



ROBERT WITTKKE

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 63RD ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

(608) 237-9163

Toll-Free: (888) 534-0063

Rep.Wittke@legis.wi.gov

P.O. Box 8953

Madison, WI 53708-8953

Assembly Committee on Education
Public Hearing
February 6, 2025

Chair Kitchens and Committee Members:

Thank you for holding a public hearing on Assembly Bill 1 (AB 1) relating to changes to the education assessment program and the school and school district accountability report.

We have a real education problem in Wisconsin – our kids can't read or do math to grade level, or even close. Academic standards are not being met and kids are suffering. We really need to honestly look at how well our schools are educating our children. There are schools doing well, working to help both their teachers and students to do better and to learn. Unfortunately, there are too many schools doing poorly.

We need to restore high academic standards for our K-12 testing protocols and firmly hold to those high standards so our kids and families, as well as teachers, have clear and consistent expectations to follow.

Assembly Bill 1 will simply ensure that pupil assessment cut scores, score ranges and pupil performance categories are aligned with the standards set out in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and reinstate cut scores to the 2019-20 standard. The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) in consultation with themselves drastically changed the cut scores and redesigned the assessment process – DPI broke the connection with NAEP standards. It is now impossible to compare Wisconsin to other states and perhaps that was their intent.

How can 94% of our schools be rated "Meet Expectations or Higher"? How can it be that 94% of schools are meeting expectations or higher when we know that our kids can't read or do math to grade?

Let's be honest, Governor Evers wants more money for schools but can you tell me where that money should be applied based on how well a school is doing? I think not.

Lowering the bar on school expectations, or standards, does not help our kids succeed! Assembly Bill 1 is the right step to take and I hope you will join me in supporting the bill.



JOHN JAGLER

STATE SENATOR • 13th SENATE DISTRICT

Phone: (608) 266-5660

Toll-free: (888) 291-3489

Sen.Jagler@legis.wi.gov

Room 415 South

P.O. Box 7882

Madison, WI 53707-7882

AB 1 Testimony

Thank you, Chairman Kitchens and members of the committee, for hearing Assembly Bill 1 today.

“I think we need to have as high of standards as possible, I don’t think we should be lowering them.”

I think this is a sentiment that we can all agree on. These words were said by Governor Evers in September of last year after the Department of Public Instruction decided to lower our academic standards for our K-12 students.

The changes made by DPI last year broke the connection to previous years that allow us to see how our students are performing over time. As we move out of COVID, it is more important than ever that we are able to see how our educational system is advancing.

Moving away from the national standards set by NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) only compounded the problem. Having an apples-to-apples comparison is key when we look at our neighbors and competing states around the country.

Recently, 4th grade NAEP reading achievements were announced, it showed only 31% of students were proficient in reading while Wisconsin standards claimed 52%. While neither of these numbers are very promising, it shows the massive disconnect between state and national standards.

We simply can’t improve our numbers by cooking the books. We wouldn’t allow it by our students and the adults should be held just as accountable.



JOHN JAGLER

STATE SENATOR • 13th SENATE DISTRICT

Phone: (608) 266-5660
Toll-free: (888) 291-3489
Sen.Jagler@legis.wi.gov

Room 415 South
P.O. Box 7882
Madison, WI 53707-7882

Even more shocking is that Superintendent Underly used the low NAEP scores to call for more funding. Which is it? Are the national standards paramount or our own?

Finally, the recent school report cards showed that 94% of school districts are meets expectations or higher. We need to be honest about how are schools are performing. We don't learn anything when we give everyone a 'C' or better.

DPI will tell us in a moment how they consulted with dozens of educational experts who said these changes were necessary. I would encourage you to ask them who these "experts" were and why they felt it was important to lower standards and not raise them.

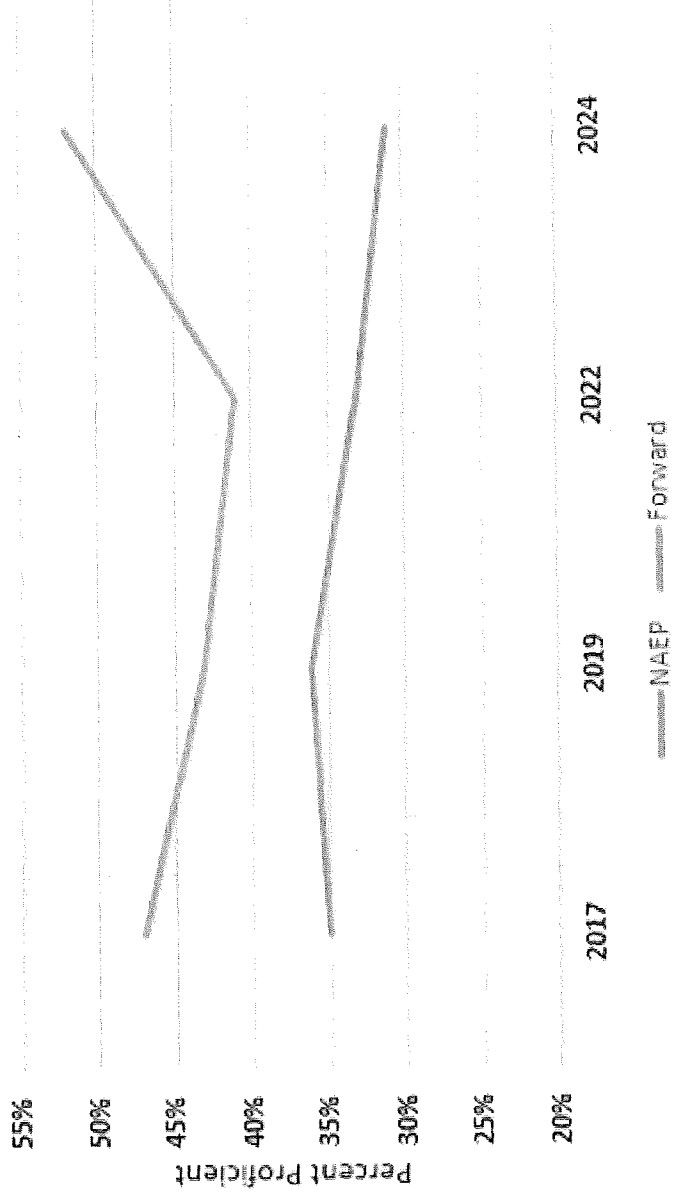
Don't get bogged down in their complicated explanation and reliance on academics. The simple answer is that we need to be expecting more out of our kids, not less. We need to hold them to higher standards, not lower.

This bill aims to return our state report card standards to pre-COVID levels, align the Forward Exam for grades 3-8 with national standards and use same cut scores, score ranges and pupil performance categories for grades 9-11 from 2021-22.

I encourage you to do the right thing and vote to install higher standards for our students and pass AB 1.

I will be happy to take any questions you may have.

4th Grade Reading NAEP & Forward Gap





February 6, 2025

Assembly Committee on Education

**Department of Public Instruction Testimony
2025 AB1**

I want to thank Chair Kitchens and members of the committee for the opportunity to give testimony on AB 1. My name is Tom McCarthy, Deputy State Superintendent for the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and with me today is Viji Somasundaram and Sam Bohrod, leaders in our Office of Education Accountability.

We are here to testify in opposition to AB1.

The DPI believes that each Wisconsin learner deserves access to rigorous and engaging instruction and that transparency in measuring and reporting the progress of student learning is necessary and important. We also believe in using teachers as experts in child development and knowledge of Wisconsin's academic standards.

While this bill is focused on assessment and report cards, these activities do not happen in isolation. Assessment is directly connected to instruction, and instruction is directly connected to Wisconsin's academic standards. Report cards provide a measure of not only assessment, but also other key data indicators of a school and district's success.

We intend to provide some background information on standards, instruction, and assessment, how the NAEP assessment is different from our state summative assessments, and then some technical reasons why this bill is problematic.

To ensure rigorous instruction for all learners, the DPI establishes grade-level standards in math and English language arts, and grade-band standards in science, social studies, and other content areas. All these standards are on a seven-year review cycle and Wisconsin educators (both public and private), post-secondary education experts, relevant business owners or leaders, and members of the public, including family members, all have the opportunity to provide feedback and input. Members of the legislature who sit on the State Superintendent's Academic Standards Review Council, and members of the education committees of both houses also had the opportunity to provide feedback during the review and revisions process.

Day-to-day classroom instruction builds from academic standards, and, under Wisconsin state statute and Federal law, we evaluate learning by administering annual standardized assessments that are aligned to the academic standards. Students in public schools, independent charter schools, and many Choice schools take these assessments. School and district report cards display the results of those annual standardized assessments, along with other school data for the public to understand what's happening within their school or district. These report cards serve as an

important tool for school leaders, educators, and families to understand the strengths and areas for improvement at the school and district level. School and district report cards are used by school leaders to make decisions about curriculum, scope and sequence of instruction, and professional learning for educators. They are used by families to see a limited snapshot in time of their child's knowledge and understanding of the state's grade-level standards. Most important, they are designed to act as a flashlight – to illuminate where things are working or need improvement – and not as a policy hammer – a tool to make decisions about school governance.

While state summative assessments, like the Forward exam, the PreACT Secure, and the ACT with Writing in Wisconsin, measure what Wisconsin children know and can do in relationship to our specific state academic standards, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) measures what the nation's students know and can do in several content areas. It is a common tool to gather information about students across the country and is used to evaluate long-term trends.

NAEP and the Wisconsin summative assessments differ in some important ways. While the Forward exam, the PreACT Secure, and the ACT with Writing are given to all learners in Wisconsin public schools, independent charter schools, and some Choice and private schools every year, the NAEP is not. NAEP is given to a representative sample of 4th, 8th, and 12th graders every two years. A small number of Wisconsin schools are selected to sit for the NAEP and within those schools, only some learners are identified to take the NAEP. In 2024, approximately 5,300 out of 56,000 Wisconsin 4th graders and approximately 5,200 out of 59,000 Wisconsin 8th graders took the NAEP. Ultimately, student participation is highly encouraged, but voluntary. Wisconsin summative assessments are required, although families do have the power to opt their children out. While individual student results are reported to families with the Forward exam, the PreACT Secure, and the ACT with Writing, the NAEP is not designed to produce individual student results. Wisconsin educators work on Forward assessment question (item) development to ensure they are aligned to Wisconsin academic standards. They have no role in NAEP assessment development.

