

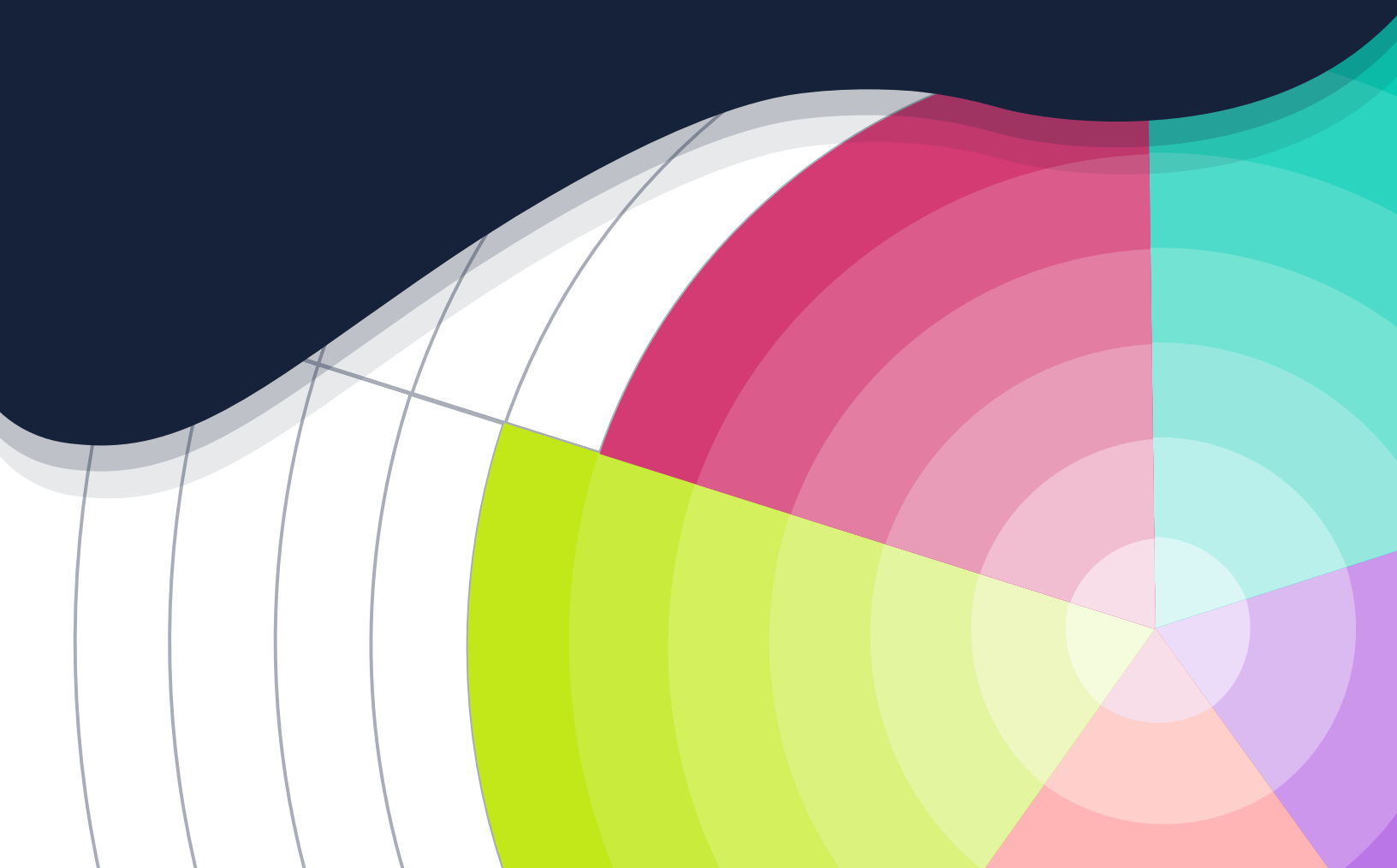


2nd Edition

The State of Educational Opportunity in Wisconsin

A Survey of Wisconsin Parents

February 2026



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Dear Friends,

At the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty, we believe that a strong education system is essential to maintaining a free and prosperous society. Ensuring that students have access to high-quality educational opportunities requires informed parents, engaged communities, and policymakers who understand what families are experiencing in the education system.


Education in Wisconsin is at a crossroads. Parental choice remains under threat, debates over school funding and accountability continue to intensify, and with only 31% of Wisconsin's 4th graders proficient in reading according to the latest NAEP results, the state risks falling even further behind states like Mississippi in key educational outcomes. Rather than confronting these challenges directly, our Department of Public Instruction has resorted to lowering academic standards and redefining benchmarks instead of addressing the underlying problems facing Wisconsin students.


At a time like this, it is more important than ever to understand where parents are coming from when it comes to their children's education. That is what drives the second edition of the *Survey of Educational Opportunity in Wisconsin*.

Developed in partnership with 50CAN and Edge Research, this updated survey captures how families are experiencing the education system now, while also allowing us to see where views have shifted since the last edition, published in November 2024. As conditions for students and schools continue to evolve, so too must our understanding of whether families feel supported, informed and empowered.

In this year's survey, 512 Wisconsin parents and guardians of school-aged children participated between September 30 and December 1, 2025. Their responses contribute to a national research effort that includes more than 23,000 families nationwide, along with representative samples in each state and the District of Columbia, allowing for meaningful state-by-state comparisons.

Among the most interesting Wisconsin results:

 **Most parents underestimate or are unaware of how much is spent on K-12 education.** When informed of the actual amount, the majority say it is "just right" or "too much."

 **There is a disconnect between parental perceptions of student achievement and actual academic results.** While 79% of parents report being extremely or very confident in their understanding of how well their child is performing, many appear to overestimate academic progress. For example, 84% of low-income parents believe their child is performing at or above grade level, even though statewide results for students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch show much lower levels of proficiency.



Parents prioritize the basics in education. The most frequently selected priorities include strong life skills (36%), a strong core curriculum in reading and math (24%), hands-on learning (23%), and high standards for student behavior (23%).



Parents using school choice options report higher satisfaction. In Wisconsin, **56% say they are "very satisfied," compared to 43% of parents in traditional public schools**, highlighting continued demand for more educational options.



Wisconsin is above the national average in parents feeling like they have a choice in where their child attends school. But 29% of parents say "no" or are unsure.



Despite changes in workforce demands, more than half of parents (62%) still want their child to attend college after high school. Highest support is for immediate four-year college attendance (47%) followed by seeking an Associate's degree (9%).

The pages that follow include:

- An overview of the survey's **methodology** and how to interpret the results
- A concise **summary** of Wisconsin's performance across all five categories and 15 questions
- Visual **comparisons** showing how Wisconsin stacks up nationally and how responses have changed since the previous survey

The full Wisconsin report is available at will-law.org. National results, the survey instrument, and the complete dataset can be found at 50can.org.

Our hope is that this second edition continues to support informed decision-making as Wisconsin works to expand educational opportunity for every student.

Sincerely,



Kyle Koenen
Policy Director
Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty

Methodology

Edge Research conducted a nationwide survey of 23,104 U.S. parents and guardians of school-aged children (K-12th grade) in each of the 50 states plus the District of Columbia. **In Wisconsin, 518 parents and guardians of K-12 children were surveyed.** Respondents could take the survey in either English or Spanish, based on their preference. The survey was in the field from September 30, 2025, to December 1, 2025.

DATA COLLECTION

The survey used a mixed-mode methodology to reach as many households as possible. First, survey respondents were recruited using online, non-probability samples obtained via national opt-in consumer research panels. These surveys were mobile-optimized (meaning participants can take the survey on a PC or mobile device, which helps reach those who do not have internet access but do have a mobile data plan). In states where Edge Research was not able to collect enough surveys using this method, they obtained supplementary text-to-web interviews.

SURVEY REPRESENTATIVENESS

As respondents entered the survey, they submitted demographic information, and quotas were set to ensure the sample is proportionately distributed in accordance with the most recent U.S. Census and National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data on U.S. parents in each state. Quotas functioned by predetermining the number of desired respondents by gender identity, race, ethnicity, child’s grade, and grade level in each state. Once the desired number was reached with each quota group, it closed, and additional respondents were turned away. After the survey came out of the field, Edge Research reviewed the data and applied additional weights by income, marital status, parent gender, race/ethnicity, school type, and area (e.g., urban, suburban, small town, rural) within states.

The following tables provide the demographics of survey respondents in Wisconsin after weighting.

