

Jeremy Thiesfeldt

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 52nd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony on Assembly Bill 435 **The Cursive Bill** *Assembly Committee on State Affairs*

Hello, Chairman Swearingen and Members of the Committee. Thank you for holding a hearing today on Assembly Bill 435, a bill that will guarantee that all Wisconsin students are able to write in cursive.

The state of education in Wisconsin is not good. Over half of all Wisconsin students are not proficient in reading and math, and horrifically, Wisconsin has the worst racial achievement gap in the country. Wisconsin's reading scores have been declining steadily, and, as Chair of the Education Committee, I have heard many heartbreaking stories from parents of students and students themselves who are unable to effectively read, who struggle in school, and who want tools to be able to learn more efficiently and successfully.

Surprisingly to many, cursive writing can lend a hand in the process of improving reading. This bill isn't about nostalgia of being able to read grandma's letters and primary source historical documents. It is so much more than that.

While education has many goals, I would contend that one of the most important goals of education is to maximize the potential of our minds. Teaching kids how to think happens by activating and creating neurological pathways connecting the different parts of our brains. Cursive writing actually trains the brain to integrate visual and tactile information and fine motor dexterity. Astonishingly, printing and typing do not stimulate the synchronicity between the right and left hemispheres of the brain, but cursive writing does. Cursive writing requires different muscles and uses a different part of the brain than regular writing. Studies have also shown that memory recall of the content of writing performed using cursive surpasses that of the typed word. On top of all of this, cursive can help grade students develop their motor skills.

Interestingly, victims of traumatic brain injuries and even older patients with neurological impairments and diseases seem to be helped in recreating these mental pathways through the written word.

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Many students with learning disabilities, specifically dyslexia, struggle with writing in print. Studies have shown that cursive comes more natural to these students as they are able to write in a 'flow' way with the mind-body connection, and with a different part of the brain, and cursive can improve learning outcomes.

Fifteen states now require students to be proficient in cursive. The most recent state to pass legislation regarding cursive proficiency, Ohio, did so in a very bipartisan manner. The legislation passed their State House of Representatives 90-4 and the State Senate 27-2.

As we look at ways to better education in the State of Wisconsin, we want to look at many different areas, including where we can get the best bang for our taxpayer dollars. Cursive is something that yields positive results in the brains of our students and their learning outcomes.

As Chair of the Assembly Education Committee, I feel strongly in giving students every chance to be successful in school. Cursive is one hugely beneficial and, honestly, fairly easy tool that can be enormously beneficial to Wisconsin students.

The Wisconsin Property Taxpayers and Decoding Dyslexia of Wisconsin are both in support of this legislation, and you will receive written testimony from many others who are also in support of being able to read and write in cursive.

Thank you.

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Cursive Writing vs. Other Writing/Typing

- The Pen Is Mightier Than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand Over Laptop Note Taking (Study)
 - **Link** - <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0956797614524581>
 - **Summary** - Many researchers have suggested that laptop note taking is less effective than longhand note taking for learning. Prior studies have primarily focused on students' capacity for multitasking and distraction when using laptops. The present research suggests that even when laptops are used solely to take notes, they may still be impairing learning because their use results in shallower processing. In three studies, we found that students who took notes on laptops performed worse on conceptual questions than students who took notes longhand. We show that whereas taking more notes can be beneficial, laptop note takers' tendency to transcribe lectures verbatim rather than processing information and reframing it in their own words is detrimental to learning.
- Early development of language by hand: composing, reading, listening, and speaking connections; three letter-writing modes; and fast mapping in spelling (Study)
 - **Link** - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16390289>
 - **Summary** - The first findings from a 5-year, overlapping-cohorts longitudinal study of typical language development are reported for (a) the interrelationships among Language by Ear (listening), Mouth (speaking), Eye (reading), and Hand (writing) in Cohort 1 in 1st and 3rd grade and Cohort 2 in 3rd and 5th grade; (b) the interrelationships among three modes of Language by Hand (writing manuscript letters with pen and keyboard and cursive letters with pen) in each cohort in the same grade levels as (a); and (c) the ability of the 1st graders in Cohort 1 and the 3rd graders in Cohort 2 to apply fast mapping in learning to spell pseudowords. Results showed that individual differences in Listening Comprehension, Oral Expression, Reading Comprehension, and Written Expression are stable developmentally, but each functional language system is only moderately correlated with the others. Likewise, manuscript writing, cursive writing, and keyboarding are only moderately correlated, and each has a different set of unique neuropsychological predictors depending on outcome measure and grade level. Results support the use of the following neuropsychological measures in assessing handwriting modes: orthographic coding, rapid automatic naming, finger succession (grapho-motor planning for sequential finger movements), inhibition, inhibition/switching, and phonemes skills (which may facilitate transfer of abstract letter identities across letter formats and modes of production). Both 1st and 3rd graders showed evidence of fast mapping of novel spoken word forms onto written word forms over 3 brief sessions (2 of which involved teaching) embedded in the assessment battery; and this fast mapping explained unique variance in their spelling achievement over and beyond their orthographic and phonological coding abilities and correlated significantly with current and next-year spelling achievement.
 - "What we found is that children wrote more words, they wrote them faster and expressed more ideas with paper and pen than with the keyboard. Up to about the

