



INSTITUTE FOR REFORMING GOVERNMENT

Below is the initial analysis of Quinton Klabon, IRG's Senior Research Director, of the new K-12 test scores for 2023.

On Tuesday, October 10th, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction released test score data from 2022-2023. That was the year that schools allocated \$1 billion in federal COVID relief. IRG is the [leading public monitor](#) of these funds and will release an [update](#) next month.

Our commentary has already appeared in [Wisconsin Public Radio](#), [Wisconsin Right Now](#), and [The Capital Times](#).

Here are IRG's 10 Takeaways from Test Scores:

1. Statewide reading proficiency is just 39%, and mathematics is 41%. This rose from 2022, but is still -2% below 2019 levels.

In other words, 6,000 students may permanently have been knocked off of a college track.

The highest-scoring districts in reading are Lake Country, Fox Point, Whitefish Bay, and Cedarburg. Among majority-poverty districts, Gillett, South Shore, and Seneca stand out.

2. What's shocking is that 27% of students (94,000 children!) score at rock-bottom reading levels. That's 3% more than 2019, and math had even more fall behind.

10,000 more children fell behind grade level, pulling them closer to future poverty, sporadic employment, and unhappiness. Extending pandemic policies pushed struggling families into lasting jeopardy.

The most-behind reading districts are Racine, Beloit, Milwaukee, and Menominee Indian in last, each with over 50% at rock bottom. Removing low-income districts, Northwood, McFarland, Medford, and Two Rivers score lowest.

3. **Only 23% of districts came back from the pandemic in both subjects, 93 of 413.**

Let's applaud Dover, Wauzeka-Steuben, Pecatonica, and Geneva for staging the biggest comebacks, Verona, Elmbrook, D. C. Everest, and Appleton for being the only big districts to pull it off, and non-Milwaukee charter schools for massive, 9% growth in each thanks to leaders like La Casa De Esperanza and The Lincoln Academy.

4. **58% of districts are more below grade level in both subjects than before the pandemic.**



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Bayfield, Ashland, Medford, Two Rivers, Winter, McFarland, and Reedsville all average -15% or more kids falling behind in each subject! Among big districts, Sheboygan and Oshkosh are recovering poorly, Green Bay and La Crosse average over -8% more behind in each, and Milwaukee charter schools and West Allis-West Milwaukee average -10% or more.

5. Surprisingly, low-income students as a whole were not hurt worse than middle- and upper-income students, and special-needs students are roughly at pre-pandemic levels.

The real splits happened by race. While White students are only -1% behind 2019, Black, Latin, and Indigenous students fell -3%. Asian students fell -4%. **While we will provide further, surer analysis, perhaps low-income White students may have benefited from rural and suburban districts that opened urgently during the pandemic compared to low-income urban students.**

6. Milwaukee's story remains tragic. Let's compare district, charter, and voucher.

READING PROFICIENCY

district: 16%
charter: 20%
voucher: 19%

MATH PROFICIENCY

district: 12%
charter: 20%
voucher: 16%

READING ROCK BOTTOM

district: 56%
charter: 45%
voucher: 46%

MATH ROCK BOTTOM

district: 65%
charter: 46%
voucher: 53%

Despite receiving \$505 million in ESSER III school COVID relief, Milwaukee is faring poorly. In fact, in math, many grade levels have lower proficiency rates this year than they did in 2022!

We also see how Congress providing little federal relief for private schools crushed performance for voucher schools. It should not be forgotten.

7. **However, most of Milwaukee's high fliers remain choice schools.** Of high-poverty schools, the top 10 for reading include 5 voucher, 3 charter, and 2 district. We applaud Saint Augustine Christian and Notre Dame Catholic for leading in reading and math, respectively! IRG will have more school-level analysis in the days ahead.

8. There are 9 schools each in Milwaukee that have 0% proficiency in reading or in math. Let that sink in.

9. **As IRG pointed out in our [ESSER III audit](#), Milwaukee allocated relief poorly and Oshkosh and Green Bay allocated far too little, too late.** Their starkly slow recoveries may be related to choices made regarding relief.



