

# TESTING OUR PATIENCE:

HOW WISCONSIN LOWERED STANDARDS,  
WIDENED THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP,  
AND BUSTED ITS STATE EXAMS

## HOW TO FIX TEST SCORES



A REPORT BY



INSTITUTE FOR  
REFORMING GOVERNMENT

OCTOBER 2024





INSTITUTE FOR  
REFORMING GOVERNMENT



## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR REFORMING GOVERNMENT CENTER FOR INVESTIGATIVE OVERSIGHT

The Institute for Reforming Government is a 501(c)(3) non-profit that wants to give all Wisconsinites an opportunity to succeed and prosper. IRG does this by developing policy reforms, engaging communities, and holding government accountable.

IRG's Center for Investigative Oversight supports rigorous, independent, and objective oversight of state government and its agencies.

CIO Director Jake Curtis joined the IRG team in 2024. Throughout his career he has focused on government relations matters for both public and private sector clients, representing dozens of units of government and handling administrative matters before WERC, DWD, ETF, DNR, DFI, DATCP, and DPI.

Jake is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, B.A., summa cum laude, 2005, the University of Wisconsin Law School, cum laude, 2008, the United States Air Force, Officer Training School, 2021, and the United States Air Force, The Judge Advocate General's Corps, 2022.



## ABOUT THE PROCESS

On April 25, 2024, IRG submitted a public record request for the period January 1, 2023, to April 25, 2024. IRG requested DPI release records concerning the 2024 standard setting of cut scores for the Forward Exam and ACT as well as records using the term "cut scores." DPI released records to IRG on September 4, 2024. For transparency's sake, IRG has published all received records on its website.

IRG has selected records for this report that inform the public about the significant problem Wisconsin's education leadership has created, how the problem arose, and how the problem may affect educators, officials, parents, and kids.

[ReformingGovernment.org](https://ReformingGovernment.org)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                     |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| Key Findings .....                  | 5  |
| Key Quotations .....                | 7  |
| Key Questions .....                 | 9  |
| Initiating Test Score Changes ..... | 11 |
| Early Inequity .....                | 12 |
| Trouble Understanding .....         | 15 |
| Changing the Tests .....            | 18 |
| Widening the Achievement Gap .....  | 20 |
| Aftermath .....                     | 23 |



# Key Findings

Within her first year as Wisconsin's educational leader, State Superintendent Jill Underly published a series of essays on equity. She wrote rousing about Wisconsin's infamous education achievement gaps for disadvantaged groups and what it would take to fix them. "We need to question what we are doing as an education system that results in these disparities... The question is again whether we have the collective will to reckon with these disparities and the need for belonging in our classrooms. I believe we do, and we must."<sup>1</sup>

She also included this. "This is the reality of the achievement gap in Wisconsin. It cannot continue this way; we are failing our students of color, and one factor in that failure is in the language we use to describe it."<sup>2</sup>

Two years later, the language describing the achievement gap became the center of a boiling debate. On June 6, 2024, the Department of Public Instruction publicly announced two substantial changes to the Forward Exam, PreACT Secure, and ACT that students take at the end of the school year.<sup>3</sup> The names of the four categories into which students sort would switch to softer, "growth-based" terms. Students would no longer demonstrate Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, or Advanced skills, but be Developing toward, Approaching, Meeting, or Advanced past Wisconsin state standards.<sup>4</sup>

**More consequentially, DPI altered each test's "cut scores," the minimum scores a student needs to reach each of those tiers of achievement.<sup>5</sup> Citing revisions to state standards, DPI announced that Wisconsin families would no longer be able to compare their children's results to their standing before the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, it soon became clear that DPI had lowered the standards for each performance level.<sup>7</sup> These changes have major consequences for Wisconsin's schools, local leaders, state officials, and families.**

---

<sup>1</sup> State Superintendent Doctor Jill Underly, "[Racial Disparities and Our Collective Will](#)," April 19, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> State Superintendent Doctor Jill Underly, "[Racial Disparities and Our Collective Will](#)," April 19, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[DPI Focuses on Growth-Based Mindset in Updated Student Performance Level Descriptors for Standardized Assessments](#)," June 6, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[Updated Asset-Based Performance Levels](#)," June 6, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[DPI Focuses on Growth-Based Mindset in Updated Student Performance Level Descriptors for Standardized Assessments](#)."

<sup>6</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[What You Need To Know: Standard Setting and Forward Exam Updates](#)," August 14, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Alan J. Borsuk, "[Does Lowering Cut Scores and Changing Terminology on Standardized Tests Better Serve Wisconsin Students?](#)" *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 23, 2024.

Given that test scores release this month, it has become important to know when the state test changes were decided, what about them has changed, how much the tests have changed, and how changes could affect schools' pursuit of excellence.

**Based on public records:**

- » **State Superintendent Underly initiated the changes to test score standards and wanted them lowered to match other states'.**
- » **State Superintendent Underly struggled to interpret the implications of new test score standards.**
- » **DPI staff provided information to decisionmakers based on either 50% or 55% proficiency in 2024, up from approximately 40% in 2023.**
- » **DPI staff projected those proficiency levels would widen Wisconsin's achievement gaps along racial, poverty, and disability lines.**
  - » **DPI staff projected those proficiency levels would increase gaps between 4 to 10 points for Black students, 3 to 4 points for economically disadvantaged students, and 5 to 10 points for special-needs students.**
- » **DPI staff projected those proficiency levels would increase ratings on federally mandated state report cards, student performance being equal.**
  - » **DPI staff projected those proficiency levels eventually would cause 71% of districts to score 4 or 5 stars on state report cards, up from 36%, and 63% of schools to score 4 or 5 stars, up from 46%.**
- » **DPI staff projected those proficiency levels would benefit low-poverty schools more than high-poverty schools on state report cards due to how they are calculated.**
- » **DPI staff, to balance out the benefits to low-poverty schools, suggested realigning aspects of the report cards that favor high-poverty schools, benefiting them.**
  - » **DPI staff projected both beneficial changes together eventually would cause 93% of districts to score 4 or 5 stars on state report cards as well as 80% of schools.**
- » **DPI staff, to prevent this drastic shift, suggested changing report card cut scores for the 2024 to 2025 school year.**

Whether State Superintendent Underly accepted the standards suggested by DPI staff and standard setting participants this summer is currently unknown, as are 2024 state test scores. These public records end in April and test scores are private until later in October.

