



"Leadership in Public School Governance"

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TO: Members, Senate Committee on Education
FROM: Dan Rossmiller, Government Relations Director
DATE: October 19, 2011
RE: September 2011 Special Session Assembly Bill 18, relating to authorizing a school board to grant a vocational high school diploma

The Wisconsin Association of School Boards (WASB) *opposes* September 2011 Special Session Assembly Bill 18 in its current form.

At the outset, the WASB recognizes that going to college is not the goal of every student. The WASB further recognizes that many high school students who are not on an academic track leading to college too often find themselves ill-equipped for the job market once they leave high school.

Given the higher drop-out rate among high school males, the lack of qualified applicants for many manufacturing jobs, and the need to rebuild technical education and youth apprenticeship programs in many Wisconsin school districts, legitimate concerns have been raised that the four-year-college focus often seen in present system is not adequately producing career-ready young adults.

The WASB also recognizes that the current weak economy and high unemployment levels have heightened concerns about whether non-college bound students are being well-prepared to enter the workforce and to meet the demands of the jobs that are available.

However, we believe an approach encouraging Wisconsin's public schools, employers and technical colleges to work together to improve educational opportunities for non-college-bound students is preferable to the simplistic proposal before you. While the WASB understands the concerns of this bill's authors, we don't believe this idea has been fully vetted to truly understand its implications for students, schools and employers.

Special Session Assembly Bill 18 would authorize a school board to grant a vocational high school diploma to a pupil who has not earned the statutorily required 13 academic credits needed for a regular diploma but has earned a sufficient number of credits in vocational subjects, as determined by the school board, if the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) has approved the school district's vocational curriculum.

Since this proposal was first introduced as a budget amendment and in meetings involving the bill's authors, the WASB has expressed concerns that this proposal needs to be better defined or it could water down Wisconsin's already fairly minimal graduation standards or create a two-tiered educational system that serves neither cohort of students--whether college bound or career bound--well.

Without some minimum standards to provide issuing school boards some guidance, a vocational diploma might mean something very different from one district to the next.

School boards wishing to offer vocational diplomas will want some assurance that vocational diplomas will be recognized by colleges, universities and tech colleges, employers and the military. If these diplomas are not duly recognized, students who receive them may find their future options foreclosed and may have to pay a price to earn credits that will allow them to pursue vocations that require some additional schooling beyond high school.

In a world where career-sustaining jobs will increasingly require at least some schooling beyond high school, the proposal embodied in Special Session Assembly Bill 18 raises some concerns that it could result in preparing students for “dead-end” jobs or jobs with low advancement potential.

We are willing to work with the bill’s authors and committee members to discuss changes that would help to ensure that students are prepared not just for entry-level jobs but for careers.

We note that currently, there are many opportunities and choices available for public high school students regarding their educational programs. Students not only have the opportunity to take regular courses within the district’s curriculum, but also may:

- Participate in individualized educational programs;
- Participate in program or curricular modifications or alternative educational programs;
- Participate in work experience, apprenticeship or school-to-work programs;
- Take courses in other public high schools under the part-time open-enrollment program;
- Take online courses through distance learning networks;
- Take summer school courses;
- Take courses at technical colleges and institutions of higher education (e.g., Youth Options Program courses or correspondence courses); or
- Participate in independent study or other educational programs or activities approved by the school board.

There already are frameworks available to provide options for non-college bound students. We want to make sure that vocational programs that might be established under this bill are cohesive, coherent and comprehensive.

Wisconsin has developed comprehensive school-to-work models in the past and it can again. In the 1990’s former Governor Tommy Thompson played an instrumental role in developing a “School-to-Work” initiative. One of the components was a youth apprenticeship program, a statewide program that integrated school-based learning with work-based learning. Wisconsin was once a nationally leader in this area, but youth apprenticeship no longer receives the attention it deserves.

Here is how that model works: The youth apprenticeship curriculum taught through class work and on-the-job training is industry-approved, competency based and uniform statewide. Students who successfully complete a youth apprenticeship earn a “certificate of proficiency” which they may then present to employers within an industry to certify that they have completed established requirements and may earn credit from a technical college.

The goal of the youth apprenticeship program is to help students develop the skills and knowledge they need to work in a specific industry. Another goal is to expand career opportunities available to students after they graduate.

