

Chair Neron, Vice-Chairs, Honorable Members, I'm Michael Dembrow, formerly the Senator for SD 23 for many years.

I've been asked to speak to provide some perspective on our efforts to fund summer learning via HB 2007 given my work as Senate Education Chair over the last few years. Let me say upfront that I registered as neutral on the bill because I believe that it's not yet ready to fully support, but with the amendments that you've heard about and a little more in addition, I see this as a bill potentially well worth supporting when it comes to a vote.

As you know, thanks to the use of temporary federal funds, we were able to run what were essentially big pilot programs in 2021 and 2022 and then a modest investment last summer.

We learned a lot from those experiences. A lot of kids all over the state had some really good experiences. Many innovative and promising partnerships were created between districts and community organizations. But these experiments were plagued by two big problems: the funding for them wasn't secured until just before they were set to begin. For a program to be successful, the planning really needs to begin with the beginning of the school year. The program needs to be designed, the staff hired, the participating students identified and assessed, and none of that can happen when the funds aren't finalized until May or June and when every year they need to start from scratch and reinvent the wheel.

So what I really appreciate about the work being done by the Ways and Means Education Subcommittee Co-Chairs, along with the Governor, is that they are trying hard to find a way to stabilize these programs and get this summer's work going as soon as possible. Although of course I'd like to see more dollars going in, I think we all recognize the uncertainties of the current budget landscape, and given that, I think we can all appreciate the effort to find dollars and to focus the way that they're spent. With this relatively modest level of funding, focusing and prioritizing is essential.

Having said that, I'm not a fan of changing the statute to make it only about literacy. I do agree that literacy is a real priority and is a logical focus right now. But I do believe that the statute needs to be kept broader than that. The changes that are being proposed in the -1 amendments help, and I appreciate the sponsors' work on improving the draft. I don't think they're quite there in the -1s but hopefully they will be in the end.

I believe that there is or will be a proposal to have ODE identify a focus or focuses each biennium, particularly when we're constrained by the level of funding. That makes good sense.

I'd make two further recommendations there, though. The statute should identify a date by which that focus is identified, and it should be early, as in the September prior to the next summer program. I would also recommend that the State Board of Education take the lead in identifying the focus. The identification of the focus or focuses will be consequential and should be done as the culmination of a thorough, deliberative public process followed by Board action.

I'm not sure if the introduced or amended versions of HB 2007 eliminate after-school programs from the statute created in HB 4082. If they do, that would be a mistake. There is extensive research on the value of after-school programs in supplementing school curricula. They should not be ruled out entirely, even if there may not be enough funding for them to make it onto the priority list at any given time.

Again, Chair Neron and Committee, I appreciate your attention to this issue. I would be happy to answer any questions or provide any additional information and history, either during this hearing or at any other time.

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