



# POLICY BRIEF

## Lost Kids: Exploring the Missing Results in Wisconsin's Report Card

*Will Flanders, Ph.D.*

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### Executive Summary

Wisconsin's Forward Exam serves as an important benchmark for parents and policymakers to determine how well Wisconsin's schools are educating students. But the state-required exam was cancelled in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With all the disruption, it was critical that this year's Forward Exam results provide some window into the state of education in Wisconsin.

Unfortunately, the recently released Forward Exam data was characterized less by what it revealed, and more by what was missing. Scores of students across the state did not take the Forward Exam. In some districts more than half of all kids did not take the test. In this policy brief, WILL explores just who are the "lost kids" who didn't take the Forward Exam, and what does their absence from the data indicate about the true state of education in Wisconsin.

Among the key takeaways:

1. **The number of public-school students, statewide, that didn't take the Forward Exam jumped from 1.4% in 2019 to 13% in 2021.** But it is who, and where, those students are that sheds some light on what the data can, and cannot, tell us.
  - ***More than half of the students in Wisconsin's two largest school districts did not take the Forward Exam.*** In Milwaukee and Madison, over 50% of students did not participate in the exam.
  - ***The data issues are so bad that DPI recommends ignoring that data from 1/3 of all Wisconsin school districts.*** DPI would recommend against using the data from 147 of the 422 districts in the state (34.8%).

- ***African American students are underrepresented in the data.*** The raw number of African American students taking the exam fell by 14,240 from 2019 to 2021. This represents a decline of 33.2%.
  - ***Low-income students are underrepresented in the data.*** The raw number of low-income students taking the exam fell by 38,085. This represents a decline of 10.7%.
2. **Public school students' proficiency rates in math and reading declined by 4 percentage points, but the true proficiency rates are likely a bit lower.** Even excluding non-test takers from the assessment, record-low proficiency levels occurred for all students. For years, state test data has revealed that low-income students, African American students, and students with disabilities have struggled the most with the Forward Exam. And this year's data indicates that a large portion of those who didn't take this year's test fall into these categories.
  3. **WILL's model analysis suggests this year's public school student exam results are likely masking additional proficiency declines.** This is particularly true for low-income and African American students whose proficiency was already at only 38% in English and Math. Under the model, student proficiency is lowered by at least 1 percentage point.
  4. **Despite gaps in the data, there is abundant evidence Wisconsin public school students are not learning at acceptable levels.** Too many students cannot read at grade level, are not leaving the public school system with proficiency in math and English, and are not graduating from high school.

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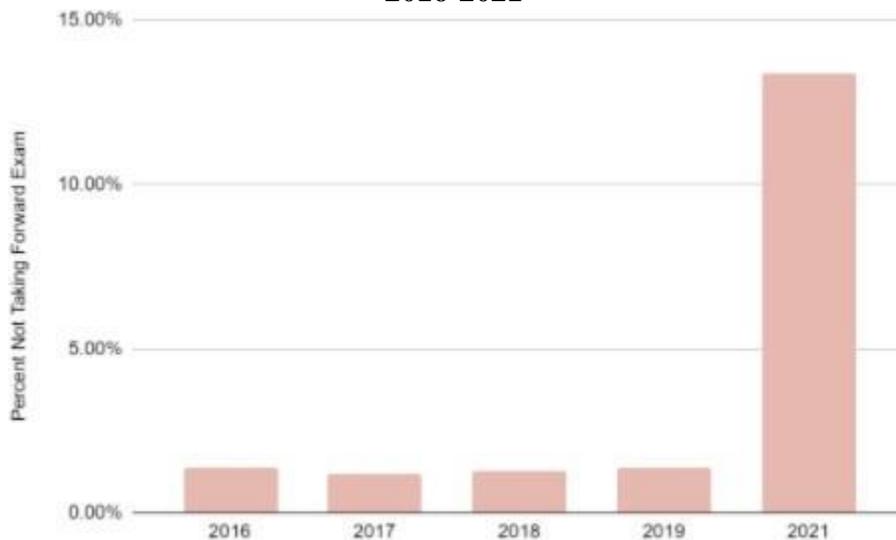
## Introduction

As the foundational data for the state's report card, Forward Exam scores serve an important purpose even in normal times. But in the aftermath of a pandemic, where many school districts were shut down for more than a year, the results become even more critical. Hypothetically, by understanding where and which students lack proficiency in a given subject, school leaders and policymakers can make decisions on how to intervene. Unfortunately, the huge number of students who didn't take the exam make this year's results difficult to use.