However, if test scores rise between 10% and 15%, if achievement score gaps increase statewide for the disadvantaged, if state report card ratings sharply rise, especially for low-poverty schools, and if Wisconsin politicians spend 2025 fixing report card ratings instead of reading instruction, the teacher supply, special-needs funding, or barriers to expanding high-quality schools, as early district results suggest, the record shows that DPI knew all of it would happen and did it, anyway.

Do we have the collective will to reckon with the massive disparities among Wisconsin students? Or will other states continue to pass us by, taking new residents, new businesses, and new possibilities with them?

# Key Quotations

“Dr. Underly is interested in taking another look at how we establish our cut scores for the Forward Exam. Given that we’re amid some other change in that area, we’re asking for a decision paper on what it would take to change the cut scores, as well as what timeline we’d be working off.”

*- then-Executive Director Thomas McCarthy, January 23, 2023, initiating changes to test score standards*

“Using comparison data from 2019 as the basis for adopting these cut scores reflects that expectations of performance have not changed over time.” - Office of Educational Accountability, May 30, 2023, setting PreACT score standards for 2023 that DPI would later lower in 2024

“I need help with this. I obviously trust Viji, but I truly don’t understand what I am looking at for my approval. And with all this other nonsense going on with literacy I want to make sure we’re not throwing more fuel onto this fire. The crummy thing is, I am an educator and I don’t understand it - so how are parents supposed to understand this too? If we could set the standards and the cut scores, but then have some kind of way to interpret it to parents and educators as a companion, that would be great. For example, what does Proficient mean vs. Advanced? That they are at grade level vs. the next grade level? I just hate this stuff so much.” - Superintendent Jill Underly, June 13, 2023, reviewing potential PreACT score standards, reviewing statements saying lowering cut scores would increase report card star ratings more for low-poverty districts than high-poverty districts, questioning the meaning of student performance levels, and commenting on a matter related to literacy during the same period as Act 20 negotiations

“I’m going to need a primer on this, or a tutoring session. I still don’t understand it, and it’s just a learning block that I have on my end.” - Superintendent Jill Underly, July 6, 2023, reviewing potential PreACT score standards again 1 day before approving them

“After equating, DRC Research staff will provide the impact data to DPI for approval. The impact data shows the percentage of students in each performance level for each grade and content.”

*- Data Recognition Corporation, October 26, 2023, referring to performance data DPI would receive by June 10, 2024, before educators reset test score standards*

“I also said that NAEP only tests 10,000 nationally, and that’s really an awful way to make generalizations about how kids are doing, and that when we use state assessments to compare kids state by state, it’s not an apples to apples comparison - so if the feds want to get in the assessment game, they should really make it so that we all take the same assessment and have the same cut scores. Because otherwise it’s not very useful information. ...But my feelings on high stakes tests are pretty well known.”

*- Superintendent Jill Underly, December 19, 2023, criticizing the Department of Education’s methodology for the NAEP, the national test commonly analyzed by researchers*

“Before I jumped off- yes, I’d like to have a conversation about our cut scores being the highest in the country and how we communicate what that translates to with NAEP.” - Superintendent Jill Underly,

*February 20, 2024, following up on lowering test score standards*

“I also want to, and maybe this exists as a possibility, to norm our levels to be similar to other states... as I hear that we have some of the highest cut scores nationally. I would like them to be looked at so that we aren’t judged negatively when we have direct standards.” - Superintendent Jill Underly, March 7, 2024, taking a tangent on lowering test score standards while discussing changing student performance level names

“Assuming these standard setting activities raise proficiency rates statewide, it is reasonably likely that: (1) proficiency-based achievement gaps will increase, (2) report card Overall Scores will increase year-over-year, and (3) increases in Overall Score and Overall Rating category will impact schools disproportionately (report card rating increases will benefit low-poverty schools more than high-poverty schools).” - Office of Educational Accountability, April 3, 2024, explaining to Superintendent Underly and her cabinet that lowering test score standards would lead to inequitable outcomes

“Our analysis projects that student groups who have been traditionally underserved will see smaller gains in proficiency rates as compared to more advantaged groups, widening the gaps between them.”

- Office of Educational Accountability, April 3, 2024, explaining to Superintendent Underly and her cabinet that lowering test score standards would widen the visibility of achievement gaps

“If proficiency rate gains are substantial, we project report card ratings will increase to such a degree that there will be little difference between schools in terms of their ratings.” - Office of Educational Accountability, April 3, 2024, explaining to Superintendent Underly and her cabinet that lowering test score standards would make school accountability report cards increasingly uniformly high and therefore useless

“In addition, these report card rating increases will benefit low-poverty schools more than high-poverty schools due to variable weighting of Achievement and Growth priority areas, as required by state law. ...As a result, rising proficiency and PBP rates will raise report card scores and ratings to a greater degree for schools and districts with lower percentages of ECD students.” - Office of Educational Accountability, April 3, 2024, explaining to Superintendent Underly and her cabinet that lowering test score standards would disproportionately benefit low-poverty schools, significantly increasing the number whose star ratings would rise

“While the impacts of the assessment standard setting on achievement gaps cannot be addressed, OEA would be able to address some of the challenges to the report card system to a certain extent... Potential next steps: 1. Keep report card calculations and rating thresholds unchanged for the 2023-24 school year as we anticipate relatively moderate increases this year. 2. For the 2024-25 school year, make the following changes to report card calculations: a. Include only two years of assessment data in achievement calculations, including the Achievement priority area, as well as the achievement components of the TGO and On-Track to Graduation priority areas... b. Adjust Growth and TGO rescaling formulas to align these priority area score distributions with the new Achievement priority area score distribution. 3. Prior to release of 2024-25 report cards, conduct a report card standard setting to establish new report card rating thresholds.” - Office of Educational Accountability, April 3, 2024, proposing to Superintendent Underly and her cabinet that DPI significantly change state accountability report cards in 2025 to attempt to balance out the effect of lowering test score standards in 2024

“Does Cabinet have a lower or upper threshold for recommendations? Forward? ACT?”

- Office of Educational Accountability, April 9, 2024, ending a meeting on test score standards before teachers had a chance to set those standards in July

# Key Questions

**These records raise numerous questions about the process, results and effects of DPI's choices. Asking these questions would create accountability.**

What in January 2023 prompted Superintendent Underly to want to change test score standards?

Could 2024 cut scores have been calibrated to the same distributions as 2023 cut scores?

Did DPI leadership reconsider lowering cut scores when told in May 2023 that doing so would benefit low-poverty districts more than high-poverty districts?

