



Luther S. Olsen

State Senator
14th District

TO: Senate Committee on Education
FROM: Senator Luther Olsen
DATE: Tuesday, November 19, 2019
SUBJECT: Testimony for Senate Bill 414

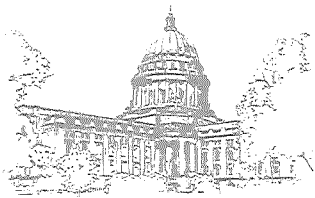
Thank you members of the Senate Committee on Education for holding a hearing and allowing me to testify in support of Senate Bill 414 (SB 414).

This past spring I gave a speech at my high school reunion where I discussed just how much has changed since we graduated. One of the things I joked about with my classmates was that our generation has the ability to write in a secret code as kids today are unable to read cursive. As technology has continued to evolve many schools now incorporate keyboarding and sometimes even coding into their requirements, but cursive has slowly faded out of the curriculum. While it is important that students learn about technology and are proficient in typing, it is also important that they are able to do the basics including being able to sign their name.

Learning how to write in cursive has a number of benefits as it helps to train different parts of the brain than typing does and it helps with fine motor skills. Cursive has also been suggested to be a good tool for treatment plans for those who struggle with dyslexia.

This bill will require the state superintendent of public instruction to incorporate cursive writing into the model academic standards for English language arts. It will also require a school board, independent charter school, and private schools that participate in the choice program to include cursive writing in its curriculum. While I agree that everyone needs to learn how to type I also believe that students would benefit from learning cursive.

Again, thank you for holding a hearing today and I ask for your support on Senate Bill 414 and I would be more than happy to answer any questions.



STATE SENATOR LaTonya Johnson

WISCONSIN STATE SENATE

6TH DISTRICT

**Senate Committee on Education
Testimony on Senate Bill 414
November 19, 2019**

Good morning members of the committee,

Thank you for holding this hearing on Senate Bill 414 (SB 414), regarding the inclusion of cursive handwriting in our K-12 curriculum.

Beyond being able to read original cursive documents such as the U.S. Constitution or notes from your grandmother, writing in cursive requires fine motor skills and eye-hand coordination. Research has shown that handwriting engages more areas of the brain than typing, and that students who handwrite their notes retain more information than those who are typing at a laptop.

According to Dr. William Klemm, Professor of Neuroscience at Texas A&M, “[c]ursive writing, compared to printing, should be even more beneficial because the movement tasks are more demanding, the letters are less stereotypical, and the visual recognition requirements create a broader repertoire of letter representation.”

SB 414 would have Wisconsin join 18 other states in requiring the teaching of cursive in schools. The bill requires the state superintendent of public instruction to incorporate cursive writing into the model academic standards for English language arts. The bill also requires a school board, independent charter school, and private school participating in a parental choice program to include cursive writing in its respective curriculum for the elementary grades with the goal of all students being able to write in cursive by the end of fifth grade.

Teaching cursive was dropped as required curriculum with the adoption of the Common Core standards, which sought to prioritize students learning to use technology in their education. I strongly support our students learning to utilize the latest technology throughout their educations, but I also think that there is evidence regarding the merits of receiving cursive handwriting instruction. SB 414 is, rightly, prompting us to have an overdue discussion as to whether we prematurely dropped this element of handwriting instruction from our elementary school curriculum, and I look forward to hearing input from the public regarding this bill.

I would like to thank my co-authors, Senator Olsen and Representative Thiesfeldt for their work on this bill and thank you, committee members, for your consideration of this proposal.

Senate Committee on Education
November 19, 2019

Statement of Information on Senate Bill 414

Thank you Chairman Olsen and members of the committee for the opportunity to provide information regarding 2019 Senate Bill 414 (SB 414). This bill requires the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to incorporate cursive writing into the model academic standards for English language arts. This bill also requires a school board, independent charter school, and private school participating in a parental choice program to include cursive writing in its curriculum for the elementary grades. The bill further requires that each elementary school curriculum include the objective that pupils be able to write legibly in cursive by the end of fifth grade.