Assessment Considerations

The DPI understands the intent of the bill's authors to ensure there is a reliable way of measuring student and school progress from year to year and agrees that this is important.

The DPI also acknowledges that expectations for student learning change over time. If one looks at Wisconsin's academic standards in the year 2000, you will see that they are vastly different from the academic standards in place today. Our current standards in reading (part of the English Language Arts (ELA) Standards), for example, are much more specific and include areas of instruction not in place as recently as 2010, such as phonemic awareness and letter-sound knowledge. These areas that we now know are critical to reading instruction were added and expanded in the current version (adopted in 2020).

When academic standards are revised, our summative assessments must also be revised so that we are in compliance with state and federal law, and more importantly, so that learners are tested on what is being taught in their classes. DPI convenes teachers to review the test questions (items), determine whether they accurately align to the academic standards, and make recommendations about assessment cut scores supported by DPI experts in test validity, reliability, and psychometrics.

NAEP assessments, on the other hand, are based on the NAEP content frameworks, which are more limited than our state standards and only available for the tested grade-levels and content areas. While there is some overlap between Wisconsin's academic standards and the content frameworks used by NAEP, there are significant differences, which result in significant differences between the Forward exam and NAEP. Further, since the NAEP is only given in grades 4, 8, and 12, NAEP does not define grade-level performance¹

The method to compare achievement in schools in Wisconsin to that of other states requires using a consistent measure; that is what the NAEP was designed to do and it is how the actual NAEP results are used. The DPI has never used the Forward Exam as the basis of comparison with other states. Additionally, NAEP results are not used in making instructional decisions in Wisconsin classrooms.

In contrast, the Forward Exam is administered only to students in Wisconsin, is designed to assess students' knowledge of the Wisconsin Academic Standards which is the basis of classroom instruction and supports school improvement efforts within the state.

When academic standards are revised the state assessments need to be revised with new test items and a review of proficiency levels by educators and psychometricians. Wisconsin's science standards were revised in 2017, so the science section of the Forward exam was changed in 2019. Wisconsin's social studies standards were revised in 2018, so the social studies section of the Forward exam was changed in 2022. Wisconsin's English language arts standards were revised in 2020, and Wisconsin's math standards were revised in 2021. Wisconsin Act 20 from 2023, also included new report card requirements in reading. To align to the revised standards and the new Act 20 requirements, the ELA and math sections of the Forward exam were changed in 2024. And, for the first time ever, a comprehensive assessment of reading skills was developed and launched in 2024 as a third part of the Forward exam. **This means that the 2024 Forward exam was no longer the same assessment as the 2019 Forward exam.**

Additionally, in school year 2022-2023, ACT discontinued the assessment that Wisconsin was using in grades 9 and 10, the ACT Aspire.

Importantly, the 2019 Forward exam was based on 2011 academic standards and cut scores. **Therefore, to accurately measure and report the learning taking place in Wisconsin schools, DPI needed to engage in a process to review and revise the Forward assessment, including performance level cut scores on the Forward exam.**

This process started in 2022 with new test items and section development. In 2023, DPI responded to feedback from nearly 1,000 Wisconsin educators and stakeholders that the meaning of summative assessment performance levels was, at best, unclear to many educators or families and at worst, was psychologically damaging. DPI asked for stakeholder input on the descriptors of "below basic," "basic," "proficient," and "advanced." Stakeholders expressed the greatest confusion with the terms "basic" and "proficient," unclear of the difference and which might denote being on grade-level. Some stakeholders expressed that labeling results as "below basic" had the impact of some learners giving up, and some families and learners believing that label meant there was no possibility that they could advance into a different category; that it was perhaps a description of a child's IQ level. Based on the input and subsequent feedback, DPI changed the performance levels to "developing," "approaching," "meeting," and "advanced." The difference between "approaching" and "meeting" grade-level proficiency was clearer to stakeholders and the term "developing"

helped both learners and families understand that it was possible for children to advance into a different category.

The new Forward exam with major changes and the addition of the reading assessment was first administered to almost all students in grades 3 through 8 in the spring of 2024. In June 2024, a diverse group of almost 100 educators from around the state participated in a standard setting meeting to establish cut scores for the new Forward exam. Using what is known as the bookmark standard-setting process, the group recommended updated cut scores, in alignment with the updated academic standards and the revised ELA and mathematics Forward assessments.

In July 2024, ACT psychometricians led a diverse group of Wisconsin educators from around the state in a Wisconsin ACT performance level standard setting workshop to align performance levels and cut scores of the ACT assessments to the updated Wisconsin content standards. This standard setting was conducted for the ACT to align performance levels within the Wisconsin Student Assessment System (WSAS).

Each state is also required to pass a stringent federal peer review to ensure the accessibility, security, and technical quality of its federally required assessments. Wisconsin's assessments have been fully approved by this process. **Meeting federal peer review requirements would be challenging** if the proposed changes went into effect, as there are specific peer review requirements related to including stakeholders in the design of the assessment system and to establishing cut scores that are aligned to grade level standards in the Wisconsin academic standards.

Everything described above was done with the goal of raising academic rigor and providing meaningful data that can improve classroom teaching. The new performance level cut scores are directly linked with the academic standards that Wisconsin educators use on a daily basis in their classrooms. The results from the first administration of the updated Forward Exam clearly identify how students are performing relative to these Wisconsin standards and how schools are doing in comparison to each other.

I want to leave you with some testimonials from educators who were involved in the standard setting process:

From Michele, a WI Elementary ELA teacher

"When I think about the standard-setting process, I appreciate the opportunity to be part of a thoughtful, data-driven discussion about what students need to know and be able to do. This work is crucial for making sure our assessments are meaningful and reflect the educational goals set by educators.

From Celia, a WI elementary level Math teacher

"I have full confidence in the standard-setting process we engaged in during the summer of 2024. We had every CESA represented with math educators, math leaders, math interventionists, and math supervisors. These educators have invested their own education in learning about math education, have invested their careers in teaching or supporting educators in teaching math, and spent their summer bringing this knowledge base and experience to support the standards setting process for the FORWARD math assessment. There were multiple layers of norming as we first engaged in the process ourselves, then with a group, and with the whole group and finally, between groups. We spent days breaking down the standards and assessment items that match

these standards. I very strongly believe that the scales that are currently used are reflective of our state standards. Changing them without engaging in such a process would be placing arbitrary scores with assessments that give students, teachers, district leaders, and families no real evidence of the child's proficiency towards the state academic standards.”

From Marvina – elementary math teacher

“I fully support the standard-setting process and the updates to the Forward Exam. As an educator, I have confidence in the standard-setting process because it is grounded in a deep understanding of child development, learning, and the unique needs of Wisconsin students. The process allowed educators to come together to create assessments that are truly aligned with the updated Wisconsin Academic Standards, which reflect the evolving needs of our students. When I think about the standard-setting process, I appreciate how it was informed by the real, on-the-ground knowledge that educators bring to the table. The recommended cut scores and scale adjustments were thoughtfully determined to ensure that the Forward Exam accurately measures student growth and performance in the context of these updated standards.

Reverting to old systems would not only undermine the hard work we did but also fail to keep up with the evolving needs of our students and the times we live in. It is crucial that our assessments continue to be aligned with the standards developed by Wisconsin educators, as they are the ones who understand how to best support our students' learning. Reverting to outdated scales, as some lawmakers are proposing, would undermine the hard work we did and diminish the value of the updated standards. I strongly believe that maintaining the new scale and test alignment will lead to a more accurate reflection of student achievement and progress.

I am proud to have been part of this process and strongly believe in the value of the new scale and test alignment.”

School and District Report Card Considerations

The proposed bill, if enacted, requires the Department to align report card rating cut scores to the report cards released in the 2019-20 school year. The DPI agrees that the cut scores should be updated; however, instead of fixing report card scores to a given past school year, a report card standard setting involving experts, educators, and education stakeholders across Wisconsin is the appropriate way to update report card rating cut scores. This work is already underway.

AB1 also proposes to lock the school and district report card rating category cut scores to scores that were set in 2011-12. While the DPI agrees that the report card cut scores should be modified, the Department opposes this component of the bill as it has technical flaws, does not consider significant report card and assessment changes that have taken place since 2011-12, and would undo a report card standard setting that is already underway.

A technical challenge with the bill is that the assessment data approach from this legislation would result in report cards that would not be comparable to prior year report cards until 2027-28. As is standard practice in accountability systems, report cards use up to three years of achievement data in scoring. By modifying the assessment cut scores through this legislation, it would take three years of updated achievement scores to stabilize the data and allow for year-to-year report card comparison by parents and educators.

Several significant updates to report cards took place since their inception in 2011-12 that necessitate a report card standard setting to appropriately determine overall rating cut scores.

Some of the changes have taken place legislatively, including variable weighting and value-added growth (2015 Wisconsin Act 55). Other changes, including replacing the Closing Gaps priority area with Target Group Outcomes and converting absenteeism into dynamic scoring instead of a deduction, have been implemented through consultation with an accountability advisory group of choice school, charter school, and other public school stakeholders across the state.

Due to all these, a report card standard setting is needed rather than simply reverting to, and locking in, outdated scores. The DPI has begun preparations for the report card standard setting. We will include education stakeholders from across the state from choice, charter, and public schools and districts to ensure that our system reflects the input of key participants across Wisconsin.

Since the 2019-20 school year, DPI has:

- published new academic standards for ELA and mathematics (which schools have now implemented);
- updated the Forward Exam blueprints and test specifications for both ELA and mathematics;
- developed new performance level descriptors and achievement standards for ELA and mathematics; and,
- convened educators to recommend new cut scores for the Forward Exam that are in alignment with the new content standards and are based on grade level requirements.

DPI has made every effort to make report cards from 2011-12 through 2023-24 comparable from year to year. When necessary updates took place over the years the focus has been on maintaining consistency, transparency, and the intent of the Accountability Design Team. Updates have been made in consultation with our technical advisory committee and education stakeholders across the state. Updates to the systems have been implemented only when legislated or to ensure that the results were fair and representative. DPI has made few major changes to report cards, and only in response to issues in which outcomes were not representative. The OEA team staff consulted with Wisconsin's Accountability Technical Advisory Committee and education stakeholders from across the state for all major changes.