RACE/ETHNICITY							
Hispanic/Latino of Any Race	White Alone	Black/African American Alone	American Indian or Alaska Native Alone	Asian Alone	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander Alone	Some Other Race Alone	Two or More Races
9%	80%	5%	1%	2%	0%	0.4%	2%

INCOME DISTRIBUTION		
Low Income	Middle Income	High Income
36%	56%	8%

SCHOOL LEVEL		
K-5th	6th-8th	9th-12th
45%	23%	31%

¹ <https://www.census.gov/>

² <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/tableviewer/acsProfile/2021>

GRADE OF CHILD

K	1st Grade	2nd Grade	3rd Grade	4th Grade	5th Grade	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	9th Grade	10th Grade	11th Grade	12th Grade
7%	7%	7%	8%	9%	7%	9%	7%	8%	8%	8%	7%	8%

SCHOOL TYPE

Local or Traditional Public School	Public Magnet School	Public Charter School	Private Independent School	Parochial/Religious School	Virtual/Online Public School	Homeschool	Microschool	Other Type of School
70%	2%	9%	5%	6%	3%	4%	0.3%	0.5%

INCOME DEFINITIONS

In the pages that follow, we provide results for low-, middle- and high-income parents. These income buckets were calculated using the Pew Research Center’s study on “The State of the American Middle Class” and their category definitions:

- Middle-income households are defined as those with an income that is two-thirds to double that of the U.S. median household income, after being adjusted for household size.
- Lower-income households have incomes less than two-thirds of the median
- High-income households have incomes that are more than double the median.

Following these definitions, Edge Research adjusted the incomes reported in the survey to reflect a three-person household using the equivalence scales technique. Pulling from the U.S. Census 2023 Annual Social and Economic Supplements, they used the three-person household income breaks of \$61,000 to \$183,000 as middle, and values above and below those thresholds as lower and upper income respectively. Edge Research also adjusted each household income using Regional Price Parities (RPPs)—indexes from the Bureau of Economic Analysis—that compare local prices to the national average. These tell whether an area is more or less expensive than the country overall. RPPs are applied differently based on what is known about the household’s location. If the exact metro area is known, the RPP is used for that metro area. If the household is in a non-metro (rural or small-town) area, the RPP for non-metro areas in that state is used.

DATA QUALITY CONTROL AND STANDARDS

Edge Research employed several practices to ensure data quality. The survey platform used reCAPTCHA to screen for bots. They also applied a third-party tool called Research Defender to screen out known bad actors and respondents with high survey-taking rates. In addition, data was monitored regularly while in the field. Once all responses were collected, they applied additional data cleaning processes, clearing data for cheating, speeding, inattentiveness, and AI-generated responses.

Edge Research follows the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Code of Professional Ethics and Practices to maintain the highest standards of competence, integrity, accountability, and transparency in public opinion and survey research work.

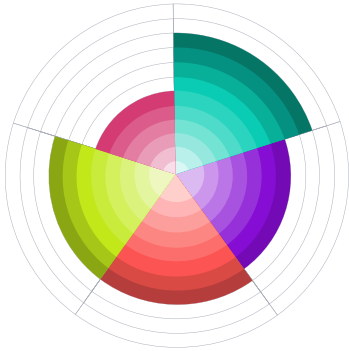
³ <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/cps/cps-asec.2023.html#list-tab-165711867>

⁴ Standards and Ethics - AAPOR

How to Read the Results

One challenge with a survey of this size was how to present the results in an accessible way that doesn't sacrifice the depth of insights. We decided to present the answers in two ways: first with an overview of the results across 15 questions for our state and then with a more in-depth look at how our state compared to all the other states for a few key questions.

OUR STATE SUMMARY



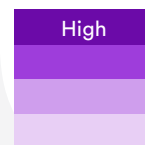
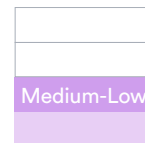
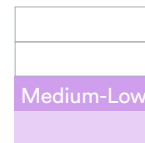
To help make it easier to look at our state's full results at a glance, we present the answers from our parents over two pages. At the top of the first page is the number of parents who participated in the survey.

We also provide a way to view our state's **relative strengths and weaknesses through a circle with five wedges**, one for each of the five categories of the survey: 1) School quality and opportunity (**pink**), 2) Tutoring, summer, and mental health (**green**), 3) Out of school activities (**teal**), 4) Information and engagement (**purple**), and 5) College and career readiness (**orange**).

Each of the five categories is made up of three questions. These are presented below each category with **our state's results compared to other states represented by a tier** shown to the right of each question, from low to high. These tiers are scored from 1 (low) to 4 (high) and the scores across the three questions determine how many rows are colored in for the wedge (up to a possible number of 12 rows).

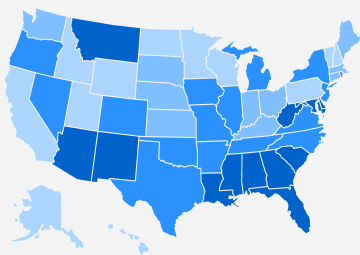
The state results for each question are presented in circles that offer a comparison of the state against the national average and the 2025 results compared to 2024. For yes/no questions, the results are presented as the percentage who said yes, rounded to the nearest whole number. For questions about parents' opinions and attitudes, we utilized a Likert scale and **reported out the percentage choosing the highest option**. For example, on question 1, which measures parents' satisfaction with their child's school, we present the percentage who answered that they were "very satisfied." This helps ground the comparison discussion in a high bar for success.

State Tier



OUR STATE IN CONTEXT

The second section of this report provides comparative results for all 50 states plus D.C., one question at a time.



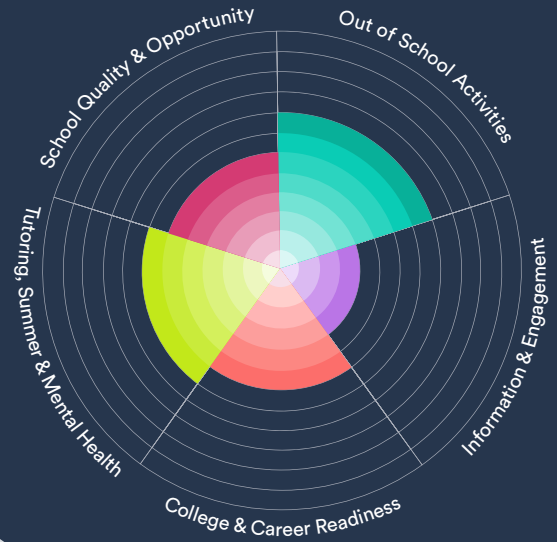
For the maps, a key provides the scale for the map and explains the numbers behind each of the four shades of blue. The darkest shade of blue is always the highest numbers and the lightest shade of blue is always the lowest numbers. Our state is outlined in red.

For the list, states are ordered from highest performing states at the top to lowest performing states at the bottom. This list shows the state average as a dark blue dot and the results for low-income families in a light shade of the section color and the results for middle- and high-income families as a darker shade of that color. Our state is identified with a red box to make it easier to spot.

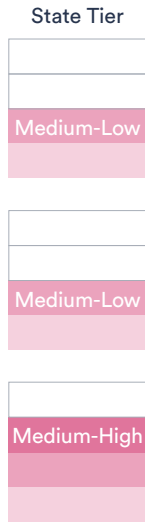
WISCONSIN



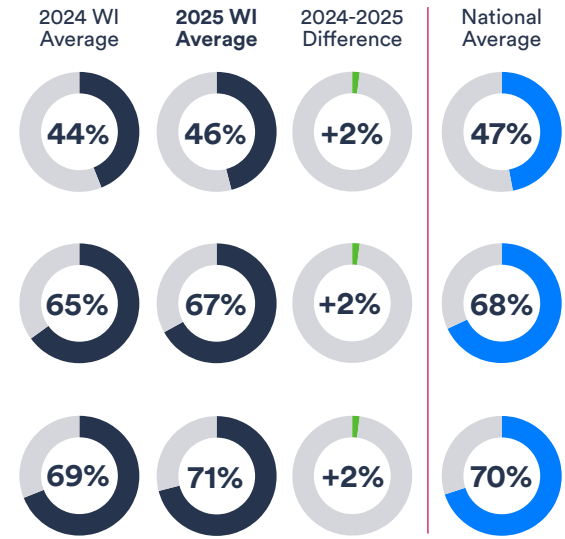
Surveyed September 30 - December 1, 2025
 Sample size (N) = 518 parents and guardians



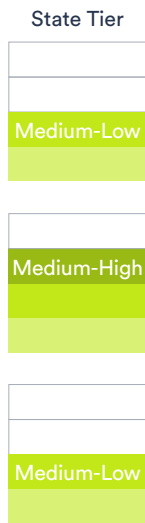
SCHOOL QUALITY AND OPPORTUNITY



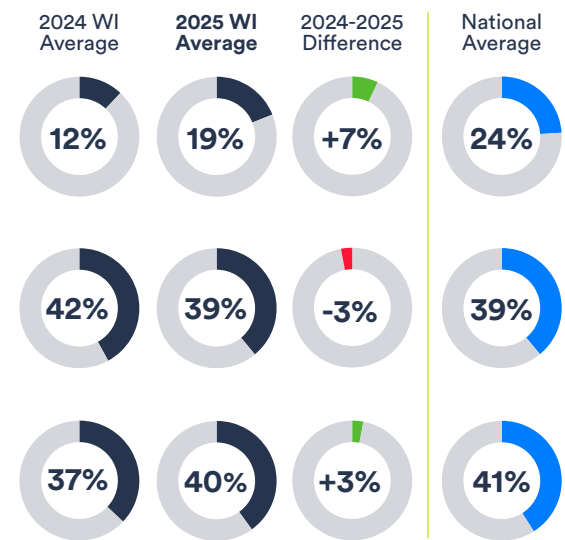
Very Satisfied with School Percentage answering they are very satisfied with their child's school	2024 WI Average: 44%	2025 WI Average: 46%	2024-2025 Difference: +2%	National Average: 47%
Would Make the Same Choice Percentage answering that they would send their child to the school they go to today	2024 WI Average: 65%	2025 WI Average: 67%	2024-2025 Difference: +2%	National Average: 68%
Feel They Have a Choice Percentage answering they feel like they have a choice in what school their child attends	2024 WI Average: 69%	2025 WI Average: 71%	2024-2025 Difference: +2%	National Average: 70%