Background

The State Superintendent adopts state standards for English language arts. Local school districts determine whether they will adopt state standards, what curriculum they will use, and if additional assessments, beyond state assessments, will be used.

The Academic Standards Review Council is the group that advises the State Superintendent on the adoption of standards. It is appointed by the State Superintendent. Legislative members, however, are requested from the leaders of the majority and minority parties in both the State Senate and the Assembly. Current legislative members include Senator Luther Olsen, Senator Chris Larson, and Representative Dave Considine. A list of the full membership is attached.

The DPI has a comprehensive process for reviewing and revising academic standards. The process begins with a notice of intent to review an academic area with an associated public comment period. The State Superintendent's Academic Standards Review Council then examines those comments and recommends to the State Superintendent whether to revise or develop standards in that academic area. Based on that recommendation the State Superintendent determines whether or not to pursue a revision or development process. Following this, a state writing committee is formed to work on writing specific standards for all grade levels. That draft is then made available for public review and comment. That public comment is provided to the State Superintendent's Academic Standards Review Council to determine if further revisions need to be made to the proposed standards and then makes a recommendation to the State Superintendent. The State Superintendent then determines adoption of the standards.

Wisconsin's Standards for English Language Arts are currently under review for revision. A draft of proposed standards will be available for public comment early next year.

Analysis

Teaching cursive writing provides learners with another way, in addition to print, keyboarding, or drawing, which are all mentioned in Wisconsin's Standards for English Language Arts, to capture and communicate thinking.

Given that local school boards currently determine curriculum, SB 414 would overwrite that authority in this area by placing a curricular requirement on schools and districts by requiring cursive to be part of each district's sequential curriculum plan.

This bill introduces the first statutory requirement regarding inclusion of a specific skill or knowledge into Wisconsin Standards for English Language Arts.

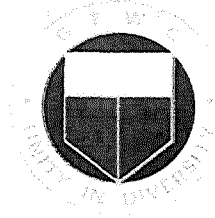
The bill does not include funding for curriculum, materials, or professional learning for educators. Teaching cursive writing would require time for instruction and practice resulting in less time for other instruction.

As written, the bill applies to all students. The fine motor skills required for cursive writing may be challenging for some students, including students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), who may need extra supports.

State Superintendent's Standards Review Council

- Barbara Bales, Director of Strategic Initiatives and Educational Innovation - University of Wisconsin System
- Mike Beighley, District Administrator - Whitehall School District
- Mariana Castro, Deputy Director, Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- Representative Dave Considine, D-Baraboo - Wisconsin State Assembly
- D. Rose Coppins, Principal, Keefe Avenue School, Milwaukee Public Schools
- Jill Gaskell of Blanchardville - Member, Pecatonica School Board
- Barbara Gransee, Director of Pupil Services and Special Education - Adams-Friendship School District
- Anne Heck, Principal - Lake Geneva Middle School
- Jenni Hofschulte of Milwaukee, Parent - Milwaukee Public Schools
- Brian Jackson, President - Wisconsin Indian Education Association
- Dean Kaminski - Principal - Prairie Elementary School, Waunakee Community School District
- Howard Kruschke of Roberts - President, St. Croix Central School Board
- Senator Chris Larson, D-Milwaukee - Wisconsin State Senate
- Heather Mielke of Elkhorn - Math Teacher - Burlington High School
- Senator Luther Olsen, R-Ripon - Wisconsin State Senate
- Desiree Pointer Mace, Professor - Alverno College
- Chris Reader, Director of Health and Human Resources - Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce
- Lisa Sanderfoot of De Pere, Computer and Information Science Teacher - Valley View Elementary School, Ashwaubenon
- Chrystal Seeley-Schreck, Associate Vice-President, Office of Instructional Services, Wisconsin Technical College System
- Amy Vesperman, Superintendent and Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Plum City School District
- Pam Yoder, District Administrator, Belleville School District

John Johnson, Ex Officio Chair, Director, Literacy and Mathematics,
Department of Public Instruction



Good morning, Chairman Olsen and Committee Members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Senate Bill 414. My name is Erin Epping and I am a member of the General Federation of Women's Clubs International with 81,000 women volunteers. Today I am representing GFWC-Wisconsin. We are proud to have clubs in every one of the 72 Wisconsin counties totaling over 1600 members. Two years ago, we drafted a resolution to reinstate cursive writing in our Wisconsin schools. It was presented at the GFWC-WI state convention in May 2018 where it passed overwhelmingly.

