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Senate Bill 18 Testimony

Thank you, Vice-Chari Quinn and members of the committee, for hearing Senate Bill 18 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.

Last month, 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.



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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 academic "experts". 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 SB 18.

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



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Senate Committee on Education
Public Hearing -March 13, 2025

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Chair 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.

Not long ago, Wisconsin's Pre-K – 12 schools were among the top in the nation, and there was no thought for comparison to other states. However, after a decade of major changes in reading and math policies, Mississippi is now a model worth considering – not just for our schools, but for our students. Their progress is the result of a decade of focused efforts by administrators, educators, students, families, and policymakers to implement meaningful improvements. We should take note.

One key factor in Mississippi's success has been school accountability – ensuring that schools are measured transparently on whether students are on grade level and making progress, with a special focus on those who have historically struggled the most. [ExcelinEd, Policy Lessons from States That Improved Students' Reading and Math Proficiency; Dr. Hovanetz]. School accountability matters and it's concerning that today its importance seems to be fading.

Wisconsin faces a serious education problem—too many of our kids are struggling to read and do math at grade level. Academic standards are not being met, and our students are paying the price. We need to take an honest look at how well our schools are preparing our children. While some schools are excelling, supporting both teachers and students in achieving success, far too many are falling behind.

High academic standards for our K-12 testing protocols should be upheld so our kids and their families, as well as teachers, have clear and consistent expectations.

Assembly Bill 1 will simply ensure that pupil assessment cut scores, score ranges and pupil performance categories are reinstated to the 2019-20 standards. The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) in consultation with themselves changed the cut scores and redesigned the assessment process – DPI broke connection with Governor Evers standards. It is now impossible to compare Wisconsin to other states; perhaps that was their intent.

According to the DPI report cards for the 2023-24 school year, 84% of public schools in Wisconsin met, exceeded, or significantly exceeded state expectations. How is this possible when our kids are not reading or doing math to grade level?

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 expectations, assessments, or standards in our schools doesn't set our kids up for success. Assembly Bill 1 is a step in the right directions, and I hope you'll join me in supporting it.



March 13, 2025

Senate Committee on Education

**Department of Public Instruction Testimony
2025 SB 18**

Thank you, Chairpersons Jagler and Quinn, and members of the Senate Education Committee, for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Tom McCarthy, and I serve as Deputy State Superintendent at the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). Today I am joined by Viji Somasundaram, our Director for the Office of Educational Accountability, and Sam Bohrod, our Assistant Director for the Office of Educational Accountability.

The DPI believes in the critical importance of rigorous academic goals, the need to identify learners' progress towards mastering grade-level knowledge and skills and holding schools and districts accountable for that progress.

The DPI is opposed to SB 18 due to the nature of NAEP as a non-grade-level assessment, disruptions to NAEP at the federal level, the rigorous process for establishing accountability benchmarks at the state level, and the need to align our state assessment to our state academic standards.

As you consider Assembly Bill 1 and Senate Bill 18, we'd like to highlight a few things that we recently provided to the Assembly Education Committee and the Joint Legislative Audit Committee.

It is important for us to also recognize major changes, cuts, and disruptions at the United States Department of Education (USDE), the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) since last month.

The USDE cut nearly 50 % of their staff this week including staff who worked with NAEP. The department suspended the long-time leader of NCES and NAEP last month and canceled the NAEP Long Term Trend (LTT) - a national test of 17-year-olds - which was in progress. The department has also canceled a contract for conducting background checks on field staff who administer NAEP tests in schools impacting NAEP's future. Also, the United States Department of Education canceled about \$881 million in multi-year research contracts. And, that's all the actions in just the past two weeks.

Anyone who follows the daily news from Washington knows that this is only the beginning and what comes next is unknown to say the least. It is clear in this time of massive uncertainty, cuts, and disruption at NAEP and the USDE that it is not the time to tie Wisconsin statute to anything related to NAEP. These cancellations will have implications for the accuracy of national-level data.

Specifically, it does not make sense to align to a non-grade-level assessment, NAEP, that is unaligned with Wisconsin academic standards and is facing uncertainty, cuts and disruption.

Now returning to our state. A couple of important points to make. It's March, which means all of our public schools and private schools participating in the choice programs are starting the annual Forward Exam assessment (grades 3 through 8) and testing runs through April. The educators and leaders of all of these schools will receive their results by the end of May. The quickest turnaround for results ever – a priority for this administration.

So, two years of trend data for every student, grade, school and district will be available in two months. We are also on track to provide prior testing data using our new assessment benchmarks, giving districts a stable trend to design instructional practices around.

We do not want to assume this committee is versed in education policy, so we want to take some time to explain standards, assessments, school and district report cards, and how they relate to one another. The State Superintendent is required by Wisconsin statute to establish academic standards, assessments, and accountability reports. The Department of Public Instruction discharges this responsibility in a highly collaborative, transparent manner consistent with the law and professional standards.

The foundation for Wisconsin's assessment and accountability systems is the state academic standards. These rigorous standards describe what we as a state believe our children should know and be able to do at the end of each grade-level to prepare them to graduate from high school ready to pursue further academic or technical study or enter the workforce. The academic standards are regularly reviewed by the State Superintendent's Academic Standards Review Council, of which Senators Jagler and Larson are members. When academic standards are revised, the revisions are authored collaboratively with educators from colleges, technical schools, universities, and school districts from around the state. Standards go through a public comment period, are sent to the members of the Education Committees in both houses for feedback, and get the recommendation of the State Superintendent's Academic Standards Review Council regarding adoption. Our revised Wisconsin academic standards in English language arts and mathematics are more specific and challenging, adding areas of instruction not in place in older versions, such as skills critical for reading, problem-solving, and the evolving use of technology.

The academic assessments are designed to measure student knowledge and skills related to the Wisconsin Academic Standards, as required by law ([Wisconsin state statute 118.30](#) and federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act). Test questions are written with the standards in mind (and with the significant involvement of Wisconsin teachers), and assessments are formally aligned with the academic standards to ensure adequate coverage. Students who take the test receive a score, called a "scale score," for example, "1545". To make the scale score meaningful, it must be compared to something, for example, to the scores of other students (e.g., "the 75th percentile") or to some objective performance standard (e.g., "meeting"). The objective performance standards place students into categories based on the degree to which they have demonstrated grade-level knowledge and skills on the tests (as required by [20 U.S. Code § 6311 \(b\)\(2\)\(B\)](#)).

Placing students into performance categories requires a standard setting, the setting of “cut scores”, the scale scores that define the boundaries between one performance level and the next. There are well-established processes for establishing cut scores. In the process used for the Forward Exam, a group of 88 educators from around the state spent nearly a week reviewing the academic standards, performance level descriptions (the grade-level knowledge and skills students would be expected to demonstrate), and actual, live test questions ordered by difficulty (as measured by actual student data). The process crucially relied on expert educator judgement. Educators were asked to recommend cut scores based on their professional judgement, without being directed toward any pre-ordained result. The Wisconsin Academic Standards are foundational, as required by law. The process is transparent, and you can read all about it on the Office of Educational Accountability (OEA) website.

These processes are transparent and collaborative. OEA works with a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) of national assessment experts. OEA regularly works with educators from around Wisconsin to review test questions before they are used on the Forward Exam and provide direction on scoring writing questions. OEA conducted a survey to arrive at updated performance level names. As you can see, Wisconsin educators are deeply involved in the development of the academic standards, assessments, and performance standard settings.

We have used the model of standards and assessment since 1998, with the adoption of the first Wisconsin Model Academic Standards and the introduction of Wisconsin-specific items on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations (WKCE). Standard settings are required whenever a new test is introduced, or a test is significantly updated - usually as a result of updated academic standards. When academic standards are updated, the test design may also need to be updated to assess the standards, and with the change in test design a performance level standard setting to establish new cut scores is also required. This is exactly what happened with the Forward Exam in 2024 - the Wisconsin English language arts and mathematics standards were updated, the assessments were significantly redesigned, including the building of a new reading test, and a new standard setting was required.

The scale scores and performance levels reported from the statewide assessments provide important information about student achievement related to the Wisconsin grade-level academic standards. The information can be used with other data to inform student instructional planning, curriculum development, school improvement planning, program evaluation, and so on. It's critical that the test results faithfully represent student knowledge and skills related to the grade-level Wisconsin academic standards - that the data can support the interpretations we make.