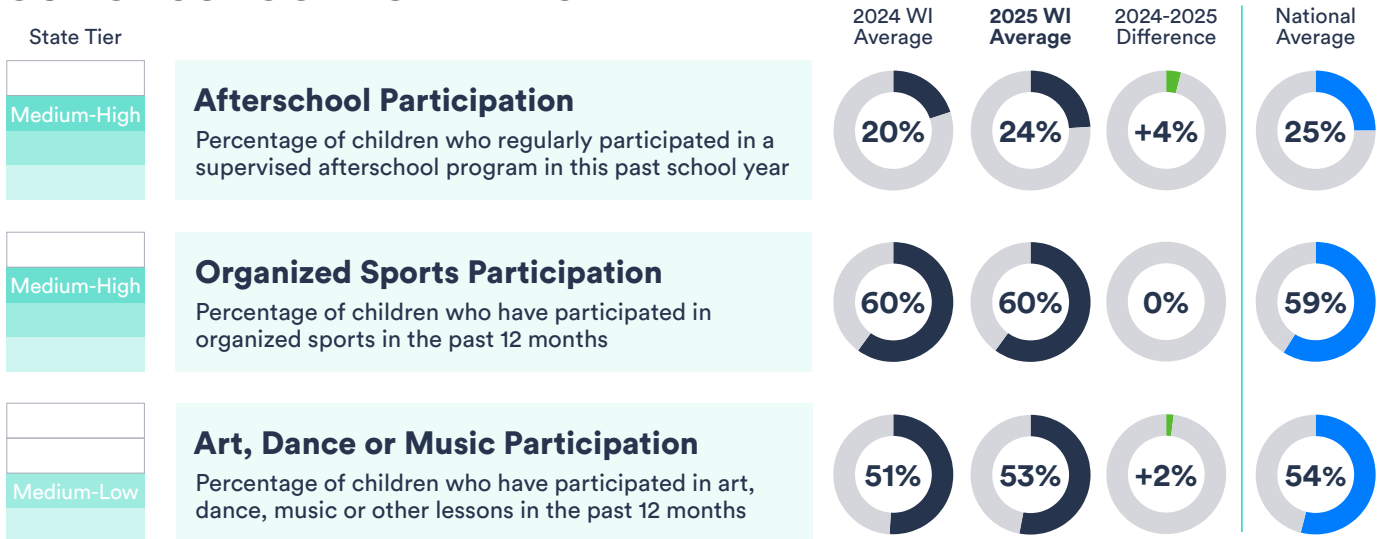
TUTORING, SUMMER AND MENTAL HEALTH



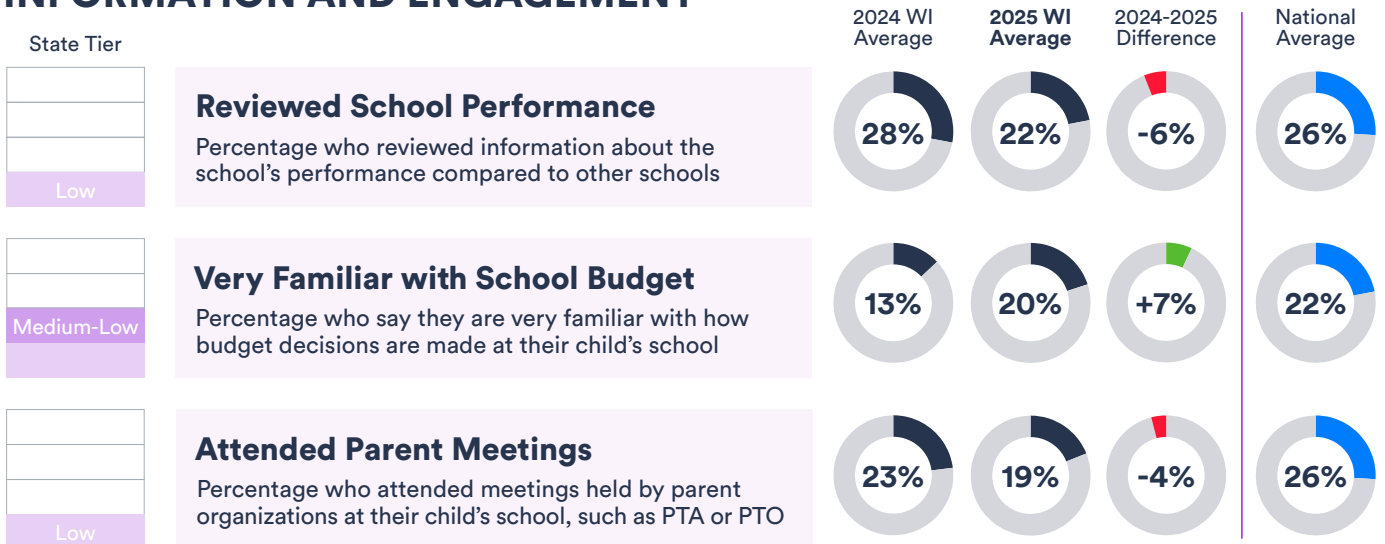
Tutoring Participation Percentage of children who have received academic tutoring in this past school year	2024 WI Average: 12%	2025 WI Average: 19%	2024-2025 Difference: +7%	National Average: 24%
Summer Program Participation Percentage of children who participated in a supervised summer program	2024 WI Average: 42%	2025 WI Average: 39%	2024-2025 Difference: -3%	National Average: 39%
Very Satisfied with Mental Health Support Percentage answering they are very satisfied with how the school supports their child's mental health needs	2024 WI Average: 37%	2025 WI Average: 40%	2024-2025 Difference: +3%	National Average: 41%



