



**THE WISCONSIN
EDUCATION
COMEBACK**

A Roadmap for
Student Success

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BY DR. WILL FLANDERS, PHD

THE FORT GAP

**How Inconsistent Teacher
Preparation Is Fueling Wisconsin's
Literacy and Educator Crises**





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Executive Summary: Reading in Wisconsin

Wisconsin is facing a growing literacy challenge marked by stagnant or declining reading proficiency and a strained teacher workforce. While these issues are often treated separately, they are actually closely connected. At the center is a systemic gap in teacher preparation—particularly in equipping educators with the knowledge and skills aligned with the “Science of Reading.” The Foundations of Reading Test (FORT) serves as a useful diagnostic tool for identifying this gap. It is required for licensure for Elementary and Middle School Education, Middle Childhood-Early Adolescence, and Special Education. Inconsistent passage rates across universities reveal significant disparities in how effectively teacher preparation programs are training future educators and exacerbating the teacher shortage.

The FORT assesses candidates' understanding of evidence-based reading instruction, including phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Although passing the exam alone does not guarantee improved student outcomes, research strongly supports the importance of these competencies in early literacy success. Despite this, statewide passage rates hover around 75%, with some institutions falling far below that benchmark. These discrepancies suggest that many programs are not adequately preparing candidates, which in turn reduces the number of licensed teachers entering the workforce and exacerbates existing shortages.

By improving the quality and consistency of teacher preparation, Wisconsin can simultaneously strengthen its educator workforce and improve student literacy outcomes. The proposed policies aim to increase FORT passage rates without lowering standards, ensuring that every child is taught by a well-prepared teacher.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1. Teacher preparation is a root cause of both low reading proficiency and teacher shortages,** with inconsistent training in the Science of Reading limiting both educator effectiveness and workforce supply.
- 2. Wide disparities in FORT passage rates across universities highlight uneven program quality.** Passage rates vary from 100% to 25%.
- 3. A balanced policy approach—combining transparency, accountability, and incentives—can improve outcomes** by strengthening preparation programs without lowering licensure standards.

INTRODUCTION

Like much of the nation, Wisconsin finds itself in a reading crisis. Reading proficiency has declined since the COVID-19 pandemic, and states like Mississippi that were once at the very bottom of national rankings have surpassed Wisconsin on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). At the same time, the state continues to suffer from a shortage of teachers—with many quickly leaving the profession or never making it into the workforce to begin with.¹

While these may seem like distinct problems, they at least partially share a common cause: a teaching workforce that is unprepared to teach the “Science of Reading,” and in many instances can’t even reach the classroom due to an inability to pass the Foundations of Reading Test (FORT)—a test designed to measure a teaching candidate’s understanding of the key concepts in the “Science of Reading.”

Blame for this unpreparedness falls squarely on our state’s universities. Passage rates on the Foundations of Reading Test (FORT) vary extensively by university. In this policy brief, we propose a new means of utilizing the FORT to incentivize universities toward more effective reading instruction with the goal of creating a more resilient teaching workforce.

WHAT IS THE FORT?

Since 2014, Wisconsin statute has required candidates in certain licensure areas to pass the Foundations of Reading Test (FORT) before becoming certified.^{2*} This requirement applies to candidates seeking certification in Elementary and Middle School Education, Middle Childhood-Early Adolescence, and Special Education/Double Education.

The FORT measures a candidate’s knowledge of evidence-based reading instruction and is largely aligned with the “Science of Reading.”³ The Science of Reading is a body of research that integrates findings from cognitive psychology, neuroscience, education, and linguistics to determine how children best learn to read. It emphasizes five key components:

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Vocabulary
- Fluency
- Comprehension

* Wisconsin State Statute §118.19 (14)

Research consistently shows that teachers' ability to convey these concepts in reading instruction is associated with stronger literacy outcomes, particularly in early grades. At the same time, studies of teacher preparation programs indicate that many candidates are not adequately trained in these areas, prompting calls for reforms that better align coursework with the science of reading and emphasize structured, practice-based early literacy (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2020–2023). A recent analysis from the Fordham Institute examined 18 state-level reading policies and their relationship to teacher knowledge of the Science of Reading in a survey. Of those policies, *only* the use of a Science of Reading-aligned licensure exam was found to increase teacher knowledge to a statistically significant level. These 18 policies are drawn from ExcelinEd's Early Literacy Initiative, which classifies the FORT exam as aligned.

