

Assembly Committee on Education
February 19, 2014

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Testimony on 2013 Assembly Bill 749

Thank you to Chairman Kestell and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Bob Soldner and I am the Director of the School Financial Services Team at the Department of Public Instruction. I am here today on behalf of State Superintendent Tony Evers to testify for information only on Assembly Bill 749 (AB 749).

AB 749 would provide additional flexibility for school districts as they schedule their calendars while keeping in statute a minimum number of hours all school districts are required to offer regular instruction.

This flexibility is something school districts have repeatedly requested. In fact, the requirement for school to be held for 180 days is the most common waiver proposal the department receives from school districts every year.

AB 749 would provide a solution in how to treat online classes for purposes of summer school, and now interim session, in state statute. School districts have in the past wanted to offer online or blended learning opportunities and the department has been unable to recognize those classes for aid purposes. This bill will allow us to do so and, as a result, create additional options for the delivery of instruction.

Additionally, the department has received inquiries from some schools who would like to move to a year round calendar to address academic needs. A major barrier to this has been the realization that this would result in an inability to provide interim session courses due to a lack of state aid. The Senate companion to this bill included language to fix this problem and thus provide schools and districts with another scheduling option moving forward. We understand that there is a substitute amendment (Assembly Substitute Amendment 1) to AB 749 that would include this language. If that amendment is approved we will be in support of the bill moving forward.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.



School District of
West Allis-West Milwaukee, et al.
EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION CENTER

February 19, 2014

Dear Assembly Education Committee Members,

The School District of West Allis-West Milwaukee is providing testimony on Assembly Bill 749.

Education throughout the world has seen significant changes over recent decades. In today's world of education we applaud the State Legislature for your willingness to review and evaluate the way we deliver education. Education today is centered around children and their learning not seat time. We are in support of Assembly Bill 749 which eliminates days children are in school (seat time) but maintains hours and minutes of learning as accountability. By eliminating the number of required days it allows for school districts to be more creative with the way education is delivered. In addition, we hope this legislation will also encourage and allow flexible learning opportunities in diverse and non-traditional learning environments as we are in an age where 24/7 learning is at the fingertips of each child.

Thank you for your attention and consideration of this matter. Please contact my office with any questions.

Kurt Wachholz,
Superintendent of Schools

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TESTIMONY TO THE ASSEMBLY EDUCATION COMMITTEE ON IMPACT OF ASSEMBLY BILL 749

Representative Kestell and the members of the Assembly Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the positive impact of Assembly Bill 749 on rural school districts. I am Jerry Fiene, the Executive Director of the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance, an organization representing administrators, board of education members, teachers and community leaders from rural school districts throughout the state.

We would like to thank the authors and sponsors for introducing legislation that creates more flexibility for school districts as opposed to creating more mandates. Much attention has been given to the significant challenges facing rural school districts over the past several years and frankly, one of those challenges is sufficient resources to meet state and federal requirements and mandates. This bill not only creates flexibility that has the potential to conserve resources but also provides opportunities for accessing additional resources.

Through our connections with the National Rural Education Association, we have learned of creative and successful organizational schedules in school districts for both the length of school days and the scheduling of those school days that are just not possible to implement in Wisconsin because of our 180 day requirement. Removing that requirement but maintaining the required hours of instruction would open up various options for conserving resources while actually improving achievement. Transportation costs are a major expense for rural districts that drains resources from the classrooms. Reducing district-wide transportation for just a single day would save thousands of dollars. Scheduling fewer days of school during the coldest winter months would again save thousands of dollars in utility costs. Research has shown that long breaks in instruction have a negative effect on achievement and retention. Creating a schedule for the school year that would reduce the length of the traditional summer recess addresses this issue. This is even more important for children in poverty and we have had a dramatic increase in poverty across rural Wisconsin over the past 10 years. Expanding the eligibility for our current summer school aid to interim sessions further allows for creative scheduling to conserve resources, increase revenue and at the same time increase the opportunities for learning.

