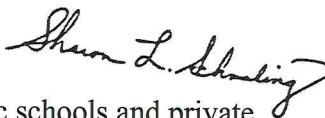


TO: Members, Assembly Committee on State Affairs

FROM: Sharon L. Schmeling, Executive Director 

SUBJECT: AB 321 - Reading instruction in public schools and private schools participating in parental choice programs,

DATE: June 13, 2023

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Thank you Mr. Chairman, and committee members, for the opportunity to testify on AB 321, 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 we could replicate that effort in Wisconsin. We came to the conclusion that the variables of our two states were so different that it was not likely we could copy them.

We wanted desperately to provide our support. But we must oppose AB 321.

It's just too problematic. 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 know, the Wisconsin Council of Religious and Independent Schools (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 members representing the various independent Christian school groups across the state.

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

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  
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District

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Our schools' autonomy is the very thing which makes our schools successful and is a magnet for parents. That's why parents choose them. Our schools won't be around to be chosen if you continue their inclusion in AB 321. 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.

You are each to be commended for your concern and hard work to address the reading deficit in the state. 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 oppose AB 321 for the following reasons:

1. It threatens religious freedom;
2. It diminishes the unique pedagogical operations of private schools;
3. It centers control of one of the core elements of education – Elementary grades English Language Arts – into the hands of those already in charge of low performing schools! In the main, public school districts are far under-performing private schools. Why should we give more influence to them and the DPI when they've already shown they are failing?
4. It diminishes parental freedom to choose schools whose programming aligns with a family's faith and values, and their children's learning styles;
5. It will lead to a rapid decline of schools willing to accept vouchers to create accessibility for families who cannot afford tuition, thus eroding quality options for thousands of low-income children.
6. It will increase costs (curriculum, training, likely new auditing rules, etc.) at schools that are already the lowest funded ones in the state;
7. It is another step on the failed path to more and more centralized government control, imposing a "one-size-fits-all" model on children who are not all universally the same.

We urge you to return to the drawing board to create a reading reform proposal that offers carrots for excellent performance in the unique styles parents seek. Those unique characteristics are what make the schools successful.

A simple block grant program that financially rewards schools for every percentage point increase in already measurable reading performance annually, will yield far more positive results that safeguard the state's unique characteristics of giving parents successful school choice options.

Please oppose AB 321. But don't stop trying to incentivize improvements in Wisconsin's reading performance. WCRIS stands ready to serve in that effort.

Thank you.