sixth grade, there does seem to be an advantage for composing and handwriting,” Berninger said.

- Teaching of Cursive Writing in the First Year of Primary School: Effect on Reading and Writing Skills (Study)
 - **Link** - [Pdf](#)
 - **Summary** - We observed that children who only learned the cursive type made faster improvements in reading. This fact may be explained by a major focus of active resources on the lexical access task. The very nature of the cursive type may help students to easily memorize and recall a word unit, since in the cursive type the letters of a word are linked one to another, while in print type they are separated.
 - In conclusion, like other studies, our work tends to demonstrate how, upon training, writing and reading abilities improve in terms of written letter rate (students write faster), orthography (words are written correctly), and reading (students read and understand better). However, writing quality is a parameter to be investigated thoroughly in further studies. Considering writing type, we can observe how students who learn every type simultaneously do not achieve results as good as those achieved by cursive-only students. This finding supports the idea that the development of writing abilities in primary school is better favored by the teaching of a single type of handwriting, namely cursive handwriting. Furthermore, teaching of the cursive type generates improvement in graphic and orthographic word production by the end of the school year.

- The Benefits of Cursive Go Beyond Writing (Article)
 - **Link** - <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/04/30/should-schools-require-children-to-learn-cursive/the-benefits-of-cursive-go-beyond-writing>
 - **Summary** - Learning to write in cursive is shown to improve brain development in the areas of thinking, language and working memory. Cursive handwriting stimulates brain synapses and synchronicity between the left and right hemispheres, something absent from printing and typing. As a result, the physical act of writing in cursive leads to increased comprehension and participation. Interestingly, a few years ago, the College Board found that students who wrote in cursive for the essay portion of the SAT scored slightly higher than those who printed, which experts believe is because the speed and efficiency of writing in cursive allowed the students to focus on the content of their essays.

- Note-taking with computers: Exploring alternative strategies for improved recall (Study)
 - **Link** - <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2012-27380-001>
 - **Summary** - Three experiments examined note-taking strategies and their relation to recall. In Experiment 1, participants were instructed either to take organized lecture notes or to try and transcribe the lecture, and they either took their notes by hand or typed them into a computer. Those instructed to transcribe the lecture using a computer showed the best recall on immediate tests, and the subsequent experiments focused on note-taking using computers. Experiment 2 showed that taking organized notes produced the best recall on delayed tests. In Experiment 3,

however, when participants were given the opportunity to study their notes, those who had tried to transcribe the lecture showed better recall on delayed tests than those who had taken organized notes. Correlational analyses of data from all 3 experiments revealed that for those who took organized notes, working memory predicted note-quantity, which predicted recall on both immediate and delayed tests. For those who tried to transcribe the lecture, in contrast, only note-quantity was a consistent predictor of recall. These results suggest that individuals who have poor working memory (an ability traditionally thought to be important for note-taking) can still take effective notes if they use a note-taking strategy (transcribing using a computer) that can help level the playing field for students of diverse cognitive abilities.

