

High Standards, Accountability, & Performance Transparency

THE BRIEF, IN BRIEF

Lawmakers must act to restore high standards and expectations for all Wisconsin students, rebuild public trust in Wisconsin's School & District Report Cards, and ensure that families and stakeholders have the information they need to hold schools accountable for preparing students for a productive career and a thriving life.

- 1 CLOSE THE HONESTY GAP & RESTORE HIGH STANDARDS:** Realign WI state standards and Forward/ACT Exam cut scores with rigorous, national benchmarks to ensure students graduate ready to enter the workforce, go to college, and thrive in life.
- 2 FOCUS ON PROFICIENCY/GET BACK TO BASICS:** Stop grading Wisconsin schools on a curve based on poverty, and hold all schools to uniform, high expectations for academic proficiency and student outcomes.
- 3 PROVIDE FAMILIES WITH TIMELY & TRANSPARENT INFORMATION:** Simplify Wisconsin's School & District Report Cards, and ensure all results are released by August 15th each year, so that parents & stakeholders no longer have to "get their hands dirty" to understand how students & schools are performing.

Wisconsin's students, families, and stakeholders want to know that schools are delivering on the promise of high-quality education for every student. But, Wisconsin's system of school and school district accountability is failing to provide the clear, actionable information we need — and recent and ongoing actions by

State Superintendent Jill Underly's Department of Public Instruction are making the problems worse.

As State Superintendent, Tony Evers worked with Republican leaders to raise Wisconsin's academic standards, aligning our state's definition of

Wisconsin’s work to close this “[honesty gap](#)” between our state’s expectations for students and NAEP earned national recognition — but decisions made by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jill Underly have undone this progress and brought [negative attention](#) back to Wisconsin.



We need as high of standards as possible. High standards are important for students in Milwaukee and in Superior. — Governor Tony Evers

WIDENING HONESTY & OPPORTUNITY GAPS

With little advance notice and no public input, the rigorous standards adopted on a bipartisan basis under Tony Evers have now been replaced by a new, lower bar for what Wisconsin’s students should know and be able to achieve. This lowered standard has reopened the honesty gap, creating a false impression for students, families, and the public that everything is fine. In reality, tens of thousands of students are exiting the K-12 education system inadequately prepared for a successful life and a career that can support themselves and their families.

DPI’s own data reports make the problem crystal clear: This year, more than 7,000 Wisconsin high school students taking the ACT received the ignominious performance rating of “Meets Expectations, Not College Ready.”

These changes were implemented in a process managed by DPI officials that required participants to sign non-

MEETING, BELOW COLLEGE READY

J	K	L	N	R
SCHOOL_NAME ▼	TEST_SUBJECT ▼	TEST_RESULT ▼	COLLEGE_READINESS ▼	STUDENT_COUNT ▼
[Statewide]	ELA	Developing	Below College Ready	14148
[Statewide]	ELA	Approaching	Below College Ready	18162
[Statewide]	ELA	Meeting	Below College Ready	3683
[Statewide]	ELA	Meeting	College Ready	17300
[Statewide]	ELA	Advanced	College Ready	6152
[Statewide]	ELA	No Test	No Test	5414

WiseDASH, WI Department of Public Instruction, ACT Statewide Certified Data File 2023-24

disclosure agreements. The changes were done in a way that disproportionately impacted students in historically under-educated groups — widening Wisconsin's already abysmal opportunity gaps, including our worst-in-the-nation disparities between Black and White students. And, the changes were implemented with little input or feedback even from most K12 school systems — leading to implementation challenges and reduced stakeholder confidence in the results.

Credible and accurate information about student outcomes is more critical than ever. Students are still recovering from COVID's educational disruptions, and the state is implementing a comprehensive overhaul of early literacy instruction aligned to the science of reading. Yet during this crucial period, Wisconsin has moved backward in providing transparent data about student achievement.



I would hope that no one, the most liberal person or the most conservative person, would want to dumb down our standards. —
Assembly Speaker
Robin Vos

GRADING ON A CURVE, DISTORTING THE PICTURE

Wisconsin's honesty gap goes beyond student proficiency; it also affects school performance. In Milwaukee, 80% of students are not meeting the state's lowered standards, yet 63% of those students are enrolled in schools that received a state Report Card rating of "Meets Expectations" or higher.