If DPI set PreACT scores in 2023 that reflected expectations of performance had not changed over time, then lowered them in 2024, have DPI's expectations of students lowered over time?

Was "this other nonsense going on with literacy" referring to the Act 20 legislation being worked on then? If so, was there an aspect of Act 20 that Superintendent Underly considered nonsense, or was it all nonsense?

Did Superintendent Underly tell legislators during the Act 20 negotiations that DPI would change test cut scores?

In simple terms that parents can understand, how would Superintendent Underly define "Proficient" under 2023 standards? How would she define "Meeting" under 2024 standards?

Why did Superintendent Underly want to change cut scores before she understood how they had been calibrated?

Who guided Superintendent Underly through understanding PreACT test score setting?

Which state's test score standard does Superintendent Underly prefer we match?

Did the DPI cabinet recommend cut score floors or ceilings for the Forward or ACT before teachers participated in the score-setting process months later?

Does Superintendent Underly believe the Department of Education's NAEP test, used to track state and national progress for decades, is an illegitimate measure of student learning?

Did DPI provide educators setting Forward Exam cut scores contextual information like past test scores?

Did DPI provide educators setting ACT cut scores contextual information like past test scores?

Did Superintendent Underly accept the cut scores as each group of participants recommended, or did she adjust them?

Does Superintendent Underly feel like a 19 on the ACT is an appropriate minimum for proficiency for 11th graders, given ACT predicts 37% of students at that level would get a D or F in college algebra and 18% at that level would get a D or F in college English composition?

Does DPI possess “impact data” for the Forward Exam sent in May and June 2024, as the contract states? Does that data show 2024 proficiency rates before June standard setting took place?

Given Superintendent Underly’s bewilderment when trying to understand the effects of PreACT score setting, how did she know if Forward and ACT score setting was the right match for Wisconsin students?

Are the current cut scores “reasonable and defensible in terms of the process, public and educator perception, and related other data,” as Director Visalakshi Somasundaram stated?

Did Superintendent Underly’s approved changes increase proficiency achievement gaps on the Forward Exam, PreACT, or ACT? Were such changes equitable?

Did academic- or equity-focused members of Superintendent Underly’s cabinet agree that cut score changes were equitable?

Did DPI enact any cut score changes or adjustments to 2024 report cards?

What is the distribution of star ratings to districts on 2024 report cards?

Did low-poverty schools disproportionately benefit on 2024 report cards?

Will DPI enact any cut score changes or adjustments to 2025 report cards?

Is it equitable to ask parents to get their hands dirty to understand whether their child is doing well in school or if their child’s school is successful?

Was DPI telling the truth in August when they said the effects of cut score changes on state report cards were unknown?

Does Governor Evers feel like these test score and report card changes unfairly diminish high-poverty schools and unfairly commend low-poverty schools?

# Initiating Test Score Changes

**Superintendent Jill Underly initiated test score standard changes as early as January 2023.**

On January 23, 2023, an email arrived in the inboxes of high-level officials within Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction. "Dr. Underly is interested in taking another look at how we establish our cut scores for the Forward Exam. Given that we're amid some other change in that area, we're asking for a decision paper on what it would take to change the cut scores, as well as what timeline we'd be working off."

This came from Thomas McCarthy, Executive Director at the time, and was sent to Student and School Success Assistant State Superintendent Keona Jones and Policy Initiatives Advisor Aastha Ranabhat as well as Executive Director McCarthy's peers in leadership, Deputy State Superintendent John Johnson and Equity and Inclusion Executive Director Demetri Beekman.

Deputy State Superintendent Johnson and Office of Educational Accountability Director Visalakshi Somasundaram quickly agreed that it was a good time for changes given that DPI had revised state standards for English language arts and mathematics during the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> Director Somasundaram explained, "Standard settings are typically done when there are changes to the standards or assessments. We plan to assess the revised ELA and mathematics standards on the Forward Exam beginning in spring 2024 (as John Johnson mentioned). Therefore, it could be appropriate to do a new standard setting in the summer of 2024. We are putting together a more detailed brief with options and a timeline for all the assessed content areas."

As DPI discussed the matter, students would ultimately take 2023 Forward Exams under the old content and cut scores, despite having new standards in place since 2021.<sup>9</sup>

What matters? How high or low DPI set test score standards was a separate issue from the need to set up standards for refreshed state tests. Though the Forward Exam included new content that needed to be calibrated by educators, Superintendent Underly appeared to have initiated a review of cut scores independent of that fact.

---

<sup>8</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[State Standards](#)," May 21, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[2024 Wisconsin Forward Exam Performance Level Standard Setting](#)," June 29, 2024.

# Early Inequity

**Superintendent Underly and her cabinet knew as early as May 2023 that lowering test cut scores would disproportionately help advantaged groups, widen achievement gaps, and inflate report card ratings.**

Director Somasundaram replied back about cut score changes on May 30, 2023, focusing on the PreACT Secure. Students took the PreACT instead of the ACT Aspire beginning in 2023.<sup>10</sup> Because of this, DPI had to set that test's cut scores for the first time. These changes would set the tone for Forward and ACT changes in 2024.

For those readers who do not know, Wisconsin students in district, charter, and private schools on a voucher are required to take state tests every spring from 3rd grade to 11th grade. 3rd to 8th graders take the Forward Exam, which primarily tests reading and mathematics knowledge and skills.<sup>11</sup> High school freshmen and sophomores take the PreACT, which also focuses on those subjects.<sup>12</sup> High school juniors take the similar ACT.<sup>13</sup> Both the PreACT and ACT are the same tests students in other states take, but Wisconsin uses them to fulfill state and federal accountability requirements.<sup>14</sup> Students who take the test receive their scores, which fall into one of four categories: Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. (Students who miss the test are also recorded.)<sup>15</sup> Two things are important about those ratings. First, Proficient and Advanced students have met Wisconsin's standards and are considered "proficient." Second, cut scores determine how many students fall into each category. High cut scores will cause fewer students to score proficiently, and lower cut scores will cause more students to score proficiently.<sup>16</sup>

Readers also need one more critical piece of background. All three tests factor into "state report cards," federally required rating systems for districts and schools.<sup>17</sup> Each receives a score between 1 and 5 stars, and school officials and parents alike often rely on those ratings as measures of quality. Report card ratings include four factors: Achievement (test score proficiency), Growth (how much students grow on tests in 1 year), Target Group Outcomes (how well the lowest performers do on test proficiency, attendance, and graduation), and On-Track to Graduation (attendance, graduation, and certain test score proficiencies). Critically, to evaluate how much schools help students and not just to judge schools based on how disadvantaged or advantaged their students are, schools have certain factors count for more toward their star rating. Achievement (test score proficiency) receives more consideration when scoring low-poverty districts. Growth (yearly test score improvement) receives more consideration when scoring high-poverty districts.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[PreACT](#)," May 2, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[Wisconsin Forward Exam](#)," September 2, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[PreACT Secure](#)," September 2, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[The ACT with Writing](#)," September 2, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[2022-23 Report Card Guide](#)," November 14, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[Forward Exam Data and Results](#)," December 2, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[Student Performance Levels](#)," December 2, 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[Report Cards Home](#)," November 14, 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[2022-23 Report Card Guide](#)," November 14, 2023.

