

Promoting the use of Makaton sign language in all Welsh schools

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 19 Tachwedd 2019
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Research Briefing:

Petition number: P-05-909

Petition title: Promoting the use of Makaton sign language in all Welsh schools

Text of petition: We call on the Welsh Government to consider the use of Makaton sign language in all Welsh schools. I am the 13-year-old sister of a little boy with Downs Syndrome whose primary use of communication is Makaton sign language. I have taught myself Makaton sign language for the purpose of communicating with my brother and as a result have set up social media platforms to help other people in similar situations learn. I was surprised how much demand there is for people who want to be taught Makaton in order to communicate with friends and family who have learning difficulties. I believe it should be included in all schools in Wales alongside the everyday teaching to give every child the ability to learn to communicate via this method.

I am passionate to achieve this and believe it is the fundamental right for all children in Wales to be taught Makaton in order to break down barriers, misconceptions and achieve true inclusion within Wales. A vast amount of research has been conducted to test the effectiveness of using symbols and signs to help people develop language and literacy skills. Current research findings support the use of sign language with adults and children who have intellectual and communication handicaps. There is also a study exploring the extent of learning sign language alongside a foreign language in modern foreign languages lessons support oral vocabulary retention in foreign languages. Many research papers have been published supporting the use of Makaton.

Background

Makaton is a language development programme that uses symbols, signs and speech to enable people to communicate. The [Makaton Charity](#) state that Makaton supports the development of essential communication skills such as attention and listening, comprehension, memory, recall

and organisation of language and expression. In using Makaton, signs are used, alongside speech, in spoken word order. The Makaton Charity state that over 100,000 children and adults in the UK use Makaton symbols and signs, either as their main method of communication or as a way to support speech. Unlike British Sign Language, it is not a recognised language.

Welsh Government policy

In her letter to the Committee, the Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams AM states:

- The new curriculum for Wales will allow for schools to include the teaching of Makaton. As it is not a recognised language, this would have to be alongside Welsh, English and an international language by the end of primary school. In the current curriculum, it can be ‘explored’ through Personal and Social Education;
- Welsh Government funding is provided to the four regional education consortia who decide how best to support schools in their areas. This can include support for Makaton where needed;
- A school or local authority would be responsible for arranging communication support if a learner required this as part of their special educational needs provision;
- A ‘significant proportion’ of the £20m investment for the Additional Learning Needs transformation programme will be used to develop the skills of the education workforce.

New curriculum

[Languages, Literacy and Communication](#) is one of the six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs) that make up the new curriculum which will be introduced from September 2022 on a phased basis. The Welsh Government published draft curriculum materials in April 2019. The feedback period ended in July 2019. The Welsh Government is due to publish the **final curriculum and assessment arrangements in January 2020**.

The Languages, Literacy and Communication AoLE statutory guidance states that the AoLE ‘will enable all learners to gain knowledge and skills in Welsh, English and international languages as well as in literature.’

The statutory guidance also states that

Languages, Literacy and Communication skills are key to enabling learners to express themselves effectively, and learners who are able to articulate their feelings and interpret those of others are better equipped to develop positive relationships and thus to become healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society, able to keep themselves and others safe, both offline and online.

There are four areas that are identified as ‘what matters’ in the Languages, Literacy and Communication AoLE:

- Learning about identity and culture through languages prepares us to be citizens of Wales and the world.

- Learners who listen and read effectively are prepared to learn throughout their lives.
- Learners who speak and write effectively are prepared to play a full part in life and work.
- Literature fires imagination and inspires creativity.

Although Makaton is not specifically mentioned in the statutory guidance, the Minister for Education states that due to the ethos of the new curriculum, schools would be free to teach it, in addition to Welsh, English and an international language.

House of Commons petition

On 1 March 2019, the UK Government responded to a petition that asked to '[Make it compulsory for schools to teach basic signing, such as Makaton](#)'. The Petitioner suggested that this could be achieved by each school having an online/paper resource pack of compulsory words and if needed a lead person from each school could attend training and roll out to rest of the staff. The Government responded that while Makaton is a valuable communication tool for some pupils and schools, the UK Government have no plans to change the national curriculum. They also said that schools already have flexibility to choose to teach it should they wish.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.