

## What Does It Take to Fix a Problem?

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***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.***

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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.

