



# POLICY BRIEF

## The Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations: Wisconsin’s Report Card “Fails to Meet Expectations”

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### Executive Summary

In a speech to the NAACP while running for President in 2000,<sup>1</sup> George W. Bush discussed the notion that our educational system was infused with a “soft bigotry of low expectations.” By not expecting and demanding similar levels of achievement from students from more challenging circumstances, we were effectively relegating them to a life of failure—passed from grade to grade without measurable progress—if they stayed in school at all.

Twenty-one years later, Wisconsin unfortunately still has an educational system with pervasive achievement gaps along racial and economic lines. But rather than shedding a light on these problems, Wisconsin’s current report card hides them. Though arguably well-intentioned, the current report card sets such a low bar for schools with high numbers of low-income students that they can “Meet Expectations” with proficiency rates of less than 10%. The most recent round of report cards doubled down on this problem, with unilateral action from the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to hide important issues like absenteeism, and changing the required score thresholds for each report card level.

This policy brief proposes three changes to the state report card to make it more representative of student success, and thus a better metric for parents and policymakers to judge schools.

1. **Reduce the weight applied to growth scores in low-income schools.** Student growth is important, but a report card formula that counts student growth as 45% of a score in some schools and only 5% in others is unfair and untenable.

2. **Report card Thresholds should be established by State Law.** The legislature should remove the ability of DPI to adjust report card thresholds at their own volition—"Meeting Expectations" should mean the same thing every year.
3. **Restore Absenteeism and Dropout Reductions in the report card formula.** If the pandemic has shown us anything in education policy, it is that classroom-based instruction matters. School districts that fail to get students into the classroom should have that reflected in their scores.

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## Introduction

The latest round of report cards for the state of Wisconsin has drawn the ire of both policymakers and parents. After missing a year of data on student proficiency, the 2020-21 report cards were anxiously awaited to understand the impact of the pandemic and school closures on our students. WILL has written a more in-depth analysis of the state's report cards in the past, which could serve as a useful reference for the information here.<sup>2</sup> But put simply, the report card combines measures of student proficiency, growth, graduation and absenteeism, with measures of student demographics to arrive at an overall picture of how well schools are educating Wisconsin's kids.

Unfortunately, the DPI report cards put out this year only serve to create a fuzzy picture that largely hides important problems. For example, with only about 1/3 of students achieving proficiency on the state-mandated test, 95% of districts in the state were still found to meet or exceed expectations by DPI<sup>3</sup>. How did this situation happen? There are at least three key driving factors: two of which were the result of unilateral changes by DPI and one of which was the result of a well-intentioned state law that arguably went too far. This policy brief explores how to fix the state report card so it can be a reliable indicator of quality for Wisconsin families.

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## Student Absentee & Drop-Out Deductions

The state report cards are created based on a variety of formulas that weigh specific information. One data point that drives the formula is whether students met attendance metrics.

In the past, school districts in the state received a 5-point deduction from their overall report card score for failing to meet attendance metrics. This deduction was applied across the board to districts that failed to meet a benchmark for the percentage of students who were chronically absent from school. In the past, a student was considered to "chronically absent"<sup>4</sup> if they attend less than 84% of days and had been enrolled in the school for at least 45 days. This metric was modified slightly in 2017 to conform with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to require

90% attendance of students in the school for at least 90 days. A district was flagged for the deduction in their report card score if more than 13% of its students fell into this category.

The absenteeism deduction serves as an important incentive for districts to ensure that students make it to the classroom. During the pandemic, with a substantial number of students disappearing from the system entirely, it is arguably more critical than ever. Yet DPI chose to remove this component from the report card formula this year. Instead, the effect of this data was lessened by inclusion as one component for the Targeted Groups and On-Track to Graduate sections of the report card. The DPI's decision was done without legislative input.

How consequential was this decision? Fortunately, despite the removal of the attendance deduction, attendance data was still reported to DPI which provides the opportunity to understand the impact of its removal from the formula.

For the 2020-21 school year, 58 districts had a chronic absenteeism rate high enough to require a deduction under the previous report card (90% attendance of students in the school for at least 90 days). The top ten most egregious failures are reported in Table 1. The importance of the problem here is hard to overstate. In Milwaukee, over the past three school years, only 64.7% of students made it to class at least 90% of the time. This assuredly warrants the highlighting that a points deduction provides, and ought to be restored.

**Table 1. Ten Worst Districts for Chronic Absenteeism (2021 Report Card)**

Menominee Indian	59.7
Milwaukee	64.7
Bayfield	71.3
Racine Unified	71.7
Beloit	75.2
Black River Falls	76.4
Cudahy	76.9
Ashland	77.6
West Allis-West Milwaukee	78.5
Lakeland UHS	78.9
Adams-Friendship Area	79.9

The drop-out deduction was also removed from the report card formula by DPI. Previously, school districts were penalized if more than 6% of students dropped out of school. While far less consequential on the report card scores, it's difficult to argue that school districts that fail to meet the 6% threshold shouldn't be penalized.

WILL supports the restoration of both of these metrics to the report card. Additionally, we call on the DPI to answer questions about their decisions, the lack of legislative input, and a wider discussion about how to improve the report cards. Even if we give the DPI the benefit of the doubt for why they removed these indicators, these decisions have an impact on how parents make decisions and shouldn't be done without a larger discussion.

