



Wisconsin Legislature: *How a Bill Becomes a Law*

A School Nutrition Association of WI Legislative Tutorial

Similar to Congress and every other state legislature across the nation, the Wisconsin legislative process was designed with the goal to provide substantial public scrutiny and thorough consideration of new legislation. As a result, the process is set-up for bills to fail – rather than to pass and be signed into law.

For example, during the 2007-08 legislative session, 1,574 bills were introduced, but only 242 (or 15.4%) were passed and signed into law. During the 2009-10 session – even with one party control in the Legislature – only 24.1% of bills were passed and signed into law (406 out of 1,686). But with a strong grassroots program and an active professional lobbying team, SNA-WI can influence the legislative process.

Listed below is a brief description of how a *Bill Becomes a Law in Wisconsin* – a process riddled with obstacles and challenges at every turn, but one that can be successfully navigated with the proper tools:

General Overview:

The Wisconsin Legislature consists of two "houses" (the Assembly and Senate), which must pass the same version of a bill before it can be sent to the governor for his signature. Bills may be introduced in one house, and then in the other, or they may be introduced simultaneously.

Legislative Process (using an Assembly Bill as an example)

- 1. Bill Introduction:** After a legislator decides to author a bill, the legislation is drafted, other legislators are asked to “sign-on” to the bill as co-sponsors and the bill is introduced and assigned a bill number (e.g., Assembly Bill 1; etc.)
- 2. Committee Referral:** Once a bill is introduced, it’s referred to a relevant Assembly committee by the Assembly Speaker. For example, education-related bills are typically referred to the Assembly Education Committee.
- 3. Committee Public Hearing:** After a bill is referred to committee, the committee chairperson can schedule a public hearing on the bill. However, committee chairs are not required to hold a hearing on a bill. Therefore, the chair has the authority to “kill” a bill in committee.
- 4. Committee Vote:** If a bill receives a public hearing, the committee chair can schedule a committee vote on the bill. However, committee passage of a bill is not automatic and is yet another obstacle in the legislative process. Also, committees can amend bills – which can alter the objective of any given legislation.
- 5. Rules Committee:** If a bill is voted out of committee, it’s sent to the Assembly Rules Committee. This Committee, made up of legislative leadership, decides which bills are scheduled for a full Assembly vote.
- 6. Assembly Floor Vote:** If a bill is scheduled for a full vote before the Assembly, it must pass by a simple majority or it is considered “dead” for the remainder of the legislative session. If the bill passes, it is sent to the Senate, where it must go through the same process.
- 7. Sent to the Governor:** If a bill is passed – in identical form – by both houses of the Legislature, it’s then sent to the Governor for his approval or veto.