Director Somasundaram used this opportunity to explain the various ways DPI could set PreACT cut scores and how that would set the tone for the Forward and ACT. She began by explaining that cut scores are “ultimately a matter of informed judgment rather than discovering objective performance standards. Recommended cut scores are submitted to the State Superintendent for review, adjustments may be made, and formal approval is documented. Cut scores must be reasonable and defensible in terms of the process, public and educator perception, and related other data.” She also noted that having a revised Forward test and new PreACT test could require resetting the ACT cut scores, too.

Director Somasundaram laid out the facts on cut score standards. Test scores account for a large part of report card star ratings. The more students who score well on the examinations, the higher a report card score is. However, because higher proficiency disproportionately helps districts and schools with fewer economically disadvantaged students, “These impacts will not be felt equally by all schools and districts... Schools and districts with the highest percentages of economically disadvantaged (ECD) students will see little change...”

Before providing recommendations, Director Somasundaram stated a truth that senior leadership would later echo. Previous cut scores set by then-State Superintendent Tony Evers “were intentionally made comparable to the cut scores for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in response to ‘mapping studies’ showing many states with ‘lower standards’ than NAEP.” The NAEP is a national, federally mandated test whose main result comes out every two years.<sup>19</sup> Its proficiency standard represents a higher standard than “being at grade level.”<sup>20</sup> This higher standard, and Wisconsin’s along with it, might most closely be described as “college readiness.”<sup>21</sup> Director Somasundaram noted that, because proficiency scores are so visible to educators, families, policymakers, media, and voters, “DPI must consider whether the current proficiency rates accurately reflect students’ level of knowledge and skills related to the grade-appropriate academic standards.”

Director Somasundaram settled on matching 2023 PreACT cut score standards to match the distribution of students on the 2019 ACT Aspire. She considered matching 2022 ACT Aspire distributions (reflecting post-pandemic decline), using the college readiness standards that the ACT company uses, or reverse engineering the cut scores by drawing a line from the 2023 Forward and ACT proficiency levels.

The effects of this decision are less important than the specifics and the scores. According to Director Somasundaram, “Using comparison data from 2019 as the basis for adopting these cut scores reflects that expectations of performance have not changed over time.” As for scores, DPI set the cut scores for English language arts as a 1, 12, 16, and 24 in 9th grade English language arts, as 1, 13, 18, and 26 in 10th grade English language arts, as 1, 15, 17, and 24 in 9th grade mathematics, and as 1, 16, 19, and 26 in 10th grade mathematics.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, “[About NAEP](#),” March 21, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, “[Scale Scores and NAEP Achievement Levels](#),” December 9, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Burhan Ogut, George Bohrnstedt, and Markus Broer, “[Updated College Enrollment Benchmarks for the Grade 12 NAEP Mathematics Assessment](#),” American Institutes for Research, October 19, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, “[PreACT Secure Data and Results](#),” November 29, 2023.

What matters? Superintendent Underly and DPI leadership knew lowering proficiency standards on state tests would raise report card ratings across the board, inequitably helping low-poverty schools more than high-poverty schools. DPI chose a PreACT cut-score standard it considered a high expectation consistent with its expectations before the coronavirus pandemic. “Proficiency” on Wisconsin and national exams did not mean “percentage of students at grade level,” but something akin to “percentage of students at a college-ready level.”

# Trouble Understanding

**Despite wanting to lower cut score standards, Superintendent Underly did not understand the standard-setting process or its effects.**

Superintendent Underly soon replied privately to her closest reports, Executive Director McCarthy, Deputy State Superintendent Johnson, and Executive Director Beekman. “I need help with this. I obviously trust Viji, but I truly don’t understand what I am looking at for my approval. And with all this other nonsense going on with literacy I want to make sure we’re not throwing more fuel onto this fire. The crummy thing is, I am an educator and I don’t understand it - so how are parents supposed to understand this too? If we could set the standards and the cut scores, but then have some kind of way to interpret it to parents and educators as a companion, that would be great. For example, what does Proficient mean vs. Advanced? That they are at grade level vs. the next grade level? I just hate this stuff so much. ...I just wish I could understand it better as parent and a professional.”

A couple of weeks later, in July 2023, leadership held a meeting to discuss Director Somasundaram’s findings and recommendations. Sometime that day, Deputy State Superintendent Johnson emailed that DPI should lower the 10th grade mathematics cut scores by 1 point for Basic and Proficient. DPI ultimately did not take his suggestion.<sup>23</sup> In reply, Superintendent Underly wrote, “I’m going to need a primer on this, or a tutoring session. I still don’t understand it, and it’s just a learning block that I have on my end.” She had approved the PreACT cut scores by the next day.

This communication reveals very important things. Superintendent Underly struggled to grasp the options put before her that would affect parents’ and educators’ understanding of their kids’ preparedness. She appeared not to know how a regular person should understand the meaning of proficiency. Most importantly, she requested changes to cut scores before understanding the basics of what she would be changing.

Additionally, the “nonsense” Superintendent Underly referred to coincides with a monumental reading law, Act 20, introduced that same month by Republican legislators in collaboration with DPI.<sup>24</sup> Governor Evers signed it into law a month later.<sup>25</sup> Act 20 copies leading literacy states like Florida, Massachusetts, and Mississippi in hopes of raising Wisconsin’s overall academic competitiveness and closing horrific achievement gaps.<sup>26</sup> Given previous cooperation between the Legislature and DPI, it is not clear whether she called Act 20 itself nonsense, whether she considered specific facets of Act 20 nonsense, like the provisions that connect to state test scores, or whether she was referring to some other literacy matter entirely.