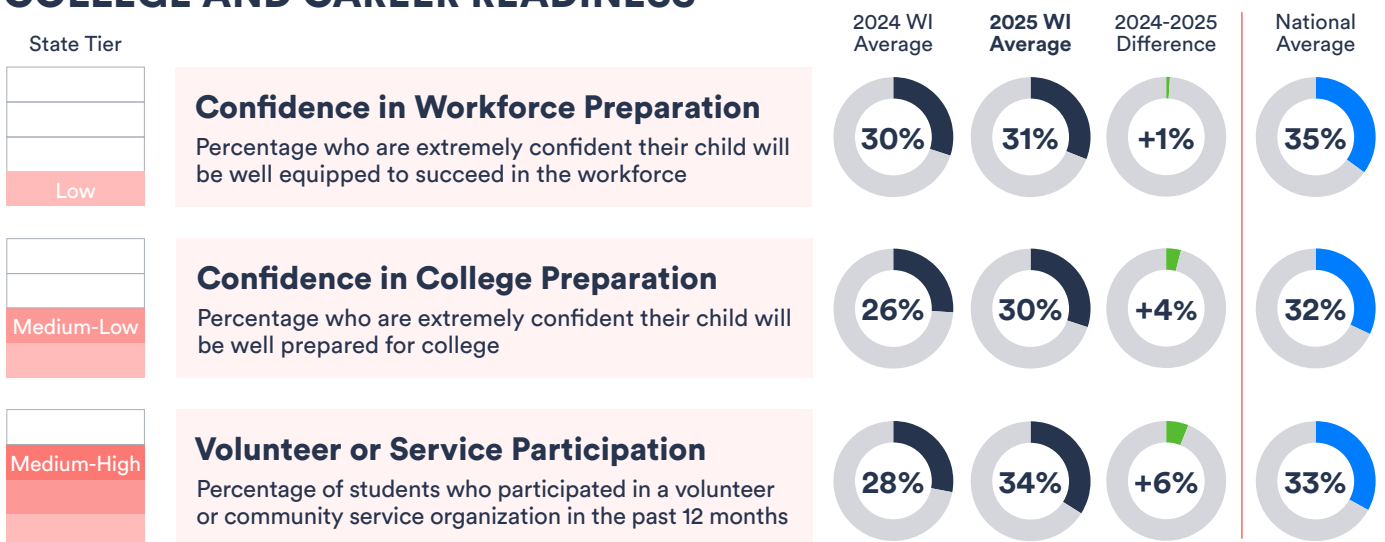
OUT OF SCHOOL ACTIVITIES



INFORMATION AND ENGAGEMENT



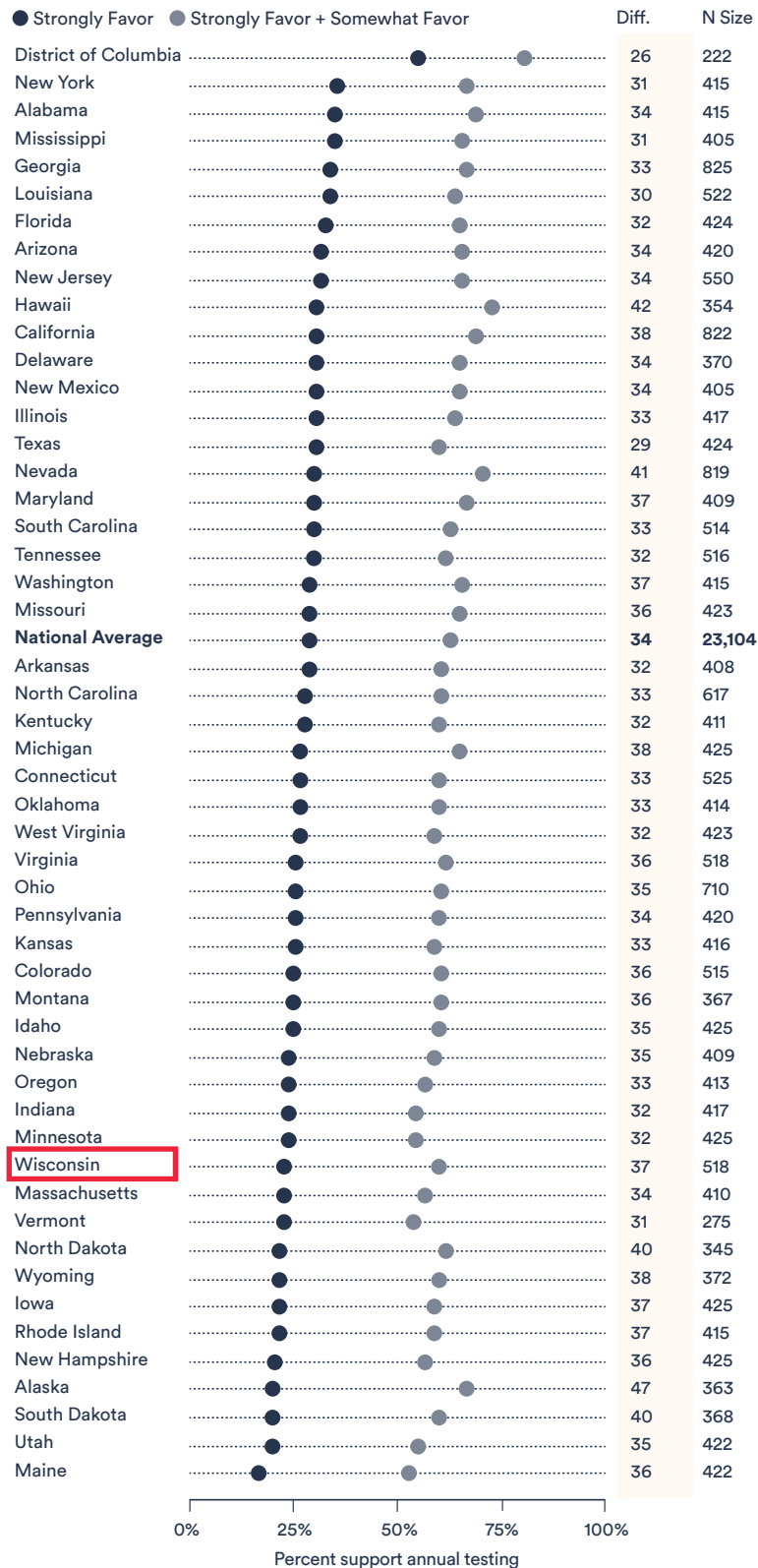
COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS



Wisconsin in Context: A 50-State Perspective

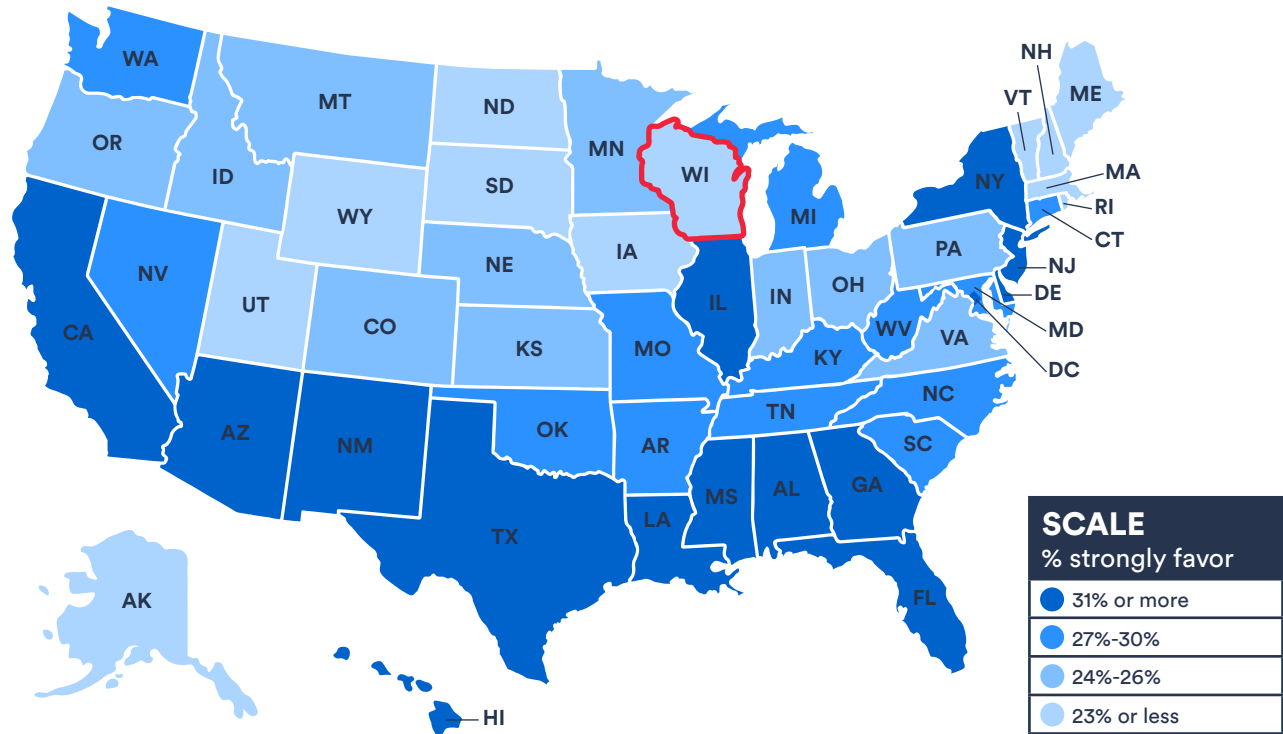
SUPPORT FOR ANNUAL TESTING BY STATE

Percentage answering they favor the use of annual standardized tests to measure how well your child is achieving academically



STRONGLY FAVOR ANNUAL TESTING BY STATE

Percentage answering they strongly favor the use of annual standardized tests to measure how well your child is achieving academically



EDUCATIONAL CHOICE PROGRAMS

Percentage answering they are aware of educational choice programs in their state

Open Enrollment

Yes, my state has this type of program	80%
No, my state does not have this type of program	5%
Not sure	15%

Charter Schools

Yes, my state has this type of program	74%
No, my state does not have this type of program	6%
Not sure	21%

School Vouchers

Yes, my state has this type of program	49%
No, my state does not have this type of program	12%
Not sure	39%

EDUCATIONAL CHOICE POLICY SUPPORT

Percentage answering they favor or oppose certain educational choice policies

Open Enrollment

Strongly favor + Somewhat favor	80%
Neutral	14%
Somewhat oppose + Strongly oppose	4%
Not sure	2%

Education Savings Account

Strongly favor + Somewhat favor	77%
Neutral	17%
Somewhat oppose + Strongly oppose	2%
Not sure	3%

School Vouchers

Strongly favor + Somewhat favor	64%
Neutral	20%
Somewhat oppose + Strongly oppose	13%
Not sure	3%

CHILDREN'S READING FOR FUN TIME

Reported daily reading for fun by their child

Reading for Fun (not assigned by school)

Less than 15 minutes	17%
15 but less than 30 minutes	25%
30 but less than 60 minutes	22%
1-2 hours	15%
More than 2 hours	5%
Rarely does this	9%
Never does this	7%

PLANS FOR AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

Percentage answering what they **think** their child will do immediately after they complete high school

Enroll in a Bachelor's degree (4-year college/university) program	37%
Enroll in a technical college/vocational/trade school program	15%
Not sure	15%

DESIRED PLANS AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

Percentage answering what they **want** their child will do immediately after they complete high school

Enroll in a Bachelor's degree (4-year college/university) program	47%
Enroll in a technical college/vocational/trade school program	16%
Enroll in an Associate degree/community college program	9%

TEACHER SALARY

Percentage answering what they think the average salary is for a public school teacher in their state

Not sure	27%
\$100,000 or more	0%
\$80,000 to under \$100,000	1%
\$60,000 to under \$80,000	13%
\$40,000 to under \$60,000	30%
\$20,000 to under \$40,000	15%
Less than \$20,000	13%

SCHOOL SATISFACTION

Percentage answering whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied with the overall quality of education their child is receiving at school