We wish to thank Senator Olsen and his co-sponsors for drafting and presenting SB414 and we encourage passage.

Our research has found that at least 21 states have passed new bills requiring cursive writing and there are several states with pending legislation. Surprisingly New York City with 1.1 million students is also requiring students to learn cursive in the third grade.

I have been mentioning our journey to everyone I meet – and their faces light up and they say “Thank goodness you are doing something about it”. But in the interest of fairness, “Why bother?”.

Why bother, indeed! We are bothering because our children are missing a valuable tool in their life's work. Professional researchers have found that handwritten notes are important because we are synthesizing the information as we are writing it. Linking letters together into word units also helps a student learn to spell words. And often cursive is faster than printing so a student's hand can keep up with their thoughts.

Based on our research, these are the reasons we recommend passage of the bill so our Wisconsin students have the opportunity to write in cursive:

1. Cursive gets the entire brain working
2. Cursive may help improve motor control
3. Cursive helps you retain more information
4. Cursive makes you a better speller
5. Cursive helps you focus on content
6. Cursive helps students with dyslexia
7. Cursive gives the student a legal signature
8. And last, but not least, it allows kids to read hand written letters!

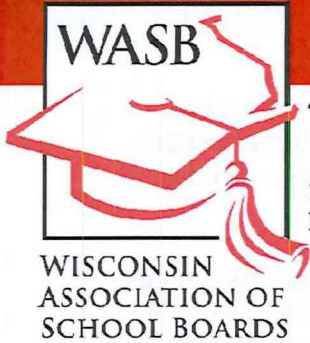
I have spoken to a number of people about this topic. An 11 year old student who attends a private Montessori school in Milwaukee knows cursive, but students in the Brown Deer School System are not taught and haven't for at least 15 years. A grandmother lamented that her adult daughter had to recently teach her son cursive in order to complete a homework assignment. My sister-in-law, who happens to be an elementary school teacher in the Kenosha Unified School District, states: "Some teachers like me do teach cursive, but most don't. It is not built into our curriculum. Definitely teach it. People need to know how to read it."

I believe we need a consistent implementation throughout the state. Therefore, I along with our members recommend passage of Bill SB414 so that when these students are 18 years of age, they can sign your nomination papers properly.

Thank you for your attention.



Erin Epping



"Leadership in Public School Governance"

JOHN H. ASHLEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

122 W. WASHINGTON AVENUE, MADISON, WI 53703
PHONE: 608-257-2622 FAX: 608-257-8386

TO: Members, Senate Committee on Education
FROM: Dan Rossmiller, WASB Government Relations Director
DATE: November 19, 2019
RE: OPPOSITION to SENATE BILL 414, incorporating cursive writing into the state model English language arts standards and requiring cursive writing in elementary grades.

The Wisconsin Association of School Boards (WASB) is a voluntary membership association representing all 421 of Wisconsin's locally elected public school boards.

During each legislative session numerous bills are introduced to impose curricular mandates on schools. We generally oppose those bills when they either impose unfunded mandates on local school districts or attempt to micromanage decisions best left to local board discretion.

The WASB opposes Senate Bill 414 based on our member-approved resolutions. One of these, WASB Resolution 3.20, states (in pertinent part): "The WASB opposes the implementation of any legislative mandates or administrative rules applicable to public school districts affecting the delivery, content or conduct of education, programming or support services unless they come with a legislative commitment by the state or federal government to permanently fund 100 percent of the actual cost or can be implemented at no cost."

The WASB also supports local school board control of curricular decisions. In that regard, this bill raises questions about the appropriate level of specificity of state standards, and about the lack of evidence showing the relative value of different amounts of instruction in cursive writing to overall student success. The question of how much instruction in cursive writing is enough and how much students should receive strikes us as one that is appropriately suited to local board decision making.

