



**WISCONSIN FAMILY ACTION**  
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**TESTIMONY ON ASSEMBLY BILL 563**  
**ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION**  
**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2021**  
**JULAIN K. APPLING, PRESIDENT**

Thank you, Chairman Thiesfeldt and Education Committee members, for the opportunity to submit by email this testimony on Assembly Bill 563. I regret that I am not able to attend the hearing today because of a previously scheduled out-of-state obligation.

Wisconsin Family Action provisionally supports this bill. To be honest, because of the extremely short notice, we have not had an opportunity to vet it as fully as we would normally do. After the hearing we will devote time to a more complete analysis and vetting as the bill works its way through the legislative process.

That said, we generally like and support the provisions in the bill, while at the same time, we find the reason for the bill lamentable. Schools should not have to be “ordered,” as it were, by state government to teach civics and to teach the components of it correctly and accurately. Unfortunately, however, surveys continue to reveal that we have a serious civics illiteracy problem on our hands.

The Annenberg Public Policy Center in its annual Constitution Day Civics Survey (results released this past Tuesday, September 14, 2021) found that while the number of Americans who can name all 3 branches of the government is getting better, we still have a lot of work to do.<sup>1</sup> This year 56% of US adults correctly named all 3 branches of government, the highest since the survey began in 2006. But that does mean that 44% of Americans are unable to identify correctly all 3 branches. When we drill down into some of the other data, we find that just over 1 in 3 people knows how long the term of office is for a US Senator and a member of the US House of Representatives. Regarding the First Amendment, while nearly 75% named freedom of speech, only 56% mentioned freedom of religion, with just 50% identifying freedom of the press, only 30% the right of people to peaceably assemble and 20% the right to petition the government. The Annenberg Survey did show that having a high school civics course correlated with more correct responses.

Even the best of these numbers shows considerable room for improvement and based on the Annenberg Survey, requiring a high school course in civics with a half a credit earned in order to graduate should help. We appreciate the intent of the authors to ensure that schools are addressing the important topic of civics.

One concern we noted in our admittedly hurried analysis is that while there is much specificity in the bill about what must be contained in the model curriculum and instructional materials, we know that without some form of “watchdog,” for lack of a better term, some schools will implement pretty much whatever they want and will unfortunately comply in both spirit and letter only if someone forces them to do so.

Again, the question is can we trust administrators, both at the district and building levels, as well as the individual teachers, to teach civics in a way that doesn’t revise our history, denigrate our founders and the form of government they gave us, interpret the Constitution using “living document” principles, and prepare our youth to be activists with the wrong motives and with a destructive and dastardly agenda? We would like to think so; but recent events involving school districts in our state raise serious questions about this very issue.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/2021-annenberg-constitution-day-civics-survey/> (accessed 9/14/2021)

This bill actually heightens the need for full transparency that Assembly Bill 488 addresses. Parents will have a difficult time knowing what is truly being taught and what instructional materials are being used if they can quickly and easily find the information on the school's website and better yet if they actually visit the classroom. In a very real sense, parents must be the "watchdogs" if this proposal is going to accomplish what it sets out to do. To be appropriate "watchdogs," parents must have easy access to curricula and instructional materials.

We would assume that if this bill becomes law, the appropriate exam or exams in the Wisconsin Student Assessment System will be adjusted to include questions reflecting the model civics instruction as detailed in the bill. This would help ensure that schools actually plan and implement civics education as provided in this proposal.

One question we have is about the current law that requires that in order to graduate, a student in a public school or a private school participating in a Parental Choice Program must pass with a score of 65% or better a civics test that is identical to the 100-question test administered to immigrants seeking US citizenship. Would this law be repealed? Would the proposed bill be added to the test requirement? If it is added to the graduation requirements, would we want to consider increasing the passing score? It might be that the bill should be amended to address how these two related requirements mesh.

We do note that the civics test requirement was not mandated for private schools (those not participating in a Parental Choice Program) whereas the civics instructional requirement would be required for private schools as well as public schools. It does not appear that the bill is mandating that these private schools make a half-cred of civics instruction a requirement for high-school graduation. If there is a different intent, please clarify that. I should note that we have always recommended that the private schools we work with make the civics test a requirement for graduation even though the state does not require it for those schools. We think it's prudent for the schools to do so.

In summary, our initial vetting of this bill indicates we support it, but we have some reservations about its actual implementation and about how it would work with the current civics test requirement.

Given the short notice on the bill, we were tempted to submit this testimony "for information only," but decided instead to give, as I noted earlier, our provisional support for this bill. As the bill is more thoroughly considered, we hope appropriate consideration will be given to the concerns we've raised.

I am happy to answer questions related to this testimony. Thank you, again, for allowing us to submit this electronically. We will have a staff member attend the hearing and register Wisconsin Family Action as being in favor of (not speaking) Assembly Bill 563.