



EXHIBIT 2
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HB 438

MONTANA ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND, INC.

an Affiliate of the National Federation of the Blind

Montana Association for the Blind
Monday, February 07, 2005 Fact Sheet

Fact Sheet

HB 438: "Blind Persons' Literacy Rights and Education Act"

Sponsored by Representative Rosy Buzzas and Senator Dave Lewis

Title: "AN ACT PROVIDING BRAILLE SERVICES TO A BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED CHILD; DETERMINING THE NEED FOR BRAILLE INSTRUCTION; REQUIRING A TEACHER, SPECIALIST, OR PARAPROFESSIONAL TO DEMONSTRATE SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE IN READING AND TEACHING BRAILLE BY PASSING AN EXAMINATION OR COMPLETING AN ACCREDITED BRAILLE CLASS OR PROGRAM; REQUIRING A SCHOOL DISTRICT TO CONSIDER THE AVAILABILITY OF ELECTRONIC VERSIONS OF TEXTBOOKS IN THE SELECTION OF TEXTBOOK PUBLISHERS AND TO PROVIDE BRAILLE EQUIPMENT TO PRODUCE BRAILLE ONSITE; REQUIRING THE OFFICE OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION TO ESTABLISH A BRAILLE ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT LOAN PROGRAM; AMENDING SECTION 20-7-602, MCA; AND PROVIDING AN EFFECTIVE DATE."

Braille is the tactile code used by the blind and visually impaired for reading and writing. Combinations of raised dots that can be felt by touch provides the same information for the blind and visually impaired that print does for the sighted. For more information on Braille, go to the fact sheet of the US Library of Congress National Library Services for the Blind and Physically Handicapped at <http://www.loc.gov/nls/reference/factsheets/braille.html>.

The evidence that Braille is essential for a productive life is overwhelming. For instance, studies show that over 85 percent of the working blind use Braille. At the same time, over 70 percent of blind people are unemployed, and the Braille literacy rate is a shocking 10 percent. HB 438 includes more statistics from research on literacy for blind and visually impaired children. While Montana works out the details of equal access to elementary and secondary education, the Montana Association for the Blind (MAB) wants to make sure blind and visually impaired Montana children are getting the quality education everyone deserves. We are painfully aware of the challenges Montana faces, so that is why our members support our local schools by providing technical assistance to families and schools, scholarships for those who want to learn Braille, and seminars on Braille and Braille technology.

The ability to read and write for blind and visually impaired children depends on Braille. Although federal laws make Braille the default medium in K-12 classrooms throughout the country, Montana does not have a state law that does the same.

Hard earned experience while working with families and schools shows the MAB that blind and visually impaired Montana children are rarely getting a quality education because Braille is not applied as often as it should be. If the parents of blind and visually impaired children are well informed and relentless, they can assure that their children will learn how to read and write through Braille: However, the process is often brutal and exhausting. No one actively opposes using Braille, but families face opposition that stems from local schools not knowing what to do. Funding for Braille education sometimes presents challenges for local schools to satisfy federal requirements, but more problematic are the skills and knowledge it takes for professionals to teach Braille and to build support systems for teaching Braille. HB 438 strengthens support provided local schools by the Office for Public Instruction and the Montana School for the Deaf and Blind. HB 438 would help everyone out by taking the federal requirements and implementing them in a way that fits Montana's education systems. We harbor no illusions that everything will be fixed by HB 438. However, we believe HB 438 will make it easier for local schools to respond to the educational needs of Montana's blind and visually impaired children.

HB 438 accomplishes four vital elements in preparing blind and visually impaired Montana children for the future. The bill:

1. Affirms federal requirements to make Braille the default in individualized Education Plans for blind and visually impaired children; and
2. Requires that those who teach and support children how to read and use Braille be skilled and knowledgeable in Braille as verified by a Braille literacy competency exam geared for volunteers, paraprofessionals, and teachers or by completing an accredited course of study in Braille; and
3. Commits Montana to getting electronic versions of textbooks in the National Instructional Materials Accessibility Standard (NIMAS) file format, which will be available from the soon-to-be established national repository of K-12 textbooks; and
4. Expands the central support to local schools provided by the Office for Public Instruction and the Montana School for the Deaf and Blind, especially where technology that supports Braille education is concerned.

