



## MEMO

TO: Senate Committee on Education

FROM: Chris Reader, Executive Vice President  
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DATE: June 15, 2023

RE: SB 329, "Right to Read" Literacy Legislation

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Senator Jagler and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill (SB) 329, the "Right to Read" legislation. Thank you also to Sen. Stroebel and Rep. Kitchens and your leadership in authoring this bill. We've been overdue for serious legislation that will help kids read, thrive in school, and live productive lives here in Wisconsin.

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.

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This week, we submitted [testimony](#) for the Assembly version of this bill. We won't repeat it here. In short, we're blown away by what's happened in states like Mississippi. By addressing every part of the reading pipeline, Mississippi went from [the bottom to the top](#) in national rankings in every conceivable demographic. They now outperform Wisconsin in every student category, and they closed their COVID learning gap in 1 year while we were still 5 points behind. Last month, IRG Action released [Ranking the Options](#), which summarized what states like Mississippi and Florida did. The nine specific policies we ranked are all present in some form in this bill. You've done your homework. You've built the foundation on phonics. All children deserve what works, phonics, especially lower performers and dyslexic students. We'd retrain educators in the science of reading to implement the curriculum well. Universities would 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 would 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 would create a path back to grade level for learners. There are a lot of commonalities between Right to Read and what happens in leading states.

But there are places where it differs from national models, and some school voices have spoken up about how that affects them. IRG Action wants a bill to pass that drives better literacy results, gets schools invested in the process, and respects educational freedom. From extended conversations with charter and choice school leaders and the public statements made by school districts, we believe that a high-quality literacy bill deserves two amendments. Neither will substantially affect the bill's efficacy, as evidenced by America's five leading states in reading: Florida, Mississippi, Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Louisiana.

First, let's discuss independent charter and choice schools. It's an unfortunate thing, but trust has been completely broken between many of them and the Department of Public Instruction. From authorization debates to, in my hometown, parents getting rejected from the choice program because their applications listed their home as "Wisconsin Rapids" while their verification paperwork from the city abbreviated it "Wisc. Rapids" to difficulty verifying students as part of the Special Needs Scholarship Program, the scars exist. So, they ask what they're getting in this exchange since a lot already use phonics. The choice school that I think is the best in the state was featured on the national website of Wit & Wisdom, a leading curriculum, because they had the foresight to do this stuff in 2016. Even with the existing amendment, they're being asked to give up a real measure of religious freedom, academic autonomy, accountability to their parent organizations, or just messing with what's working. So, we could remove independent charter schools and voucher schools from the bill entirely, both from DPI mandates and from access to any of the services and funding.

In other words, let's do what Florida did. Florida has a significant amount of choice students. When Florida invented a lot of these reforms years ago, they did not include choice schools in their reforms. What happened? Florida has enjoyed the best public school reading scores in the nation for years. Miami is, by far, the best big district in the country, with students years ahead of those in Milwaukee. But they also have some of the biggest and best private schools in the country. They are a charter paradise with every high-scoring, diverse option you could imagine. How? They had a common goal, but allowed slightly different paths to get there. The bill would still address 92% of kindergarten-to-third grade students, and you could even raise the reimbursement rate for participating schools.

Now, while districts have craved direction on reading for awhile and have spoken positively of the investment and resources, some of the accountability has made them nervous. We're

talking specifically of 3rd grade retention: assuming that they're not special needs or learning English as a second language, students would repeat 3rd grade with additional, individual help if they score Below Basic on the Forward Exam. To be clear, 3rd grade retention seems to have been effective in states like Florida and Mississippi. It is a policy worth considering. However, it is not the only accountability in this bill. In fact, SB 329 includes significant accountability. No reading reform law can work without some of the pieces here. Proactive interventions are mandated. Parent involvement, the strongest accountability there is, is mandated. The science of reading training and coaching is mandated for professors, college classrooms, and current teachers. Even without 3rd grade retention, the bill still delivers the accountability needed to improve literacy in Wisconsin. Moreover, top states like Massachusetts and Louisiana do not retain students and still rank in the top 5 because of the quality of their classrooms and interventions. In fact, 3rd grade retention might not seem so frightening once other reforms are allowed to work, allowing it to pass later. Louisiana might sign retention into law this session as a finishing touch for their record of success. So, you could remove 3rd grade retention entirely and rely on the excellent inputs and accountability that already exist in the bill.

Both of those amendments allow us to remind schools that Mississippi's reforms are positive in nature. They lifted burdens from students, instilled renewed professional pride to teachers, and granted relief to thousands of parents of the dyslexic. The science of reading is a gift, and we need to get the people implementing it excited about this historic opportunity.

Even our nation's highest-performing states did not include all aspects of Right to Read in their transformations. Removing the choice school complication and holding the line on the vast majority of accountability measures for school districts could allow Wisconsin to chase and surpass those national leaders. Otherwise, we risk going back to the status quo. It's no place that we want to be.

Phonics works. Coaching works. Intervention works. I believe that. You believe that. If it's true, why would we let leaving out some finishing touches stop us from unambiguous improvement in the lives of 5-year-olds around this state? The 90% of this that everyone agrees on would give every child a fighting chance to be great, would make businesses give Wisconsin a second look for investment, and would be one of Wisconsin's landmark bipartisan victories this century. Consider these two possible improvements, and consider what a vetoed or hostilely resisted law will cost us. Thank you so much for the research and thoughtfulness that you've put into your work already. You've made me proud to be a Wisconsinite.