

August 2022



POLICY BRIEF

The State of Education in Wisconsin

Introduction

How does Wisconsin stack up against other states in K-12 education? An eye-popping list from *U.S. News and World Report* ranked the Badger State K-12 system as the 8th best in the country.ⁱ But this rosy picture contradicts other key indicators that Wisconsin students are falling behind. So what's going on? To get a clear look at public education in the Badger State requires a dive into the details.

Key Takeaways

- **The academic proficiency data used by *U.S. News & World Report* to rank Wisconsin 8th is from the 2018-19 school year.** Notably, this school year featured a transition in the governor's mansion and was a full year before the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on Wisconsin schools.
 - **A sophisticated analysis of Wisconsin's academic proficiency from 2018-19 puts Wisconsin in the middle of the pack.** An Urban Institute analysis that controls for demographic factors finds Wisconsin falls out of the top ten in both math and reading on the NAEP scores.
 - **Academic proficiency has fallen significantly in Wisconsin since the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in 2020.** Forward Exam scores fell by about 4 percentage points in reading and 5 percentage points in math.
 - **Chronic absenteeism in Wisconsin schools reached new heights in the most recent school year.** The share of students not regularly showing up for class rose to 16% in 2020-21 school year—the highest in five years.
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The Recent *U.S. News & World Report* Rankings

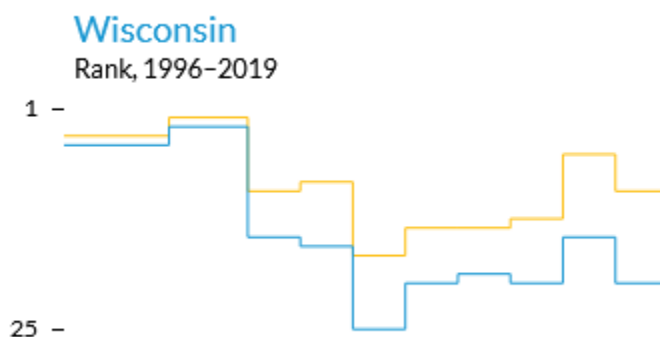
The core claim in question, that Wisconsin is ranked 8th for Pre-K-12 public education, refers to Wisconsin's placement in the *U.S. News & World Report* Pre-K-12 rankings for 2022.ⁱⁱ In the previous ranking released in 2018, Wisconsin's schools were ranked 16th, meaning the state shot up 10 places. While this would doubtless be encouraging news if it were credible, there is recent to question where Wisconsin sits on the list.

The biggest issue with the rankings is in the use of raw scores on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP). As a national norm-referenced test, the NAEP is arguably the best tool for making interstate comparisons, but one must be careful when simply using the raw numbers, which *U.S. News* does for eighth grade reading and math. On these metrics, Wisconsin is ranked 6th and 4th respectively. Just as in WILL's *Apples to Apples* report,ⁱⁱⁱ where we note that demographic factors must be taken into account in determining how well a school is doing, they must also be taken into account when ranking state performance. Unfortunately, factors like poverty, race, and English Language Learner status (ELL) matter in school performance. Low-

income and minority students, on average, perform worse on exams for any number of reasons. These factors must be controlled for to make serious comparisons.

Fortunately, the Urban Institute has such a ranking.^{iv} After controlling for age, race, disability status, family income and ELL, Wisconsin falls to 14th from 4th in math and from 6th to 21st in reading. The Urban Institute also provides a chart of the overall trend in ranking for each state. The unadjusted ranking is in yellow, while the demographically-adjusted ranking is in blue. The chart shows that there isn't much of a discernible trend in performance—if anything, it's the opposite of improvement.

Figure 1. Wisconsin Adjusted NAEP Result Ranking Over Time (Math)



Reproduced from the Urban Institute's America's Grade Book

Wisconsin has a smaller number of students in many of the categories that are correlated with lower performance on exams. An honest observer can't ignore that reality when analyzing where we stand.

