

Assembly passes grade school reading assessment overhaul

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The Assembly voted 62-32 today to overhaul reading assessments for Wisconsin grade schoolers.

The bill has already cleared the Senate and now heads to Gov. Tony Evers' desk.

Three Dems joined majority Republicans in backing SB 454, which would replace the current reading readiness assessment program with a tiered early literacy screening program. Under the bill, students in 4K would take two tests per year, and those in 5K through second grade would take three tests per year. Individual reading programs and additional assessments would be required for students who score in the 25th percentile or lower.

Dems in support included Reps. LaKeshia Myers and Dora Drake, both of Milwaukee, and Francesca Hong, of Madison.

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Bill author Rep. Joel Kitchens, R-Sturgeon Bay, said the bill would improve kids' ability to read. He said that would help reduce the increasing generational wealth gap because those who read better generally get better-paying jobs. He added more steps will be necessary to bring Wisconsin's reading performance back up to previous levels.

But Dem Rep. Deb Andraca, of Whitefish Bay, said that while the bill's goal is good, it wouldn't be effective. Andraca said the bill would take time away from teaching students how to read and force teachers to spend that time on preparing for another standardized test.

"What we're facing is not an achievement gap," she said. "What we're facing is an

opportunity gap.”

Other Dems argued against the bill because they say it would increase schools' workload responsibilities without giving them any extra funding to administer the new tests.

Assembly Education Committee Chair Rep. Jeremy Thiesfeldt, R-Fond du Lac, said the testing is aimed at showing the areas in which students are having problems with reading. He also said the test would help combat a statewide downward trend for reading rates.

“We are in a crisis in reading,” Thiesfeldt said. “This is not the end of the road, there's more that needs to be done, and I will be along for that ride because you can't do anything else.”

Myers, of Milwaukee, said she supports the bill because it would give teachers more insight into the individual problems of each of their students. She added it would help teachers learn which students need to catch up on their reading abilities before pushing them to the next grade without the learning tools they need to succeed.

“We have the opportunity to actually do something about it,” she said. “It's time for us to stop making excuses and actually do something.”