



# Alberta Darling

Wisconsin State Senator • District 8

Testimony before the Senate Committee on Education  
Senate Bill 966  
2/23/2022

Thank you committee members for taking the time to hear Senate Bill 966.

This bill is part of the Empowering Parents K-12 Education Reform Package to address the growing demand from parents to tailor their children's individual education, establish accountability, and encourage collaboration with educators.

This bill establishes uniform standards for school accountability reports. Our state's educational accountability system relies heavily on the state school and district report card. This bill improves the accountability reports to provide a consistent assessment of student success.

Late last year, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) released the first batch of Report Cards in two years. This was the first time parents, teachers, taxpayers, and policymakers had a chance to see how difficult the pandemic has been for children and the impact it had on their performance.

Unfortunately, DPI made changes to how absenteeism is measured, changes to the threshold scores for report card ratings, and how academic growth impacted overall scores. Due to these changes, the data is fundamentally flawed and prevents parents and policymakers to make comparisons from pre-pandemic and post-pandemic educational outcomes.

This bill requires DPI, for school and school district report cards that will be released this November, to use the measures, index system, and other components, methods, and formulas that DPI used to publish the school and school district report cards for the 2018-19 school year. Going forward, DPI may change the measures, index system, and other components, methods, and formulas after it goes through the legislative rules process.

Now, more than ever, parents should be able to rely on our accountability reports to help them make important decisions about their child's education. I want to thank Representative Wittke for leading these efforts in the Assembly, and thank you again committee members for hearing Senate Bill 966. I hope to have your support.



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# ROBERT WITTKE

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STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 62<sup>nd</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT  
TESTIMONY: SENATE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION  
February 23, 2022

Madame Chair and Committee Members,

Recently, a constituent emailed this comment to me, “Our schools have failed our children because they have become a social experiment”. That sentiment, personal experience, and three years as Board President of Racine Unified School District drives me to push education reform from talk to action for our children. Thank you, Madame Chair and Committee Members, for taking time to hold a public hearing on this package of K-12 Education Reform bills.

Members, with all due respect, we can no longer let the status quo in education be our guide. When Senator Darling came to me with these proposals asking for me to join the effort, I was enthusiastic. She knows well how important it is for us to take action for our children. Thank you, Senator Darling.

In a recent statement from State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly, she said “Our schools are facing major challenges, many of which existed long before COVID-19...” “We need solutions to these challenges...” and I couldn’t agree more, we just have a different way of getting there. Let me summarize four bills I’ve co-authored for our children and their parents. **Senate Bill 966 (SB 966)** would require the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to use the Administrative Rules process to establish the method and formulas it will use in creating school and school district report cards. Specifically how pupil achievement and growth in reading and mathematics is determined. Schools should be able to count on a standard guide each year.

**Senate Bill 964 (SB 964)** and **Senate Bill 965 (SB 965)** team up to allow growth in Wisconsin’s already successful charter school program. Charter schools are a popular option that parents have used, with success, and SB 964 would create the Charter School Authorizing Board and allow it to authorize independent charter schools. Charter schools under current law may be authorized by school boards, the City of Milwaukee, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and Parkside, Madison Area Technical College, the Waukesha County executive to name some of the authorizing entities. **SB 965** would allow increased access to charter schools by giving high-performing charter schools – those ranked in the top two performance categories in the most recent report card – to duplicate themselves. The duplication process is currently part of the charter contract and SB 965 expands the provision to these high performers.

**Senate Bill 963 (SB 963)** would reorganize the Milwaukee Public School System (MPS). This bill creates a Redistricting and Implementation Commission made up of the Governor and two appointees, the City of Milwaukee Mayor and two appointees, and the State Superintendent of Schools. Their charge is to look at the current district make up, student population and school buildings and determine how to establish four to eight new school districts in place of MPS. In the mid 2000’s a proposal was introduced to break up MPS; it failed. Today, too many children in MPS are failing and it must stop. We just can’t continue to spend hours and hours talking about what’s wrong with our schools then sit on our hands and do nothing. **SB 963** is a good starting point.