I have advocated for a long time to allow online classes at the junior and senior high level to be eligible for summer school aid. We are very pleased to see that this provision is included in Assembly Bill 749. The quality and rigor of online classes has improved dramatically over the past 10 years. During the same time our rural school districts have been forced to eliminate advanced classes, AP offerings and foreign languages as a result of declining enrollments and diminished resources. These opportunities are all available online and would be a great resource for students to access during the summer session or interim session. However, these opportunities do come with a cost that a rural school district may not be able to afford. Eligibility for state aid on these courses will make them much more affordable and the clear winners will be our rural youth.

Thank you very much for introducing this legislation and we encourage your support for its approval.



School Administrators Alliance

Representing the Interests of Wisconsin School Children

TO: Assembly Committee on Education
FROM: John Forester, Director of Government Relations
DATE: February 19, 2014
RE: Assembly Bill 749 – 180-Day Requirement

The School Administrators Alliance (SAA) strongly supports Assembly Bill 749, relating to the number of school days required each school term.

I want to thank Chairman Kestell for bringing this bill forward and for allowing the SAA to participate in the bill development process. Mr. Chairman, in my research for today's hearing I found that the Assembly Committee on Education held a public hearing on this issue on August 12, 2003. So, this issue has indeed been around a while. I also noted that the arguments made in favor of the bill that day by the SAA's then youthful lobbyist are still very much relevant today.

Under current law, school districts must hold school for at least 180 days during the school term. In addition, each school district must maintain minimum required hours of instruction. AB 749 eliminates the 180-day requirement and retains the minimum instructional time requirement. I understand that there is an amendment to the bill that, if adopted, will also ensure that a school district employing a flexible year-round instructional calendar can receive state aid for pupils during both summer school and interim session classes. In this fashion, AB 749 removes a current law impediment (loss of summer school aid) to school districts exploring innovative year-round schooling.

If enacted, AB 749 would:

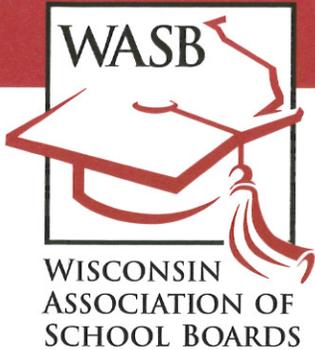
- Empower local officials to direct limited district resources to most effectively meet the instructional needs of their students. Local elected board members, school administrators and instructional staff are better positioned to identify student needs and allocate resources to meet those needs than are lawmakers and bureaucrats in Madison. Increasingly, schools are being held accountable to student outcomes. Dictating inputs like the number of calendar days reduces local control and flexibility. Also, given the challenging weather issues we have faced this year in Wisconsin, giving school districts the flexibility to respond to local conditions is simply the right thing to do.

- Allow districts the flexibility to achieve significant cost savings in the areas of energy, transportation, utilities and food service – savings that could be reinvested into improving student achievement.
- Allow districts the flexibility to explore innovative school calendars and instructional strategies including, but not limited to, year-round scheduling. Increasingly, schools would like to build their schedules around more flexibly-designed learning periods and less around the agrarian calendar.
- Help school districts increase critically-needed staff professional development. Many school administrators hope to use the flexibility in this bill to “buy” a day or two of additional staff professional development time within the existing school calendar without increasing staff costs. This is the most popular argument in support of AB 749 expressed by school administrators in the field.

If enacted, AB 749 **would not** require school districts to hold fewer than 180 days of instruction. The bill simply affords districts the flexibility to reduce student contact days if local circumstances or student needs warrant. Nothing in the bill would prevent a district from maintaining a 180-day calendar (or more) if the district and the community believed it was best for their children. Calendar issues would still be determined by the local school board in consultation with the community.

Simply put, AB 749 is about restoring a modicum of calendar flexibility to local school districts and trusting in local school leaders to use this flexibility to meet the unique needs of the students they serve.

We urge your support of AB 749. Thank you.



