

# Wisconsin Association of School Boards: Guest column: Mandates mean less choice

Posted on Monday, Feb 7, 2022

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By Ben Niehaus, member services director of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards

Every session, state legislators propose and consider a number of mandates (requirements enforced by state law) on our local schools. These almost always deal with worthy topics and, considered by themselves, might not seem like that big of a deal for schools to implement.

The problem comes when you consider that there are only so many hours of instruction in a school day, and there are new instructional mandates proposed every legislative session. This session we have seen mandates proposed that would require schools to provide instruction on civics, cursive writing and teen dating violence prevention, among others. The latest example is a bill (Assembly Bill 899) that would require a full-year financial literacy course as an additional high school graduation requirement.

You may be thinking: “But financial literacy is important.” We agree. Did you know that Wisconsin recently adopted a law (2017 WI Act 94) that requires each school board to adopt financial literacy academic standards? In fact, schools have already begun incorporating financial literacy into their curriculums not just in high school but across all grade levels K-12.

As a former school superintendent, I know how challenging it would be to fit a full year of any additional graduation requirement into a school’s offerings, especially in the many small, rural schools throughout Wisconsin. I’m sure larger schools would

be challenged in their own unique ways. More importantly, as a parent of a recent high school graduate with two other children in high school, I know how many classes my kids have wanted to take but were not able to because of current requirements and scheduling limitations. This new mandate would only exacerbate course selection challenges for high school students.

The Wisconsin Association of School Boards is concerned that this mandate would force school boards to reduce or eliminate critical programming at the high school level. These include offerings that prepare students for careers in their communities, provide college credit opportunities that save students time and tuition, or prepare students via higher-level courses needed for college entrance requirements.

School districts that wish to offer a specific course in financial literacy as a graduation requirement for their district can already do so voluntarily. They don't need a mandate from the state to take that step. However, for the many school districts facing teacher shortages and struggling simply to keep their doors open for in-person instruction, the last thing they need is yet another unfunded mandate.

Let's say no to more state mandates that are a recipe for a "one size fits all" education among 421 different and unique public schools. Instead, let's advocate for maximum flexibility for students to take classes where they can explore areas of interest for their continuing education or employment upon graduation.

Ben Niehaus is the director of member services for the Wisconsin Association of School Boards. He was formerly superintendent of the School District of Florence County in northern Wisconsin.