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STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 83RD ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony on Assembly Bill 235

Assembly Committee on Workforce Development, Labor, and Integrated Employment
May 28, 2025

Thank you, Chairman Melotik and committee members, for hearing my testimony on Assembly Bill 235.

Wisconsin is facing a real workforce problem. Businesses are ready to grow, but they can't find the workers they need to get the job done. At the same time, many job seekers don't have the skills employers are looking for, and that's holding our economy back.

One major barrier that hasn't been addressed is adult literacy levels. Right now, about one in seven adults in Wisconsin can't read above a third-grade level. This is beyond concerning.

Without basic reading and writing skills, it's hard for anyone to get a job or stay in one. Nearly every job requires a minimum level of reading comprehension. It also affects a person's ability to navigate everyday life – from managing finances to understanding medical information. Adult literacy is essential for strengthening our workforce.

Assembly Bill 235 creates an adult literacy grant program through DWD. This program will support nonprofit organizations with experience providing literacy services. The funding can be used for workforce readiness training, GED prep, digital literacy, and other basic skills tied directly to getting and keeping a job.

Helping people has always been my passion, and that's why I'm here today. I'm truly committed to supporting individuals on their path to success. I want to thank Senator Jagler and Representative Melotik for their leadership on this issue, and I'm hopeful we can count on bipartisan support.

At the end of the day, this is a smart, reasonable approach to solving a problem that's hurting our economy. It helps more Wisconsinites become self-sufficient, support their families, and contribute to the long-term success of our state.

I respectfully ask for your support, and I'm happy to answer any questions.



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Thank you, Chairman Melotik and members of the committee, for hearing our testimony today.

There has been a strong focus in the last several years on how we teach reading in our schools. Knowing how to read is the bedrock for all other learning in our society. While we hope the effort of the literacy bill from last session begins to bear some fruit, there are too many adults who are unable to read.

Not being able to read as an adult can severely limit employment opportunities and earning potential. Additionally, workers are needed now more than ever, we need every able-bodied adult to step up and fill jobs around the state. This bill would create a grant program at the Department of Workforce Development to address these needs and get these individuals ready to work.

The problem is far worse than many realize. It is estimated by some that one-in-seven adults in the state can't read at a third-grade level. This is a huge issue but this program may be able to get the ball rolling in the right direction.

The bill would create a framework for DWD to provide a grant to a non-profit organization that serves at least half of the counties in the state and may use the grant to teach workforce readiness skills, basic literacy, digital literacy and provide GED and HSED preparation and testing.

Thank you for considering this bill and we welcome any questions you may have.



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**Testimony of Wisconsin Literacy, Inc.
In Support of Assembly Bill 235
Presented to the Assembly Committee on Workforce Development
Jake Gorges, Executive Director, Wisconsin Literacy, Inc.
May 2025**

Chairman Melotik, members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today in support of Assembly Bill 235, which would establish a Workforce Literacy Grant Program. My name is Jake Gorges, and I serve as Executive Director of Wisconsin Literacy, Inc. I am joined today by Ashleigh Henrichs, our Associate Director, Robyn Hallet, Northeast Regional Literacy Consultant, and Holly McCoy, Executive Director of Literacy Services of Wisconsin.

Wisconsin Literacy is a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing adult literacy. We represent a coalition of over 80 community-based member agencies, collectively serving 68 counties throughout Wisconsin. Together, we provide literacy support to more than 15,000 individuals each year.

We appear today in strong support of Assembly Bill 235. If enacted, Wisconsin Literacy intends to apply for this grant to expand workforce literacy services statewide.

The need for this program is urgent and well documented. According to the most recent federal data, approximately 15% of Wisconsin adults—about one in seven—read at or below a basic level. In some rural counties and in Milwaukee, this rate approaches one in four adults. In total, more than 1.3 million adults across Wisconsin could benefit from improved literacy skills. In addition, approximately 354,000 Wisconsin adults age 25 and older—6.3%—do not have a high school diploma or equivalent (American Community Survey, 2023).

At the same time, Wisconsin is experiencing a significant workforce shortage. One critical and often overlooked barrier to employment is low literacy. Many available jobs, especially in today's digital economy, require foundational reading, writing, and digital skills. Without these, otherwise capable individuals are excluded from meaningful employment opportunities.

The case for investment in adult education is clear:

- Adults without a high school diploma experience higher unemployment rate and earn significantly less over their lifetimes.
- Participation in adult education doubles the likelihood of earning a GED or HSED, which increases annual income by approximately \$10,000.
- Each GED or HSED graduate strengthens the workforce, reduces public assistance expenditures, and increases state tax revenue.



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By investing in workforce literacy through this grant program, Wisconsin can remove one of the most fundamental barriers to employment. This investment will benefit workers, employers, the state economy, and communities across Wisconsin. If enacted, Assembly Bill 235 will enable thousands of Wisconsin adults to gain the skills they need to participate fully in the workforce and achieve greater economic security.

Thank you again for your consideration of Assembly Bill 235 and for your commitment to addressing workforce challenges in Wisconsin. I am happy to answer any questions or provide further information on the impact of workforce literacy and GED/HSED programs in our state.

Respectfully submitted,

Jake Gorges
Executive Director, Wisconsin Literacy, Inc.