There is evidence that implementation of the Science of Reading can dramatically improve student achievement. States like Mississippi and Louisiana were among the early adopters of Science of Reading-aligned policies. These states have shot up from the bottom of the pack on national testing even as other states have stagnated or declined in reading proficiency post-COVID.⁴

Consistently low FORT passage rates at universities are a strong signal that teacher preparation programs are falling short in equipping future educators with the knowledge and skills needed to teach reading effectively.

THE TEACHER PREPARATION CRISIS

A 2023 analysis of more than 700 teacher preparation programs conducted by the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) revealed troubling trends.⁵ Nationally, only 25% of teacher preparation adequately prepares teaching candidates in all five components of the Science of Reading. In Wisconsin, only two programs received a grade of "A" or higher—UW-Madison and UW-Stevens Point. Four schools in the state (Carthage College, UW-Superior, UW-Milwaukee, and UW-Eau Claire) received an "F." The full list is included in Table 1 on the right.

Table 1. NCTQ Science of Reading Ratings

2023 Grade	Institution
F	Carthage College
A	Maranatha Baptist University
D	Marian University
F	University of Wisconsin — Eau Claire
C	University of Wisconsin — Green Bay
C	University of Wisconsin — La Crosse
A	University of Wisconsin — Madison
F	University of Wisconsin — Milwaukee
C	University of Wisconsin — Oshkosh
B	University of Wisconsin — Parkside
D	University of Wisconsin — Platteville
B	University of Wisconsin — River Falls
A+	University of Wisconsin — Stevens Point
F	University of Wisconsin — Superior
C	University of Wisconsin — Whitewater

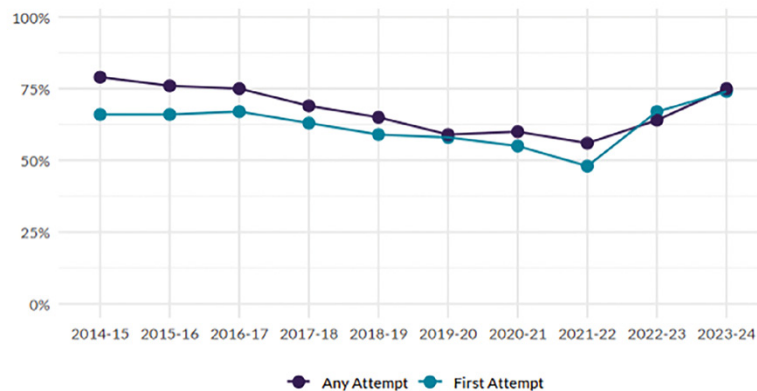
Of course, this analysis predates the implementation of Act 20. Wisconsin’s Act 20 is a 2023 law that aims to improve early reading skills by requiring schools to use science-based (phonics-focused) instruction, assess literacy in grades 4K–3, and provide extra support to struggling readers.⁶ It also requires that “to be approved by the state superintendent, a teacher preparatory program shall demonstrate that it provides instruction that prepares teachers to teach reading and language arts using science-based early reading instruction, as defined in s. 118.015 (1c) (b), and does not provide instruction on teaching reading and language arts that incorporates 3-cueing, as defined in s. 118.015 (1c) (c).”

It is possible that university curricula and standards have changed to better align with the legislation. But it does point to the fact that legislation like Act 20 was necessary, and there are very real problems to solve, and some form of university accountability may be needed, as most schools are not implementing the Science of Reading on their own.

FORT PASSAGE RATES

The figure below is taken from Wisconsin DPI’s Educator Preparedness and Workforce Analysis.⁷ It shows that passage rates on the FORT increased slightly from the 2021-22 school year to the 2023-24 after steadily declining from 2014-15 through 2021-2022. The exam was updated in the Fall of 2022, possibly helping to explain the higher passage rate. However, passage rates around 75% indicate there is a significant share of candidates who are not prepared for the rigors of the exam—either on their first attempt or subsequent attempts.

