



School Administrators Alliance

Representing the Interests of Wisconsin School Children

TO: Assembly Committee on Education
FROM: John Forester, Director of Government Relations
DATE: December 17, 2015
RE: AB 581 – Licenses to Teach Vocational Education Subjects

Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important issue today. The SAA is testifying for information only on Assembly Bill 581 (AB 581), relating to licenses to teach vocational education subjects.

This past year, the SAA convened a team of Wisconsin school administrators to identify an evidence based policy agenda that could provide Wisconsin with an effective path to improving student achievement and closing achievement gaps. We partnered with researchers at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to provide research and policy expertise. Regarding educator preparation, we found that the most important school factor determining whether students achieve academically is the knowledge and skills of the classroom teacher. Therefore, if our objective for education policy in Wisconsin is to improve student achievement for all students and close achievement gaps, it is critically important that we continue raising the bar for what our teachers know and are able to do.

The research was very clear on the importance of rigorous teacher preparation. Whether we are discussing traditional teacher preparation programs or alternative certification programs, high quality teacher preparation helps candidates to develop the knowledge and skills they need in the classroom. Both strong content knowledge and strong pedagogical content knowledge are important elements of high quality teacher preparation. While the research is inconclusive about many facets of teacher preparation, industrialized nations whose students outperform U.S. students tend to invest heavily in pre-service preparation. Compared to the U.S., these nations had very different teacher preparation criteria, marked by more extensive advanced coursework and specialization in content knowledge, more rigorous selection and admissions criteria, more pedagogical content and general pedagogical preparation, exit exams and certification and licensing programs.

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I think if given the clear choice, Wisconsin school leaders would hire candidates that are products of high quality, rigorous teacher preparation. Unfortunately, we have a big problem. The evidence demonstrates that in Wisconsin and in the nation there is a conflict between two key factors. While more rigorous, selective educator preparation tends to yield improved student outcomes, our current incentives and program structure do not entice the best and the brightest to enter and remain in education. In Wisconsin, we are witnessing declining numbers of candidates entering colleges of education, increasingly thin applicant pools in most if not all subject areas, and quality teachers leaving the state and even the profession. It is these factors that led the SAA to recommend to lawmakers and the State Superintendent that we convene a high level effort to focus like a laser beam on educator recruitment, retention and training and develop a comprehensive, long-term approach to attack this problem head-on.

Some school districts are currently facing a critical situation in which they have concluded they either get flexibility in the licensure of technical and vocational education candidates or they will have to close popular academic programs. It's not the loss of the program itself that is the travesty. Rather, the travesty is the resulting loss of educational opportunities for students in program areas they are enthusiastic about and that we as a state hold as an important priority. So we understand why some school administrators are supporting AB 581.

The concern we have about AB 581 is the "message" of the bill and its long term effects. "Professional teacher preparation and licensure is no longer necessary in Wisconsin" is not the message we should send in our education policy. School leaders in Wisconsin are concerned that if we continue to go down this road, in 5 or 10 years we will look back at the results and say, "What the heck were we thinking?" And do we want that to be our legacy?

Mr. Chairman, I understand that I am testifying for information only but, I would like to make a couple of recommendations. First of all, sunset the experience-based licensure approach for technical and vocational education subjects in 3 to 5 years, at which time the Legislature will consider the results and decide whether to keep it or not. Secondly, please support convening a high-level effort of all relevant PK-16 education stakeholders to develop a long-term, comprehensive approach to attack our recruitment, retention and educator training problems here in Wisconsin.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. If you should have any questions regarding the SAA's statement on AB 581, please call me at (608) 242-1370.