Taking the state exam results at face value, the state of education in Wisconsin looks pretty bad. Proficiency rates statewide fell by about 4 percentage points in English and math among students who participated in the exam.<sup>1</sup> But there is reason to be even more concerned when one looks a bit deeper into the data.

What is immediately clear is an unusually large number of students did not participate in the exam this year. State law allows parents to formally go through the process of opting out of the exam. But the data implies that in many cases, students simply didn't show up to test. For private schools in the state's choice program, DPI's data separately tracks the number of kids who utilize the formal opt-out process versus those who do not show up to take the test. This data showed that private schools in the choice program had some increase in both opt-out and non-test participants. But a similar analysis cannot be completed for public schools since the DPI does not provide this information publicly. Figure 1 below shows the percentage of Wisconsin public school students who did not take the test in each of the past five school years.

**Figure 1. Percentage of Students Not Taking the Forward Exam, 2016-2021**



In the past, statewide rates of non-participation hovered around 1.0-1.5%. However, this year the rate increased dramatically, to over 13% of students statewide. This represents an increase of 857% over 2019. The numbers at the district level present even more cause for concern. Table 1 below details the top ten districts in terms of the percentage of students that did not participate in testing. The data below is for English/Language Arts here, but the numbers are similar for other subjects.

**Table 1. Top Districts for Forward Exam Non-Participation**

District	Percent No Test
Milwaukee	55.93%
Madison Metropolitan	50.29%
Monona Grove	35.79%
Medford Area Public	28.48%

Green Bay Area Public	26.20%
Verona Area	24.80%
Kenosha	24.59%
Beloit	20.16%
Sheboygan Area	20.05%
Sun Prairie	19.78%

Throughout the pandemic, the teachers' unions in these districts worked to keep schools shut down. WILL is in the process of quantifying the number of districts that fit into each bucket for a subsequent report. Despite strong evidence that in-person learning could be done safely, a 2020 WILL study<sup>2</sup> found that teachers' unions worked to keep schools shut down regardless of the rates of COVID-19. Because Forward Exam testing had to take place in-person at school, it isn't all that surprising that the schools that were closed for in-person learning for most of the year had the most trouble ensuring students showed up for the test.<sup>3</sup>

Half of the students in Madison and Milwaukee did not take the exam. Suburban Dane County schools in Monona Grove, Sun Prairie, and Verona also had large numbers of missing test-takers. This is likely due in large part to aggressive mandates and orders from the Dane County Health Department— including a school closure order that was subsequently declared illegal by the State Supreme Court.<sup>4</sup>

In their press release announcing the availability of results, DPI recommended against making use of the data for any district with less than 95% participation<sup>5</sup>. Without significant adjustments to the data, which may or may not be plausible, we agree with this assessment. But this means ignoring the results from 147 of the 422 districts in the state, or 34.8% of all districts.

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## Lost Kids

The two lost years of Forward Exam testing data is made even more troubling because the number of students not taking the test fell specifically among groups that have been proven to struggle. This policy brief focuses on three subsets: students from low-income families, African American students, and students with disabilities.

Family income is among the largest predictors of proficiency on the Forward Exam (as well as on many other metrics, such as graduation rate). In the raw DPI data, proficiency rates among students from low-income backgrounds were 29.2 percentage points lower in English and 31.5 percentage points lower in math. According to the results of WILL's 2019 Apples to Apples report,<sup>6</sup> where schools are put on a level playing field by taking into account student

demographics, going from a hypothetical school with no low-income kids to one with 100% low-income kids would be expected to decrease proficiency significantly in both English and math.