- Psychology professors Dung Bui, Joel Myerson, and Sandra Hale at Washington University found that taking computer notes does offer the immediate benefit of better recall than well-organized, handwritten notes. So the computer wins...at first. But then their research, they uncovered something interesting: that advantage disappears in about 24 hours. By that point, people who typed their notes actually performed worse on tests about the material. The researchers concluded that the typing note-takers had worse recall because they weren't actively summarizing and synthesizing key points.
 - "Taking organized notes presumably involves deeper and more thorough processing of the lecture information, whereas transcribing requires only a shallow encoding of the information," they explained.
- The effects of handwriting experience on functional brain development in pre-literate children (Study)
 - **Link** - <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2211949312000038>
 - **Summary** - In an age of increasing technology, the possibility that typing on a keyboard will replace handwriting raises questions about the future usefulness of handwriting skills. Here we present evidence that brain activation during letter perception is influenced in different, important ways by previous handwriting of letters versus previous typing or tracing of those same letters. Pre-literate, five-year old children printed, typed, or traced letters and shapes, then were shown images of these stimuli while undergoing functional MRI scanning. A previously documented "reading circuit" was recruited during letter perception only after handwriting—not after typing or tracing experience. These findings demonstrate that handwriting is important for the early recruitment in letter processing of brain regions known to underlie successful reading. Handwriting therefore may facilitate reading acquisition in young children.
 - Handwriting or Typewriting? The Influence of Pen- or Keyboard-Based Writing Training on Reading and Writing Performance in Preschool Children (Study)
 - **Link** - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4710970/>
 - **Summary** - Digital writing devices associated with the use of computers, tablet PCs, or mobile phones are increasingly replacing writing by hand. It is, however, controversially discussed how writing modes influence reading and writing performance in children at the start of literacy. On the one hand, the easiness of

typing on digital devices may accelerate reading and writing in young children, who have less developed sensory-motor skills. On the other hand, the meaningful coupling between action and perception during handwriting, which establishes sensory-motor memory traces, could facilitate written language acquisition. In order to decide between these theoretical alternatives, for the present study, we developed an intense training program for preschool children attending the German kindergarten with 16 training sessions. Using closely matched letter learning games, eight letters of the German alphabet were trained either by handwriting with a pen on a sheet of paper or by typing on a computer keyboard. Letter recognition, naming, and writing performance as well as word reading and writing performance were assessed. Results did not indicate a superiority of typing training over handwriting training in any of these tasks. In contrast, handwriting training was superior to typing training in word writing, and, as a tendency, in word reading. The results of our study, therefore, support theories of action-perception coupling assuming a facilitatory influence of sensory-motor representations established during handwriting on reading and writing.

- The power of writing hands: Logical memory performance after handwriting and typing tasks with Wechsler Memory Scale Revised Edition (Study)
 - **Link** - <https://lauda.ulapland.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/62563/Frangou.Satu-Maarit.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>
 - **Summary** - Information and communications technologies have generated a multilevel metamorphose not only of the educational field, but also of the usage of hands. The shift from handwriting to typing is bringing about a change in the ways people learn to recognize and recollect letters and words, read and write. This study investigates how different writing methods affect memory retrieval. The aim is to understand how the memory performances compare after handwriting and typing tasks, and how the factor of time or age affects recollection. The Wechsler Memory Scale Revised Edition (WMS-R) was used with experimental within-subjects research design to measure memory functions of 31 University of Lapland students in 2016. Participants wrote down a dictated story with a pencil, computer keyboard, and a touch screen keyboard. Consequently, the degree of recollection of each writing task was measured and analysed with repeated measures analysis of variance. Additionally, this thesis deliberates the embodied cognition theory, as learning and memorizing are not simply information processing in nothingness. Experiences, actions and senses all play part in learning, as well as in writing process with the harmonious co-operation of brain, mind and body. The results of this study indicate that writing modalities have statistically significant effect on recollection, handwriting receiving the highest scores. These results are of interest due to the constant increase of digitalization of learning environments.

