



MEMO

TO: Assembly Committee on State Affairs

FROM: Chris Reader, Executive Vice President
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DATE: June 13, 2023

RE: AB 321, "Right to Read" Literacy Legislation

Chairman Swearingen and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on Assembly Bill (AB) 321, the "Right to Read" legislation. Thank you also to Rep. Kitchens and Sen. Stroebel for their leadership in authoring this bill. Wisconsin must tackle this important issue to uplift countless kids, helping them succeed in school and beyond.

IRG Action is the advocacy and lobbying partner of the Institute for Reforming Government, a Delafield-based think tank that works to give all Wisconsinites an opportunity to prosper. Central to that is reading in schools, the key to unlock all other learning. Improving literacy outcomes for Wisconsin's kids is one of the most critical reforms policymakers will consider this session. Improving schools is a way to keep families and businesses in small towns, to turn our big cities into economic powerhouses, and to give every child control over their future.

Any state that wants to improve its schools should emulate national leaders like [Mississippi and Florida](#). Last month, IRG Action released [Ranking the Options](#), which summarized those states' efforts around 9 specific policies. Together, they address every part of the reading pipeline - curriculum, teacher preparation, coaching, support for struggling readers, parent involvement, and accountability.

Why have states as politically different as Ohio and Minnesota copied Mississippi this legislative session? It's because Mississippi proved that any student can become a great reader, no excuses. In 2013, Mississippi had the [highest](#) poverty rate in America and a [rock-bottom](#) education system. Then, they passed [legislation](#) that fixed every part of the pipeline without any leaks. An incredible thing then happened. After a slow rise in 2015, Mississippi skyrocketed to the top of national reading rankings in every category: [lower-income children](#), [middle- and upper-income](#), [White](#), [Black](#), [Hispanic](#), [special needs](#). They now outperform us in every one of

those categories. The gains predictably unlocked other learning; Mississippi has become a [top-10](#) state in math, too. They turned around their future spending just [\\$15 million annually](#) on literacy, the Wisconsin equivalent of \$30 million per year with our larger population. As a result, in 2022, Mississippi [surpassed](#) their pre-pandemic reading proficiency. We, a much more middle-class state, were still 5 points [behind](#) 2019.

So, as IRG Action learns more about the legislature's Right to Read bill, we wanted to share where we find commonalities with what has worked in leading states and where we think improvements can be made. We understand that a substitute amendment is forthcoming that aims to address certain concerns raised with provisions of this draft, and we look forward to reviewing the amendments in the coming days.

Commonalities

Positive reform starts with phonics. Phonics is not [an](#) option or even a [superior](#) option, but [the scientifically verified](#) way that children begin to learn to read. [Any other curriculum type](#) puts children behind, especially lower performers and dyslexic students. We've run a 20-year balanced literacy experiment with catastrophic results, and it's time to end it.

If we want phonics taught well, retrain educators in a program based on the science of reading. Beyond that, universities can realign around phonics-based instruction to help teachers enter classrooms better prepared. To make sure that those principles stick, coaches with an eye for best classroom practices can break bad habits in struggling schools. Finally, screening for struggling or learning-disabled students, building a comeback plan for them, and looping their parents in creates a path back to grade level for learners.

AB 321 includes versions of these key reforms. As IRG Action noted last week in our [statement](#), "While there are improvements to be made on a couple of key concerns...all of IRG Action's top nine literacy priorities are present," which would help students across the state.

Improvements

Some of the bill's mandates are more restrictive than those in other states, especially toward choice schools. As mentioned earlier, we understand that an amendment is being introduced that will likely address some concerns that have been raised. We look forward to reviewing the amendment this week.

Wisconsin charter and voucher schools have typically experienced more educational freedom, determining their own curricula and being accountable to their authorizer or board.

High-performing voucher schools like [Saint Marcus](#) and charter schools like [The Lincoln](#)

[Academy](#) have found the phonics path for themselves and succeeded. In the current draft, private schools with voucher students and independent charter schools would be subject to the curriculum mandates, upending their autonomy. Some schools also worry about messing with success by having a specific screener or 3rd grade retention mandated. These mandates have alarmed some choice schools.

Thinking about the big picture, [34 states](#) will have passed some combination of these science-of-reading reforms for district schools, and the leaders have left Wisconsin in the dust. Let's not forget, Mississippi's reforms are positive in nature. They lifted burdens from students, granted renewed professional pride to teachers, and granted relief to thousands of parents of the dyslexic. The science of reading is a gift, not a burden. In this debate, let's keep in mind the mistakes of the last 20 years. Those circular discussions ended up burying generations of talent in Milwaukee, Beloit, Marinette, and Bayfield and started new cycles of poverty. Reading reform is the right way forward from our educational struggles and we thank you for your attention to this important matter.

We look forward to reviewing the upcoming amendments to AB 321 this week and having our expert compare the proposal to successful efforts in other states. We appreciate the many voices who have put children's futures first by working on this bill, and we look forward to it being improved and moved forward.