It has been suggested that Wisconsin should adopt the performance standards set by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The latest grade 4 and 8 reading and mathematics NAEP tests were administered in January 2024, and the results were released on January 29, 2025. The Wisconsin state summative assessments are usually administered until the end of April, and the results became available in vendor reporting portals as early as May and June. The turnaround time for our state reporting is a month or two, while the NAEP test took a year. In addition to timeline challenges, the tests measure different things, and NAEP tests a small sample of Wisconsin students, while the Wisconsin State Assessment System covers all publicly funded students. No student or school that participates in NAEP ever gets to see their results, while every tested student, school, and district gets detailed state assessment results. NAEP test questions are written to test students' knowledge and skills related to the federal government's NAEP assessment frameworks, taught at no school in Wisconsin, while the state test questions are

aimed directly at the state academic standards taught in our schools. NAEP has never been geared toward helping classroom teachers improve instruction, while the Wisconsin State Assessment System (WSAS) is designed to serve our schools with actionable data to drive learning.

This leads us next to the school and district report cards, which use the assessment data, among other school data, in evaluating school and district performance.

For background, Wisconsin state statute 115.385, the statute concerning report cards, requires the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to annually publish school and district report cards by the end of November. The law also requires report cards include the following:

- Multiple measures to evaluate school and district performance and improvement,
- Pupil achievement in reading and mathematics,
- Growth in pupil achievement in reading and mathematics, calculated using a value-added methodology,
- Gap closure in pupil achievement in reading and mathematics and graduation (when available),
- Rates of attendance or high school graduation,
- “Variable weighting” of achievement and growth scores on report cards based on the percentage of economically disadvantaged students enrolled in the school or district,
- An index system to be used to evaluate school and district performance and improvement and to assign to each school and district one of the following ratings:
 - Five stars–Significantly Exceeds Expectations
 - Four stars–Exceeds Expectations
 - Three stars–Meets Expectations
 - Two stars–Meets Few Expectations
 - One star–Fails to Meet Expectations.
- Reporting (not scoring) on certain postsecondary and arts course data.

The Department has fulfilled this requirement by producing report cards every year since the establishment of the school and district report card system in 2011-12 unless prohibited by statute (2014-15 and 2019-20).

As dictated by statute, report cards are not solely based on test scores. The Achievement Priority Area measures a three-year weighted average of assessment results. The Growth Priority Area uses a value-added methodology to track student performance across years and scores the improvement relative to similar students. The Target Group Outcomes Priority Area measures the performance of the bottom quartile of performers to determine within-school/district gaps on achievement, growth, attendance, absenteeism, and graduation. Finally, the On-Track to Graduation Priority Area scores 3rd grade English language arts and 8th grade mathematics achievement along with attendance, absenteeism, and graduation.

These bills propose 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 bills as it 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. Some of the changes have taken place legislatively, including variable weighting and value-added growth (2015 Wisconsin Act 55). Other updates, including replacing the Closing Gaps priority area with the Target Group Outcomes priority area and converting absenteeism into dynamic scoring instead of a deduction, were made through consultation with an Accountability Advisory Group of choice school, charter school, and other public school stakeholders across the state.

When necessary, updates took place over the years and the focus has been on maintaining consistency, transparency, and the intent of the Accountability Design Team that created the report card system. The Accountability Design Team was led by then Governor Walker and then State Superintendent Evers along with prior co-chairs of the Legislature's education committees. Updates to the original report card system created by the Accountability Design Team 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.

Changes to the original report card system that significantly affected report card scoring have been made in the 2015-16 report cards, 2020-21 report cards, and 2023-24 report cards. Even when scoring changes have been made, DPI has made every effort to make report cards from 2011-12 through 2023-24 comparable from year to year.

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.

In conclusion, using NAEP results from previous years as the basis for re-setting cut scores would mean that the Forward Exam is no longer aligned with the grade level expectations as defined by Wisconsin educators and described in the Wisconsin Academic Standards.

The updated performance level cut scores resulting from the 2024 assessment standard setting process represent what educators believe Wisconsin students know and can do in relation to the academic standards. These updated cut scores accurately represent the learning that is taking place in Wisconsin schools and should remain in place, so we are able to measure student learning in a meaningful way for Wisconsin.

This proposal replaces the thoughtful work done by Wisconsin educators and the Department with a plan to use an outdated measurement system that does not provide clear and accurate information on how Wisconsin students are performing in relation to Wisconsin Academic Standards. The processes implemented to update the Wisconsin academic standards,

assessments, and performance standards serve the best interests of Wisconsin students and families.

The performance level cut scores should not be set back and locked in to outdated scores. We followed nationally recognized processes and relied on the expert advice of hundreds of Wisconsin educators to align academic standards and assessments and establish rigorous performance standards for all students as guided by national experts on Wisconsin's Technical Advisory Committees.

We received input from nearly 1,000 stakeholders around the state regarding updated category names that affirm the continuum of learning without diminishing those students who are still developing the skills to be successful learners.

This has been a multi-year effort to modernize our standards and assessments to align with the education landscape in Wisconsin and meet the needs of our students. We believe the new performance level cut scores established by Wisconsin educators should remain intact to provide the most accurate measure of student and school progress in Wisconsin.

As we've discussed today, we strongly oppose reverting report card cut scores to ones that were set before a decade's worth of changes took place.

Thank you for your time and attention. We would be happy to take any questions you have at this time and our copy of our submitted testimony includes an email address to direct any future questions.

TESTIMONIALS FROM WI EDUCATORS ENGAGED IN FORWARD EXAM 2024 PROFICIENCY LEVEL (CUT SCORE) SETTING

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 Marvinna – a WI 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.

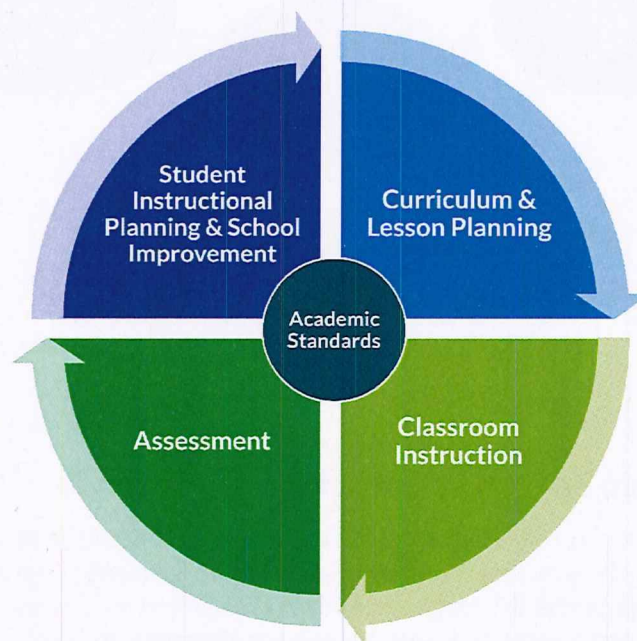
Reverting to old systems would not only undermine the hard work we did but also fail to keep up with the evolving needs of our students and the times we live in. It is crucial that our assessments continue to be aligned with the standards developed by Wisconsin educators, as they are the ones who understand 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.”