As a result, the school and district report cards have maintained integrity and comparability across years, since 2011. In contrast to neighboring states, Wisconsin's accountability system has remained largely stable since its inception in 2011-12. For example:

- The State of Michigan's school report cards have experienced substantial changes nearly every year since 2014-15, including a complete change to their rating system, the addition and removal of priority measures, and even a hiatus in reporting during the transition to a new state assessment.
- The State of Minnesota has likewise made similar one-year adjustments to calculations when necessary for comparability and used similar language to that used by DPI this past year; that state's best-practices rationale was the same as ours, "This adjustment is happening only once, as part of a historical recalculation. It will not be a routine part of graduation rate calculation going forward."
- The State of Iowa completely overhauled their accountability system in 2024, replacing the system in place from 2018.

The proposed legislation assumes that the state will continue to use the same student assessments in the future, with no changes to standards, blueprints, and scales. To the extent that changes are made to the assessments in the future, the proposed legislation is **likely to cause additional problems with respect to alignment with previous exams and school years.**

Thank you for allowing DPI to share this testimony. Please direct any questions to Laura Adams, Policy Initiatives Advisor, at laura.adams@dpi.wi.gov.



Wisconsin Forward Exam Updates

Overview

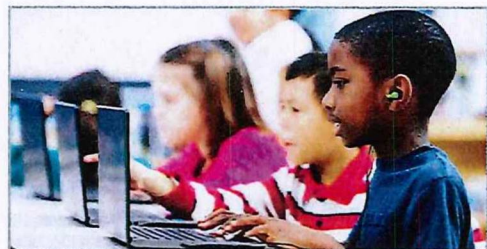
The Forward Exam assesses Wisconsin students' knowledge in English language arts and mathematics from third through eighth grades. The exam was updated beginning with the 2023-24 test administration to reflect feedback from educators and [revisions to the Wisconsin Academic Standards for English Language Arts \(ELA\) and Mathematics](#).

For the first time, the Forward Exam includes a distinct reading assessment, and a corresponding student score. This is a measurable step in support of extensive efforts to improve Wisconsin students' educational outcomes and reading comprehension. For more information on Wisconsin's reading initiative, [visit the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's website](#).

What's different?

The ELA section of the Forward Exam now has three test sessions, with all questions aligned to updated academic standards:

- Session 1 - Reading comprehension
 - Session 2 - Language arts/writing, including one short-write task
 - Session 3 - Language arts/writing, including one short-write task
-
- The ELA Listening Session was removed to make room for an expanded reading test, and due to its low perceived assessment value among Wisconsin educators. This change also allows for year-over-year comparability.
 - The ELA Text-Dependent Analysis Session was removed and replaced with two short-write tasks. Having more than one writing sample from a student helps measure their written communication in relation to state standard-aligned grade level expectations.
 - The Forward Exam mathematics section now reflects a [shift of focus](#). Test questions more effectively measure the standards that represent the major focus of each grade level.



For more information about required statewide assessments, [visit the DPI's website](#).



Forward Exam

2024-25 Information for Families

What is the Wisconsin Forward Exam?

The Wisconsin Forward Exam is designed to gauge how well students are doing in relation to the Wisconsin Academic Standards. These standards outline what students should know and be able to do in order to be college and career ready. The Forward Exam is administered online in the spring of each school year for students in:

- grades 3-8 in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics,
- grades 4 and 8 in science, and
- grades 4, 8, and 10 in social studies.

Accommodations and supports for students with disabilities and English learners are built into the system so that the progress of students can be accurately measured.



What does this mean for my child?

The Forward Exam is a summative assessment that gauges your child's achievement in the content areas tested in relation to grade-level standards. It provides a broad measure of achievement that should be used along with

local measures such as report cards, school-wide assessments, and other information about your child's progress in school.

When does the Forward Exam take place?

The Forward Exam will be given in schools between March 17 and April 25, 2025. Schools are permitted to select their own testing dates within this window.



The estimated time for test administration in each grade is approximately:

- 115 minutes for ELA,
- 90-115 minutes for mathematics,
- 105 minutes for science, and
- 70 minutes for social studies.

These estimated times are for the purpose of scheduling, as **the Forward Exam is not a timed test**. It is important to note that students may take more time or less time to complete the test based on effort and ability levels.

What type of scores will be provided?

The Forward Exam is a summative assessment that provides information about what students know and can do in relation to the Wisconsin Academic Standards. Students receive a score based on their performance in each content area. Each score will fall in one of four levels:

Advanced - The student demonstrates a thorough understanding of the knowledge and skills described in the Wisconsin Academic Standards for their grade level and is on-track for future learning.

Meeting - The student is meeting the knowledge and skill expectations described in the Wisconsin Academic Standards for their grade-level and is on-track for future learning.

Approaching - The student is approaching the knowledge and skill expectations described in the Wisconsin Academic Standards for their

grade-level needed to be on-track for future learning.

Developing - The student is at the beginning stages of developing the knowledge and skills described in the Wisconsin Academic Standards at their grade-level needed to be on-track for future learning.



Where can I find sample or practice test questions?

The Forward Exam Practice Test provides student, families, and educators, with a sample of the type of content and questions students will encounter on the Forward Exam. It also allows students to familiarize themselves with the question formats and online testing platform including the tools available to them



during testing. The Practice Test is not scored and does not cover the full range of content on the exam. The Practice Test is approximately two-thirds the length of the actual Forward Exam and is intended to provide all students with the opportunity to become comfortable with the Forward Exam platform prior to testing.

The Forward Exam Practice Test is available for student use online, in the classroom or at home at <http://dpi.wi.gov/assessment/forward/sample-items>.

For more information about the Forward Exam contact the Office of Educational Accountability at osamail@dpi.wi.gov or visit <https://dpi.wi.gov/assessment/forward>.



Here we display Wisconsin Forward Exam data, the state's principal indicator of student academic proficiency for students in third through eighth grades. While no single measure can definitively determine how well districts are doing in educating students, standardized assessments such as the Forward Exam can illuminate aspects of districts' past performance and the challenges they face going forward.

Note: The Forward Exam was not administered during the 2019-20 school year due to school closures related to COVID-19. The exams returned in the 2020-21 school year, but statewide test participation decreased markedly because of the pandemic. When making comparisons with previous years or other districts, use caution when rates of non-testing are greater than 5%.

ELA

Math

Select a School District

Select a Grade Level

Student Group

All Students

Race/Ethnicity

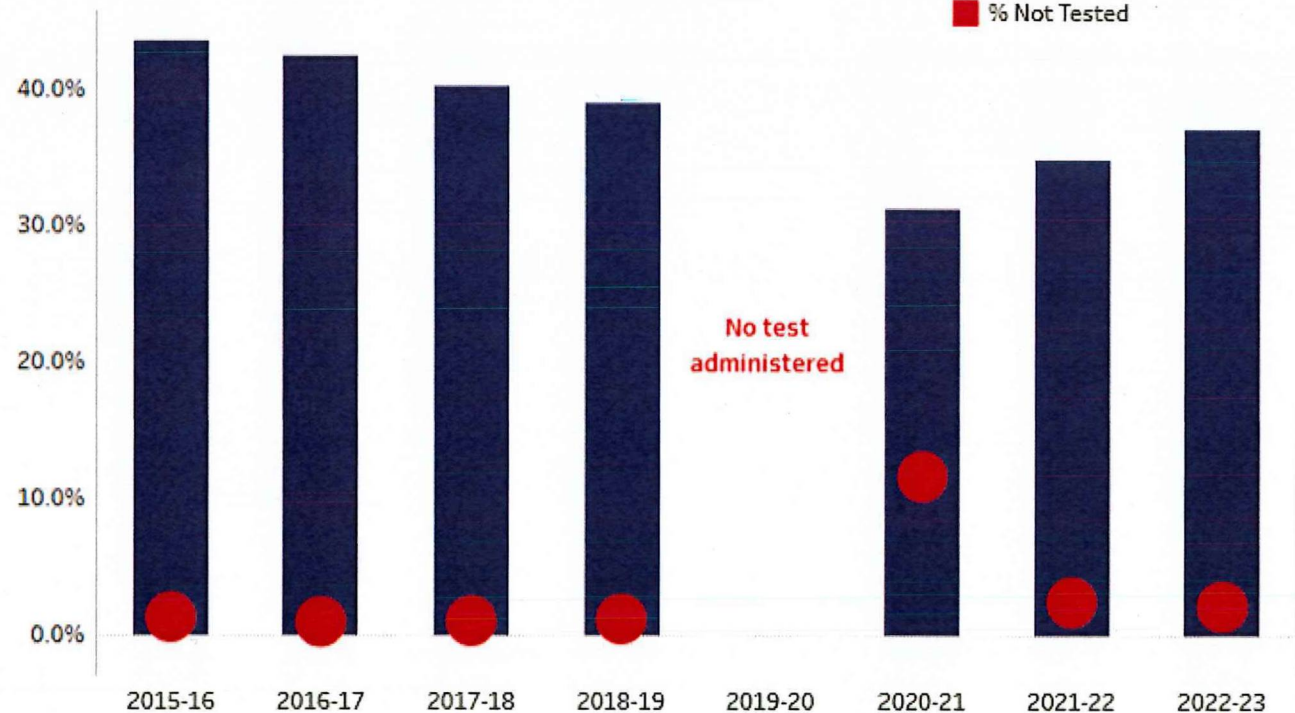
Economic Status

English Proficiency

State of Wisconsin Forward Grade 3 ELA

All Students

■ % Proficient/Advanced
■ % Not Tested



Forward Exam

[Click to Compare Statewide Peers](#)

[Click to Compare Local Peers](#)



The Wisconsin Forward Exam is the statewide standardized test for students in third through eighth grades. Though the exam is just one tool, scores for English and Language Arts (ELA) and math can provide important insight into school and student success. Below, use the buttons to explore these metrics over time for the School District of Beloit.

Note that 2023-24 scores are not comparable to previous years due to changes in the Forward exam and scoring. At the time of publication, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction had not provided resources for understanding the 2023-24 scores in relation to past years. Prior to this change, data showed that Beloit student outcomes had not yet recovered from the pandemic, with the exception of fifth grade ELA. Math outcomes dropped by more points than ELA from 2018-19 (pre-pandemic) to 2022-23.

Note: The Forward Exam was not administered during the 2019-20 school year due to school closures related to COVID-19. The exams returned in the 2020-21 school year, but statewide test participation decreased markedly because of the pandemic, limiting the validity of comparisons to previous years or other districts.

