

Senate sends bill to change literacy instruction to Evers' desk

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The Senate today approved a bill to turn Wisconsin's approach to literacy into a phonics-based program in an attempt to improve reading.

Senators 25-7 approved the bill, sending AB 321 to Gov. Tony Evers' desk. The bill would establish an Office of Literacy to contract 64 full-time literacy coaches who would help teachers implement a newer model based on phonics, vocabulary building, reading fluency, and oral language development, among other things.

The measure would also require students who read below grade level to have individualized reading plans until they catch up and to include the percentage of third-grade students who read at that grade level on school report cards.

All Dems present voted against the bill except Sens. Kelda Roys, of Madison, Robert Wirch, of Somers, and Lena Taylor, of Milwaukee. Sen. LaTonya Johnson, of Milwaukee, was not in the chamber during the roll call.

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Sen. Chris Larson, D-Milwaukee, said his office reached out to 421 school districts across the state, and of those that responded, only two supported the bill.

He also criticized the bill for banning the current curriculum, arguing the provision takes tools away that work for at least some kids, "specifically for a subset of people who are otherwise marginalized."

Sen. Duey Stroebel, R-Saukville, argued the current literacy curriculum is the entire reason for literacy disparities.

"For decades we have seen districts across the country get away from teaching kids

foundational reading skills, instead in favor of an approach known as balanced literacy,” he said. “The use of so-called balanced literacy has yielded unbalanced results for students across the country.”

The body also reconfirmed Transportation Secretary Craig Thompson 28-4, slightly better than his previous 27-4 confirmation vote in 2021.