---

<sup>23</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, “[PreACT Secure Data and Results](#),” November 29, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Wisconsin State Legislature, “[2023 Wisconsin Act 20](#),” July 19, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Corrinne Hess, “[Gov. Tony Evers Signs Sweeping Reading Literacy Bill into Law](#),” *Wisconsin Public Radio*, July 19, 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Kymyona Burk, “[Thompson Center Summit on Early Literacy](#),” March 6, 2023.

Over the next months, however, Superintendent Underly and DPI made clear their stance on Wisconsin's cut scores: they were too high, misleading parents, underrating children, and making DPI look bad. When 2023 test scores released, DPI's press release included a paragraph enforcing that point. "I am also tired of politicians claiming that our children aren't learning because they aren't reaching a proficiency score. Instead of using test scores as a cudgel, we should all take the time to learn what a high bar proficiency on this test represents, because the truth is that our proficiency cut scores are very high in comparison to every other state in the country," Underly argued.<sup>27</sup> The day before Milwaukee Public Schools' board discussed its test scores at a committee meeting, then-Communications Director Abigail Swetz emailed the district links to Superintendent Underly's comment and NAEP's research showing that Wisconsin's proficiency standards most closely matched NAEP's high proficiency standards.<sup>28</sup> Director Swetz also notified journalist Ruth Conniff that Superintendent Underly would address measurements of success at her Wisconsin State Education Convention speech. A few months later, after DPI released test scores, Superintendent Underly wrote to now-Associate Deputy State Superintendent McCarthy, Deputy State Superintendent Johnson, Executive Director Beekman, and new Executive Director Sachin Chheda, "Before I jumped off- yes, I'd like to have a conversation about our cut scores being the highest in the country and how we communicate what that translates to with NAEP." Soon afterward, addressing 2024 Forward cut score changes, Superintendent Underly wrote, "I also want to, and maybe this exists as a possibility, to norm our levels to be similar to other states... as I hear that we have some of the highest cut scores nationally. I would like them to be looked at so that we aren't judged negatively when we have direct standards." Finally, in a lengthy presentation to Superintendent Underly and her cabinet, the Office of Educational Accountability displayed Wisconsin's state test scores compared to other states'. Wisconsin, which has nationally aligned, higher standards than nearly all states, regularly appeared near the bottom of the slides' charts. That led to the discussion question for the cabinet, "Does Cabinet have a lower or upper threshold for [cut score] recommendations? Forward? ACT?"

In the longest available record, Superintendent Underly also appeared to misunderstand how NAEP works and distrusted statistical sampling. After calling for more federal spending on education to address student disadvantages, Superintendent Underly mused, "I also said that NAEP only tests 10,000 nationally, and that's really an awful way to make generalizations about how kids are doing, and that when we use state assessments to compare kids state by state, it's not an apples to apples comparison - so if the feds want to get in the assessment game, they should really make it so that we all take the same assessment and have the same cut scores. Because otherwise it's not very useful information. ...But my feelings on high stakes tests are pretty well known."

Again, Superintendent Underly criticized high-stakes tests. Despite this, she did not wish Congress abolished state tests. She posed that Congress could institute a unified, national test given to all students, as countries with national academic standards instead of differing state ones often do.

---

<sup>27</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[DPI Releases Wisconsin Student Assessment System Results](#)," October 10, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, "[Data Tool: Mapping State Proficiency Standards onto NAEP Scales, 2007-2019](#)," September 22, 2021.

The Superintendent's NAEP criticisms are of more interest. NAEP is produced, administered, and analyzed by the Department of Education.<sup>29</sup> They extensively document its sampling methods,<sup>30</sup> its scaling methods,<sup>31</sup> and its documentation methods,<sup>32</sup> they simply answer frequent questions,<sup>33</sup> and they illustrate its methods as well.<sup>34</sup> The Department of Education can answer any questions state education leaders have about the largest, longest-term, nationally representative assessment of student performance. Additionally, NAEP quizzes approximately 110,000 students nationally in each grade to compare states, not 10,000.<sup>35</sup> They do require only 10,000 to 20,000 students for their national sample, but that produces an overall score for America, not the individual state scores to which Superintendent Underly refers.<sup>36</sup> A national political poll, for instance, requires fewer respondents than one comparing all 50 states' results to each other.

No leader is a subject-matter expert on every facet of his or her job. But a pattern appears: a rush to leave behind the standard that every child will be prepared for college, but insufficient understanding of what those standards mean and why they may be significant.

What matters? Months after moving to lower test score standards, Superintendent Underly needed significant assistance to understand what standards were and how changing them would affect the number of students grouped into each performance tier. Superintendent Underly disapproved of Wisconsin's cut scores, which align with national NAEP standards and college-readiness standards, and preferred to lower them to match other states'. Superintendent Underly thought the NAEP, administered by experts at the Department of Education, lacks legitimacy. Superintendent Underly referred to "nonsense going on with literacy" at the same time DPI was cooperating with the Legislature and Governor Evers to pass transformational changes in how students read, emulating the states with the highest-performing schools.

---

<sup>29</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, "[About the NAEP Reading Assessment](#)," September 16, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, "[Statistical Significance and Sample Size](#)," October 14, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, "[NAEP Analysis and Scaling](#)," March 28, 2024.

<sup>32</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, "[NAEP Data Collection](#)," March 6, 2024.

<sup>33</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, "[NAEP State Assessment Sample Design Frequently Asked Questions](#)," November 30, 2023.

<sup>34</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, "[Assessment Literacy](#)," July 1, 2024.

<sup>35</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, "[Appendix Tables for 2022 Reading Report Card](#)," September 16, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, "[Frequently Asked Questions](#)," February 20, 2024.

# Changing the Tests

**New standards for the Forward and ACT tests had clear implications for students, and DPI had the final word on cut scores.**

In October and November of 2023, DPI began to receive information about setting standards for the 2024 Forward Exam. Data Recognition Corporation, the company that produces the Forward Exam, would run a summer standard-setting session from June 11th to June 14th, 2024. They would select and guide teachers to help DPI establish cut scores that “reflect the updated state content standards, link students’ scores on the tests to the state’s expectations for students in each performance level, and are well-articulated across grades.”