Grade Level

[English/Language Arts](#)

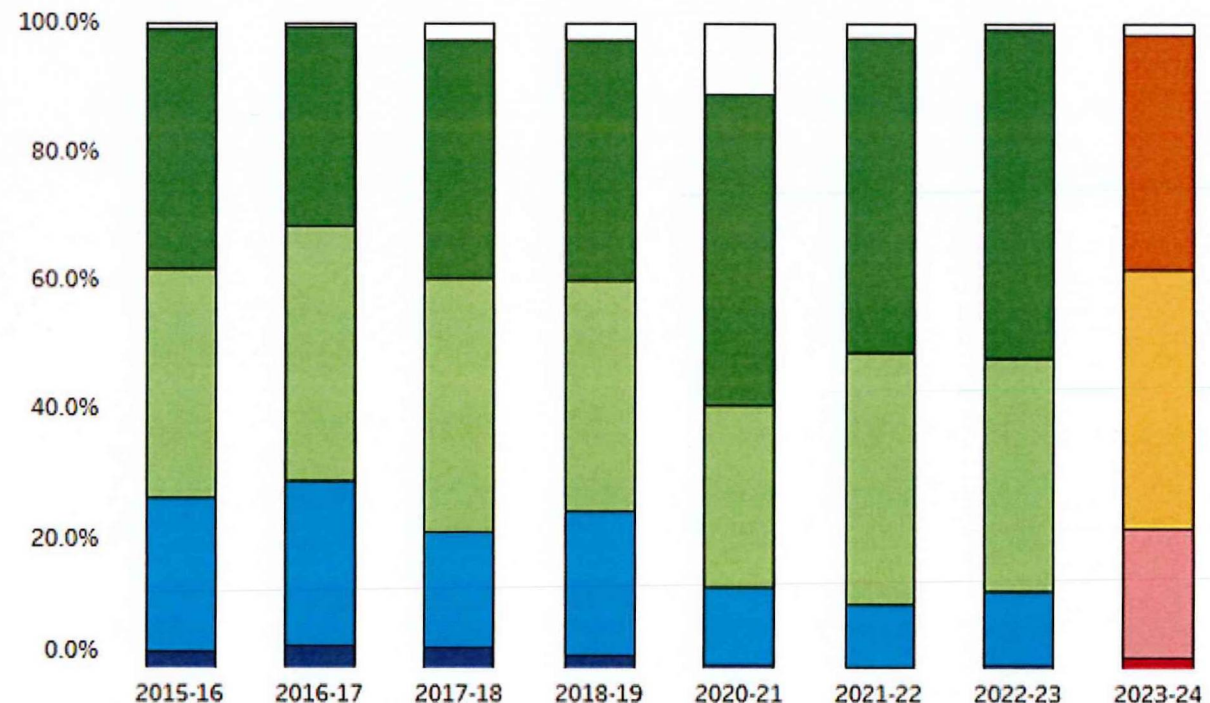
[Mathematics](#)

[Click to view Forward Exam data:](#)

School District of Beloit Forward Exam Grade 3 English/Language Arts

All Students - % by benchmark

- All Students**
- Race/Ethnicity
- Economic Status
- English Proficiency





School Facts 10

An annual publication of the nonpartisan Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, featuring 2008-09 actual and 2009-10 budgeted revenue and expenditure figures. Also includes information on staff sizes and ratios, property values, fund balances, student demography, and district characteristics.

DISTRICT	STUDENT PERFORMANCE																						
	4th Grade					5th Grade		6th Grade		7th Grade		8th Grade					10th Grade						
	Read.	Math	Sci.	S. S.	Lang	Rd.	Math	Rd.	Math	Rd.	Math	Read.	Math	Sci.	S. S.	Lang	Read.	Math	Sci.	S. S.	Lang		
	De-		De-						De-		De-		De-		De-								
Type Name	Pct.	cile	Pct.	cile	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	cile	Pct.	cile	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	Pct.	
K-8 DISTRICT AVG.	89		86		86	96	87	87	85	91	84	91	87	89		84		88	88	74	na	na	na
UHS DISTRICT AVG.	na		na		na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na		na		na	na	na	85	79	82
K-12 DISTRICT AVG.	81		81		77	92	77	80	78	84	78	86	81	84		78		80	81	65	77	71	72
K-12 AVG. MINUS MPS	84		83		80	94	80	82	81	87	81	88	84	86		81		83	84	67	80	75	76
K-12 Beaver Dam	83	7	83	6	78	94	82	88	86	84	81	87	81	80	9	77	8	77	82	53	73	9	70
K-12 Beecher	80	8	73	9	80	100	93	50	67	100	100	89	83	81	9	67	10	71	76	38	79	7	68
K-12 Belleville	97	1	96	1	94	99	92	91	89	92	86	98	91	79	9	84	5	87	85	70	82	5	81
K-12 Belmont	100	1	100	1	100	100	100	86	86	95	80	90	70	81	9	76	8	81	76	48	83	5	87
K-12 Beloit	71	10	71	10	62	89	64	72	67	76	62	78	64	71	10	55	10	64	65	42	65	10	54
K-12 Beloit Turner	94	2	93	2	86	98	88	92	88	87	77	87	67	80	9	78	8	83	87	56	80	6	71
K-12 Benton	88	4	94	1	100	100	100	100	96	93	64	91	91	89	4	89	2	89	89	78	100	1	92
K-12 Berlin Area	90	3	80	8	86	97	80	73	85	86	80	88	78	75	10	73	9	72	78	57	77	8	75
UHS Big Foot	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	na	84	4	75
K-12 Birchwood	77	9	85	5	77	85	77	73	60	81	61	67	73	96	1	78	7	91	91	65	81	6	75
K-12 Black Hawk	75	9	79	8	79	96	71	78	70	87	73	85	85	75	10	75	9	68	73	55	69	10	66
K-12 Black River Falls	78	9	73	9	68	93	65	75	79	80	74	82	69	94	2	76	8	84	90	64	69	10	54
K-12 Blair-Taylor	84	6	84	6	81	97	94	82	82	88	82	86	74	96	1	77	8	87	89	74	71	9	71
K-12 Bloomer	76	9	78	8	72	90	72	77	76	76	67	91	80	87	6	91	2	84	90	79	85	4	77
K-12 Bonduel	79	8	65	10	70	95	60	89	79	93	83	88	88	82	8	74	9	78	82	58	87	2	90
K-12 Boscobel Area	88	4	79	8	79	91	81	72	62	83	62	92	88	81	9	83	5	73	89	66	63	10	54
K-12 Bowler	89	3	93	2	82	96	89	59	64	89	78	93	83	76	10	86	4	76	76	57	84	4	63
K-12 Boyceville	83	7	88	4	85	97	82	87	81	93	88	78	82	77	10	82	6	80	75	55	83	5	84
K-8 Brighton #1	94	1	100	1	94	100	89	96	96	100	95	100	89	88	5	88	3	92	92	79	na	na	na
K-12 Brillion	83	7	85	5	79	94	71	75	79	80	86	86	92	91	3	93	2	89	84	69	81	6	87
K-8 Bristol #1	85	6	80	7	79	92	80	82	85	86	86	81	81	89	5	73	9	84	87	56	na	na	na
K-12 Brodhead	83	7	80	8	80	92	78	78	77	93	84	93	84	84	7	71	9	84	82	69	86	3	85
K-12 Brown Deer ²²⁰	73	9	76	9	74	90	72	61	71	85	81	83	84	81	9	83	5	79	82	70	70	9	63
K-12 Bruce	70	10	73	9	77	90	73	79	82	88	79	83	73	82	8	79	7	79	79	64	84	4	74
K-12 Burlington Area	82	7	87	5	80	91	77	78	75	88	81	92	83	85	7	74	9	83	88	64	75	8	74



700 W. Virginia St., Suite 604
Milwaukee, WI 53204
cityforwardcollective.org

**City Forward Collective Testimony In Support of Assembly Bill 1
Assembly Education Committee February 6, 2025**

Chair Kitchens and Members of the Committee

Last week's NAEP results revealed a stark reality for Wisconsin education: stagnant performance across all tested areas, the nation's largest Black-White performance gaps, and a deepening academic crisis for our students. In Milwaukee, the situation is particularly dire, with proficiency rates far below other large urban districts - including just 9% proficient in 4th-grade reading and 8% in 8th-grade math.

State Superintendent Jill Underly and DPI officials dismiss these troubling results by claiming NAEP is 'just one test.' They suggest that critics – from Governor Evers to legislative leaders, from education advocates to Wisconsin families – are simply 'politicizing test scores.' When such a diverse group of stakeholders shares the same concerns, perhaps it's time for DPI to listen rather than dismiss.

Superintendent Underly's DPI has claimed that basic math skills – like identifying even and odd numbers or counting to 30 with tally marks – are 'above the abilities' of our fourth graders.

And according to Jill Underly, changing the proficiency standard on the ACT from a 22 to a 19, resulting in the creation of a new category of "Meeting, Below College Ready" for thousands of Wisconsin students, somehow isn't lowering the bar.

As an educator and former accountability & testing administrator for a large urban school district, a parent of two elementary-school-aged girls, and as the leader of City Forward Collective, an organization dedicated to ensuring that every child has access to high-quality schools of their choice, I couldn't disagree more strongly. When critics from every corner of our state – Democrats and Republicans, educators and parents, urban and rural communities – all raise the same concerns, they aren't 'getting it wrong.' It's Superintendent Underly and DPI who are wrong to lower standards and mask the true state of student achievement in Wisconsin.

That's why we at City Forward Collective strongly support Assembly Bill 1.

This crucial legislation would require DPI to reverse the harmful changes made this summer through a closed-door process—complete with non-disclosure agreements—that dramatically lowered student performance expectations.

The bill would realign state assessment expectations with the rigorous proficiency standards of NAEP, the Nation's Report Card, and the ACT's College & Career Benchmarks, By closing the gap between state and national measures, we can finally see an honest picture of how our students are actually performing.

Consider: Across all NAEP-tested grades and subjects, there are differences of 15-20 percentage points between NAEP's benchmarks and DPI's new, lowered standards. For example, while only 31% of 4th graders are proficient in reading according to NAEP, 52% are classified as "Meeting" standards under the new Forward Exam metrics.