*Our students and their parents, deserve better than status quo. I believe these bold proposals encourage action. Thank you again for holding this public hearing today.*

# CITY FORWARD COLLECTIVE

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February 23, 2022

## **Senator Darling and Members of the Committee,**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 966, which addresses important issues related to our state's measure of school performance, the Report Card.

My name is Colleston Morgan Jr, and I serve as the Policy & Advocacy Director for City Forward Collective, a Milwaukee-based nonprofit organization whose mission is to eliminate educational inequity by ensuring every Milwaukee child has access to a high-quality school. On behalf of our Executive Director Dr. Patricia Hoben, we're grateful to you for taking on this important issue.

Central to our organization's mission is a strong commitment to the importance of performance transparency and accountability: we believe in providing clear and transparent information to parents, families, and other stakeholders about how our city's – and our state's – students and schools are performing, because as James Baldwin said, "Nothing can be changed, until it is faced".

Each year, [Wisconsin publishes Report Cards](#) for every school that receives public tax dollars. These Report Cards are meant to be a scoreboard, helping parents keep track of school quality to make smart choices about where to enroll their children.

Last November, the Department of Public Instruction released the first new Report Cards in two years, following a delay related to the COVID-19 pandemic. These Report Cards provided our city, and our state, with the first big-picture evidence we have of how the pandemic impacted student academic performance. That overall picture wasn't a pretty one: More than 80 percent of Milwaukee students failed to meet grade level expectations in reading and math.

And yet – more than 70 percent of Milwaukee's schools earned a Report Card rating of "Meeting Expectations" or better.

We simply don't believe that those last two statements can both be true. While we know educators in classrooms and schools throughout our city and our state have done their very best to serve students through the pandemic, we also know that the plain and simple truth is that there's no way that 70% of our schools are "Meeting Expectations" when 80% of students aren't performing at grade level.

And we're not alone in this view: in polling our organization recently conducted, just one-quarter of respondents rated school quality in Milwaukee as good or excellent, while 41% of respondents reported that they believed school quality in Milwaukee is getting worse.

This disconnect between student outcomes and School Report Card ratings isn't a new, pandemic-related phenomenon, either: Average Report Card scores across Milwaukee have steadily increased since 2016, even as student proficiency, as measured by the Achievement component of the Report Card itself, has actually declined. The scoreboard keeps saying Milwaukee schools are getting better, but in reality – our city's students are falling further behind.

AB 965 addresses two core challenges that our organization believes are directly contributing to this broken scoreboard:

First, the bill addresses the process shortcomings that occurred in the run-up to year's Report Card release, which led to last-minute shifts in the scoring scale. The bill requires DPI to undo the late changes that were made to this year's scoring scale, and it ensures that future changes to the Report Card methodology are done in a more timely, transparent, and publicly accountable manner. While we can all acknowledge that schools were uniquely impacted by the challenges of teaching and assessing students during the pandemic last year, we share the concerns of many other stakeholders that the adjustments made to the Report Card happened without appropriate safeguards and sufficient public input, and were adopted far too late in the process for parents and other stakeholders to understand their impact.

A City Forward Collective analysis shows these late changes had a real impact: The new scale resulted in 74 Milwaukee schools receiving better ratings than they otherwise would have earned, including 42% of the schools operated by Milwaukee Public Schools. And at the district level, these changes moved MPS' Report Card rating up to the "Meets Expectations" level, even though the district's numeric Report Card score actually slightly declined.

Intuitively, we all know that this doesn't make sense – your letter grade in school shouldn't go up when your score goes down. And yet, that is exactly what happened as the result of these late changes to the report card.

Second, the bill addresses a longer-standing issue: how the Report Card system combines data measuring student proficiency and student growth to calculate an overall composite score and assign a rating.