96 educators would split into six groups of 16, each covering either reading or mathematics across two grade levels. Participants would receive descriptions of the knowledge and skills students should have at each grade level, increasing over the four performance tiers of Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. After orientation and training, individuals would write descriptions of the minimum requirements a Basic student, a Proficient student, and an Advanced student should have in order to set the floor for their scoring. After discussing and editing descriptions within their groups and the room, teachers would review the test questions students saw, which DRC ordered from easiest to hardest. Educators would mark the first question they think a Proficient student would know, but a Basic student would not. They would repeat that for Advanced and Basic, then write justifications for their decisions based on the expectation descriptions. DRC would show each group’s median cutoff question for each performance tier. Based on the groups’ chosen cutoffs, DPI would have the option for DRC to show the groups their 2024 benchmarks compared to 2023’s. Either way, groups would debate if they liked the current cutoffs, then would reset them if they would desire. DRC would show each group’s new median cutoff question for each performance tier. Based on the groups’ chosen cutoffs, DPI would have the option for DRC to show the groups the proficiency percentages their cutoffs would produce. Individuals would return to their groups one last time to debate the cutoffs, reset them if desired, and set their “final draft” of cut score recommendations. The whole group would look at the cut scores and proficiency percentages from grades 3 through 8 and provide feedback on such things as unevenness, extremism, or inconsistency. To conclude, one representative from each group would meet with DRC to debate whether they should tweak any cut scores, using the final draft feedback. However, DPI ultimately would decide cut scores based on the groups’ recommendations, “internally and with stakeholders.”

In March 2024, DPI began to receive information about setting standards for the 2024 ACT. ACT, the company formerly known as American College Testing that produces the ACT, would run a summer standard-setting session from July 10th to July 11th. The ACT standard-setting process would be very similar to the Forward’s.

30 educators would split into three groups of 10, each covering reading, mathematics, or science. Participants would consider DPI's descriptions of the four performance tiers of Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced as they relate to 11th graders. However, ACT would not share the ACT questions with participants for them to bookmark. Rather, ACT has rigorous data that shows the likelihood a student would receive an A, a B, and a C in college freshman reading or mathematics courses, based on their ACT score. After orientation and training, individuals would pick the percentage chance a student would have of receiving a certain letter grade based on DPI's definition of Proficient, then discuss as groups. ACT would show each group's cutoff definition of Proficient, which ACT score matches their cutoff based on their data, and what percentage of students would be considered Proficient as a result. For example, ACT considers its own college-readiness definition "a 50% chance of getting a B," which corresponds to a 22 cutoff on the ACT mathematics section. Groups could then revise their cut scores based on those results as well as contextual data like ACT's grade projections, past Wisconsin ACT scores, other states' ACT scores, Forward scores, NAEP scores, college enrollment rates by ACT score, and Wisconsin colleges' ACT cutoffs for course placement and scholarships. Groups would repeat the setting and revision process for Advanced and Basic. To conclude, the room would finalize cut score recommendations after reviewing the entire range. However, DPI ultimately would decide cut scores based on the groups' recommendations.

The rigorous processes make clear that DPI fully understood the implications of any cut scores it produced. Even though DRC would work with DPI to reset Forward cut scores later in the year, DRC stated they would send preliminary data to DPI on the percentage of students in each performance tier in May and June, before new standard setting occurred. Additionally, DPI would have impact data after the standard-setting process, as its participants did. On the ACT, DPI would have rigorous data on the likelihood of college success based on each cut score.

What matters? Teachers who set Forward and ACT cut scores understood in real time how their choices would affect proficiency rates. Teachers who set Forward Exam cut scores may have referenced the previous year's proficiency rates, assuming DPI allowed them access to that data during the session. According to the exam contract, DPI would receive Forward performance data before educators suggested new cut scores, though DPI will only release proficiency scores under the changed cutoffs.

# Widening the Achievement Gap

**Superintendent Underly and her cabinet had clear evidence in April 2024 that lowering test cut scores would disproportionately help advantaged groups, widen achievement gaps, and inflate report card ratings.**

In April 2024, an innocuous report became a problem. During the previous months, DPI had debated the merits and legality of changing the names of each student performance tier, which they eventually did. Students would no longer score Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, or Advanced, but be Developing, Approaching, Meeting, or Advanced.<sup>37</sup> Much graver concerns would soon press them.

Lowering the bar for student proficiency on state tests would have drastically inequitable effects on achievement gaps and accountability. As Director Somasundaram summarized, “Assuming these standard setting activities raise proficiency rates statewide, it is reasonably likely that: (1) proficiency-based achievement gaps will increase, (2) report card Overall Scores will increase year-over-year, and (3) increases in Overall Score and Overall Rating category will impact schools disproportionately (report card rating increases will benefit low-poverty schools more than high-poverty schools).”

Proposed changes to state tests would make Wisconsin’s achievement gaps even more brutal. Raising state proficiency from 40% to 50% likely would cause “student groups who have been traditionally underserved [to] see smaller gains in proficiency rates as compared to more advantaged groups, widening the gaps between them,” projected Director Somasundaram. Her team predicted new proficiency levels would increase gaps between 3 to 4 points for economically disadvantaged students and between 5 to 10 points for special-needs students. Director Somasundaram broke down the growing disparities by race. In reading, she projected White students would score 59%, Asian students would score 49% (falling 1% further behind), multiracial students would score 46% (1%), Pacific Islander students would score 42% (2%), Hispanic students would score 32% (2%), Indigenous students would score 28% (2%), and Black students would score 18% (4%). In mathematics, she projected White students would score 61%, Asian students would score 51% (falling 3% further behind), multiracial students would score 43% (3%), Pacific Islander students would score 39% (4%), Hispanic students would score 29% (4%), Indigenous students would score 26% (5%), and Black students would score 14% (7%). In addition, comparisons to past proficiency rates would be unhelpful. Director Somasundaram’s team estimates 13% more White students would reach proficiency in mathematics and Black students still adding 6% more.

---

<sup>37</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, “[Wisconsin Student Assessment System Updated Asset-Based Performance Levels](#),” June 6, 2024.

The federally required state report cards would rise to the point of uselessness. Director Somasundaram wrote, “School and district report card scores and ratings will also rise if proficiency rates increase. If proficiency rate gains are substantial,” using 55% statewide proficiency, “we project report card ratings will increase to such a degree that there will be little difference between schools in terms of their ratings.” Accompanying graphs predicted a rapid rise over the 3-year phase-in period. Assuming no improvement or decline in student performance, Director Somasundaram estimated the percentage of 4- or 5-star schools would rise from 46% to 53% in 2024, 60% in 2025, and 63% in 2026. Director Somasundaram estimated the percentage of 4- or 5-star districts would rise from 36% to 50% in 2024 and 71% in 2026.