In the wake of last week's results, local & national commentary has repeatedly called out Wisconsin, for our largest-in-the-nation Black-White achievement gap, for the lowest-in-the-nation performance of students in Milwaukee Public Schools, and for the misleading changes made by Superintendent Underly and DPI to state assessments - which were previously some of the most rigorous and honest standards in the country.

You'll likely hear testimony today from top DPI officials, seeking to muddy the narrative with technical jargon about scale score, and misleading statements about the impact of these decisions.

What you won't hear them say in this room, is what they're saying elsewhere: In the Journal-Sentinel just last week, State Superintendent Jill Underly stated that she believes NAEP's Proficiency standard is "above the abilities" of our state's students.

In a series of op-eds and statements, the State Superintendent has repeatedly denied what's plain: that her decisions lowered expectations for students.

Meanwhile, in rolling out these changes last summer, Deputy State Superintendent Tom McCarthy stated in an interview that parents need to "get their hands dirty" to understand how schools are performing.

It doesn't have to be this way. The experiences of other states shows us that dramatic improvement is possible. Mississippi has risen from 49th to 9th nationally in 4th-grade reading, while Louisiana has climbed from 48th to 16th. Tennessee has shown similar impressive gains, demonstrating that real progress is achievable with the right approach.

Let's be crystal clear about what these states did—and did not do—to achieve such dramatic improvements. They did not lower the bar for student achievement. They did not mask poor performance by manipulating assessment standards. They did not tell parents and educators that high expectations were "above students' abilities."

Instead, their success was built on implementing quality curriculum, providing strong instructional supports and teacher development, and maintaining clear district and school report

cards to show academic progress. These states proved that the path to improvement lies in maintaining rigorous expectations while providing educators and students with the tools and support needed to reach those high standards.

These states didn't hide from the truth – they faced the sometimes-brutal facts head on, and then they committed to the hard, unglamorous work of changing the reality for students.

The problems with transparency run deep. In a nationwide study by the Center for Reinventing Public Education that reviewed all 50 states, Wisconsin's school data reporting system under Superintendent Underly received a D grade. The researchers couldn't even locate DPI's data portal in their initial search – a telling sign of just how difficult it is for Wisconsin families to access basic information about their schools.

Rather than facing up to the real challenges facing schools in Milwaukee and across Wisconsin, DPI has tried time and again to hide, obfuscate, and

AB1 represents a necessary first step toward following the successful example of states like Mississippi, Louisiana, and Tennessee. DPI's decision to lower standards has been criticized by people across the ideological spectrum—from Governor Evers to legislative leadership—because this isn't about partisan politics; it's about doing what's right for our students.

By restoring high standards and honest assessment of student achievement, we can begin the vital work of ensuring every Wisconsin student receives an excellent education. The stakes are too high, and our students' potential too great, to accept anything less than a complete commitment to academic excellence and transparency. The time for action is now.



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Monday, February 3, 2025

For more information, contact:

Chelsea Cross, Director of Communications
City Forward Collective
media@cityforwardcollective.org

CFC Position Statement In Support of Assembly Bill 1

City Forward Collective, alongside our advocacy partners at CFC Action Fund, announce our support for Assembly Bill 1, authored by Representatives Bob Wittke and Todd Novak, and Senate Education Committee Chair John Jagler.

Colleston Morgan, CFC's Executive Director, stated: "Last week's results on NAEP, the Nation's Report Card, underscore a dire reality, and must serve as a wake-up call for us all. Student performance in Wisconsin is languishing – while our state's Black students, as well as students in Milwaukee Public Schools, remain mired in a deepening, worst-in-the-nation academic crisis. No amount of manipulated data or misleading rhetoric from State Superintendent Jill Underly's Department of Public Instruction changes these brutal facts."

Assembly Bill 1 requires DPI to undo the harmful changes made in a closed-door process this summer to lower student performance expectations on state assessments. The bill would require Forward Exam standards to be realigned with the rigorous proficiency standards of a national benchmark, NAEP - The Nation's Report Card. Standards for high school students would be similarly aligned with ACT's College & Career Readiness Benchmarks - eliminating the newly-created category of "Meeting, Below College Ready" created by DPI's changes.

Said Morgan, "We've been clear from the start: for us at City Forward Collective, this issue is about our values and our belief in the potential of every child. It's about right and wrong for kids in Milwaukee and across our state, not the partisan politics of right vs left. Our state's students and families deserve the truth — it's time to close the honesty gap, and begin the hard, necessary work to ensure every child receives an excellent education at a high-quality school."

Hundreds of Wisconsinites Join CFC's Campaign To Restore High Standards

Along with our endorsement of AB 1, CFC Action Fund is also announcing that more than 750 residents from across Wisconsin have already signed on to our digital petition, calling on state leaders to restore accuracy & transparency in our state standards. CFC Action Fund's campaign to restore high expectations for all students will continue in the coming weeks, including social media and digital advertising buys to elevate the critical importance of restoring high standards for students and families in Milwaukee & across Wisconsin.

Morgan continued, "At City Forward Collective, we believe every family deserves accurate, transparent, and honest information about how our students and schools are performing. Progress is possible: states that have committed to transparency and accountability for student outcomes, like Louisiana & Tennessee, bucked the national trends and showed progress.

AB 1 represents a necessary step for Wisconsin to follow their lead, by closing Jill Underly & DPI's honesty gap, and providing Wisconsin's students, families, and educators with the accurate and transparent information that's needed to face and change these unacceptable realities."

Heeding Gov Evers' Calls to Do What's Right for Wisconsin's Kids

State Superintendent Underly and top DPI officials have repeatedly resorted to misleading statements in defense of their decisions to lower expectations for students - claiming that Wisconsin's prior standards were "above students' abilities" and that parents needed to "get their hands dirty" to understand how schools were performing, while inaccurately claiming that standards were not lowered and falsely accusing critics of politicizing student performance.

Morgan continued, "There's good reason that criticism of Jill Underly and DPI's lowering of the bar has come from across the ideological spectrum, from Governor Evers, to Speaker Vos and Senate Majority Leader LeMahieu, to both challengers in the upcoming elections for State Superintendent.

Governor Evers was right when he said that high standards matter for students in Superior and in Milwaukee. He was right when he said Wisconsin ought to have as high of standards as possible. And he was right when he called these new, lowered expectations a mistake.

We call on Democrats in the Legislature to follow Governor Evers' lead, and Republicans to follow the lead of Speaker Vos and Majority Leader LeMahieu. Legislators have the opportunity to do what is right for students in Milwaukee and throughout Wisconsin. We need to restore the high standards that the Governor established a decade ago."

CFC Has Been At The Fore In Challenging DPI's Secretive Process, Harmful Changes & Misleading Public Rhetoric

Since the Department of Public Instruction first made public its plans to change how student performance would be measured, City Forward Collective has been at the forefront in expressing our concerns about the harmful changes to lower Wisconsin's expectations for students by

- Calling attention to the secretive, closed-door bureaucratic process – complete with non-disclosure agreements – used by DPI to make these changes without transparency or public input;

- Pointing out deeply problematic statements by top DPI officials, including the insulting assertions that “Parents must get their hands dirty” in order to determine how schools are performing, and that proficiency on NAEP is “above students’ abilities”; and
- Identifying the impacts of the honesty gap created by Jill Underly & DPI’s lowered standards, including:
 - 15-25 percentage points differences for students in grades 4 and 8 identified as “Meeting” lowered state standards, compared to NAEP Proficiency, and
 - thousands of HS students now identified as “Meeting” lowered state standards but “Below College/Career Ready” on the ACT

City Forward Collective has also been on record in opposition to previous efforts by DPI officials to lower standards, including testifying before the Legislature in 2021 in opposition to a previous round of changes that lowered the bar for schools.

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City Forward Collective envisions a city where every Milwaukee child receives an excellent education that prepares them to thrive at a high-quality school of their choice. We advance our mission to secure Milwaukee’s future through informing, engaging, and catalyzing transformation across Milwaukee’s K12 school ecosystem.

Learn more about our work at www.cityforwardcollective.org

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CFC Action Fund is a 501(c)(4) organization whose mission is to secure Milwaukee’s future by electing champions and advancing policies to ensure that every Milwaukee child receives an excellent education at a high-quality school of their choice. For more information, visit our website at www.cfcactionfund.org

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Testimony in Support of Assembly Bill 1

Assembly Committee on Education

February 5, 2025

Chairman Kitchens, Vice Chair Goeben, and Members of the Assembly Committee on Education:

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to testify in favor of Assembly Bill 1. My name is Kyle Koenen and I am the Policy Director at the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty, a non-profit law and policy center based out of Milwaukee.

Assembly Bill 1 represents a critical step in restoring the ability of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers to accurately assess the performance of Wisconsin's schools. Having consistent, reliable information allows policymakers, educators, and families to better identify what's working, find areas for improvement and develop strategies to deliver the best possible educational outcomes for students. Unfortunately, the Department of Public Instruction's (DPI) unilateral actions over the past four years have made it more difficult to track school performance by changing terminology, adjusting cut scores, and modifying report card calculations.

This began in 2021, when DPI lowered cut scores on the state's report cards, artificially boosting ratings by allowing more schools and districts to receive a higher "grade" without actual improvements in performance. As a result, there are zero districts that fall into the "Fails to Meet Expectations" category. The new report card cut points also pushes districts out of "Meets Few" expectations and pushes others into "Exceeds Expectations." If we still had the old cut points, 66 fewer districts would be counted as "Exceeds Expectations," and 66 more would "Meet Few Expectations." To demonstrate the impact of these changes, WILL identified 14 schools on the most recent report card that fall below 15% ELA yet are categorized as "Meets Expectations".

In 2024, DPI also made changes to the labels assigned to student outcome categories on the state's Forward Exam. While this change may seem innocuous, the new terms are misleading to parents and downplay the need for improvement. For example, the lowest performance category shifted from "Below Basic" to "Developing". The second lowest category changed from "Basic" to "Approaching". DPI argues that these new terms promote a "growth mindset" and that the old terms could be perceived as insulting, but consider this: which of these labels would give you, as a parent, a greater sense of urgency that your child may need extra support or attention to succeed? Lastly, it's important to note that the previous

terms were aligned with the terminology used on the NAEP, the nation's report card.