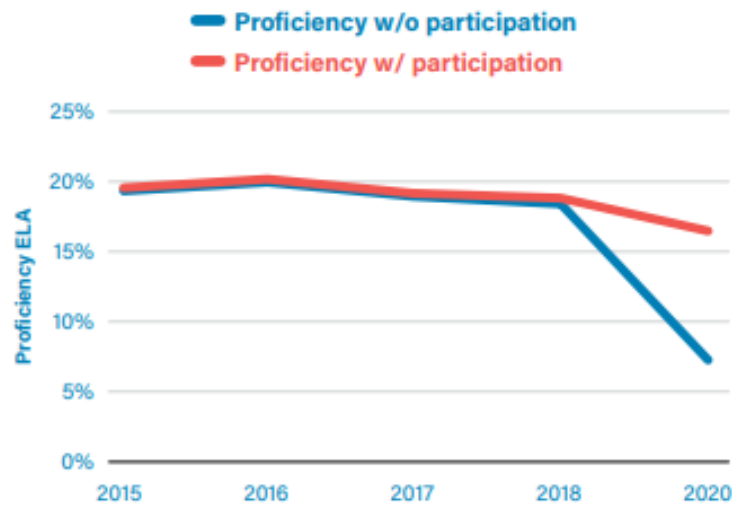
The Reality of Education in Wisconsin

Falling Proficiency Rates

Some states do not have post-pandemic testing data as yet, which is why *U.S. News* uses the 2018-2019 data for its 2022 rankings, but Wisconsin does have post-pandemic testing data. And the results were not pretty.

Proficiency declines first reported in the media likely looked bigger than they actually were, as all students who didn't take the exam are counted in the denominator of "not proficient." That said, even after removing those students from the dataset, declines were still precipitous. Figure 2 reproduces a depiction of proficiency over time in WILL's *Apples to Apples* report. The red line removes non-participants, while the blue line incorporates them. Note that the 2019-20 school year is skipped because no testing took place.

Figure 2. Proficiency Over Time, Reading



As is evident, even the red line sees its steepest decline in 2020 in the midst of the pandemic. Proficiency rates in English Language Arts—depicted here—fell by nearly 4%. In math, declines were more than 5%. Key data from around the state back this up. In Wausau,^v the freshmen class saw a 350% increase in the number of students failing classes. In Appleton, more than 30% of 10th graders failed a class the first year back.^{vi}

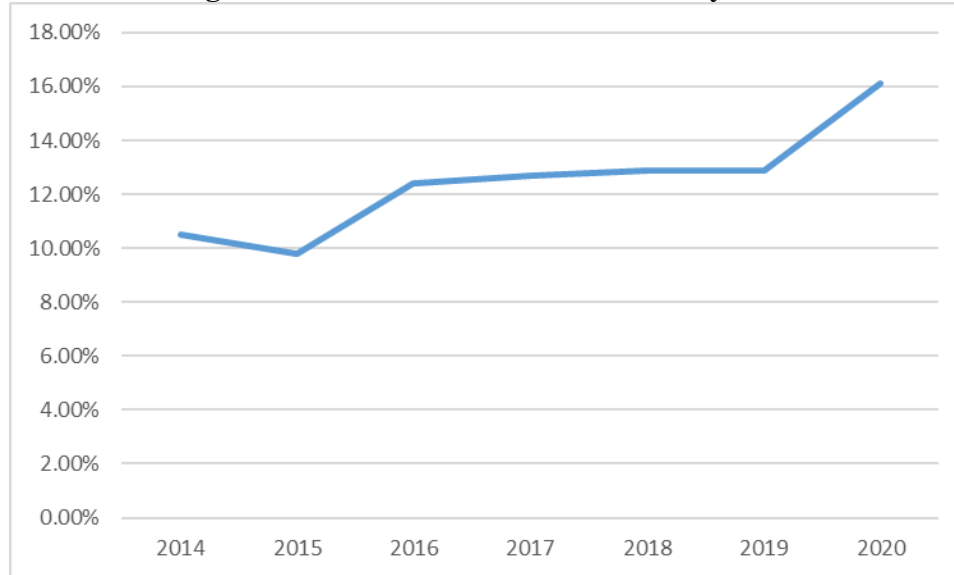
Because the same big city districts where students struggle the most were also the districts most likely to remain shut down for much of the 2020-21 school year, the pandemic has likely exacerbated a well-known problem in Wisconsin schools: the black-white achievement gap. On the same NAEP that was used to rank Wisconsin in the top ten for education, the achievement gap between black and white students was 39 points in both fourth and eighth grade reading.^{vii} This gap is the largest of any state, and only lower than the District of Columbia among jurisdictions the NAEP disaggregates. On the Forward Exam, a school with 100% African American students would be expected to have proficiency rates 31% lower in ELA and 20% lower in math than a school with all white students.

