Chairperson Felzkowski and members of the Committee, thank you very much for the opportunity to share some thoughts 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 more than 4,600 school administrators throughout Wisconsin including school superintendents, business officials, principals and associate principals, special education directors and personnel directors.

The SAA supports Senate Bill 114, relating to waiving the Foundations of Reading test licensure requirement during a national health emergency declared in response to COVID-19. If adopted, this legislation would waive the requirement that applicants for certain initial teaching licenses pass the Foundations of Reading test (FORT) on applications for initial teaching licenses received by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) beginning on the date the bill becomes law and ending at the official termination of the national health emergency or December 31, 2021, whichever is earlier.

In anticipation of this hearing, I sought input on SB 114 from a cross-section of SAA members, primarily superintendents, personnel directors and special education directors. These members shared the following comments in support of the bill:

- The FORT is a barrier to the profession, limiting the available teaching force at a time we know there is a critical shortage in many areas and, in particular, negatively impacts our need to increase district staffing to address COVID-related learning disruption.

- An inability to fully staff district instructional programs may lead to increases in class size, program reduction or inconsistent substitute teaching assignments – all of which negatively impacts student learning at this critical time when we need to focus our resources and energy on student recovery.

- Many believe the FORT to be a culturally biased barrier to the profession for prospective teachers of color. Research shows that racial/cultural diversity in our teaching force
positively impacts student achievement, especially for many of our students most affected by the pandemic.

- There appears to be no evidence that passage of the FORT improves teaching performance or leads to enhanced student achievement.

- We understand that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, several testing sites have either been closed or limited in operation which has caused teaching candidates additional difficulty in taking and passing this gateway assessment.

In addition to the comments above, several SAA members also shared anecdotes regarding the challenges that quality teachers have faced in passing the FORT, including:

- “I have a candidate for my elementary special education opening that has been trying for three years to pass the FORT. She has masters degrees in vocational rehabilitation and adult learning, but cannot get her special ed teaching license because of the FORT.”

- “One of my best special education teachers, who works with some of our students with significant behaviors, is contemplating leaving the profession at the end of this year because she has taken the FORT three times and hasn’t been able to pass it.”

- “We are at risk every year of losing a solid special education teacher due to issues around taking and passing the FORT. We have such a shortage of special education teachers.”

- “I have met some talented educators that had tremendous difficulty passing the FORT. I shudder to think how many more were unable to use their talents to teach because they were unable to pass this arbitrary and biased exam. Aspiring teachers have wasted precious time and money attempting to jump through this hoop all at the expense of our students who desperately need the presence of caring educators.”

Finally, I would like to thank the authors for bringing this important legislation forward. I would also like to suggest a small modification to change the end date of the bill to January 31, 2022. This date would cover the fall and winter instructional terms and provide clarity for license applicants on whether they need to take (and prepare for) the exam or not. Without this change, it appears that the national emergency could terminate before a term ends, leaving the candidate unprepared for the exam.

Thank you for your consideration of our views. If you should have any questions regarding our thoughts on SB 114, please call me at 608-242-1370.