Public Schools

Very satisfied	43%
Somewhat satisfied	41%
Neutral	11%
Somewhat dissatisfied + Very dissatisfied	5%

Choice Schools (Charter, Private, Parochial, Homeschool, Microschool)

Very satisfied	55%
Somewhat satisfied	34%
Neutral	4%
Somewhat dissatisfied + Very dissatisfied	6%

WOULD MAKE THE SAME CHOICE

Percentage answering that if they could send their child to any school, they would send their child to the school they go to today

Public Schools

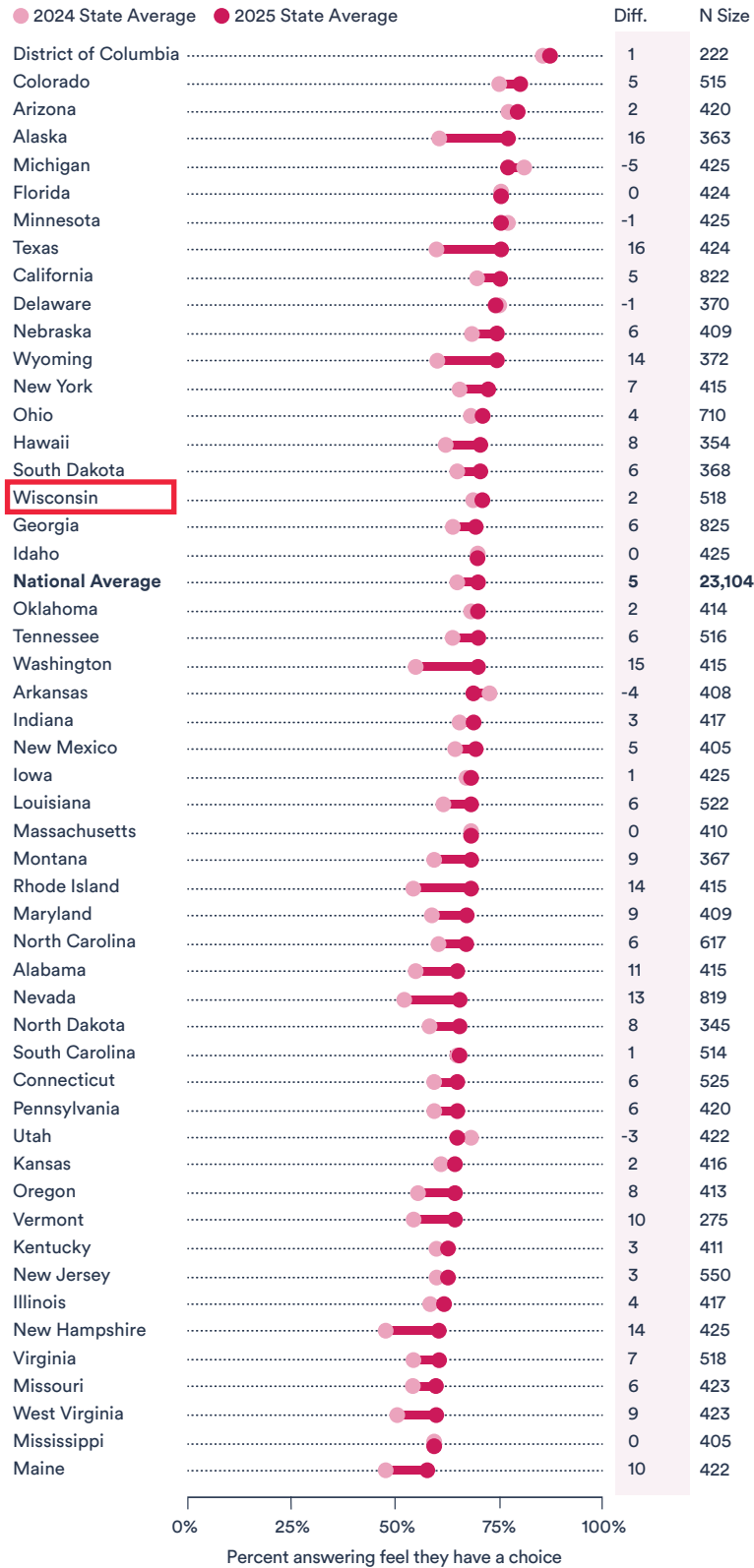
Yes	62%
No	25%
Not sure	12%

Choice Schools (Charter, Private, Parochial, Homeschool, Microschool)

Yes	78%
No	16%
Not sure	6%

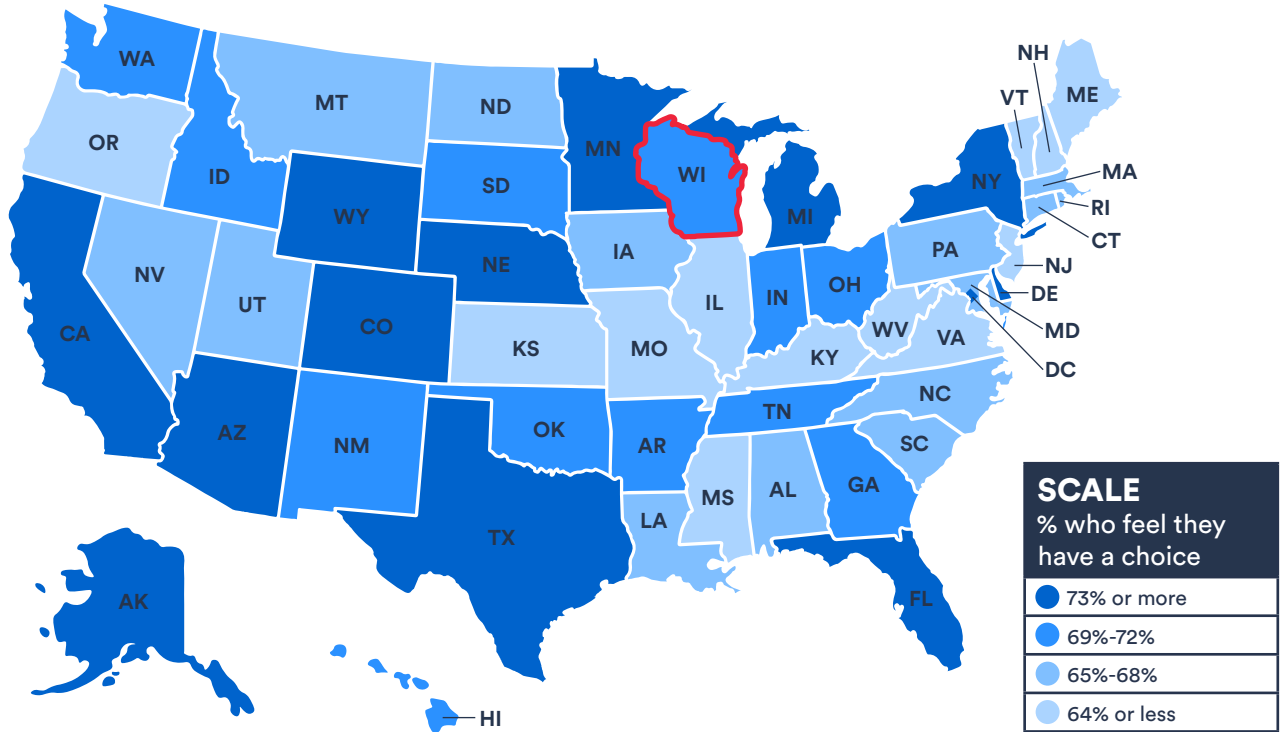
FEEL THEY HAVE A CHOICE BY STATE & YEAR

Percentage answering they feel like they have a choice in what school their child attends