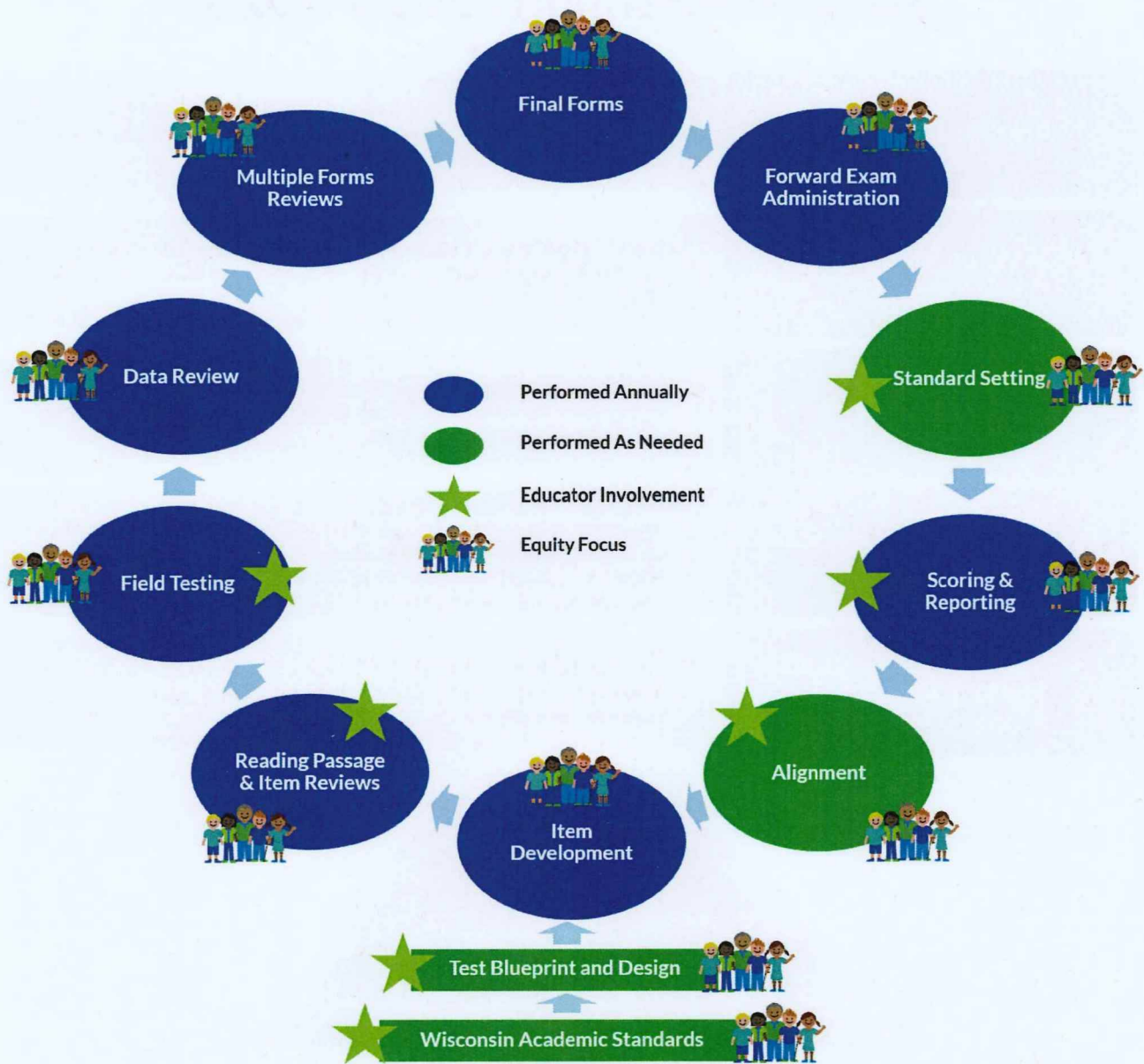
Thank you for allowing DPI to share this testimony. Please direct any questions to Laura Adams, Policy Initiatives Advisor, at laura.adams@dpi.wi.gov .

Academic Standards, Classroom Teaching, and State Assessments 2020-2025

Academic Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Specify the knowledge and skills students should learn (ELA (2020) with more detailed sections on reading and phonics, and Mathematics (2021), revised)
Classroom Teaching and Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Districts and schools implement the new academic standards in instruction in 3-4 years through revising curriculum and lesson plans
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Statewide assessment aligned to the new academic standards and revised when changes made (New Reading assessment created and used first in 2024)
Performance Level Standard Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Educators recommend new cut scores (the level of performance required on the test to be classified in each performance level) on revised and new assessments by reviewing academic standards, descriptors, and all test items (in 2024 for ELA, Math, and new Reading assessments)
Assessment Reporting and Student and School Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Parents, Educators and School Leaders use results for individual student and classroom instruction planning and school improvement efforts



Forward Exam Development Process



Involvement of Wisconsin Educators in the Forward Exam:

Wisconsin educators play an integral role at all stages in the development of the state's academic content standards, achievement standards, and assessments. Educators with diverse geographic, demographic, racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds across the state participate in the Forward Exam development activities. Special education and English learner representation is also ensured at all stages of development. A diverse group for educator involvement is an important step in ensuring that the Forward Exam supports educational equity.

Selected examples of this participation include the following:

- Development of the Wisconsin Academic Standards;
- Participation in the standard-setting process that established performance descriptors and cut scores for the Forward Exam
- Annual review and editing of assessment items in English language arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies for content appropriateness, bias and sensitivity, depth of knowledge, and difficulty and fairness prior to field testing;
- Refining of the test blueprints and test designs to ensure the Forward Exam reflects what students should know and should be able to do to be college- and career-ready.

Wisconsin Academic Standards:

The Wisconsin Academic Standards specify what students should know and be able to do in the classroom, in order to be college- and career-ready. To ensure that all children have equal access to high quality education programs, the academic standards are essential in making sure our schools offer opportunities to get the knowledge and skills necessary for success beyond the classroom.

Test Blueprints and Designs:

The test blueprints and designs outline the number, types, and difficulty of items on the Forward Exam. The blueprints and designs ensure the structure and format of the Forward Exam is consistent from year to year, allowing for tracking student group progress over time, to monitor and ensure equity.

Item Development:

The test vendor annually develops multiple items (in multiple formats and types) for English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, aligned to the Wisconsin Academic Standards. Once DPI reviews all new items, Wisconsin educators are brought together to review, edit, and approve them.

Reading Passage and Item Review:

The DPI staff, Wisconsin educators, and the test vendor review all reading passages and items to make sure that all students have an equal-and-fair opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. Items are reviewed for potential bias against racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender, or geographically-represented groups.

After items are developed, the DPI staff and a team of Wisconsin educators are brought together to review items and to decide whether they should be included on the Forward Exam. The educators review the items to make sure that they are appropriate for the intended grade level and that all students will have an equal-and-fair opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. The team of educators may modify the items as necessary to achieve these goals. Items unable to be modified appropriately are rejected from use on the Forward Exam.

Field Testing:

After items have been approved by DPI and the team of Wisconsin educators, they are embedded in the Forward Exam for field testing. How students perform on the field test items does not affect students' score on the exam, but it does allow the DPI and test vendor to collect data to ensure that the items provide all students with an equal-and-fair opportunity to demonstrate their skills.

Data Review:

Field testing data are reviewed by DPI and the test vendor to make sure that the items performed as intended and do not contain bias toward a specific group of students. Items are rejected from future use on the Forward Exam if they do not meet these criteria.

Multiple Forms Reviews:

The test vendor conducts multiple statistical analyses to make sure that test forms are consistent from year to year. The DPI staff conducts multiple reviews of the test forms to make sure that the items are appropriate for all students, grade-level, and subjects.

Final Forms:

The final test forms and all items are reviewed by the test vendor and DPI for sensitivity issues related to equity, current events, and natural disasters before the testing window opens.

Forward Exam Administration:

The Forward Exam test administration is conducted in a standardized manner. A standardized test is a test that is administered and scored in a consistent, or "standard", manner. Standardized tests are designed in such a way that the questions, conditions for administering, scoring procedures, and interpretations are consistent and are administered and scored in a predetermined, standard manner. All test administrators are required to complete training and follow exact instructions and a written script provided in a Test Administration Manual. This standardization ensures all students have equal access and opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in relation to the Wisconsin Academic Standards.

Standard Setting:

Standard Setting is a process of determining cut scores that correlate with performance levels. A diverse group of Wisconsin educators set these cut scores by engaging in a structured conversation that includes content standards, performance levels, the test, and expectations for ALL students. The cut scores that are determined during the standard-setting procedure distinguish one performance level from another.

Scoring and Reporting:

The tests are scored using a pattern scoring technique based on item response theory (IRT). A student's score is dependent not only upon the number correct, but on each item's difficulty and guessing parameters in conjunction with the student's response on the item.

