



"Leadership in Public School Governance"

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TO: Members, Assembly Committee on State Affairs
FROM: Dan Rossmiller, WASB Government Relations Director
DATE: November 6, 2019
RE: OPPOSITION to ASSEMBLY BILL 459, 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 Assembly Bill 459 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.

Given that some legislators, including one of the main authors of Assembly Bill 459, 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 and tested? Does a four-week unit suffice, does a quarter or semester suffice or is a whole year needed?

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 locally 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.

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. Even back 21 years ago, the state standards adopted recognized that new ways of communicating digitally were becoming more prevalent and 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 Assembly Bill 459.