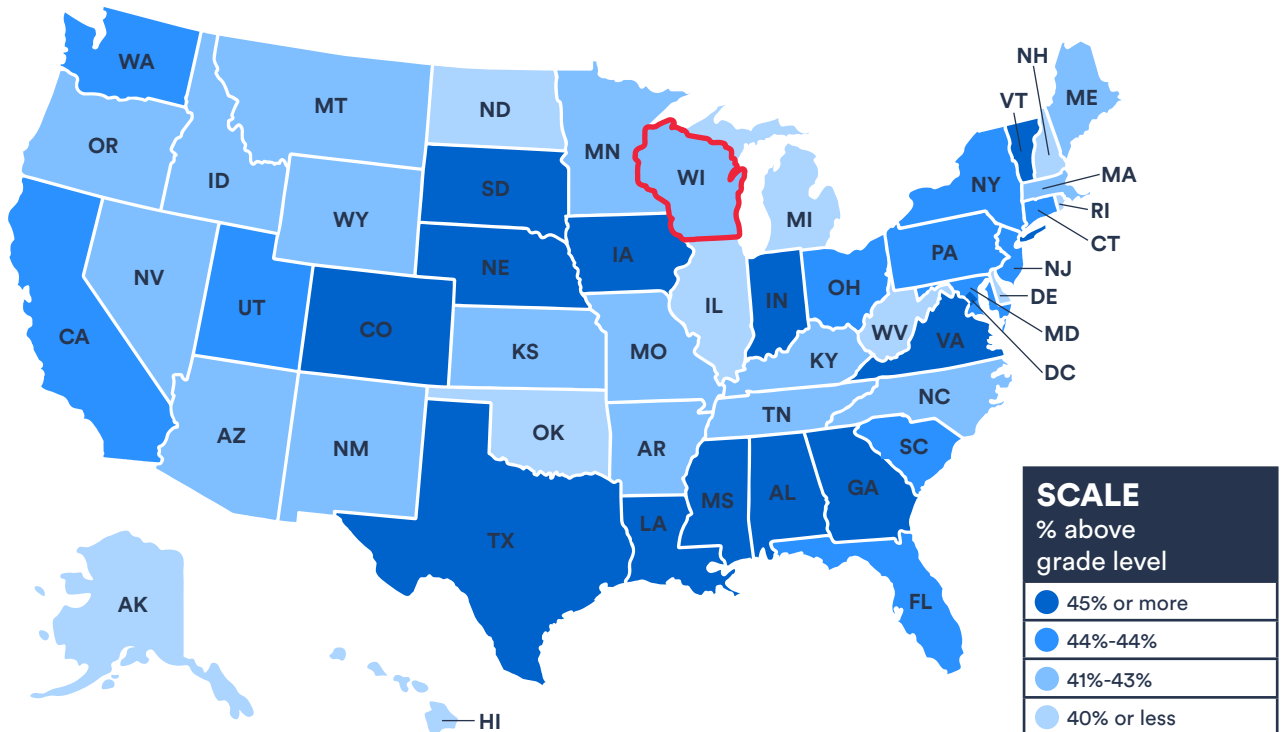
FEEL THEY HAVE A CHOICE BY STATE

Percentage answering they feel like they have a choice in what school their child attends



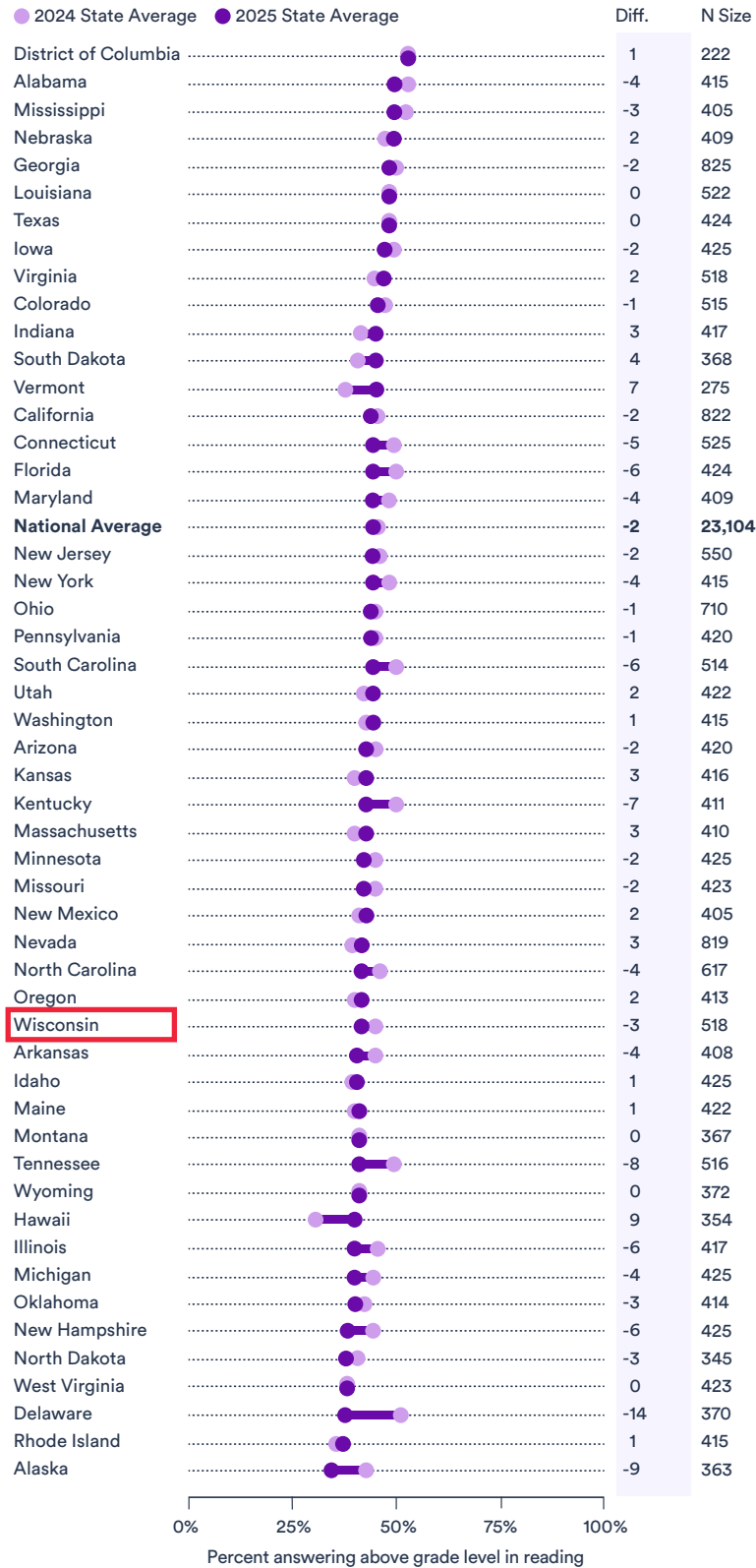
ABOVE GRADE LEVEL IN READING BY STATE

Percentage who believe their child is performing above grade level in reading



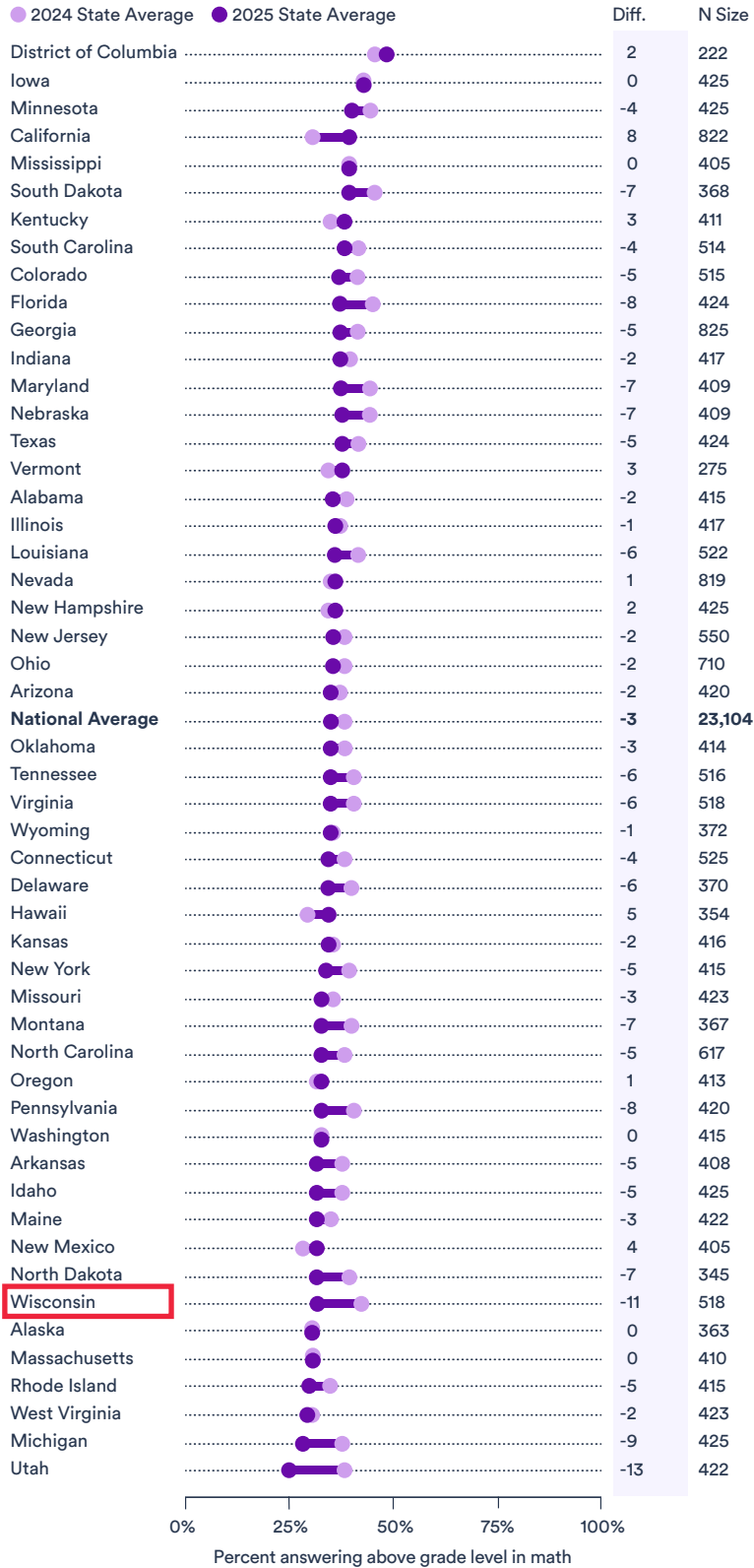
ABOVE GRADE LEVEL IN READING BY STATE & YEAR

