



School Administrators Alliance

Representing the Interests of Wisconsin School Children

TO: Senate Committee on Education
FROM: John Forester, Executive Director
DATE: October 6, 2021
RE: Opposition to Senate Bill 454

Chairperson Darling and members of the Senate Committee on Education, thank you very much for the opportunity to testify on this important legislation. My name is John Forester. I'm the Executive Director of the Wisconsin School Administrators Alliance (SAA). In that capacity, I represent the combined memberships of five professional associations of public school administrators: the Association of Wisconsin School Administrators (AWSA), the Wisconsin Association of School Business Officials (WASBO), the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators (WASDA), the Wisconsin Association of School Personnel Administrators (WASPA), and the Wisconsin Council for Administrators of Special Services (WCASS). The SAA also represents the 10,000 members of the Wisconsin Retired Educators Association (WREA).

The SAA, and WREA, opposes Senate Bill 454, relating to reading readiness assessments. Please consider the following in support of our position:

- Our members throughout Wisconsin share the concerns expressed by the authors of SB 454 regarding Wisconsin's disappointing reading outcomes. However, districts have not been waiting for legislation to address this issue. In the past few years, school leaders have been identifying and evaluating best practices in literacy instruction throughout the country and implementing promising new initiatives. Many of our members have expressed concern that the requirements of SB 454 would draw the focus away from the work they are doing to improve reading outcomes in their districts, draining time and resources away from critical interventions and support for students.
- I would like to thank Senator Bernier for the opportunity to meet with her staff and with Dr. Kymyona Burk via Zoom for more than an hour on September 9th. We especially appreciated the opportunity to learn from Dr. Burk about the development of Mississippi's comprehensive early literacy program. Our main takeaways from Dr. Burk included three points that are simply not addressed in SB 454: 1) the importance of focusing first on professional development in the science of reading for teachers and administrators; 2) the necessity of gaining "buy-in" from school leaders and teachers in the field; and 3) state investment to support school districts in their efforts to improve reading outcomes is absolutely critical.
- How will this bill, with its focus on additional testing, affect reading outcomes? Comprehensive early literacy programs include multiple components in addition to assessment, including interventions, staff pre-service, supports for students and school districts, and professional development for teaching staff. Wisconsin school leaders see enormous needs for professional development in the science of reading for teachers and administrators. It is our understanding that

Mississippi saw a similar need and addressed professional development first on their journey to a comprehensive early literacy program. Why are we focusing first on assessment?

- With respect to importance of “buy-in,” SB 454 appears to be a very prescriptive top-down mandate developed with very little input from school leaders in the field. Our members support development of a comprehensive early literacy program in consultation with school leaders, teachers and other education experts, as opposed to a disjointed, piecemeal approach developed with limited input from educators in the field.
- The bill is silent on the importance of state investment to improve reading outcomes in Wisconsin. Simply put, this bill is an unfunded mandate. Our members believe this bill will increase costs for school districts due to increased staff time and resources necessary to administer an increased number and frequency of required assessments, development of remediation plans and compliance with new reporting and parental notification requirements. School districts that already collectively transfer \$1.15 billion from their district general funds to cover the funding gap between required special education costs and current state funding will be forced to make difficult cuts in program areas outside of early literacy to comply with this legislation. Finally, it is our understanding that the majority of federal funds cannot be used to pay for the provisions of this legislation. Therefore, the cost of this mandate would likely be covered by district state and local funds.
- Many of our members find it disturbing and inappropriate that the legislation would advantage certain private companies by specifically naming certain assessments. Is this best practice in legislative drafting or state policy development? We don’t really know what will happen to those preferred companies and their assessments in the future, and yet, they could be specifically named in statute.
- There is evidence that Wisconsin is making progress with Multi-level System of Support (MLSS). According to the 2019-20 Wisconsin RtI Annual Report, students performing in the lowest 5 percent on the Forward English Language Arts (ELA) exam show statistically significant improvements in outcomes after they have attended a high-implementing school for 3 or more years. We raised this issue in our meeting with Dr. Burk and she expressed strong support for the MLSS. If adopted, what impact will SB 454 have on Wisconsin’s MLSS?
- Finally, I will offer a brief answer to the question, “Well, if you don’t support SB 454, what do you support?” We support a two-pronged approach to the development of a comprehensive early literacy program in Wisconsin. First, we should develop legislation yet this session offering financial support for districts to provide professional development in the science of reading for teachers and administrators. Secondly, we would like to see an effort to bring relevant stakeholders to the table to develop the other components of the early literacy program including assessment, staff pre-service, interventions, supports, and other elements. This second part, in our estimation, would begin to address the challenge of creating the “buy-in” from the field that Dr. Burk believes is critically important to successful implementation.

Thank you for your consideration of our views. If you should have any questions regarding our thoughts on SB 454, please call me at 608-242-1370.