The legislature has made attempts to tackle the important issue of reading in recent sessions. A bill during the 2021 session would have instituted a tougher testing regime for reading, and would have required school districts to personalize reading improvement plans for students who were struggling. The bill even received bipartisan support in the state assembly, with Representative LaKeshia Myers delivering an impassioned plea about its necessity. Unfortunately, this bill was later vetoed by the governor.

Chronic Absenteeism

Consistent with the lack of participation in the Forward Exam, the most recent school year also saw record-high numbers of students who were chronically absent from school. The Department of Public Instruction defines chronic absenteeism as a student who is enrolled in a school for at least 90 days, but present in class for less than 90% of those days. Figure 3 depicts chronic absenteeism in Wisconsin over the past several years.

Figure 3. Chronic Absenteeism Rates by Year



The rate of chronic absenteeism reached 16.1% during the 2020-21 school year, more than 3% higher than the next highest year in this analysis. Both anecdotes and education research^{viii} show that students who aren't in school tend to fall behind academically. In districts that are already struggling with challenging student populations, like Milwaukee, absenteeism regularly reaches more than 30%. While getting students to show up to school is at least partially out of the hands of the state and districts, it is yet another sign that there is far more work to be done before we declare an education victory in Wisconsin.

Opposition to What Does Work

Fortunately for Wisconsin kids, there are some school sectors that regularly outperform the traditional public schools that we have been discussing here: private choice and charter schools. Numerous studies^{ix} over the past two decades have found benefits of these options ranging from higher test performance to a lower likelihood of becoming involved in criminal activity. Given that these options are less costly to taxpayers overall, they represent a better return on investment for Wisconsin taxpayers than traditional public schools.^x

We shouldn't pretend that educational choice is the only pathway that can lead Wisconsin to a better standing in education, but it has a clear role as part of the solution. Parents already know this. Wisconsin's public-school enrollment continues to decline,^{xi} while the choice, charter, and homeschooling sectors continue to grow.^{xii} Some policymakers have sought to limit or end these educational options. But as public schools continue to stagnate, it is incumbent upon Wisconsin's leaders that they work to, at minimum, preserve school-choice options and, ideally, expand access to them substantially.

Conclusion

The status quo solution for public school education has been to simply provide more money, which research has found bears little relationship to student performance. In order for Wisconsin school districts to actually be some of the best in the nation, Wisconsin needs to sever the connection to the preferred policies of teacher unions and the public-school establishment, who fight competition from every alternative option. Instead, Wisconsin education policies must empower parents to make the best choice for their son or daughter, which may include a traditional public school.

Wisconsin needs robust alternative options that enable every student in the state to attend the school that best meets their needs. This includes opening up private-school choice to middle-class families who can't afford private-school options, and a more open charter school sector that ensures public-school options exist in every corner of the state. Achieving these goals won't be easy, but the information here shows that the state can ill afford complacency when it comes to education policy.

End Notes

ⁱ <https://www.wispolitics.com/2022/icymi-governor-evers-leads-wisconsin-schools-to-top-10-best-in-u-s/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/rankings/education/prek-12>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://will-law.org/apples-to-apples-2022-a-definitive-look-at-wisconsin-school-performance/>

^{iv} <https://apps.urban.org/features/naep/>

^v <https://www.maciverinstitute.com/2021/03/the-lost-year-of-learning-what-wisconsin-needs-to-do-to-keep-our-children-from-falling-farther-behind/>

^{vi} <https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/education/2021/02/01/28-appleton-high-school-students-failed-one-class-fall-2020/4307437001/>

^{vii} https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/dashboards/achievement_gaps.aspx

^{viii} <https://www.epi.org/publication/student-absenteeism-who-misses-school-and-how-missing-school-matters-for-performance/>

^{ix} <https://smdp.uark.edu/milwaukee-parental-choice-program-evaluation/>

^x [ERIC - EJ1139886 - Bang for the Buck: Autonomy and Charter School Efficiency in Milwaukee, Journal of School Choice, 2017 \(ed.gov\)](#)

^{xi} <https://dpi.wi.gov/cst/data-collections/student/ises/published-data/excel>

^{xii} <https://schoolchoicewi.org/wisconsin-choice-programs-show-gains/>