Right now, for almost all schools in Milwaukee, the picture of student outcomes is obscured by a statutorily-mandated Report Card weighting scale that values student growth at 90%, while weighting proficiency at 10%. At this 9:1 ratio, Wisconsin's report card for schools with high levels of economically-disadvantaged students is a significant outlier when compared to other states. And far more importantly, the current system makes it difficult for parents to assess how well a school is doing on fully supporting the academic growth – and academic achievement – of students.

To be clear: as an organization, City Forward Collective believes that both proficiency and growth are important factors that have to be considered in measuring school performance – but we believe that the current Report Card approach distorts the picture.

To illustrate the point using a personal example: I'm both a former classroom teacher, and the parent of two elementary school-aged daughters.

As a teacher, I began each school year by assessing the students in our classroom in order to understand where they were starting from, and then mapping how far each child needed to advance during the school year. Both proficiency and growth were important to me, and for the students in my classroom, and neither was a substitute for the other: growth without eventually achieving proficiency would have left my students underprepared to lead a thriving adulthood. Proficiency without growth would mean academic stagnation that would have put my students behind their peers over time.

And now as parents, my wife (and fellow recovering educator) and I expect the same of our children's teachers. We care immensely about our daughters' academic growth – that over the course of one school year, our girls are appropriately advancing through at least a school year's worth of material. We also care immensely about our daughters' academic proficiency – that at any given point in time, our girls are reading, writing, performing math, and otherwise meeting grade-level academic expectations.

Again – both proficiency and growth are important, and neither is a substitute for the other: proficiency without growth means that our girls would be at risk of falling behind their peers over time, while growth without proficiency would leave them underprepared to lead a thriving adulthood.

Our organization's analysis shows that this issue of how growth and proficiency are weighted in the Report Card is also one that has real impact: if last year's report cards had used the more balanced weighting of proficiency and growth proposed under AB 965, 129 Milwaukee schools would have seen a change in their rating, with 98 seeing no change. The current, imbalanced weighting ratio means more than 55% of MPS district-operated schools received elevated Report Card scores – in some cases by as much as two rating levels. As with the late changes to the scale made by DPI, this obscures the true story of school performance, giving families and stakeholders a false sense of school quality.

Right now, the scoreboard says most Milwaukee students are not winning. Even though some schools received higher Report Card ratings because of longstanding imbalances and late changes to the rating scale, the underlying state assessment results indicate that at least 4 out of 5 Milwaukee students are not performing at grade level – with Black students, students with disabilities, and students from low-income households all disproportionately represented in this group.

More than ever, parents, caregivers, and other stakeholders in our K-12 education ecosystem need to be able to face the brutal facts and understand exactly how Milwaukee students and schools are performing. AB 965 is a necessary and important step in repairing the scoreboard, so parents and caregivers can know the true score, make smart choices for our children, and hold those in power accountable for ensuring our state's students and schools are thriving.



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February 23, 2022

Madame Chair Darling and members of the Senate Committee on Education,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Senate Bill 966, a proposal by Senator Darling and Representative Wittke regarding the state report card and limitations on the Department of Public Instruction. I am Libby Sobic from the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty.

Over the past several years, WILL has published reports regarding some of the major issues of the Wisconsin report card system.<sup>1</sup> However, the Department of Public Instruction's (DPI) latest iteration (for the 2020-2021 school year) made these problems far worse.

The goal of the state's report card should be to provide information about the quality of local schools so families can make informed decisions. But the most recent report cards released by the DPI make it impossible for parents to compare schools to their neighbors, or even track the progress of an individual school over several years.

This year, DPI made three major changes to the report card: changes to how absenteeism is measured, changes to the threshold scores for report card ratings, and a longer-standing issue with the way in which growth is included in report cards. These changes were done without any legislative input. These decisions fundamentally changed the report card data and will prevent a true year-over-year comparison of the data. This essentially makes the report cards a useless tool for parents and schools.

This was bureaucracy overreach. A representative of DPI recently testified that DPI does make calculation changes to the report card before it is released.