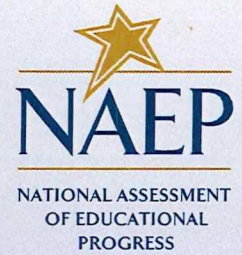
Reports are generated annually for parents, districts, schools, and DPI. State, district, and school level data are publicly reported for all students and all student groups. Parents receive an individual student report of their child's performance on the Forward Exam. DPI provides a template of a student report translated in both Spanish and Hmong.

Alignment:

After testing and scoring are complete, an independent and diverse group reviews the items on the test to ensure they align to the academic standards. The group makes sure there are enough items, coverage across standards, and ranges of difficulty for each objective.

NAEP and State Assessments

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and state assessments are both used to measure the academic progress of the nation's students. Understanding the similarities and differences between these assessments is critical to improving education in the United States.



NAEP

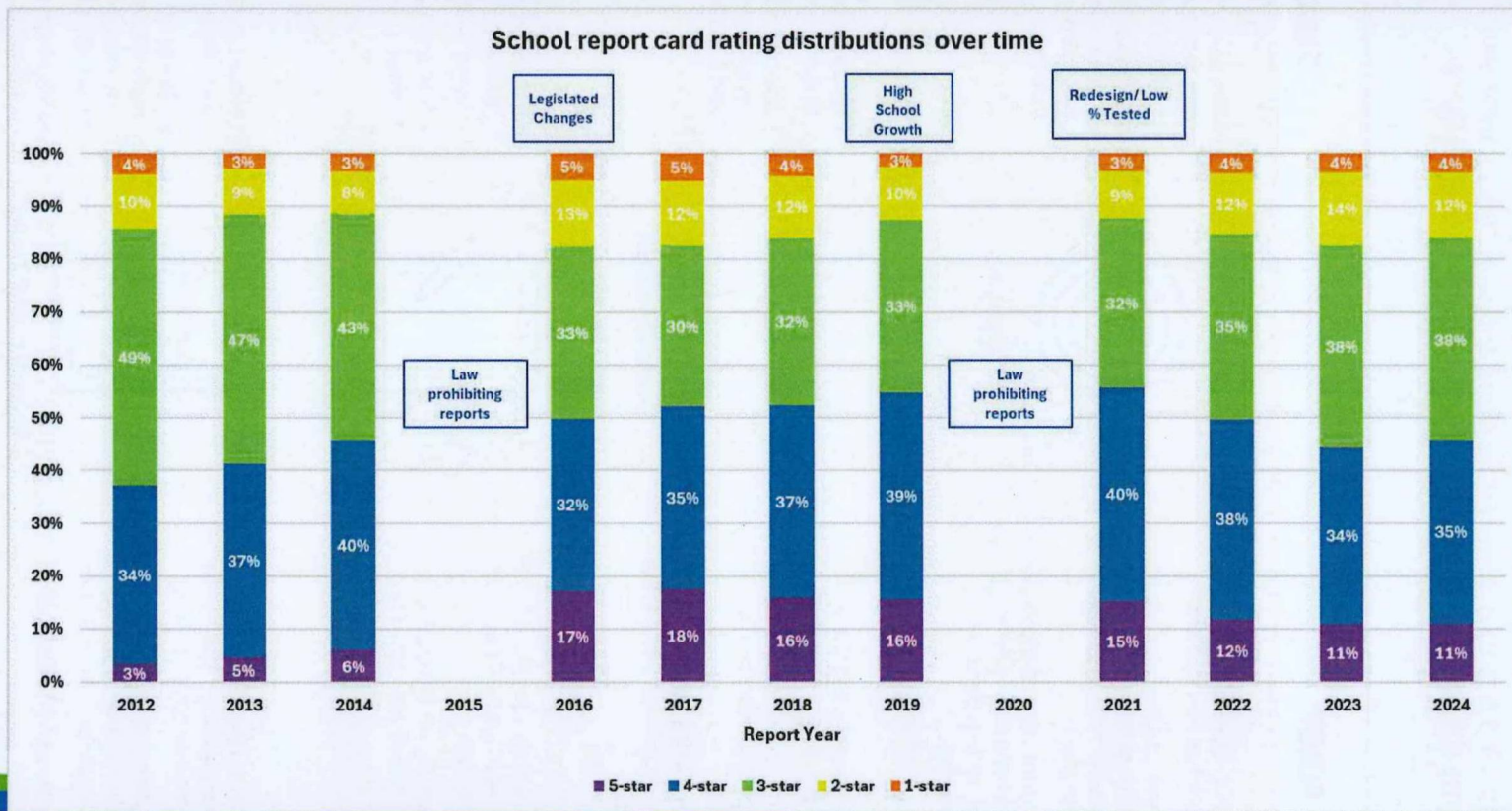
State Assessments

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measures what the nation's students know and can do in various subjects • Provides a common yardstick for states to measure student progress and gathers contextual information about students' educational experiences • Designed to measure content frameworks developed by the National Assessment Governing Board, an independent, bipartisan organization 	 <p>Purpose</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measure students' progress toward required knowledge and skills as set and defined by each state's content standards • Comply with annual assessment requirements in reading/language arts and mathematics and periodic assessments in science
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A nationally representative sample of students in grades 4, 8, and 12 is asked to participate • Student participation is voluntary, but highly encouraged • Allows a broad range of accommodations for students with disabilities and English language learners 	 <p>Participation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation may be required for all students in public schools • Offer accommodations and modified assessments for students with disabilities and English language learners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessments are administered in 90–120 minutes by NAEP staff on NAEP-provided equipment on one day • Administered digitally, on tablets or laptops, or in paper-and-pencil format 	 <p>Administration</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessments range from being administered in a few hours to over the course of multiple days • Administered digitally or in paper-and-pencil format
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluates trends in student achievement over time by demographic groups for the nation, states, and some urban districts • Used by policymakers, educators, the media, and the assessment community to develop ways to improve and report on education • Results are not reported for individual students or schools 	 <p>Results and Uses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report state, district, school, and individual student results • Used to set state education policy, examine school and group performance, and make local decisions about curriculum and instruction • May be used as a measure of accountability for districts, schools, teachers, and students

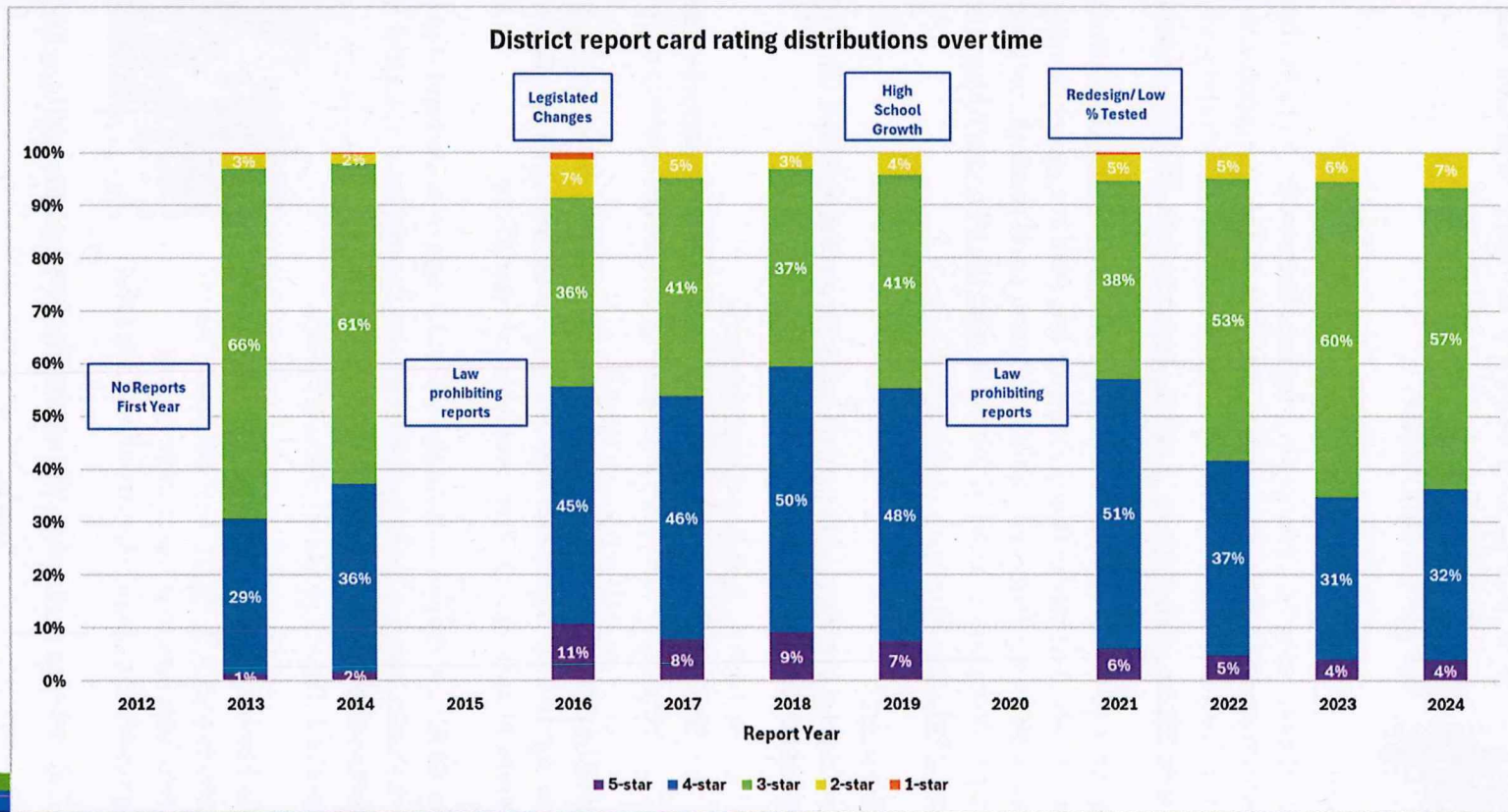
To learn more about NAEP visit: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>