Table 1. Changes in DPI Proficiency Terminology

Old Terminology	New Terminology
Below Basic	Developing
Basic	Approaching
Proficient	Meeting
Advanced	Advanced

Perhaps the most significant change happened in 2024, when DPI lowered the cut points on the Wisconsin Forward Exam as part of a standards rewrite. This not only lowered proficiency standards but also disrupted alignment with NAEP, making it harder to compare scores to historical data and national benchmarks. It's important to note that the previous standards that aligned Wisconsin with national standards were instituted in 2012 by then DPI Superintendent Tony Evers.

DPI also changed the ACT/Pre-Act performance level cut scores, moving the state away from the ACT's measurement of college readiness. Those changes are depicted in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Change in ACT Proficiency Cut Scores

Issue Category	Old Proficiency Cut Score	New Proficiency Cut Score
English/Language Arts	20	19
Math	22	19
Science	23	21

With last week's release of NAEP scores, we now have a clearer understanding of how DPI's changes to Forward Exam cut scores have impacted results. Despite a decline in Wisconsin students' performance on the NAEP 4th grade reading assessment—reaching the lowest level since at least 1992—state-level proficiency rates saw a significant increase. For example, in 4th grade ELA, the percentage of students scoring proficient or higher on the Forward Exam rose from 44.8% in 2022-23 to 52.1% in 2023-24. This suggests a massive disconnect between the two

standards, as evidenced in the table below.¹ In 4th grade reading, the difference between the state Forward Exam and the NAEP was a staggering 21%.

Table 3. Forward Exam Results Compared to NAEP (Proficient or Higher)

Grade Level Tested	Forward Exam Results	NAEP Results	Difference
4 th Grade Reading/ELA	52.1%	31.0%	-21.1%
4 th Grade Math	54.0%	42.0%	-12.0%
8 th Grade Reading/ELA	48.4%	31.0%	-17.4%
8 th Grade Math	51.4%	37.0%	-14.4%

Notably, all these changes were implemented unilaterally by DPI with no legislative input or oversight. Specifically, the adjustments to the cut scores this past year were carried out in secret, with participants required to sign a non-disclosure agreement, and no public input was solicited. Even Governor Evers has criticized the process calling it a “mistake” and has noted that changes will make it difficult to compare data year over year.

Wisconsin students and parents deserve the truth. Lowering the bar doesn’t help kids—it just hides failure. At a time when we should be laser-focused on tracking recovery from pandemic learning loss, DPI has instead chosen to manipulate the data to cover up poor academic results. Parents, educators, and policymakers need honest, transparent data to ensure students are truly prepared for the future—not just given a false sense of success. Assembly Bill 1 takes a meaningful step to put us back on that track.

Thank you for your time and I’m happy to answer any questions.

Kyle Koenen
Policy Director
Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty

¹ Table 3 compares the most recent results from the Wisconsin State Forward Exam and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), showing the percentage of students scoring in the top two achievement categories for each exam. For the 2023-24 Forward Exam, this includes students classified as "Meeting" or "Advanced," while for the 2024 NAEP, it includes those rated as "Proficient" or "Advanced."

Support AB 1 to Restore K-12 Accountability

Overview

This bill will realign Wisconsin's school performance standards with national benchmarks and ensure greater transparency and accountability moving forward.

Over the past few years, DPI has made multiple unilateral changes to academic accountability standards, making them far less rigorous, leaving parents, policymakers and educators in the dark about student's academic performance.

These changes include:

- **Lowering the cut points on the state's report cards**, allowing more schools and districts to achieve "Meets Expectations" status without any improvement in performance.
- **Changing the names of outcome categories on the Forward Exam.** "Below Basic" became "Developing," "Basic" became "Approaching," and "Proficient" became "Meeting." The "Advanced" category was left the same.

Worst of all, they **lowered cut scores on the Forward Exam and ACT/PreACT**, resulting in students being considered proficient at lower scores. This also severed the alignment between the Forward Exam and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), making long-term performance tracking and national comparisons impossible.

Why this matters:

These changes have created absurdities that undermine accountability for academic failures. For example, Milwaukee Public Schools' reading proficiency jumped from 15.8% in 2023 to 23.4% in 2024, and the district now "Meets Expectations" on the state report card despite its consistently poor performance. Statewide, district proficiency rates have increased by 14% in math and 13.2% in ELA on average.

Assembly Bill 1 is the solution.

Assembly Bill 1, introduced by Sen. John Jagler and Rep. Bob Wittke will restore the accountability system as it was prior to these changes.

- The bill will replace vague terms like “developing” and “approaching” that can mislead parents about student progress and return to clear accountability categories such as “below basic” and “basic”.
- It also reverts report card cut scores to better differentiate school and district performance, resolving the current issue where almost all schools are clustered in the top three categories.
- Most importantly, the bill realigns proficiency standards to national NAEP benchmarks and ACT/PreACT college readiness, ensuring a clearer comparison of Wisconsin students to national performance.



Learn more at:



will-law.org/taking-the-blindfold-off-k-12-accountability

Questions? Contact:



Kyle Koenen
Director of Policy, WILL
kyle@will-law.org



Feb. 6, 2025

Chairman Kitchens and Assembly Education Committee Members,

Thank you for hearing Assembly Bill 1, legislation designed to return Wisconsin's academic standards to the high levels from which they were lowered by Superintendent Jill Underly and the staff at the Department of Public Instruction.

Like everyone, we shared the same reaction as Governor Evers when we were surprised by the drastic changes revealed just prior to the required release of the data.

The DPI's actions lowered cut scores, detached our standards from NAEP proficiency levels, and modified the tests in ways that render comparisons to previous testing data impossible. In short, the changes force Wisconsin to start over with education data after lowering the bar.

An example from the results of the DPI's Forward exam and from the just-released NAEP tests illustrate the problem.

In Wisconsin statewide, among 4th-graders in 2022, 44.8% were found to be proficient at reading. The most recent results show 52.1% proficient, or "meeting," as the relabeled category is called. That's a 16% improvement.

But the NAEP test of Wisconsin 4th-graders found in 2022 that 33% were proficient in reading in 2022, and 31% are proficient now, a 6% drop.

Among 4th-graders in Milwaukee, the DPI in 2022 found that 17.2% were proficient in reading, while in 2024, 22.2% were — a 29% improvement. NAEP, however, found that in 2022, 12% of Milwaukee 4th-graders were proficient in reading, while in 2024, only 9% were — a 25% drop.

Which is correct? The DPI's flawed standard-setting process make its results uselessly unreliable — indeed, the DPI says we can't even compare the latest figures to previous ones. How are policymakers and parents to judge the results?

While this bill is focused on restoring previous, higher standards, much of the problem with the lowering of our standards was the process used in making the changes. Done entirely within the walls of the DPI by staff and an advisory group whose members were required to sign non-disclosure agreements, dozens of significant policy changes were made without anyone on this committee having a voice in the decisions.



While not all the changes made to Wisconsin's testing paradigm and statewide report cards are addressed in this bill, we support the goal of realigning our standards with NAEP, of using common sense language for describing the levels of proficiency, and of setting higher expectations for our kids. Wisconsin's continued shameful status of having the largest racial achievement gap is now decades old. Knowing that Superintendent Underly was warned by staff that her preferred changes would help high-income districts and exacerbate the racial gap, her insistence on pushing the changes through is even more unsettling.

We hope this hearing is the beginning of a process that results in changes to both our standards and the process we use to change them.

Mike Nichols
President, Badger Institute



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF ASSEMBLY BILL 1

Wisconsin State Legislature

February 6, 2025

Dear Chair Kitchens and Vice-Chair Goeben,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Assembly Bill 1. My name is Nicholas Munyan-Penney, and I serve as the Assistant Director of P12 Policy at EdTrust, a national nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated to advancing educational equity for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.

Our organization strongly supports AB1 as a necessary correction to the Department of Public Instruction's recent decision to lower assessment cut scores — a change that has dramatically inflated student proficiency rates and masked real achievement gaps. The data tells a concerning story about how these changes are disproportionately affecting students of color. In fourth grade mathematics, while the gap between NAEP and Wisconsin Forward proficiency rates remained constant for white students between 2022 and 2024, it expanded by 12 percentage points for Black students. This means the lowered standards are creating a particularly misleading picture of achievement for our Black students.

This troubling pattern extends across grade levels and subjects. In fourth grade English language arts, the gap between NAEP and Wisconsin Forward proficiency rates jumped from 8 percentage points in 2022 to 21 percentage points in 2024 — a concerning increase of 13 percentage points in just two years. Even more striking, while eighth grade ELA proficiency rates were identical between NAEP and Wisconsin Forward in 2022, by 2024 there was an 18-percentage point gap between the two test results. These numbers show that DPI's decision to lower cut scores has created an artificial inflation of student achievement.

The proposed alignment with NAEP standards matters because NAEP is our nation's academic yardstick — it tells us how Wisconsin students are really doing compared to rigorous academic standards and their peers across the country. DPI's recent lowering of cut scores moved Wisconsin in the opposite direction, creating a disconnect between what we're telling parents about their children's progress and how prepared those students actually are for college and careers.

This move particularly hurts students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. When we hide achievement gaps behind inflated proficiency rates, it becomes much harder to make the case for additional resources and support for struggling schools. Parents think their children are on track when they're not, and schools might miss crucial opportunities for intervention.

The bill's requirement to return to previous performance standards will provide the reliable data needed to track student progress over time. Wisconsin leaders need consistency in the cut scores to identify trends, evaluate what's working, and make smart decisions about where to invest resources.

The pandemic's impact on learning makes it more important than ever to have accurate measures of student achievement. Yes, returning to more rigorous standards might initially show lower proficiency





rates. But state leaders must be honest about where students stand if they want to give them the support they need to succeed. Lowering standards in response to learning loss doesn't help students — it just hides the challenges they're facing.

I strongly urge the legislature to pass AB1 and reverse DPI's decision to lower academic standards. Wisconsin students deserve honest information about their academic progress, and education leaders need accurate data to ensure that resources go where they're needed most.

Thank you for your consideration of this important legislation. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Nicholas Munyan-Penney





Date: February 6th, 2025

Dear Chairman Kitchens and members of the Senate Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on Assembly Bill 1. My name is Evan Eagleson, and I am the Legislative Director for the Great Lakes Region with [ExcelinEd in Action](#), a national non-profit focused on education reform and improved student outcomes in the states. I am writing in support of Assembly Bill 1.

I first want to thank Chairman Kitchens for giving AB 1 a hearing, as well as Rep. Wittke and the rest of the Wisconsin State Assembly for making this such a high priority.