Mr. McCarthy testified on January 12<sup>th</sup> about the DPI's management of the report card's "cut scores." He explained, "when we have the norm and distribution of information we get from report cards, we want them to match. In other words, we want to see the same amount in proportion of schools in all the different categories as we make changes."<sup>2</sup> This is concerning because the DPI wants to maintain the status quo of the report card system. But let's remember that we already have a report where 96% of school districts "met or exceeded expectations".<sup>3</sup> Clearly something is wrong with the distribution of data to begin with.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/final-report-card-policy-brief-9.21.20.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> January 12, 2022 hearing with the Assembly Committee on Education, <https://wiseeye.org/2022/01/12/assembly-committee-on-education-68/>

<sup>3</sup> DPI Press Release, November 2019, <https://dpi.wi.gov/news/releases/2019/most-schools-and-districts-meet-expectations-2018-19-report-cards>



The goal of the report cards should be to provide a clear understanding of how Wisconsin students and schools are actually performing. Editing the report cards behind the scenes to ensure that the majority of schools look as if they are performing well is a disservice to parents, schools and taxpayers.

SB 966 addresses this specific concern by ensuring that the Department cannot change the report card system again next year. While the harm is already done for this year, SB 966 at least ensures that the report card data is comparable next year.

After nearly two years of unprecedented changes to education, parents, school board members and taxpayers are empowered to better understand how students are learning and where there is room for improvement. By changing the report cards on a whim, DPI has impeded this process, and put yet another roadblock in the path of parents to understanding what is going on with schools in their community.

Thank you,

Libby Sobic

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Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty



**Written Testimony: Senate Committee on Education  
Andrew Davis, Director for Government Affairs  
Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce  
February 23, 2022**

Madam Chairwoman and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on these important education issues. It is important that we share with you the value that our membership, the business community, places on K-12 education and the role it plays in our mission.

The MMAC is a regional chamber serving nearly 2,000 member companies that employ 300,000 people in the metro-Milwaukee area. It is our mission to invest capital, grow business and create jobs. K-12 education has always been a top priority for our organization. We have always been an active participant with an aggressive agenda to increase educational attainment and improve career development to help feed the talent pipeline for our members and employers in the region.

MMAC has a long history of engaging in education reform, including the formation of a K-12 system fueled by parent options with the goal to develop citizens as skilled, innovative and productive lifelong learners. Historically we have worked with education stakeholders and partners to help provide our citizens with a pathway to great educational outcomes through our K-12 system, two-year, technical and four-year plus degree granting institutions. Educational attainment and a discipline of lifelong learning are the best anchors for prosperity. Unfortunately, this reality is eluding too many of our citizens-- leaving them without opportunity and hope. Leaving Milwaukee short on the talent it needs to thrive.

It is for the reasons stated above that we care very strongly about the following MMAC agenda items:

- A fair and balanced school report card that rewards schools educating some of our most troubled students below grade level.
- Automatic charter reauthorization and replication of high performing charter schools, that includes non-instrumentality charter schools.
- Expansion of charter school authorizing entities and options
- Addressing the issue of under-used and vacant school facilities in Milwaukee. Both taxpayers and parents will benefit from any use of these empty facilities owned by the City of Milwaukee.
- Closing the charter and choice per pupil funding equity gap. The disparity threatens to financially strangle quality schools and reduce educational options. This inequity must be addressed as we are already seeing some schools in Milwaukee close because of it.

Too much of the debate in Milwaukee is over the type of school students attend and too little on results. Whether attending a traditional public school, a public charter school or a school in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, ensuring that Milwaukee's children and future workforce have access to a world class education is not only a moral imperative, it is also an economic necessity.

There is no greater determinant of a region's prosperity than the educational attainment and workforce skills of its citizens. We need an unapologetic and unwavering commitment to students and families that attend schools that deliver uncharacteristic results, regardless of what type of school they are in. Getting children ready to learn is the first step, and getting them ready to work is a necessary step.

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