



Assembly Committee on Education

September 14, 2021

Department of Public Instruction

Statement in Opposition to Assembly Bill 446

Background:

The last decade has brought a number of significant changes to how districts operationalize reading instruction and intervention. A large component of that reform comes by way of a required reading readiness assessment, which has also seen significant change over the years.

In 2011, Governor Walker's Read to Lead Task Force recommended legislation that became Wisconsin Act 166. That law required each school board and the governing body of each independent charter school to administer an appropriate, valid, and reliable assessment of literacy fundamentals. The act required the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to select an assessment to screen the reading readiness of kindergartners beginning in the 2012-13 school year. Furthermore, the assessment was required to measure whether a pupil possessed phonemic awareness and letter sound knowledge. Results of the assessment were required to be shared with parents.

Using this assessment, if a student was found to be at risk of reading difficulty, they were required to be provided with interventions or remedial reading services. Wisconsin Statute 121.02 (1)(c) requires that the interventions or services provided shall be scientifically based and shall address all areas in which the pupil is deficient in a manner consistent with the state standards in reading and language arts. The parent must agree that the assessment score is accurate in order for the student to be engaged in interventions or remedial reading services. No funding is provided related to this statute.

DPI was appropriated \$800,000 for the 2013-14 school year to cover the costs of the reading assessment. The Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) was chosen as the statewide assessment. PALS was chosen as a research-based screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring tool. Wisconsin teachers used PALS to identify students at risk of developing reading difficulties, diagnose students' knowledge of literacy fundamentals, monitor progress, and plan instruction that targeted students' needs. Student data collected from PALS provided a direct means of matching literacy instruction to specific literacy needs.

The 2013 biennial budget provided additional funding for the assessment and expanded the reading readiness assessment chosen by the DPI to grades 4K - 1 in the 2013-14 school year and 4K - 2 in the 2014-15 school year. The three main PALS assessments used are described below.

- PALS-PreK - Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening for Preschool measured:

- name writing,
 - alphabet knowledge,
 - beginning sound awareness,
 - print and word awareness, and
 - rhyme awareness.
- PALS-K (for 5K students) - Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening for Kindergarten measured:
 - phonological awareness,
 - alphabet knowledge,
 - knowledge of letter sounds,
 - spelling,
 - concept of word, and
 - word recognition in isolation.
- PALS 1-3 (for grades 1 and 2) - Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening for first through third grades measured:
 - spelling,
 - word knowledge,
 - letter sounds,
 - oral reading in context,
 - alphabet knowledge, and
 - phonemic awareness.

The 2015 biennial budget moved the state away from a single statewide screener. It changed the reading readiness assessment requirement so school districts and independent charter schools could choose their own reading screener to annually assess the reading readiness of students in grades 4K - 2. Whichever assessment is chosen, students must still be evaluated for phonemic awareness and letter sound knowledge, and the assessment must be valid and reliable. The budget further required DPI to reimburse school districts for the assessment chosen and prorate payments if costs exceeded the funds available.

Last year, school districts and independent charter schools received reimbursement for \$1,609,176. The most frequently used assessments used were PALS, MAP, STAR, Aimsweb, and Fastbridge. PALS, MAP, and STAR are the most common assessments.

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DPI welcomes the opportunity to engage with the Legislature around the best resources and support we can provide to our school districts so they can further advance the literacy success of all students in the state. Strengthening the instruction all students are engaged in - particularly reading foundational skills instruction including phonemic awareness and phonics - is an important first step. Developing educator expertise, particularly in teaching reading foundational skills such as phonemic awareness and phonics, allows educators to respond to student's unique needs, including students with characteristics of dyslexia. In addition, schools can utilize universal screening to understand which students might need additional systems. Further, schools can build a system of interventions to ensure that interventions are available that match student needs. Strong universal instruction and intervention depend upon professional knowledge and are supported by literacy coaches.

It is important that we recognize the frustrations some students and parents feel when looking at appropriate solutions and supports to create a learning environment that serves all students regardless of what skills they enter our schools with. Along with our partners at CESAs and the Wisconsin Rtl Center, DPI continues to support schools/districts in continually improving their equitable multi-level systems of support to best utilize screening, universal instruction, intervention, formative assessment, and communication with families to meet the needs of every student.

In addition, in 2020, DPI worked with educators and sought public comment about revising our standards for ELA, including the standards for reading foundation skills. Wisconsin educators have revised standards which emphasize phonemic awareness, encoding, and fluency and corresponding professional learning from DPI. In 2022, Wisconsin's Standards for Early Learning will be revised; for reading, these standards apply from birth to 5K. Finally, in compliance with Wisconsin 2019 Act 86, DPI worked with an advisory committee and public comment to create an informational guidebook on dyslexia and related conditions. This guidebook includes information about screening, universal instruction, intervention, and resources specific to individuals with characteristics of dyslexia.

DPI looks forward to engaging in conversations to advance literacy. It does not agree with the pathway forward provided in AB 446 due to concerns, which include:

- AB 446, like the existing statute, requires intervention for students who are not yet meeting expectations on the reading screening (those scoring below the 25th percentile). No funding is provided for this intervention; arguably, schools/districts would have to use existing local funds to pay for certified reading teachers to teach reading intervention. The majority of federal funds (including reading teachers paid with funds from Title I) cannot be used to comply with this state statute.
- AB 446 has very specific requirements about the qualities of screening tools. There are a limited number of screening tools that meet the requirements in AB 446 which could greatly limit schools'/districts' options. The original requirement for an assessment of reading readiness began, schools/districts all used the assessment selected by DPI (PALS). The statute was revised by the legislature to allow for school/district choice in assessment, in part because schools/districts asked for choice.
- AB 446 provides a specific definition of "intensive intervention." This intervention addresses the alphabetic principle, which is one component of reading. It does not address comprehension - reading or listening. It does not address vocabulary. This type of intervention may not be appropriate for every student who is in need of intervention.
- Screening is a specific type of assessment used to quickly determine which students might be lacking skills predictive of later success. AB 446 increases the amount of screening our youngest students will experience. Currently, students are screening annually. Under AB 446, students in 4K are screened twice per year, and students in 5K through grade 2 are screened three times per year. This applies to all students - even those far above grade level expectations.

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Again, DPI looks forward to engaging with schools, educators, parents and legislators around the discussion and advancement of literacy in our state and thanks the committee for the opportunity to share these concerns with you today.