The accountability report cards would score high-poverty schools more harshly than low-poverty schools. Director Somasundaram continued, “In addition, these report card rating increases will benefit low-poverty schools more than high-poverty schools due to variable weighting of Achievement and Growth priority areas, as required by state law. ...As a result, rising proficiency and PBP rates will raise report card scores and ratings to a greater degree for schools and districts with lower percentages of ECD students.” Director Somasundaram predicted that 45% of low-poverty districts like Whitefish Bay, DeForest, and Kohler eventually would gain an additional star on their ratings, while only 23% of high-poverty districts like Cudahy, Beloit, and Green Bay would.

Director Somasundaram provided a potential avenue to fix this lopsided benefit to advantaged students. Simply, DPI would severely change the state report card ratings in 2025. Step 1: “Keep report card calculations and rating thresholds unchanged for the 2023-24 school year as we anticipate relatively moderate increases this year,” referring to a 14% rise in highly rated districts, disproportionately those with lower poverty, that would rate half of all Wisconsin districts 4 or 5 stars. Step 2: “For the 2024-25 school year... include only two years of assessment data in achievement calculations” rather than three, which “would shorten the timeline to full impact of new assessment cuts. Adjust Growth and TGO rescaling formulas to align these priority area score distributions with the new Achievement priority area score distribution.” Unfortunately, Director Somasundaram foresaw those changes alone would result in 80% of schools and 93% of districts scoring 4 or 5 stars on state report cards in 2025. So, step 3: “Prior to release of 2024-25 report cards, conduct a report card standard setting to establish new report card rating thresholds.” While achievement gap growth “cannot be addressed” without raising proficiency cut scores, “OEA would be able to address some of the challenges to the report card system to a certain extent.”

These projections, previewed in 2023 but made explicit while the 2024 Forward Exam was going on, would have mammoth implications for Wisconsin education and politics.<sup>38</sup> It would change report card scoring for the second time in four years, likely initiating a similar political battle.<sup>39</sup> The visibility of Wisconsin's achievement gap would grow, and districts that set long-term goals to close those gaps would lose ground and be forced to reset expectations. The PreACT cut scores, which DPI had set just one year earlier, would reset to match the Forward and ACT proficiency rates. DPI, whose accountability plan with the federal government already needed renewal, would find any achievement gap closure goal much more difficult to achieve. Massive increases in proficiency, especially in advantaged schools in Wisconsin, would prevent comparisons to student success before the pandemic. Shortly thereafter, Deputy State Superintendent Johnson posed to the team, "Could we push out a decision for a year on - new cut scores - on new nomenclature?" as they grappled with the ripple effects of cut score changes.

What matters? Despite rhetorically treating equity as an essential value, DPI lowering proficiency cut scores on state tests was predicted to increase racial, economic, and disability achievement gaps. Lowering cut scores was projected to cause widespread inflation of state report card ratings, disproportionately favoring low-poverty schools. DPI proposed a 2-step solution: increasing lenience on growth and target group report card scores, primarily favoring high-poverty schools, then significantly altering report card scores. Failing to rescore report cards was projected to result in 80% of schools and 93% of districts scoring 4 or 5 stars.

---

<sup>38</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[Wisconsin Student Assessment System Updated Asset-Based Performance Levels](#)," February 27, 2024.

<sup>39</sup> Rory Linnane, "[Did State Officials 'Rejigger' School Scores to Make Them Look Better, as Lawmakers Say?](#)" *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, March 1, 2022.

# Aftermath

## **Early indicators affirm planned changes were carried through, greatly changing the appearance of student achievement in Wisconsin.**

After all of these changes, what happened to Wisconsin's students? Test scores and report cards have not yet gone public, and public records ended in April. However, some effects of DPI's cut score changes are apparent.

There is evidence that widespread proficiency increases as well as achievement gap increases on the Forward Exam have come to pass. 13.7% fewer Green Bay middle schoolers scored in the lowest category in 2024.<sup>40</sup> Appleton's achievement gap for students with disabilities grew 7.9% in English language arts and 7.6% in mathematics, 8.6% and 5.7% for students whose first language is not English, and 4.3% and 4.0% for Black students.<sup>41</sup> White middle schoolers in Madison scored 77% and 73% proficient in reading and mathematics, increasing achievement gaps an additional 5% and 11% for Hispanic students and an additional 7% and 13% for Black students.<sup>42</sup>

DPI had just set PreACT cut scores in 2023, but lowered them to match cut score changes on the Forward and ACT.<sup>43</sup> Proficiency cut scores in English language arts fell from 16 and 18 for 9th and 10th graders to 15 and 17. Proficiency cut scores in mathematics fell from 17 and 19 for 9th and 10th graders to 16 and 17.<sup>44</sup> In other words, DPI adjusted its expectations for a 10th grader's mathematics skills to match the previous 9th grade standard.

On the ACT, DPI has clearly defined a standard for success in high school that does not align with success in college. Previously, DPI set a 20 in English language arts and a 22 in mathematics as proficiency.<sup>45</sup> Now, DPI marks proficiency as a 19 and 19.<sup>46</sup> According to ACT's data, students considered proficient in 2024 would have a -2.5% smaller chance of getting an A, a -2.9% smaller chance of getting a B, and a -1.3% smaller chance of getting a C in freshman English Composition I compared to students considered proficient in 2023. Students considered proficient in 2024 would have an -9.0% smaller chance of getting an A, a -15.5% smaller chance of getting a B, and a -9.7% smaller chance of getting a C in freshman Algebra compared to students considered proficient in 2023.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Green Bay Area Public Schools, [Board of Education work session](#), August 12, 2024.

<sup>41</sup> Appleton Area School District, [Board of Education meeting](#), September 9, 2024.

<sup>42</sup> Madison Metropolitan School District, [Board of Education instruction work group](#), September 9, 2024.

<sup>43</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[PreACT Secure Data and Results](#)," September 1, 2024.

<sup>44</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[PreACT Secure Data and Results](#)," November 29, 2023.

<sup>45</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[ACT Data Proficiency](#)," June 9, 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[The ACT Data and Results](#)," September 1, 2024.

<sup>47</sup> Jeff Allen, Justine Radunzel, and Joann Moore, "[Evidence for Standard Setting: Probabilities of Success in 'Benchmark' College Courses, by ACT Test Scores](#)," May 12, 2017.