Additionally, the state of Wisconsin has regularly been found to have one of the largest racial achievement gaps in the nation. A look at scores on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) reveals that over the last six test years, Wisconsin has the largest gap in performance between African American and white students.<sup>7</sup> With these gaps persistent before the pandemic, there isn't much reason to think they magically improved during the year of disruption.

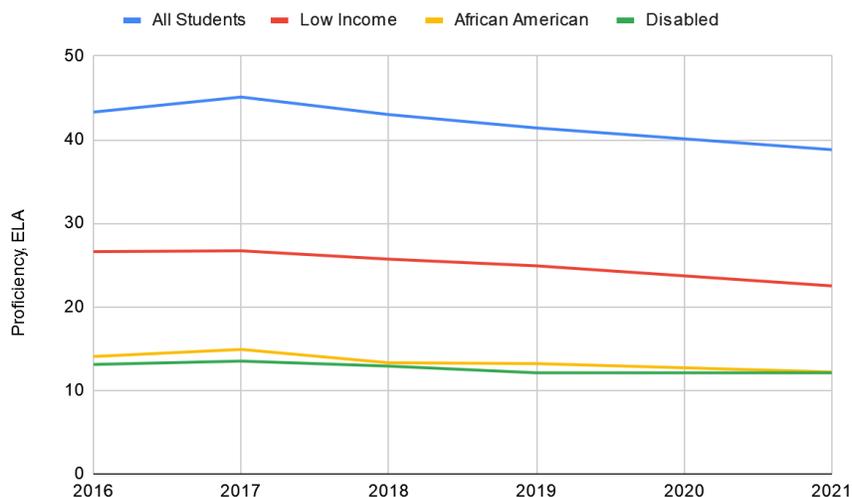
In fact, they may have been exacerbated by decisions that prevented in-person learning. Many Wisconsin African American students are also low-income. Students from low-income families are more likely to face difficulties in accessing internet at home, and their parents may have less ability to take time off work to supplement online learning.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, there is abundant evidence that many children with special needs were unable to access vital services during the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> Critical learning supports such as speech therapy, special teacher aides, and other accommodations were disrupted due to the pandemic and the move to virtual learning. Only when forced by the DPI were some public-school students provided with the opportunity for in-person learning in February 2021.<sup>10</sup>

The figure below shows proficiency rates among each of these groups, plus Wisconsin students overall, over the past five years in English (similar results can be observed for other subjects). Note that the percent proficient here differs slightly from the numbers provided by DPI, particularly for the most recent school year. This is because DPI's data includes students who didn't take the exam as not proficient. In reality, we don't know the level of proficiency among these students. While this makes proficiency look worse this year, it will likely make it look like a more dramatic improvement next year, assuming a higher percentage of kids take the test. For a fairer view of proficiency over time, all of the references to current proficiency levels in this paper are based on the subset of kids that actually took the exam.

As shown in Figure 2, Wisconsin students' proficiency was struggling prior to the pandemic. With overall student proficiency less than 50% and declining steadily over the last several years, it is even more cause for concern that there is a lack of data to understand the impact of the pandemic on student proficiency.

**Figure 2. English Proficiency in Wisconsin by Subgroups Over Time**



Even among the subset of test takers, there is a noticeable decline in proficiency. Among all groups under study here, the 2021 administration of the Forward Exam represented record low proficiency levels.

Addressing the needs of these student groups is vital to getting education back on track in Wisconsin. Unfortunately, the numbers below show that Wisconsin has a long way to go to even find out where our students stand.

## Analysis: The Numbers

The proficiency data allows us to take a deep dive into just what kids were missing from this year’s Forward Exam results. In the tables below, we compare the percentage of kids in a number of subgroups in the 2021 administration of the test with the percentage of those kids during the last “normal” school year—2019-20. The table below shows the statewide percentages over two years.