Do we argue that the Legislature lacks authority to impose such curricular mandates? No.

We recognize that public education is a fundamental responsibility of the state and that establishing goals and expectations is a necessary and proper complement to the state's financial contribution to public education. You, as legislators, can make this change should you choose to do so. The question is *should* you do so and, if so, why?

Do we question the wisdom of imposing a curricular mandate in the case of cursive writing? Yes.

In a world that is increasingly moving away from paper communications toward digital and electronic communications, we question the value of spending a significant portion of instructional time in third or fourth grade on cursive writing. Educators know that achieving mastery of cursive writing can take up an enormous amount of instructional time during a period when children's brains are developing rapidly.

Given that some legislators, including one of the main cosponsors of Senate Bill 414, have questioned our lack of progress as a state toward improving student academic achievement and narrowing achievement gaps, this bill raises serious questions about whether schools should be spending time on other things rather than having students learn and practice cursive writing and what those things are.

This bill should force you to ask the question: what should schools emphasize in 2019? It should also prompt the related question: if this bill passes, how much cursive writing mastery will be enough to satisfy those of you who want to ensure cursive is taught? Does a four-week unit suffice, does a quarter or semester suffice or is a whole year needed? How do you propose that the state test for compliance with this mandate?

We note that section 118.01(2), Wis. Stats., sets forth a number of state-mandated educational goals applicable to school districts. Cursive writing has never been explicitly mentioned among those goals and we question what has changed that now requires that it be explicitly mentioned.

Section 118.01 (2)(a)1. States that:

... “each school board shall provide an instructional program designed to give pupils:

1. Basic skills, including the ability to read, write, spell, perform basic arithmetical calculations, learn by reading and listening and communicate by writing and speaking.

In addition to the goals set forth in statute, state-level and local-level academic standards attempt to identify the most essential and fundamental aspects of student learning, but they do not attempt to describe all that can or should be taught or precisely how instruction should be delivered. Further, the adoption of general academic standards in no way prevents adjustments in programs, curriculum, or individual learning goals or activities for students who have exceptional educational needs and interests, such as students with disabilities, students with dyslexia, English learners, and gifted students.

The state has also established state-level academic standards. These academic standards specify what students should know and be able to do, what they might be asked to do to give evidence of standards, and how well they must perform. They include content, performance, and proficiency standards.

- Content standards refer to what students should know and be able to do.
- Performance standards tell how students will show that they are meeting a standard.
- Proficiency standards indicate how well students must perform.

State law (see Section [118.30\(1g\)\(a\)1.](#), Wis. Stats.), expressly requires all school boards to adopt local-level academic standards in mathematics, science, reading and writing (i.e., English/language arts), and geography and history (i.e., social studies).

Neither the state-level academic standards nor the statutorily mandated school district-level academic standards currently make any explicit reference to cursive writing or, for that matter, the manner in which students are to be instructed regarding the mechanical act of putting pen or pencil to paper. As the DPI noted in its testimony to the Assembly committee regarding the companion bill, “this bill introduces the first statutory requirement regarding the inclusion of a specific skill or knowledge into the Wisconsin Standards for English Language Arts.”

Wisconsin’s initial model academic standards were adopted in 1998 through a joint effort of the Governor (Tommy Thompson) and the State Superintendent (John Benson). [At that time, Republicans controlled the Governor’s office and the state Assembly and Democrats controlled the state Senate.]

The model state academic standards for English language arts adopted at that time included standards for writing, but they were focused on the content of writing not the manner in which handwriting is taught. This makes perfect sense since all communication, whether spoken or written, has content.

Those 1998 standards made no mention of handwriting or the manner in which students put pencil to paper, whether in the form of cursive writing, or printing (or manuscript writing as it is often called). This was left up to local school boards to decide. Further, even back 21 years ago, the state standards adopted recognized that new ways of communicating digitally were becoming more prevalent. Those 1998 state standards set forward a goal that by end of fourth grade students will be able to “Use a variety of writing technologies, including pen and paper as well as computers.”