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10. We conclude with a story. This month, Maryland became fed up with their small-town schools struggling and Baltimore competing with Detroit and Milwaukee for "least-successful big district in the country." To fix things, they [poached Mississippi's State Superintendent of Education](#), the one who [catapulted Mississippi's schools](#) from the bottom to the [top](#) and had states ([including Wisconsin](#)) copying them. They believe that adults can help good kids become great and turn around the lives of the least fortunate.

In contrast, our Wisconsin State Superintendent wrote [this](#):

"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."

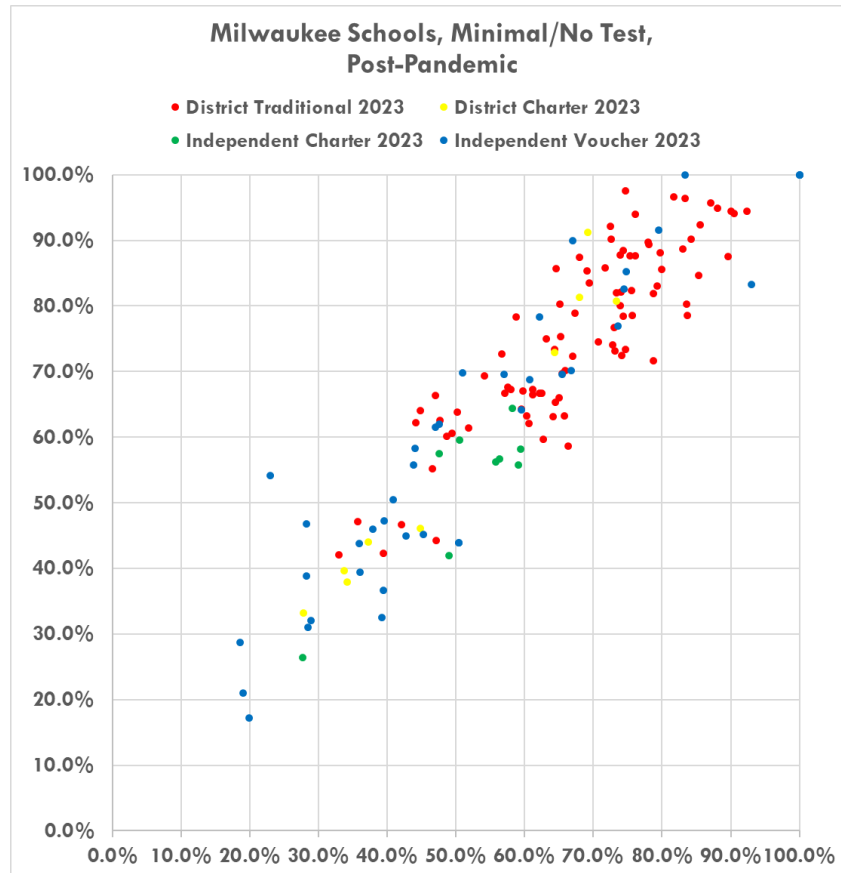
In other words, to some, "college-ready" is not the standard we should expect of all children. Adults care about test scores, not children.

What an appalling surrender that would be. While students may prefer the trades, the military, or the workforce to college, any parent knows that high standards and belief in their kids inspire children to grow beyond their dreams academically, emotionally, and morally.

But let's take her at her word.



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That is a plot of all low-income Milwaukee schools based on how many kids are functionally illiterate or innumerate. 80%, 90%, even 95% of students are behind grade level in these schools. Very few MPS schools keep it under a majority.

DPI's press release is about forgiving adults who didn't get it done for kids. But in towns across Wisconsin, the world is very unforgiving. Everything that can go wrong has: depressive isolation, raucous classrooms, hollowed-out neighborhoods, drugs, brick walls of post-pandemic learning.

When children grow up and reach the real world, they aren't grateful for adults who held them to a low standard. When their email gets called "unprofessional" because the grammar's wrong or they drop their apprenticeship because their analytical skills don't hold up, they're left with shame.

Don't look away from the test scores like some people tell you to do. Don't avoid peeking into classrooms to see what's going on. When we cut down a generation of children, it should scar us.

We can [oversee reading](#), [upgrade teachers](#), fund choice, and make sure \$500 million left in relief saves what it can. Let's put out more lifeboats and hope.