**Table 2. Test Participation by Year, Wisconsin**

Statewide						
Variable	2021	2019	% Participation '21	% Participation '19	Raw Change	Percentage Point Change
Low Income	120,650	158,735	39.20%	43.87%	-38,085	-4.67%
African American	19,095	33,335	6.20%	9.21%	-14,240	-3.01%
Disability	41,381	48,998	13.44%	13.54%	-7,617	+0.10%
Total	307,797	361,852	--%	--%	-54,055	--

First, note the overall decline in test takers of about 52,000 students. This decline of approximately 15% exceeds the overall decline in student enrollment observed over the past two school years of approximately 3.36%. Over the last two school years, there were declines in test participation statewide in all three groups identified in the previous section. The raw number of African American students taking the exam fell by 14,240 students from 2019 to 2021. In terms of representation, African American representation statewide fell from about 9.2% of the sample to 6.2%. The raw number of low-income students statewide taking the exam fell by 38,085.

This represents decline of about 32.61%. Participation among low-income students fell from 43.9% to 39.2%—a decline of about 4.7 percentage points, or 10.64% in terms of percent change. Based on the demographic data for the state available from DPI, we can be relatively sure that the percentages in 2019 were closer to the share of those groups in school population. At the state level, we did not see much of an appreciable shift in the representation of students with disabilities.

Next, we see similar results for some of the larger districts in the state. The final column represents the change in the representation of that group between 2019 and 2021. Red highlights indicate that representation of that group went down by more than 1.5%. Green highlights indicate an increase in representation of more than 1.5%. The cut point here is somewhat arbitrary, however shifts as large as 1.5% don't ordinarily occur between school years.

**Table 3. Test Participation by Year, Select Cities**

Variable	2021	2019	Percentage '21	Percentage '19	Change	Percentage Point Change
Low Income	10,735	25,962	81.15%	86.51%	-15,227	-5.36%
African American	6,263	15,139	47.35%	50.45%	-8,876	-3.10%
Disability	2,391	5,937	18.08%	19.78%	-3,546	-1.71%
Total	13,228	30,010	-- %	-- %	-16,782	--
<b>Madison</b>						
Variable	2021	2019	Percentage '21	Percentage '19	Change	Percentage Point Change
Low Income	2252	5389	42.36%	49.47%	-3137	-7.11%
African American	883	1828	16.61%	16.78%	-945	-0.17%
Disability	634	1486	11.93%	13.64%	-852	-1.72%
Total	5316	10893	-- %	-- %	-5,577	--

Green Bay						
Variable	2021	2019	Percentage '21	Percentage '19	Change	Percentage Point Change
Low Income	3951	5198	65.65%	61.95%	-1247	+3.71%
African American	516	725	8.57%	8.64%	-209	-0.07%
Disability	828	1115	13.76%	13.29%	-287	+0.47%
Total	6018	8391	-- %	-- %	-2,373	--
Kenosha						
Variable	2021	2019	Percentage '21	Percentage '19	Change	Percentage Point Change
Low Income	3386	4784	54.30%	55.01%	-1,398	-0.72%
African American	752	1003	12.06%	11.53%	-251	+0.52%
Disability	728	1199	11.67%	13.79%	-471	-2.11%
Total	6236	8696	-- %	-- %	-2,460	--

In many cases, the percentage of low-income students participating in the exam fell significantly. In Madison, low-income students fell by 7 percentage points. Even in Milwaukee, where the vast majority of students are low-income, their representation fell by more than 5 percentage points. On the question of disability status, representation was far more varied. In all the districts we looked at other than Green Bay, students with disabilities were also underrepresented. Green Bay represents another interesting example in which low-income students actually became somewhat *over*represented. Exploring why this occurred might be an interesting question for further research, however it is beyond the scope of this report. It is important to note that differences in either direction make the quality of the data questionable.

## Analysis: Where do We Really Stand?

It is possible to estimate what performance on the Forward Exam likely *would have* looked like had we had participation at rates among these subgroups that were close to normal. However, a number of important assumptions have to be made regarding the lost students.

In this simple analysis, the lost kids are restored to the sample in the percentages that they participated in 2019-20. The results from the students in these groups that did take the exam are the baseline for the estimates of the impact of full results. This is the largest assumption

here—it is possible that students who didn’t participate in the exams are even further behind than their peers who did come in to take the test. We simply can’t know for sure. Assuming these rates of proficiency and participation, we recalculate the statewide proficiency rate.