As the introduction and overview to those 1998 standards also made clear:

The importance of Statewide academic standards in mathematics, English language arts, science, and social studies is that they determine the scope of statewide testing. While these standards are much broader in content than any single Wisconsin Student Assessment System (WSAS) test, they do describe the range of knowledge and skills that may appear on the tests.

Question: How is a computerized state assessment going to test students for proficiency in cursive writing?

An overview of the English language arts standards adopted in 1998 puts the standards into perspective. It states:

Students listen, read, speak, write, use language, and enjoy literature at all levels and grades. The difficulty of the materials, the complexity of what students do with them, and the sophistication of their skills change as they grow older. In practice, teachers build on what students have already achieved at one level to help them meet higher standards at the next level.

The components of English language arts standards are inter-related. To use media, one must read or listen. To write, one must acquire knowledge by reading, listening, and viewing. To do research, one must read. To communicate in any form, one must know how the language works. To meet any single performance standard, students must achieve a level of proficiency in more than one content standard.

It strikes us that this statement articulates what developmental standards related to English language arts should be about. We should be focused on ensuring that students are effective communicators, regardless of whether they are communicating in spoken, handwritten or typed formats. Regardless of what the standards say, schools can always adjust individual instruction to meet individual needs. However, to the extent the state issues “one-size-fits-all” mandates this can become more challenging.

In summary, we believe that the decision to teach or not teach cursive writing is best made by local school boards in consideration of local values and preferences in each community. We note that many school districts provide instruction in cursive writing. We also note that many school districts do not require instruction in cursive writing or require only minimal instruction in cursive writing. This includes some districts that are regarded as high performing districts based on the state’s school report cards.

Clearly, the state regards these districts and boards as capable of managing their affairs with respect to overall student performance. We ask: Why is the state now stepping in and attempting to micromanage curriculum decisions in those and other districts? And why among all the concerns being expressed about student achievement is mandating cursive writing among the bill’s authors’ top educational priorities?

For all of the above reasons, the WASB opposes Senate Bill 414.



School Administrators Alliance

Representing the Interests of Wisconsin School Children

TO: Senate Committee on Education
FROM: John Forester, Executive Director
DATE: November 19, 2019
RE: SB 414 – Incorporating cursive writing into the state model English language arts standards and requiring cursive writing in the elementary grades.

The School Administrators Alliance (SAA) opposes Senate Bill 414, relating to incorporating cursive writing into the state model English language arts standards and requiring cursive writing in the elementary grades.

SB 414 requires the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to incorporate cursive writing into the model academic standards for English language arts. It also requires a school board, independent charter school, and private school participating in a parental choice program to include cursive writing in its curriculum for the elementary grades. Finally, the bill requires that each elementary school curriculum must include the objective that pupils be able to write legibly in cursive by the end of fifth grade.

In anticipation of this hearing, I sought input on SB 414 from a cross-section of SAA members, primarily school superintendents and directors of curriculum and instruction. I'd like to share with you some of their thoughts on the bill.

First of all, we believe there is value in teaching cursive. Many of the SAA members I consulted with shared that their district continues to provide instruction in cursive. Some provide only minimal instruction in cursive. A few shared that they do not require instruction in cursive. But the members I consulted shared that, over the past several years, their districts have had discussions about prioritizing district instructional needs that considered the future of cursive instruction in the district.

Part of the issue comes down to limited available instructional time. It's also critically important to consider what's most relevant for students in this digital age. Communication and writing take place more commonly now with computers and other electronic devices. Districts also needed to strengthen student proficiency in keyboarding to take online state assessments. In many districts parent and community expectations have also moved districts to prioritize technology instruction at the elementary level.

Our educators in Wisconsin face some enormous challenges in meeting the objectives we have for K-12 education. In a nutshell, I would characterize these primary objectives as follows:

- To improve student achievement for all students.
- To close those stubborn achievement gaps.
- To make sure all Wisconsin students graduate college and career ready.