All of the information provided by participants may be used only for statistical purposes and may not be disclosed, or used, in identifiable form for any other purpose except as required by law (20 U.S.C. §9573 and 6 U.S.C. §151). By law, every National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) employee as well as every NCES agent, such as contractors and NAEP coordinators, has taken an oath and is subject to a jail term of up to 5 years, a fine of \$250,000, or both if he or she willfully discloses ANY identifiable information about participants. Electronic submission of participant's information will be monitored for viruses, malware, and other threats by Federal employees and contractors in accordance with the Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015. The collected information will be combined across respondents to produce statistical reports.

School Report Card Ratings Over Time



District Report Card Ratings Over Time





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](#).



WISCONSIN INSTITUTE
FOR LAW & LIBERTY

Testimony in Support of Assembly Bill 1 and Senate Bill 18

Assembly Committee on Education

February 6, 2025

Chairman Jagler, Vice Chair Quinn and members of the Senate Education Committee,

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

Assembly Bill 1 and Senate Bill 18 represent 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.

DPI will no doubt try to pull the wool over your eyes with layers of technocratic speech, but the reality is that their 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.

These changes have not been in the spirit of setting higher, more challenging benchmarks for Wisconsin's students—indeed, they have done the exact opposite.

This march towards mediocrity 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. Today, we have the absurd situation where zero districts fall into the "Fails to Meet Expectations" category despite proficiency rates of under 20% in some areas. 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."

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, they also work to confuse parents and families. 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.” But they also convey optimism where none may be warranted: parents deserve to know when their child is struggling, and terms that quell a needed sense of urgency are unhelpful.

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 also happened in 2024, when DPI lowered the cut points on the Wisconsin Forward Exam as part of a standards rewrite that. This not only lowered proficiency standards but also disrupted alignment with NAEP, making it impossible 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. The NAEP—which has not been altered—showed Wisconsin struggling and stagnating when it comes to educational progress. Once again, we had the largest racial achievement gaps in the country. The new Forward Exam, in contrast, exhibited the soft bigotry of low expectations by falsely claiming record showing record gains in proficiency.

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.

DPI defends these new standards by saying Wisconsin teachers were involved in the process of creating them. But participants were only a small percentage of the teachers in the state. And these teachers were no doubt fed a narrative about the wisdom of lowering standards similar to what you will hear from DPI's experts today.

Wisconsin has many great public, charter, and private schools. But we also have many that are struggling in all sectors. Families deserve clear, unbiased information about how their kids schools are doing—both to understand how to help their children who are already in school and in evaluating what schools would be best for their kids.

Don't let DPI distract you with technocratic language and all the reasons this had to be done. The reality is they robbed Wisconsin families of a key tool for evaluating school performance to absolve themselves of responsibility for a generation of failure.

We hope that the legislature will reverse course.

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

Will Flanders

Research Director

Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty



MEMO

DATE: March 13, 2025
TO: Senate Committee on Education
FROM: Quinton Klaron, Senior Research Director
RE: IRG Action Fund Testimony in Support re: SB 18: changes to the educational assessment program and the school and school district accountability report.

Senator Jagler and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in favor of Senate Bill (SB) 18, 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 prioritizing these essential resources for school boards, legislators, and families.

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.

I am a huge sports fan. Get me going on Kirill Kaprizov, Brandon Woodruff, or Iga Swiatek, and I will not stop. But leagues increasingly rely on analytics to gain advantages, and, as a numbers nerd, which number you pick really matters. Take the National Basketball Association. There's a statistic called box plus/minus that tries to sum everything a basketball player does on the court to 1 number. The ranking this produces makes a lot of sense at first glance - Giannis Antetokounmpo, LeBron James - until you examine its components. According to defensive box plus/minus, do you know who is the best defender in the NBA? It is Nikola Jokic.¹ In fact, he has 3 of the top 10 greatest defensive seasons of all time! If you have never seen Jokic play basketball, his offense is truly marvelous, like watching a 35-year-old dad back down his 10-year-old son in the driveway with weight, sneaky passes, and unreachable jump shots. However, his defense resembles that same father at 45 as he gets whooped by his son on college break: concrete feet, low effort, sweaty, and desperate. He is not a great or even good defender. Because of our eye test as well as other competing statistics we have, we know box plus/minus is not a useful metric. Furthermore, if Jokic's general manager builds a roster using numbers that call Jokic a great defender, the Nuggets will waste tens of millions of dollars and lose constantly.

The changes to the Forward Exam, PreACT, and ACT fail in the exact same way. Nobody who looks at the new proficiency rates actually believes they are real, that the student performance they purport is

¹ Sports Reference, "[NBA & ABA Year-by-Year Top 10 Leaders and Records for Defensive Box Plus/Minus](#)," March 13, 2025.

actually true. Additionally, if we did act as if they were true, we would squander billions making horrible policy decisions.

Take a look at some of the least impoverished school districts in Wisconsin. Does anyone in this room believe 1 in 5 Fox Point students enter Nicolet High School reading below grade level, unable to comprehend *Treasure Island* or *The Wind in the Willows*?² That is what DPI's results say. Now, my Senator, Senator Larson, is a fierce advocate for public school resources. If we address poverty and get schools their constitutionally required resources, he would say, we will see students soar. Fox Point cracked \$20,000 in spending per student per year and only had 8% economically disadvantaged students.³ Students are funded superbly and have few stressors at home. Yet, DPI says 20% struggle with grade-level work despite every advantage. Either DPI's scores are way off or Senator Larson's arguments that adequate funding and solved poverty lead to stellar results are false. Which is it? It cannot be both.

Look at Lodi. DPI says 1 in 4 8th graders struggle with mathematics like $3x - 1 = 11$.⁴ Do you believe that? Will Senator Keyeski drive home after her vote today thinking, "I agree with DPI. 27% of my district's freshmen do not know the Pythagorean Theorem"? If DPI's changes hold, that is the new truth. Forget college-readiness. 1 in 6 Kohler kids cannot read.

Look at DPI's own communication. DPI is asking us to believe 2 things simultaneously. Wisconsin had the highest high school graduation rate it has ever had, and that is something to celebrate, invest in, and grow.⁵ Also, a majority of 11th graders do not meet simple, grade-level reading standards like, "Cite textual evidence that supports what the text says explicitly or implicitly, including determining where the text is ambiguous."⁶ Those 2 things directly conflict, but they are understandable when DPI believes the first statement but not the second.

Now, of course, nobody is going to make policy decisions based on these numbers because nobody - not school boards, not Democrats, not Republicans, not DPI's Office of Educational Accountability (OEA), not Governor Evers - believes them. But if nobody believes them, we ought to roll them back to the numbers that had credibility.

