

TO: Members, Senate Committee on Education

FROM: Daniel Henderson, School Programs Coordinator

SUBJECT: SB 329 -- Reading instruction and private schools participating in parental choice programs and amendments

DATE: June 15, 2023

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Thank you Mr. Chairman, and committee members, for the opportunity to testify on SB 329, the reading reform bill.

You are to be applauded for wanting to address this issue and for your willingness to publicly recognize that we have a reading crisis in the state.

It is appalling that billions of dollars are being spent annually on education and our children still cannot read. It needs to be fixed. Thank you for leading the charge.

We studied the Mississippi miracle months ago. And asked ourselves if Wisconsin could replicate that effort. We came to the conclusion that the variables of our states are too different. Wisconsin's diverse education environment with its many options requires unique approaches, which prevent its effective replication.

We wanted desperately to provide our support. **But the Wisconsin Council of Religious & Independent Schools (WCRIS) must oppose SB 329 unless it is amended.**

We stand ready to work with you on repairing this bill and making it something the private schools throughout the state can support. We honestly want to find ways to say "yes."

As you may know, WCRIS represents 800 schools and over 100,000 children across the state. We represent all major private school groups. Our Board of Directors comprise the superintendents of all the Catholic and Lutheran schools, and has members representing the various independent Christian school groups across the state.

Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Association of Christian  
Schools International

Christian Schools  
International

Diocese of Green Bay

Diocese of LaCrosse

Diocese of Madison

Diocese of Superior

Lutheran Church  
Missouri Synod  
North Wisconsin District

Lutheran Church  
Missouri Synod  
South Wisconsin District

Wisconsin Association  
of Independent Schools

Wisconsin Conference  
of Seventh Day Adventists

Wisconsin Evangelical  
Lutheran Synod  
Northern Wisconsin District

Wisconsin Evangelical  
Lutheran Synod  
Western Wisconsin District

Wisconsin Evangelical  
Lutheran Synod  
Southeastern Wisconsin  
District

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Unlike Wisconsin's other education advocacy groups, we actually run schools. Our superintendents say that if voucher schools are mandated to adopt policies that conflict with their religious beliefs and values, they will withdraw from the voucher program.

Our schools' autonomy is the very thing which makes our schools successful and is a magnet for parents. Our schools won't be around to be chosen if SB 329 is not fixed. Wisconsin's private schools save local and state taxpayers \$1 billion annually, thanks to private philanthropy. The public sector has no way of closing that gap when our schools go away.

You are each to be commended for your concern and hard work to address the reading deficit in Wisconsin. But one size does not fit all. We learned that during the pandemic, when the whole state was treated as sick, while only certain regions were actually ill.

We seek the following changes to SB 329:

1. **Retention policy:** omit the requirement that the private school promotion policy for third to fourth grade *"include all of the components that are required to be in DPI's model policy."* This is not mandated for the required written policies for promoting pupils from grade 4 to grade 5, and from grade 8 to grade 9;
2. **Clarify the effects of the retention policy on voucher students.** For example, because of the voucher cap, you don't want two voucher students when only one seat is available in a particular grade. Direct that the accounting for the voucher is assigned fully to the grade assigned to a retained student despite the number of vouchers allowed in that grade, so that a promoted student will not trigger a lack of sufficient voucher seats;
3. **Exempt costs that are required to comply with the reading program from voucher totals.** Vouchers have just been increased, but the cost of compliance with the reading initiative unwittingly erodes the increase, along with requirements for crime reporting, Narcan and cold baths, to name three other pending legislative proposals;
4. **Curriculum and retention:** Make it clear that voucher schools that choose NOT to adopt a new literacy curriculum are also not obligated to follow this bill's third grade retention requirement;
5. **Delete the prohibition on three-queuing.** While it may not be as effective as phonics, there may be the occasional student who can only learn to read with this method of training. Teachers should be free to use this technique without fear of breaking the law;
6. **Literacy Council.** The Council should include a representative from the Wisconsin Council of Religious & Independent Schools. WCRIS currently has statutory inclusion in the DPI's Title One Committee of Practitioners, and the Professional Standards Council.

7. **Literacy coaches:** Literacy coaches who are assigned to serve private schools must have demonstrated knowledge/experience with private K-12 schools. They must respect the beliefs and values of the private school, and respect the private school's religious identity and culture;
8. **True opt-in trigger:** Clarify that schools can only participate if they "opt-in" to the program. And, unless they are officially a member of the program and receive funding support through the program, they do not have to use a state literacy coach nor follow the state's third grade retention policy;
9. **Opt-out:** Allow private schools to "opt-out" of the state's reading goals and program for the next school year, if they had been previously participating;
10. **Non-voucher private school students:** Not all of the state's 100,000 private school students are eligible to participate in the voucher programs. Non-voucher students are equally in need of improving their reading ability. There is substantial learning loss from the pandemic. A simple block grant program that financially rewards schools for every percentage point increase in students' annual reading scores, will yield positive results. Students are already being tested.

Please fix the reading bill proposal. WCRIS stands ready to serve in that effort.

Thank you. I'd be happy, Mr. Chairman and committee members, to take any questions.