Students who complete a youth apprenticeship have the background they need to begin entry-level employment. Their background also makes it possible for them to enter a technical school with advanced standing or they may seek admission to a university. Students also learn skills needed to apply to for consideration for a registered apprenticeship program. In short, students who complete a youth apprenticeship program are far more likely to have a range of family-sustaining career and vocational options available to them than students who are merely awarded a vocational degree under this bill.

Programs like youth apprenticeship help students ease the transition from school to work, post-secondary education or on-the-job training by exposing students to more extensive career development through on-the-job training in high skill occupations. Programs like youth apprenticeship improve students' ability to apply their academic skills to situations in a work environment. They help students develop the critical-thinking, problem solving, decision making, technical and communications skills they will need to function in future employment and they create a school program that is interesting, challenging and which incorporates industry standards.

Equally importantly, programs like youth apprenticeship provide instruction and training in a broad array of occupations with an industry not just one job. A school district may operate a youth apprenticeship program by itself or in a consortium, which can help to conserve taxpayer dollars while providing opportunities for students that an individual district strapped by the constraints of revenue limits may not be able to provide.

In short, there are models that provide a comprehensive approach to preparing students for careers and not just for jobs and that incorporate vocational counseling (including job shadowing and mentoring) and link academic and occupational standards to workplace skills and experiences.

We believe these more comprehensive models are preferable to the approach taken by this bill and should be explored. We are willing to participate in that exploration and work with the authors and members of this committee. We also believe the role of technical colleges should be explored. Partnerships, dual enrollment, Youth Options programs with technical colleges--might be better alternatives.

In short, the WASB believes the current Special Session Assembly Bill 18 needs more work and we do not support it as introduced.

APPENDIX

Generally, the state laws governing high school graduation are found in section 118.33 of the Wisconsin Statutes and PI 18 of the Wisconsin Administrative Code. The following is a description of some of the state law provisions governing high school graduation.

State Law Requirements

State law requires that each school board operating high school grades develop a written policy specifying criteria for granting a high school diploma. The written policies must be reported to the State Superintendent of Public Instruction at the same time they are adopted and whenever they are revised.

The criteria for granting a diploma must:

- Comply with the state's credit requirements for graduation;
- Include the student's academic performance; and
- Include the recommendations of teachers.

The state's credit requirements for graduation specify that except as otherwise provided, a school board may not grant a high school diploma to any student unless the student has:

- In the high school grades, earned at least 4 credits of English including writing composition, 3 credits of social studies including state and local government, 2 credits of mathematics, 2 credits of science and 1.5 credits of physical education; and
- In grades 7 to 12, earned at least 0.5 credit of health education.

School boards are encouraged by law to require an additional 8.5 credits selected from any combination of vocational education, foreign languages, fine arts and other courses.

Under state law:

- School boards may require a student to participate in community service in order to receive a high school diploma.
- School boards may grant a high school diploma to a student who has not satisfied the state's credit requirements if all of the following apply:

(1) The student was enrolled in an alternative education program. For purposes of this law, "alternative education program" means an instructional program, approved by the board, that utilizes successful alternative or adaptive school structures and teaching techniques and that is incorporated into existing, traditional classrooms or regularly scheduled curricular programs or that is offered in place of regularly scheduled curricular programs. "Alternative education program" does not include a private school or a home-based private education program.

- (2) The board determines that the student has demonstrated a level of proficiency in the subjects listed in the state's credit requirements equivalent to that which he or she would have attained if he or she had satisfied the state's credit requirements for graduation.

Accommodating Students with Special Needs

Boards may provide programs to accommodate students with exceptional educational interests, needs or requirements. Successful completion of such an education program may result in issuance of a diploma. For purposes of this law, students with exceptional educational interests, needs or requirements includes children with disabilities as defined under section 115.76(3) of the state statutes, gifted and talented children as determined by the board, limited-English speaking students as defined by section 115.955 of the state statutes, transfer students, students participating in a program or curricular modification under section 118.15(1) (d) of the state statutes, and other students with unusual circumstances as established by board policy.

Education programs to accommodate students with exceptional educational interests, needs or requirements, other than programs under Subchapter V of Chapter 115 of the state's statutes (the state's special education law) must be approved by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. These programs must:

- (1) state the specific nature of the exceptional educational interests, needs or requirements;
- (2) state how the proposed program will respond to the exceptional educational interests, needs or requirements; and
- (3) State how the education program will address each of the requirements in section 118.33 of the state statutes and PI 18 of the Wisconsin Administrative Code.