## Student Growth

The report card formulas are impacted most by the student growth measurement. Unfortunately, income level matters greatly for student proficiency. In previous analyses conducted by WILL,<sup>5</sup> the number of students who are from low-income backgrounds is generally the largest or second largest predictor of proficiency in a school; sometimes second to student race.

To compensate for this phenomenon, the report card is designed in a manner to reward schools for helping students who are behind to “catch up.” The extent to which this growth metric is weighted relative to proficiency varies by the percentage of students in the school or district who are low income.

For districts like Milwaukee that have a high number of low-income students, proficiency represents 5% of the overall report card score, while growth represents 45%. Districts at the other end of the income spectrum are the exact opposite. Proficiency represents 45% of the overall report card score, while growth represents 5%. While this is sensible to some degree, the extreme variation in the weighting of each factor leads to results like those depicted in Table 2.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 2. ELA Proficiency and Report Card Score**

<b>District Name</b>	<b>Overall Accountability Rating</b>	<b>Percent Proficient ELA 2021</b>
Milwaukee	Meets Expectations	17.5%
White Lake	Exceeds Expectations	18.1%
Elcho	Meets Expectations	18.9%

<sup>1</sup> Note that the proficiency rates reported here vary to some extent from those in WISEDash because of variation in the way the rates are calculated for the report card.

Wausaukee	Meets Expectations	19.3%
Owen-Withee	Meets Expectations	19.9%
Lac du Flambeau	Exceeds Expectations	20.1%
Green Bay Area Public	Meets Expectations	20.5%
Adams-Friendship Area	Meets Expectations	21.1%
Nekoosa	Meets Expectations	21.2%
Marinette	Meets Expectations	21.7%

While Milwaukee has garnered attention for low achievement and apparently “Meet(ing) Expectations,” this applies to other districts around the state. For example, White Lake School District in northeastern Wisconsin reported proficiency rates barely above those in Milwaukee but had “Exceeded Expectations” on the report card. This does not accurately inform parents about their students’ ability to learn and whether the district is meeting their students’ academic needs.

As we look for ways to improve the report card, adjustments to the weighting of growth versus proficiency must be considered. There are policy solutions that can provide parents with information about student proficiency while providing schools with the benefit of student growth. We must demand more from our schools across all sectors.

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## Threshold Adjustments

As has been reported on elsewhere<sup>6</sup>, DPI also reduced the report card score thresholds for four of the five accountability categories. The previous cut points had been used for every year of the Forward Exam dating back to the first administration in Spring of 2016. Table 3 on the following page highlights the changes in the thresholds for 2020-21.

**Table 3. Report Card Threshold Changes**

	<b>Old Threshold (2018-19)</b>	<b>New Threshold (2020-21)</b>
Significantly Exceeds Expectations	≥83	≥ 83
Exceeds Expectations	≥73	≥ 70
Meets Expectations	≥63	≥ 58
Meets Few Expectations	≥53	≥ 48
Fails to Meet Expectations	< 53	< 48

Using the old thresholds, the picture of success painted for schools across the state is significantly altered. Rather than only 22 districts failing to meet expectations, the number would jump to 61 districts—a 177% jump.

Changing well-established thresholds made the report cards incomparable from year to year, and far harder for parents and policy makers to assess how schools and their students are doing. Policymakers should consider writing the previous thresholds into law so that the DPI can no longer change them at will.

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## Conclusion

Time and time again throughout the pandemic, DPI has appeared to put the interests of the public-school monopoly ahead of the interests of Wisconsin kids. A report card that creates a false narrative of massive success of the public school system when parents feel, more than ever, that the system has failed them, warrants deep scrutiny. These decisions should not be made by a rogue agency and without legislative input. Fortunately, the legislature has the power to make the reasonable changes described above. Doing so will allow report cards to better fulfill their goal as a guide for parents, rather than the current system where they now provide little of value.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/elections/bushtext071000.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/final-report-card-policy-brief-9.21.20.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/education/local\\_schools/95-of-wisconsin-school-districts-met-or-exceeded-expectations-in-latest-state-report-cards/article\\_8ffa5688-415f-5e72-a234-f686bf34b8a0.html](https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/education/local_schools/95-of-wisconsin-school-districts-met-or-exceeded-expectations-in-latest-state-report-cards/article_8ffa5688-415f-5e72-a234-f686bf34b8a0.html)

<sup>4</sup> [https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/accountability/pdf/Report%20Card%20FAQ%202016\\_Web.pdf](https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/accountability/pdf/Report%20Card%20FAQ%202016_Web.pdf)

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<sup>5</sup> <https://will-law.org/apples-to-apples-2019-charter-choice-outperform-public-schools-in-growth-test-scores/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.thecentersquare.com/wisconsin/wisconsin-legislators-claim-state-report-cards-for-schools-fudge-numbers/article\\_04b6b03c-47e6-11ec-b8b2-6b5c9813c9de.html](https://www.thecentersquare.com/wisconsin/wisconsin-legislators-claim-state-report-cards-for-schools-fudge-numbers/article_04b6b03c-47e6-11ec-b8b2-6b5c9813c9de.html)