Teaching Cursive

- Cursive Swoops Back into Curriculum (Article)

- **Link** - <https://www.educationdive.com/news/cursive-swoops-back-into-curriculum/521417/>
- **Summary** - Megan Kreitlein spends every year, for the past 12, teaching her 4th grade students at Eden Elementary School in Pell City, AL, how to write in cursive. Fifteen minutes a day, her class learns each letter — both lower case and uppercase — until they're capable of turning in their assignments in cursive. Students also do an art project where they write their name in cursive, and turn it into a "cursive critter" that we display in the hall all year," says Kreitlein. "They also write thank you notes for our funded Donors Choose projects in their neatest cursive, and I've had some donors very pleased to see the cursive handwriting." Ultimately, she finds that students who don't print clearly can sometimes have beautiful cursive handwriting, which she says she finds easier to read. And to keep her students practicing, she sends a workbook home, sometimes hearing from grandparents and parents who are happy that children are still learning how to write in the curls and loops that they remember from their own childhood.
- **Ciro Scardina**, who has been teaching cursive on and off since 2002, sees the ability to write in cursive as an important ability, and started a weekly club for 3rd through 5th grade students two years ago at Public School 18 in Staten Island, NY. He now has about 15 students who meet to learn how to write in the flowing style. "The historical documents that frame our country's history were written in cursive and I think in order to truly appreciate them, it helps to read them in the style in which they were written," says Scardina. "We live in a digital world but I find it vital to keep sacred some analog parts of life." He does this by having students copy poems in cursive, and has even created a short video of some people writing in cursive so they can keep studying independently. During the club meetings, students spend 90 minutes talking, practicing and even doing hand exercises to build up their muscle strength, he says.
- We're glad cursive is making a comeback, and that's not just nostalgia (Article)
 - **Link** - https://lancasteronline.com/opinion/editorials/we-re-glad-cursive-is-making-a-comeback-and-that/article_c7edc240-62ae-11e9-a058-4f39eeb8e050.html
 - **Summary** - Amy Prechel, an occupational therapist who also teaches for Learning Without Tears, told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette that kids' inability to learn handwriting is a problem. "They are trying to write sentences and paragraphs and the teacher can't read what they are trying to write," Prechel said. In severe cases, students can't read their own handwriting. Prechel conducts workshops on how to make the teaching of cursive fun for students. At the seminar covered in the Post-Gazette story, she employed a hand-held puppet named Magic C, a black and white bunny with a black bow tie, black sunglasses and a cellphone. The Magic C letters are c, a, d, g, o and q. That's because after a child forms a lowercase c, additional strokes can turn it into any of those other letters. To teach writing the lowercase b, h, m, n, r and p, Prechel said, "we pretend we are professional divers. We dive down, come up and swim over."
 - Learning how to write and read cursive is an important skill because people who take hand-written notes "are synthesizing the information at the same time," she

told the Post-Gazette. Learning cursive, Prechel said, builds neural pathways in children because the effort lights up more hemispheres of the brain than typing. "It's also faster than print once you are fluent."

- For children with dyslexia and other disabilities, "cursive can assist them with the decoding process because it integrates hand-eye coordination, fine motor skills and other brain and memory functions," NPR reported.

Common Core

- Why Don't the Common-Core Standards Include Cursive Writing? (Article)
 - **Link** - http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2016/10/why_dont_the_common-core_standards_include_cursive_writing.html
 - **Summary** - One of the most widely cited criticisms of the Common Core State Standards is that they don't require teaching students to write in cursive. Some states, such as Tennessee and California, have added cursive to the standards. Louisiana mandates that students get instruction in cursive every year from the 3rd through 12th grades. Without knowing cursive, students "will be locked out of doing research with literary papers and archival collections," Valerie Hotchkiss, a library director at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, wrote in the Chronicle of Higher Education in 2014. "They will not even be able to read their grandmother's diary or their parents' love letters." Others say cursive helps students write faster than print, and that they need it to develop a signature.