Figure 1.
Trends in FORT
Pass Rates



Recent editions of DPI’s Educator Preparation and Workforce Analysis report have not included university level FORT passage rates. However, we obtained this information through an open records request and the results for the 2023-24 school year are shown in Table 1 below. Also included is the average passage rate at that school over the past three school years.* DPI provided both first-time taker and any-attempt passage rates, and we report the any attempt passage rates in Table 2.

* Note that some schools are lacking data for one or more years. This is particularly true in 2022 when the presence of two tests made the cell sizes below the limit for privacy concerns for some schools. In these cases, the available data is used to estimate the average.

Table 2. 2023-24 FORT Any Attempt Passage Rates

	Total Candidates	Total Passed	% Passed	Average 21-23
Marquette University	15	15	100%	91%
Maranatha Baptist University	21	20	95%	95%
University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire	135	124	92%	82%
University of Wisconsin – Madison	110	98	89%	89%
Wisconsin Lutheran College	28	25	89%	89%
Carroll University	18	16	89%	81%
University of Wisconsin – La Crosse	98	86	88%	80%
University of Wisconsin – Stout	47	39	83%	85%
University of Wisconsin – Parkside	23	19	83%	83%
University of Wisconsin – River Falls	73	60	82%	75%
St. Norbert College	31	25	81%	86%
University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh	99	80	81%	77%
Carthage College	27	21	78%	79%
University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point	194	146	75%	71%
Edgewood College	54	39	72%	78%
University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee	136	97	71%	67%
University of Wisconsin – Whitewater	290	202	70%	64%
Viterbo University	55	38	69%	64%
University of Wisconsin – Platteville	71	48	68%	63%
University of Wisconsin – Superior	104	68	65%	61%
Concordia University – Wisconsin	95	61	64%	62%
University of Wisconsin – Green Bay	111	70	63%	61%
Cardinal Stritch University	15	9	60%	60%
Alverno College	66	38	58%	49%
Ripon College	16	9	56%	56%
Lakeland University	20	11	55%	55%
Marian University	19	10	53%	54%
College of Menominee Nation	10	5	50%	50%
Mount Mary University	11	5	45%	45%
MTEC (Milwaukee Teacher Education Center)	17	7	41%	41%
Northland College	12	3	25%	25%

There are dramatic differences in passage rates by university. For example, students at UW-Madison have a passage rate 19 percentage points higher than those at UW-Whitewater. Among private universities, passage rates vary by as much as 70%. Note again that these are the “any attempt” measures—so almost a quarter of teaching candidates never pass the exam in the time frame of DPI’s analysis.

Some variation is expected based on the academic competitiveness of each school, but such large disparities point to inconsistencies in how well preparation programs equip candidates with the knowledge needed to teach reading. It is worth noting that the passage rates here do not always align well with the NCTQ scores reported in the previous section. While we can’t say for sure, it is possible that the implementation of Act 20 has caused some schools to improve their practices even by the 2023-24 school year that we examined here. But it certainly highlights that there is more to preparation than what can be objectively evaluated on paper.

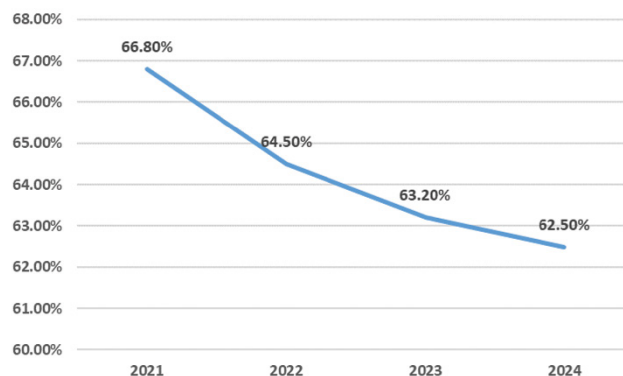
At the lowest passage public university on the list, students would pay about \$91,000 for a four-year degree assuming everything goes right throughout their college career.⁸ This is a huge investment for a low amount of return if a teaching candidate can’t pass the test required in order to work.

More broadly, this reduces the pool of licensed educators and undermines the goals of Act 20.