But maybe you agree the new results have no relation to either grade-level or college readiness but are still skeptical. Maybe you agree with the standards then-Superintendent Evers set, which this bill would restore, but you still want to object to it. Perhaps, then, it comes down to teachers being involved in this work. "Educators led this work and I trust educators." The question I will raise is, "Did DPI fully trust educators?"

² Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[WISEdash Data Files by Topic - Forward](#)," October 8, 2024.

³ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[Comparative Revenue Per Member](#)," June 25, 2024.

⁴ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[Wisconsin Standards for Mathematics](#)," May 4, 2021.

⁵ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[WISEdash Data Files by Topic - High School Completion](#)," June 3, 2025.

⁶ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[Wisconsin Standards for English Language Arts](#)," May 5, 2020.

If you have not read the hundreds of pages DPI transparently uploaded on this summer's setting of test-score standards through Data Recognition Corporation (DRC), I will summarize them.⁷ For each grade, teachers received performance-level descriptors written by DPI that said what skills a student would have at Developing versus Approaching versus Meeting versus Advanced. They also received Forward Exam questions arranged from easiest to hardest. Their task was to pick the easiest question a student would get correct at Approaching, Meeting, and Advanced. Those questions would become the borders of those categories and determine the percentage of students in each group. They narrowed them down over multiple rounds, but every round was not the same. In Round 1, teachers set the benchmarks alone and without any way to see what proficiency rates would result. In Round 2, teachers saw which questions the others picked and discussed the choices with each other, then reset their individual benchmarks. In Round 3, teachers saw what proficiency rates their choices would produce, 2023 Wisconsin proficiency rates, and 2023 proficiency rates from Minnesota, Michigan, and Illinois, discussed the choices with each other, then reset their individual benchmarks. In Round 4, 1 teacher from each grade saw the near-final proficiency rates, reviewed descriptors, then tweaked benchmarks. After teachers had finished, DPI adjusted the proficiency rates for each grade so that they were close to one another. All changes were within 1 standard deviation of the scores from Round 4, and Superintendent Underly made no changes upon reviewing the final scores.

If you look at the tables in your packet, you see the rush to 50% occur during Round 3. This is the round in which DPI introduced outside influences to the teachers. I am quoting the report now: "Participants were encouraged to compare the benchmarked impact data with the impact data from their Round 1 recommendations. Participants were informed that DPI did not require or necessarily expect the impact data from their recommendations to match any of the benchmarked impact data, but that they should instead use the benchmarked impact data as a reasonability check for their recommendations." If DPI really trusted teachers to interpret the text of the new standards, why would they let DRC introduce numbers that scared teachers into recanting their previous positions? Even worse, why would they let DRC tell teachers to check our scores against Minnesota's, Michigan's, and Illinois'? DPI's entire argument for altering benchmarks is the gold-standard Department of Education NAEP is not suitably matched to Wisconsin's standards. Yet, apparently, we should align ourselves to what they decided in Lansing and Saint Paul. No, if we are going to trust teachers, trust them all the way. What we got instead was a DPI-shifted product. Supporting this bill is not a rejection of teachers, but a rejection of a flawed process that unduly suppressed teachers' real opinions.

But it is possible people still want to support scores that fail the eye test and are a distortion of educators' original intent. So, what if we just want our reputation back? In all other respects, Wisconsin DPI puts out the deepest and broadest set of education data in the country. Other states barely have functioning websites; we have teacher turnover rates and flexible analysis of enrollment trends for schools to use. OEA Director Visalakshi Somasundaram is on NAEP's actual State Policy Task Force.⁸ But you know how other states know Wisconsin now? Here is Education Next, Harvard University Kennedy

⁷ Data Recognition Corporation, "[Wisconsin Forward Exam ELA and Mathematics Standard Setting 2024 Technical Report](#)," November 12, 2024.

⁸ National Assessment Governing Board, "[State and TUDA Task Forces](#)," April 10, 2023

School's education journal: "Recent moves by Wisconsin and other states to lower the proficiency bar on their tests suggests the importance of public scrutiny of student performance."⁹ Here is Education Week, the journalism standard, in a straight news piece: "Outside of graduation requirements, other states, including Wisconsin, Oklahoma, and Alaska, have lowered the bar to pass state tests over the last few years—a move that critics worry will obscure the academic toll that national indicators have shown the pandemic took on students."¹⁰ I want Wisconsin to have the best schools in America, not a reputation as an easy or inaccurate grader.

IRG Action supports SB 18 for those host of reasons. DPI's new standards are lower than the college and career readiness students deserve for flourishing, contented lives. DPI's new standards are unusable because they also are not grade-level standards, as demonstrated by vastly inaccurate assessments of familiar districts. When setting standards, teachers relied too much on outside data DPI allowed in place of the plain text of the standards and their own experiences in classrooms. Wisconsin is now likened to Oklahoma's similarly tumultuous education department instead of exemplars in Mississippi and Massachusetts. I hope the information provided today is helpful in making the best decision for school boards, parents, and kids. We used to be the best at this. Let us get back to it.

⁹ Thomas Toch, "[Which of the Following Approaches to State Testing Works for U.S. Schools?](#)" *Education Next*, February 11, 2025.

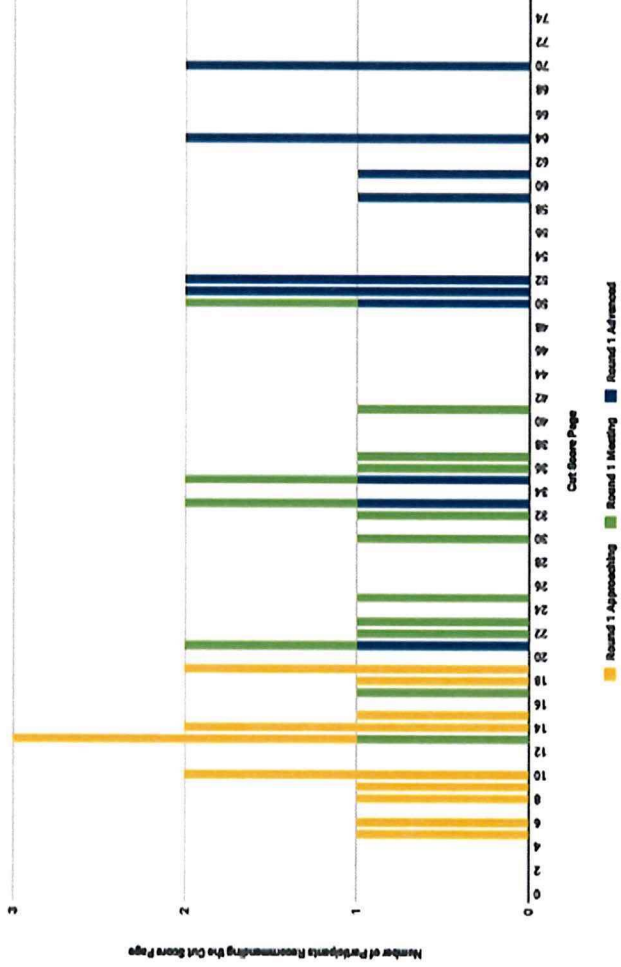
¹⁰ Sara Schwartz, "[Why the Pioneers of High School Exit Exams Are Rolling Them Back,](#)" *Education Week*, November 11, 2024.

