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Chairman Jagler and members of the Senate Committee on Education,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today on Senate Bill 329.

This bill comes at a critical time for literacy in Wisconsin. According to the most recent data from the Forward Exam, only about 37% of Wisconsin students are proficient in reading.<sup>i</sup> And this is not just a problem in the largest cities. Districts that “Exceed Expectations” on the state report card often have proficiency levels below 70%—meaning 30% of students aren’t achieving adequately.<sup>ii</sup>

Sadly, many school districts around the state have not taken the necessary steps to address the problem. Antiquated curricula not based in the “Science of Reading” is pervasive. A recent WILL study<sup>iii</sup> found that 44% of districts around the state are using curricula that do not align with the best practices identified in educational research. Those districts had lower reading outcomes on average than districts that used other methods.

Fortunately, there is a better way forward. States that have implemented legislation substantially similar to what’s under consideration today have made significant jumps in reading. One success story is Mississippi, long a bottom-dweller in reading proficiency. In 2013, they ranked 49<sup>th</sup> in fourth-grade reading as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. After requiring more phonics, today they are ranked 21<sup>st</sup>. Wisconsin desperately needs a similar revolution.

The success of Mississippi shows the effectiveness of phonics. That state-wide evidence is backed by a scientific understanding of how connecting written letters to the sounds kids hear is the best way to teach reading; this is opposed to the method of “three-cueing,” which is popular in schools but partly to blame for poor reading proficiency. The strength of the science behind this is affirmed, to quote one example, by Mark Seidenberg, a University of Wisconsin-Madison psychology professor and reading expert, who has been quoted in the *New York Times* explaining that the evidence for phonics, “is about as close to conclusive as research on complex human behavior can get.”<sup>iv</sup>

This bill creates a “Council on Early Literacy Curricula” to recommend the curricula and instructional materials for use in kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. This system will ensure that reform-minded voices will play a key role in choosing appropriate curricula, and that the power of DPI to undermine that reform is hemmed in. While some might view the ban on teaching “three-cueing” methods as too prescriptive on local school districts, the reality is that many districts around the state have thus far refused to base their decisions on faddish theories rather than evidence, necessitating a state-level solution.

The standards for a teacher preparatory program would also change, to include a demonstrated ability to prepare teachers to teach reading and language arts using the science-based approach, and explicitly not the “three-cueing” method. This component is necessary because far too often, teachers do leave

the university system unprepared to teach reading in the best possible way.<sup>v</sup> According to a 2020 analysis,<sup>vi</sup> more than 30% of would-be teachers failed to pass the Foundations of Reading Test on the first try. The overall passage rate, including teachers who failed and later re-took it, was less than 55%.

There are many potential reasons why universities remain tied to disproven methods. Many legacy professors are reluctant to change the way they've personally always done things, and there is always strong bureaucratic inertia behind the institution's status quo. But regardless of the reason, colleges of education must prepare teachers to be effective at teaching kids to read. That is necessary for these improvements to materialize in the elementary classroom. But it is not only future teachers who need to learn in a new way; we must retrain our current educators as well. Under the bill, all K-3 teachers, principals of schools that offer grades K-3, and reading specialists will receive training in the science of reading no later than 2025.

In addition to phonics instruction, another hallmark of Mississippi's progress has been early identification of struggling students—and the provision of extra help to get them moving in the right direction. Under the bill, districts would be required to assess the literacy skills of students in K4-3<sup>rd</sup> grade and create a personal reading plan for each student who is identified as “at-risk” to fall behind. By far the best way to avoid later reading issues is early intervention, and the bill provides for that.

Finally, a core concern of WILL's education agenda has long been the central role that parental empowerment deserves in our education policy. Almost anyone involved in education will tell you that parental involvement is key to success. Under this bill, schools will be required to disclose the student's literacy assessment score within 15 days. The provisions here ensure that parents are aware of their child's literacy progress so that they can provide more help at home if needed.

In addition, parents and guardians of a student enrolled in 4K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade have the ability to file a complaint with DPI if the parent/guardian believes the school board did not live up to their duties under this bill. This provision ensures that parents are empowered if they feel that the school district is not meeting its obligations to do everything it can to make sure every student can read.

There are few issues more critical to the future of Wisconsin than improving literacy. When a child can't read, their future options in life become extremely limited. Students who can't read by third grade are less likely to graduate from high school, which leads to lower lifelong income and even poorer overall health. While no single piece of legislation is a silver bullet, this bill would put Wisconsin on the right path to improved reading and a brighter future for the state's kids.

## **Kyle Koenen**

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<sup>i</sup> <https://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/dashboard/19948>

<sup>ii</sup> For example, Cedarburg. [https://apps2.dpi.wi.gov/reportcards/get-file?level=district&distKey=000937&fileName=DRCDetail\\_Public\\_Cedarburg\\_2021-22\\_000937.pdf](https://apps2.dpi.wi.gov/reportcards/get-file?level=district&distKey=000937&fileName=DRCDetail_Public_Cedarburg_2021-22_000937.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://will-law.org/report-outdated-reading-curricula-impedes-wisconsin-students/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://0-www-nytimes-com.countycat.mcfls.org/2020/02/15/us/reading-phonics.html>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/02/12/582465905/the-gap-between-the-science-on-kids-and-reading-and-how-it-is-taught>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://uwm.edu/sreed/wp-content/uploads/sites/502/2020/03/Research-Brief-The-Utility-and-Cost-of-Requiring-Wisconsin-Teachers-Pass-the-FoRT-and-edTPA-assessments.pdf>