



Wisconsin Reading Coalition Statement in Opposition to AB 72 and SB 114

As you are likely aware, Wisconsin's school children perform poorly on assessments of reading, and have done so for more than two decades. Only 30 to 40% of our students are able to perform at a proficient level on national and state standardized testing, and the statistics are much worse for student groups that carry more risk: student of color, low-income students, and students with disabilities. While our performance has been stagnant, other states and jurisdictions have improved and passed us by in national rankings. Where we once scored third in the nation, we have been rated 25th, 34th, and 27th in the past three administrations of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Our Black students are the lowest scoring among the nation's Black population, and we have the largest gap between Black and White students. That is not to say that everything is fine with our White students. Wisconsin White students rank 34th among the nation's White population, and Wisconsin White students who are not economically disadvantaged rank 40th. It is clear we are leaving many children without the necessary reading skills for school and life success.

Of all the factors that schools can control, teacher knowledge about language structure and reading acquisition is the most important in reversing the current trend. The Foundations of Reading Test (FORT) is a fair and efficient independent assessment of what our future teachers have learned about reading before they enter the classroom. Passing the test shows that you have at least the bare minimum of knowledge required to be able to teach all children, and is an indication that your teacher preparation program or your self-study has equipped you well. Failing the test shows that you have significant gaps in your knowledge that will detrimentally affect your ability to be successful with all students, and is an indication that your teacher preparation program had deficiencies that you were not able to overcome through self-study. The purpose of the FORT is to ensure that beginning and struggling readers are being taught by an individual with the necessary level of content knowledge. You cannot teach what you yourself do not understand. At times, the failure rate on the FORT has been turned into an adult issue, with calls for opening the pathway into the classroom for potential teachers and allowing districts to hire whomever they please. Unlike other states that use the FORT as a licensing tool, Wisconsin has created a series of exemptions to the FORT requirement through emergency licensing procedures, the creation of Tier I licenses, alternative options for special education teachers, and test waivers for out-of-state license applicants and graduates of one particular online program. While this has alleviated some adult problems, it has not addressed the fundamental problem for our children: namely, that they cannot count on their teacher having sufficient knowledge to successfully teach them to read.

Now the Covid-19 pandemic has brought yet another excuse to avoid taking the FORT. The waiver of the FORT requirement for anyone seeking an initial license for the duration of the national emergency declaration or December 31, 2021, if earlier, is ill-advised and unnecessary for the following reasons:

1. The testing centers are open and follow all the guidelines for health safety, including screening for COVID exposure, social distancing, masks, and hand sanitizing.
2. There is no extra charge for changing your testing site.
3. There are provisions for applying for a refund if you fall ill before your testing date.
4. Comparing the FORT requirement for licensure to universities waiving requirements for entrance tests such as the ACT or SAT ignores crucial differences. The SAT and ACT are entrance exams, not outcome assessments that lead to licensing. Further, many universities were already deciding to eliminate entrance exams or make them optional because they do not seem to strongly predict which students will be successful in college. The FORT, on the other hand, tests knowledge that our state has decided is essential for new elementary and special education teachers.
5. There is no limit on who can apply for a license during this waiver period, potentially creating a flood of applications from individuals who have failed the FORT – perhaps multiple times – and view this as an opportunity to get a license without acquiring essential knowledge about reading.

For these reasons, we oppose AB 72 and SB 114. It is time for Wisconsin to start valuing the education we are providing to our children.

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