WISPOLITICS: School test results debated as racial gaps persist

By WisPolitics

New school test results have fueled an ongoing debate about methodology and persistent racial achievement gaps. The debate hints at partisan state budget rhetoric to come in 2025 when a new Legislature will consider a new spending plan from Dem Gov. Tony Evers.

The major racial disparities between students of color and white students in English language arts continue to be an issue — no matter what the methodology, analysts said.

Results for the 2023-24 school year were released after the Department of Public Instruction came under fire this year for implementing new categories for student achievement that critics argue mask poor performance.

The state had used the terms “below basic, basic, proficient and advanced” to describe student performance since 2014-15. Those terms were replaced with “developing, approaching, meeting and advanced.”

Due to the change in terminology, this year’s results for English language arts and math cannot be compared with previous years.

A DPI spokesperson tells WisPolitics said the results represent “one test on one given day, and there are many other data points going forward.” DPI noted the results for social studies and science can still be compared year over year because the score grading scales have not changed.

State Superintendent Jill Underly in an op-ed defended the change, saying DPI wasn’t lowering standards, “rather, we are reflecting actual student results using Wisconsin’s strong academic standards.”

She noted previous standards aligned with the National Assessment of Educational Progress exam, arguing those levels are extremely high and exceed grade-level knowledge.

But Senate Education Committee Chair John Jagler, R-Watertown, questioned why the change was made.

“Why move to lower standards ? (Even @GovEvers disagrees with this) Why make it impossible to track data from previous years?” Jagler said in an X post.

And Will Flanders, research director for the conservative Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty, said parents, taxpayers and policymakers have relied on the statewide Forward Exam to gauge how schools are performing.

“Inflated proficiency scores resulting from unilateral changes by DPI mean that this is no longer the case. The legislature should reverse these changes, and limit the ability of DPI to act in this manner in the future,” Flanders said.

These criticisms and defenses will likely be on display next year during the once-every-two-year state budget debate. Evers, who used to have Underly’s job, has made education funding a budget priority. And the GOP-dominated Legislature has shaped Evers’ plans to its liking. But the new Legislature, being elected under new maps, is likely to have narrower partisan margins and may be more receptive to Evers and Underly.

The data measure public school scores and participation in assessments including: the Forward Exam for grades 3-8 and 10; the PreACT Secure exam, which gauges ACT preparedness for grades 9 and 10; and the ACT statewide exam for grade 11. The data also include scores for Dynamic Learning Maps assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Across all three exams, public school students had proficiency rates of 48 percent in English language arts, which includes writing and reading skills.

In the English language arts portion of the Forward Exam, 39.5% of students were meeting, 29% approaching, 17.1% developing and 11.6% advanced, while 2.8% weren’t tested.

Student scores are also divided into categories of “meeting” and “not meeting.” The broader meeting category includes meeting and advanced scores, while not meeting combines developing and approaching scores with the percentage of untested students.

The Forward Exam data also show racial disparities continue, particularly for Black, American Indian and Hispanic students. Overall, 78% percent of Black students, 66.6% of American Indian students and 62.2% of Hispanic students were not meeting grade-level expectations. The data show 37.5% of White students did not meet expectations.

Meanwhile, on the ACT statewide exam’s English language arts portion, 32.4% of students were meeting, 28% approaching, 21.8% developing, 9.5% advanced and 8.3% weren’t tested.

ACT scores also indicated significant racial disparities, primarily among Black, Hispanic, Pacific Islander and American Indian students. Overall, 66.3% of Black, 65.9% of Pacific Islander, 65% of Hispanic and 61.1% of American Indian students weren’t meeting grade-level expectations.

For the preACT Secure exam’s English Language Arts section, 34.1% of students were meeting, 31.1% approaching, 16% developing, 10.1% advanced and 8.7% weren’t tested.

The preACT data also showed racial gaps, with 61.6% of Hispanic, 58.6% of Black, and 55.5% of American Indian students not meeting expectations. Excluding students of two or more races and those of unknown race, white students had the lowest percentage of scores not meeting expectations at 42.2%.

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