As you know, school accountability is a critically important aspect of education policy that states need to get right so students can succeed. While setting cut scores can be technical and complex, it is one of the most important steps a state can take to ensure student success.

Students' scores on the state assessment indicate whether they are performing at, below or above grade level in key subjects. Those scores are the only objective signal the state sends to parents about how their children are doing academically.

In most states, students who fall below the state's cut scores receive different intervention services to ensure they are getting all the help they need to bring them up to proficiency. A perfect example is the work this body did in 2023 around early literacy, taking bold steps to ensure students are being taught to read using evidence-based practices and that struggling students get the crucial intervention services needed to get them back on track. When states determine passing scores on annual assessments, that line determines whether a student is on grade level or proficient in the subject. Unfortunately, when Wisconsin's cut scores were lowered substantially last year, the bar for what it means to be proficient was lowered as well.

Now, a large swath of Wisconsin students *appear* more proficient on paper than they may be in real life. And as a result, those students who need the help the most are likely not to receive it.

However, all 50 states participate in the National Assessment on Education Progress (NAEP), otherwise known as the “Nation’s Report Card,” providing a way to compare performance across state lines.

We can tell if a state has what we refer to as an “honesty gap” by looking at the difference between the percent of students the state reports as “grade level” on their state assessment to the percent of students who achieve proficiency on the national test.

As you likely know, the most recent NAEP results were released last week. The results showed that only 31% of Wisconsin fourth and eighth graders were at or above proficient in reading. However, based on the cut scores of the state’s Forward Exam, 52% of fourth graders were at or above proficiency. This is a 21% gap.

By aligning the state’s Forward Exam cut scores to the NAEP, AB 1 will ensure honesty and transparency regarding student performance. We also support the provisions that align Wisconsin’s cut scores to those previously used for grades 9-11 and reverting back to the terminology used. These changes will provide clarity for parents and schools alike and guarantee students who are struggling will get the assistance they need to be successful.

Thank you again to Rep. Wittke, Chairman Kitchens and the Assembly for making AB 1 a priority. I appreciate your time and consideration of this important issue. We look forward to tracking this legislation through the process and hope that Wisconsin will close the student performance honesty gap that was created last year.

Respectfully,

Evan Eagleson

Legislative Director, Great Lakes Region

ExcelinEd in Action

FutureEd

Independent Analysis, Innovative Ideas

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Thomas Toch. I am the director of FutureEd, a non-partisan education think tank at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy. FutureEd recently [analyzed](#) the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results, comparing them to student performance on federally mandated state assessments, including Wisconsin's.

NAEP is widely recognized as a rigorous measure of student achievement. Students scoring "proficient" or "advanced" on NAEP tests are typically on academically track to high school graduation and post-secondary success. While a handful of states reported higher proficiency rates on at least one 2024 NAEP test than on their state assessments, proficiency rates on state tests in 2024 typically were far higher. This discrepancy, often called an "honesty gap," suggests that many state tests are giving families a false sense of higher academic achievement, while signaling to educators that they don't need to set high expectations for their students.

In more than three-quarters of the states, proficiency rates on state assessments were more than 15 percentage points higher than on one or more NAEP tests. In some cases, the percentage of students deemed proficient on state tests was more than double that of NAEP. Wisconsin, after recent changes to its proficiency thresholds, is now among the states with the largest honesty gaps.

Under its previous standards, Wisconsin's state assessment results aligned relatively closely with those on NAEP tests. In fact, Wisconsin was one of the few states where a higher percentage of students scored proficient on NAEP tests than on state assessments.

But in 2024, after Wisconsin lowered its proficiency thresholds, there were wide gaps between proficiency rates on NAEP and on Wisconsin's standardized tests.

- In 8th-grade math, for example, the proficiency rate on Wisconsin's tests jumped from 29 percent in 2022 to 51 percent in 2024, compared to an increase from 33 percent to 37 percent on NAEP tests during that period.
- In 8th-grade reading, the proficiency rate jumped from 32 percent in 2022 to 48 percent in 2024 on the Wisconsin assessment, while declining from 32 percent to 31 percent on NAEP.

The lower state standards reflected in these gaps create the illusion of significant academic gains in Wisconsin, while potentially masking a lack of student readiness for high school. At a time when students are still recovering from the pandemic's impact on learning, having an accurate measure of achievement is critical. Lowering proficiency standards may create the

appearance of progress, but it ultimately does a disservice to students—especially those already at risk. Alignment between state assessments and NAEP increases transparency and makes it easier for everyone—students, parents, teachers, administrators, and elected officials—to be clear on where Wisconsin needs to focus to improve educational outcomes for all students.

Charts below compare trends in proficiency levels on NAEP tests and Wisconsin’s assessments.

Thank you very much.

Thomas Toch
 Director, FutureEd
 202-487-5941
Thomas.toch@georgetown.edu
 Future-ed.org

4th grade reading					
	2019	2022	2024	Change 2022-2024	Change 2019-2024
NAEP	36%	33%	31%	-2	-5
State	43%	41%	52%	11	9
Proficiency gap	7	8	21		

8th grade reading					
	2019	2022	2024	Change 2022-2024	Change 2019-2024
NAEP	39%	32%	31%	-1	-8
State	36%	32%	48%	17	12
Proficiency gap	-3	0	17		

4th grade math					
	2019	2022	2024	Change 2022-2024	Change 2019-2024
NAEP	45%	43%	42%	-1	-3

State	46%	44%	54%	10	8
Proficiency gap	1	1	12		

8th grade math					
	2019	2022	2024	Change 2022-2024	Change 2019-2024
NAEP	41%	33%	37%	4	-4
State	36%	29%	51%	22	16
Proficiency gap	-5	-4	14		



MEMO

DATE: February 6, 2025
TO: Assembly Committee on Education
FROM: Chris Reader, Executive Vice President
Quinton Klabon, Senior Research Director
RE: IRG Action Fund Informational Testimony re: AB 1: changes to the educational assessment program and the school and school district accountability report.

Representative Kitchens and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on Assembly Bill (AB) 1, which addresses the critical need to make state test scores and report cards useful again after recent revisions by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). Thank you to the many cosponsoring legislators for thinking of a way to prioritize consistency and accuracy for parents and schools.

IRG Action Fund is the advocacy and lobbying partner of the Institute for Reforming Government (IRG), a Wisconsin-based think tank that works to give all Wisconsinites an opportunity to prosper. Central to our prosperity is having high-performing schools with high standards and the tools to meet them. State standardized tests and reports cards are essential information for school boards, legislators, and families.

Last month, Wisconsin got back its true test scores. The National Assessment of Educational Progress results ranked Wisconsin 34th in 4th grade reading, 28th in 8th grade reading, 29th in 4th grade mathematics, and 8th in 8th grade mathematics, adjusted for demographics.¹ To make us look even worse, many of the top-performing states were among the lowest spenders in America. The top-10 reading states, for example, were Louisiana, Mississippi, Massachusetts, Indiana, Georgia, Kentucky, Colorado, Texas, South Carolina, and Connecticut. 6 of those 10 are in the bottom 20 in spending per student.²

Unfortunately, our state Forward Exam and ACT benchmarks no longer align with those of the gold-standard Department of Education NAEP. Unlike the state test score standards, the federal standards remained unchanged. Just 31% of 4th graders scored Proficient in reading, far below the 52% claimed by the 2024 Forward Exam.³ This is down from 33% in 2022 and 36% in 2019.⁴ 39% scored Below

¹ Matthew Chingos, "[States' Demographically Adjusted Performance on the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress](#)," Urban Institute, January 29, 2025.

² National Center for Education Statistics, "[Total Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education and Other Related Programs, by Function and State or Jurisdiction: School Year 2020-21](#)," August 8, 2023.

³ United States Department of Education, "[State Profiles: Overview & Trends](#)," January 29, 2025

⁴ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[WISEdash Data Files by Topic: Forward](#)," October 8, 2024.

Basic. In mathematics, 42% of 4th graders scored Proficient, not 54%, as the Forward Exam claimed. Having an unreliable test is terrible news for educators, parents, and elected officials.

IRG's report, *Testing Our Patience*, broke the news on how, when, and why Superintendent Jill Underly lowered 2024 Forward Exam and ACT standards. We will share key insights from that report here, drawing on public records through April 2024. IRG has waited months for DPI to provide a second round of public records on the matter for its follow-up report.

To help you understand why these changes are bad, we will advance 3 main points. First, DPI's public justification for changing standards does not match what they said behind closed doors. Second, DPI's new Forward and ACT proficiency rates are not useful to parents. Third, DPI's changes hurt the consistency of state report cards.

Superintendent Underly has argued test standards needed to be lowered due to changes in the test. DPI updated reading and mathematics standards this decade, and they also modified the Forward Exam with new components.⁵ To quote the Superintendent, "This meant the Forward Exam needed to be updated to accurately assess students on those learning goals, and that a standard setting was required to take place."⁶

This does not appear to be how changes originated. On January 23, 2023, then-Executive Director Tom McCarthy wrote, "Dr. Underly is interested in taking another look at how we establish our cut scores for the Forward Exam. Given that we're amid some other change in that area, we're asking for a decision paper on what it would take to change the cut scores, as well as what timeline we'd be working off."⁷ In other words, Superintendent Underly's desire to change cut scores came before she was aware of any standard setting. In February and March 2024, she added, "Before I jumped off- yes, I'd like to have a conversation about our cut scores being the highest in the country and how we communicate what that translates to with NAEP," and, "I also want to, and maybe this exists as a possibility, to norm our levels to be similar to other states... as I hear that we have some of the highest cut scores nationally. I would like them to be looked at so that we aren't judged negatively when we have direct standards."⁸ These quotations came months before teachers show up to set cut scores, yet Superintendent Underly specifically indicates that she would like to lower standards to match Wisconsin's scores to those of Midwestern states surrounding us.

Additionally, it is simply not true that holding a fresh standard setting or revised test format required drastic changes in the grading scale. In June and July, educators and DPI had full autonomy to set the

⁵ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[Wisconsin Forward Exam Updates](#)," July 17, 2024.

⁶ Jill Underly, "[New Proficiency Levels Reflect Wisconsin Student Performance](#)," *The Capital Times*, October 10, 2024.