Percentage who believe their child is performing above grade level in reading



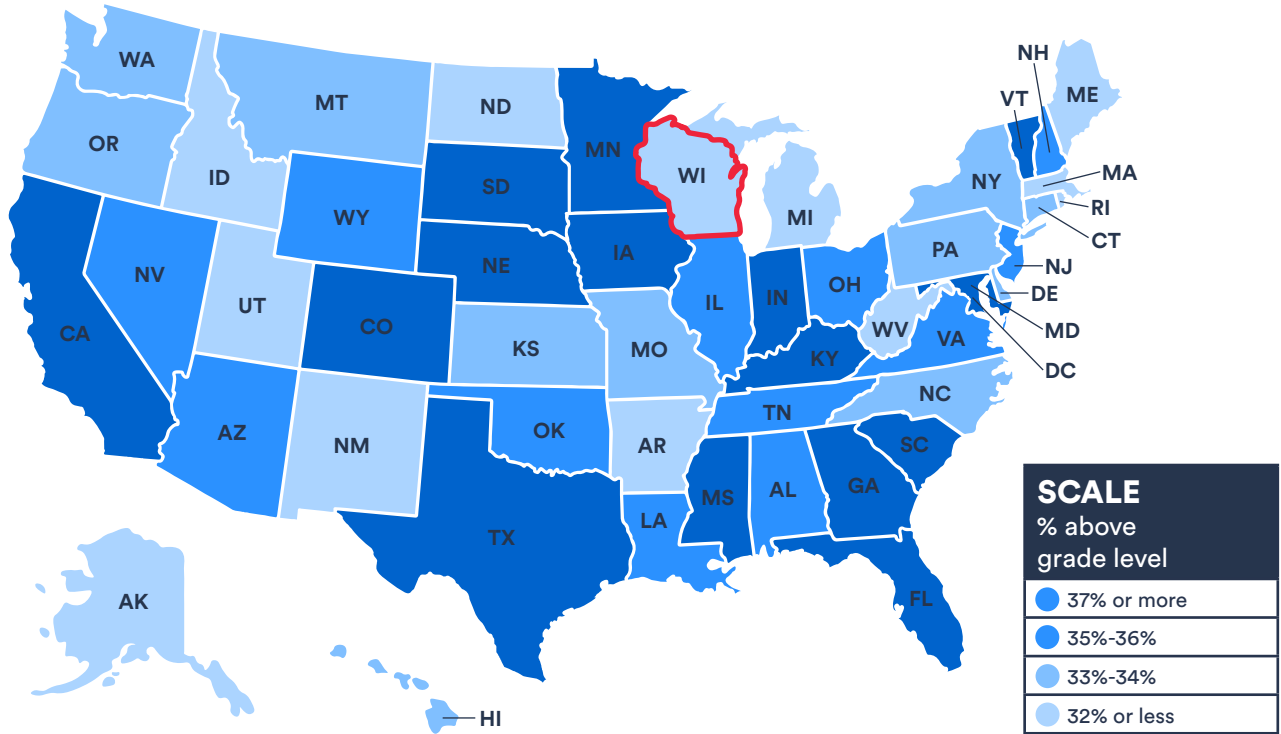
ABOVE GRADE LEVEL IN MATH BY STATE & YEAR