The MAB strives to change what it means to be blind. We believe that, with proper training and opportunity, blindness is respectable and need not be the tragedy many think blindness is. Our members consist of blind and visually impaired Montanans, our families, and our friends. We organized in 1946, and are governed by our annual convention and board of directors. There are eleven local chapters scattered throughout Montana. Some of our programs include the Summer Orientation Program for the Blind and Partially Sighted, which is held each year on the campus of Montana State University-Bozeman, multiple scholarship programs, blindness-related technology loans and leases, and many other programs that endorse personal responsibility and acquisition of the alternative skills of blindness. The MAB is an affiliate of the National Federation of the Blind. Our members are active at the local, state, and national levels of advocacy for the blind and visually impaired. For more information, please contact MAB President Myrle Tompkins through our central office at:

Montana Association for the Blind
PO Box 465
Helena, MT 59624
(406) 442-9411

Q. Why should those Montana teachers and paraprofessionals who instruct blind and visually impaired children in Braille be required to pass the National Literary Braille Competency Test or complete an accredited course in Braille?

A. The purpose of the test or completed course is to verify that the teacher or paraprofessional reached a verifiable level of competency in reading and writing in Braille. One can hardly imagine functionally illiterate teachers instructing elementary and secondary school children how to read and write. Yet, this is precisely what happens to blind and visually impaired children. There should be a way to verify that the teachers and paraprofessionals charged with the responsibility of teaching Braille can actually read and write in Braille. For more information on the test and the free courses in Braille, go to <http://www.loc.gov/nls/reference/circulars/brailleliteracy.html#1b2>.

Q. Which teacher and paraprofessionals should pass the competency exam or complete an accredited course of study in Braille?

A. Only those teachers and paraprofessionals who provide direct instruction and support for Braille need pass the exam or an accredited course in Braille. Mainstream classroom teachers do not need to know Braille in order to teach effectively. Once a child learns Braille, Braille frees the child to learn on equal footing with peers.

Q. Are there alternatives to Braille that are equally effective?

A. No. Other technologies, such as large print, audio recordings, and electronic text do not afford the level of access to print that Braille does. With Braille, blind and visually impaired people can read with their fingertips in much the same way sighted people read with their eyes. With Braille, readers can see the beauty and form of written language, punctuation, spelling, etc. Literacy is linked to Braille like no other alternative reading and writing system is.

Q. How does technology affect Braille?

A. Thanks to developments in Braille technology, Braille is easy and inexpensive to produce and read. Braille embossers, which work like computer printers, connect to standard computers. Print to Braille translation software makes it a snap to convert documents in any file format to Braille, so long as the operator is Braille literate. In addition, small portable computers equipped with Braille or standard keys and a refreshable Braille display make it possible for Braille readers to read, write, and operate computer software with Braille and voice synthesizers. Libraries for the blind and visually impaired provide electronic files in formatted Braille that can be loaded on computers and read via the computer's refreshable Braille display. In fact, technology makes Braille a more viable medium for literacy than it ever was previously. Future technological developments promise even more functionality and reduced costs.

Q. Will HB 438 cost anything to implement?

A. Yes. In order to implement HB 438, Montana will have to spend money to support its elements. However, it is important to note that federal requirements already mandate the kind of services HB 438

includes. If Montana were meeting federal requirements fully, HB 438 would add no extra costs. Well-informed and relentless parents can hold local schools accountable, but the process is far from easy. If HB 438 is adopted, local schools would rely heavily on central support services from the Office for Public Instruction and the Montana School for the Blind and Deaf, thus relieving them of some costs. Moreover, a centralized system would allow Montana to meet federal requirements in a fiscally responsible way because resources could be shifted to where they are needed. Local schools may incur expenses in assuring that teachers and paraprofessionals who teach and support Braille instruction are qualified to do so. However, Braille courses from a variety of sources, such as the Library of Congress National Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped and the Hadley School for the Blind, are free and provided as distance learning. Local teachers and paraprofessionals need not leave home to learn Braille. Of course, learning Braille will take time, and time for professionals costs money. To that end, the MAB offers scholarships to those who want to learn Braille. The MAB welcomes a fiscal note on HB 438 because we know that, in order to improve the quality of education for Montana's blind and visually impaired children, Montana must commit reasonable resources.

Q. What is the national repository and how does it work?

A. In the 2005 re-authorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the federal government established a national repository of electronic versions of K-12 education textbooks. The repository, which will be the American Printing House for the Blind, will receive computer files from textbook publishers and distribute computer files. In the National Instructional Materials Accessibility Standard (NIMAS) format to states. When the repository opens its doors in 2006, Montana schools will be able to get the files from the repository and use them to produce Braille. The Braille, with the use of technology, will be printable on paper or displayed on computers equipped with refreshable Braille displays.