



February 1, 2024

To: Members of the Assembly Committee on Education

From: Faith M. VanderHorst, Executive Director, Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance (SWSA)

Re: Testimony in support of AB1017 with amendment

Chairman Kitchens and Members of the Assembly Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. My name is Faith VanderHorst. I am the Executive Director for the Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance (SWSA). The **Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance** (SWSA) provides school leaders with objective, non-partisan information and training they need to be strong advocates for educational excellence. SWSA serves 27 urban and suburban public school districts with a combined enrollment of more than 200,000 students (approximately 25% of Wisconsin's public school students).

We appreciate the work and collaboration it took to enact 2023 ACT 20. And, we are grateful for the State funding the screener. I am here today to respectfully request a technical amendment to Assembly Bill 1017 to provide for a longer runway for implementation of Act 20. This will allow districts time to acquire and train staff on the new screener. It will allow districts to implement the statewide universal screener with fidelity and accuracy and provide a strong foundation for a positive impact on literacy outcomes for every child.

We ask that the technical amendment allow all districts to begin use of the screener during the third screening cycle (approximately February 2025). This provides districts the opportunity to utilize the screener once and establish a baseline for each student and then follow with full implementation effective for the 2025-2026 school year.

In support of this request I would like to share the following letter written by SWSA, SAA, WASB and WiRSA, representing all districts and school boards in Wisconsin. The desire to implement the new screener with fidelity and accuracy is so critical to our districts that we felt a joint letter was necessary. We addressed this letter to Dr. Underly, Superintendent, DPI, and shared copies with Rep. Kitchens, ACT 20 author and Education Committee Chair; Sen. Duey Stroebel, ACT 20 author; Sen. John Jagler, Senate Education Committee Chair and Governor Evers:

(see page 2)



January 26, 2024

Honorable Dr. Jill Underly
State Superintendent of Public Instruction
P.O. Box 7841
Madison, Wisconsin 53707-7841

Dear Dr. Underly,

We write to you today after hearing from many of our members. Together we, SWSA (Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance), SAA (School Administrators Alliance), WASB (Wisconsin Association of School Boards) and WiRSA (Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance) represent the interests of all 421 public school districts in Wisconsin.

As a collective group of public education leaders we understand the importance of 2023 Act 20, and the importance of ensuring that all students, across the state of Wisconsin, are reading at grade level by the time they reach third grade. Act 20 provides a clear definition of the components of strong, evidence-based reading instruction. The work all school districts in the state will be engaging in over the course of the next several years, as the result of ACT 20, has the potential to result in deep, lasting transformational change in every school district which will positively impact literacy outcomes for every child.

There is, however, a deep concern with the specified timelines in the law and what can be realistically implemented in schools and districts. There is a significant need to introduce a trailer bill to adjust the implementation timelines of the requirements of Act 20. Without this trailer bill, school districts across the state will be scrambling to comply with the unrealistic timelines currently outlined, which will result in surface-level implementation, wasting precious resources of time, talent, and budget money, and limit the opportunities for critically important training and professional learning around evidence-based literacy instruction.

By December 1, 2023, the Literacy Council was to provide a list of recommended early literacy curricula to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. It is currently January 22, 2024 and the Literacy Council is still reviewing the submitted curricula. It is likely that the Council will not have this work completed until after the first of February, at which time they will submit their list to the Department. This timeline puts school districts in a difficult position. The delay of recommended curricula provides school districts with very little time to vet and pilot curriculum resources off of the recommended list for potential adoption for the 2024-25 school year. Many school districts are waiting to see if their current literacy resources will be on the recommended list or not and that list will then guide and inform their next steps with an early literacy curriculum. While the work of the Literacy Council is behind schedule, we are not advocating for them to rush through the process. The reviewing of primary curriculum resources is a critically important first step and needs to be completed in a thorough and vigilant manner. It would make sense for a trailer bill to identify a realistic and practical timeline to ensure all submitted curriculum materials have been thoroughly vetted to guarantee alignment with the state's definition of evidence-based early literacy instruction.