Percentage who believe their child is performing above grade level in math



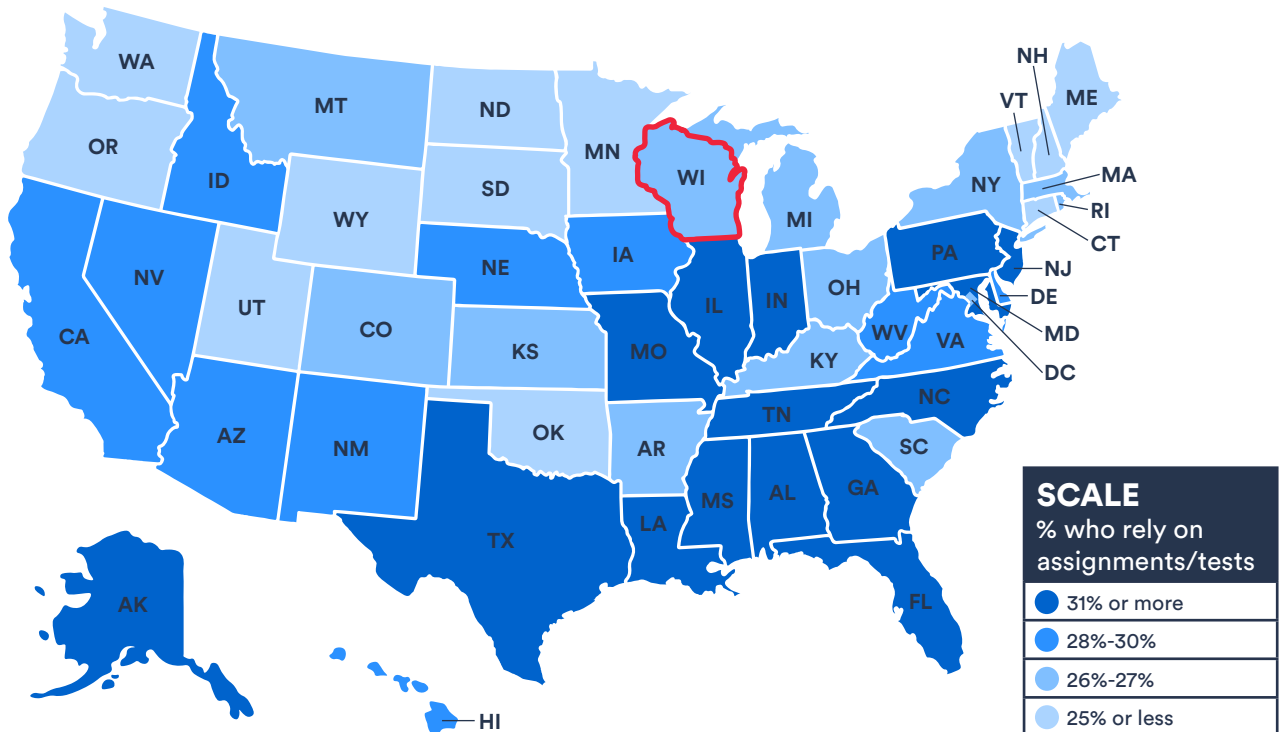
ABOVE GRADE LEVEL IN MATH BY STATE

Percentage who believe their child is performing above grade level in math



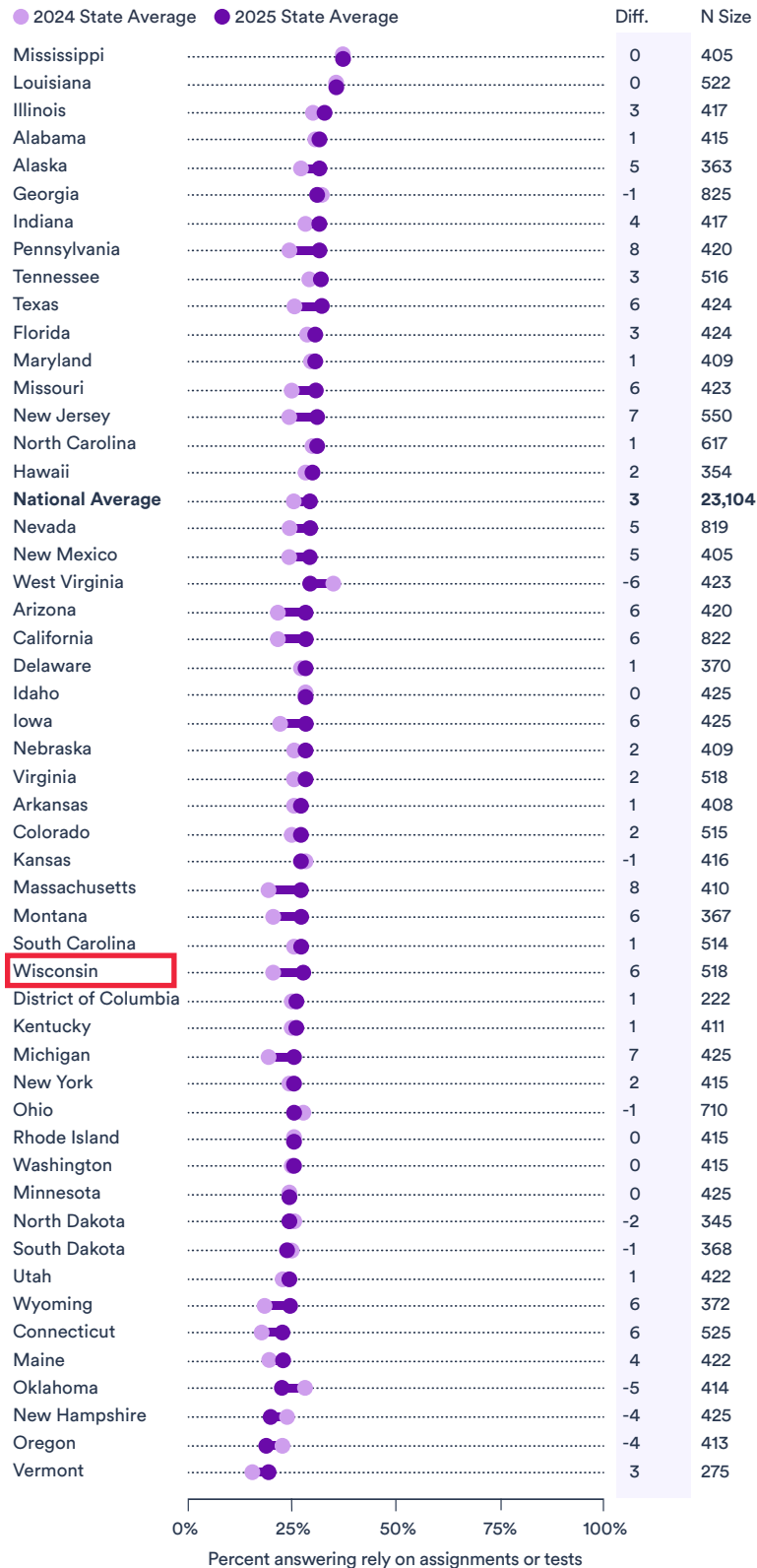
RELY ON ASSIGNMENTS OR TESTS BY STATE

Percentage who say they rely on graded assignments or standardized tests to determine if their child is on grade level



RELY ON ASSIGNMENTS OR TESTS BY STATE & YEAR

Percentage who say they rely on graded assignments or standardized tests to determine if their child is on grade level



MOST IMPORTANT INFO ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Percentage who rely on certain factors to determine if their child is at, above, or below grade level

Parent-teacher conferences or other communication from teachers	29%
What my child's teacher tells me	17%
Grades on their report card	16%
Grades on school assignments and tests	14%
Scores on standardized tests	13%
What my child tells me	8%
Not sure	2%
I don't think you can rely on any of these	2%

PER PUPIL SPENDING

Percentage answering how much they think is spent on each student in Wisconsin

Not sure	43%
\$50,000 or more per student per school year	4%
\$40,000 to under \$45,000	1%
\$30,000 to under \$35,000	0%
\$25,000 to under \$30,000	1%
\$20,000 to under \$25,000	2%
\$15,000 to under \$20,000	4%
\$10,000 to under \$15,000	9%
\$5,000 to under \$10,000	8%
\$1,000 to under \$5,000	15%
Less than \$1,000 per student per school year	13%

EDUCATION SPENDING IN WISCONSIN

Percentage answering they think Wisconsin is spending too much or too little per public school student, after being told the state spends approximately \$14,882

The right amount	36%
Too little	29%
Too much	20%
Not sure	15%

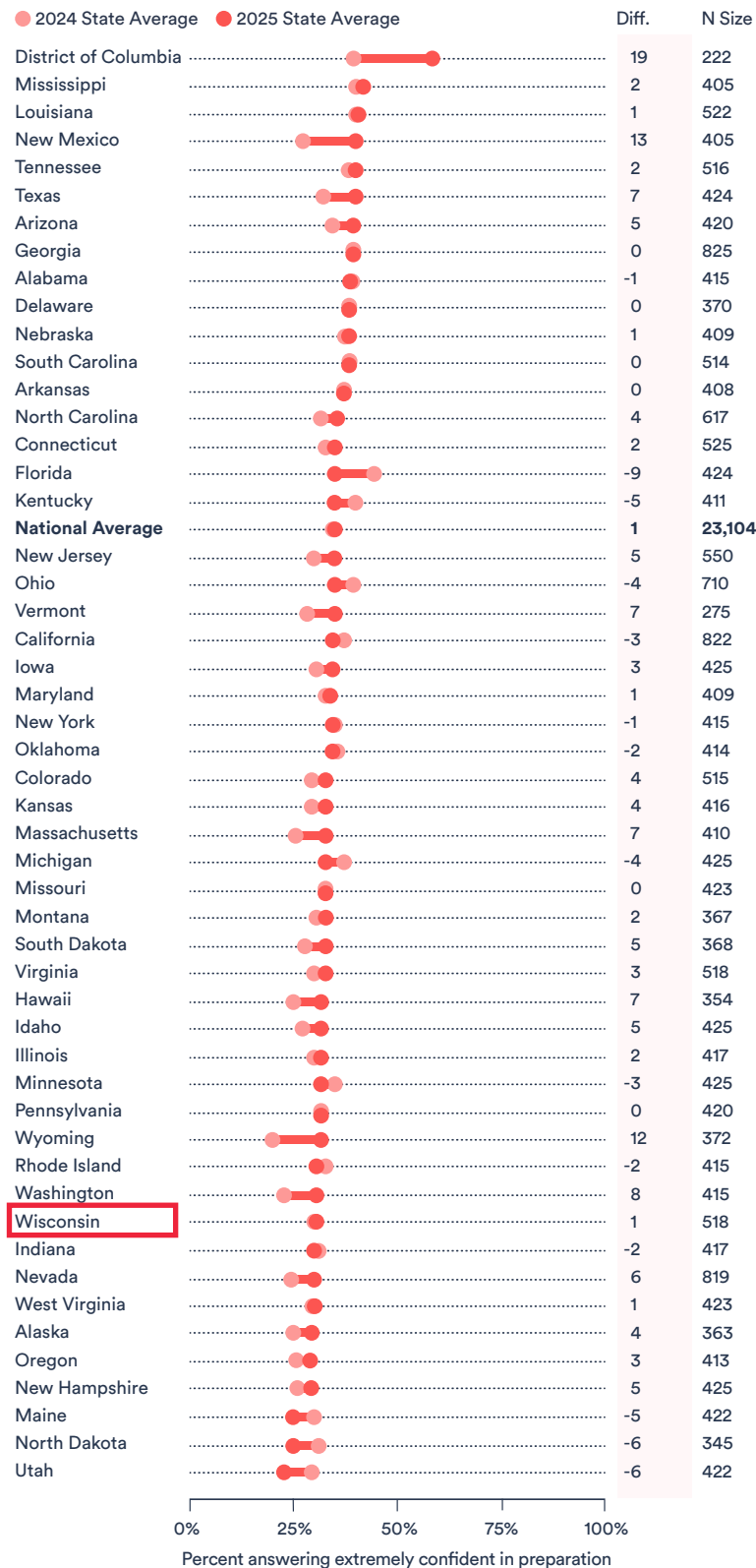
EDUCATION QUALITY DETERMINANTS

Percentage answering what is most important to them in determining the quality of education their child is receiving at their school

Strong education in life skills	36%
Strong core curriculum in reading and mathematics	24%
High standards for student behavior	23%
High academic standards	23%
Hands-on/project-based learning	23%
Offers programs for struggling or special needs students	22%
Emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education	17%
Variety on extracurricular activities	15%
Traditional approach to learning	15%
Technology used as a learning tool	15%
Encourages parent involvement	15%
Programs for advanced students	10%
High standardized test scores	9%
Diverse student body	9%
Offers vocational classes or job-related programs	8%
College acceptances	5%
Not sure	2%
Something else	1%

CONFIDENCE IN WORKFORCE PREPARATION BY STATE & YEAR

Percentage who are extremely confident their child will be equipped with the knowledge, skills and competencies to succeed in the workforce



HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAM UNMET DEMAND

Percentage answering they are interested in the following programs
for their high school student

Internship or Apprenticeship

Very interested + Somewhat interested	78%
Neutral	16%
Not too interested + Not interested at all	4%
Not sure	2%

Career Technical Education (CTE)

Very interested + Somewhat interested	71%
Neutral	22%
Not too interested + Not interested at all	6%
Not sure	1%

Industry Certificate/Credential

Very interested + Somewhat interested	70%
Neutral	23%
Not too interested + Not interested at all	6%
Not sure	1%

ABOUT WILL

The **Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty Inc.** (“WILL”) is a public interest law and policy center based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Through litigation, education, and participation in public discourse, WILL advances the public interest in the rule of law, individual liberty, constitutional government, and a robust civil society. We do so in partnership with like-minded individuals and organizations who are committed to conservative principles and a government bound to serving the people, as our nation’s founders intended.

ABOUT 50CAN

50CAN is an education advocacy organization focused on building the dynamic, student-centered education system of the future so that all kids, regardless of address, receive a high quality education. At the center of this work is our support for local education advocates who together have secured more than 275 transformative policy wins since our founding in 2011. This advocacy work is complemented by fellowships to spark and amplify the voices of changemakers, support for educational entrepreneurs as they build proof points of a better tomorrow, and efforts to help elected leaders better serve the public through a deeper understanding of education policy.

ABOUT EDGE RESEARCH

Edge Research tells data-driven stories that make our clients’ programs, products, and brands successful. One of Edge’s key verticals is education, which ranges from early childhood development, to K-12 and postsecondary education, to lifelong learning. We work for dozens of foundations, advocacy organizations, curriculum providers, associations, districts, schools and universities. Edge is constantly in the field talking to parents, students, teachers, administrators, and other education decision makers – getting the pulse on the issues that matter most.

