

Sen. Bernier & Rep. Kitchens: Reading crisis demands urgent action

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(Madison)... Senator Kathy Bernier (R-Chippewa Falls) and Representative Joel Kitchens (R - Sturgeon Bay) introduced an amendment to the Roadmap to Reading Success, a bipartisan bill vetoed by the Governor that addresses Wisconsin's alarming K-12 reading crisis through proven, evidence-based literacy screening. The authors sent the following letter to Governor Evers:

Governor Evers,

Literacy in Wisconsin is in crisis: 64% of Wisconsin 4th graders can't read at grade level, with 34% failing to read at even the basic level. As co-chair of Governor Walker's Read to Lead Task Force, you know that high quality universal literacy screening is the undisputed cornerstone of evidence-based reading instruction. Unfortunately, your veto of Senate Bill 454, The Roadmap to Reading Success, delays the inevitable adoption of desperately needed science-based standards for how we screen and identify struggling readers to get them the help they need.

For too long we have relied on the now disproven pet theories and guesswork of the education establishment and it has left a full two-thirds of our 4th graders struggling to read. How many more children need to pass through Wisconsin's failing reading system while state specialists hold endless meetings to puzzle over this crisis?

When you vetoed the Roadmap to Reading Success, you said more money is needed. Governor Evers, under the budget you signed into law in July, the state already reimburses schools for 100% of the costs of literacy screeners. Sadly, what you vetoed are the science-based high standards that would ensure we use

screeners that actually get the job done with accurate, actionable data.

Our recent budget invests \$15.3 billion into K-12 education, or nearly 40% of all state spending. On top of this, Wisconsin schools are receiving an unprecedented \$2.7 billion in federal COVID funds and you recently committed an additional \$110 million in no-strings-attached federal ARPA funds. Governor Evers, if more funds are needed to take this inevitable and critical first step toward solving our reading crisis, you have sole control over nearly \$1 billion in additional federal COVID dollars. That's why today, we're introducing an amendment to Assembly Bill 446, calling on you to release any portion of these funds you see fit and sign this bill into law. When a full one-third of fourth graders can't read at the basic level, we simply cannot wait.

As red and blue states across the country are adopting the reforms in this bill and seeing stunning improvement in reading achievement, Wisconsin's children are being left behind. If you need further convincing that the Roadmap to Reading Success is the foundational change we need to begin addressing our literacy crisis, some of the most significant research driving literacy reforms across the country is happening right here at UW-Madison's Language and Cognitive Neuroscience Lab. Dr. Seidenberg, one of the world's foremost researchers on neuroscientific understanding of how children learn to read, spearheads groundbreaking research. We urge you talk with Dr. Seidenberg and learn firsthand why he supports the Roadmap to Reading Success.

The time to act is now. As more and more Wisconsin parents, teachers and local school leaders are waking up to this reading crisis and taking the challenge head-on, they are crying out for desperately needed statewide leadership. The Roadmap to Reading Success isn't speculative, wishful thinking about what might work. It is the best of evidence-based screening practices. It's not a question of if, but when Wisconsin will adopt these science-based reforms. Governor Evers, if you don't sign this bill into law, someone else will. So, for the sake of our kids, do your homework on this quickly and sign this bill into law.