ROUND 1				1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	3RD 4TH	READ
3RD	1502	1539	1585	13.50%	20.00%	33.20%	33.30%	66.50%	
4TH	1532	1576	1643	17.90%	25.70%	44.50%	12.00%	56.50%	
5TH	1525	1561	1619	7.30%	15.10%	39.40%	38.40%	77.80%	
6TH	1564	1607	1665	15.10%	26.50%	42.50%	15.90%	58.40%	
7TH	1565	1604	1641	13.70%	21.60%	25.50%	39.10%	64.60%	
8TH	1587	1650	1696	18.80%	36.40%	25.40%	19.40%	44.80%	
TOTAL				14.38%	24.22%	35.08%	26.35%	61.43%	
ROUND 2				1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	3RD 4TH	CHANGE
3RD	1502	1539	1585	13.50%	20.00%	33.20%	33.30%	66.50%	0.00%
4TH	1537	1578	1644	20.30%	24.60%	43.50%	11.60%	55.10%	-1.40%
5TH	1525	1563	1617	7.30%	16.10%	36.70%	39.90%	76.60%	-1.20%
6TH	1573	1605	1665	19.30%	20.70%	44.10%	15.90%	60.00%	1.60%
7TH	1556	1613	1641	10.30%	31.10%	19.50%	39.10%	58.60%	-6.00%
8TH	1587	1652	1696	18.80%	37.70%	24.20%	19.40%	43.60%	-1.20%
TOTAL				14.92%	25.03%	33.53%	26.53%	60.07%	-1.37%
ROUND 3				1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	3RD 4TH	CHANGE
3RD	1511	1563	1622	17.30%	33.50%	36.90%	12.20%	49.10%	-17.40%
4TH	1532	1581	1646	17.90%	29.10%	42.20%	10.80%	53.00%	-2.10%
5TH	1545	1593	1646	14.40%	28.10%	38.50%	19.10%	57.50%	-19.10%
6TH	1570	1607	1665	17.80%	23.70%	42.50%	15.90%	58.50%	-1.50%
7TH	1572	1623	1696	16.80%	31.50%	41.20%	10.50%	51.70%	-6.90%
8TH	1587	1648	1715	18.80%	35.10%	34.40%	11.80%	46.10%	2.50%
TOTAL				17.17%	30.17%	39.28%	13.38%	52.65%	-7.42%
RANGE				1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	3RD 4TH	CHANGE
3RD	1511	1563	1622	17.30%	33.50%	36.90%	12.20%	49.10%	0.00%
4TH	1532	1581	1646	17.90%	29.10%	42.20%	10.80%	53.00%	0.00%
5TH	1545	1595	1654	14.40%	29.50%	41.80%	14.30%	56.10%	-1.40%
6TH	1570	1610	1667	17.80%	26.00%	41.30%	14.90%	56.20%	-2.30%
7TH	1572	1623	1696	16.80%	31.50%	41.20%	10.50%	51.70%	0.00%
8TH	1587	1645	1715	18.80%	33.20%	36.20%	11.80%	48.00%	1.90%
TOTAL				17.17%	30.47%	39.93%	12.42%	52.35%	-0.30%
DPI				1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	3RD 4TH	CHANGE
3RD	1511	1560	1622	17.30%	31.40%	39.10%	12.20%	51.30%	2.20%
4TH	1532	1581	1646	17.90%	29.10%	42.20%	10.80%	53.00%	0.00%
5TH	1549	1599	1658	16.20%	30.60%	41.10%	12.10%	53.20%	-2.90%
6TH	1570	1613	1671	17.80%	28.40%	40.80%	13.00%	53.80%	-2.40%
7TH	1572	1623	1696	16.80%	31.50%	41.20%	10.50%	51.70%	0.00%
8TH	1587	1641	1715	18.80%	30.60%	38.80%	11.80%	50.60%	2.60%
TOTAL				17.47%	30.27%	40.53%	11.73%	52.27%	-0.08%

ROUND 1				1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	3RD 4TH	MATH
3RD	1504	1537	1577	18.00%	18.40%	31.10%	32.50%	63.60%	
4TH	1529	1570	1625	18.40%	23.10%	41.00%	17.50%	58.50%	
5TH	1572	1598	1625	27.60%	19.20%	21.10%	32.10%	53.20%	
6TH	1572	1608	1650	16.50%	21.70%	35.90%	25.80%	61.70%	
7TH	1595	1638	1678	23.60%	26.80%	27.10%	22.50%	49.60%	
8TH	1611	1649	1702	22.80%	21.60%	35.80%	19.90%	55.70%	
TOTAL				21.15%	21.80%	32.00%	25.05%	57.05%	
ROUND 2				1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	3RD 4TH	CHANGE
3RD	1504	1532	1577	18.00%	15.10%	34.40%	32.50%	66.90%	3.30%
4TH	1532	1576	1629	19.60%	26.20%	39.10%	15.10%	54.20%	-4.30%
5TH	1565	1591	1625	23.50%	17.80%	26.60%	32.10%	58.70%	5.50%
6TH	1572	1608	1650	16.50%	21.70%	35.90%	25.80%	61.70%	0.00%
7TH	1597	1635	1678	24.70%	23.70%	29.20%	22.50%	51.70%	2.10%
8TH	1611	1649	1700	22.80%	21.60%	34.60%	21.00%	55.60%	-0.10%
TOTAL				20.85%	21.02%	33.30%	24.83%	58.13%	1.08%
ROUND 3				1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	3RD 4TH	CHANGE
3RD	1506	1537	1597	18.90%	17.50%	45.20%	18.40%	63.60%	-3.30%
4TH	1529	1576	1630	18.40%	27.40%	39.70%	14.50%	54.20%	0.00%
5TH	1551	1598	1641	16.50%	30.40%	32.00%	21.10%	53.20%	-5.50%
6TH	1583	1619	1656	22.00%	25.20%	31.80%	21.00%	52.80%	-8.90%
7TH	1597	1633	1684	24.70%	22.30%	34.00%	19.00%	53.00%	1.30%
8TH	1611	1659	1700	22.80%	28.50%	27.70%	21.00%	48.70%	-6.90%
TOTAL				20.55%	25.22%	35.07%	19.17%	54.25%	-3.88%
RANGE				1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	3RD 4TH	CHANGE
3RD	1506	1540	1597	18.90%	19.60%	43.10%	18.40%	61.50%	-2.10%
4TH	1529	1576	1629	18.40%	27.40%	39.00%	15.10%	54.20%	0.00%
5TH	1558	1598	1641	19.80%	27.10%	32.00%	21.10%	53.20%	0.00%
6TH	1583	1619	1656	22.00%	25.20%	31.80%	21.00%	52.80%	0.00%
7TH	1597	1633	1684	24.70%	22.30%	34.00%	19.00%	53.00%	0.00%
8TH	1611	1659	1701	22.80%	28.50%	28.30%	20.40%	48.70%	0.00%
TOTAL				21.10%	25.02%	34.70%	19.17%	53.90%	-0.35%
DPI				1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	3RD 4TH	CHANGE
3RD	1506	1548	1597	18.90%	25.40%	37.30%	18.40%	55.70%	-5.80%
4TH	1529	1576	1625	18.40%	27.40%	36.70%	17.50%	54.20%	0.00%
5TH	1558	1598	1641	19.80%	27.10%	32.00%	21.10%	53.10%	-0.10%
6TH	1583	1619	1656	22.00%	25.20%	31.80%	21.00%	52.80%	0.00%
7TH	1590	1633	1684	21.20%	25.80%	34.00%	19.00%	53.00%	0.00%
8TH	1603	1653	1701	19.30%	27.80%	32.50%	20.40%	52.90%	4.20%
TOTAL				19.93%	26.45%	34.05%	19.57%	53.62%	-0.28%

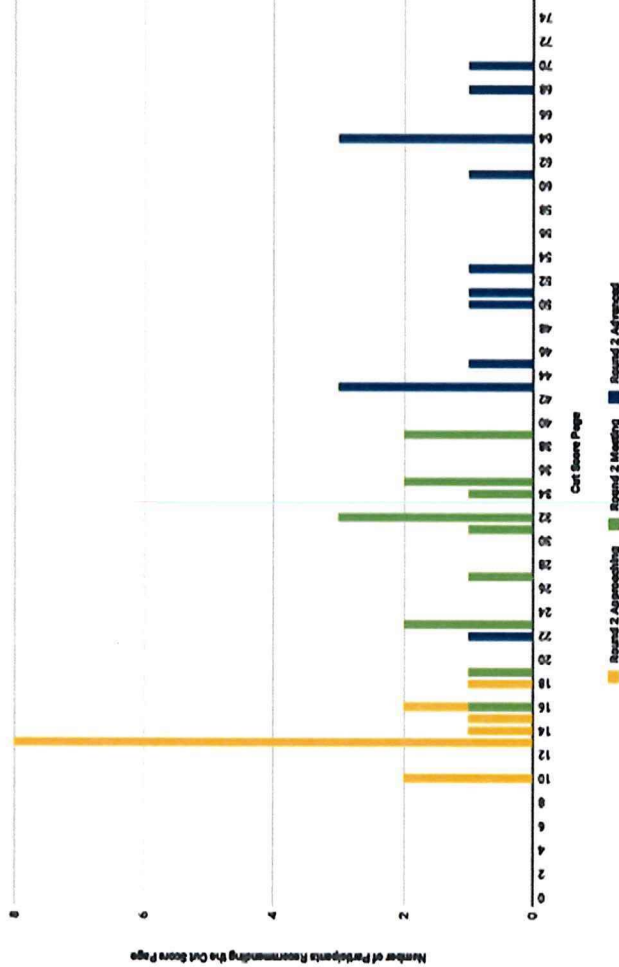
Histogram of Recommended Cut Score Pages for Round 1

