217841_7.pdf

ARGUMENTS:

For:

Supporters of this legislation join with the bill's sponsor to argue that "language is the foundation of any culture, and as such, Native American language revitalization efforts...seek to ensure the continued survival not only of these languages, but associated cultural, historical, and spiritual heritage as well." They observe that "tribal elders are often the only tribal members with the ability to speak such languages fluently, and it is important that the State of Michigan work with our neighbor tribes to eliminate any unnecessary roadblocks to ensuring these language can be passed on to future generations."

Proponents of the bill also note that the federal Native American Languages Act encourages states to "allow exceptions to teacher certification requirements...when such teacher certification requirements hinder the employment of qualified teachers who teach in Native American languages."

To these ends, this bill would allow a teacher who demonstrates fluency in a Native American language, but who has no teaching certificate, to teach a Native American tribal language and culture class. It also allows students to fulfill their two-credit world language requirement under the Michigan Merit Curriculum by completing Native American language coursework.

Against:

No arguments in opposition to the bill were advanced.

POSITIONS:

The Michigan Department of Education supports the bill. (9-22-10)

The Gun Lake Tribe (of Potawatomi Native Americans) supports the bill. (9-22-10)

The Hannahville Indian Community (of Potawatomi Native Americans) supports the bill. (9-22-10)

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■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.