Secondly, school districts are significantly concerned about the timeline regarding the statewide universal early literacy screener. The law states that all school districts must utilize the statewide literacy screener beginning with the 2024-25 school year. Currently, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction is working on finalizing the Request for Bid for the statewide literacy screener and putting it out for bid. When information regarding the statewide screener was initially

shared with districts, it was shared that districts would know what the screener would be by March of 2024. Over the last few weeks, districts have now been informed that August of 2024 is a more realistic timeline. To expect school districts across the state to set-up and integrate a new screening tool within their existing technology, ensure that it works efficiently and effectively, provide training and professional learning for their administrators and professional educators, as well as successfully launch a new school year is completely unrealistic. By this time in the current school year, the vast majority of school districts have already solidified their plans for 2024-25 initiatives and the necessary, aligned professional learning. Adding the implementation of a universal screener and the associated training and professional learning in August with no ability for districts to plan and adjust prior to that date puts meaningful implementation of Act 20 in jeopardy across the state.

Due to the fact that school districts are already required to have a universal screening tool for literacy, and they likely also use that tool for screening in mathematics as well, an August announcement date for the statewide screener does not provide school districts the opportunity to break their contracts with their current providers for the 2024-25 school year. This reality will not only result in a duplication of efforts as districts will potentially have two screening tools for 2024-25, but it is also a significant waste of time, money, and human resources as it doesn't provide the time or the ability to shift those resources to other key initiatives in the district.

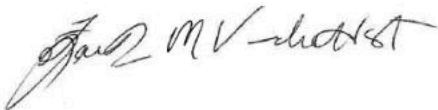
Finally, research indicates that the most influential school-based factor on student success is the professional educator in the classroom. The current timeline for implementation and the reality of when teachers will have the tools they need for the implementation of Act 20 will not only put them at a disadvantage to start the 2024-25 school year, but it will also create a situation where teachers will see this as "one more thing to do" with little additional resources and support. Successful implementation of Act 20 in school districts across the state requires teacher ownership in improving student literacy outcomes and this can only be accomplished by supporting their learning, providing time to collaborate with their peers, and to ask meaningful questions. Due to the significant impact teachers have on their students, the mindset of teachers has to be at the forefront of all we do. Without a reasonable implementation timeline for Act 20, we run the risk of it negatively impacting school culture and teacher morale to start the new school year. The mindset of our professional educators has to be the number one priority if we desire positive outcomes for students.

Our request is simple trailer legislation to require districts, during the 2024-25 school year, to begin to transition away from their current screener to the statewide required screener, with the expectation of full implementation of the statewide screener to begin the 2025-26 school year. This is a timeline that positions school districts to purposefully and confidently implement the requirements of 2023 Act 20.

We appreciate the work and collaboration it took to enact 2023 ACT 20. And, we are grateful for the State funding the screener. We respectfully request that a trailer Bill be enacted to extend the implementation time for 2023 ACT 20 to September 2025. This will allow districts time to acquire and train staff on the new screener. It will also allow districts to pilot and acquire new curriculum after the late spring 2024 Curriculum List announcement.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



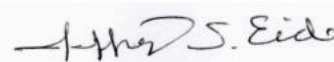
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cc: The Honorable Governor Tony Evers
The Honorable Senator Duey Stroebel
The Honorable Representative Joel Kitchens
The Honorable Senator John Jagler

End of January 26, 2024 letter

Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. We do appreciate your deep concern for Literacy, the funding provided for the screener and pro rata funding for the new curriculum. We respectfully request adding a technical amendment to AB1017 to provide an extension to February 2025 as the initial implementation date of the statewide universal screener. This will establish a baseline for each student which will be followed with full implementation effective for the 2025-2026 school year.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Respectfully,

Faith M. VanderHorst
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