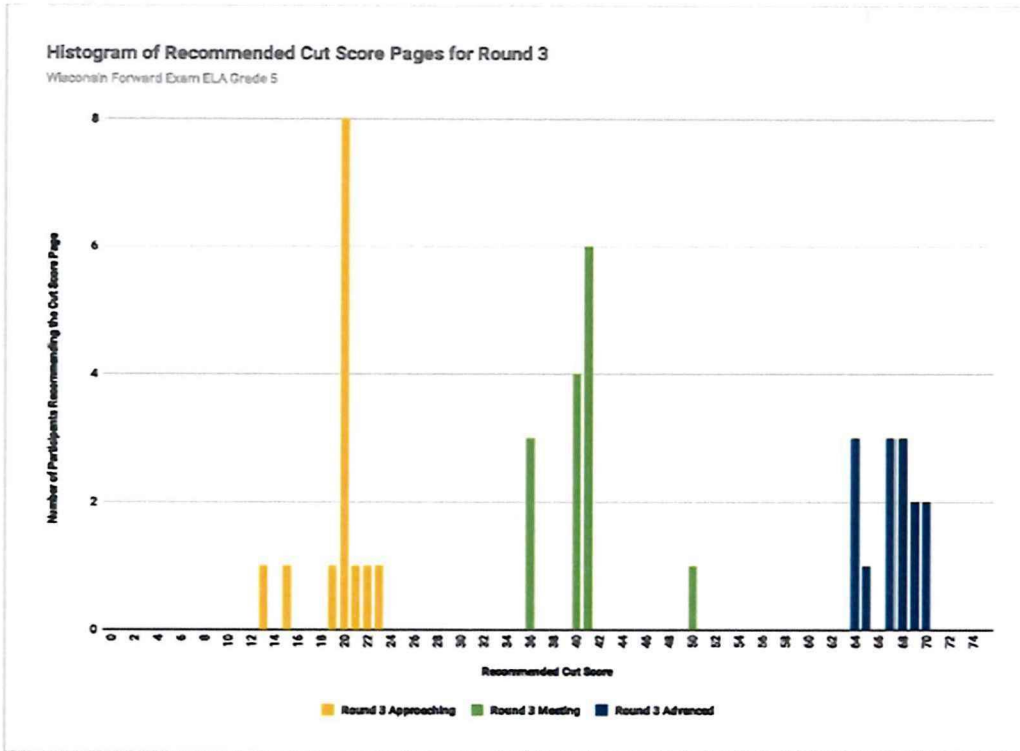
Wisconsin Forward Exam ELA Grade 5



Histogram of Recommended Cut Score Pages for Round 2

Wisconsin Forward Exam ELA Grade 5





From: [Underly, Jill K. DPI](#)
To: [Johnson, John W. DPI](#); [McCarthy, Thomas G. DPI](#); [Beekman, Demetri A. DPI](#); [Chheda, Sachin K. DPI](#)
Date: Tuesday, February 20, 2024 9:03:26 AM

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

From: Underly, Jill K. DPI <Jill.Underly@dpi.wi.gov>
Sent: Thursday, March 7, 2024 10:19 AM
To: Johnson, John W. DPI <John.Johnson@dpi.wi.gov>; Chheda, Sachin K. DPI <Sachin.Chheda@dpi.wi.gov>; McCarthy, Thomas G. DPI <Thomas.McCarthy@dpi.wi.gov>; Beekman, Demetri A. DPI <Demetri.Beekman@dpi.wi.gov>
Cc: Adams, Laura L. DPI <Laura.Adams@dpi.wi.gov>; Lovings, Tacara M. DPI <Tacara.Lovings@dpi.wi.gov>

Subject: Re: FOR APPROVAL: Recommended Asset-Based Performance Levels for the Wisconsin Student Assessment System

This is a change I want. I have always hated the wording of basic, etc. 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. That's a digression.

I'd like to get this release and change in place for next school year. But if it must wait a year maybe that gives us more time to plan the release.



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**Testimony In Support of Senate Bill 18/Assembly Bill 1
Senate Education Committee
March 13, 2025**

Senator Jagler and Members of the Committee

The most recent results from NAEP, the Nation's Report Card, 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 those of other large urban districts—including just 9% proficient in 4th-grade reading and 8% in 8th-grade math.

When not attempting to muddy the narrative and bury their decisions in technical jargon, State Superintendent Jill Underly and DPI officials dismiss these troubling results by claiming NAEP is 'just one test.' They suggest that critics are simply 'politicizing test scores.' They insult parents by saying they have to "get their hands dirty" to understand how schools are performing.

They even claim 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.

As an educator and former accountability and testing administrator for a large urban school district, 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.

But you don't need to take it from me: The most recent Marquette Law Poll showed that 60% of respondents believe state standards are too low, while just 6% agree with Jill Underly & DPI's position that standards are too high.

That's why we at City Forward Collective strongly support SB 18/AB 1.

This legislation would require DPI to reverse the harmful changes made this summer in a closed-door process—complete with non-disclosure agreements—that lowered the bar for Wisconsin's students. The bill would realign Wisconsin's expectations with the rigorous proficiency standards of NAEP and the ACT's College and Career Benchmarks—standards set by national experts in the field whose names and credentials are known to all.

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.

Yet, according to Jill Underly's DPI, 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.

In the wake of the NAEP results, local and national experts have 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.

Wisconsin has become the subject of national disdain in the wake of these changes, with the honesty gap created by Jill Underly & DPI's lowering of the bar being called out in the pages of Forbes magazine and by national leaders from the Education Trust, the Progressive Policy Institute, and FutureEd at Georgetown University, among many others.

Our students, our families—and yes, even our state's dedicated and passionate educators—deserve better. Restoring honesty and transparency to our evaluation of student learning isn't an attack on teachers and shouldn't be a partisan issue. This isn't about right and left; it's about what's right and wrong.

I'm also the parent of two elementary school-aged daughters - and even they see through the misleading spin. When I shared with them the questions on the 4th grade NAEP that Jill Underly believes are "above their abilities," they completed them and were angered to know that many of their peers couldn't do so. They were so incensed, in fact, that they wanted to be here today. And while they're where they should be right now: in school, continuing to learn, they know - as I know, and frankly as I know you all know - that NAEP's benchmarks are reasonable and that we should hold every child to high standards.

When critics from every corner of our state – Democrats and Republicans, educators and parents, urban and rural communities, even Governor Evers – 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.

By restoring high standards and requiring an honest assessment of student achievement, we can begin the vital work of ensuring every Wisconsin student receives an excellent education. As James Baldwin said, "Nothing can be changed until it is faced." 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 us to face reality is now.



Testimony: AB 1 / SB 18
Andrew Davis, Vice President of Governmental Affairs
Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce
March 13, 2025

Chairman Jagler 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 National Assessment of Educational Progress (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 and Senate Bill 18, which restore accountability by requiring DPI to align state proficiency standards with nationally recognized benchmarks, including the NAEP and ACT College & Career Readiness Standards. We respectfully ask for your support of Assembly Bill 1 and Senate Bill 18. By passing AB 1 and SB 18, 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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Date: March 13, 2025

Dear Chairman Jagler 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 Jagler and Chairman Kitchens for giving AB 1 a hearing, as well as Rep. Wittke and the legislature 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 Chairman Jagler, Chairman Kitchens, Rep. Wittke and the legislature for making AB 1 a priority. I appreciate your time and consideration to this important issue, and I applaud the legislature for making a stand and focusing on what is in the best interest of students. 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.

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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		