Dyslexia

- **Katie Testimony** - Handwriting is an essential component of remediation for children with dyslexia. Every remediation program or curricula incorporates explicit and systematic handwriting instruction, most often cursive, to reinforce letter to sound association for struggling readers. Programs for struggling readers should include VTAK (Visual, Tactile, Auditory and Kinesthetic) multisensory learning. Cursive provides all of those components.
 - IDA (International Dyslexia Association) states these reasons for teaching cursive:
 - Cursive is faster to write
 - Cursive becomes a unit rather than a series of separate strokes and correct spelling is more likely retained
 - All lower-case letters begin on the line
 - Handwriting engages more cognitive centers in the brain than the keyboard
 - Ability to read historical documents
- The Contribution of Handwriting and Spelling Remediation to Overcoming Dyslexia (Study)

- **Link** - <https://www.intechopen.com/books/dyslexia-a-comprehensive-and-international-approach/the-contribution-of-handwriting-and-spelling-remediation-to-overcoming-dyslexia>
- **Summary** - The main thrust of this chapter is that whilst the focus in education is the teaching of reading, the needs of dyslexics are different. Their core difficulty lies in the area of spelling first in 'cracking the alphabetic code'... In research terms it is suggested that there should be more focus on spelling and handwriting as part of literacy investigations and that a programme of early screening and intervention in Reception should be explored (i.e: cursive).

General Benefits of Cursive

- The Case for Cursive: 6 Reasons Why Cursive Handwriting is Good for Your Brain (Article)
 - **Link** - <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/585138/case-cursive-6-reasons-why-cursive-handwriting-good-your-brain>
 - **Summary**
 - 1) CURSIVE PROVIDES A FLOW OF THOUGHT AS WELL AS A FLOW OF WORDS
 - Numerous studies on the effect of writing in cursive have been completed, but one of the most influential remains a 1976 investigation from the journal Academic Therapy. It demonstrated that the act of writing words in a continuous fashion—as opposed to the interrupted format of block letters—promoted an understanding of complete words better than separate letters. Humans, after all, think structurally, not phonetically. Cursive helps reinforce that.
 - 2) CURSIVE HELPS YOU FOCUS ON CONTENT
 - When one becomes proficient in cursive, the barrier between thought and action is minimal. In fact, the College Board found that students taking the essay portion of the SAT exam scored slightly higher when writing in cursive than if they printed their answers. By not having to slow down with block printing, experts believed they could put virtually all of their focus on the content of their work.
 - 3) CURSIVE GETS THE ENTIRE BRAIN WORKING
 - Cursive may seem like just a different way of writing, but studies have found that it activates different neurological pathways than typing or manuscript writing. And reading cursive also activates different parts of the brain than printed text—one study found that in all cases they studied, when they presented information to the left hemisphere of the brain fewer errors occurred than when it was presented to the right hemisphere. But when reading cursive, this advantage was much smaller, indicating that the right hemisphere plays a much larger in reading cursive than in printed form.
 - 4) CURSIVE HELPS YOU RETAIN MORE INFORMATION

- Studies have shown that taking notes during an educational class using handwriting is preferable to typing. That's because when we type, we're able to transcribe speech almost verbatim. When we write, we have to be more selective and the brain has to process information to decide what's important enough to write down. That level of brain engagement tends to make information "stick" rather than just pass through our typing fingers.
 - 5) CURSIVE MAY HELP IMPROVE MOTOR CONTROL
 - Cursive handwriting is a fine motor skill that allows for plenty of practice. For people with developmental dysgraphia this can have a range of benefits to improve these skills.
 - 6) CURSIVE WILL MAKE YOU A BETTER SPELLER
 - The act of writing out words and thinking of them as a single unit means you're more likely to re-tain their proper spelling than if you simply typed them out. Cursive writers tend to spell more accurately as a result.
- Why Cursive? The Importance of Teaching Students to Write in Cursive (Article)
 - **Link** - <http://www.cursivelogic.com/why-cursive>
 - **Summary** - According to neurologist William Klemm, the neurological benefits of writing by hand are compounded with cursive writing. "Cursive writing, compared to printing, is even more beneficial because the movement tasks are more demanding, the letters are less stereotypical, and the visual recognition requirements create a broader repertoire of letter representation." Researcher Diane Montgomery posits that the connected letters and fluid motion of cursive handwriting are especially beneficial to students with disorders such as dyslexia and dysgraphia. Yet many fail to recognize the value of cursive. When students write confidently and legibly, their academics as a whole seem to improve.
 - Cursive has the added benefit of being both artistic and highly personal. Children no less than adults long to express their individuality and creativity. Developing a cursive hand—epitomized in the signature and carried through in a unique form of writing that others can identify and associate with a particular individual—is an important step in developing a personal style and voice. Students are not automatons, and education should include tools that encourage the individual personality.



