*Fiscal Facts by Wisconsin Policy Forum*

**Missed tests cloud view of pandemic’s student impact**

Newly released results of statewide testing last spring appear to confirm that student learning suffered in Wisconsin amid the COVID-19 pandemic. But a surge in students missing the exams — particularly in the largest districts and among less privileged groups — undercut the data’s value.

With parents and policymakers alike concerned about the pandemic’s effect on student learning, this means education leaders must look elsewhere for additional insights on student needs.

Each spring, third through eighth graders take the statewide Forward exam in math and English Language Arts to assess their knowledge and skills. Eleventh graders take the statewide ACT exam to assess college readiness. The U.S. Department of Education and Wisconsin Legislature suspended 2019-20 test requirements due to COVID-19, making the 2020-21 data the first statewide source of information about these areas since the pandemic began.

As expected, statewide test scores released last month showed an overall decrease in student proficiency from the 2018-19 to 2020-21 school years amid the disruptions of the pandemic. The actual dip may be even larger than what these scores suggest, however, because of a sharp rise in students who did not take the exams at all.

Particularly concerning is the decreased participation among marginalized student groups. Students of color and students from low-income households saw particularly large decreases, compromising the value of the data for statewide analyses and for districts with large shares of underserved students. Both the ACT and the Forward exam must be administered in person, which created challenges for schools operating remotely.

Without these missing exam results, users of the data will need to proceed with caution. Many districts and communities will need to seek additional information to appropriately target student supports and maximize the impact of federal pandemic aid.

The low participation rates may well be a one-year blip since students have largely returned to in-person learning for the 2021-22 school year thus far. In the meantime, despite their limitations, the current test data still reinforces concerns that the pandemic has harmed student learning, especially for those who were already underserved. The results underscore the need for education leaders to act with clarity and urgency to target their federal K-12 pandemic aid toward short-term recovery and long-term gains for students.

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