⁷ Jake Curtis, "[Testing Our Patience: How Wisconsin Lowered Standards, Widened the Achievement Gap, and Busted Its State Exams](#)," Institute for Reforming Government, October 5, 2024.

⁸ Jake Curtis, "[Testing Our Patience: How Wisconsin Lowered Standards, Widened the Achievement Gap, and Busted Its State Exams](#)," Institute for Reforming Government, October 5, 2024.

cutoff standards wherever they preferred, making it possible to compare 2024 to earlier years.⁹ The Long-Term-Trend NAEP itself has provided unbroken trend lines since 1971 despite vast changes in American education and a test format revision in 2004.¹⁰

Superintendent Underly has also argued that NAEP is too difficult a grader and the Forward Exam and ACT now properly measure grade-level achievement. She recently said, “[NAEP’s] actually a grade level above where kids are, so we were measuring kids on their current Forward exam at a different standard than grade expectation for the kids.”¹¹

There are a few problems with this. First, it is not clear that Superintendent Underly came into this work with the necessary understanding to do the best job. In June and July 2023, when setting standards for the PreACT they would lower a year later, she wrote, “I need help with this. I obviously trust Viji [Somasundaram], but I truly don’t understand what I am looking at for my approval. And with all this other nonsense going on with literacy I want to make sure we’re not throwing more fuel onto this fire. The crummy thing is, I am an educator and I don’t understand it - so how are parents supposed to understand this too? If we could set the standards and the cut scores, but then have some kind of way to interpret it to parents and educators as a companion, that would be great. For example, what does Proficient mean vs. Advanced? That they are at grade level vs. the next grade level? I just hate this stuff so much.” Later, she responded, “I’m going to need a primer on this, or a tutoring session. I still don’t understand it, and it’s just a learning block that I have on my end.” Aside from a possible shot at Act 20 reading reforms, it also appears she was unsure of how to define proficiency.

Second, it is the 2023 benchmarks that clearly labeled student learning and the 2024 benchmarks that mislabeled them. NAEP and 2023 Forward benchmarks used to be simple. Minimal was roughly “below grade level,” Basic was “grade level,” Proficient was “college- and career-ready,” and Advanced was “selective college- or career-ready.”¹² Instead of simply relabeling them as such, DPI changed the cut scores to new benchmarks that no longer represent grade level. For example, the Lake Country School District has among the highest proficiency rates in Wisconsin. But 22.3% of Lake Country 4th graders still scored Developing or Approaching on the 2024 Forward Exam and are supposedly below grade level, according to Superintendent Underly. Does anybody on this committee actually think 1 in 5 Lake Country 9-year-olds cannot read grade-level books like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* or *The Wind in the Willows*? But do not take my word for it. Her own staff at DPI appeared to contradict her. Deputy State Superintendent Tom McCarthy and Policy Initiatives Advisor John Johnson told the Milwaukee Journal

⁹ Jake Curtis, “[Testing Our Patience: How Wisconsin Lowered Standards, Widened the Achievement Gap, and Busted Its State Exams](#),” Institute for Reforming Government, October 5, 2024.

¹⁰ United States Department of Education, “[NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment Results: Reading and Mathematics](#),” March 5, 2024.

¹¹ Kelly Meyerhofer, “[Wisconsin State Superintendent Voter Guide for Spring 2025 Primary: What 3 Candidates Say about ICE, School Police, Referendums and More](#),” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, February 5, 2025.

¹² United States Department of Education, “[Scale Scores and NAEP Achievement Levels](#),” December 9, 2021.

Sentinel “‘Grade level’ probably falls between ‘meeting’ and ‘approaching.’”¹³ Whether you want rigorous or less rigorous standards, parents need information about their children that clearly communicates how their children are doing. The new Forward Exam standards do not provide that.

Third, the federal government clearly declares what “proficiency” means. Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, “Students in America [are to] be taught to high academic standards that will prepare them to succeed in college and careers.”¹⁴ DPI, on the other hand, has lowered the proficiency standard on the ACT from about a 21 to a 19.¹⁵ ACT itself says students who score a 19 will not likely succeed in college.¹⁶

Finally, Superintendent Underly’s change will disrupt state report cards yet again, hurting the consistency for parents and school leaders. “The DPI will convene a group of educators [in 2025] to help align the report card cut scores to communicate the success of schools and districts.”¹⁷ This would be the third time in 5 years that DPI changes the report cards.

This is because Achievement scores are now through the roof while Growth scores stay the same. In other words, districts with few low-income students would have a much greater advantage than districts with many low-income students on state report cards. Unfortunately, DPI staff warned leadership of this happening. “These report card rating increases will benefit low-poverty schools more than high-poverty schools due to variable weighting of Achievement and Growth priority areas, as required by state law,” said the Office of Educational Accountability on April 3, 2024.¹⁸ Indeed, that is what happened. From 2023 to 2024, White-Black achievement gaps in reading grew 4.7% in Madison and 7.9% in Racine. White-Hispanic gaps grew 1.9% in Eau Claire and 4.1% in Sheboygan.¹⁹ Mathematics is even worse. As a result, unless DPI revises state report cards, their internal emails suggest the amount of 4- and 5-star districts will rise to 50% in 2025 and 71% in 2026.²⁰ What parents, school boards, and educators want from report cards is consistency from year to year, especially as children recover from the pandemic. Superintendent Underly’s lowering of test score standards makes consistency impossible going forward.

In sum, Superintendent Underly wanted to lower standards years ago, her new standards do not communicate grade-level- or college-readiness to parents, and her revisions require yet another revision to state report cards. The changes are bad for families, policymakers, and educators. Superintendent

¹³ Alan Borsuk, “[Does Lowering Cut Scores and Changing Terminology on Standardized Tests Better Serve Wisconsin Students?](#)” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 23, 2024.

¹⁴ United States Department of Education, “[Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#),” January 14, 2025

¹⁵ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, “[The ACT Data and Results](#),” October 1, 2025.

¹⁶ American College Testing, “[ACT Scores for Higher Education Professionals](#),” March 1, 2023.

¹⁷ A.J. Bayatpour, “[New State Report Cards Released: Scoring Change Complicates Yearly Comparisons](#),” *WDJT*, November 19, 2024.

¹⁸ Jake Curtis, “[Testing Our Patience: How Wisconsin Lowered Standards, Widened the Achievement Gap, and Busted Its State Exams](#),” Institute for Reforming Government, October 5, 2024.

¹⁹ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, “[WISEdash Data Files by Topic: Forward](#),” October 8, 2024.

²⁰ Jake Curtis, “[Testing Our Patience: How Wisconsin Lowered Standards, Widened the Achievement Gap, and Busted Its State Exams](#),” Institute for Reforming Government, October 5, 2024.

Underly has said the debate over test-score standards is a distraction from underfunding Wisconsin district schools, adding, "If it wasn't a political year, this is my feeling, it wouldn't be an issue."²¹ The school boards, education advocates, and parents in uproar over these confusing changes demonstrate it is the opposite: chasing high standards is what is best for kids every year.

AB 1 will return standards to rigorous benchmarks that all parents want for their children. We thank the committee for hearing this bill today.

²¹ Jill Underly, "February 4, 2025," *UpNorthNews Radio*, February 4, 2025.



612 W. Main Street, #200
Madison, WI 53703

Phone: (608) 256-0827
www.lwwwi.org



02/01/25

Re: the League of Women Voters of WI opposes AB1

1. The new assessment cut scores better reflect how students are performing in the classroom.

The new cut scores, which separate students' assessment scores into the four different performance levels, are more in line with educator perceptions of student achievement. The majority of Wisconsin students are doing grade level work based on local assessment results and teacher evaluations of students.

Recent updates to statewide assessments more accurately reflect where Wisconsin students perform academically in public and choice schools so that parents get results that make sense to them in relation to what their children are being taught at their grade level in school.

Our Wisconsin standards are set by grade level, so our statewide assessment performance levels should reflect where students are based on these Wisconsin standards.

2. The new cut scores and performance level terms are more conducive to student and school improvement.

The new cut scores better show opportunity gaps (or differences in student performance) and areas for improvement.

The new performance level terms provide clear information for students and parents that avoid the use of negative labels that are likely to decrease student motivation and be detrimental to student mental health.

3. Practicing educators have been involved in assessment updates, including the new cut scores, from the very beginning. Practicing educators have been part of the entire academic standards, test development and performance standard setting processes.

4. Assessment updates fit within the larger cycle of academic standards, instruction, assessments, and accountability. The DPI changes fit a coherent system of standards, instruction, assessment, and accountability that accurately informs parents and supports school improvement. They are also consistent with the state Forward Exam and align with expectations from grade 3 to grade 11.

5. The report card changes under the bill are unnecessary and DPI is best positioned to manage the report card system.



Testimony: AB 1 / SB 18
Andrew Davis, Vice President of Governmental Affairs
Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce
February 6, 2025

Chairman Kitchens and members, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on this important education issue. It is important that we share with you the value our membership and 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.

A strong education system is fundamental to this vision. Our students, families, educators, and policymakers rely on clear, measurable, and transparent academic standards to assess progress and identify areas for improvement. These standards ensure students are prepared for success in higher education, careers, and civic life. The recent changes made by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) have significantly altered how student proficiency is measured. By lowering standards and redefining assessment categories, these changes have made it impossible to compare current student performance to previous years. This lack of continuity and transparency hinders efforts to improve educational outcomes, particularly in historically underserved communities.

The need for accurate data is especially urgent in Milwaukee, where the most recent NAEP results indicate that Wisconsin has the largest racial achievement gap in the nation. Ensuring that families, educators, and policymakers have access to clear and honest data is essential for addressing these challenges.

This issue extends beyond the classroom and directly impacts Wisconsin's economy. The business community depends on a well-educated workforce to drive economic growth, innovation, and job creation. Yet, many employers report challenges finding workers with essential skills, particularly in literacy and math, which are fundamental to success in nearly every industry. Employers rely on clear academic benchmarks to ensure graduates are prepared for the demands of the workforce. Lowering standards does not prepare students for real-world expectations, it only delays the challenges they will face in higher education and employment.

MMAC supports Assembly Bill 1, which restores accountability by requiring DPI to align state proficiency standards with nationally recognized benchmarks, including the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and ACT College & Career Readiness Standards. We respectfully ask for your support of Assembly Bill 1. By passing AB 1, Wisconsin can reaffirm its commitment to high-quality education, better prepare students for the future, and ensure that our region remains a competitive place to live and work.

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