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JOHN H. ASHLEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

TO: Members, Assembly Committee on Education
FROM: Dan Rossmiller, WASB Government Relations Director
RE: WASB Support for Assembly Bill 749, relating to the number of school days and hours of instruction held in a school year and state aid for summer classes
DATE: February 19, 2014

Good morning Chairman Kestell and members of the committee. My name is Dan Rossmiller. I am the Director of Government Relations for the Wisconsin Association of School Boards (WASB), representing the 424 locally elected school boards in our state. We wholeheartedly support Assembly Bill 749, and particularly the substitute amendment that conforms the bill to its Senate companion bill, Senate Bill 589.

Since the 1800's, school schedules have been organized around an agrarian calendar. However, to meet the demand for higher student achievement levels while maximizing limited resources, school boards and administrators are looking for greater flexibility in setting school schedules. The current 180-day school term is a remnant of a bygone era. Its linkage to state school aid funding is a hindrance to school districts wishing to explore 21st century options such as longer school years or year-round schooling as a way to improve student achievement.

School board member delegates to the 2014 WASB Delegate Assembly from around the state voted overwhelmingly last month to adopt a resolution in support of legislation to repeal the existing statutory provisions governing the number of school days required under current law (the 180-day requirement), and to allow districts to be governed only by the hours of direct pupil instruction required under current law.

Under those existing hours of instruction requirements, school boards must schedule at least 437 hours of direct pupil instruction in kindergarten, at least 1,050 hours in grades one to six, and at least 1,137 hours of direct pupil instruction in grades seven to twelve. Under the bill, these existing requirements would take the place of the 180-day requirement.

Assembly Bill 749, by eliminating the 180-day requirement, while still maintaining existing hours of instruction requirements, will give local school boards options to explore creative approaches to organizing the school year, which could help them to improve instruction and to attract and retain high-quality educators.

The Senate version of this bill would also ensure that school districts receive aid for students while in sessions not considered part of the regular school year, including summer school and interim sessions. In that way, it will encourage school boards and administrators to explore innovative scheduling such as year-round school that could help to reduce summer learning loss and further contribute to student learning gains. That piece, which was inadvertently left out of the original Assembly Bill 749, greatly strengthens the bill and we strongly support the adoption of the substitute amendment that has been prepared to add those provisions.

Assembly Bill 749 supports the concept of local control in developing and implementing innovative methods of delivering instruction. It also gives districts needed flexibility in making up lost instruction in years, such as this year, when an inordinate number of inclement weather cancellations occur. Many school districts will have to schedule additional days of school this year, at additional cost, in order to meet the 180-day requirement, even though they meet the hours of instruction requirement.

To be sure, some school districts, particularly smaller and more rural districts, may wish to explore options such as a four-day week to save on pupil transportation costs. Many districts seek added flexibility for other reasons, such as the ability to schedule additional professional development time for teachers and staff without increasing costs or cutting back on instructional time for students.

This year, due to high number of “inclement weather days” it is likely that many school districts will have to add additional days—even though they are meeting the required hours of instruction—and will almost certainly be in session thorough mid-June.

Given when the regular school term ends under current law, fitting in a six-week summer school session—even in a year without so many inclement weather cancellations—means that classes can easily run into early August. For teachers who both teach summer school and coach fall sports and students who both take summer school and participate in fall sports, this makes it challenging to fit in a vacation. Schools are looking for greater flexibility to make the calendar work better for parents, students and school staff.

When it comes to improving student performance, and especially when it comes to narrowing achievement gaps that are preventing many low-income and minority students from reaching their full potential, *all* options should be on the table. The bill before you will give districts the ability to consider more flexible options in scheduling summer sessions and interim sessions to provide more time on the essential task of student learning without sacrificing the opportunity to receive state aid.

Assembly Bill 749 provides school districts with much needed flexibility. We urge your support for the bill and for the amendment that has been prepared to add the language on “interim sessions” that would bring the bill in line with its Senate companion bill.