JOAN BALLWEG

STATE SENATOR · 14TH SENATE DISTRICT

Assembly Bill 435: Incorporating Cursive Writing into the State Model English Language Arts Standards and Requiring Cursive Writing in Elementary Grades
Testimony of Senator Joan Ballweg
September 15, 2021

Good morning, members of the committee. Thank you for hearing this important piece of legislation.

At a time when technology is rapidly evolving and kids are growing up without ever knowing a time before computers, it might seem unnecessary to advocate for legislation promoting cursive writing. However, I believe it is the perfect time to make sure the skill of cursive writing is not lost for our younger generations, especially when Wisconsin students are struggling to learn how to read. While it is important that kids in school learn to type and properly use a computer, there is an abundance of research that shows learning to write by hand, particularly in cursive, helps build foundational skills for literacy.

Recent reports on reading scores for Wisconsin students show they are struggling with reading. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress, 64% of fourth graders are not proficient in reading, and 34% do not meet the basic standard for the test. When you break out reading scores by race, the statistics are starker. Of the 42 states that report separate reading scores for black students, Wisconsin is in last place after falling 31 places since 1992.

Having the availability to write in cursive can greatly benefit Wisconsin students, because it helps them to learn how to spell, read, and write. Block printing, cursive, and typing each elicit distinctive neurological patterns. Cursive writing causes the brain to integrate visual and tactile information, with fine motor dexterity. Additionally, while normal printing and typing do elicit these patterns, they do not stimulate the synchronicity between both sides of the brain, while cursive can. As students with dyslexia oftentimes struggle with writing in print, numerous studies have shown that cursive may come more naturally to these students and can also improve their learning outcomes.

AB 435 requires the state superintendent to incorporate cursive writing into the model academic standards for English language arts. The bill requires all school boards, independent charter schools, and private schools in the parental choice program to include cursive writing in their elementary school curriculum with the objective that students can write legibly in cursive by the end of fifth grade.

When Common Core standards were introduced in 2010, cursive writing was not required in the standards, but since then, at least 21 states have adopted some form of requirement that cursive be included in instruction. We hope Wisconsin can be added to that list soon. Thank you for your consideration of AB 435, and I am happy to answer any questions.



Assembly Committee on State Affairs

September 15, 2021

Department of Public Instruction

Statement of Information on Assembly Bill 435

Thank you Chairman Swearingen and members of the committee for the opportunity to provide information regarding Assembly Bill 435 (AB 435). The bill requires the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to incorporate cursive writing into the model academic standards for English language arts. This bill also requires a school board, independent charter school, and private school participating in a parental choice program to include cursive writing in its curriculum for the elementary grades. The bill further requires that each elementary school curriculum include the objective that pupils be able to write legibly in cursive by the end of fifth grade.

Background

The State Superintendent adopts state standards for English language arts. Local school districts determine whether they will adopt state standards, what curriculum they will use, and if additional assessments, beyond state assessments, will be used.

The Academic Standards Review Council is the group that advises the State Superintendent on the adoption of standards. It is appointed by the State Superintendent. Legislative members, however, are requested from the leaders of the majority and minority parties in both the State Senate and the Assembly. Current legislative members include Senator Alberta Darling, Senator Chris Larson, Representative Thiesfeldt, and Representative Dave Considine.

The DPI has a comprehensive process for reviewing and revising academic standards. The process begins with a notice of intent to review an academic area with an associated public comment period. The State Superintendent's Academic Standards Review Council then examines those comments and recommends to the State Superintendent whether to revise or develop standards in that academic area. Based on that recommendation the State Superintendent determines whether or not to pursue a revision or development process.

Following this, a state writing committee is formed to work on writing specific standards for all grade levels. That draft is then made available for public review and comment. That public comment is provided to the State Superintendent's Academic Standards Review Council to determine if further revisions need to be made to the proposed standards and then makes a recommendation to the State Superintendent. The State Superintendent then determines adoption of the standards. *Wisconsin's Standards for English Language Arts* were reviewed, and

revised in 2020 based on public and legislative input and drafted by a team of more than 50 Wisconsin educators. Those revisions included the addition of cursive writing.