The report cards will change in 2024 and 2025. DPI has attempted to suppress the extreme outcomes of sharply rising test scores this year, and educators will recut report card standards in 2025 “to accurately communicate the success of schools and districts.”<sup>48</sup>

Journalists have focused on the performance tier naming conventions, and DPI has made a strong, student-centric case. “We’re not the only state to make changes to better define and put less blame and shame onto the names,” explained now-Deputy Superintendent McCarthy. “You can call it ‘rose-colored glasses,’ but if I have to explain to my kindergartener that she’s ‘below basic’ in a task? Those words have a sting. They have a specific meaning. The Department feels like there is value in being able to have a conversation that is growth-mindset-oriented. ...So, we’re going to stick on the side of kids on that...”<sup>49</sup> State Superintendent Jill Underly underlined the mass confusion around whether “proficiency” means “on grade level.” “I’ve often heard confusion from parents, families and legislators on what performance terms on tests meant in regard to where students are at academically.”<sup>50</sup>

However, how DPI has improved information for families is unclear. If students can be Developing, Approaching, Meeting, or Advanced, which one tells parents that their child is prepared with grade-level skills? That is a hard question for Deputy Superintendent McCarthy and now-Senior Policy Advisor Johnson, who said grade level probably falls between Meeting and Approaching.<sup>51</sup> To rephrase that, “Parents now have no simple way to interpret their child’s end-of-year test scores.” DPI continues to deemphasize the importance of the federally required, summative test. Deputy Superintendent McCarthy and Senior Policy Advisor Johnson told media that screener tests, alternative evaluations, or parent-teacher conferences provide richer and deeper insight to parents.<sup>52</sup> “I think [test scores] are an imperfect tool. I don’t know of a perfect tool for a parent... We’ve engaged in this oversimplification process for a long time to say, ‘Let’s roll up a bunch of data and make some scientific calculations and...I can look at my school and say it’s 4 stars... I think, if you really want to have that conversation, it does require parents to get their hands a little dirty, look at the system, and figure that out.’”<sup>53</sup> Is it equitable to ask low-income and single parents, whose school decisions are of the most immense consequence, to come off third shift and dig into aimswebPlus growth graphs? Would Wisconsin officials tell citizens navigating unemployment benefits or BadgerCare, “Get your hands a little dirty, look at the system, and figure it out,” or is that what bureaucrats are paid to do?

What matters? While test scores and report cards release later in the year, early indicators support the surging scores and widening achievement gaps DPI predicted in records. DPI will alter school accountability report cards in 2025. DPI now deems a high school junior proficient who has a 37% chance of earning a D or F in college freshman Algebra. Changes to state tests and report cards may confuse parents more, not less.

---

<sup>48</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, “[What’s New for the 2023-24 School and District Report Cards?](#),” September 27, 2024.

<sup>49</sup> Erin Richards, “[Newsmakers: K-12 Education on the Campaign Trail](#),” *WisconsinEye*, August 26, 2024.

<sup>50</sup> Alan J. Borsuk, “[Are Wisconsin Students Really Doing Better? Or Does It Just Look That Way?](#)” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 30, 2024.

<sup>51</sup> Alan J. Borsuk, “[Does Lowering Cut Scores and Changing Terminology on Standardized Tests Better Serve Wisconsin Students?](#)” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 23, 2024.

<sup>52</sup> Alan J. Borsuk, “[Does Lowering Cut Scores and Changing Terminology on Standardized Tests Better Serve Wisconsin Students?](#)” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 23, 2024.

<sup>53</sup> Erin Richards, “[Newsmakers: K-12 Education on the Campaign Trail](#),” *WisconsinEye*, August 26, 2024.

Three important questions remain for DPI.

Will lower cut scores mislead parents and diminish urgency for instructional and financial improvement? Deputy Superintendent McCarthy said Wisconsin did not benefit from higher cut scores. “We’re returning to something that looks more like our neighboring states.”<sup>54</sup> The largest long-term academic gains in our lifetimes coincided with the introduction of demographically differentiated, high-stakes state tests.<sup>55</sup>

Will report cards give high marks to a skyrocketing number of schools? DPI said in August, “Any potential impact on state report cards is unknown at this time, as we are working on analyzing data that will help calculate report cards this fall.”<sup>56</sup> Deputy Superintendent McCarthy promised, “We will make sure [report cards] have the stability...[for] communities to say, ‘This is where we stand.’”<sup>57</sup> Those statements differ from the projections DPI staff provided in April.

What is the plan to make Wisconsin’s advantaged children nationally competitive and give disadvantaged kids a fighting chance? However we measure students, as Deputy Superintendent McCarthy laid out, “The question becomes, ‘What are we doing with them?’”<sup>58</sup> Essential programs like reading reforms and teacher apprenticeships are withering. Are criticisms of the prolonged wait for these improvements “partisanship,” too?<sup>59</sup>

One truth is constant amidst all of this change: common citizens ultimately decide the future of young generations. What we accept for our children - our expectations, our commitments, and our opportunities - determine their fates. Will Wisconsin be a place where families settle down and businesses crowd in? Or will we rust and fade, a place people drive past on their way to prosperity?

---

<sup>54</sup> Alan J. Borsuk, “[Does Lowering Cut Scores and Changing Terminology on Standardized Tests Better Serve Wisconsin Students?](#)” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 23, 2024.

<sup>55</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, “[Long-Term Trends in Reading and Mathematics Achievement](#),” September 12, 2022.

<sup>56</sup> Alan J. Borsuk, “[Does Lowering Cut Scores and Changing Terminology on Standardized Tests Better Serve Wisconsin Students?](#)” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 23, 2024.

<sup>57</sup> Erin Richards, “[Newsmakers: K-12 Education on the Campaign Trail](#),” *WisconsinEye*, August 26, 2024.

<sup>58</sup> Alan J. Borsuk, “[Are Wisconsin Students Really Doing Better? Or Does It Just Look That Way?](#)” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 30, 2024.

<sup>59</sup> Sachin Chheda, [post](#), X, September 8, 2024.



# INSTITUTE FOR REFORMING GOVERNMENT

[ReformingGovernment.org](http://ReformingGovernment.org)

PO Box 180291  
Delafield, WI 53018

[info@reforminggovernment.org](mailto:info@reforminggovernment.org)

 [ReformingGovernment](https://www.facebook.com/ReformingGovernment)  
 [@ReformingGovt](https://twitter.com/ReformingGovt)