Statewide, just over half of students met the state's lowered standards in core academic subjects - but 84% of Wisconsin's publicly-funded schools and an even more astonishing 93% of the state's 431 school districts were rated as meeting or exceeding expectations (3 - 5 stars). Not a single district in the state received a 1 star rating.

In schools with a high number of low-income students, the calculation of state report card results can further distort student performance. This is due to the practice of grading schools on a curve, where student growth is weighted nine times more heavily than student proficiency. Here are a few examples to consider:

- A small private school in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program earned a four-star, Exceeds Expectations rating with 8(!) students meeting the lowered state standards.
- Meanwhile, a much larger & higher-performing public charter school earned only a three-star, Meets Expectations rating despite having more than 50% of its testing students performing at or above state expectations.

- As a district, Milwaukee Public Schools earned three-star, “Meets Expectations” ratings in each of the past two years, despite fewer than 1 in 5 MPS students — and fewer than 1 in 10 of MPS’ Black students — meeting the state’s expectations.

This approach is flawed — both in principle and in practice. All Wisconsin students — regardless of their identity, their family background, or their economic circumstances — should be expected to perform at high levels, and every Wisconsin school should be equally accountable for ensuring this happens.

In practice, families have lost faith in a system that yields wildly different outcomes for schools with the same student achievement outcomes. Students in different circumstances need different supports — but we should hold every school to the principle that Martin Luther King espoused, that it should be so good that we cannot tell who a child’s parents are (or how much money they make).

GETTING BACK TO BASICS: HONESTY, TRANSPARENCY, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

This session, Wisconsin lawmakers must act to restore high standards, hold schools accountable for delivering student outcomes, and give our state’s residents and families the honest, transparent, and credible information they need to make informed choices.

First, Wisconsin must take cross-partisan action to undo the harm done by Jill Underly’s actions to lower state expectations for student learning and reopen the honesty gap. As now-



I think there should have been some information and dialogue happening with all sorts of people before that decision was made. The mistake was there wasn’t enough conversation with stakeholders, parents ahead of time.
—Governor Tony Evers

Governor Tony Evers said in direct response to DPI’s changes, “ We should have as high of standards as possible.”

The Legislature should work with the Governor to pass legislation that:

- returns Wisconsin to rigorous, nationally-aligned standards tied to the proficiency benchmarks established by NAEP
- provides for transparent, robust public input and meaningful legislative oversight of any future changes to state standards or state assessment benchmarks, by requiring them to be reviewed through the administrative rule-making process
- Wisconsin lawmakers should look to Virginia’s work to elevate its expectations for students as a model

to follow. The state's [new School Performance & Support Framework](#) — the “Road to Readiness” — provides educators, families and stakeholders with accurate and actionable data, aligned to rigorous expectations for student learning. Virginia has gone even further, pairing these new, more honest standards with a proposed \$50M in targeted investments to support improvements at the state's lowest-rated schools.

Second, state legislators must take action to rebuild public confidence in Wisconsin's School & District Report Cards by grading all schools on a uniform, balanced scale that meaningfully considers both student proficiency & student growth. Right now, state law requires DPI to calculate Report Card scores on a curve — explicitly setting lower expectations for schools with higher numbers of low-income students and distorting comparisons between schools and districts.

While the initial intentions behind its implementation over a decade ago were positive, we now have years of data and models from other states that demonstrate the feasibility of creating a unified Report Card scale for all schools. Notably, Wisconsin's weighting of student growth over proficiency for low-income students, set at 9:1, is a significant outlier on a national scale—more than three times greater than that of the next closest state. In contrast, the median weighting across the country treats these two factors equally.

Finally, state officials must prioritize improvements to Wisconsin's student and school data portal, WiseDASH, and to the presentation of Wisconsin's School & District Report Cards. A recent 50-state review of state report cards conducted by the [Center for Reinventing Public Education](#) (CRPE) rated Wisconsin's WiseDASH portal a D.

Even more concerning is that the D rating represented an improvement from the initial F rating, as the reviewers were unable to locate the WiseDASH portal during their first assessment. If professional education researchers struggle to find essential information about Wisconsin's student and school performance metrics, how can families and members of the public be expected to access the data and engage with it effectively?



It's hard to compare year to year if one year you're doing something completely different ... I think it could have been handled better. — Governor Tony Evers

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