In late spring of 2020, the state superintendent of public instruction approved and adopted those revisions which included the addition of cursive writing into *Wisconsin's Standards for English Language Arts* for kindergarten through grade 6.

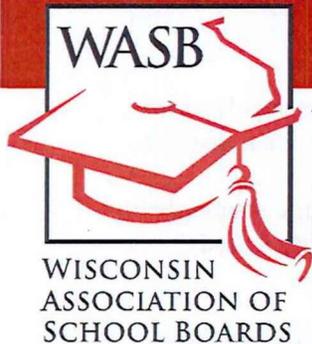
There are not currently any legislative requirements (beyond the sequential curriculum plan) related to specifics of English language arts curriculum. Specifically, there are no Wisconsin statutory requirements regarding the *Wisconsin Standards for English Language Arts*. Although the State Superintendent adopts standards for English language arts, all decisions about standards, curriculum, and assessment are made at the local level.

Analysis

Teaching cursive writing provides learners with another way, in addition to print, keyboarding, or drawing, which are all mentioned in Wisconsin's Standards for English Language Arts, to capture and communicate thinking.

Given that local school boards currently determine curriculum, AB 435 would overwrite that authority in this area by placing a curricular requirement on schools and districts by requiring cursive to be part of each district's sequential curriculum plan. This bill introduces the first statutory requirement regarding inclusion of a specific skill or knowledge into Wisconsin Standards for English Language Arts.

As written, the bill applies to all students. The fine motor skills required for cursive writing may be challenging for some students, including students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), who may need extra supports. Authors of the bill may wish to address this issue for students who may have disabilities which prevent them from obtaining proficiency in this skill.



"Leadership in Public School Governance"

JOHN H. ASHLEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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TO: Members, Assembly Committee on State Affairs
FROM: Dan Rossmiller, WASB Government Relations Director
DATE: September 15, 2021
RE: OPPOSITION to ASSEMBLY BILL 435, incorporating cursive writing into the state model English language arts standards and requiring cursive writing in elementary grades.

The Wisconsin Association of School Boards (WASB) is a voluntary membership association representing all 421 of Wisconsin's locally elected public school boards.

During each legislative session numerous bills are introduced to impose curricular mandates on schools. The WASB generally opposes those bills when they either impose unfunded mandates on local school districts or attempt to micromanage decisions best left to local board discretion. In general, the WASB supports local school board control of curricular decisions.

Assembly Bill 435 has two parts. The first part of the bill requires the state superintendent of public instruction to incorporate cursive writing into the model academic standards for English language arts.

The first part of the bill has likely already been accomplished. State model academic standards were modified in May 2020 to incorporate cursive writing into state English language arts (ELA) standards, *including an expectation that students should be able to proficiently produce writing through printing and cursive in fifth grade.*

The second part of the bill would require each school board to include cursive writing in its language arts curriculum for the elementary grades, and specifically include the academic objective that pupils be able to write legibly in cursive by the end of grade 5.

The bill thus imposes a curricular mandate on all school boards in the state except those in districts that don't operate elementary grades. This mandate is unusual in its specificity and in that it sets a goal by a specific grade level. It is this second part of the bill that triggers our objections.

Effectively, the bill would require *all* school districts to provide instruction in cursive writing for their elementary students, including those districts that may have chosen not to provide such instruction for whatever reason. This language effectively enshrines cursive writing in the curriculum of every Wisconsin public elementary school.

The question of how much instruction in cursive writing is enough and how much students should receive strikes us as one that is appropriately suited to local board decision making. We question the wisdom of, and raise objections to, the state Legislature mandating this requirement on all schools and students against the wishes of those school boards who have not adopted this requirement.

Wisconsin's model academic standards specify what students should know and be able to do in the classroom. They serve as goals for teaching and learning. Adopting these model standards is voluntary for local districts.

In Wisconsin, all state standards serve as a model. Locally elected school boards adopt academic standards in each subject area to best serve their local communities. Districts may, and often do, use the state's model academic standards as guides for developing local grade-by-grade level curriculum.

Implementing this bill will no doubt require some school districts to upgrade school and district curriculums, and may result in changes in instructional methods and materials, professional development for elementary teachers, and perhaps even local assessments. These changes will come at some cost to districts.

