

GET RIGHT ON READING

Policy solutions by:  INSTITUTE FOR REFORMING GOVERNMENT



Wisconsin ranked 40th among states in reading when adjusted for race and income.¹ Our state cannot be prosperous without fantastic schools statewide, and our schools cannot reach their potential without expertly teaching reading. By adapting other states' miraculous reforms, supercharging our teaching corps, making our state test more accurate, and more publicly sharing reading curriculum, Wisconsin can become a top-5 reading state by 2030.

BACKGROUND

If there's 1 issue that dragged Wisconsin schools from the top of the podium, 1 issue that condemns the last 20 years of paper-shuffling in Madison, it's that Wisconsin kids can't read well anymore. Through Governor Tommy Thompson and an ambitious legislature, Wisconsin ranked 6th in the nation in 1998.² Kids learned the same way their parents did: learning the sounds that letters make, assembling them into basic words, and then deciphering even longer ones using the same principles. If you can pronounce "apple," you can pronounce "apoplectic," even if you don't know what it means. That's called "phonics," and it's why every friend of yours who moved to Wisconsin did so for the good schools. Our teachers taught literacy better than most anybody, and it worked for kids in Rothschild and Racine alike.

Then, a bunch of bureaucrats broke everything. Out-of-state experts, hungry for the next big thing, started telling children to guess when they encountered a new word using the context of a sentence. So, if you see a word that begins with "a" and your story's in a kitchen, guess "apple" even if it's spelled "a-v-o-c-a-d-o." Everyone soon realized that was an awful idea, but colleges and textbook companies had already latched on. Thus, an Ivy League professor named Lucy Calkins rebranded it "balanced literacy"³ and made enough money to retire to a \$3.4 million house in New York's richest suburb.⁴

Calkins' ideas polluted Wisconsin under Superintendent Tony Evers, who said that fighting about whether students can read "makes interesting theater."⁵ Green Bay, Fond du Lac, Waukesha, and 156 other districts took the bad advice and saw achievement fall apart.⁶

You wouldn't believe how far we've fallen. Our state's White students crashed to dead average, falling behind 3 of America's poorest states.⁷ Milwaukee's children are 2 whole years behind Atlanta's, Boston's, and Chicago's.⁸ Madison's superintendent publicly confessed, "I was a big balanced literacy fan, too. Lucy Calkins admits it did not get to the Black and Brown children."⁹ (Yes, 2 years ago, Professor Calkins admitted that the other side was right.¹⁰ She did not give back the house.)



Worse, other states cracked the code and have years of lead time on us. Mississippi – yes, Mississippi – pioneered a front-to-back reading overhaul in 2013 that rocketed them to national leaders and had states desperate to copy the “Mississippi Miracle.”¹¹ Wisconsin tried in 2021, but now-Governor Evers vetoed it as an unfunded mandate.¹²

Reading unlocks every other type of learning, and there is no educational strength we lack more. If we want this generation to come back from the pandemic, it starts here. If we want teachers to be respected again, this is it. If we want businesses to invest here and families to put down roots, we must fix reading now.

PROBLEM: WE LET NON-READERS STAY NON-READERS

29% of Wisconsin 3rd graders are already below grade level.¹³ Instead of fixing it earlier, we ask teachers to engage the teenagers who got frustrated young and checked out. The ripple effects are enormous. When Mississippi soared in reading, they also soared in mathematics.¹⁴ By failing primary schoolers in reading, we are failing middle and high schoolers in every other subject.

So, we should emulate the rest of the country by addressing the main flaws in our system.

- Our triennial mini-tests like STAR and MAP are supposed to reveal students’ problem areas but don’t substantially affect our teaching.
- Parents are not aware of their role in catching up struggling children.
- Even students the farthest behind in 3rd grade graduate to 4th grade, ensuring that every school year afterward is even more miserable for them.

SOLUTION: MAKE NATIONAL REFORMS OUR OWN

- Replace Statute 118.016 as the previous bill did, but focus on the key change generators for district and charter schools and use screeners already in service as cost savings.
 - Approve high-quality screeners like STAR and MAP for triennial reading assessment of 5K through 3rd grade students. Screeners should also be able to identify possible dyslexia in students.
 - At-risk students then receive streamlined reading recovery plans marking the specific types of deficits, what research-based recovery methods a teacher or reading specialist will administer, and continued screener results.
 - Parents of at-risk students receive these recovery plans for reinforcement at home. All parents receive a state-issued guide to the best reading practices when their children turn 2 and again upon enrollment in school.
 - 3rd grade students who score at the lowest levels on the Forward Exam – whether Below Basic or below the 20th percentile – repeat 3rd grade with even



- greater intervention, including dedicated small groups and an extra 1.5 hours daily with a reading specialist.
- Certain students are exempt from this requirement: those who pass Forward on a 2nd try the same spring (excluded from state results), English language learners who started school within the last 2 years, students with significant special needs, and students who have already repeated a grade twice.
- Provide targeted reading funding to districts around reading specialists and before- and after-school interventions.