RELATIONSHIP TO TEACHER SHORTAGE

Like most of the United States, Wisconsin school districts report a shortage of qualified teachers. A 2026 Wisconsin DPI report found that the state’s teacher pipeline is weak at every stage, with far fewer candidates ultimately entering the classroom than the number who begin preparation programs.⁹ Of the 5,256 individuals who completed an educator preparation program in 2023–24, only 3,568 became licensed. Retention is equally troubling. Only about 62.5% of teachers remain in the entire state of Wisconsin after five years. Figure shows how that percentage has declined by more than four percentage points over the four most recent years of data.

Figure 2.
Five Year Teacher
Retention Rate,
2021-24



These trends limit the supply of qualified teachers and heighten the urgency of improving the quality and consistency of teacher preparation. Low FORT passage rates exacerbate Wisconsin's teacher shortage. This pressure has prompted repeated attempts to relax or eliminate the requirement that teachers pass the FORT before beginning classroom instruction. A 2023 bill sought to expand an exemption from the FORT—currently limited to special education teachers—to include all licenses subject to the FORT requirement. Specifically, it would have allowed applicants for K-5 teaching licenses, initial reading teacher licenses, and initial reading specialist licenses to meet the requirement through approved coursework rather than passing the FORT.

While there is understandable logic behind these proposals, a more effective solution is to incentivize universities to improve their FORT passage rates. Improving passage rates would help expand the teacher pipeline without compromising instructional quality. Many candidates who fail the FORT do so not because they lack the potential to be great teachers, but because they were not adequately prepared or supported during their training. Investments in targeted supports—such as aligned coursework, test prep resources, and mentoring—can help more aspiring educators succeed on the test, enter the classroom, and provide high-quality literacy instruction to Wisconsin students.

POLICY PROPOSALS

We propose a “carrots and sticks” approach to working with universities to improve FORT passage rates. This policy prioritizes transparency while also balancing accountability with support. It avoids lowering standards for reading instruction while acknowledging that many institutions need structural incentives and resources to improve. By rewarding excellence and spotlighting underperformance, Wisconsin can realign its teacher prep programs with the urgent goal of ensuring every child is taught to read by an educator trained in evidence-based practices.

Public Reporting:

Earlier editions of DPI's workforce reports included institution-level FORT passage rates, but the most recent reports no longer provide this information. The proposed policy would require DPI to publish an annual dataset reporting FORT performance for each educator preparation program, disaggregated by program type (elementary, special education, reading), candidate demographics, attempt history, and preparation pathway (undergraduate or alternative certification). Regular, disaggregated reporting strengthens oversight, supports data-driven program improvement, and provides districts and candidates with greater clarity when choosing an educator preparation program.

Warning and Probation Status:

Teacher preparation programs with consistently low pass rates (e.g., below 75% for two consecutive years) would be designated as “Underperforming” and placed under DPI review. The 75% threshold is chosen

because, on the most recent administration of the test, the statewide passage rate was 73.6%. Thus, universities below 75% are close to or below average in passage rates. Institutions must submit a corrective action plan and risk funding cuts or program reapproval status if no improvement is shown within three years.

Literacy Excellence Grants:

Universities that are excelling in this area should be incentivized to continue to do so. A competitive grant fund that provides performance bonuses to institutions that:

- Exceed a benchmark passage rate (e.g., 90% or above)
- Show significant year-over-year improvement (e.g., a 5+ point one-year increase)

These programs could receive a special designation for meeting or exceeding excellence benchmarks that could be featured in university marketing materials and recommended to districts hiring new teachers.

Conclusion

By pairing Act 20's classroom reforms with a renewed focus on teacher preparation, Wisconsin has the opportunity to lead the nation in reversing declining literacy outcomes. Ensuring that every future teacher has a deep understanding of the "Science of Reading" is not just about passing an exam—it is about guaranteeing that students receive high-quality reading instruction from day one. Transparent reporting, targeted supports, and accountability measures can help drive meaningful change without lowering standards or compromising on quality.

Wisconsin's reading crisis demands bold but thoughtful action. Strengthening the connection between educator preparation programs and literacy outcomes will help close gaps in student achievement while expanding the pipeline of qualified teachers. By adopting the policies outlined here, the state can ensure that Act 20 achieves its full potential—moving Wisconsin from the middle of the pack back to a national leader in reading proficiency.

ENDNOTES

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- 9 Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. 2026. *Educator Preparation Program and Workforce Analysis Report*. <https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/education-workforce/pdf/2022-wi-epp-workforce-annual-report.pdf>



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