We currently have lots of statutory requirements directed at schools, some that help schools to achieve these objectives and some that don't. Every legislative session we see several bills that would create new instructional mandates. And we all know that there are scores of interest groups that believe that schools should be providing children with instruction in many new subject areas in order to meet laudable public policy goals. In short, these proposals, if adopted, would lead school districts to take time, money and focus away from their primary objectives.

Mr. Chairman, you know that I have great respect for the work of this committee and the challenges you face. I see this committee as the gatekeeper in the Senate for education policy. As such, I would just pose three questions for the committee as you consider this legislation.

- First, how will this bill help school districts to meet our education policy objectives?
- Given the very big challenges that we face and the important objectives we are working hard to achieve, "How would you like us to use the precious minutes we have in the limited number of instructional days in each school year?"
- Finally, "Who should be charged with the responsibility of determining the curricular priorities that best meet the unique needs of students in each of the 421 school districts – state policymakers or local teachers, administrators and school boards?"

Thank you for your consideration of our views. If you should have any questions regarding our position on SB 414, please call me at 608-242-1370.

RE: SB414

November 18, 2019

My name is Katie Kasubaski and I'm the State Lead for Decoding Dyslexia WI here to testify in support of SB414. Decoding Dyslexia WI is a grassroots, parent-lead statewide group to educate, advocate and legislate about dyslexia. Our Decoding Dyslexia WI Organizing Committee voted unanimously to support SB414.

Please see the handout showing an example of a student who would benefit greatly from cursive instruction. Cursive provides consistent letter formation, as all letters start on the line, as well as chunks letters into words when writing sentences.

Handwriting is an essential component of remediation for children with dyslexia. Every remediation program or curricula incorporates explicit and systematic handwriting instruction, most often cursive, to reinforce letter to sound association for struggling readers. Programs for struggling readers should include VTAK (Visual, Tactile, Auditory and Kinesthetic) multisensory learning. Cursive provides all of those components.

IDA (International Dyslexia Association) states these reasons for teaching cursive:

- Cursive is faster to write
- Cursive becomes a unit rather than a series of separate strokes and correct spelling is more likely retained
- All lower-case letters begin on the line
- Handwriting engages more cognitive centers in the brain than the keyboard
- Ability to read historical documents

In addition to my testimony as a parent, I have personal story that illustrates how cursive handwriting improves civic literacy. I have had the joy of being an election official in various polling places in Wisconsin (Eau Claire, Mount Horeb and Oregon) since the 2000 presidential election. The last two most recent elections in Oregon, I had a few bright, young new voters who didn't know how to sign their own signature on the poll book. They were nervous and ashamed that they didn't know how to sign their names. I had two young men ask me, "in cursive?" I directed them to sign however they signed on their driver's license. They both said they would just print their names as they did on their driver's license. Young voters cannot sign their names.

In conclusion, getting explicit cursive instruction into the hands of students earlier benefits all learners and struggling students shouldn't need to be diverted into intervention programs to access the explicit handwriting instruction they need.

Sincerely,

Katie Kasubaski, CALP
State Lead Decoding Dyslexia WI/ Legislative Coordinator
Attachment: 1 handwriting sample

Name: EIAN

Date: 2/1/2010

~~Handwritten scribbles and crossed-out words at the top of the page.~~

o, th, un, d, e, l, sh, p, t, u, r, b, non, a, wh, o
f, i, m, v, i, z, c, k, ck

1. ~~rag~~ rag

8. ~~grunt~~ grunt

2. ~~pit~~ pit

9. ~~admit~~ admit

3. ~~huts~~ huts

10. ~~mine~~ mine

4. ~~chess~~ chess

11. ~~luck~~ luck

5. ~~shop~~ shop

12. ~~milk~~ milk

6. ~~slap~~ slap

13. ~~thrash~~ thrash

7. ~~unbend~~ unbend

14. ~~hose~~ hose

15. ~~me~~ me

Sentences:

1. ~~The lad had five pens in the box.~~

The lad had five pens in the box.

2. ~~Can Jane jump up the big step?~~

Can Jane jump up the big step?

X
as
the