These reforms are the best of both worlds: a bold change in how we do business but clearly effective in other states.

PROBLEM: OUR TEACHERS NEED MORE TOOLS TO SUCCEED

To help students now, we must upgrade the incredible teachers who reach them. Unfortunately, many of our educators absorbed the Calkins method in college, forcing them to adapt once they reached the classroom. Wisconsin's college programs still mix in her work. The state tried fixing this by requiring all teaching majors to pass a reading instruction test to teach, hoping that colleges would teach to the test.¹⁵ Instead, colleges and districts did their own thing, leaving benefits unclear.

Let's turn our focus. If we can mandate what goes into teaching programs and adjust how current educators teach, every kid in Wisconsin has a shot at reading excellence.

SOLUTION: MAKE EVERY TEACHER A READING SUPERSTAR

- Amend Statute 118.19(14)(a) to require all reading teachers to reach specific hour milestones in their core literacy instruction class to receive licensure.
 - Require 7 hours of phonemic awareness, 8 hours of phonics, 6 hours of vocabulary, 4 hours of fluency, and 9 hours of comprehension as marked on a public syllabus. These are the building blocks of fluent reading.
 - Teachers should still demonstrate competency.
- Invest in dedicated reading professional development for existing educators over a 1-year period using a vendor based in the science of reading. Offer \$1,000 bonuses to teachers for dedicating the time to do it right, completing the program, and demonstrating mastery.
- Invest in rigorous regional instructional coaches to maintain quality over a 2-year period. Coaches would dedicate time to schools as each requires.

PROBLEM: OUR STATE TEST IS SOFT

All states must administer annual tests for students, and far too many make them easy to fool parents on progress. Unfortunately, Wisconsin is one of them. 41% of Wisconsin 4th graders



are college- or career-ready according to our state Forward Exam.¹⁶ According to the national NAEP test that compares states to each other, however, only 33% of students are proficient.¹⁷ This deception provides cover for ineffective strategies, staff, and government leadership. It's time that parents know how their children are really doing.

SOLUTION: BE HONEST WITH PARENTS

- Recalibrate the state Forward Exam reading to match Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced standards on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

PROBLEM: PARENTS DON'T KNOW HOW THEIR CHILDREN LEARN

The pandemic showed parents that they really don't know what goes on in the classroom. Ever since, battles over parent input, student privacy, teacher roles, and American values have strained trust among the most influential people in kids' lives. To begin to rebuild that trust, every parent should have the right to know what base curricula schools use in the four core subjects, especially reading. The Department of Public Instruction already collects that information privately at its leisure,¹⁸ and it has partnered with the University of Wisconsin-Madison to publish it publicly on a voluntary basis.¹⁹ This information should be widely and comprehensively available so that parents can choose the best school for their child.

SOLUTION: SHARE HOW STUDENTS LEARN TO READ

- Mandate the formation of a public, searchable database containing reading and other core curricula by school and grade level. Make provision mandatory for district and charter schools and encouraged for voucher schools.

¹ [Urban Institute. "America's Gradebook: How Does Your State Stack Up?" 2020.](#)

² [The Nation's Report Card. "Wisconsin State Comparisons." 1998.](#)

³ [Sarah Schwartz. "Lucy Calkins Says Balanced Literacy Needs 'Rebalancing.'" *Education Week*, 2020.](#)

⁴ [Houlihan Lawrence. "50 Cricket Lane, Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522." 2020.](#)

⁵ [Alan J. Borsuk. "Borsuk: Literacy May Not Be a Constitutional Right, but It's a Life Imperative." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 2018.](#)

⁶ [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. "Instructional Materials." 2019.](#)

⁷ [The Nation's Report Card. "Wisconsin Student Groups and Gaps Data." 2022.](#)

⁸ [The Nation's Report Card. "Milwaukee District Comparisons Data." 2022.](#)

⁹ [Madison Metropolitan School District. "03/07/2022 MMSD Board of Education Instruction Work Group." 2022.](#)

¹⁰ [Dana Goldstein. "In the Fight Over How to Teach Reading, This Guru Makes a Major Retreat." *The New York Times*, 2022.](#)

¹¹ [David Kaufman. "In Mississippi, a Broad Effort to Improve Literacy Is Yielding Results." *The New York Times*, 2022.](#)

¹² ["Evers Vetoes Education Bill Meant to Help 'At-Risk' Readers." *The Associated Press*, 2021.](#)

¹³ [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. "WISEdash Data Files by Topic: Forward." 2022.](#)

¹⁴ [The Nation's Report Card. "Mississippi Student Groups and Gaps Data." 2022.](#)

¹⁵ [Erin Richards. "Early Literacy Screening Sought to Improve Reading." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 2012.](#)

¹⁶ [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. "WISEdash Data Files by Topic: Forward." 2022.](#)

¹⁷ [The Nation's Report Card. "Wisconsin Overview." 2022.](#)

¹⁸ [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. "Instructional Materials." 2019.](#)

¹⁹ [Wisconsin Center for Education Research. "Wisconsin Instructional Materials: About." 2022.](#)