In a world that is increasingly moving away from paper communications toward digital and electronic communications, we question whether spending a significant portion of instructional time in third or fourth grade or fifth grade on cursive writing is the proper choice. Educators know that achieving mastery of cursive writing can take up an enormous amount of instructional time during a period when children's brains are developing rapidly.

Given that many legislators have questioned a lack of progress as a state toward improving student academic achievement and narrowing achievement gaps, this bill raises a serious question about whether schools should be spending time on other things rather than having students learn and practice cursive writing and what those things are. If nothing else, this bill should force you to ask the question: what should schools emphasize in 2021 and beyond?

For the above reasons, the WASB opposes Assembly Bill 435.



School Administrators Alliance

Representing the Interests of Wisconsin School Children

TO: Assembly Committee on State Affairs
FROM: John Forester, Executive Director
DATE: September 15, 2021
RE: Opposition to Assembly Bill 435

Chairman Swearingen and members of the Assembly Committee on State Affairs, thank you very much for the opportunity to submit testimony on this important legislation. My name is John Forester. I'm the Executive Director of the Wisconsin School Administrators Alliance (SAA). In that capacity, I represent the combined memberships of five professional associations of public school administrators: the Association of Wisconsin School Administrators (AWSA), the Wisconsin Association of School Business Officials (WASBO), the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators (WASDA), the Wisconsin Association of School Personnel Administrators (WASPA), and the Wisconsin Council for Administrators of Special Services (WCASS). The SAA also represents the 10,000 members of the Wisconsin Retired Educators Association (WREA).

The SAA, and WREA, opposes Assembly Bill 435, relating to incorporating cursive writing into the state model English language arts standards and requiring cursive writing in the elementary grades.

AB 435 requires the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to incorporate cursive writing into the model academic standards for English language arts. It also requires a school board, independent charter school, and private school participating in a parental choice program to include cursive writing in its curriculum for the elementary grades. Finally, the bill requires that each elementary school curriculum must include the objective that pupils be able to write legibly in cursive by the end of fifth grade.

In anticipation of this hearing, I sought input on AB 435 from a cross-section of SAA members, primarily school superintendents and directors of curriculum and instruction. I'd like to share with you some of their thoughts on the bill.

First of all, we believe there is value in teaching cursive. Many of the SAA members I consulted with shared that their district continues to provide instruction in cursive. Some provide only minimal instruction in cursive. A few shared that they do not require instruction in cursive. But the members I consulted shared that, over the past several years, their districts have had discussions about prioritizing district instructional needs that considered the future of cursive instruction in the district.

Part of the issue comes down to limited available instructional time. It's also critically important to consider what's most relevant for students in this digital age. Communication and writing take place more commonly now with computers and other electronic devices. Districts also needed to strengthen student proficiency in keyboarding to take online state assessments. In many districts parent and community expectations have also moved districts to prioritize technology instruction at the elementary level.

Our educators in Wisconsin face some enormous challenges in meeting the objectives we have for K-12 education. In a nutshell, I would characterize these primary objectives as follows:

- To improve student achievement for all students.
- To close those stubborn achievement gaps.
- To make sure all Wisconsin students graduate college and career ready.

We currently have lots of statutory requirements directed at schools, some that help schools to achieve these objectives and some that don't. Every legislative session we see several bills that would create new instructional mandates. And we all know that there are scores of interest groups that believe that schools should be providing children with instruction in many new subject areas in order to meet laudable public policy goals. In short, these proposals, if adopted, would lead school districts to take time, money and focus away from their primary objectives.

In conclusion, I would just pose three questions for the committee as you consider this legislation.

- First, how will this bill help school districts to meet our education policy objectives?
- Given the very big challenges that we face and the important objectives we are working hard to achieve, "How would you like us to use the precious minutes we have in the limited number of instructional days in each school year?"
- Finally, "Who should be charged with the responsibility of determining the curricular priorities that best meet the unique needs of students in each of the 421 school districts – state policymakers or local teachers, administrators and school boards?"

Thank you for your consideration of our views. If you should have any questions regarding our position on AB 435, please call me at 608-242-1370.