Note that, because the participation rate for students with disabilities did not vary substantially statewide from that observed previously, there were not any changes to that rate in this analysis. Table 4 below shows the demographic makeup in the actual 2021 student data and the makeup in the WILL updated hypothetical model. The corrected model also takes into account the general decline in enrollment that occurred from 2019 to 2021.

**Table 4. Demographics of students.**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Actual 2021 Data</b>	<b>Full Participation Model</b>
Total Test Takers	307,797	351,539
African American Students	19,095	32,376
Low-Income Students	120,650	154,219

In table 5 below, the changes to proficiency that would be expected in both math and English are estimated for the restoration of lost kids. In the below table, neither low-income nor African American students see a major decrease in proficiency. The model attributes an approximate 1% change in proficiency across the state and is likely due to the lost students not participating in testing.

**Table 5. Modeled changes to proficiency.**

	<b>Actual 2021 Proficiency</b>	<b>Full Participation Proficiency Low Income</b>	<b>Full Participation Proficiency African American</b>
English	38.8%	38.1%	38.0%
Math	38.8%	38.0%	37.9%

These results could obviously be even more dramatic if we looked district-by-district, as some districts had drastic underrepresentation of certain subsets of students. However, as we drill down further into the data, we have less confidence that the subgroup samples we have are representative of the group as a whole. Wrestling with this question and how to best address it is likely something that will be part of our next Apples to Apples report.

The bottom line is that these proficiency numbers, and the forthcoming 2021 report card scores that come out of them, will have to be treated with a healthy dose of skepticism. Districts that improved their performance, or didn’t experience large declines, shouldn’t be touting their results too loudly. It should be noted that, regardless of whether adjustments are made to the data or not, proficiency rates in the state remain pitifully low. While proficiency rates under 10% in Milwaukee garner the most headlines, this is not just an urban problem. Rural school districts like Algoma, Ashland, Lac Du Flambeau, and Sparta have proficiency rates of less than 30%.

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## Conclusion

Prior to the pandemic, too many Wisconsin students were struggling to read at grade level, and statewide less than half of our students were even proficient on state exams. The pandemic exacerbated this reality but the lack of student-level data over the last two years is masking the extent of the educational crisis.

In order to begin to recover lost learning and ensure every student is prepared for college and career, it is vital that Wisconsin parents, school leaders and policymakers have a clear understanding of our students' academic proficiency. The forthcoming state report cards released by DPI, based on this Forward data, are all but useless due to the number of students who didn't participate in the Exam this year.

Wisconsin's lost kids are at risk of becoming a lost generation without interventions to help them get back on track. To do this, policymakers must empower parents with more transparency for their public schools, give every child access to a high-quality school, and address the funding inequities so that every child receives funding based on their characteristics and not the school door they walk through.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/dashboard/19948>

<sup>2</sup> <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/reopening-brief.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://dpi.wi.gov/assessment/COVID-19/Historical/2020-21>

<sup>4</sup> [https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/education/local\\_schools/wisconsin-supreme-court-strikes-down-dane-county-health-department-order-to-close-schools/article\\_69630809-2ef0-5a68-9687-9003d649a30c.html](https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/education/local_schools/wisconsin-supreme-court-strikes-down-dane-county-health-department-order-to-close-schools/article_69630809-2ef0-5a68-9687-9003d649a30c.html)

<sup>5</sup> <https://dpi.wi.gov/news/releases/2021/student-assessment-results-wisconsin>

<sup>6</sup> <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/applestoapplesstudyiii-1.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.wpr.org/wisconsin-has-widest-achievement-gap-nations-report-card>

<sup>7</sup> <https://medium.com/@TulsaSEED/parents-teachers-and-distance-learning-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-a-snapshot-from-tulsa-ok-5b5fdb54ea18>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.calhealthreport.org/2020/08/11/amid-pandemic-young-kids-with-special-needs-missing-out-on-services/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.wuwm.com/education/2021-01-28/mps-board-president-district-wants-teachers-vaccinated-before-bringing-back-students-with-ieps#stream/0>