http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/school-tutor-reading-s5.jpg



Sen. Smith writes about the public hearing for Senate Bill 454, which aims to improve early childhood literacy, and how state lawmakers can better support parents and children with a reading disability.

MADISON - Constituents expect their legislators to solve problems. I know that's what is expected of me and it's what I enjoy doing. It's truly satisfying coming up with new ideas that make a positive impact on people's lives.

We hear concerns and suggestions from constituents for how to fix the problem. In fact, many bills we propose come directly from the minds of the people we're elected to serve.

Public hearings happen nearly every day in the Capitol for legislators to hear about an issue and how a bill can help fix it. Last week was no different. I serve on the Senate Committee on Education and I attended the public hearing for Senate Bill 454, which aims to improve early childhood literacy. The bill authors introduced this legislation intending to help students with reading disabilities, like dyslexia. Improving early childhood literacy is an issue we can all support. However, I do have serious concerns about the unintended consequences of this bill and the failure to address the actual problem.

Currently, school boards and independent charter schools are required to assess students

from four-year-old kindergarten to second grade on reading readiness. This bill overhauls the assessment practices Wisconsin has in place. Ultimately, this will impact the way students are taught by implementing more testing for all students, thus delaying the time needed to actually intervene and improve an individual student's reading ability. Additionally, I found it problematic that there was little input from teachers and the bill specifics that schools must use private companies for this testing.

What may seem incredible to some is that the bill authors modeled this legislation after Mississippi. Before you jump to conclusions, you should know that Mississippi really has made strides in raising the level of reading competence over the last eight years. They've almost reached the same level that Wisconsin scores have been at for the last thirty years. They did this through reading assessments *and* by making the investments needed to provide teachers with training and schools with specialists.

Senate Bill 454 only focuses on discovery, not the investment in services. Undoubtedly, the sooner a parent or educator identifies a child's reading difficulties, the better. But, also the sooner we invest in the services that child will need, the better. Mississippi also implemented a strict retention policy to hold students back a year, which raises some concerns about how they raised their scores.

We are well aware there is a problem with reading proficiency in Wisconsin, especially for students of color, but it doesn't make sense for us to implement more testing to identify a problem we already know exists.



Some of my committee colleagues and I attempted to raise concerns, but the committee chair dismissed them and made the decision to not allow any more questions. There just seems to be no appetite to actually fix these problems.

We then heard testimony after testimony from parents who have experience taking their child to a clinic to be “evaluated by a private neuropsychologist.” This might cost them anywhere between one to two thousand dollars. After their diagnosis they then might spend $600 per month for private tutoring.

Throughout this six-hour hearing, all I could think about was how disingenuous we were being to these desperate parents who seemed to believe this bill would fix everything. But we wouldn’t be funding a neuropsychologist for school districts who already can’t afford one more staff person. Nor would we fund more specialists trained to tutor students with reading disabilities. All the legislature is willing to do is mandate more class time on assessments, so the teacher might be able to tell parents that they will need to find private tutoring to help their child.

Wisconsinites expect their legislators to fix problems, not push the problem onto someone else. This bill is telling parents, “We want to assess your child’s reading skills, but you’re on your own for helping them.” If the Legislature is serious about closing Wisconsin’s achievement gap, we need to put our money where our mouth is and move bills forward that will truly make a difference.